The Movement against War in Iraq
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The U.S.-led invasion of Iraq aroused widespread opposition in the United States and around the world and sparked one of the largest waves of antiwar protest in history. The global reaction to the war, wrote Francis Fukuyama, “succeeded in uniting much of the world in a frenzy of anti-Americanism.”¹ In the United States opposition to the war and military occupation led to the creation of a large scale sustained antiwar movement, which has helped to make Iraq the dominant political issue in the country. In this essay I review the extent and nature of the Iraq antiwar movement, describing the mammoth scale of global protest prior to the invasion and the continuing and growing political opposition to the war in the years since. I highlight a few specific dimensions of the antiwar upsurge, particularly the rise of Internet organizing, and offer some observations about the overall impacts of the movement.

A Peaceful Superpower
As an unprovoked war of choice, fought without legal justification or U.N. authorization, the Iraq invasion fundamentally lacked moral legitimacy. Opposition within the religious community played a significant role in the overall public rejection of Bush administration policy. The war was condemned by religious leaders throughout the world. Nearly every mainline Christian denominational body in the United States, including the U.S. Catholic Conference of Bishops and the major Protestant churches, publicly opposed the war. At the Vatican, Pope John Paul II pleaded for peace, and Archbishop Renato Martino, head of the Pontifical Council for Justice and Peace, called the proposed military action a “war of aggression.”² Many religious leaders and members of local congregations in the United States participated in antiwar activities. Church-based opposition to war was broader in the case of Iraq than in any previous conflict in modern history. Faith-based activists were major players in the principal U.S. coalitions against the war, United for Peace and Justice and Win Without War. Traditional religious peace groups—including the Catholic pacifist organization Pax Christi and groups within the Friends, Mennonite, and Brethren communities—played a leadership role in raising awareness and organizing antiwar opposition.

The campaign against the invasion of Iraq was the largest, most intensive mobilization of antiwar sentiment in history.³ On 15 February 2003 in hundreds of cities across the globe an estimated 10 million people demonstrated against war. It was the largest single day of antiwar protest ever organized. More than a million people jammed the center of London, and equal numbers demonstrated in Rome and Barcelona. Crowds of hundreds of thousands gathered in New York, Madrid, Berlin, Sydney, and dozens of other cities.⁴ In the course of just a few months the peace movement in the United States reached levels of mobilization that, during the Vietnam era, took years to develop. The campaign against the invasion was more international in character than any previous antiwar movement, as protests were coordinated throughout the world and activists understood themselves to be part of a truly global struggle. In dozens of countries national coalitions were created, encompassing a wide range of movements and organizations. The coalitions set up web sites that were linked to each other,
and many adopted the same slogan and graphic design, a missile crossed out with the words “stop the war.”

More important than the number and extent of these demonstrations was the political character of the antiwar opposition. Rejection of U.S. policy was especially strong in countries where governments supported the U.S. war effort. In Great Britain, Spain and, Italy, citizens said “no” while their political leaders were saying “yes.” In Spain and Italy opinion polls showed more than 80 percent of the public opposed participation in the U.S.-led war. In Germany antiwar sentiment played a decisive role in Chancellor Gerhard Schroeder’s come-from-behind electoral victory in September 2002. In Turkey, with antiwar opposition running at 86 percent in the polls, political leaders turned aside billions of dollars in American financial inducements and refused the Bush administration’s request to use the country as a base and transit corridor for U.S. invasion forces. Ankara’s rejection had a direct impact on military planning, forcing the Pentagon to alter its attack plan and redeploy forces to the south of Iraq. Public revulsion over Spain’s participation in the war and the government’s mishandling of the initial reaction to the Madrid terrorist bombing led to the March 2004 election of socialist José Luis Rodríguez Zapatero, who promptly implemented his campaign pledge to withdraw Spanish troops from Iraq. Throughout the world, public opposition to the war prevented Washington from obtaining meaningful military contributions to its ersatz coalition in Iraq.

A few days after the February 2003 demonstrations, New York Times reporter Patrick Tyler conferred “superpower” status on the antiwar movement. The huge antiwar demonstrations were indications, wrote Tyler, of “two superpowers on the planet: the United States and world public opinion.” The White House faced a “tenacious new adversary” which was generating massive opposition to the administration’s war policy and left the world’s largest military power virtually alone in the international community. Antiwar commentators quickly adopted the phrase and proclaimed their movement “the other superpower.” Jonathan Schell wrote in The Nation of the movement’s “immense power” in winning the hearts and wills of the majority of the world’s people. Even U.N. Secretary-General Kofi Annan used the phrase in referring to antiwar opinion. A new form of global social movement emerged, an unprecedented expression of collective consciousness and action bound together through the Internet.

Online against War

The Iraq antiwar movement marked the emergence of the Internet as a powerful tool of mass mobilization. The leading force in this development was MoveOn, founded in 1998 by software entrepreneurs Wes and Joan Boyd to oppose the impeachment of President Bill Clinton. The Internet was already emerging as an effective tool of international mobilization, primarily through the global justice movement, but it was not until the Iraq antiwar movement that the full range of possibilities for Internet organizing became evident. Antiwar activists used the Internet as a means of communication, coordination and education among decentralized networks of organizers around the world. The coordinated global protests of February 2003, announced just a few weeks before, would not have been possible without the Internet. Antiwar activists also pioneered new dimensions of online mobilization: the development of large scale “membership” networks, the creation of meet-up tools to facilitate coordinated
local action, and grassroots fundraising. In the crucible of antiwar mobilization, E-activism matured dramatically.

Internet-based groups emerged as the backbone of the U.S. antiwar movement. MoveOn in particular took advantage of the rising wave of antiwar sentiment and expanded rapidly. In the six months leading up to the March 2003 invasion, MoveOn’s online network, U.S. and international, jumped from approximately 700,000 to nearly 2 million. The network continued to grow in subsequent years, reaching 3.2 million in 2006, which enabled MoveOn to mount a massive campaign of volunteer action in the November elections of that year. Other online networks also expanded during the mobilization against war, but none was able to match the success and scale of MoveOn.

Skeptics have questioned the value of Internet organizing as a means of social change activism. How can you change the world, they ask, when glued to a computer screen? The very ease with which one can click and send a message seems to cheapen the value of the effort. Lobbyists confirm that e-mail messages and online petitions as a form of political communication have minimal impact. MoveOn and other groups recognized these limitations early on and devised methods of mobilization that broaden the impact of e-activism. One of the most significant innovations is the use of the Internet to organize coordinated local events and meetings. Through the use of meet-up tools, online organizers direct local activists to get up from behind their computer screens and go out into the public arena to take coordinated action with like-minded colleagues. MoveOn and other groups have used this technique successfully to organize waves of local vigils and protest events, to arrange house meetings in conjunction with film showings and television broadcasts, and to mobilize participation in demonstrations and protests.

MoveOn and other groups have also utilized the Internet as an effective tool of grassroots fundraising. As online marketing has matured and become a major factor in the commercial economy, Internet fundraising has become a vital source of income for social movements, nonprofit groups, and political campaigns. In the months prior to the invasion, MoveOn raised more than $1 million for advertising and public relations efforts and began to turn its vast online network into a vital source of financial support for antiwar mobilization. In the years since the invasion, MoveOn has become a fundraising powerhouse, generating millions of dollars for organizing campaigns and advertising and public relations against the continuing occupation. During the 2004 and especially the 2006 electoral campaigns, MoveOn raised tens of millions of dollars for independent political activities in support of Democratic Party candidates opposed to the war. In the 2006 campaign season, MoveOn raised and spent an astounding $27 million, making it one of the largest political action committees in the United States and giving it enormous influence in national political debates.

The experience of online organizing challenges some of the traditional assumptions of social movement theory. According to resource mobilization theory, movements depend upon organized structures that can provide a sustained and predictable base of financial support and activist participation. The classical model, followed by Gandhi, King, and other great nonviolent
leaders, linked mobilization capacity to the creation of formal organizations. As Saul Alinsky famously wrote, “power and organization are one and the same thing.” In their book *Strategic Nonviolent Conflict*, Peter Ackerman and Christopher Kruegler emphasized the importance of “efficient, fighting organizations” as crucial elements of successful social action. Online groups such as MoveOn provide networks for fundraising and coordinated action, but they do not create formal institutional structures. They rely on networks of atomized individuals rather than structures of organized affiliation. There are no annual dues or membership requirements, no chapters or affiliates, indeed no fixed organizational structure at all. The “members” participate only to the extent that they feel motivated at a particular time to respond to a specific action alert.

Online networks are highly ephemeral and susceptible to diminished participation and defection. The same is true of more formalized organizations, however. Large membership groups have the additional burden of devoting resources and staff to the maintenance of affiliate networks and may suffer from institutional sclerosis. Online groups have fewer membership maintenance costs and are more nimble organizationally and politically. They have a horizontal rather than vertical structure that allows for greater spontaneity and flexibility. Whether such groups will be able to sustain their influence into the future remains to be seen, but there is no doubt that they have revolutionized the nature of social change generally and antiwar activism in particular.

**Winning while Losing**

Despite the unprecedented scale and scope of the Iraq antiwar movement, the United States and Britain ignored the pervasive opposition to war and rolled ahead with their pre-planned invasion. Given the Bush administration’s determination to remove Saddam Hussein by force, the movement probably had little chance of halting the march to war. Nor did peace advocates have much time to organize, less than six months from when the major antiwar coalitions emerged in the fall of 2002 until the start of war.

Although the antiwar movement did not stop the invasion, it nonetheless had significant impacts. The influence of the global opposition to war was evident in the Security Council debate prior to the invasion. When the Bush administration went to the Security Council in the fall of 2002, it won backing for a tougher weapons inspection regime but not for military action. Resolution 1441 established rigorous conditions for renewed weapons inspection, which the Baghdad regime promptly accepted, but it contained no language that could be interpreted as authorizing the use of military force. When the United States and Britain returned to the Security Council in February 2003 to seek authority for war, they were decisively rebuffed. Not only France, Germany and Russia, but six other nonpermanent members—Chile, Mexico, Cameroon, Guinea, Angola, and Pakistan—refused to support the U.S. proposal. Washington made determined efforts to twist arms, sending diplomatic missions to each country to make threats and offer inducements, but its lobbying efforts produced only two other supporters, Spain and Bulgaria. Rather than face the embarrassment of such a meager showing, Washington withdrew its proposed resolution. This was a major victory for the global antiwar movement. The strength of worldwide opposition prevented the Bush and Blair governments
from gaining Security Council support and forced them to proceed without international authorization. The importance of the Security Council rebuff to the United States is enormous. It was, according to Immanuel Wallerstein, “the first time since the United Nations was founded that the United States, on an issue that mattered to it, could not get a majority on the Security Council.” This was widely recognized as a humiliating political defeat for the supposed lone superpower. It represented a major loss of legitimacy and a weakening of U.S. political prestige.

The interplay between the antiwar movement and the United Nations deserves special comment. Most U.N. officials and Security Council members were opposed to the war but were powerless to stop it. The U.N. Security Council by its very design is a captive of the permanent members, and when its most powerful members are bent on military aggression, the United Nations has no capacity to prevent them from acting. The most important power of the Security Council is its authority to confer international legitimacy. When it withholds consent, as it did in Iraq, it denies legitimacy. It was able to do so because of the worldwide antiwar movement. A creative dialectic developed between the Security Council and global civil society. The public opposition to war hinged largely on the lack of U.N. authorization. The objection of U.N. diplomats in turn depended on the strength of antiwar opposition. The stronger the antiwar movement in the United States, Germany, France, and other countries, the greater the determination of officials at the United Nations to resist Bush administration pressures. The stronger the objections at the United Nations, the greater the legitimacy and impact of the antiwar movement. It was a unique and unprecedented form of global political synergy. By defending the United Nations, despite its many shortcomings, and insisting upon international authorization for the use of force, the peace movement helped to build the opposition to war and strengthened respect for international law. Bush administration officials later criticized the Security Council for supposedly “failing its responsibilities.” Many peace advocates considered the episode a shining moment for the United Nations. By standing up to political pressures from the United States, the Security Council displayed rare political courage and integrity. It was one of the United Nations’ finest hours.

Movements can win even when they appear to lose. Although the antiwar movement did not prevent the invasion of Iraq, it helped to set the terms of the debate internationally and exerted decisive influence on public opinion. The peace movement achieved unprecedented credibility and legitimacy and gained widespread backing within civil society. Peace movement insistence on Security Council authorization for the use of force served as a counter-weight to the Bush administration’s circumvention of the United Nations and gave greater legitimacy to the world body, despite its many flaws. The movement’s arguments against the war were vindicated by official deceit and incompetence and by the horrendous aftermath of the invasion and occupation.

The Bush administration succeeded in ramming through its war policy, but it was unable to win the larger and more important struggle for hearts and minds. War is never solely about military results, said Clausewitz, but is an extension of politics, a means of realizing political aims. For the Bush administration, the war was a disaster that failed to achieve its declared aims and
weakened America’s political standing at home and abroad. The war was lost politically before it ever began militarily.

**Continuing Resistance**

As the occupation dragged on, antiwar activities persisted and domestic opposition to Bush administration policy steadily mounted. At each anniversary of the invasion or milestone of additional thousand U.S. fatalities, MoveOn and the Win Without War coalition joined with other networks to organize antiwar vigils across the country. The local events were arranged to take place simultaneously and to communicate a common message. They were often accompanied by national advertising and media efforts, usually paid for and produced by MoveOn. Hundreds of thousands of people participated in a thousand or more events in each wave of protest, which attracted news coverage in hundreds of newspapers and broadcast outlets in local and regional media markets. The other major coalitions, Act Now to Stop War and End Racism (ANSWER) and United for Peace and Justice (UFPJ), continued to organize large scale national and regional protest demonstrations. Mass demonstrations occurred each year in New York or Washington and on the West Coast, but except for the mammoth protest of several hundred thousand at the 2004 Republican convention in New York, the crowd sizes were smaller than in February 2003. In Europe protests also continued, but they were relatively small and lacked the consistency and intensity of demonstrations in the United States.

Antiwar sentiment spread to the ranks of the military. Veterans of the war began to speak out publicly, adding an important voice of legitimacy and authenticity to the antiwar movement. New organizations emerged, including Iraq Veterans Against the War and VoteVets, to represent the growing number of veterans opposed to the war. Active duty service members also spoke out. In 2006 they launched the Appeal for Redress, a web site through which service members can send an online message to members of congress. The message urges members of Congress “to support the prompt withdrawal of all American military forces and bases from Iraq.” Some 2,000 active duty, reserve, and National Guard service members signed the Appeal, adding an important voice to the growing chorus of opposition to war.

With antiwar protest continuing, and growing numbers of elite experts and former officials speaking out against Bush administration policy, public skepticism about the war increased. Polls showed a steady drop in presidential approval ratings because of Iraq. According to an April 2007 analysis by the Gallup Poll, 33 percent of Americans considered Iraq the “most important problem” facing the country, by far the most dominant issue mentioned, well above “health care,” which was selected by 10 percent of respondents. A majority of Americans, 57 percent, agreed that it was a mistake for the United States to become involved in Iraq. A May 2007 New York Times/CBS News poll found more than three-quarters of respondents believing that the war is going badly. Sixty three percent favored a timeline for military withdrawal “sometime in 2008.” Polls also found a significant gender gap on Iraq issues, with women far more likely than men to say that the war was a mistake and to support a timetable for withdrawal.
With Iraq the dominant political issue in the United States, many activists, led by MoveOn, shifted their attention from protest demonstrations to increased involvement in electoral politics and legislative lobbying. This emphasis on conventional political engagement began with the 2004 elections, when antiwar activists initially propelled the candidacy of former Vermont governor Howard Dean, and many later backed the Kerry-Edwards ticket for president. The trend toward increased political involvement continued and intensified in 2006. As Republican approval ratings plummeted and support for administration policy dwindled, MoveOn mounted a major effort to mobilize support for progressive candidates. The MoveOn campaign focused not only on the Iraq issue but also the protection of Social Security benefits. Hundreds of thousands of activists participated in MoveOn’s electoral and legislative activities, contributing money, calling potential voters, participating in campaign events, and communicating the antiwar message to the media. MoveOn volunteers made seven million phone calls during the election cycle, targeted to specific campaigns. In close contests the number of MoveOn-generated calls to voters far surpassed the thin margin of victory. MoveOn’s tens of millions of dollars worth of independent expenditures and campaign contributions gave a further boost to candidates. The MoveOn effort during the 2006 elections played a decisive role in the political transformation that saw Democrats win control of both houses of Congress. It was one of the largest grassroots electoral mobilizations in U.S. history.

The Republican defeat in the 2006 elections was widely interpreted as a rebuke of White House policy in Iraq. The release of the Iraq Study Group report by James Baker and Lee Hamilton a few weeks later added weight to the plea for a new direction in Iraq. Instead of heeding the public demand for military disengagement, however, the Bush administration escalated the war and sent tens of thousands of additional troops to Iraq. Antiwar groups responded by forming a new coalition, Americans Against Escalation in Iraq, which added significant new energy and resources to the antiwar cause. The new coalition was led by MoveOn and US Action, a network of dozens of state-wide citizen groups previously focused on consumer and environmental issues. AAEI also had the backing of the 1.8 million member Service Employees International Union. The coalition worked with the new Democratic leadership in Congress early in 2007 to win support for an amendment to the war appropriations bill requiring a timeline for the withdrawal of U.S. combat troops. The amendment was approved in both the Senate and House of Representatives, marking the emergence of an antiwar majority in Congress—although the White House vetoed the measure. Democrats vowed to continue the fight, however, and promised further legislative and political efforts to bring the war and occupation to a halt.

Some antiwar groups were critical of the legislation offered by the Democratic leadership because it provided full funding for the war. Many cheered Rep. John Lewis (D-GA), who declared on the floor of the House that he “cannot vote for another dollar or another dime to support this war.” Divisions surfaced within the movement over the best strategy for ending the war—whether to work with the Congressional majority on incremental measures such as a timeline for withdrawal, or to press Congress to use its power of the purse to end the war immediately. Groups supporting the latter view were critical of MoveOn and the new AAEI coalition for supporting the Democratic leadership proposal. Many activists supported both
positions, however, urging a cutoff of funding but also backing a timeline for withdrawal, supporting any and all measures to stop the escalation and end the military occupation. The movement against war in Iraq continues, and its history is still being written. This brief sketch has highlighted only a few points, but it is evident even from this partial overview that citizen opposition has been significant. Antiwar groups have helped to shape the public debate and have exerted substantial pressure on U.S. political leaders. While the movement has had impacts, it continues to ‘lose’—as the war goes on, and even escalates. The goal of setting a timeline for military withdrawal remains distant, and probably will not be fulfilled during the Bush presidency. Yet antiwar opposition is pervasive and steadily becoming stronger, and the political trends in the United States point increasingly in its favor. Perhaps the movement may yet succeed in putting an end to the U.S. military occupation of Iraq.

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