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Reflections on the Anti-war Movement, Then and Now

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The single most frequently asked question in the early days of the war against Iraq was: where is the antiwar movement? Americans asked it of each other and were besieged by the question when they travelled abroad. There was a war then and a massive movement. There is a war now; so where is the movement? Is there any organisation at all? What is its strength? What are its positions? Each time I was asked to speak or write on this straightforward subject I would start by trying to say two things at once: the old movement wasn't quite the wonder of democracy-in-the-streets-stopping-an-imperialist-war it is often made out to be and, there *is* a movement now. Then I'd stop. Because I too feel myself pulled back in memory to a time when, for over a decade, it seemed that every day was filled with a communal sense of rage, exchanged not in emails or blogs but directly in conversations, endless meetings, newly launched journals. The politics of the antiwar movement merged with the urgent cultural changes of the time: music, dope, sex, contempt for ways of studying and learning that had produced the wars and injustices against which we protested. I can remember travelling across the country to meetings on state college campuses in the deep mid-West which I had expected to be sunk in some timewarp of the 1950s and finding instead liberated zones in which we danced to the same music, smoked the same dope and had the same endless debates over tactics and strategy. The community of protest that was established in those years, however temporary, was nevertheless real. The ties between students and other groups opposing the war

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– churches, some labour unions, long-established pacifist groups – were strong and seemed to promise (although the language had not yet been invented) a strengthening of civil society. In short, before the revolution, everything was very beautiful. Of course, the beauty of this strong antiwar movement rested solidly on the back of the ongoing prosecution of a war of exceptional length and brutality. And then too, we were all young, then.

Having now discharged my own abiding nostalgia let me move to history, rather than memory. The Sixties – to use the general noun currently in use – were centrally about the recognition, on the part of an ever growing number of Americans, that the country in which they thought they lived – peaceful, generous, honourable, just – did not exist and never had. The emergence of a more nuanced history of the US as opposed to the patriotic metanarrative taught in grade school began not with the war but with the civil rights movement. Its criticisms of the US were couched initially in the familiar rhetoric of the Cold War, but it quickly developed in new directions, introducing the country to a set of tactics, and the images that went with them, that raised different questions: What was the nature of the federal government's commitment to universal suffrage? Would it use federal troops to enforce equal rights for all its citizens? Questions about contemporary racial arrangements led inevitably to historical ones and an uneasy recognition of the contradictory nature of the entire national narrative, from the Founding Fathers to nation-building in Vietnam.

Early on in the war, some leaders of the civil rights movement began to connect racial justice at home and the war abroad. Malcolm X, for example, denounced the war in December 1964 and, before the year was out, he was joined by James Forman, executive secretary of the Student Non-Violent Coordinating Committee (SNCC). In 1965, the McComb, Mississippi, branch of the Freedom Democratic Party explicitly called for draft resistance: "No one has a right to ask us to risk our lives and kill other Coloured People in . . . Vietnam so that the White American can get richer. We will be looked upon as traitors to the Coloured People of the world if Negro people continue to fight and die without a cause . . . We can write our sons and ask if they know what they are fighting for. If he answers Freedom, tell him that's what we are fighting for here in Mississippi. And if he says Democracy, tell him the truth – we don't know anything about Communism, socialism, and all that, but we do know that Negroes have caught hell under this American democracy."¹

By 1967 Martin Luther King Jr had not only endorsed draft resistance, but had expressed an unexpected empathy for the "desperate, rejected and angry young men" who had set ghettos from Watts to Washington, DC, on fire: "As I have walked among [them] I have told them that Molotov cocktails and rifles would not solve their problems . . . But they asked – and rightly so – what about Vietnam? . . . Their questions hit home, and I knew that I could never again raise my voice against the violence of the oppressed in the ghettos without having first spoken clearly to the greatest purveyor of violence in the world today – my own government."² A May 1967 FBI report on the potential for racial violence in the summer of that year noted the link between the civil rights movement and anti-Vietnam War movement with considerable alarm: "King has now joined [Stokely] Carmichael [of SNCC], [Floyd] McKissick [of the Congress of Racial Equality], and other civil rights extremists in embracing the communist tactic of linking the civil rights movement with the anti-Vietnam-war protest movement . . . King's exhortation to boycott the

draft and refuse to fight could lead eventually to dangerous displays of civil disobedience and near-seditious activities by Negroes and whites alike.”³

The assassinations of King and Malcolm X short-circuited what might have been a powerful, united movement against the war and for fundamental social change. In the event the mainstream of the antiwar movement narrowed its focus to a single goal: to end the war in Vietnam.⁴ The destruction of a small Southeast Asian country by the most powerful military machine in the world, which unfolded daily in the press and on TV screens, never felt ordinary. Rather, it assumed nightmare proportions, requiring an ever greater need to protest and somehow bring it to an end.

Richard Nixon, like Lyndon Johnson before him, was extremely sensitive to the antiwar movement and monitored it closely. “Realises,” Haldeman noted in his diary for 29 September 1969, referring to the president, that “war support is more tenuous every day and knows we have to maintain it somehow.” Fearful of the coming October moratorium, Nixon considered scheduling a press conference that would “pre-empt coverage of the day’s activities”. The point, Haldeman told his diary, was to “try to make the innocents see they are being used . . . Hard to do much because momentum is tremendous and broad based.” The November moratorium – a nationwide call to suspend ‘business as usual’ in order to protest the war – disturbed Nixon even more. He thought hard about it and had “helpful ideas like using helicopters to blow their candles out . . .” Much in the style of his superior’s later observation of the Great Wall of China, that it was a great wall, Haldeman noted that “the big march turned out to be huge”. Even, “really huge”.⁵

At the same time, many Americans were often as upset by the demonstrators as by the war. Indeed, their opposition to the war frequently took the form of urging that the government go ‘in’ or get ‘out’ – in which going in meant the yet more total destruction of Vietnam as a means of getting out. As George Packer described it in a recent essay, the sixties, “which began in liberal consensus over the Cold War and civil rights, became a struggle between two apocalyptic politics that each saw the other as hell-bent on the country’s annihilation. The result was violence like nothing the country had seen since the civil war . . .”⁶ Republican politicians skilfully manipulated these enmities (and still do).

Finally, Ho Chi Minh *did* win. His colleagues and heirs had defeated the world’s pre-eminent military power. And the antiwar movement had succeeded as well, if not in ending the war then at least in contributing to its end. It took more than a decade to achieve this, but the legacies of the antiwar movement, like the legacies of the war itself, lingered and for a time seemed to have an effect, albeit limited. The powerful anti-military consensus of the post-war period had a name: the Vietnam syndrome, which can be defined as a dangerous lack of blood-lust on the part of the public. Presidents who wished to send troops into combat had to mount determined campaigns to persuade people that such action was necessary. Public expressions of disapproval of the use of force paused when soldiers were actually deployed, but that did not lessen their impact on politicians and policy-makers.

No US troops were sent to Nicaragua or El Salvador though protests could not prevent massive military aid to the Contras in Nicaragua or the government of El Salvador. When American

troops were sent, the administrations involved laboured to make their wars exceedingly brief, over almost before they began, and virtually free of American casualties – this was the case in Grenada, Panama, and Gulf War I. In addition, reliance on air power and the substitution of human rights for anti-communism as a motive for the use of force worked to fracture the anti-interventionist consensus of the early post-Vietnam years.

At the same time, unexpectedly from the left, predictably from the right, there was a post-Vietnam attack on both the political and countercultural aspects of the movement. Todd Gitlin, himself a major actor in the antiwar movement, rejected what, in retrospect, he considered the movement's excesses: its divisiveness, its elitism, its disregard for the sensibilities of ordinary Americans. He insisted that any antiwar movement in future should separate the war from the warrior and "support the troops". He himself did so during Gulf War I through a very public blood donation.⁷ The right, on the other hand, rejected both the political messages of the antiwar movement and the legacy of the counterculture, locating in the latter a deplorable individualism and consumerism. In the name of individual freedom, public authority had been delegitimised in almost all arenas of social life with a consequent weakening of democratic institutions. The antibourgeois utopian movements of the Sixties, such critics argued, destroyed themselves through excess and violence, only to be born again in the late 70s and 80s as individualistic liberation movements. The roots of the neoconservative movement lie here, in the rejection of both the political and cultural remnants of the past.⁸

Then, in 1989 the US won the Cold War. The triumphalism of the early post-Cold War years set the stage for the overweening sense of American power that marked the 1990s and the early years of the twenty-first century. For conservatives, Vietnam – when they didn't argue that the US had in fact won that war – became one lost battle in a 50-year war from which the US emerged the sole victor. Many on the left, freed of the obligation to be anti-anti-communist, discovered their inner liberalism, looked upon America and found it, once again. Good. Militant and militarised humanitarian intervention, even would-be benign imperialism, characterised the writing of many post-Cold War public intellectuals who had once counted themselves in the ranks of the antiwar movement.⁹

And yet for all these changes, the opposition to George W. Bush's push for war in Iraq was massive. Despite the steady barrage of deliberate lies and misinformation about Iraqi nuclear weapons, WMD and Saddam Hussein's links to 9/11, the demonstrations in February of 2003 were the largest in US history. Some months earlier, the ageing Democratic senator from West Virginia, William Byrd, urging his colleagues to call a halt to Bush's drive to war, had reminded his colleagues: "I recall all too well the nightmare of Vietnam. I recall too well the antiwar protests and demonstrations, the campus riots, and the tragic deaths at Kent State . . . And I remember all too well the gruesome daily body counts in Vietnam. The United States was a deeply divided country."¹⁰

Byrd was right but also wrong. The body count, though far lower than during the Vietnam War, remained gruesome – for both Americans and Iraqis. Antiwar protests and demonstrations and campus riots, however, did not return. There *was* a movement against the war in Iraq but its shape had shifted. No longer spectacular in any sense of that word, it persisted in local efforts in

cities across the country to oppose the war, bring aid and comfort to veterans, counter the aggressive military recruiters at minority high schools, and organise grassroots support for political candidates believed to be ready to bring the Iraq war to an end. Learning from Vietnam, soldiers created their own organisation against the war and themselves conducted hearings about what they had seen and done in Iraq.¹¹ The movement was differently articulated than the movement against the Vietnam War had been and that different articulation made it less visible. The question then is how to account for that difference.

There were a number of factors. First, instead of the energies of the civil rights movement fueling outrage against the war in Vietnam, the largest political and social movement of the 1990s was antiglobalisation, a movement far more powerful and focused in Europe than in the US. In many European countries, the movement against globalisation made vital connections with longstanding antinuclear movements and green parties. By contrast, the antinuclear movement in the US seems to have disappeared entirely and green parties, such as they are, remain local and very weak. Antiglobalisation in the US has been a small, diffuse movement with a constituency limited almost entirely to students and organised labour, the latter far weaker than it was in the 1960s. In any case, the moral force of antiglobalisation never reached the national proportions of the civil rights movement.

Secondly, the Vietnam War exploded on the consciousness of Americans as if the country had been entirely at peace since 1945. To be sure, the war in Korea was massively unpopular, but that opposition, occurring in a country in the grips of severe political repression of liberals much less the left, expressed itself almost entirely in polling data and the wholesale repudiation of the Democratic Party in the 1952 election. After its ambiguous conclusion in 1953, Korea was more or less forgotten, so that when the US troops were dispatched to Vietnam, the images of Americans dying and killing in some distant, hitherto unknown country in Asia came not as a reprise but as a shock. I have noted the constraint imposed on post-Vietnam administrations by the legacy of Vietnam, but the small doses of war in Grenada, Panama, Somalia and Kosovo worked to undermine the Vietnam syndrome, inuring the public to the regular, albeit modest, use of force abroad. And when a big war was undertaken – though against a very small power – in Gulf War I, it was conducted as an explicit rejection of the Vietnam War. An immediate application of massive force (rather than incremental); a clear objective (Iraqi withdrawal from Kuwait); an exit strategy and the careful garnering of public support in anticipation of all of the above.

Central to public acceptance of these wars was the elimination of the draft. Christian Appy and others have pointed out that the Vietnam-era draft was never an equal opportunity threat.¹² Then, as now, the ranks of the military were filled with men (it was only men then) drawn from the ranks of the poor and the working class. Yet, just the fact of carrying a draft card, of living with the possibility of being drafted, of having to make an explicit effort to evade the draft, was a powerful engine of protest – not only on the part of those eligible for the draft but their friends and family. Throughout the war, draft resistance – from the first public burning of draft cards to the regular draft counselling carried out by church and lay groups – was an important element of the movement. Draft resistance took many forms – from efforts to get into the National Guard (now, of course, no longer an escape) to going to jail or to choosing exile in Canada or Europe.

A volunteer army allows few such public and visible platforms for resistance. Moreover, the times have changed. Then, young men fleeing to the safety of Canada were welcomed and had little difficulty, other than homesickness, in making new lives there. Today, members of the volunteer military who have tried to emigrate to Canada in order to avoid deployment or redeployment to Iraq have been turned back by Canadian authorities; those who managed to enter the country have been waging an ongoing battle for political asylum – thus far without success. And while there is a great deal of sympathy and support for these men on the part of pacifist groups, the larger public – and the Canadian government – take refuge in the notion that, after all, none of them were forced into service; all were volunteers. It is not difficult to make the case that there is a ‘poverty draft’ in the US: those who volunteer are seldom from the middle class but rather people who see the army as their best, perhaps their only, chance for an education and job training. It does seem to be difficult for the larger public to focus on these men and women when the overwhelming majority of the population has no connection with them and no fear of having to join them either.

Of course, part of the difference between the two antiwar movements is rooted in the differences between the wars themselves. Protesters could chant for Ho Chi Minh’s victory; it would be difficult to chant for Al Qaeda – in Iraq or Afghanistan. Nor did any American seriously worry that the Viet Cong would land in force on Californian beaches, whereas the threat of terrorist attacks on the US is real and abiding. Then too, the Vietnam antiwar movement, in particular its student component, was energised by its connection to revolutionary movements elsewhere in the world, from Cuba to Paris, an energy conspicuously lacking in the first year of the twenty-first century.

In the US, the aftermath of the great antiwar demonstrations that tried to stop the Iraq war before it began was a feeling of complete powerlessness. It was as if people collectively decided – well, if *those* demonstrations couldn’t stop them, nothing can. The focus then turned to the sort of local organising and – here in contrast to the Vietnam era – electoral politics. Of course organising for particular candidates had been an important part of the Vietnam era as well, but a substantial segment of the movement spurned working ‘within the system’ and remained outside of electoral politics for the entire period. But when the Republicans stole the election in 2000 and then went on to attack key regulatory agencies, threaten fundamental civil liberties, cut the taxes of the super-rich, dismantle what was left of the welfare state, stack the Supreme Court and *then* declare an illegal war – there was a widespread feeling that taking back the presidency was essential and that the only way to do it was to organise for the next election. An astonishing grassroots movement was built, almost entirely online, and for a while it looked as though the Democratic Party would be transformed from below into a genuine party of opposition. Led by a conservative Vermont governor, Harold Dean, mobilised by the organisation MoveOn (founded in 1998 but coming into its own in 2003–2004), it seemed for a time that a real-life Frank Capa movie might come true: Mr Dean Goes to Washington and Ends the War.

Instead, Dean’s campaign imploded. Briefly, the campaign of John Kerry, one of the leaders of Vietnam Veterans against the War, brought the two wars and opposition to them together. But Kerry ran a dreadful campaign, the Republicans fought a clever, dirty race and the war went on. Yet, without a visible antiwar movement and despite the fact that most Americans get their news

from partisan cable TV channels, feeling against the war steadily mounted until George W. Bush and his war rivalled each other in their unpopularity. MoveOn once more helped to organise voters and, in the election of 2006, the Democrats took back the Congress. It was a repudiation of the president, his administration and his policies. But it did not end the war. The Democratic majority was not large enough and the party, as usual, was sufficiently divided so that all efforts to withdraw funding for the war failed.

The impact of the antiwar movement and antiwar sentiment in general was then reflected in the candidacy of Barack Obama, whose early and consistent opposition to the war was part of his appeal, just as some of Hillary Clinton's problems were rooted in the fact that she voted for the war in 2003. In local congressional elections, candidates vied to present their opposition to the war as earlier and firmer than that of their opponents. In the extraordinary grassroots organising for Obama during the primaries and then his victory in November 2008, it is possible to see the success of the electoral efforts of the contemporary antiwar movement, aided, to be sure, by the collapse of the American economy and, as of this date of writing, relative stability in Iraq.¹³

Unlike earlier antiwar movements, the movement against the war in Iraq had focused on persuading politicians to do the right thing. The few large Washington marches that were held were directed less on the numbers who marched down Pennsylvania Avenue than on sending teams of constituents to lobby in Congress for specific measures relating to the war. Defunding was one, of course, and that did not succeed. But the form in which support for the troops could now be expressed included legislation strongly opposed by the Bush administration – such as enlarged educational benefits for veterans and efforts to limit the number of deployments and extend the time between deployments. Moreover, again as urged the antiwar lobbying groups, Congress used its subpoena power to investigate a range of abuses associated with the war, from the conduct and practices of private military contractors such as Blackwater to the immense corruption of Pentagon contracts to corporations such as Halliburton. There were also direct actions. On 1 May 2008, for example, ports on the West Coast of the US shut down for a full day in protest against the war. "Cranes and forklifts stood still from Seattle to San Diego," William Yardley reported for the *International Herald Tribune*, "and ships were stalled at sea as workers held rallies up and down the coast to blame the war for distracting public attention and money from domestic needs like healthcare and education." The protest was under-reported by the press (deep inside the *New York Times* and in the business section of the *Los Angeles Times*) and completely ignored by TV news.¹⁴

In many small towns – especially in states in the Northeast – opposition took the form of collective resolutions against the war, or to impeach Bush, or as in Brattleboro, Vermont, to threaten to arrest members of the Bush administration as war criminals should they venture a visit. The town council of Berkeley, California, declared Marine recruiters "uninvited and unwelcome" and gave free parking spaces – a very rare privilege – to members of a local protest group.¹⁵

Finally and perhaps contradictorily, the most significant articulation of the antiwar movement has been its ever-growing presence online and in the movies. In a sense, the largest component of the movement against the war in Iraq was virtual. It took the form of online blogs, news

groups and petitions which reached millions of people (as many as 50 million according to one estimate), correcting the mainstream media, introducing new sources of information and new ways of understanding US policy. The influence of these blogs on mainstream reporting is evident from the apology both the *Washington Post* and the *New York Times* made to their readers several years ago for having shamelessly followed the administration line on the approach to the war.¹⁶

A number of blogs monitored events in Iraq with the greatest care, offering more realistic assessments of the situation than the relentlessly good news put out by the Bush administration. It wasn't the same as marching in the streets, but on a daily basis people got up from their computers feeling they had put in rather a full political day, ready to watch the evening news with appropriate scepticism. Even as the *New York Times* confined its Iraq news to small articles deep inside the paper, Common Dreams, Antiwar, the KnightRidder newspapers, AlterNet, *Informed Comment* and the *Huffington Post* kept the war alive and solidly in view. For the first time a wired general public was able to read – and watch (Al Jazeera is available online) well outside of the standard sources.

It is too early in the Obama administration to know whether a new antiwar movement will be necessary. He has committed himself to the full and early withdrawal of troops from Iraq, the closing of Guantanamo, the end of the torture of prisoners. His policy on Afghanistan remains in flux although the decision to dispatch 30,000 more troops remains in place. Yet thus far into the new president's term anyhow, there has been a decided drop in the level of aggressive rhetoric and the flexing of America's military muscle. At the same time, anticipating trouble, there is a rising chorus of voices urging an end to the war in Afghanistan – online websites, petitions, the occasional TV interview show. One can hope . . .

NOTES

- 1 Quoted in Marilyn B. Young, *The Vietnam Wars, 1945–1990*, New York: HarperCollins, 1991, p. 198.
- 2 Martin Luther King Jr, *I Have a Dream: Writings and Speeches that Changed the World*, ed. James Melvin, New York: HarperCollins, 1992, pp. 135–52.
- 3 Federal Bureau of Investigation, "Racial Violence Potential in the US This Summer", 23 May 1967, at www.ddrs.psmmedia.com (accessed 10 July 2004).
- 4 Factions of Students for a Democratic Society and the Weather Underground embraced a more militant agenda, convinced that an armed uprising in the US was not only necessary but possible. For them, the war in Vietnam was no more than another instance of American imperialism which would only end when capitalism itself was overthrown.
- 5 H. R. Haldeman, *The Haldeman Diaries: Inside the Nixon White House*, New York: Berkley: 1995, pp. 110, 129.
- 6 George Packer, "The Fall of Conservatism," *New Yorker*, 26 May 2008.
- 7 For Gitlin's account of this episode, see his *Media Unlimited: How the Torrent of Images and Sounds*

Overwhelms Our Lives, rev. ed., New York: Holt, 2007, p. 124.

- 8 See, for example, Mark Lilla, "A Tale of Two Reactions", *New York Review of Books* 45:8 (14 May 1998).
- 9 Examples abound but see, for one example, Michael Ignatieff, "The Burden", *New York Times Magazine* 5 January 2003 (accessed online 6 February 2006).
- 10 Paul J. Nyden, "Byrd Challenges Bush's Ideas on War; West Virginia Senator Warns of Another Vietnam", *West Virginia Gazette*, 29 June 2002 (www.truthout.com, accessed 7 July 2003)
- 11 See Iraq Veterans against War and Aaron Glantz, *Winter Soldier: Iraq and Afghanistan: Eyewitness Accounts of the Occupations*, Chicago: Haymarket, 2008.
- 12 Christian Appy, *Working-Class War: American Combat Soldiers and Vietnam*, Chapel Hill, NC: University of North Carolina Press, 1993.
- 13 The concern now is the war in Afghanistan, obscured for the past seven years by the larger struggle in Iraq. The irony is that the man for whom antiwar activists worked so hard, Barack Obama, insisted during the campaign that he would pursue the war there until Al Qaeda has been crushed. How long he will maintain this position is unclear. There are an increasing number of mainstream commentators questioning the administration's Afghan policy and the 9 February 2009 issue of *Newsweek* wondered, on its cover, whether Afghanistan would be Obama's Vietnam.
- 14 William Yardley, "U.S. dock workers skip work to protest Iraq war", *International Herald Tribune* 2 May 2008.
- 15 Doug Oakley, "Berkeley council tells Marines to leave", *ContraCostaTimes.com*, 20 January 2008.
- 16 See, for example, "From the editors. *The Times* and Iraq", 26 May 2004.