

Moving From Protest to Politics: Dumping Bush's Regime in 2004

By Carl Davidson and Marilyn Katz

Despite our arguments and the overwhelming presence of our numbers on the streets and in city councils across the country, the anti-war movement was not successful in preventing the invasion and occupation of Iraq. While hardly anyone has mourned the downfall of the brutal and corrupt dictatorship of Saddam Hussein and the Baath party, the triumphal U.S.-led invasion for "regime change" has exacted a terrible cost on the Iraqi people. To be sure, many Iraqis have expressed joy at the downfall of Hussein. But tens of thousands of Iraqi citizens and ordinary soldiers are dead, hundreds of thousands are wounded, and millions are suffering from social chaos and the breakdown of the infrastructure of normal life. Many are now mobilizing around demands for the U.S. to leave quickly.

Bush is certainly not out of the woods in Iraq. As his hegemonist policy now enters the phase of occupation, it faces the already evident dangers of factional fighting, popular resistance and growing Muslim resentment. The escalating threats against other countries in the region, especially Syria and Iran, show there is still grave danger of additional slaughter in Iraq and wider war elsewhere.

Making a Realistic Assessment

The White House is riding high for the moment. More than 70% of the people are now expressing support for the war and approval of Bush's performance. Celebrity critics of the war are being attacking in the media and public life. "Support Our Troops" rallies are being mobilized by the right wing media, while continuing antiwar protests are often being met with massive police intimidation and arrests. Hate crimes against Muslims and other minorities are breaking out, and civil liberties are under fire. The upsurge in mass participation in antiwar events reached a peak in the first days after the invasion, but has now subsided considerably. In addition, Republicans now control both the administrative and legislative branches of government, thus able to pass virtually any law or take any executive decision they choose.

What does this mean for the antiwar movement? What new assessments do we need of our situation, and how do we reshape our strategy and tactics?

To begin, we must look at the other side of the coin. In a few short months, more than a million Americans took to the streets, with many more in support, to express their opposition to war with Iraq and the radical shift in U.S. foreign policy to "unilateral, preemptive war" launched by the Bush White House. They joined with nearly 10 million others throughout Europe, Africa, Asia and Latin American who were also outraged at the arrogant assertion of a new era of American hegemonism.

While the upsurge in mass participation in antiwar events reached a peak in the first days after the invasion, and has now subsided considerably, the millions remain a force to be reckoned with—they mobilized once, and most likely, under the correct circumstances, they would be desirous of taking action again.

At the same time, the pro-war majority is very uneasy. In many ways, its support is a mile wide and an inch deep, capable of reversal with a negative turn of events. Only 30% are firmly pro-war in the sense that they express support at this time for additional adventures against North Korea, Iran or

Syria, while another 25-30% at the other end of the spectrum continues to maintain opposition to the current war.

The antiwar minority is thus still substantial, active and relatively well organized. The African American community continues to register a solid super-majority opposition to the war, even as their sons and daughters are highly represented among the troops in Iraq. Trade unions and many local governments and schools have expressed deep concerns over the costs of the war and the state of the economy; in fact, when Bush's job performance is measured in economic terms, it drops considerably. And among a broad grouping of Americans, even those who tacitly supported the invasion of Iraq, there is a great unease about an increasing restrictiveness on civil liberties and civil rights.

Importance of Differences at the Top

Finally, and not to be discounted, there is still a deep and intense division between globalists and hegemonists within the country's ruling elites. The more multilateral-oriented globalists are deeply disturbed over the policies of Bush's hegemonist "War Party," the neoconservative faction of Paul Wolfowitz, Richard Perle, Donald Rumsfeld and Richard Cheney. Headquartered in the Project for the New American Century thinktank, this is the group that opportunistically seized on the 9/11 attacks to implement its 10-year-old plan for "regime change" in the Middle East, beginning with Iraq. Despite some on-again, off-again opposition from Colin Powell and others in the State Department, they are now embraced by Bush and shaping U.S. foreign and military policy.

It is this ruling group, the War Party, that must be the antiwar movement's strategic target if we are to effectively harness the power of dissent unleashed during the past year to effect any significant immediate change in U.S. foreign or domestic policy. This clique is the principal architect of the war in Iraq and the main immediate danger to peace in the Middle East, and to any semblance of democracy or equality in the United States.

Decisive progress on these fronts requires that the War Party be exposed broadly, combated, undermined and, along with Bush, removed from power. This is the concrete meaning of the popular slogan, "Regime change begins at home."

Removing the War Party will require a sophisticated multi-pronged strategy and a variety of tactics.

First, the antiwar opposition must stay active and visible through a creative array of mass demonstrations and public events against the occupation, the danger of wider war, and the war's impact at home. . Any public space not expanded will be contracted by the War Party's desire and need to quell dissent.

Second, we need an educational and media campaign to deepen people's knowledge about the War Party and the Patriot Act, and expose all their implications to a wider public. . The past five months of public and internet education have provided the fullest public education on issues of foreign policy and power that this nation (and others) have ever seen; it must continue

Third, we must develop an approach to the 2004 election. Defeat in 2004 is the best and earliest opportunity to reverse the War Party's hold on a power and danger it poses to the world.

How should we approach voting and the elections? For many people in the peace movement, this is the natural next step. Working in campaigns and getting out the vote is their normal approach to politics, and many of them are highly energized by a call to throw Bush out of office by getting behind any candidate who stands for a different policy and has a chance of winning. But for many other people in the peace movement, electoral activity is controversial, if not considered a diversion. They want to keep the movement in the streets, which is perceived as a more radical and effective opposition, and away from any support for any candidates of the Democratic Party.

These differences will simply have to be debated, openly and respectfully. Agreement may be found in some areas, while differences in other areas will simply remain unresolved. While still maintaining an ability to come together in united actions, different sectors of the peace movement may have to launch projects that take different directions.

Among those opposed to an electoral project, some will argue that replacing Bush with a Democrat is simply replacing the representative of one group of imperialists with a representative of another group of imperialists. Since imperialist plunder and imperialist rivalries are the main cause of war, they might argue, this is a direction that diverts and thwarts the real aim of the peace movement.

Anticipating Some Criticisms

How would we reply? First, it is true that the next president of the U.S. will represent one or another imperialist grouping, most likely either the Globalists or the Hegemonists. In this period, given current domestic and international forces, the election of an anti-imperialist president in 2004 is simply not possible. However, the differences between the Globalists and the War Party at this time are not unimportant and cannot be a matter of indifference. The War Party is the greater danger; if not defeated this party will move to control the world. In the process, it not only deepens the misery of those who suffer in this nation, but narrows the opportunity for dissent as well. Not only will the War Party's capitalist rivals benefit from its defeat, all the progressive forces will also benefit.

Further, the peace movement, it should be noted, is not an anti-imperialist movement, nor should it be. Rather, it is a broad, multiclass, multitendency alliance against a particular war, the impact of that war and danger of more like it in the region. While it includes a minority of socialist, anticapitalist and anti-imperialist components, it also includes larger numbers of Independents, Democrats and Greens; liberals and moderates; and even a few Republicans and conservatives.

Every component of the movement, naturally, would like to see its ranks grow. The socialists would like to recruit more socialists and the Greens more Greens. The anti-imperialists want more people to see the imperialist system as the cause of war, to make greater solidarity with all movements against it around the world and bring it down. The anticapitalists want to get rid of capitalism; the reform Democrats want to expand their ranks and defeat Republicans and conservative Democrats; the Republican peaceniks want to rescue their party for moderates like Colin Powell rather than hawks like Rumsfeld.

Theoretically, in the short run, it's possible for everyone to succeed. The movement simply has to keep expanding by drawing in more and more of different varieties of new people, who would then gravitate to whatever political grouping suits them. Practically, however, there will be competition and debate; some will gain at the expense of others. The real test for success for anyone will be their ability to demonstrate in practice their clarity of political leadership, organizing skills, and ability to unite the majority and move forward. The main burden on all will be a need to maintain civility and a democratic style of work.

What kind of electoral option could bring together large numbers in a creative, unity-building way?

The first step would be to focus on voter registration. The best way is to do it independently of any party or candidate, by forming Peace and Justice Voter 2004 committees. Their main task would be to project a position that reflects the opposition to the international and domestic policies of the war party and to target key constituencies and neighborhoods, registering unregistered voters, and building lists of voters, their addresses, emails and a database of their political inclinations on our issues. These committees would build their own independent funding base and organizational strategies. Working in concert with public mobilizations, local organizing and outreach, they would engage in educational and organizational activities, providing literature on the issues, organizing nonpartisan candidate forums, and voter education scorecards showing where all candidates stand on the issues. A good starting point would be to make use of the nationwide Cities for Peace network of activists and elected officials who helped pass city council antiwar resolutions, and such networks as those forged by MOVEON and United for Peace and Justice. While focused on 2004, a committee could also have a longer range perspective for building an independent political organization.

The second step would be to focus on the primaries. Here the aim would be to demonstrate to the political conventions that a large and dynamic base of campaigners exists that are motivated by peace and justice issues. Activists could work for those with the clearest antiwar stands, like Dennis Kucinich, Al Sharpton Carol Mosley Braun or Howard Dean, with the aim of winning delegate seats at the Democratic convention to move the entire process in our direction as much as possible. Others might choose to work in the campaigns of those whose stance they felt they might influence. This would also help to build a national network of peace and justice voters for future endeavors.

The third step would be to focus on November 2004. Here the task is to get the largest number of non-Bush voters to the polls. Some people will simply work through the Democratic or Green parties. Others could form independent Peace Voters for Candidate X or Peace Voters to Defeat Bush committees and carry out the same work independent of the existing party structures, which would lay a basis for future work.

All this sounds fine, but is it in the cards? Is Bush vulnerable in 2004? Is it actually possible to defeat him and the War Party at the polls?

The answer is “Yes, but it will be difficult. It will require a combination of considerable skill on our part and some mistakes and setbacks on their part.” To make a long story short, Bush is especially vulnerable on the economy and the Democrats are vulnerable on national security issues. However, if the Democrats downplay national security and simply try a replay of “It’s the economy, stupid,” they are likely to lose in a big way.

The Social Base for Militarism

First, there is a reason Bush is making public appearances by touring the country’s military bases and military towns. Apart from concerns for his personal security, these areas represent a large institutionalized base of pro-military voters.

“In the United States today,” states an analysis in the Feb. 19, 2003 Japan Times by foreign policy experts Michael O’Hanlon and Aaron Moburg-Jones, “there are 25 million Americans who have served in the armed forces. Another 6 million people are heavily involved in defense today, including 1.4 million active-duty troops, nearly 1 million reservists, over 600,000 full-time civilian employees

of the Department of Defense, and 3 million contractors working for the Department of Defense. Then there are the immediate families of those individuals.

“All in all, perhaps 50 million adult Americans have a very strong tie to the armed forces and many are highly motivated voters. Over 60 percent of veterans are over 50 years of age, with nearly 40 percent over 65. This places veterans in an age group known to demonstrate high voter turnout. Age is not the only reason for high turnout among veterans; there is also patriotism. For example, a poll taken by the veterans’ organization Veterans of Foreign Wars showed that 91 percent of its members faithfully trek to the polls.”

Even though Bush is currently popular with this constituency, he by no means has it locked up. Many veterans are from the Vietnam generation, and a good number of them are highly dubious about foreign wars where the country is not united. While the right wing may be very good at tying yellow ribbons on trees and lampposts, they are lousy at defending VA hospitals and veterans benefits. Any successful anti-Bush candidate, however, is going to have to take a different path than saying “Me too!” on “supporting our troops.” He or she is going to have to turn the tables and expose the hypocrisy and demagoguery of flag-waving Republicans who abandon vets and their families in real life after putting them in unjust wars.

Bush’s current popularity, however, reaches beyond military families. A Current Zogby poll has Bush at 50% vs 32% against any Democrat among likely voters. Even in left-leaning California, says Margaret Talley in the April 16 Sacramento Bee, “Were the election held now, 45 percent of all California voters would choose the Republican incumbent, according to a Field Poll released Tuesday. Another 40 percent said they would prefer whoever emerges as Democratic nominee, while the remaining 15 percent either were undecided or planned to support a third-party candidate.”

Key Bush Ally: The Religious Right

The President’s most solid constituency is among white evangelical Christians, especially white Southern Baptists and white non-college-educated males. “Eighty-four percent of them voted for Bush, providing nearly one-third of his total. Evangelicals made up only 13 percent of Gore's vote,” states the April 2001 Christianity Today, quoting a study done by Akron University. The Christian right is strongly opposed to a progressive social agenda; its main issues are opposing abortion rights, contraception and “the Gay agenda”, along with support for militarism and opposition to gun control. But even here Bush has some problems. States foreign policy specialist Edward Walker Jr. in the Baltimore Sun: "If the war is put too much in the context of, 'The Christian faith is somehow burdened, so we have to assume the role of good Christians,' it sends a very negative signal....The president has been very careful that no one misinterprets this as a fight between religions, but he has to be careful about quoting evangelical hymns. That kind of thing gets picked up immediately. There are people actually looking for it."

The evangelicals also have a left wing, the most prominent of which was former President Jimmy Carter, who strongly opposed the war. The Sojourners organization, a left-to-moderate grouping of evangelicals, also added its voice to the peace movement.

Bush’s greatest weakness is on the economy. The right wing pundits are befuddled over why more than 60% of Americans are opposing Bush’s proposed tax cuts even as they support him on other issues. The April 9 ABC News reported:

“With the war in Iraq, will our already weakened economy — marked by job layoffs and hiring freezes — get better or worse? Unemployment stands at 5.8 percent, or 8.5 million people, and the United States is in the worst labor slump since World War II.

“People are traveling less, and the increased terrorism threat that accompanied the war in Iraq has prompted many Americans to stay home and watch TV instead of going out. As a result, service industries have seen fierce cuts, with about 77,000 jobs slashed from retail stores, bars, airlines and other service-oriented sectors.

“In the public sector and manufacturing, cities and states unable to balance budgets are laying off workers in some of the most important areas, including teaching positions.

“It is not for lack of demand for such jobs, but rather because municipalities can't meet budgets. City and state revenue are down because tax revenue is down. Tax revenue is down because more people are unemployed, and there is greater demand for social programs.”

People are not generally stupid about the economy. They know that large federal tax cuts will either starve states and cities, or cause increases in local taxes. They know that large deficits require large interest payments to the banks that hold the deficit notes. They know that those interest payments come out of their pockets, or out of the budgets providing services to the elderly and the poor, and go into the pockets of the bankers.

Pitfalls for the Democrats

The main danger for the Democrats, however, is that they base their strategy on the notion that the primary issue is the economy and everything else is secondary. Instead, any successful candidate against Bush has to make a primary issue of international, national and homeland security. But it must not be a “me too” approach that supports Bush on the main arguments, and only quibbles over tactics, details and dollar amounts.

“In 2000 and again 2002, the Democratic Party suffered serious setbacks in large part because it underrated the importance of national-security issues to the American electorate,” state O’Hanlon and Moburg-Jones. “In 2002, Democrats lost the Senate in large measure over the perception—at least partly correct—in states such as Missouri and Georgia that they had impeded formation of a new department of homeland security in the interest of defending the political interests of a traditional union constituency. Recent polls on Iraq and the war on terrorism show that Republicans are trusted to do a better job than Democrats by a margin of 20 percent among potential voters.”

Instead in 2004 the Democrat national security platform must be an all-sided attack on the national security policy of the Bush hegemonist clique, showing how the future it proposes will make our country and the world less secure, not more secure. Far from defending our freedoms, it will be at great cost to our liberties. Give the relation of forces, this will be mainly the critique of the multilateral Globalists—a position that is some combination of the critiques currently espoused by former Presidents Carter and Clinton and major voices of global capital like George Soros. If the progressive left is strong enough in the primaries, the overall platform will reflect some of its concerns as well, but there should be no illusions that this will be or should be an anti-imperialist position.

This last point is crucial. It must be a national security policy that can first energize both new voters and the traditional Democratic base. The millions who hit the streets and the millions more behind

them will be looking for a bold alternative strategy about how our nation can navigate today's world without unjust war and repression Without this there are no troops to deliver the votes to the polls and make sure they get counted. But it must also be a national security policy that the political center can recognize as its own and that sow splits in the right. With the national security plank thus nailed down, the Democrats can go on to add their traditionally stronger positions on the economy and other social issues.

The peace movement has the forces and alliances necessary to make a big difference at the base. The critical question then becomes one of leadership. Among the array of political and military leaders currently vying for the job, do any have the right stuff? Let's take a quick look at the field:

Joe Lieberman.(Conn). He's hopelessly compromised by being too avid a supporter of the war and too close to Bush on foreign policy. Given a choice between a Bush wanna-be and Bush, voters will opt for the real thing.

John Kerry (Mass). He's waffled on the war, but ended up supporting it with reservations. He reflects the perspective of the Globalists, and is both a decorated Vietnam war hero and an early member of Vietnam Veterans Against the War. He took on the GOP rightists when they attacked him as "unpatriotic" for calling for "regime change" at home. He's raised a lot on money in New England and California. On the downside, he's viewed as elitist.

Richard Gephardt. (Mo). He's also compromised by helping Bush push through the vote on Iraq. As a strong point, he does have a lot of ties with the labor leadership. His financial support comes mainly from the Midwest.

John Edwards. (NC). Critical support for Bush on the war, plus wants to develop a "Homeland Intelligence Agency" that threatens civil liberties. Strong on civil rights and labor issues, he's generally compared to Clinton on both foreign and domestic issues, and has raised a lot of money.

Bob Graham (FL). Pro-war, but he is also one the main architects of the Patriot Act. He also has a long history in the intelligence community, and a strong base among Cubans in Florida.

Gen. Wesley Clark. (Ret) Supports the war now that it is underway, but holds the Globalist critique of the hegemonists. He's a former leader of NATO and the war of Kosovo; a stealth candidate, without much financial support at this time.

Howard Dean (VT). Strong opposition to the war, with some wavering once the fighting began. Militant opposition to the hegemonist clique across the board, popular liberal in New England, but he's not well known elsewhere.

Rev. Al Sharpton. (NY). He's got considerable support in the Black community as a champion against police brutality and for civil rights. Consistently antiwar, he also has some support in the anti-imperialist left; negative baggage from the Tawana Brawley case, and little support among whites generally.

Carol Mosley Braun. (IL). Antiwar, some support in the Black community and even more among middle class feminists. She's tarnished a bit by some scandals involving former associates and the idea that she's mainly a counterweight to Sharpton.

Dennis Kucinich (OH). Leader of the Congressional progressive caucus, he organized, along with Barbara Lee, the antiwar vote in Congress. He is a firebrand speaker of the peace movement and appeals to both anti-imperialists and rank-and-file workers. Not much chance of winning, but he has a strong ability to shape the debate.

This field mainly falls into three groupings: Those worth defeating (Lieberman, Graham); those worth supporting in the primaries (Dean, Kucinich, Sharpton, Braun); and those worth watching to see how their strength and positions evolve (Clark, Kerry, Edwards, Gephardt).

First Things First

But there are several other priorities before settling on any candidate or series of candidates. For the peace and justice movements especially, there are a number of critical components of electoral work that are nonpartisan and independent of any candidate.

Expanding the electorate. Many people who are eligible to vote are not registered; in many areas, this can be as many as one-third of the potential electorate. Many demographic groups, moreover, are highly unregistered. As it stands, the numbers of actual voters are tilted toward older people, middle-to-upper income earners and non-Hispanics. Young people are especially under-registered.

Registering larger numbers of voters from progressive constituencies can both offset similar efforts by the right, aid new insurgent candidacies, and provide the margin of victory in close races. Voter registration drives in many states are also now much easier due to “motor voter” reforms, and do not have to be tied to any candidate or party. It is a mass activity that can involve tens of thousands of volunteers; special programs can even be created for high school students seeking community service activities for graduation requirements.

Educating the electorate. Voter registration can also include voter education on targeted issues rather than endorsing a particular candidate. This is important for 501C3 organizations and can include producing a wide range of literature, community forums, press conferences, teach-ins and media events—all aimed at helping to shape the terms of the debate and discussion leading up to the election and having an ongoing impact afterwards.

Educating and influencing the candidates. Simply registering a good number of voters will not go unnoticed by almost any politicians, but there are many more options. “Candidate Nights” are popular, where a range of candidates or their representatives are invited to present their positions and be questioned, or to debate their rivals.

Enhancing independent political organization. Organizations like Peace and Justice voters 2004 develop, as a matter of course, all the core resources of any political organization: staff, volunteers, its own bank account and sources of funding, lists of supporters (email and snail mail), and assessments of where each precinct’s potential voters stand on the relevant issues. After the 2004 election, these resources do not have to disappear; the main point is that they do not belong to the Democrats or any other political party or candidate. Instead, they are the embryos of autonomous community base organizations that can form the foundation of a variety of progressive political parties, alliances, candidates or activities in the future.

How does it all fit together?

Developing an electoral arm for the peace movement can make solid achievements in the next 18 months. But when all is said and done, it will only be one component among many needed to defeat

Bush and the War Party. Presidential campaigns in the U.S. are enormous financial enterprises. Bush already has set a budget of \$200 million—and he doesn't even have to run against contenders in the primaries.

That's why the candidate to defeat Bush in this time frame has to have the backing of a major faction of the U.S ruling class. This is the only source of the bulk of material resources needed to do the job in the given time. We might want a system that works differently, and many of us will do all we can in the present to bring it into being in the future. But in the meantime, it does no good to pretend that things are otherwise.

We will be among a number of mass allies of the anti-Bush Globalists. As such, we can have some influence on the parameters of the campaign's debates and issues in the primaries; we may even get a plank or two in the platform, or a say in who gets to be the running mate. We will have some influence because it is bound to be a close race; every vote will count, and the extra voters we bring to the polls can provide the edge for victory.

We should do this without illusions. The day after Bush's defeat, the U.S. will still be an imperialist power. The point is that it will be governed by a set of policies that, in the short run, are not quite as dangerous to peace abroad and civil liberties at home. Our movement, moreover, will come out of the battle far more organized and with far more influence than we have now.

Those are gains worth fighting for. Let's see if we can make it happen.

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