

## *Challenges for Peace Movement in Time of War*

By Stephen Zunes

The tragic events of September 11 have created unprecedented challenges for the peace movement, anti-interventionist forces, and other progressive activists. For the first time in the lives of most Americans, the U.S. has found itself under attack.

After more than fifty years of fabricated and exaggerated threats to national security put forward by the U.S. government, academia, and the media to justify military interventionism abroad, even many traditional critics of U.S. foreign policy now acknowledge that there does exist a very real threat to U.S. security. Indeed, there is little question that Osama Bin Laden's ideology is apocalyptic and his methods are genocidal. Furthermore, his worldview is closer to that of the European fascists of the 1930s than of the progressive third world revolutionaries of the 1970s who inspired many progressives in the West.

A significant minority of Americans, however, seriously question the wisdom of the U.S. military response. Some of these dissidents come from the pacifist tradition, taking a principled position in opposition to all war. They support nonviolent alternatives and argue that violence necessarily begets more violence. Other opponents of the Bush administration's war on terrorism come from the far left. They argue that—given the nature of the U.S. role in the world and the powerful special interests that possess an inordinate amount of influence on policymaking—any such military intervention is inherently imperialistic. Still others emphasize utilitarian arguments against the use of large-scale bombing and other blunt instruments of power when dealing with a decentralized network of underground terrorist cells, where more targeted police or commando operations might be more appropriate.

Part of the difficulty in building an antiwar movement has been the nature of the Bush administration's military response thus far. On the one hand, few progressives would have objected to a limited and targeted paramilitary action under international auspices, or even bombing raids targeted exclusively at Al-Qaeda facilities and nearby antiaircraft batteries. On the other hand, massive attacks against a series of Middle Eastern and Central Asian countries with the concomitant large-scale civilian casualties would have created such a backlash that the self-defeating nature of the U.S. military response would have created a credible antiwar opposition. Instead, the U.S. response has been somewhere between the two: excessive enough to raise serious moral, legal, and political objections, but limited enough so that the immediate negative consequences are not readily apparent to most Americans. Indeed, despite the failure to capture Osama Bin Laden and destroy the Al-Qaeda network, U.S. military operations have at least partially crippled the operations of the terrorist group and succeeded in overthrowing what was perhaps the most brutal totalitarian regime on the planet. While U.S. military operations were not as quick or successful as many in the Bush administration hoped, dire predictions from the left that the United States would be dragged into a quagmire comparable to the Soviet experience of the 1980s also proved to be incorrect.

Yet there are still strong utilitarian arguments against war. Given that terrorism is an international problem, it needs international solutions. This means vigorously and collaboratively pursuing diplomatic, investigative, and international police channels to identify, track down, arrest, and bring to justice members of terrorist cells responsible for these crimes. Precipitous and inappropriate military action makes many nations—particularly in the Middle East,

whose support is needed to track down terrorists hiding within those countries' borders—reluctant to cooperate in antiterrorism efforts.

The United States is good at dropping bombs, firing missiles, and other displays of military force. However, even Bush administration officials acknowledge that the most important aspects of the campaign against terrorism are non-military, including good intelligence on, interdiction of, and disruption of the financial networks which support terrorists, all of which goals require cooperation with other nations. Unfortunately, the apparent U.S. military victory in Afghanistan and threats to expand the war elsewhere is likely to make the far more important political struggle all the more difficult.

For years, progressive voices in this country called for the withdrawal of American troops from the Middle East, a more even-handed position between the Israelis and Palestinians, a cessation of support for repressive governments, an end to the punitive sanctions against the people of Iraq, and a halt to the massive arms shipments to that already overly militarized region. If those in power had heeded these demands, it would have likely prevented the rise of anti-American terrorism in the Middle East; thousands of Americans and others killed on September 11 would still be alive today. It is ironic, then, that the very militarists whose policies led to the current crisis have successfully manipulated the threat they helped create to their own political advantage while marginalizing the prophetic progressive voices who warned that such consequences might be forthcoming if such misguided policies continued.

Those supporting peace and seeking alternatives to military intervention

must find a way out of this conundrum.

## Short to Medium-term Strategies for the Peace Movement

The September 11 attacks have placed traditional critics of U.S. militarism and interventionism in a bind. In refusing to support military action, such critics can easily be portrayed as naively acquiescing to dangerous forces that have demonstrated both the willingness and the ability to do enormous harm to many thousands of innocent people in our own country.

As a result, many former peace activists—even while cautioning against the more large-scale military actions advocated by administration hawks—are, for the first time, endorsing at least some sort of military response. At the same time, there are still very real moral and legal questions regarding certain aspects of military action, even among non-pacifists. Furthermore, supporting military action feeds the very militarization of U.S. foreign policy that helped create the backlash so frighteningly manifested in the Al-Qaeda movement and other extremist activities.

Perhaps the greatest contribution progressives can make to the current situation in the short- to medium-term is exposing how the Bush administration is using the crisis to advance its right-wing ideological agenda. For example, no other country besides Taliban-ruled Afghanistan has been shown to have harbored or given any other kind of direct support to Al-Qaeda. However, there have been a series of threats by the Bush administration to extend the war to Iraq, Somalia, Yemen, and

elsewhere, in an apparent desire to use counterterrorism as an excuse to punish regimes it doesn't like and to extend American military power. Such attacks would create a widespread anti-American backlash in the region that would severely compromise the non-military but more crucial counterterrorism efforts on which the United States must concentrate at this stage. Those opposing further U.S. military intervention must emphasize that the struggle against terrorism is too important to be sabotaged by ideologues wishing to settle old scores.

Another example regards the enormous increase in military spending advocated by the Bush administration—with apparent support from leading congressional Democrats—that has been justified as necessary to fund the war on terrorism. However, the vast majority of the proposed spending is for weapons systems and other expenditures having nothing to do with counterterrorism; indeed, many were originally designed to counter Soviet weapons that no longer exist. Activists can point out that, at a time of national crisis where a singularity of purpose is required, the two major parties are taking advantage of the American people and their hard-earned tax dollars to subsidize the arms industry. For example, if the terrorist attacks of September 11 proved anything, it is the folly of the assertion that a nuclear missile defense can protect us. The use of missiles, bombers, and other heavy high-tech equipment may have been partially successful in Afghanistan, where there were some tangible, if limited, targets in the form of training camps for Al-Qaeda and other military installations belonging to the allied Taliban regime. However, such weapons will be of little use against the majority of

Al-Qaeda that remains intact as a network of decentralized, underground cells. As a result, antiwar activists can point out that the emphasis on heavy high-tech weaponry in the proposed federal budget is based not on its need to protect Americans from terrorism but because such weaponry is extremely profitable for arms manufacturers.

From fiscal policy to civil liberties to trade issues to environmental concerns, the entire agenda of the political right is being advanced in the name of fighting terrorism. Indeed, many progressives barely had time to grieve the tragedies of September 11 before we had to start worrying about the frightening political implications of our government's response. In addition to the threat of war, few progressives could doubt that there would soon be assaults on such areas as civil liberties, immigrant rights, saner budget priorities, human rights, international law, and arms control. Antiterrorism has become what anti-communism was during the cold war: the manipulation of an outside threat to pursue a right-wing agenda, including the suppression of legitimate dissent. Also as during the cold war, most prominent liberals have timidly accepted many of the assumptions and policies put forward by right-wing Republicans and thereby made thoughtful debate of the policies that resulted in this terrorist threat extremely difficult.

At the same time, few things make people angrier than being taken advantage of in time of genuine need. Progressives must acknowledge the reality of the terrorist threat and the necessity of a strong and effective response from our government, while at the same time exposing the perfidy of the Bush administration in cynically manipulating our genuine need

for security for the sake of its rigid ideological constructs and its wealthy financial supporters.

### Longer-term Strategies

In most previous cases of U.S. military intervention abroad, it was generally enough to simply demand the U.S. stay out. The current crisis, however, does require some credible alternatives to the Bush administration policy. Successful activism against war has to proceed from good policy prescriptions to introduce this shift. In previous campaigns regarding military intervention, antiwar forces have been mostly reacting to U.S. policy. To win this struggle, those desiring a more enlightened foreign policy must also be on the offensive.

Whatever the most appropriate U.S. response may be in the short term, the most important thing the United States can do to prevent future terrorism is to change its policies toward the Middle East. There can not be a successful peace movement without a movement to change U.S. Middle East policy. Such changes will certainly not satisfy the Bin Ladens and other extremists. A more rational Middle East policy, however, will seriously reduce their potential following and, by extension, their capacity to do damage. The United States should certainly not change any policy for the sake of appeasing terrorists. But progressives must push for policy changes that should be made anyway for moral or legal reasons that would simultaneously reduce the threat from terrorism. For example, it would be wrong to call for an end to the American commitment to Israel's legitimate security needs in order to appease anti-Jewish terrorists. However, peace activists should demand an end to the unconditional

U.S. military, economic, and diplomatic support for Israel's rightist government and its occupation and colonization of the West Bank and Gaza Strip—not only because it fuels the fires of anti-American extremism but also because it is wrong to support any government that violates basic principles of international law and human rights.

Building a U.S. Middle East policy based more on the promotion of human rights, international law, and sustainable development and less on arms transfers, support for occupation armies and dictatorial governments, air strikes, and punitive sanctions would make the United States much safer. It is, therefore, appealing to enlightened self-interest—consistent with the professed values with which most Americans identify—that can build a progressive alternative to current U.S. policy. Indeed, claims by President George W. Bush to the contrary, the United States has not become a target because of our freedom and democracy, but because U.S. Middle East policy is not about freedom and democracy. We are not hated because of our values, but because we have strayed from those values.

The emphasis on a largely military response to the threat of terrorism ignores the fact that it has been the dramatic militarization of the Middle East in recent decades, encouraged by successive U.S. administrations, that has helped create this violent anti-American backlash. Indeed, the more the U.S. has militarized the region, the less secure the American people have become. All the sophisticated weaponry, brave fighting men and women, and brilliant military leadership the United States may possess will do little good if there are hundreds of millions of people in the

Middle East and beyond who hate us. Even the tiny percentage that may support Osama Bin Laden's methods will be enough to maintain dangerous terrorist networks as long as his grievances resonate with the majority. Even should there be an initially successful outcome of the military response to Bin Laden and his Al-Qaeda network, there will be new terrorists to take their places unless there is a critical examination of what has prompted the rise of such a fanatical movement.

There are those who argue that Osama Bin Laden's political agenda should not be taken any more seriously than those of Oklahoma City bomber Timothy McVeigh, late 1960s cult leader Charles Manson, or any other mass murderer. Certainly anyone who would be willing to sacrifice thousands of innocent lives for any reason is clearly a pathological killer and is unlikely to be reasoned with or appeased through negotiations.

An important distinction should be made, however. Terrorist groups whose political grievances have little political appeal—such as the far left and far right terrorist groups which have periodically arisen in relatively open societies like those in Western Europe and the United States—can be suppressed relatively easily. By contrast, terrorist groups whose agendas reflect those of systematically oppressed populations—such as Palestinian Arabs, Sri Lankan Tamils, or Northern Ireland Catholics—are far more difficult to control without also addressing the underlying political grievances. Osama Bin Laden and his network may be more like the latter, only on a regional scale. Indeed, with the dramatic rise of radical Islamic movements worldwide and

the growing Arab diaspora, the threat is on a global scale.

As most Muslims recognize, Osama Bin Laden is certainly not an authority on Islam. He is, however, a businessman who—like any good businessman—knows how to take a popular fear or desire and use it to sell a product: in this case, anti-American terrorism. Although very few Muslims support his ideology and tactics, the grievances expressed in his manifestoes—the ongoing U.S. military presence in the Gulf, the humanitarian consequences of the U.S.-led sanctions against Iraq, U.S. support for the Israeli government, and U.S. support for autocratic Arab regimes—have widespread appeal in that part of the world. For the struggle against terrorism to be successful, the United States must redefine security from the current militarist paradigm to one that addresses the root causes. This is where a strong progressive movement must take the lead.

The so-called “terrorism experts,” like the “strategic analysts” of the cold war, are disproportionately right-wingers who have their own ideological agenda. The more narrow the focus on terrorism, the more it feeds the militarists. At the same time, simply pointing out the hypocrisy in U.S. counterterrorism policy (including U.S. support for terrorist groups over the years) is not enough. We must also offer solutions.

## The Potential for Building a Movement

Support for U.S. military action is a mile wide and an inch deep. Given the nature of the threat, the vast majority of Americans believe that military action is necessary. Yet there is also a realization by many millions

of Americans that Al-Qaeda was at least in part a result of a series of misguided U.S. policies over the years. Simply addressing the security aspects of terrorism, as U.S. policy currently does, is merely confronting the symptoms rather than the cause. The struggle against terrorism cannot be won until the U.S. also ceases its pursuit of policies that alienate such large segments of the international community, particularly in the Middle East and elsewhere in the third world.

The U.S. is a target of terrorists in large part due to our perceived arrogance, hypocrisy, and greed. Becoming a more responsible member of the international community will go a long way toward making the U.S. safer and ultimately stronger.

There was nothing karmic about the events of September 11. No country deserves to experience such a large-scale loss of innocent lives. Yet the willingness of Americans to recognize why some extremists might resort to such heinous acts is necessary if there is to be any hope of stopping it in the future. To raise these uncomfortable questions about U.S. foreign policy is difficult for many Americans, particularly in the aftermath of the attacks. However, doing so could not be more important or timely.

A widespread assumption is that concerned citizens must focus on electing those supportive of change if they are to change policy. While backing candidates with more enlightened views toward the U.S. role in the world certainly has its merits, history has shown that who is elected political leader is less important than what choices a well-mobilized citizenry gives those elected once they're in office. Currently, if anything, the Democrats are somewhat to the right of the Republicans on some key Middle East policy issues. It will be

hard to change the policies of the Bush administration if, for example, the majority of the Progressive Caucus and the Human Rights Caucus in the House of Representatives continue their current support for the status quo.

This can change, however. The history of U.S. foreign policy in recent decades has been shaped markedly as a result of popular demands by large numbers of people putting pressure on elected officials through congressional lobbying, legal protests, civil disobedience, and public education campaigns. The Democratic Party had a pro-Vietnam War platform and nominee from the incumbent war-making administration in 1968 only to be replaced by a strong antiwar platform and antiwar nominee in 1972. In the four years in between, there were massive antiwar mobilizations by hundreds of thousands in Washington, DC and elsewhere, as well as large-scale civil disobedience campaigns, widespread draft resistance, and other forms of opposition. Similarly, in 1980, Vice-President Walter Mondale and others in the Carter administration strongly opposed the call for a freeze in the research, testing, and development of new nuclear weapons systems; by the time he ran for president in 1984, however, Mondale was an outspoken supporter of the Freeze campaign. In the intervening four years, the Nuclear Freeze Campaign and disarmament activists mobilized grass roots initiatives across the country, including the massive 1982 protest in New York City. In 1978, Andrew Young—the African-American clergyman and former aide to Martin Luther King who served as Carter's ambassador to the United Nations—vetoed a UN Security Council resolution calling for sanctions against South Africa. By 1986, the

Republican-dominated Senate joined the Democratic-led House of Representatives to override a presidential veto and to impose sanctions on the apartheid state—which was instrumental in the downfall of white minority rule.

Massive protests against the U.S. military role in Central America in the 1980s forced the U.S. government to accept the Arias peace plan, which brought an end to the bloody civil wars and led to more democratic governance in a region then-dominated by dictatorial regimes. In the 1990s, a popular movement supporting self-determination for East Timor forced a reluctant Clinton administration to cut off military aid to Indonesia, playing a key role in forcing a withdrawal by Indonesian occupation forces and eventual independence.

The key to a successful peace movement in our current situation will be to build a popular movement to change Middle East policy comparable to these successful precedents. So far, such a movement has been relatively small compared to the others, which is ironic given what is at stake. As with other movements, there are elements of the far-left and others that adhere to rigid ideological models based upon little empirical information about the conflict in question, often greatly simplifying complex historical dynamics and sometimes even buying into bizarre conspiracy theories. On some Middle East issues, certain elements within the far right can infiltrate various campaigns; for example, there is often a risk of anti-Semites becoming involved in campaigns challenging U.S. policy supporting the Israeli government. However, the biggest problem has been the timidity of the peace and human rights movements to become more involved. For exam-

ple, it is very unlikely that the dozens of prominent liberals who support the bombing of Iraq or military aid to Ariel Sharon's government in Israel would do so if faced with the kind of mobilization that took place opposing U.S. policy in Central America.

Indeed, the failure of pro-peace and anti-interventionist forces to address the Middle East with the same kind of moral fervor demonstrated in campaigns regarding Southeast Asia, Central America, and Southern Africa is what has allowed the U.S. government to pursue policies that have resulted in the current crisis.

There are many opportunities for a movement for peace and justice in the Middle East to build upon existing popular movements. Those challenging the neoliberal model of globalization can observe how the economic stratification and declining access to basic needs by the Middle East's poor majority, resulting from policies of the International Monetary Fund and World Trade Organization have contributed to the rise of extremist groups. Human rights campaigners can note the tendency of Islamic extremists to emerge in countries where open and nonviolent political expression is suppressed. Peace activists can emphasize how the arms trade has contributed to the militarization of the region and the resulting propensity to violence.

Public opinion polls indicating popular support for U.S. Middle East policy does not mean that most Americans support that policy. It merely means that they support what they think that policy is. Many Americans actually believe their government's rhetoric that the United States actually supports democracy, international law, demilitarization, economic development, and Israeli-Palestinian peace. The challenge for

the American peace movement is to expose the real nature of U.S. policy. Once this is done, the popular support for such a movement will already be there to mobilize the kind of resistance that has forced a change toward a more ethical foreign policy in previous conflicts. The threat from terrorism has in certain ways made this more difficult, as so many Americans have become angry and defensive about critiques of U.S. policy in the

face of such violence and rage from foreign extremists. In other ways, however, the very seriousness of the threat has opened people up to learn more about the Middle East, why so many people in that part of the world might hate us, and what might be in the real security interests of the nation.

The Chinese character of “crisis” is a compound word consisting of “dan-

ger” and “opportunity.” The dangers of the current situation are obvious. No less important are the opportunities now available for those who want to change the direction of United States policy in the Middle East and work for peace and justice.

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Focus (online at www.fpif.org).)*

## Who's Who in the Bush Administration

<http://www.fpif.org/republicanrule/index.html>

### Essays Include:

Robert Cutler  
Karen Hansen-Kuhn  
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Chris Toensing  
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*Bush's Middle East Policy: Look to His Advisors*  
*George W. Bush and the "Other" Europe*  
*Republican Rule and the IFIs*  
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And Many Others!

### Profiles Include:

Richard Lee Armitage  
Paul O'Neill  
Richard N. Perle  
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Donald Rumsfeld  
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