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Celebrate Resistance on the 100th anniversary of the founding of the War Resisters League

I'm honored to be here with elders I honor for your role in resistance past, activists carrying on resistance present, and youth I look to and hope to learn from as an ally to resistance future.

It's not often that we step back to think about the long arc of our resistance, or that I'm invited to sum up my life's work in 10 minutes.

The draft for the U.S. war in Indochina, the resistance to which is chronicled in "The Boys Who Said No", ended in 1973. So if tonight's discussion is the second half of a two-part program of which Act One was the film, it's perhaps appropriate that I will focus on the second half of WRL's life, and particularly on the history of draft resistance since 1973.

When we think about the draft and draft resistance, we tend to focus on the years when the draft was in effect. But that may be getting cause and effect backwards. The absence of a draft is evidence not that draft resistance was unneeded but that resistance has been successful.

One of the reasons we haven't had a draft for the last 50 years is the widespread and almost entirely spontaneous and unorganized resistance to draft registration that has been sustained continuously by young people since 1980. Compliance with Selective Service requirements is lower today than it was during any time when people in the U.S. were being drafted.

Most young men register for the draft only if it's automatic when they get a driver's license. It is in some states, including here in New York, but not in others including New

Jersey, Pennsylvania, and – most significantly -- California. The requirement for men ages 18 to 26 to report to Selective Service each time they change their address is, as the chair of the House Armed Services Committee noted last year, “universally” ignored. Even the former director of Selective Service has testified that the registration database is so incomplete and inaccurate as to be “less than useless” for an actual draft.

Why does preventing the draft matter? The goal of draft resistance, as distinct from conscientious objection, is not to opt ourselves out of participation in war but, by depriving the military of our human matériel, to deter and constrain warmakers and impede the war effort.

The U.S. has made wars without a draft, of course; wars fought by economic conscripts, by members of the reserves and the National Guard who thought they would only be “weekend warriors”, by proxy forces, by mercenaries.

It’s hard to see the success of our resistance through the smoke of those wars. The U.S. war in Indochina went on for 20 years, longer than any previous U.S. war except the settlers’ war of genocide against indigenous Americans. Who could have imagined, when the U.S. war in Indochina ended, that it would be followed by 30 years of war in Iraq, much less by 40 years of war in Afghanistan, with the U.S. on one side for 20 years and on another side for the next 20?

(Allow me to note parenthetically that the pretext for resuming draft registration in 1980 was to “send a message” of U.S. popular support for military intervention in Afghanistan, at a time when the U.S. was arming and supporting the people who would come to call themselves Al Qaeda. The U.S. government put me in prison for refusing to agree to fight on the side of Al Qaeda and the Taliban. But I digress.)

As Dan Ellsberg has pointed out, the last 50 years of war would have been even more deadly had a draft been in effect. The existence of a system of conscription makes military adventurism more likely – as we have seen in Russia in the last year – by giving war planners the illusion that they don’t need to think about whether enough people will “volunteer” to fight their wars. Even the existence of draft registration creates the false perception that the draft is available as a fallback option. That’s why it’s so important to take the next step from having prevented the draft to abolishing draft registration and getting the government to admit that the draft is not an option and to remove it from the arsenal of war planning. Young draft resisters have done the heavy lifting, but we still need to claim and realize their victory.

Preventing a draft isn't our only success in this period. Both "protest" which seeks to persuade those in power and "resistance" which seeks to wield the power of nonviolent coercion can be Gandhian forms of nonviolent action. Some of you may have seen the more recent film, "The Movement and the Madman," which tells the story of the Vietnam Moratorium as a parallel in protest to the resistance story told in "The Boys Who Said No". President Nixon claimed to be watching football on TV and ignoring the protesters surrounding the White House, but in fact the Moratorium dissuaded Nixon and his advisors from a planned nuclear attack on Vietnam.

I suspect, though I do not know, that there is an as-yet-untold sequel or second act to that story. The largest gathering in one place for a political purpose in U.S. history was on June 12, 1982, when more than a million people overflowed Central Park and its surroundings in a show of support for unilateral nuclear disarmament. That turnout was driven by our fear that President Reagan would launch a nuclear first strike against what he called the "evil empire".

In documents made public later in draft registration cases, Reagan administration officials discussed their fear of arousing the antinuclear and student movements. We may never know the full story, but I believe that the June 12th mobilization made a significant contribution to saving the world from nuclear annihilation.

I'm preaching to the choir. But resistance is a phenomenon, and only sometimes a movement. There are many intersections between war resistance and other movements, and I'd like to highlight two steps forward – both related to sexuality and gender – and one step back – related to age – that the draft resistance movement has made in the last 50 years.

As someone who came into the draft resistance movement as a sexual naïf, or perhaps as a "Q" for "questioning" in the spectrum of LGBTQ, I owe a huge debt of consciousness-raising to my feminist and queer comrades in resistance. I think our movement owes them a great deal too.

With respect to sexuality, the draft resistance movement – and WRL specifically – has moved from being willing to hire Bayard Rustin in spite of his being gay (as long as he kept himself closeted), to allowing Dave McReynolds to come out in the pages of *WIN* magazine (while arguing explicitly in that marvelous coming-out article that being gay was irrelevant to his work for WRL), to gay draft resisters in the 1980s and after, perhaps most prominently my queer comrade Stardust, speaking publicly about how resistance to the draft is part of their resistance to heteronormative masculinity.

We've gone from "draft resisters can't admit to being gay" to "you can be a draft resister in spite of being gay", to "we're here in the resistance because we're queer." That's progress.

The politics of gay liberation, particularly the role played by "coming out" in both empowering oneself and influencing others, have made an invaluable contribution to our understanding of the relationship between the closeted mass movement of noncompliance with draft registration and the much smaller movement of public nonregistration. James C. Scott, in *Domination and the Arts of Resistance*, describes as typical a synergy between large-scale but silent subaltern shirking and smaller movements of direct confrontation, often among those with more privilege to withstand retaliation.

Openly gay men openly defying the draft apply the same tactics to encouraging people who have violated the draft law to speak publicly about doing so that they apply to encouraging gay people to come out of the closet. In both cases, coming out is essential to getting people outside those communities to believe that they even exist.

At the same time, much of the draft resistance movement has taken a big step backward in its understanding or even its awareness of the relationship between draft resistance and youth liberation.

There are many sources of war resistance. I came to draft resistance and pacifism by way of youth liberation, and I was won over to feminism by Shulamith Firestone's analysis, in *The Dialectic of Sex*, of sexism and ageism and the common cause of women and young people in resistance to patriarchy as the illegitimate assertion of authority by older men over both women and young people.

Fifty years ago, it was widely recognized that age was a dimension of oppression and that the draft was, in part, an expression of the ageist contempt of the old for the lives of the young.

That's as true today as ever, but many who were part of the youth movement have forgotten the political analysis of youth liberation. And too little of our thinking about "allyship" and power relations between more and less privileged groups has been applied to age relationships. As potential draftees, young people have been misconceptualized as powerless victims we older people need to protect against conscription, rather than as people wielding their power nonviolently to withhold their labor from the war machine as a way to protect us all, including old people, against the larger and longer wars that a draft would

enable. The greatest “victims” of a draft, after all, are not draftees but those against whom draftees are weaponized in war.

Ageism by older people against younger people is as much old people’s problem as sexism is men’s problem or racism is white people’s problem. Our ageism as old people holds back the potential of our movement.

I am here with you to celebrate our war resistance; to celebrate our survival, which is testimony to the success of that resistance; and to celebrate and support, as an ally to youth liberation, the resistance by young people on which our future depends.

[Edward Hasbrouck has been a WRL member and a draft resistance organizer since the early 1980s. In 1983-1984, he "served" six months in a Federal Prison Camp for publicly refusing to register with the Selective Service System and organizing resistance to draft registration, as one of 20 nonregistrants nationwide selected for prosecution. In 2019, he was the only draft resister invited to testify before the National Commission on Military, National, and Public Service at its hearings on whether to continue, expand, or end draft registration. In 2021, he received a Social Courage Award from the Peace and Justice Studies Association “for exemplifying courage and honor in speaking truth to power”. An award-winning travel journalist and author of advice books for travelers, he works for a human rights project focused on freedom of movement. He maintains the definitive Web site about the draft, draft registration, and draft resistance in the U.S. since 1980 at "Resisters.info".]