

The Peace Movement One Year Later

by Mark Engler | March 2004

One year after the start of war in Iraq, the peace movement in the United States faces an unusual predicament. Critics of the invasion had many of their key arguments vindicated in the past year, as President Bush's case for war has collapsed. Likewise, activists can take substantial credit for emboldening Democratic criticisms of the Bush administration and for keeping war-related scandals in the spotlight. Yet even as we sense that greater space for progressive activism in the country is opening, it has been hard to maintain a sense of unity and purpose within the peace movement itself.

On March 20, the one-year anniversary of the U.S.-led invasion of Iraq, opponents of the war and the ongoing occupation will stage protests and memorials in countries across the globe. The actions will recall the massive demonstrations that took place before the war. However, they will be far smaller than the protests of early 2003.

This set of circumstances raises two key questions: What has the peace movement accomplished? And where do we go from here?

Reflection on these two questions is vital, not because it will magically give the movement a bold new direction or clear up all confusion among supporters about where peace activism now stands. Rather, only by standing back can we crystallize the strains of thinking that are circulating between different activists, and spark further discussion about strategies for going forward. Therefore, this paper will consider each of the questions in turn, with the goals of providing an overview of what has happened so far and of evaluating current ideas about movement strategy.

I. What Has the Peace Movement Accomplished?

Last year, the Bush administration's push for war with Iraq faced a huge wave of international dissent. This outcry culminated in the coordinated worldwide demonstrations of February 15, 2003. The mobilization was especially noteworthy because it drew out massive crowds before an invasion of Iraq had even started. In the U.S., the largest protests took place in New York and San Francisco, but significant actions sprang up in many communities across the country that rarely see sizable demonstrations. Likewise, as part of the "Cities for Peace" campaign, some 140 U.S. communities passed antiwar resolutions, including large cities like Chicago, Detroit, and Los Angeles, as well as small ones like Telluride, Colorado, Salisbury, Connecticut, and Des Moines, Iowa.

The pace of organizing remained strong through the opening week of the war, producing in some surprisingly militant direct actions immediately after the bombing began. Actions in

San Francisco merit particular attention not only because they generated a remarkable 2,300 arrests in the first days of war, but also because they show the difficulty of sustaining momentum after a tremendous first thrust.

Early in the morning of March 20, the day after the war began in Iraq, activists descended *en masse* on the San Francisco financial district. Protestors tied up the main thoroughfares and blocked the entrances to major office buildings, acting "like sand in the gears," as one headline in *The San Francisco Chronicle* read. A mock construction crew closed off a highway ramp with orange cones, road flares, and "Men at Work" signs. After the first day, Alex Fagan, San Francisco's Assistant Chief of Police, acknowledged the historic proportions of the actions. "This is the largest number of arrests we've made in one day and the largest demonstration in terms of disruption that I've seen," he said. Protests continued in force for another three days.

Given that the city of San Francisco was generally sympathetic to the anti-war cause, mainstream critics of the actions argued that protesters were picking poor targets by bringing the city's "business as usual" to a standstill. In response Andrea Buffa, spokeswoman for United for Peace and Justice, indicated, "People are moving on from tying up intersections and preventing ordinary San Franciscans from getting to work." Instead, organizers focused more intensively on targeting corporations set to profit from the war. They staged downtown actions against the Carlyle Group and protests at the Oakland dockyards against military cargo freighter APL Shipping and postwar contractor Stevedoring Services of America.

However, these actions did not translate into a strategy for escalation, and the movement's momentum slowed in the weeks following the first mass arrests. The shift was compounded by a dramatic change in mood nationally as the invasion of Iraq swiftly came to an end and the regime change heralded as a success.

After Regime Change

As Bush proclaimed "Mission Accomplished," a perception emerged that the movement was a failure because it

Foreign Policy In Focus (FPiF)



had been unable to stop the invasion. Organizers in San Francisco, having pulled off a remarkable series of actions, will have to evaluate for themselves whether these tactics proved effective in advancing a local strategy, given the time and resources they devoted. But there is no doubt that, in more general terms, the visible, outspoken, and sometimes disruptive global protests significantly shaped public understanding of the war.

In the wake of the protests on February 15, 2004, *The New York Times* famously labeled “world public opinion” as the second of “two superpowers on the planet.” In several countries, most notably Spain (where the anti-war left just succeeded in ousting a pro-war government), forces standing in opposition to the invasion and occupation of Iraq have significantly altered the balance of power within their governments. It is possible that international outrage stopped the administration from fulfilling neoconservative desires to follow up on the invasion of Iraq with assaults on Syria and Iran.

Domestically, protesters can also point to specific effects of their actions. Due to strong expressions of dissent, the war in Iraq was framed as a fiercely disputed affair. The taint of controversy limited the surge of support that any U.S. president can expect to receive when commanding troops overseas, and set the stage for the later scandals that would plague the Bush administration. The relentless scrutiny and criticism by the peace movement of the faulty case for invasion would ultimately gain mainstream traction and leave the president flailing to defend his wartime lies and deceptions.

Peace movement activists also helped to empower a mainstream Democratic critique of Bush’s war. Al Gore chose a movement vehicle, MoveOn.org, as a platform to launch his stern critiques of the White House. The same organization was closely associated with Howard Dean’s grassroots fundraising machine. Activists soon found many of their arguments voiced in the presidential primaries. This came to fruition most visibly in the Dean campaign, which in turn helped to push the entire Democratic field in an anti-war direction. Even reluctant critics like John Kerry realized that a Lieberman-esque stance in defense of war was simply not going to work in reaching an energized Democratic base.

While peace activists seemed demoralized by a triumphal Bush administration throughout much of spring 2003, antiwar sentiment began to rebound by autumn. This resurgence was due less to an overall critique of imperialism and occupation than to success in advancing a series of smaller, more concrete points. The sustained hostilities and attacks on U.S. servicemen in Iraq disproved the neo-

conservative vision of an easy reconstruction, suggesting grim and difficult times ahead. Likewise, increasing U.S. casualties fermented growing discontent among military families about the war’s necessity.

Movement critiques helped to discredit the popular myth of a link between Hussein and al Qaeda, disrupting contentions that the Iraq war was an effective way to fight terrorism. Denunciations of the administration’s corporate pandering appeared especially trenchant following a series of no-bid contracts offered to well-connected U.S. businesses, as well as after persistent scandals about Halliburton profiteering. Finally, the administration’s misuse of police powers to target opponents of the war helped to feed a backlash of civil libertarians calling for the repeal of the Patriot Act.

This winter, after search teams in Iraq failed to produce weapons of mass destruction, the central justification of the war collapsed and public support of the invasion weakened. In this context, critics of the war effort have found many of their arguments more readily accepted than ever.

II. Where Do We Go From Here?

All these achievements deserve recognition. However, none of them amounts to a movement strategy. Since the end of combat operations, peace activists have struggled to present a unified message, structured campaign goals, or a plan for escalating dissent. The call to “Bring the Troops Home Now” is not universally accepted even amongst those who oppose the U.S. occupation, and it often muddies the waters by focusing on technical discussion of if and how the international community should play a greater role in furthering Iraqi sovereignty. The slogan for the March 20 protests, “The World Still Says No to War,” is not fashioned to provide a new alternative or to convey a sense of fresh demands.

Some prominent writers have proposed campaigns that might inaugurate a new phase of the peace movement. Tariq Ali has proposed an international movement to close some of the 702 U.S. military bases abroad. Arundhati Roy has suggested a targeted campaign against two selected corporations profiting from Iraq, and the organization Direct Action to Stop the War has continued its focus on corporate profiteers. Naomi Klein has argued for a focus on stopping the privatization of the Iraqi economy.

Each of these proposals merits consideration, especially on the international level. But in the U.S., they must be put in the context of the one dominant strategy to which organizations and activists have actually committed themselves already: The drive to achieve “regime change at home.”

“Beat Bush” and Beyond

In terms of critical mass, unified message, and clear goals, the push to “Beat Bush” is likely the only thing on the map of the U.S. peace movement that qualifies as a true strategy. This is by no means uncontroversial amongst activists, and many leading peace movement organizations have refrained from explicitly endorsing an anti-Bush electoral effort. Yet in contrast to four years ago, when many progressives supported the Nader campaign and felt that a ripe moment for third party insurgency had arrived, a wide range of left-of-center citizens are now unrepentantly joining forces to oust the current administration.

It hardly needs to be argued that there are many good reasons for this. One worth mentioning is that since most opponents of U.S. militarism also deplore such evils as the upward redistribution of wealth via tax cuts, the destruction of the environment, the denial of civil liberties, the busting of unions, and the repeal of reproductive freedoms, supporting the Democratic candidate for president presents itself as a “radical” option since it links these various harms and allows us to kill several birds with one stone. Or if not to kill those birds, then at least to clip their wings.

However, a “Beat Bush” strategy also has its limits. The first, and most obvious, is that John Kerry’s “anti-war” position is barely passable—something he belatedly adopted after initially voting to authorize an invasion. For better or worse, the candidate keeps up “presidential” appearances by explicitly distancing himself from claims that a U.S. “empire” exists. He instead prefers to talk about Bush administration “mistakes” and “errors of judgement.” The peace movement may have good reason to support Kerry, but we would be foolish to expect him to voice our views of U.S. policy for us. Moreover, critics of the “Anybody But Bush” impulse rightly note that an over-focus on the election could cause considerable frustration for the movement—not only in the event that Bush wins, and the effort seems all for naught, but even if Kerry wins and his management of the occupation proves less than praiseworthy.

Second, just because peace activists join in a broader Democratic coalition does not mean that we will recruit more people to our cause, nor necessarily spread a more radical analysis of global challenges. Of course, these organizational objectives are not ends in themselves. But they do impact efforts to advance wider progressive campaigns. While groups like United for Peace and Justice were able to mobilize large crowds to prewar demonstrations, they have been markedly less successful in turning out participants to protest related issues, like domestic budget cuts. Work on globalization issues, which many activists rightly

see as integrally linked with anti-war campaigning, has slowed as focus has turned to military intervention. Articulating the connection between these causes is a task that must continue to take place regardless of the presidential elections.

Third, having a firm goal for next November still does not substitute for long-term thinking. While U.S. progressivism at its weakest has avoided electoral politics altogether, at its best it has put support of candidates in the context of a larger vision—it has used electoral work as a means to greater ends.

The labor movement provides one example. The most aggressive segments of organized labor—those waging forceful campaigns for union representation, respect on the job, just wages, and immigrant rights—can come to political campaigns as representatives of an ongoing movement. As such, they can look at electoral drives as one tactic of many. They can spend less time agonizing that they have subverted the whole of their politics to a “lesser of evils” opportunism. They can support candidates wholeheartedly in the short term, and then use electoral gains to advance their organizing.

Whether or not one happened to agree with it, the 2000 Nader campaign was also able to articulate a concrete strategy for its electoral intervention: It aimed to gain 5% of the popular vote. In doing so it would secure millions of dollars in federal matching funds for the Green Party in future contests and, supporters argued, open a real space for progressive third-party politics. The Kucinich campaign, like Nader’s current bid for the presidency, hasn’t been able to express this level of strategic clarity.

One way that peace activists can think about longer-term strategy is simply by reconceptualizing specific demands as ongoing campaigns. An effort to “Bring the Troops Home” can be a multi-stage affair, which includes defeating Bush as a first step, and then pressuring Kerry on his foreign policy stances and appointments as an important second step. In this way, we start talking about what happens after the November elections. Campaigns to close military bases or target war profiteers could similarly play out both during and after the election season.

A Unique Role

Concerning the immediate future, the main institutions of the U.S. peace movement (to the extent that they have accepted the “Beat Bush” strategy at all) have been well aware of the need to approach a coalition effort with an agenda of their own. Many have worked to articulate what such engagement might look like. The newspaper *War*

Times, while celebrating Bush's poor showing in the polls, argues for the need "to continue to push our peace demand ourselves—and push Democrats to follow." Many activists would take from this a plan for "critical support" of John Kerry. Of course, when it comes to mainstream presidential candidates, the U.S. left has proven itself better at the "critical" part of things than at "support." Along similar lines, United for Peace and Justice's 12-month strategy paper speaks of "shaping the debate." This is an admirable goal, but probably is too ambitious and diffuse to plan around effectively.

Looking at what unique strengths the peace movement brings to a larger "Beat Bush" coalition, a more specific job emerges for anti-war activists to tackle: Namely, the job of taking the war away from President Bush as a campaign asset. When the White House tries to portray its Iraq conquest as a victory for freedom and justice in the world, peace activists have a clear mandate to challenge the rosy story line, to expose the lies, and to highlight the true costs of neoconservatism. Already, we have made considerable strides in this direction, forcing the administration into what *The New York Times* describes as a "slow retreat... a day-by-day, fact-by-fact backing away from assertions they made with such confidence nine months ago."

Klein, among others, is now forcefully arguing that the privatization of Iraq's economy will be a vital front in this effort. As each of the leading justifications for war—first the weapons of mass destruction, then the links with al Qaeda—has fallen away, Bush has increasingly been forced to fall back on humanitarian reasoning. His apologists now frame the war as an effort to promote democracy. It will

be incumbent upon peace activists, drawing on a wider analysis of global injustices, to raise questions about what version of "freedom" the White House is actually offering.

After all, what kind of democracy is the Bush administration promoting when the occupying authority has already sold away the Iraqi economy—where virtually everything is newly privatized, where there are no limits on the controlling interests of foreign corporations, where profits are expatriated, and where pre-arranged Structural Adjustment programs put handcuffs on national policymakers? Freedom for a well-connected corps of multinational profiteers and true self-determination for the Iraqi people are two very distinct things. It's the job of the peace movement to publicize the difference in a way that can resonate with a large portion of the American electorate.

A modest start to our renewed efforts to make the costs of war an election issue will be participating in protests on March 20. This means joining vigils taking place throughout the world. Or, better yet, marching with military families to the White House from the Dover, Delaware Air Force Base, a site where the media is banned and the Iraq war dead arrive. Pictures of the families, the marchers, and the mourners are images of dissent that the president would rather not see in advance of the November elections. But for a movement rebuilding momentum, they would be only the beginning.

Mark Engler, a writer based in New York City, is a commentator for Foreign Policy in Focus. He can be reached via the web site <http://www.DemocracyUprising.com>. Research assistance for this article provided by Jason Rowe.

Published by Foreign Policy In Focus (FPIF), a joint project of the Interhemispheric Resource Center (IRC, online at www.irc-online.org) and the Institute for Policy Studies (IPS, online at www.ips-dc.org). ©2004. All rights reserved.

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:

Mark Engler, "The Peace Movement One Year Later," Foreign Policy In Focus (Silver City, NM: Interhemispheric Resource Center, March 2004).

Web location:

<http://www.fpif.org/papers/2004peace.html>

Production Information:

Writer: Mark Engler

Editor: John Gershman, IRC

Layout: Tonya Cannariato, IRC

