

What's a Peace Activist to do After the War's Begun?

Nine Theses on Moving the Peace Movement Forward

By Betsy Hartmann | April 7, 2003

As the U.S. army occupies Baghdad, the peace movement is faced with a series of strategic challenges, challenges we must face openly, and challenges for which there are no easy answers. We must develop political strategies that draw on solidarity and information from activists and analysts in diverse social movements and incorporate those into our own work.

The following reflections are offered as a contribution to the ongoing strategic debates within the peace movement. They are based upon my own ongoing involvement in the peace movement and informed by my own thinking over the past several years about how to build a broad-based progressive social justice movement in this country, a movement that sees the connections between national and international policies and a movement that, while respecting difference, moves beyond the narrow confines of identity and single-issue politics.

1. **We must sustain our resistance to the war.** Even though we have failed to stop the war, our collective pressure may be able to prevent some of the worst military excesses, and this could translate directly into saving the lives of both civilians and soldiers. Sustaining resistance means we need to remain optimistic, and not to be depressed by the opinion polls, which tell us over two-third of Americans are for the war. Those figures change dramatically according to how the questions are asked. We are not alone: an estimated 200,000 people were on the streets of New York in early March protesting the war, as well as thousands more in other cities in the United States and around the world. It is also important that people in other countries see that there is resistance here, in the “belly of the beast.”

2. **We must squarely recognize the class challenges of this war and the resistance to it, and guard against the arrogance of white, middle-class entitlement in framing both resistance and a proactive program of peace and social justice.** This was brought home to me when I attended a demonstration at Westover Air Force Base in Chicopee, Massachusetts, not far from where I teach at Hampshire College. Families in front of their houses were shouting insults at us, while men drove by in flag-covered SUVs and trucks, giving us the finger. The chasm was not only about attitudes toward the war but social class; it felt like middle-class Amherst vs. working class Chicopee. In a depressed economy, with enormous gaps between rich and poor, joining the military is often an economic, not a

political or moral decision. Students at universities and colleges across the country serve in the reserves or the National Guard because it is one of the only ways to pay for college. How do we negotiate the class divide? We can shout, “Support our troops, bring them home,” but bring them home to what?

3. **If ever there were a time to integrate issues of economic justice, it is now.** Not only is it costing us hundreds of billions of dollars to destroy Iraq, but it will also cost billions more to pay any number of corrupt crony corporations to rebuild it. In the process, the Bush administration manufactures a false sense of economic scarcity as communities all over the country are forced to make massive cuts in education, health care, and job creation. The peace movement not only needs to expose these processes—exposing links between Bush administration officials and crony firms and showing how the war in Iraq is undermining economic security at home—but it must also put forward an alternative economic agenda that lasts beyond the immediacy of the war. We are not only struggling for a peace dividend, but a profound transformation of business as usual.

4. **Make the links between war at home and war abroad, for the strength of the national security state depends on a highly racialized internal and external enemy.** For over a decade now, the so-called war on drugs has been a war on communities of color, and repression of immigrants was intensifying well before the September 11th attacks. Unless the peace movement seriously challenges the attack on the human rights and civil liberties of all those deemed “Other,” and defends the rights of those forced outside the boundaries of privileged white American citizenship, it will fail to build an enduring alternative because the militarization of domestic society is precisely what has paved the way for militarism abroad.

5. **We must also understand the link between war abroad and Bush's war on women and reproductive rights.** It is a

Foreign Policy In Focus (FPiF)



characteristic of fundamentalist regimes—and the evidence suggests that we are moving closer to one in this country—that women’s sexuality and reproduction become the target of state control, not only legally and administratively, but symbolically. The Bush administration has already made explicit its opposition to reproductive rights for women at home and abroad through its limits on funding for reproductive health programs and its attacks on abortion rights. At times of war, gender differences become further reified and enforced, and male aggression and violence celebrated. We must understand these connections, and link the peace movement to the ongoing struggle for gender equality and reproductive rights.

6. Monitor and expose the environmental consequences of war. Even in times of relative peace, the U.S. military is probably the single-biggest polluter and energy user on the planet and in times of war the damage is far more extensive. Moreover, as in the case of the Arctic Wildlife Refuge, Bush will try to use the war as an excuse for further environmental deregulation.

7. While our eyes are trained on the situation in Iraq, we must remain vigilant and look elsewhere for repercussions. Several months ago, prominent Israeli academics circulated a letter warning of the possibility that Sharon would use the opportunity of war in Iraq to embark on a massive ethnic cleansing in Palestine. We must consider what pay-offs members of the “coalition of the willing”—or rather coalition of the killing—have received for their support of Washington. We can be sure the U.S. will turn a blind eye to human rights abuses in those countries.

8. Be prepared for the next stage—the occupation of Iraq. While the U.S. is already putting into place its own proxy rulers, the peace movement here needs to forge links and make common cause with progressive Iraqi

groups. We have to be ready to engage in an informed way in the murky politics of humanitarian assistance.

9. Build a new, positive vision of peace and security that eschews both American isolationism and imperialism and strengthens the rule of international law. This isn’t the place to present an outline of a whole new security agenda. But what would real security look like? My short list includes:

- Dismantling weapons of mass destruction in all countries, including ours.
- Supporting institutions to end the impunity of war criminals such as the International Criminal Court and stronger institutions for the protection of human rights.
- Promoting economic, social, and environmental justice that reduces the risk of conflict.

Such positive visions are perhaps the hardest thing to contemplate at times like these. But we must look forward, and not allow the pictures of tanks and bombs and death and destruction on TV to colonize our imaginations, preventing us from imagining a better world. We must stay firmly rooted in our sense of possibilities despite the grim days ahead.

(Betsy Hartmann <ehartmann@hampshire.edu> is the director of the Hampshire College Population and Development Program and a member of the Committee on Women, Population, and the Environment. This is a revised version of a presentation she made at a public forum at Hampshire College sponsored by the Five College Program in Peace and World Security Studies on March 24, 2003.)

Foreign Policy In Focus

“A Think Tank Without Walls”

Established in 1996, Foreign Policy In Focus is a network of policy analysts, advocates, and activists committed to “making the United States a more responsible global leader and global partner.” For more information, visit www.fpif.org.

Recommended citation:

Betsy Hartmann, “Nine Theses on Moving the Peace Movement Forward,” (Silver City, NM & Washington, DC: Foreign Policy In Focus, April 7, 2003).

Web location:

<http://www.presentdanger.org/commentary/2003/0304activist.html>

Production Information:

Writer: Betsy Hartmann
Editor: John Gershman, IRC
Layout: Tonya Cannariato, IRC