

USA/Iraq...: Remembering the War and the Movement

Wednesday 3 August 2011, by [DRUCKER Peter](#) (Date first published: 1 January 2001).

FEBRUARY 28, 1991. Thinking that weeks of war and antiwar organizing were still ahead (not my only mistake during those months!), I took a Canadian vacation at the end of February 1991 with my lover Christopher. On the morning of February 28 I got up in Vancouver in the friend's house where we were staying and went to collect the Globe and Mail from the front stoop.

There was the headline: Iraq had surrendered. A wave of confused emotions swept through me. Exhaustion: There's nothing more we can do. Anger: goddamit, we were building a big movement, couldn't this supposed anti-imperialist Saddam Hussein have held out for a few months?! The South Vietnamese NLF held out for years! Relief: It's over. And sadness: the U.S. has won, we've lost, we've all lost.

The Letter from the Editors in the January-February 1991 issue of *Against the Current* said, "A victory for the United States in the war would be the greatest evil among the possible outcomes, because of the long-lasting consequences: a military occupation of the Gulf lasting for many years, a huge shift in the balance of forces in favor of imperialism and against movements for self-determination in the Arab world or anywhere else, a revival of military triumphalism in the U.S. at precisely the moment when the permanent war economy needs to be dismantled."

How right we were. And dismantling the permanent war economy — what a pipe dream that turned out to be! Today the U.S. military enjoys a global military supremacy unprecedented in human history. It outspends the world's next six biggest military powers combined. The result has been, yes, "a huge shift in the balance of forces in favor of imperialism." The 1990s were U.S. imperialism's decade, with the Gulf War and the NATO bombing of Serbia as the blood-drenched markers of its opening and close.

The hundreds of deaths and thousands of injuries in the West Bank and Gaza these last weeks are one delayed-action consequence of the U.S. Gulf War victory. Yasser Arafat would hardly have made his loser's bet on the Oslo process, with a deck so stacked in Israel's favor, if his Palestine Liberation Organization had not come out of the Gulf War so discredited and friendless because of its support for the losing side.

This made the 1990s in a sense an interlude between the two Intifadas. They were the few years necessary to show the Palestinians beyond any doubt that they were being cheated and robbed, and that revolt was still their only option. Bush and Clinton's New World Order had nothing to offer them after all, despite the assurances that the Pax Americana would smooth away regional conflicts — just as it has had nothing to offer the Kurds or Angolans or Central Americans.

As for the Iraqis, even the most foresighted did not foresee the hell that the 1990s had in store: the many thousands of deaths, the hunger, the sickness, the bombings, the decimation of the economy.

While the competition is mind-numbingly tough in the twentieth century's catalogue of crimes against humanity — King Leopold's genocide in the Congo Free State (1880s-1900), Turkey's

Armenian genocide (1915), Nazi death camps, the atomic bombing of Hiroshima (1945), Stalin's Gulag, Mao's Great Leap Forward (1958-60), Cambodia (1970-79), genocide in Rwanda (1994), Structural Adjustment Programs — historians will surely put the Iraq embargo somewhere in the recent top ten.

Premeditation and malice can be proved to the hilt. The evidence of Iraqi civilian suffering piled up in one report after another; not one imperialist aim was achieved; and yet every six months the U.S. and British UN ambassadors got up in the Security Council to insist that the Iraqi people continue being strangled.

Even an unrivalled military power armed to the teeth is not all-powerful, however. The U.S. giant too has its Achilles heel. The Vietnam Syndrome, solemnly buried at the Gulf War's end, still cannot really be killed.

The high-tech extravaganza of the Pentagon's budget bears witness to its obsession with waging body-bagless wars. What will they do if the guerillas of the Colombian FARC and ERN are closing in on Bogota and the Colombian army is collapsing? Do they delude themselves even now that they can win the hearts of minds of their own troops in a long counterinsurgency, let alone the hearts and minds of Colombians?

The bottom line is that in the post-Cold War world everything depends on politics. The Husseins and Milosevics are the empire's preferred adversaries, because they have only regular armies to fight for them and rightly command so little sympathy in world public opinion. The question for us is how to mobilize against imperialism despite the Husseins and Milosevics, which means asking ourselves what vision of an alternative we have to offer. On this score we are still going through a learning process.

August 1990. Each month, as National Mobilization for Survival's program coordinator, I took part in a meeting of the Disarm 2000 Coalition. Despite big hopes at the beginning Disarm 2000 had ended up small, an informal network of a few leftish peace groups: Mobe, the War Resisters League, the Women's International League for Peace and Freedom (WILPF) and the U.S. Peace Council. The meetings alternated between New York and Philadelphia, and we took turns preparing them. The August 1990 meeting was in Philadelphia, and it was my turn to prepare and chair it.

The Iraqi invasion of Kuwait and Bush's decision to send U.S. troops to Saudi Arabia changed our usual relaxed morning, exchanging thoughts and gossip into more of a crisis summit. This meeting in fact began the process that led to the founding in September of the National Campaign for Peace in the Middle East. We invited the Palestine Solidarity Committee, Committee in Solidarity with the People of El Salvador (CISPES), Leslie Cagan; and when someone from Ramsey Clark's office called Jane Midgley of WILPF and asked if they could send someone, she said sure. Clark was someone peace groups often invited and worked with in those days, and now.

As chair I tried to move the meeting through the agenda: the background in the region, the first steps in organizing in the United States, the more controversial issues that were coming up — including what to say about the Iraqi invasion of Kuwait.

Introducing that point, I mentioned that the newly formed New York Coalition for Peace in the Middle East opposed condemning the invasion, a stand I attributed to the leading role played in it from its inception by the Workers World Party. The man from Ramsey Clark's office spoke up to defend the New York Coalition position — an awkward moment, since no one else in the room agreed with him.

I said that this was indeed one of the most controversial points, one we couldn't resolve that day, and we moved on. But as we were going out for lunch he asked me why I had brought up Workers World, and as I tried to answer he yelled at me to cut out the goddamned redbaiting.

[Editors' note: The Workers World Party, one of the left-wing groups active from the beginning of the Gulf War struggle, remains today among the leading forces in the anti-sanctions movement through the International Action Center. WWP/IAC was the largest of those left currents that argued against any condemnation of the Saddam Hussein regime's invasion of Kuwait, or the regime's murderous internal policies, whether because they sympathized with the Iraqi invasion or believed opposing it would weaken the struggle against the United States' war machine.]

The socialist and communist left has always played a big role in anti-imperialist organizing. That was true before, during and after the Gulf War.

The U.S. left has been divided for decades too, and the divisions play themselves out, more or less openly, more or less destructively, in antiwar coalitions. There had been competing antiwar coalitions during the Vietnam War (over demanding immediate withdrawal or negotiations, and other issues), separate demonstrations in Spring 1981 against Reagan's interventions in Central America, a split in the antinuclear mobilizations of 1982 (over the mainstream peace movement's silence on Israel's invasion of Lebanon among other things), and so on.

In that sense the split around the Gulf War was nothing new. But I at least had never experienced anything like it. All the bitter feelings evoked by previous splits exploded and set off a chain reaction in the anti-Gulf War movement. On the two coasts and especially in New York City, the result was a nightmare.

The clearest ostensible reason for the split was the dispute over whether or not to condemn the Iraqi invasion of Kuwait. While I argued then, and still believe, that this was not an issue worth splitting the movement over, I continue to believe that an effective anti-imperialism — more than ever since the Cold War's end — must also be independent of imperialism's oppressive adversaries as well as its oppressive satellites.

To support Saddam's regime in Iraq — or more recently, Milosevic in Serbia — would have handed the issues of democracy, self-determination and basic humanity to imperialism on a silver plate. The few tattered "socialist" pretensions that the Iraqi regime had left in 1990, and the Serbian regime in 1998, did not make the case for taking our distance from them any less compelling.

But was condemning Iraq really the decisive issue in the split? On one side, the overwhelming majority of the gathering that founded the National Campaign in September 1990 was ready to avoid an explicit condemnation of Iraq in the interests of unity, though a majority did go along with a condemnation in the end.

On the other side, despite that condemnation, there was no immediate split: representatives of the New York Coalition took part in National Campaign coordinating meetings for several months afterwards. Only much later in the crisis did the New York Coalition rebaptize itself the National Coalition for Peace in the Middle East, issue a call for a national antiwar demonstration on January 19, 1991, and thus emerge as the National Campaign's avowed rival.

[The National Campaign called a mobilization in Washington, D.C. and San Francisco for January 26. Left organizations involved in this effort included the Communist Party, Socialist Workers Party, Socialist Party, Democratic Socialists of America, Solidarity and Socialist Action. Around the country many local antiwar forces supported both dates — ed.]

As in any split a history of antagonism, organizational jockeying and bad personal chemistry were as much at work as politics. But there was a political factor that to my mind was more important in the split than the dispute over condemning Iraq. In fact, key people on both sides — in large part from the organized left — believed that they had the best strategy for reaching masses of people outside the organized left, and that their strategy made them the antiwar movement's appropriate leadership.

The fact that this was largely a debate within the left made the charge of redbaiting bizarre. Without the participation of organized leftists, both warring coalitions would most likely have collapsed. In fact each strategy enjoyed a certain limited success in 1990-91 — for the last time in the twentieth century.

Key people in the Coalition believed that they could mobilize masses of people by putting forward clear radical positions and reaching out directly to the most oppressed, above all to communities of color. To some extent the tens of thousands of people that the Coalition gathered in Washington D.C. on January 19, 1991, vindicated that claim.

On the other side, key people in the Campaign believed that they alone were equipped to link up with the forces that could build a big, powerful antiwar movement: the leaderships of the unions, churches and student groups. And although the more progressive unions and churches never mobilized against the Gulf War the way they had done at the height of the Vietnam War, to some extent the hundreds of thousands that the Campaign gathered in Washington on January 26, 1991, vindicated that claim.

Perhaps both strategies would have succeeded even better if they had been combined in the building of a single demonstration; who knows. In reality the big battalions of people of color and the poor did not line up behind the Coalition; and no major union or denomination lined up behind the Campaign.

Even the limited readiness of those constituencies to mobilize in 1990-91 has not been duplicated since. True, the AFL-CIO's presence in Seattle showed that sometimes bureaucrats are still ready to turn some people out around an international issue. But neither the AFL-CIO leadership nor the International Action Center, the Coalition's heir, offers a short cut to building a big movement at home against the U.S. empire.

The left's fundamental task remains to organize between crises in the unions and communities of color and other mass constituencies, to make direct contact with the rank and file and grassroots, so as eventually to replace bureaucratic leaderships of mass organizations with leaderships that are genuinely militant and internationalist.

January 26, 1991. Early in the morning, in the subway on the way to the bus to Washington, I began to feel nauseous. In hindsight, the anxiety and tension of the weeks of organizing and infighting seemed to have all settled in my gut. The nausea persisted on the bus — a union bus in which people were talking in hushed tones about the unravelling of Gorbachev's power in the Soviet Union — and in Washington during the march and rally.

But as announcements were made from the stage about the numbers in DC and San Francisco and LA, as it became apparent that something like a million people around the country were protesting against the war that day, nausea gave way to a kind of incredulous euphoria.

A million people, a week and a half into the war, I remember thinking — compare that with the three or four years it took to build a movement this size against the Vietnam War! If we're this big already,

what kind of movement will we have in a few months as U.S. troops are dying?!

In fact over a hundred thousand Iraqis died in the war's remaining month, but relatively few Americans. The expectation of a protracted ground war, with heavy Iraqi resistance and U.S. casualties, turned out to be our biggest miscalculation.

The movement would never grow bigger than it was on January 26. In a matter of weeks, leaving aside ongoing, important but small campaigns against the embargo and bombings, there was no longer a movement. The cutting off of that anti-Gulf War movement opened a decade of unprecedented U.S. supremacy and crimes. Perhaps the victory of the post-Seattle movement, if it learns the right lessons from the past, can end it.

The anti-Gulf War movement remains the biggest movement I have ever been part of in the twenty-odd years of my activist life. (I was too young for Vietnam.) In hindsight 1991 was the end of a cycle of anti-imperialist activism, a cycle that began in 1965 with the anti-Vietnam War movement, and continued through the ups and downs of Central America and antiapartheid organizing.

Today, in the wake of the December 1999 Seattle actions and later ones in Washington, Melbourne, Prague and Nice, there is reason to hope that a new cycle has begun. If we are lucky, some of the debates that split our movements in 1965-91 will be less damaging to the new movements on the rise today.

So far no major current of the new movements seems inclined to follow uncritically the leadership of, say, the Cuban Communist Party or the Zapatistas (let alone Milosevic's Yugoslav Socialist Party) the way some currents in 1965-91 uncritically followed Vietnamese, Chinese, Albanian, Central American or South African leaderships. So far no major wing of the new movements seems to limit itself to calling on the IMF or WTO to "negotiate a just solution."

One major issue from the past is not going away, however; at least, so far neither the direct action forces nor the left-wing non-governmental organizations (NGOs) nor the union officials seem to have the answer. In a conflict where the interests of peasants, consumers, poor and working people around the world are at stake, who gets to speak for them, represent them, and take decisions in their name?

Self-proclaimed leaderships are not the right answer, but neither is an absence of leadership. Ultimately there is no substitute for the long process of building participatory democracy at every level of the movement, locally, nationally and globally, until literally millions of people are actively part of that movement's structures and its legitimacy dwarfs that of the empire's institutions.

Peter Drucker

P.S.

* From Against the Current (ATC) 90, January-April 2001.