

The Struggle Against War Demands a Struggle for More Democracy: Strategic Proposals for the Peace Movement

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American antiwar protests have usually failed to prevent or to seriously curtail U.S. military operations, even though they have probably made things a little less bad than they might have otherwise been. But the failures are not wholly the fault of the movement itself, as many activists have assumed that our democracy is designed to respond to public pressures for or against particular government policies. Instead, the U.S. foreign policy process is designed to insure that even very large anti-war mobilizations will have minimal policy impact.

The U.S. Constitution places the principal foreign policy making duties in the Executive branch of government. Defenders of this arrangement praise its efficiency and claim that it allows the nation to present a more united front in the face of foreign adversaries or allies. In other words, “politics must end at the water’s edge.” The Constitution’s authors probably did not foresee a need to provide many democratic checks on foreign policy processes that, at that time, were far less consequential in most people’s daily lives than they are today.

While Congress has the authority to declare war and to approve all government expenditures, these powers have not translated into an effective foreign policy role. The president can deploy troops without a declaration of war, and the ability of Congress to recall troops in the absence of such a declaration is untested. Moreover, the power of the purse has not proved very effective in the context of a modern, permanently mobilized military that could never have been envisioned by the authors of the Constitution.

In short, the only democratic check on the president’s foreign policy decisions comes with the presidential election. And few national elections place extensive emphasis on foreign policy questions. The few opportunities for public debates about major foreign policy issues like wars have been overwhelmed by pressures on elected representatives to demonstrate their patriotism and national loyalty by rallying behind the president. Such scenarios leave little room for expressions of loyal opposition. Thus, Congressional debates on both the first Gulf war and on the more recent military conflict with Iraq were both shallow and brief. And although through the “cities for peace” campaign more than 125 city and county councils approved resolutions against George W. Bush’s policy of “pre-emptive” war, many individual legislators and local legislative bodies waived their right to engage in public debates about foreign policy issues, which are seen as within the exclusive jurisdiction of the president. This presidential prerogative in foreign policy goes beyond peace and security issues and into the trade arena, as Congress has passed several versions of “fast track” trade negotiating authority, which again waives the right of legislators to engage in any serious debate of international trade agreements.

The Mass Media

The mass media have become central to our political processes, and they can determine the course of most elections and major policy debates. They help set national agendas by

defining what events or issues large numbers of people think and talk about, if not how they do so. And their coverage (or lack thereof) can determine the chances a candidate has to win an election. But the mass media are unlikely to be shaped by popular mobilizations around foreign policy issues, and this is largely because the democratic, watchdog function of the mass media is subordinated to its profit-making orientation.

News reporting, particularly in the electronic media, has become increasingly commercialized. That process has involved a steady trend towards more entertainment-oriented “news” presentations. Sound bites and dramatic images have replaced sophisticated analysis and systematic news reporting. Intense competition for ratings among the few remaining mass media outlets has contributed to “pack journalism” so that every major outlet covers the same few stories. The media’s focus on the economic bottom line means that the news production process hinges on ratings and appeals to advertisers rather than on an independently defined obligation to provide audiences with the information they need to be informed and active citizens. The gruesome details of wars or famines and the important if complex realities of international conflicts and peace-building are not the kind of fare that appeals to advertisers with the message, “don’t worry, go shopping.” Patriotic displays and calls to “support our troops” are preferred to serious considerations of the long-term implications of U.S. military engagements for either U.S. security interests or for the people of the countries involved.

To top it off, the major electronic and print news outlets have systematically reduced their funding for international news coverage, replacing highly specialized and seasoned reporters with a less costly but more easily managed generalist reporting staff. This heightens an already strong tendency for foreign policy news reporting to rely primarily on Administration sources. By far the most frequent source for news on U.S. foreign policy is the White House. And while in theory a “balance” norm guides coverage of most issues, in practice few alternative sources –from either inside or outside of government-- are brought in to offer serious critiques of official foreign policy positions.

From Peace Movement to Democracy Movement

Given these tremendous structural disadvantages to effective peace movement mobilization, those seeking alternatives to a highly militarized approach to U.S. involvement in the world should adopt a conscious strategy of enhancing public involvement in the foreign policy process. Without substantial changes to the way U.S. foreign policy is made, anti-war activities, no matter how popular and dramatic, will have little policy impact.

The U.S. Constitution effectively authorizes a presidential monopoly on foreign policy decision-making, but is this kind of structure appropriate for a contemporary democracy in an increasingly globalized world? Should our elected officials at both local and national levels be able to opt out of debates around matters that have increasingly important impacts on the day-to-day lives of both U.S. citizens and of people around the world? Is a sound-bite and corporate-dominated media an appropriate form of information-transmission in an increasingly interdependent world with complex and multi-faceted problems? For those who truly believe in democracy, the answer to all of these questions is clearly “no.” But how might things change?

The time is ripe to talk about reviving American democracy. Indeed, as the U.S. government seeks to impose democracy on countries of the Middle East, it is blatantly curtailing democratic rights within this country. A recent international Gallop poll showed low levels of trust in democratic institutions and especially low levels of trust in corporations. The peace movement could tap into this sentiment and perhaps find new allies in an attempt to revive public

engagement in governance. Here are a few proposals for action that might help focus peace movement efforts in this direction:

- Advocate for a constitutional amendment that would re-define war-making powers, perhaps even by demanding a national popular referendum to authorize war. It may sound far-fetched, but even raising the idea would help to get people asking the question of who should be involved in making crucial decisions about U.S. engagement in the world. The Ludlow Amendment of 1935 proposed just such a thing, and it gained nearly 50% of Congressional votes (a 2/3 vote would be needed to amend the Constitution).
- Systematically expose and counter the corporate influences on the foreign policy process. This goes far beyond the military-industrial complex, but we could begin there. Then let's look at the revolving doors between government offices and corporate headquarters, including the links between current and former Administration officials and the corporations now dividing up the spoils of U.S. victory in Iraq. Of course, the corporate-government collusion runs much deeper, and advocates of a different kind of foreign policy might help expose the multiple ways that corporations influence U.S. engagement in the world, including their role in shaping U.S. trade and aid policies.
- The U.S. public deserves far better coverage of international news than it gets from the mainstream U.S. media. Change advocates face a tremendous hurdle here, given the huge concentrations of corporate influence on mass media which has increasingly succumbed to a "Fox effect," which is blatantly contemptuous of dissent and which rejects traditional notions of objectivity and skepticism towards government. It is ironic that the majority of the U.S. public is provided with such a limited range of information about the world in an era of unprecedented access to information via the Internet. Challenging this media monopoly would require coordinated efforts among those who believe that the public must be better informed about the world. Concerted pressure on mass media networks and grassroots efforts to shape international news coverage in the few remaining locally-owned newspapers can help, but what is also needed is the creation of viable news alternatives that are accessible to a mass U.S. public.
- Consciously support multilateralism and international organizations. Nearly 80% of the U.S. public consistently supports U.S. action through the United Nations over unilateralism. In comparison, less than half of our leaders support multilateral approaches to international policy. Also, U.S. citizens' groups were among the most numerous and motivated of those pressing for an International Criminal Court, which now has broad international support (but intense U.S. opposition) as it begins its work. American leaders and citizens like the idea of the "rule of law" at home; let's talk about having it globally!
- Mobilize public support for existing Congressional legislation for a Cabinet-level, Department of Peace. Rep. Dennis Kucinich has introduced such legislation, seeking to devote more of our national resources and attention to finding alternatives to military responses to international crises and threats. The Department of Defense and National Security Council play an extensive role in shaping U.S. policy in the world. And we

have five national military academies. Yet there is no non-military parallel to these institutions. Why shouldn't the U.S. invest serious financial and human resources into research on non-military solutions to complex international issues that are hardly solved through military interventions? Our military now costs around \$400 billion per year (without any major deployments), and it is still unable to protect us from a variety of contemporary threats—including terrorism. Investments in peace research and in non-violent forms of international engagement are certainly cost-effective ways to both enhance U.S. security and to promote more sustainable solutions to international economic, environmental, and humanitarian problems. Although the current U.S. Administration is unlikely to fill such a post with an effective leader, the Department would outlast any single Administration and would certainly have long-term impacts on the ideas and resources the U.S. brings to its international relations.

- Advocate for Selective Conscientious Objection (SCO). Soldiers should not be asked to check their conscience at the recruitment office. Indeed, advances in international law make it all the more important that soldiers are equipped to make ethical judgments about what they are ordered to do, as they can be held individually liable for carrying out illegal orders. Under SCO, soldiers could choose not to participate in a war they saw as unjust, and alternative service options would be available to such persons.
- Support a national debate on Rep. Charles Rangel's Congressional proposal to reinstate the military draft. Although few are eager to see a draft, a national discussion of the inequality that is part of our existing "all-volunteer" military is important. An army of draftees would encourage more critical reflection on official justifications for wars, forcing elected officials to avoid military interventions that do not enjoy broad public support. A new debate about the draft should be used as a chance to consider other questions about national priorities, such as: Why are public monies used to provide military career options but not to expand other sorts of economic opportunities for low-income Americans? And why shouldn't our ideas of national service include activities that do not involve participation in organized violence? A broadened definition of national service would provide both an enhanced sense of national community (which may be crucial to encouraging tolerance and unity in an increasingly diverse American society), and it would encourage a more critical look at culture of militarism and violence that plagues our society.

Most activists will still want to participate in mass protests and otherwise continue more traditional forms of antiwar activism, and these actions still serve useful functions of building solidarity and nurturing activists' commitments to the broad principles of justice, equality, and a preference for nonviolent approaches to resolving conflict. But we must not pretend that these protest actions will, by themselves, bring substantial policy changes. Effective peace advocacy demands efforts to strengthen our democratic institutions at home. It requires the fostering of public discourse and understanding not only of foreign policy issues, but also of core democratic values, especially those of tolerance, equality, and freedom.