

Peace on Earth and Peaceful Dissent

by Polly Mann

How does one challenge unjust foreign policy of the United States? How was the supreme power of monarchies curtailed? In England it took the Magna Charta. Here we have the Constitution. But like the Bible, the Constitution can have many interpretations. In his book "A Power Governments Cannot Suppress" the late historian Howard Zinn wrote: "It would be naïve to depend on the Supreme Court to defend the rights of poor people, women, people of color and dissenters of all kinds. Those rights only come alive when citizens organize, protest, demonstrate, strike, boycott, rebel and violate the law in order to uphold justice."

Once it is decided, contesting a decision of the government or court system, is very expensive (often prohibitive) to consider. But policy must sometimes be challenged. Again, Zinn says it best: "No Supreme Court, liberal or conservative will stop the war in Iraq or redistribute the wealth of this country or establish free medical care for every human being. Such fundamental change, the experience of the past suggests, will depend on the actions of an aroused citizenry, demanding that the promise of the Declaration of Independence – an equal right to life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness?be fulfilled."

So it was with the 14 anti-war and international solidarity activists from the Michigan, Minnesota and Illinois who are currently being investigated by the FBI. I believe that they, like me, have tried means other than traveling to foreign countries to find solutions for problems for which the government too often proposes war or the threat of war. I believe that some tried the political system—attending caucuses and state conventions, writing platforms, door knocking for candidates, etc. But typically, the decisions regarding controversial issues are made by the "power brokers", the officers of the political parties and their cohorts. The more controversial the issue the more difficult it is to champion a cause. So it was with the Vietnam War.

Howard Zinn foresaw how 9/11 would translate into a situation like the 14 activists being besieged by the FBI: "The question is, whether Americans will at some point begin to understand that the 'war on terror' has become a war against the liberties of Americans, and will demand that these liberties be restored. Without the right to speak freely, to dissent, we cannot evaluate what the government is doing, and so we may be swept into foreign policy adventures with no oppositional voices and later lament our silence."

One of those opposition voices is Attorney Michael Deutsch of the People's Law Office, whose lawyers are defending the 14 activists. In his letter of November 11, 2010 he quoted the Supreme Court's 6-3 opinion of last June that decided that non-

violent First Amendment speech and advocacy “coordinated with” or “under the direction of” a foreign group, designated by the Secretary of State, as “terrorist” was a “crime.” The Secretary of State gets to decide which groups are “terrorist.”

The defendants were said to have provided “material support” for the Popular Front for the Liberation of Palestine (PFLP) or the Revolutionary Armed Forces of Colombia (FARC). And again from Deutsch’s letter: “Thus, the Court’s opinion criminalizes efforts by independent groups to work for peace if they in any way cooperate or coordinate with (government) designated FTOs (foreign terrorist organizations).”

WAMM, an organization dedicated to non-violence, supports the constitutional right of free speech and the promotion of peace negotiations. While the Supreme Court’s decision under which the 14 activists were subpoenaed was passed in June 2010 but the travel of individuals took place prior to this date. So how is it possible for the Supreme Court to criminalize actions that took place before the date of its decision?

A final word from Zinn: “We cannot depend on the governments of the world to abolish war, because they and the economic interests they represent benefit from war. Therefore, we the people of the world, must take up the challenge...The idea of obedience to the state is the essence of totalitarianism. And we find it not only in Mussolini’s Italy, in Hitler’s Germany, in Stalin’s Soviet Union, but in so-called democratic countries like the United States.”

Polly Mann is a co-founder of WAMM and continues to be active with the organization. Her column appears regularly in the WAMM newsletter. Also find her writing for WAMM online in at <http://wammtoday.wordpress.com>; the Middle East Committee section of www.worldwidewamm.org.

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