

COMMITTEE TO BRIDGE THE GAP

1637 BUTLER AVENUE, SUITE 203
LOS ANGELES, CALIFORNIA 90025
(310) 478-0829

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A LETTER TO HELP 35 YEARS END, AND COMMENCE ANEW

An' here I sit so patiently
Waiting to find out what price
You have to pay to get out of
Going through all these things twice.

Dylan

Dear Friends,

Bridge the Gap was founded thirty-five years ago, in the midst of an unpopular war. Our country had intervened militarily in a far-away land whose culture and history our leaders barely understood, justified by what subsequently turned out to be fabricated intelligence. We were facing a resistance we continually underestimated, bogging us down in a quagmire. The public wanted us out; our leaders repeated endless bromides about “staying the course” and that we wouldn’t “cut and run”; those who called for disengagement were decried as unpatriotic, or worse, traitors to our men and women in uniform.

Controversies arose over revelations of American involvement in torture abroad and violations of civil liberties at home. Dissidents here were spied on, phones (including ours) tapped. Prisoners in South Vietnamese jails supported by the U.S. faced gruesome treatment in violation of international human rights norms.

A Congressional team investigating allegations of mistreatment of prisoners at the infamous Con Son Island stumbled upon “tiger cages” in which political prisoners were shackled by their legs for years to iron bars, eventually permanently losing the use of their legs; caustic lime tossed on them from above, blinding many; electric shock and all manner of torture and abuse employed against them. This was all supported by the U.S. government, who funded the police and prison system through an extraordinarily cynical means: The Nixon Administration reallocated funds from Public Law 480, the “Food for Peace” program. Additionally, after the initial disclosures of the tiger cages, the Navy let a contract to the consortium Raymond, Morrison, Knutson-Brown Root and Jones to build new, even smaller cages.

One of Bridge the Gap’s first activities was work to end the torture of the Vietnamese political prisoners. I went to Washington and wrote an amendment to the foreign assistance appropriation bill that cut off U.S. funding for the police and prison system in Vietnam because of the human rights violations. It passed and became the first U.S. human rights legislation, later expanded to address other countries as well. That single sentence in the appropriation bill constituted perhaps my first words in print.

We—and millions of others—worked hard to end the war, a result not achieved until 1975. The U.S. finally exited under terms that were virtually identical to those available years earlier and many hundreds of thousands of deaths fewer.

In the years that followed, Bridge the Gap worked on an array of peace, human rights, and environmental issues, for the last quarter century focusing on nuclear matters. After thirty-five years

of frankly very hard work, one would like to sit back and think of all that had been accomplished. And indeed there is much, some of which is described in the enclosed newsletter.

The last U.S. reactor to produce plutonium for the nuclear weapons program was closed. The UCLA reactor was shut down, and many other reactors around the U.S. and globally forced to stop using weapons-grade uranium that, if stolen or diverted, could be used to make nuclear bombs. Ocean dumping of radioactive waste has been internationally banned. The Department of Energy nuclear facility at Santa Susana was shuttered. The proposed Ward Valley nuclear waste dump near the Colorado River defeated. We played instrumental roles in these and many other successful struggles.

And yet. And yet. If one pulls back and looks honestly at the current situation, it is hard not to feel that we as a country have gone dramatically backwards. It is almost as if we had entered a time warp, had reverted, that the record has gotten stuck. Vietnam has become Iraq. Con Son Island has become Abu Ghraib and Guantanamo. The Nixon Administration COINTELPRO program of violating civil rights at home has become the Patriot Act.

But it is more than that. Hard-won arms control treaties have been abrogated. Inequality has hugely increased and programs for the poor eviscerated. After a thirty-year bipartisan policy banning reprocessing of civil nuclear fuel (separating out the plutonium) because of its proliferation risk, a new policy has been adopted directing the startup of plutonium reprocessing here—at the same time we rightly criticize the Iranians and North Koreans over their nuclear programs. After three decades of no new nuclear plants being successfully ordered and built, huge taxpayer subsidies have been provided to build new ones. And we still have tens of thousands of nuclear weapons in the world, and, after a long hiatus, efforts underway to build more.

Aldous Huxley once noted, “Such is the world in which we find ourselves – a world which, judged by the only acceptable criterion of progress [progress in charity], is manifestly in regression.” Ironically, it was his grandfather, Thomas Henry Huxley, who in the 1800s was the great defender of Darwinian evolution. Now we have slid so far back that Darwin is under attack. Who would have believed there would be new Scopes trials in the 21st Century?

”Real progress has been made by fits and starts,” wrote the later Huxley. And progress, like steps backwards, is made by men and women. Yes, the consortium contracted to build the tiger cages in Vietnam has now morphed into the Brown and Root subsidiary of Halliburton, constructing the isolation cells in Guantanamo. But yes, those of us who fought to end the Vietnam war, the American support for torture, the nuclear arms race, the environmental and inequality crises – we too are still around. And we will not rest until the world is at peace, justice flows like mighty waters, and the natural world provided the protection it deserves. It just might take a while.

To the next 35 years,

Dan Hirsch

Bridge the Gap asks you to do two things to help:

- **MARK OUR 35TH ANNIVERSARY WITH A TAX-DEDUCTIBLE CONTRIBUTION.**
- **WRITE TO THE NUCLEAR REGULATORY COMMISSION ON REACTOR SECURITY.**

Email NRC by January 23 at secy@nrc.gov; put “RIN 3150–AH60” in subject line; say you support Bridge the Gap’s Petition for Rulemaking to upgrade reactor protections against terrorist attack and that you oppose NRC’s proposal to leave reactors unprotected against air attack or by a ground attack by a group as large as the number of terrorists involved with 9/11. Call us if you want more details.