

Why Peace Movements Are Important

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On the third anniversary of “Shock and Awe” on March 19, 2006, bells rang to commemorate the growing toll of American and Iraqi dead. Peace activists continue to stage solemn protests against what they believe is an unjust and un-winnable war. The American public notes with regret the continuation of a war which a substantial majority believes is a mistake.

And the war goes on.

As the Iraq war enters its fourth year with no end in sight, doubts creep in about the effectiveness of the peace movement. If the largest peace demonstration in world history – perhaps 10 million on February 15, 2003, alone – could not prevent the war; and if a vigorous peace movement has been unable to end it, then it is reasonable to ask whether peace movements can stop wars.

A realistic appraisal of American history suggests the answer is no. At the beginning of the twentieth century, the Philippines were conquered in the face of a powerful anti-imperialist movement. Widespread opposition did not prevent U.S. entrance into the First World War. Revulsion against that war produced a peace movement of unprecedented scope, but it did not prevent the outbreak of World War II, nor did it stop the Roosevelt administration from participation even prior to Pearl Harbor. Opposition to the Vietnam War produced the largest demonstration in American history up to that point in the 1969 “moratorium,” but it could not stop the war. What did stop it was U.S. defeat at the hands of the Vietnamese, who, with Soviet and Chinese backing, were determined to be free of foreign domination. In short, peace movements have protested all of America’s modern wars (except Korea), and they have failed to end any of them.

If peace movements do not end wars, does that mean protest is futile? Definitely not. It means we need to approach the matter from a different angle. We should be asking, “How have peace movements shaped history?” The answers show why peace movements are important.

The first thing to note is that peace movements set limits on war-makers. In raising the cry, “Never again!” pacifists played an important role in bringing about the Geneva conventions against the kind of chemical weapons used in the First World War, just as the campaign for nuclear disarmament helped insure there would be no repeat of the ghastly slaughter at Hiroshima and Nagasaki. Peace activists helped create a climate that led to a series of nuclear arms limitation treaties, beginning with the atmospheric test ban of 1963 and running through the Strategic Arms Limitation treaties of the 1970s. Seeking to curry favor with an anti-nuclear public, even President Reagan said in 1982, “To those who protest against nuclear

war, I can only say: 'I'm with you!'" When Reagan sat down with Mikhail Gorbachev in Reykjavik to discuss the "zero option" of completely eliminating nuclear weapons, it was clear that this bold idea was more popular with the public than with their respective military establishments.

Setting limits involves creating a political climate where politicians who support peace are rewarded at the polls, not punished. By the end of 1968 a majority of Americans were telling pollsters the Vietnam War was a mistake, largely because the United States was not winning. Although Nixon remained bent on victory, his policy of "Vietnamization" led to the gradual withdrawal of U.S. ground troops and ended the draft lottery, enabling him to say he sought "peace with honor." It was a cynical ploy that critics said merely "changed the color of the corpses," but it helped him win a landslide victory in 1972. Meanwhile, Congressional opponents took the direct route of cutting off funding in 1973 for future ground operations, thwarting any lingering impulse to rescue the South Vietnamese puppet regime from collapse.

Setting limits also involves making demands for a *just peace*. Peace movements were especially powerful at the end of the two world wars, when diplomats were under strong pressure to create a world worthy of wartime sacrifice. Wartime leaders had promised "a world safe for democracy," "a land fit for heroes," and "a New Deal for the world," and peace movements demanded redemption of these pledges in form of "industrial democracy," full employment, and racial equality. They also pressured framers of the United Nations to prevent future wars by creating international machinery to resolve disputes and by removing the social and economic grievances believed to be the root cause of war.

Peace movements are also important players in the struggle over the distribution of resources. Every era has its version of "money for schools, not for bombs." Proposing a "moral equivalent of war," William James called for boot camps for wilderness conservation instead of military training. In the First World War, the American Union Against Militarism opposed building a 400,000 man army and a navy equal to the British on the grounds that militarism drained resources from civilian needs. In the Vietnam era, activists called for a redirection of funds away from the hundreds of overseas military bases toward "model cities" and other Great Society programs at home. In the Reagan years, the nuclear freeze movement called for "economic conversion" from the military-industrial complex to civilian investment, pointing out that school construction and investment in health care produced far more jobs dollar-for-dollar than costly B-1 bombers.

The struggle over resources leads peace movements towards social justice. As Martin Luther King observed, "Peace is not the absence of conflict, it is the presence of justice." While many hew to the single issue of war, some leading organizations consciously combine peace and social justice, including the Women's International League for Peace and Freedom, founded in 1919, and today's largest anti-war

organization United for Peace and Justice. From Jane Addams forward, feminists have been particularly prominent in pacifist ranks, and King linked racial and economic justice to ending the Vietnam War. Although the American Federation of Labor and the Congress of Industrial Organizations were reliably pro-war until recently, socialist and other segments of the labor movement objected to the First World War in class terms as a “rich man’s war, poor man’s fight.”

Of course, peace and justice movements are no more effective in ending social injustice than in ending wars, but they can be important weights in the social balance of power. For example, advocates of “People’s Peace” and other anti-warriors of 1917-1918 helped labor win concessions from elites in the form of the War Labor Board to settle disputes and a Women’s Bureau to guard against exploitation of women workers. The Second World War brought similar concessions.

Peace and justice movements also play an important role in opposing empire. Early in the twentieth century, anti-imperialists sought to preserve a republic free of the overweening influence of finance capital, seen by many populists and progressives as the malign force behind U.S. intervention from the Philippines to Bolshevik Russia. Although most of the credit for forcing U.S. withdrawal from Mexico in 1916 and Russia in 1920 goes to resistance on the ground, anti-imperial forces in the United States also played a hand.

What are the lessons for today? It seems unlikely that the peace movement will stop the Iraq war any time soon, let alone the *permanent* “war on terror” that started in Afghanistan, moved to Iraq, and will expand who knows where? For the first time in our history, America’s rulers have rested their case for war on fear and fear alone. They make no promise of a better world and ask no sacrifice of the general public. To the contrary, they give repeated tax cuts to the rich and urge consumers to shop ‘til they drop, while slashing social benefits for low income people. The only thing everyone is asked to give up is civil liberty. The logical outcome is an Orwellian world where ordinary people are forced to foot the bill for the corporate-military tyranny that oppresses them.

Yet such a nightmarish outcome is not inevitable. President Bush’s poll numbers put him in the company of Richard Nixon on the eve of resignation. There is disorder in ruling circles at home and strong opposition to U.S. empire abroad. The American people are ahead of their leaders in calling for a prudent, orderly withdrawal from Iraq. If ever there was a time when the peace movement could put limits on elites, it is now. By linking peace to justice and democracy, the movement has a chance to mobilize a majority in opposition to permanent war, another name for empire. As the death toll has mounted in Iraq, ordinary people have come to understand the truth in the old saying, “Ask not for whom the bell tolls; it tolls for thee.”