

Beyond this War, and the Next: Waging Peace for the Long Haul

Bruce Hahne, March 20, 2003

"The war... is but a symptom of a far deeper malady within the American spirit, and if we ignore this sobering reality we will find ourselves organizing clergy- and laymen-concerned committees for the next generation... We will be marching for these and a dozen other names and attending rallies without end unless there is a significant and profound change in American life and policy." - Martin Luther King Jr., April 4, 1967

The international peace movement to prevent a preemptive U.S. war against Iraq has achieved spectacular results in the past six months, results which ten years ago would have been utterly inconceivable. Despite the fact that the U.S. will have its war regardless of international opinion, despite the propaganda which will blare from our TV screens 24 hours a day as the attack begins in earnest, despite the vicious hatred heaped on the peace movement by those who worship the gods of preemptive violence, we must always remember that we are the people who, for a moment, caused the war beast to hesitate in surprise. Yet as we both recognize our successes and mourn our short-term failures, we should take to heart Martin Luther King's words of 36 years ago. This war, and the next, and the next, are all symptoms of a spiritual and intellectual poison in America, a poison which is slowly killing us all. The U.S. peace movement must channel the energy and organizational cohesion generated by the Iraq peace protests into a new set of long-term goals: the creation of the institutions, programs, and political power that we need to rescue the nation from the killing vice grip of totalitarian neoconservative ideology, an ideology which dominates all major channels of political discourse and the contemporary American mindset.

In the spirit of putting flesh onto the bones of Dr. King's 36-year-old call for a revolution of values, I suggest here five foundational needs for the U.S. peace movement - five objectives which we must pursue as part of a multi-decade process to build a society grounded in the equality of all human beings and a belief in the futility of violence as a long-term means of conflict resolution.

1. Get active in electoral politics

Progressive activists must enter, in the thousands, into volunteer and paid positions in local and state Democratic Parties to give progressive candidates a fighting chance, to ensure that pro-war, WTO-supportive neoliberal Democrats are punished in the primaries, and to provide an army of Democratic election campaign volunteers working overtime to take seats away from Republicans in swing states. It was precisely this type of citizen influx during Pat Robertson's 1988 presidential campaign which set the stage both for Republican electoral gains in the 1990's and for the Republican Party's dutiful obeisance to the Christian Right. As Sojourners magazine contributor Vicki Kemper wrote in the wake of the 1988 election, "thousands of Robertson supporters - most... of them right-wing evangelicals or charismatics - have flocked to precinct, county and state organizations of the Republican Party. ...The goal... is to reshape and reorient American politics completely by systematically infiltrating and taking over its basic political structures."

Progressive activists must do the same with the Democratic Party, in equal or greater numbers. Yes, I've heard of the Greens, I donate to the Greens, and I value the Greens as a voice challenging the Democrats to be true Democrats, but we need both outsiders and insiders, and today our greatest need is for thousands of progressive insiders within the Democratic Party system. An easy way to begin is to sign up for the Swing State Project (www.swingstate.org), a 2004 election initiative organized in cooperation with Dorris "Granny D" Haddock of www.grannyD.com.

2. Establish and strengthen media watchdog and advocacy organizations

The peace movement needs a member-supported media organization which plans and coordinates offensive and defensive national media campaigns, and which offers media training to activists. A model example of this type of organization is GLAAD (Gay and Lesbian Alliance Against Defamation, glaad.org), the leading media advocacy group of the gay rights movement, which strategically targets specific newspapers, journalists, and talk show hosts in a relentless effort to ensure fair and balanced coverage of gay and lesbian people and issues. A peace movement version of GLAAD would, as an example, organize a relentless grass-roots campaign to pressure the Associated Press to stop writing "caught in the crossfire" as a euphemism for "shot by Israeli soldiers". It would coordinate mass letters and phone calls to major newspaper editors when the U.S. press prints historical lies such as "Iraq ordered the U.N. weapons inspectors out of the country in 1998" instead of the truth, "the U.N. ordered its weapons inspectors out of Iraq due to the threat of potential U.S. airstrikes." Most major newspapers, when they get their wrists slapped on the same distortion by several thousand readers, do take steps to adjust their coverage in the future. As GLAAD's successes have amply demonstrated, the ability to promote undistorted press coverage, applied over a period of many years, can pay off handsomely for a movement.

3. Create a national network of student-led public school nonviolence clubs

The peace movement need not wait for public schools to introduce nonviolence and peacemaking material into the curriculum - we can have a strong presence in the public schools right now. Thanks to the Federal Equal Access Act, passed in 1984 under pressure from the evangelical Christian lobby out of its hunger to host Bible studies on school property, secondary schools must grant to any student-run club, regardless of its subject matter, the same right to meet on school property granted to any other student organization. Within the gay rights movement, the Equal Access Act has led to the formation of hundreds of "gay-straight alliances" (GSAs), student-led clubs which offer support and information to gay and gay-supportive students, and which initiate local projects to fight school homophobia. Within California, over 100 GSAs are linked by an independent umbrella nonprofit, GSA Network (gsanetwork.org), which offers a host of resources to school GSAs throughout the state, including information about how to start a local GSA, tips on how to build membership, access to student leadership conferences, and online crash courses in meeting facilitation and strategic planning.

The peace movement can and should create a similar infrastructure to promote public school "nonviolence alliances" (NVAs), with an umbrella "NVA Network" organization that offers discussion topics, suggests school education campaigns, and provides access to content and

resources suitable for use at NVA meetings. School NVAs would engage in a wide variety of activities depending on local student interest - possibilities include showing and discussing videos such as the civil rights documentary *Eyes on the Prize* and the nonviolence documentary *A Force More Powerful*; conducting nonviolent conflict resolution role-playing exercises ; planning counter-recruitment events to offset the influence of ROTC ; and inviting guest speakers from local minority and religious communities. School NVAs, in other words, would serve as training grounds for the next generation of peace activists.

Any public secondary school student can walk into school tomorrow and start a nonviolence alliance, but without an umbrella nonprofit, the NVAs will be isolated and short on resources. The peace movement must "bell the cat" by generating seed funds and a board of directors to create an NVA Network organization.

4. Establish and strengthen progressive think tanks

Social progressives must create a network of think tanks to offer a strong countervoice to the scores of think tanks on the right, particularly the well-known "fatal five": Heritage Foundation, Cato Institute, American Enterprise Institute, Hoover Institution, and the Center for Strategic and International Studies. Peace activists unfamiliar with how these right-wing institutions have skewed political discourse in America should browse through a copy of the National Center for Responsive Philanthropy's 1999 report, "\$1 Billion for Ideas: Conservative Think Tanks in the 1990s". As the press release announcing the report notes, "The absence of a mainstream or left-of-center parallel to the critical mass of conservative policy institutions currently operating in the U.S. today has allowed conservative policy entrepreneurs formidable power to define, direct, and dominate policy and ideological debates."

One early-stage effort to create a progressive antidote to the fatal five is the California-based Commonweal Institute (commonwealinstitute.org), a multi-issue think tank involved in research, education, and communication. Social progressives must make a commitment to fund think tanks like Commonweal and to create new multi-issue and specific-issue think tanks to counter today's overpowering influence of think tanks on the right.

5. Invest heavily in leadership training

The old saw about teaching a man to fish instead of giving him a fish holds true in spades for the peace movement. The U.S. is planted thick from coast to coast with well-meaning but organizationally dysfunctional, underfunded, message-poor, anemic would-be social change groups. You may know the type - the six to ten people who meet once a month, thrash from one short-term reactive project to another with no focus, and spend much of their meeting time commiserating about how awful the world is.

The peace movement must create and strengthen training organizations whose mission is to engage the leadership of these grass-roots organizations and teach them the skills they need to bring about lasting social change. Fundraising. Meeting agenda and facilitation skills. Strategic planning. Membership growth. Volunteer management. Media communication, press

conference, and spokesperson skills. Inter-group conflict resolution. Equip a few thousand leaders with these skills, and we plant the seeds for future success.

A limited number of progressive training organizations exist today, including midwestacademy.com, piconetwork.org, compasspoint.org, and trainingforchange.org, but we need dozens more, and we need a broad awareness within the progressive community that every dollar, every hour spent on training today will pay off a hundred-fold in the future. The neoconservative movement took precisely the same approach to training in the late 1970's: New Right architect Morton Blackwell has commented that "we set about quite systematically to identify [fundamentalist Christian] leaders, to teach them how to become effective, how to organize, how to communicate, how to raise funds, how to use direct-mail technology - skills that would make them more effective." Social progressives must offer the same types of training, and make a commitment to keep at it for the years it will take to build a critical mass of skilled leaders.

The institution-building we must engage in over the next quarter century won't be easy, nor will it be cheap. Hundreds of thousands of social progressives must be prepared to commit a minimum of ten hours a month and 3% of our gross yearly income to the support of progressive media watchdog organizations, think tanks, school nonviolence groups, and leadership training, and to involvement in Democratic Party politics and support of progressive candidates. We must shift our energies out of a reactive "protest mode" and focus on a 25-year effort to build the core infrastructure that we need to redirect the nation's priorities. New Right architect Paul Weyrich accurately recognized the need for such a shift within the neoconservative movement decades ago:

"The Christian Coalition people followed the advice of those of us... who said, 'Train people and deploy them effectively, if you're going to have an impact.' The Randall Terry group [Operation Rescue, an anti-abortion group] didn't want to hear this. They thought of everything in terms of mass rallies and confrontation, and not in terms of building an infrastructure of support that will make sure laws aren't passed that do you in."

Today, of course, the Christian Coalition stands as one of the most successful of the New Right organizations, while Randall Terry's Operation Rescue protest group lies in the "where are they now?" ashcan of history. In similar fashion, Rev. Jim Lawson, the "godfather of nonviolence" who organized the 1960's Nashville lunch-counter sit-ins, recently issued this admonition:

"On April 4, 1967, Martin King said that if we could not create a spiritual or moral revolution in the United States, a revolution of values, a revolution of spirit, a revolution of priorities... then he said that fifty years from now, we'll be picketing over South Africa, we'll be marching on Central America... And that is my pitch to the peace movement and the people of good will in the United States. We have been antiwar for fifty years or more. We haven't changed the policy. Now how long are we going to continue to march?"

The road ahead will be costly, laborious, and at times agonizingly slow, yet we can do nothing less. Sign up for the Swing State project. Write a check to the Commonweal Institute. Encourage your children to start school nonviolence clubs, and join together with other parents to form a nonviolence club network. Get yourself and the leaders in your social circles the training that you need to maximize your social change skills. Commit ten hours a month and

3% of your income for the next quarter century to waging peace... because the future depends on all of us. Perhaps Martin Luther King Jr. said it best in the closing words of his April 1967 speech:

"Now let us begin. Now let us rededicate ourselves to the long and bitter -- but beautiful - struggle for a new world".

Bruce Hahne is a Christian gay rights activist and nonviolence trainer who lives in Sunnyvale, California. He can be reached at hahne@newvisionsproject.org

References:

- Morton Blackwell, Paul Weyrich, and Sojourners quotes taken from William Martin, *With God on Our Side: The Rise of the Religious Right in America*, Broadway Books, 1996.
- Martin Luther King Jr. quotes taken from "Beyond Vietnam: A Time to Break Silence", April 4, 1967, speech given at Riverside Church in New York City.
- Jim Lawson quote taken from interview in *Fellowship* magazine, September/October 2000, available in online archives at www.forusa.org.

Copyright (c) 2003 by Bruce Hahne. Nonprofit, noncommercial redistribution of this essay in its entirety is permitted and encouraged.