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MILITARY FAMILIES & COUPLES

THE WAR ON DISSENT GETS CREEPY



By [Mike Ferner](#)
Veterans for Peace

JANUARY 24, 2006: On New Year's Day, I decided to start 2006 out with a public protest against the war. Little did I know how public it would become.

My younger brother and I (he was only the wheelman, led astray) tagged three highway overpasses near Toledo with "TROOPS OUT NOW!" (see photo above). Suburban cops with too much time on their hands and citizens with cell phones being what they were, we were soon pulled over by five (no kidding) patrol cars and arrested on no fewer than five *felonies* each. For those of you who haven't been paying attention to how state legislatures protect us from crime, in the late 90's in Ohio it became a felony to spray-paint a public building (called "getting tough on gangs") AND a felony to possess a can of spray-paint in the commission of that crime ("possession of criminal tools" says the Ohio Revised Code).

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this PAGE to a friend

We spent that night in jail and the next day appeared, shackled together, before a judge who set bond at (this is all for real, pals) \$3,000 each, no 10% business.

Earlier this week we went to one suburban court, plead to misdemeanors, and found out how much the Ohio Dept. of Transportation (ODOT) charges for the "preliminary" repair of each overpass (grey paint) --\$600--with the final repair bill due at our sentencing next month. Technically, that includes up to 90 days in jail.

Today we went to the second suburban court and my brother plead to misdemeanors. I, on the other hand decided that if I'm going to pay that kind of money and face time in the cooler, I'm at least going to have a trial and speak my mind about the war. I've now been "bound over to the grand jury" (which may mean something to those of you who watch cop shows) for a trial in county common pleas court on the remaining felony charges.

Finally--our local paper, the Toledo Blade, ran an editorial last week titled "Defacing a reputation," referring to my time on city council and what it considered acceptable war protests, opining that I went too far with the spray-paint. Below is my response to the paper and our fellow citizens.

RESPONSE:

The Blade was gracious enough to list me in the company of some civilly disobedient heroes, indicating my behavior fell woefully short of those honorable standards. Spray paint wasn't invented in Gandhi's day, but might he at some point have scrawled "Brits Out Now" with whitewash and a brush? One might think so.

"But why break the law," people ask? "What about this war troubles you enough to break the law?"

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In one word: images.

Images that never leave me.

Images of young soldiers and marines lying in row upon row of hospital beds. Images of picking shrapnel out of Mike Ramsack's backside... dressing Bob Butikofer's wounds every day and trying not to make him scream...changing colostomy bags on guys hoping they won't defecate out the hole in their guts caused by a gunshot wound to the abdomen...trying to give a brain scan to a young soldier missing his entire left temporal lobe...Images of eating in the chow hall as dozens of patients in wheelchairs, on crutches, missing arms and legs and eyes line up for dinner...Images of a young man sitting silent and broken in a corner of the psych ward.

And there are other, more recent images from my trips to Iraq that I cannot forget. Images of the kids I met on the streets of Baghdad, and the ones in Abu Siffa who shared their chicken and rice dinner with an American journalist two days after a cruise missile blew their orange grove to bits. Images of Fatima in the Sa'adoon St. copy shop who told me how beautiful she thought her country was and how she hoped there would be no war. Images of the young U.S. Army sergeant from West Virginia I accompanied on patrol one night near Balad, who answered my question, "why are you in Iraq?" with a tired shrug saying, "I really don't know." And his partner from North Dakota, just as bone-tired, who answered simply, "oil."

I see these images every day. And I know that the young men in that Navy hospital 35 years ago, just like the ones I met last year in Iraq, are getting killed and maimed for a preposterous lie. As my blood boils I tell my government to "BRING THEM HOME NOW!" by writing letters, signing petitions, speaking, and yes, painting highway overpasses.

Our government is not only causing great suffering by this war, it is also violating dozens of international and domestic laws. See the Veterans For Peace “[Case for Impeachment](#)” for a partial list at . As citizens we are complicit in these crimes and suffering. That is why historian Howard Zinn’s words make more sense to me each day this war continues:

“Civil disobedience is not our problem. Our problem is civil obedience. Our problem is that people all over the world have obeyed the dictates of the leaders of their government and have gone to war, and millions have been killed because of this obedience...Our problem is that people are obedient all over the world in the face of poverty and starvation and stupidity, and war, and cruelty. Our problem is that people are obedient while the jails are full of petty thieves, and all the while the grand thieves are running the country. That's our problem.”

The most important mistake I made on New Year’s Day was not that I painted “Troops Out Now” on overpasses, it was choosing a form of civil disobedience not many people are comfortable adopting. If you believe we must end this war, what kind of civil disobedience would you choose? Refuse to pay part of your taxes this April? Sit in at a Congressional office? Organize a strike? Or will we be content to speak quietly, watching the petty criminals go to jail while the grand criminals continue the slaughter in our name?

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Mike Ferner served as a Navy Corpsman from 1969 to 73, was discharged as a conscientious objector, and is a member of [VETERANS FOR PEACE](#). He would like to add that any contributions to his legal defense fund above \$5 will be returned.

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