Economic Conversion (41)

Approaching two decades after the disappearance of the only superpower rival to the United States, the U.S. military budget is almost as large as all other countries’ military budgets combined. The United States continues to spend at cold war levels despite the fact that, as we are slowly learning, none of the most pressing twenty-first-century threats to security—terrorism, proliferation, climate change—are effectively addressed by military force. Why is this the case? In part the reason is that the livelihoods of millions of people in politically powerful military-dependent institutions and communities are tied to the flow of military dollars.

Economic conversion is the process of efficiently transferring people and facilities from military-oriented to civilian-oriented activity. By forcing military programs to be judged on their real contribution to security, conversion is important to more intelligent decision making on national priorities. Given the urgent need to redirect the nation’s attention and resources to address the economic and security realities of the twenty-first century, economic conversion has never been more important. Through letters, town hall meetings, and other types of political mobilization, people in and out of the government must learn that reducing the military drain on the economy is critical to rebuilding the American middle class; repairing the decaying national infrastructure, and addressing the real problems of national security.

Written by Lloyd Dumas

International Networks of Alternative Media (43)

A key challenge facing movements for social change is the global commercial media. A handful of Western-based transnational media corporations, working in tandem with regional companies, control most programming, emphasizing entertainment to recruit urban consumers, and circulating news primarily framed by the interests of corporate business and Western foreign policy. A global network of communications activists, advocates, and researchers is emerging to address these problems. This network of networks operates simultaneously on at least three planes: the construction of alternative communications media, the reform of the mainstream corporate and state media, and the support of transnational communications networks for social change movements. Alternative media projects (zines, radio, video, television, and Internet sites and blogs) not only serve people seldom represented in the corporate media; they also demonstrate what democratic media might look like.

What can people do to help build this network? They can help support or produce programming for their local alternative communications media. They can also find and support the existing campaigns to reform the mainstream corporate and state media. Finally they can educate themselves about what is going on, and then help link the work of the local and global justice networks.

Written by Dorothy Kidd

Strengthening International Law (42)

In an era when international cooperation is critical, no overall reliable system of global governance is in place that enjoys universal respect and satisfies concerns about accountability of leaders, participation of peoples and their representatives, and transparency of the regulatory process itself. Particularly disturbing is the persistent tendency of political leaders to consider war as their fundamental instrument for the resolution of international conflict and to divert vast resources to the preparation for war without being constrained by the limits set by international law governing the use of force. Although it is important not to overstate its potential (nor to ignore the misuse of international law historically), international law is an important means for communicating claims and grievances and provides insight into whether particular demands are reasonable. Protecting the future of the peoples of the world presupposes an ethos of responsibility, which rests on the willingness by both the powerful and the disempowered to replace, whenever possible, coercion with persuasion and to rely much more on cooperative and nonviolent means to achieve order and change. Law is centrally important in providing guidelines and procedures for moving toward a less violent, more equitable, and more sustainable future for the whole of humanity.

Written by Richard Falk

Design Stance (44)

Conscientious activists try to understand the issues or problems they confront rather than act blindly. However, significant issues are typically intricate, ill defined, and conceptually complicated. But although even partial understanding can be virtually unattainable, rushing to action, substituting passion or outrage for understanding, is not the answer. Design Stance is for people or organizations, who are ready to initiate meaningful action. They have done enough analysis and are convinced that action is needed. How can they focus notions, wishes, and urges into specific, meaningful steps? Design Stance suggests a productive mode of thinking in which issues are approached with the stance of the designer: construct, in imagination assisted by concrete representation, ways to intervene in the world for the better. More specifically, choose a client, a locus of action, and a form of intervention; use static or dynamic simulations to indicate how the setting will react to the intervention; gather information and make analyses to shape the details of the contemplated intervention; modify, adjust, and refine repeatedly, evaluating effects at each round. Assume few limits at the start, and use the iterative process of modifying and evaluating to determine which real limits exist and how to cope with them. When the right balance of timeliness and effectiveness presents itself, follow Samuel Mockbee’s advice: “Proceed and be bold.”

Written by Rob Knapp