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Protests target Uncle Sam's wallet

By Will Evans -- Bee Staff Writer
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"Hell no -- we won't owe ."

It's doubtful anyone will actually yell this while refusing to pay taxes this year, but it could be a slogan for the so-called "war tax resisters."

The resisters are a smattering of citizens across the country who risk severe penalties by not paying all or some of their federal taxes because part of the money goes toward military spending.

With tax day -- April 15 -- nearing and war raging, the number of resisters reportedly is growing.

The practice of war tax resistance dates to colonial times among pacifist Quakers, and it peaked during the Vietnam War with tens of thousands of adherents, says Ed Hedemann, author of "War Tax Resistance: A Guide to Withholding Your Support From the Military."

Now, with the war against Iraq, interest in the illegal tactic is intensifying, according to the National War Tax Resistance Coordinating Committee in New York. Similar groups, from the Bay Area to Sonoma County to Chico, are getting more phone calls and participation at workshops, too.

"We've been having more activity than I remember in the last 20 years," says Susan Quinlan, a member of Northern California War Tax Resistance,

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Resisters likely aren't flocking to this kind of civil disobedience to save money. In fact, many of them donate the funds they withhold to charities and nonprofits, and some end up being forced by the Internal Revenue Service to pay interest and fees in addition to what they owe.

They do it because otherwise they simply "can't sleep at night," as one put it. They specifically oppose the use of their money for military spending, distinguishing themselves from those who don't believe in the income tax at all.

Just how much federal revenue goes to the military is disputed -- from the IRS figure of around 15 percent to the War Resisters League estimate of 47 percent.

Income tax, though, has been tied to warfare from its inception, when it helped pay for the Civil War, according to Daniel Simmons, a law professor at the University of California, Davis.

The military connection is why people such as Ajay Advani, a science teacher at Davis High School, don't pay the feds. Advani, 34, believes in taxation and pays his state taxes, though he doesn't like all of California's spending, either. But the way he sees it, helping to financially support war is the ethical cutoff point.

"The bottom line is the money is going to be used to buy weapons and to pay people to use those weapons to kill people," he says. "For me, it's a matter of conscience."

Still, this year, instead of withholding all of his federal taxes, as he has for years, he will deduct only a symbolic amount of \$100, as a compromise with his wife, Sara Prout, who isn't keen on the penalties.

Tax resistance comes in many forms and levels of commitment.

At one end of the spectrum, some resisters go into voluntary poverty to avoid paying taxes. At the other end, the Santa Rosa-based organization One Million Taxpayers for Peace advocates withholding only \$10.40 (after Form 1040) to make a statement but hopefully avoid the wrath of the IRS. Others will pay all their taxes but attach the check to a protest note or something creative such as a model of a coffin.

Somewhere in the middle are people like Bob Runyan, 47, a software engineer in Loma Rica. This year, he will deduct the 47 percent he figures goes to military spending and donate it to charity.

As the protest varies, so does the government response.

"They need to file and they need to pay what they owe -- but everything is (decided) on a case-by-case basis," says IRS spokesman Chips Maurer.

The IRS can levy fees and interest on money owed and, if necessary, take a cut from a person's wages or bank account. As a rare last resort, the agency can seize cars and homes.

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While some resisters have had the IRS take hundreds of dollars, others haven't been hit at all. Some ignore a steady pileup of IRS letters, while still others lead the agency on a chase, changing jobs every time the government targets their wages, hoping to keep their money away from war at all costs.

Runyan and his wife, Kathy, had wondered whether they should resist. They figured the IRS would eventually extract the money anyway.

The two Quakers settled on a principal: "Resistance to something that we don't believe in is important, even if it's not going to be successful in the near term," Bob Runyan says.

Certainly, this is about the long run. Advocates have been pushing Congress since the early 1970s for a law allowing "conscientious objectors" to send their taxes to a government fund that would not be used for the military. They're still pushing.

Another Vietnam War-vintage campaign still rolling is the protest against the federal tax on telephone bills. Activists say the tax has been used to boost government revenue during wars.

Some phone companies now accommodate resisters. SBC, for example, will not cut off phone service if customers send in what they owe, minus the tax, and explain why, though the company will report it to the government, according to spokesman Fletcher Cook.

All of which goes to show that while Benjamin Franklin coined the phrase, "Nothing is certain but death and taxes," it doesn't resonate with everyone. To the war tax resisters, one may be prevented by withholding the other.

About the Writer

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