

Give peace a chance?

by Alan Dawley

On the third anniversary of “Shock and Awe,” March 19, 2006, bells rang to commemorate the growing toll of American and Iraqi dead. Peace activists staged solemn protests against what they believe is an unjust and unwinnable war. The American public noted with regret the continuation of a war that a

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 20th century, the Philippines was conquered in the face of a powerful anti-imperialist movement. Widespread opposition did not prevent

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



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substantial majority now believes was a mistake.

And the war went 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 protesting the impending invasion of Iraq 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

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

angle. We should be asking, “How have peace movements shaped history?” Posing the question this way yields abundant evidence of why peace movements are important.

The list begins with setting limits on war-makers. In raising the cry, “Never again!” peace organizations 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 ensure there would be no repeat of the ghastly slaughter at Hiroshima and Nagasaki.

Carrying anti-Vietnam War posters, members of the Women’s Strike for Peace push their way to the doors of the Pentagon. The main doors of the building were locked for 30 minutes, as the women stormed the doors in an effort to gain entrance. This photo is a close-up of the group.

For those who think the war does not concern them, there is something to think about on each new day:

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

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

diplomats were under strong pressure to create a world worthy of wartime sacrifice. Peace movements took seriously the extravagant promises of "a world safe for democracy," "a land fit for heroes," and "a New Deal for the world," and they demanded redemption of these pledges in "industrial

400,000-man army and a navy equal to the British on the grounds that militarism drained resources from civilian needs. Proposing a "moral equivalent of war," William James called for boot camps for wilderness conservation instead of military training. In the Vietnam era, activists called for a redirection of funds



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"Ask not for whom the bell tolls; it tolls for thee."

Above, Peace parade in New York City, August 29, 1914.

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 requires the creation of a political climate in which politicians who take steps toward peace are rewarded at the polls, not punished. Consider the late stage of the Vietnam War. By the end of 1968, a majority of

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 more direct route in 1973 of cutting off funding for future ground operations, thwarting any lingering impulse to rescue the South Vietnamese puppet regime.

Setting limits also applies to peace settlements. Peace movements are important in laying out demands for a just peace. They were especially powerful at the end of the two World Wars, when

democracy," full employment, and racial equality. They 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. That is evident in their recurrent opposition to militarism. Every era has its version of "money for schools, not for bombs." In the first World War, the American Union Against Militarism opposed building a

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 building costly B-1 bombers.

The struggle over resources leads peace movements toward social justice. As Martin Luther King Jr. observed, "Peace is not the absence of conflict, it is the

After thousands of petitions calling for drastic cuts in armaments and for international agreements for universal disarmament were presented to President Franklin Delano Roosevelt in 1933, an open-air mass meeting was held in Farragut Square, Washington, DC. Mrs. Mildred Scott Olmstead (speaking to the assemblance), executive secretary of the Philadelphia Branch of Women's International League for Peace and Freedom, carried one of the petitions to the president.

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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

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.

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 and Iraq and will expand to 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. To the contrary, they crush civil liberties, slash the social benefits of low-income people, and give tax cuts to the rich. The logical outcome is a nightmarish Orwellian world where ordinary people are forced to foot the bill for the corporate-military tyranny that oppresses them.

Fortunately, the current situation suggests other possible outcomes. Opposition to U.S. empire is strong abroad; there are signs of disorder in ruling circles at home; President Bush's poll numbers put him in the company of Nixon on the eve of resignation. If ever there were a time for a peace movement to oppose permanent war—another name for empire—this is it. Linkage between peace and economic justice would expand the ranks. At the very least, today's movement can do what peace movements have always done—claim the moral high ground by affirming life over death. Finally, for those who think the war does not concern them, there is something to think about on each new day: "Ask not for whom the bell tolls; it tolls for thee."

Peace and justice movements also play an important role in opposing empire. Early in the 20th 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 in the Philippines, the Caribbean, revolutionary Mexico, and 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.

Definitely not.

forward, feminists have been particularly prominent in pacifist ranks, while 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, many 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," or what socialists like Eugene Debs called "capitalist war."

Of course, peace and justice movements are no more effective in ending social injustice than in ending wars,

Above, anti-Vietnam War protesters in Washington, DC hold a banner that reads "Sociologists for Peace" during a demonstration for the students killed at Kent State.



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