

## WHATEVER HAPPENED TO THE ANTI-WAR MOVEMENT?

**A**MERICA RIGHT NOW is 'anti-war', in the sense that about two thirds of the people think the occupation of Iraq is a bad business and the troops should come home. Anti-war sentiment was a major factor in the success of the Democrats in last November's elections, when they recaptured Congress. The irony is that this sharp disillusion of the voters owes almost nothing to any anti-war movement. To say the anti-war movement is dead would be an overstatement, but not by a large margin. Compared to kindred movements in the 1960s and early 1970s, or to the struggles against Reagan's wars in Central America in the late 1980s, it is certainly inert.

When in March of this year Democrats in the US Congress felt obliged to send President Bush the message that he should bring the troops home before he leaves office, they were not voting in the shadow of a mighty throng of protesters cramming into the open spaces in front of the Lincoln Memorial, their slogans rattling the windows of Congress. They were voting in the shadow of the elections of 2008, and eager to display in gesture if not in substance some acknowledgement of a general anti-war feeling abroad in the land.

To this day the anti-war movements from the era of Vietnam survive—often vividly—in the texture of everyday life in America. Lives were changed forever by the decisions of thousands upon thousands to refuse to serve in south-east Asia. The great peace marches on Washington, the rallies in major cities, the riots outside recruiting offices, the upheavals in the universities smoulder still—sometimes dangerously—in popular memory. Just last year, a Vietnam vet in Colorado spat on Jane Fonda

and said publicly he would be happy to shoot her because of her supposed treachery to the American flag forty years ago.

Of course, back in the Vietnam era, America had the draft. The imminent possibility that they might be compulsorily conscripted into the Army or the Marines and find themselves in the Mekong Delta in six months concentrated the minds of middle-class 18-year-olds on the monstrosity and injustice of war with marvellous speed, just as it concentrated the minds of their parents. Today there is no draft. It is true that many of the soldiers deployed in Iraq have been compelled to serve double tours of duty; that others were facing criminal conviction and were offered the option of prison or enlistment in the army; that others again are illegal immigrants offered a green card or US citizenship in exchange for service in Iraq. But every member of the US military there or in Afghanistan is, technically speaking, a volunteer.

In the near future, at least, no US administration will take the political risk of trying to bring back the draft, even though lack of manpower is now a very serious problem for the Pentagon. By the same token, the absence of the draft is certainly a major factor in the weakness of the anti-war movement. But though there was no draft in the Reagan years, there was certainly a very vital movement opposing Reagan's efforts to destroy the Sandinista revolution in Nicaragua and to crush the insurgency of the FMLN in El Salvador.

I remember well criss-crossing America in those years, giving anti-intervention speeches on campuses, in churches and labour halls in scores of towns in nearly every state in the union. Almost every American town in every decade has its dissident community. At any rally you can see the historical strata in human contour.

Up until a decade ago there would be the old Communists, maybe veterans of the Lincoln Brigade that volunteered to fight for the Republic in the Spanish Civil War. Into the late 1980s, these red vets were often the best organizers. Then there would be anti-war activists like the late Dave Dellinger, who went to federal prison as a pacifist in World War Two. There were people who came of age politically with Henry Wallace and the Progressive Party that challenged Truman from the left in 1948. A slightly younger cohort learned its organizing in the years of the Korean war and the rise of the Civil Rights Movement. Old labour

activists rubbed shoulders with Quakers and Unitarians. Then there is the Vietnam generation, many of them in their mid-sixties now. More than once, in the South, I have found that the still-active sparks are former Maoists who deployed to places like Birmingham, Alabama as their revolutionary duty, and who took root as civil rights attorneys or public defenders or labour organizers.

There are scores of overlapping 'lefts' in America, mustered in their separate struggles—for immigrants' rights, for public control of energy, against military recruitment. There are the anarchists, the Trotskyist groups. And when a war comes along, as it does with great regularity in America, they generally coalesce into an anti-war movement. They certainly did in the late 1980s. The other day I found in a box of old papers in my garage a directory to 'sister-cities'—towns in the US that had 'paired' with beleaguered cities in Nicaragua, exchanging regular delegations. The directory was as thick as a medium sized telephone book. There were hundreds of such pairings, and they led in turn to numerous individual pairings. People's Express, the 'backpackers' airline', as it used to be called, would shuttle many a demure sister in the struggle down from Vermont or the Pacific Northwest to Miami, for onward passage to Managua and a rendez-vous with some valiant son of Sandino or with an oppressed Nica sister, liberated by North American inversion from the oppressions of Latin patriarchy.

The directly personal aspect of international political solidarity is not just the stuff of nostalgic anecdote. In the late 1980s the Central American 'resistance' was constantly present in the US, in physical form and not just in the shape of Daniel Ortega and Rosario Murillo working the Hollywood liberal circuit. The Sanctuary movement sheltered militants and sympathizers in churches and defied the efforts of the Feds to seize them. Labour organizers from El Salvador travelled across North America from Local to friendly Local. I can remember being at a picnic of a union Local on strike at a door factory in Springfield, Oregon, south-east of Eugene, where a man from a radical labour coalition in El Salvador got a cordial reception from the strikers and their families as they swapped stories of their respective battles. The resistance in Iraq has no such human face or presence here, not least because any expression of direct solidarity can be savagely penalized under the terms of the Patriot Act and kindred laws.

Lawrence McGuire, a North Carolinian now teaching in Montpellier, France, organized a meeting of anti-war Americans and various interested French parties at which I spoke last fall. He wrote to me recently regarding this matter of direct solidarity:

I was reading a recent piece by Phyllis Bennis, she talked about the 'US military casualties' and the 'Iraqi civilian victims', and it struck me that the Grand Taboo of the anti-war movement is to show the slightest empathy for the resistance fighters in Iraq. They are never mentioned as people for whom we should show concern, much less admiration. But of course, if you are going to sympathize with the US soldiers, who are fighting a war of aggression, then surely you should also sympathize with the soldiers who are fighting for their homeland. Perhaps not until the anti-war movement starts to some degree recognizing that they should include 'the Iraqi resistance fighters' in their pantheon of victims (in addition to US soldiers and Iraqi civilians) will there be the necessary critical mass to have a real movement.

Now there are many obvious reasons why the direct solidarity with 'resistance' fighters, visible in the Vietnam anti-war struggle and the Central American anti-intervention movement, has not been seen. The 'war on terror' means—and was designed to mean—that any group in the US with detectable ties to or relations with Iraqi resistance movements would be in line for savage legal reprisals. The contours of the resistance have been murky and in some obvious aspects unappetizing to secular progressive coalitions in the West. This time there has been no Wilfrid Burchett, or kindred Western reporter/interpreter working behind the lines; this has had its consequences, of the kind McGuire sketched out.

### *Captive coalitions*

It seemed, back in 2003, on the eve of the US attack, that a vigorous anti-war movement was flaring into life. There were some very big rallies. United for Peace and Justice, the main umbrella coalition, had been formed during the run-up to the war in October 2002, at a meeting in Washington, DC. There were 40 or so organizations represented. What was to be one large formation had an early split-off when Win Without War was formed, which included NOW, NARAL, NAACP and so on. That coalition required each member group to have some thousands of members, whereas UFPJ had no such requirement. The latter's rival organizing group was ANSWER, conjured into existence that same year

by the Workers World Party, a Trotskyite group. Belabouring ANSWER as 'hard left' and thus somehow defiling a notionally 'respectable' anti-war movement became a favoured occupation—and excuse for inaction—on the part of fence-straddlers who basically thought some sort of onslaught on Iraq, preferably sporting UN drapery, was not such a bad idea.

Both UFPJ and ANSWER had their successes. But across the four ensuing years, as the full ghastly futility and destructiveness of the war has become more and more manifest, the anti-war movement has got weaker. In late January 2007, United for Peace and Justice held a rally in Washington. It mustered a respectable number of people. It featured Hollywood stars like Sean Penn and 60s icons like Fonda and her erstwhile partner, Tom Hayden. But it was, alas, rather dreary, rather predictable. To be memorable and effective, an anti-war rally has to be edgy, not comfortable. Emotions should be high, nerves at least a bit raw, anger tinged with fear. It should not be just a picnic or a reunion. At the anti-WTO demonstration in Washington in 2000, months after Seattle, the police had orders to shoot to kill if things got out of hand. I doubt any cop had such orders in Washington, DC this last January. The political temperature was way too low.

An absence on the speakers' platform at that January UFPJ rally gives us a significant clue to the weakness of the anti-war movement. Ralph Nader was not invited, even though he is a major political figure on the left, and a fierce critic of the war. Why was he not invited? Nader is still anathema to many Democrats because he ran as a third party candidate in 2000, and they blame him for drawing crucial votes from Al Gore, thus enabling Bush to win. Even though the war in Iraq is a bipartisan enterprise, even though Democrats in Congress have voted year after year to give Bush the money to fight that war, the mainstream anti-war movement, as represented by UFPJ, is captive to the Democratic Party.

The auguries of this captivity were manifest in 2004, when the anti-war movement invested great hopes in the candidacy of Howard Dean, who enjoyed a meteoric ascent towards the Democratic nomination until he burned out in Iowa. This right-of-centre former governor of Vermont did get some traction in late 2003 by opposing the war in Iraq, but soon he was hedging his bets, finding merit in the occupation and vowing that although he would balance the budget he would exempt the Pentagon's funding from any cutback. Finally he surrendered even his signature

issue, saying the war was not really a concern for Democratic voters. As his candidacy expired, many on the left transferred their hopes to Dennis Kucinich, the Ohio congressman. Kucinich was certainly a more robust opponent of the war than Dean, and far to the left of him on economic and justice issues. But it was obvious from the start that he did not have the remotest chance of breaking into double digits in any primary, and thus would lack even the clout to negotiate some rhetorical concessions at the Democratic Party convention in Boston. The actual function of his candidacy was to try to hold the progressive section from defecting to Nader. Those who pointed this out in the first half of 2004 had their analysis resoundingly confirmed as Kucinich bestowed his unstinting support on John Kerry, a man who had so many positions on the war that it became a national joke.

To clarify the consequences of this occasionally petulant subservience of the bulk of the anti-war movement to the Democratic Party, we can ask a simple question. Has the end of America's war on Iraq been brought closer by the recapture of the US Congress by the Democrats in November 2006? On March 23, 2007, the full House voted 218 to 212 to set a timeline on the withdrawal of US troops, with September 1, 2008 as the putative date after which war funding might be restricted to withdrawal purposes only. It was not a stringent deadline. It only required Bush to seek Congressional approval before extending the occupation and spending new funds to do so.

On Democratic House leader Nancy Pelosi's website could be found her portrait of what US troops would be doing in Iraq following this withdrawal or 'redeployment': 'US troops remaining in Iraq may only be used for diplomatic protection, counterterrorism operations and training of Iraqi Security Forces.' But did this not bear an eerie resemblance to Bush's pre-surge war plan? Would the troops being redeployed out of Iraq even come home? No, said Pelosi, as did Senate Majority leader Harry Reid. These troops would go to Afghanistan to battle al-Qaeda.

So the bill—the outermost limit of Democratic 'anti-war' resolve—essentially adopted and enforced Bush's war plan and attendant 'benchmarks', as spelled out in his January 10 speech. On March 27, the Senate voted 50–48 to start withdrawal in March 2008, said schedule being nonbinding on the President. Bush promptly vowed to veto all schedules for withdrawal coming out of Congress, and duly did so. Amid

all the political manoeuvrings in this phase, the war goes on, with a supplemental, Democrat-approved \$124 billion—more than Bush himself requested. As Congress considered the half trillion dollar FY 2008 Pentagon budget, there was no sign that the Democratic leadership would permit any serious attack on further war funding.

Thus when it comes to the actual war, which has led to the bloody disintegration of Iraqi society, the killing of up to 5,000 Iraqis a month, the death and mutilation of US soldiers every day, nothing at all has happened since the Democrats rode to victory in November, courtesy of popular revulsion in America against the war. Bush's reaction to this censure at the polls was to appoint a new commander in Iraq, General David Petraeus, to oversee the troop 'surge' in Baghdad and Anbar province. The Democrats voted unanimously to approve Petraeus, and now they have okayed the money for the surge. Bush hinted that he would like to widen the war to Iran. Nancy Pelosi, chastened by catcalls at the annual AIPAC convention, swiftly abandoned all talk of compelling Bush to seek congressional authorization to make war on Iran. In early June the Hearst news service reported that by November 2007, the number of US troops in Iraq would actually double.

Although nothing of any significance actually happened on March 23, to read liberal commentators one would think we had witnessed some profound upheaval, courtesy of Nancy Pelosi's skilful uniting of the various Democratic factions. What she accomplished in practice was the neutering of the anti-war faction. In the end only eight Democrats (plus two Republicans) voted against the Supplemental Appropriation out of opposition to the war. The balance of 202 no votes came from Republicans who opposed Pelosi's bill as anti-Bush and anti-war. So, in Congress 420 representatives officially have no problem with the war in Iraq continuing until the eve of the next election. Ten are foursquare against it, which is more or less where Congress has always been in terms of committed naysayers.

Anti-war forces in Congress are now weaker. Take Sam Farr of Santa Cruz, California and Peter DeFazio of Eugene, Oregon—both Congressmen with large progressive constituencies. In the last Republican-controlled Congress they were stout opponents of the war, voting against authorization to invade and money for the war thereafter. No longer. Pelosi handed Farr bailout money for his district's spinach

growers, and DeFazio got funding for schools and libraries. Who knows? Perhaps a few dollars of the latter will go to wheelchair access for the paraplegics who will come home from Iraq over the next sixteen months, maimed in the war for which DeFazio just voted more money.

Seeking to explain his yes vote for Pelosi's war-funding bill, Farr issued a press release saying, 'This bill brings our troops home'. But he also told the *San Francisco Chronicle*, 'They want to go gung-ho. They want to escalate in Iraq. So what would our "no" votes mean?' Actually they would have meant more votes against the war, and had there been four more holdouts against Pelosi's palm-greasing, these no votes would have monkey-wrenched her bill, thus demonstrating that it is impossible to get a majority in the House of Representatives to endorse a piece of fakery designed to deceive the very people who put the Democrats back in power.

The real anti-war movement proved itself incapable of pressuring House Democrats to hold out. As noted above, the January 27 demonstration organized by United for Peace and Justice did involve active lobbying of Democrats to hold their feet to the fire, but the demo itself was really a Bush-bashing session, with scant reminders that Bush's war has been and continues to be a bipartisan project.

Tom Matzzie, the Washington director of MoveOn.org, said after the March 23 vote, 'Bush is our worst enemy and our best ally.' In other words, when Bush savaged Pelosi's bill with accusations that it gives aid and comfort to the enemy, he cemented Democratic support for it. The focus stays always on Bush, over whom MoveOn will never have influence, as opposed to Democrats, whom MoveOn could have pressured with its three million-strong email list. But rather than rousing its members to accuse Pelosi of enabling the war, MoveOn carefully limited the available options in polling them. It only asked whether they were for, against or not sure about war funding as dealt with in her bill. MoveOn could have phrased it another way: do you support the Pelosi plan (fully describing it); do you support the Barbara Lee plan (funding exclusively for gradual withdrawal of US troops); do you reject war funding altogether?

The window of opportunity for that flew open right after the election, when anti-war forces roared in outrage after being snubbed by Pelosi



and Reid, who omitted the war and the Patriot Act from their must-do agenda. Instead, the Democratic leadership chose merely to appear to oppose the war while continuing to fund it. This they have now achieved, amid the satisfied cheers of the progressive sector.

So now, after the Bush veto, the Democratic resistance has crumbled. Over in the House, Jack Murtha did his best, with a plan for re-review every three months. But when this bill went into conference, Democratic support for Murtha was slim. Reason: the Democratic presidential aspirants in the Senate—Clinton, Obama, Biden—don't want any sort of determined resistance to the war to prevail, courtesy of the Democrats. So now they are voting the money without deadlines or reservations. In fact, the Republican call for withdrawal to commence as early as this September (unless the US position in Iraq improves, which it will not) is a fiercer challenge to Bush than what the Democrats have finally managed. The Democrats' reward for this shameful collapse? Perceived now as fraudulent in their claims to oppose the war, their standing in the polls is as low as Bush's.

### *After-effects*

Do anti-war movements end wars? The Vietnam war ended primarily because the Vietnamese defeated the Americans, and because a huge number of US troops were in open mutiny. At home a large sector of society was in mutiny too. Anti-war movements are often most significant in their afterlife—schooling a new generation in attitudes and tactics of resistance. What has happened in the US across the intervening years since Vietnam is a steady, unsurprising decline in the left's overall political confidence and ambition, and in the 1990s a disastrous failure to attack the Democratic Party, and Democratic Administration led by Clinton and Gore, for the onslaught on Yugoslavia and the inhumane sanctions against Iraq.

In the Bush years we have seen a further decline in any independent left with any unified theoretical and practical strategy or even political theory. There has been a corresponding rise in unconstructive and indeed demobilizing paranoia, as in the orgy of 9/11 conspiracism, along with devolution of political emotion—a vague word that matches the pallid politics involved—into clarion calls for a 'war on global warming', a metastasis of the 'dialectics of nature' that surely would have stunned

Engels. The campuses are sedate. The labour movement is reeling. To describe the anti-war movement in its effective form is really to mention a few good efforts—the anti-recruitment campaigns, the tours of Military Families Against the War, particularly of those who have lost children in Iraq, the efforts of some returning vets, the stands taken by some enlistees refusing deployment to the Middle East—and three or four brave souls. Cindy Sheehan single-handedly reanimated the anti-war movement last year, commencing with her vigil outside Bush's Texas ranch; there is also the radical Catholic Kathy Kelly, and Medea Benjamin and her 'Code Pink' activists. Sheehan has now given Nancy Pelosi an ultimatum that she will run against Pelosi in her San Francisco district unless the House speaker stops blocking impeachment proceedings against Bush and Cheney.

What were the big surprise demonstrations in the US last year? Quite suddenly major American cities saw gigantic, militant demonstrations of immigrants—mostly Hispanic. Their fury was at brutal treatment and harsh new laws against illegal migrants, without whose low-paid toil agriculture in states like California would come to a halt. The war was not an issue.