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American Antiwar Movement Plans an Autumn Campaign Against Policies on Afghanistan

By JAMES DAO
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A restive antiwar movement, largely dormant since the election of [Barack Obama](#), is preparing a nationwide campaign this fall to challenge the administration's policies on Afghanistan.

Anticipating a Pentagon request for more troops there, antiwar leaders have engaged in a flurry of meetings to discuss a month of demonstrations, lobbying, teach-ins and memorials in October to publicize the casualty count, raise concerns about the cost of the war and pressure Congress to demand an exit strategy.

But they face a starkly changed political climate from just a year ago, when President [George W. Bush](#) provided a lightning rod for protests. The health care battle is consuming the resources of labor unions and other core Democratic groups. American troops are leaving Iraq, defusing antiwar sentiments in some quarters. The [recession](#) has hurt fund-raising for peace groups and forced them to slash budgets. And, perhaps most significant, many liberals continue to support Mr. Obama, or at least are hesitant about openly criticizing him.

“People do not want to take on the administration,” said Jon Soltz, chairman of VoteVets.org. “Generating the kind of money that would be required to challenge the president’s policies just isn’t going to happen.”

Tom Andrews, national director for an antiwar coalition, [Win Without War](http://WinWithoutWar.org), said most liberals “want this guy to succeed.” But he said the antiwar movement would try to convince liberals that a prolonged war would undermine Mr. Obama’s domestic agenda. Afghanistan, he said, “could be a devastating albatross around the president’s neck.”

But there is also a sense among some antiwar advocates that Mr. Obama’s honeymoon with Democrats in general and liberals in particular is ending. As evidence, they point to a recent Washington Post/ABC News [poll](#) showing that 51 percent of Americans now feel the war in Afghanistan is not worth fighting, a 10-point increase since March. The poll had a margin of sampling error of plus or minus three percentage points.

“We’re coming out of a low period,” said Medea Benjamin, co-founder of the antiwar group [Code Pink](http://CodePink.org). “But as progressives feel more comfortable protesting against the Obama administration and challenging Democrats as well as Republicans in Congress, then we’ll be back on track.”

The Obama administration has opposed [legislation](#) requiring an exit strategy, saying it needs time to develop new approaches to the war. “Given his own impatience for progress, the president has demanded benchmarks to track our progress and ensure that we are moving in the right direction,” a White House official said, speaking on condition of anonymity.

The October protest schedule is expected to include marches in Washington and elsewhere. But organizers acknowledge that it may be difficult to recruit large numbers of demonstrators. So groups like [United for Peace and Justice](#) are also planning smaller events in communities around the country, including teach-ins with veterans and families of deployed troops, lobbying sessions with members of Congress, film screenings and ad hoc memorials featuring the boots of deceased soldiers and [Marines](#).

“There are some that feel betrayed” by Mr. Obama, said Nancy Lessin, a founder of the group [Military Families Speak Out](#). “There are some who feel that powerful forces are pushing the president to stay on this course and that we have to build a more powerful movement to change that course.”

The October actions will be timed not only to the eighth anniversary of the first American airstrikes on [Taliban](#) forces and the seventh anniversary of Congressional authorization for invading Iraq, but also an anticipated debate in [Congress](#) over sending more troops to Afghanistan. Gen. [Stanley A. McChrystal](#), the commander of American forces in Afghanistan, is widely expected to [request](#) additional troops, beyond the 68,000 projected for the end of the year, after finalizing a policy review in the next few weeks.

The antiwar movement consists of dozens of organizations representing pacifists, veterans, military families, labor unions and religious groups, and they hardly speak with one voice. Some groups like Iraq [Veterans](#) Against the War have started shifting their focus toward Afghanistan, passing resolutions demanding an immediate withdrawal of troops from there. Others, like [VoteVets.org](#), support the American military presence in Afghanistan, calling it crucial to fighting terrorism.

And some groups, including [Moveon.org](#), have yet to take a clear position on Afghanistan beyond warning that war drains resources from domestic programs.

“There is not the passion around Afghanistan that we saw around Iraq,” said Ilyse Hogue, [Moveon.org](#)’s spokeswoman. “But there are questions.”

There are also signs that some groups that have been relatively quiet on Afghanistan are preparing to become louder. U.S. Labor Against the [War](#), a network of nearly 190 union affiliates that has been focused on Iraq, is “moving more into full opposition to the continuing occupation” of Afghanistan, said Michael Eisenscher, the group’s national coordinator.

“[President Obama](#) risks his entire domestic agenda, just as Johnson did in Vietnam, in pursuing this course of action in Afghanistan,” Mr. Eisenscher said.

Handfuls of antiwar protestors can still be seen on Capitol Hill, outside state office buildings and around college campuses. Cindy Sheehan, for instance, has set up her vigil on Martha’s Vineyard while Mr. Obama vacations there. But many advocates say a lower-key approach may be more effective in winning support right now.

An example of that strategy is an Internet film titled “[Rethink](#) Afghanistan,” which is being produced and released in segments by the political documentary filmmaker Robert Greenwald. In six episodes so far, Mr. Greenwald has used interviews with academics,

Afghans and former [C.I.A.](#) operatives to raise questions about civilian casualties, women's rights, the cost of war and whether it has made the United States safer.

The episodes, some as short as two minutes, are circulated via [Twitter](#), YouTube, [Facebook](#) and blogs. Antiwar groups are also screening them with members of Congress. Mr. Greenwald, who has produced documentaries about Wal-Mart and war profiteers, said the film represented a "less incendiary" approach influenced by liberal concerns that he not attack Mr. Obama directly.

"We lost funding from liberals who didn't want to criticize Obama," he said. "It's been lonely out there."

Code Pink is trying to build opposition to the war among women's groups, some of which argue that women will suffer if the Taliban returns. In September, a group of Code Pink organizers will visit Kabul to encourage Afghan women to speak out against the American military presence there.

And Iraq Veterans Against the War is using the Web to circulate episodes of a documentary, "This Is Where We Take Our [Stand](#)," filmed in 2008 at its Winter Soldier conference, at which veterans from Iraq and Afghanistan testified about civilian casualties, combat stress and other tolls of the wars.

The group's leaders say they do not expect many people to take to the barricades against the administration any time soon. But that will change, they argue, as the death toll continues to rise.

"In the next year, it will more and more become Obama's war," said Perry O'Brien, president of the New York chapter of Iraq Veterans Against the War. "He'll be held responsible for the bloodshed."