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Protesting the War in Afghanistan: We Finally Gave Up

Having been an antiwar protester and war resister during the Vietnam War and then standing against all the later serial wars that the US fought, how an antiwar group to which I belonged in Rhode Island fared following the attacks on September 11, 2001 was telling. War is big business and also feeds into the sense of national “pride” in ways easy to understand. Chris Hedges described the latter well in War is a Force That Gives Us Meaning (2002). “You are either with us or against us,” said George W. Bush after the 2001 attacks, a war criminal through his aggression in Iraq in 2003. A casual observer can easily discern how those words would play out after the attacks of 2001, and it was no surprise that death threats came our way during demonstrations against US aggression in the Middle East following those attacks. Getting everyone on board for war is as old as the republic and history itself.

By the time of the 2001 attacks, the US had normalized war. First there was Reagan’s “noble war” bullshit during the 1980s, then his gradual ramping up of war as low-intensity war in Central America. George H. W. Bush took warmongering to another level with the first Gulf War. His objective was not to look wimpy in the eyes of the US public and to conquer the Vietnam Syndrome. Iraq’s invasion of Kuwait gave Bush I that opportunity. The Vietnam Syndrome was the collective revulsion at war after the horrors of the war in Vietnam, Cambodia, and Laos during the 1960s until 1975. I have a documented case of Vietnam Syndrome, or so said the US Army. Happily, or perhaps not happily, I’ve guarded my case of the syndrome with ferocity for decades and against all odds. A core

belief of that syndrome is revulsion against the empire's use of war to extend economic interests and to project power.

The frenzy to go to war in Afghanistan following the attacks by Al-Qaeda was a given. When a group of antiwar protesters took to the streets of Providence, Rhode Island in the early days of that war, rumors of death threats against us were many. The antiwar group in Rhode Island was spearheaded by students from Brown University, Brown alumni, professors, and others throughout the state. Brown University had a long history of protest supported by a powerful presence of socialists on and off their College Hill campus.

The antiwar group met in a church in the Olneyville section of Providence across town from College Hill and one of the poorest sections of the city. It was fitting that the group met there because the trillions of dollars spent on war had and has direct impacts on poverty in the US. This is the guns v. butter thesis. That thesis has long been a given within antiwar movements within the US. The War on Terror destroyed the chance of butter vying with guns in a significant way. How the War On Terror unfolded with the Soviet intervention in Afghanistan in the 1980s and the growth and support of the mujahideen there, then the rise of the Taliban, are subjects for another writing. Poor intelligence gathering and action by the US government leading up to September 2001 are yet another subject.

The antiwar group met regularly in the cavernous meeting hall of the church in Providence and there were several dozen members, which was heartening given the repression of antiwar protest following the September attacks. Led by socialists, the meetings were the epitome of parliamentary organization, debate, and planning, and harkened back to some of the antiwar organizational meetings from the Vietnam War era that had a tendency to go on for hours into the early morning.

We protested in front of the federal courthouse in Providence for weeks and had a good turnout because students from Brown were a reliable source for protest. Idealism was still alive in some despite the pushback and support of war in the Middle East. However, there was one major problem that faced those protests and organizers, and that was that unrelenting support for war that goes on today as wars are fought in much different ways by a small cadre of troops on the ground, drones, wars fought from the air, and by mercenaries. Economic sanctions are also a factor in the conduct of war and their effectiveness is apparent from the endless sanctions brought against nations like Cuba, Venezuela, and Iran. Proxy wars such as the war in Yemen are yet another way for the US

and its allies to conduct wars through proxies and from the air and the sale of arms to aggressor nations like Saudi Arabia.

After months of protest against the war in Afghanistan, the leaders of the group realized that our protests achieved almost nothing besides keeping the flames of protest alive and being an active presence on the streets. Our efforts finally folded and were not rekindled until the immoral (what war is moral?) attack against Iraq in 2003 by the Bush II-Cheney-Rumsfeld axis.

The problem with protest, however, was not its presence on the streets, but how normalized war had become. By the time Barack Obama became president, his troop surge into Iraq went all but unanswered by those who had been in the antiwar movement. Even the death of bin Laden did not stop the war in Afghanistan. Today, as Biden removes thousands of troops from Afghanistan (According to the AP, 650 troops will remain in Afghanistan), but still having a residual presence of troops and drones and airstrikes at his administration's disposal, no significant protest is evident. The US fights in Syria and other places and no one seems to bother coming out into the streets in any numbers anymore. A collective yawn greets wars fought by the US. The elite have largely jettisoned the rules of war in their lust for empire and power. The simple rules of war hold that war is waged in response to a direct threat and the issue of the proportionality of armed forces facing each other in war is never considered. The premise that once an objective in war is achieved, then the war ends was turned on its head in Afghanistan. So was the protection of civilians in war zones and the admonition against torture. War has become normalized and the FY 2021-2022 budget is \$715 billion. Without skin in this deadly game (that also has an ever-present nuclear weapons element) idealism has to do with getting by financially or dedication to careerism among most of those once taken by idealism and a revulsion against the horrors of war.

The bodies of the innocent from Korea to Southeast Asia to the World Trade Center and into Afghanistan and Iraq and far beyond pile up.

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