

Why I Support Amnesty International

Eric L. Michelsen, circa 2009

You *can* have an enormous impact on spreading justice in the world. I am Eric Michelsen, and I have supported Amnesty International for almost 40 years. I'm a theoretical physicist and teacher, recently using a laser to trace out the orbit of the moon, as a study of General Relativity. I'm a member of Local Group 137 in San Diego, and was a member of AI's Executive Director's Leadership Council. I'd like to quickly tell you some of my story.

A few years ago, I was at an Amnesty function in San Francisco. I was talking with Larry Cox, then Executive Director of AIUSA, and another man whom I did not know. Larry asked me how I got started with Amnesty. I told the story of how, when I was 18 years old, I was outraged at US government complacency about Marcos' abuses in the Philippines. I joined Amnesty International then, and have been a member ever since. At this point in my story, the man next to me turned, gave me a hug, and said, "Thanks, man. You helped get me out of prison." He had been a college student in the Philippines at the time. He was arrested, along with many other students, and falsely charged with trying to assassinate Marcos. He later told me, "A lot of us didn't make it. They shot the love of my life in the back of the head."

The world has changed a lot in the years since Marcos, and so has Amnesty International. Amnesty started in 1961 primarily as a letter-writing organization, petitioning oppressive governments for the release of nonviolent "criminals," whose only crimes were speaking the truth and advocating justice. As a teenager, I wondered why a tyrannical government would care about letters written by far-away foreigners. But I learned first-hand from freed political prisoners, one of whom said, "Five hundred letters makes no difference. But 50,000 letters got me out of Russian jail." Though exact figures are obviously hard to pin down, it is estimated that over 40,000 political prisoners have been freed after petitions by AI. That's about 1,000 people per year freed from torture, abuse, and unjustified imprisonment. I have personally met some of these freed prisoners, and heard them thank Amnesty International for their release. (Here is a short video about Jose Gallardo, an incredibly brave Mexican general that I had the honor of meeting: www.youtube.com/watch?v=F4SJF9aVK50.)

Today, AIUSA not only continues its direct access campaigns on behalf of "prisoners of conscience" (non-violent political prisoners), but is also an active and highly respected advocate for human rights legislation and the judicial process. I have walked the halls of Congress with AIUSA Government Relations staff, and seen the tremendous recognition and respect given them by Representatives and Senators alike. (Once, Senator Akaka from Hawaii stopped us unexpectedly, and said to the AI Government Relations officer, "Alex, I need your help.") I sat down with AIUSA members and Senator Barbara Boxer, and heard her talk of the effective collaboration between Amnesty and her office. We also met with Diane Feinstein's staff, and the then Assistant Secretary of State for Democracy, who answered to Condoleezza Rice, and the President.

Amnesty moves our government in other ways, as well. In the last few years, the US Supreme Court ruled, for the third time, in line with Amnesty's long-held position on the un-American detentions at Guantanamo Bay. Amnesty International drafted the "International Violence Against Women Act," now with bipartisan support in both the House and Senate. Amnesty's insistence that China live up to its promise of improved human rights before the Olympics there (instead of its actual crackdown on dissent to make China look "harmonious" to international onlookers) resulted in increased talks between the US State Department and China about human rights.

Amnesty International USA collaborates with many different human rights and justice organizations, as opportunities arise for synergy between the groups. In 2009 in Boston, I attended a rally sponsored jointly by the ACLU and AIUSA. Amnesty routinely provides research and expertise to other organizations, including governments, so that each can focus on its core competencies, and everyone is most effective.

To accomplish all this, Amnesty is keeping up with new information technologies to insure that its resources are spent in the most productive way possible. Amnesty has more than just an active, timely web presence. It was ahead of its time years ago (before Facetime and Skype were widely available), when I was part of a live, two-way video conference from Washington, DC to a former Guantanamo prisoner in London. The session was fully interactive, with questions, answers, and dialog. Such an exchange would have cost substantially more, and probably been logistically impossible, without the video capability. Around that time, AIUSA was awarded a \$750,000 Kresge Foundation matching grant for technology infrastructure, and completed a \$25 million capital campaign six months ahead of schedule. Amnesty International is the primary partner with the American Association for the Advancement of Science in a Science for Human Rights program that uses the latest in satellite imaging, computer modeling, and information display technology to not only document, but in so doing help avert, human rights abuses around the world.

Sadly, despite Amnesty's many successes, there are still countless people throughout the world in desperate need of Amnesty International. And here at home, we have an opportunity to restore American values and credibility. But in today's economic downturn, more than ever, Amnesty needs our help in continuing to achieve justice, and build its infrastructure.

In summary, I see Amnesty's biggest strengths in four key areas: (1) research and documentation, (2) direct legislative interaction, (3) policy shaping through popular demand, and (4) direct prisoner advocacy. Our political authority comes from 155,000 direct members, 500,000 online supporters, and the worldwide respect that Amnesty International has earned over almost 50 years.

Thanks again for listening, and sharing.

P.S. A common concern for many Americans is how to achieve justice, while simultaneously protecting our citizens and our country from those who would do us harm.

On terrorism, AI believes that America's greatness derives from its commitment to justice. Amnesty does not take sides in a war. We seek to achieve compliance by all parties with international law, and respect for human rights. Amnesty does not object to the detention of prisoners of war captured on a battlefield or from military facilities. In contrast, when suspects are arrested from ordinary daily activities, we believe that they are innocent until proven guilty, that they have a right to a civilian court hearing of the evidence, and a right to be either charged with a crime, or released.

Amnesty International believes that America will win the fight against terrorism through commitment to our principles of justice, showing the world our integrity through our actions. We believe that terrorists are the vast minority of people in the world, and that new terrorists are made, not born. Each act of brutality that we commit plays into the hands of terrorist demagogues, recruiting for them hundreds of restless new followers. This position is supported by many practicing US interrogators. (The British detainee from Guantanamo told us of a common saying there: "If you weren't a terrorist going into Guantanamo, you would be going out." Also see [How to Break a Terrorist](#), by Matthew Alexander, the lead interrogator of one of the most valuable terrorists yet captured.)

Amnesty's position is that America's so-called "harsh" interrogation methods are clearly torture, since their only purpose is to cause such great suffering that a victim will give up his beliefs and his associates, to make the pain stop. That is the *only* goal of such methods. Like many of our military leaders, such as Colin Powell, former Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff, we believe that any short-term gains achieved by these methods are vastly outweighed by the recruiting power they give to our enemies.

America will not defeat terrorists by being their equal. We will not defeat them by out-brutalizing them. We will defeat them by being better than they are, by wielding our great strength with compassion and fairness.