ABOUT FASTING

The Abolitionist Action Committee urges you to prepare for this experience in advance. Below is some basic information about fasting. There are numerous resources available in bookstores and on the internet, so consider additional research...

Please remember that FASTING IS OPTIONAL. Many of those among us will NOT be fasting. Those who are not fasting are asked to refrain from eating and from talking about food in the presence of those fasting. There will be a small fine imposed upon violators of this rule! Drinks (water, juices, Gatoraid) will be provided for everyone. A meal will also be provided for everyone when we break the fast at Midnight on July 2, although those who have fasted will be invited to eat first.

Participants who cannot fast because they take medication or for whatever reason might choose to symbolically fast by giving up a standard but unnecessary part of their diet during the fast, like meat, or coffee. (But please don't give up coffee if it will make you a grouch!)

WHY FAST?

The idea of fasting is not about torturing ourselves. Fasting is practiced worldwide for a variety of reasons - spiritual, religious, political, and for health reasons. Some people fast regularly for short periods of time, and some for protracted periods. Cesar Chavez once fasted for 36 days to protest working conditions for farm workers, drawing national attention to his issue of concern. Each of us has our own reasons for fasting, but a common theme in fasting while taking part in a political action is that by foregoing food, we adjust our schedule by not stopping to eat every few hours, instead focusing all of our energy and time on our issue of concern.

HEALTH CONCERNS

The body uses a tremendous amount of energy digesting and assimilating foods. Giving your body a rest from this process allows it to cleanse and balance itself. A modified fast is considered by many experts to be an excellent way to give the body a chance to regroup or fight minor illnesses like colds.

When done carefully and with deliberation, fasting is not really a health risk at all. Of course, this is only true for people who are generally in good health. Diabetics, and those on anti-inflammatory drugs or steroids should not fast. Always check with your doctor before any significant alteration of your diet, but particularly If you are over 50, on any medication, or if you have other specific health concerns.

It is important to stay conscious of your own health status during your fast. If you feel ill or woozy, tell someone, and get help. We usually have health professionals among us, but Emergency Medical Technicians are just a phone call away, should it come to that. We have never had a fasting-related medical emergency since the beginning of this event.

HOW EXTREME IS YOUR FAST?

Technically, a true fast means not ingesting anything - not even liquids! If you are Jewish and have ever fasted for Yom Kippur, then you know what that is like, and you know that 26 hours is plenty of time to go without food or water! But such a fast would be dangerous in the heat of DC, and is not recommended.

For purposes of the AAC's annual Fast & Vigil, each individual defines their own fast. Most people who fast do a "liquids only" fast, meaning that if its liquid, it's fair. This is not to say that you should bring a blender and liquify a hamburger! Most AAC fasters drink whatever they choose. Since 2000, when one faster (Ron Kaz) resolved to drink only water, a growing group of us have taken the "water only" route. Some folks alternate with whatever we have on-hand: water, Gatoraid, soda, juices and coffee. We will provide plenty of water and an electrolyte/carbohydrate enhanced sports beverage like Poweraid or Gatoraid. We will also provide soda and V-8 vegetable and fruit juices. Coffee drinks are available at nearby shops. If there is something specific that you like, tell us and we will try to get some, or just bring your own.

BREAKING THE FAST

It is very important not to "pig out" upon ending your fast. This is bad for the body and can make you ill. If you have enjoyed a spiritual experience with your fast, it is particularly important to re-enter the world of food slowly and deliberately. We will break our fast with a wonderful and nutritious vegetarian meal lovingly prepared by our friends at the Dorothy Day Catholic Worker House.

A FEW USEFUL TIPS

* Most people find it useful to start eating less, and lighter foods, in the 2-3 days prior to the fast.
* Drink continuously.
* Alcohol has additional risks while fasting. The kick will be stronger on both ends. If you grab a beer in the evening at a local bar, take it easy. Remember your pledge not to drink or do illegal drugs while involved with the Fast & Vigil.
* One of the most difficult things about fasting is giving up food - not in our body, but in our head. Some folks find themselves fantasizing about food. If you deny the fantasy, it can get stronger. You might find it useful to enjoy the fantasy, and then turn again to the reason that you are fasting.
* Some folks experience hunger pangs for the first day or two. This will pass, and by the third day your body will typically adjust. When experiencing hunger pangs, you may find it helpful to acknowledge that you are hungry, and then turn your thoughts to the reason that you are fasting.

* Another difficulty with fasting is texture deprivation. After a day or two, you may get a touch of diarrhea. Rest assured that bathrooms will always be within 100 yards while you are at the vigil site, but be sure to use them before taking a walk....
* By the time you get to the third day, you may begin to feel a little "high" from the lack of food. This is natural. It is important to be a little more aware of yourself while walking or doing anything potentially dangerous, like carrying stuff, or driving. Some people use this "high" as a special place in which to meditate, and enter into solidarity with all suffering people.
* If at any time in your life you used an excessive amount of hallucinogenic drugs or other powerful medication, be aware that there may be a residual effect (flashback) when your body begins to use body fat to replace the food you are not eating. If you start tripping, enjoy!
* Caffeine depravation can produce a serious headache. Take your favorite headache medicine and a nap. Abe Bonowitz relates his experience: "In 2003 I started doing water only. No coffee, no soda, no gatorade - nothing but water. Every year is different, but in 2004 by the end of the first day I had a massive headache, to the point that I actually thought I was going to vomit. At about 10pm I took some Excedrin (which contains caffeine) and went to bed. When I woke up I felt great, and the rest of the fast was a breeze. I find that doing a water-only fast takes away all the decisions and keeps me that much more focused. I save a lot of money on coffee, too!"