

Strategy, Hegemony & the 'Long March':

Gramsci's Lessons for the Antiwar Movement

By Carl Davidson

As we enter the fourth year of the war on Iraq, our grassroots antiwar movement faces a critical political conjuncture, here and abroad. How we respond to it means a great deal, most importantly to the people of Iraq, but also to all Americans touched by this unjust war.

There are four main factors of this turning point.

- First, the U.S. invasion of Iraq is floundering, stalemated, and drifting toward defeat – but in a horrible way unleashing all the fury of sectarian violence and slaughter, and, beyond Iraq, a 'Clash of Civilizations' throughout the region that serves no one but reactionary zealots on all sides.
- Second, the American people, in their majority, have turned against the war. Likewise, although not by exactly the same numbers, the American soldiers fighting the war in Iraq have also, in their majority, seen the futility of their mission and want to return home by the end of 2006, if not sooner.
- Third, the American political class is more deeply divided than ever. The antiwar factions are emerging in the entire range – left, center and right – and are gaining in strength. A significant section of the Pentagon has even turned on the war policy of the White House, even if its rules of discipline require it to find others to serve as its voice.
- Fourth, the critical leadership factions of the American political class—the GOP alliances

making up the Bush administration and the DLC caucus in the Democratic Party—are still determined, however, to continue the war. They simply have greater fear of the cost of defeat *now* than the prospect of even greater defeat in the future. They are like an addicted gambler, still hoping that by 'staying the course' in the game and doubling their bets, they can regain their losses, if not come home winners.

The problem for the rest of us is that their deluded thinking is the cause of untold suffering.

But how can an unjust war be ended?

Apart from what happens in Iraq and the stubbornness of the White House, it requires three things:

- First the antiwar insurgency has to expand, with majority support, until the streets are ungovernable.
- Second, the antiwar views among soldiers and their families have to intensify to the point that young people refuse to join and soldiers refuse to fight.
- Third, the antiwar bloc in Congress, which will grow in response to the growth of the first two, has to become a majority that will vote to cut off funds for the war, impeach the president, or both.

Our problem, as a grassroots peace and justice movement, is to develop an appropriate strategy, tactics and plan for getting from here to there.

Militant Minority, Decisive Majority

It won't be easy. It's one thing to mobilize the militant minority of activists, even a million of them, for another vigil, rally or mass action. It's quite another to activate and mobilize the antiwar majority of everyday folks who have yet to take part in their first active protest. It's one thing to get a union local, or labor council, or even the AFL-CIO to pass a resolution against the war. It's quite another to organize workers to 'hot cargo' war munitions, realistically threaten a mass strike or even break with pro-war Democrats. It's one thing to organize a

small 'Out Now' caucus in Congress or get your city council to oppose the war. It's quite another to develop the independent, grassroots electoral organization and strength needed to defeat the pro-war leadership of both parties or to impeach a president.

The common thread in all of these examples is the varying degrees of political understanding and commitment. The militant minority is in one place, while the antiwar majority is in another. It's important to keep both places in mind when developing strategy and tactics. It does little good, for instance, to complain that we're tired of vigils and marching, that they don't do any good, when most of those now critical of the war have not yet gone to a vigil or rally. There's no iron wall separating the two places, but it's critically important to accurately assess both, especially if the links and transitions between them are to grow in a progressive, empowering way.

In short, just because a set of tactics or beliefs has become obsolete for you and your friends, doesn't mean those same tactics or beliefs are also obsolete for the bulk of the country's antiwar majority. In fact, the opposite is usually true.

So how does the passive sentiment of the majority against the war grow into active opposition? One thing is certain: it usually doesn't happen because the militant minority increases the intensity of its rhetoric, the frequency of its media outreach or the militancy of its tactics. All these things play a role, but the main way new people become radicalized is the same way many of us did. They learn through their experiences, mainly through their experiences in carrying out mass actions or confronting institutions of power. We have all felt, in this kind of practice, the surge of solidarity, the widening of possibilities, and the potential for empowerment and changing an unjust order.

Our task, then, in the first place, is to listen to the antiwar majority, to learn how they frame the issues and express their concerns and priorities. Then, in the second place, we work with them to find the forms of protest and struggle most suited to their conditions and concerns, and work with them to deploy this new activity. People won't take to the streets because the militant minority declares profusely that going through legislative or electoral channels is ineffective – they take to the streets because they learn, first hand through their own

experiences, that legislative and electoral channels alone are ineffective. This way we bring forward new layers of practice that will provide the lesson plans for new levels of consciousness and radicalization.

A Long March Through the Institutions

There's a name for this process. It's called "the long march through the institutions." The phrase is often attributed the Italian communist and anti-fascist leader, Antonio Gramsci. While entirely consistent with Gramsci's work, the term was actually coined and popularized in the late 1960s by Rudi Dutschke, a leader and theoretician of the German SDS and founder of the German Greens, who had studied Gramsci's work.

Both Gramsci and Dutschke focused on the problem of working in a revolutionary or radical way when conditions were not insurrectionary or revolutionary, but when reformist or even reactionary conditions prevailed. Gramsci spent many years writing in Mussolini's prisons, where harsh conditions took a toll on his health. He died under confinement in 1937. Dutschke was severely wounded by a would-be assassin's bullet to his brain. He continued working for several years, but died young in 1979 from the damage of the wound.

Both Gramsci and Dutschke argued that radical social change in highly developed societies would be the result of long, patient organizing inside and outside of key institutions, and not simply or primarily a quick, frontal assault through mass actions. This is Dutschke's long march through the institutions, what Gramsci called the "war of position," a concept we'll come to later.

In many ways, 'the long march' is already reflected in how our current antiwar movement has grown over the past four years. It started with small but insurgent actions centered in towns, cities, campuses and neighborhoods. It proclaimed opposition to impending war and captured a portion of public space, breaking a fear of public dissent in the post-9/11 period. Petitions were signed, email lists multiplied, and soon local churches and local city councils began passing resolutions against the onset of war. These efforts were linked into wider and larger actions and mass mobilizations, nationally and globally. Some took the issue to the trade unions; others to Congress where they formed a small antiwar bloc; still others to churches and community

groups, often winning them over from the bottom up. In the 2004 elections, independently of the party organizations, many activists also trained election workers and registered massive numbers of new voters. More city councils again voted against the war, after it was well underway. Iraq vets and their families formed organizations.

At each step, what happens here is a portion of public space and the organizations of civil society and governing bodies are won over, 'captured' or simply express their solidarity with the antiwar opposition. In doing so, these same institutions, starting at the grassroots and working upwards, are then denied to the War Party and its defenders. Naturally, there are lots of forces in between, still in contested areas. But step-by-step, campaign by campaign, we expand the building of a counter-consensus, while the Bush regime's consensus, such as it is, begins unraveling. This is the 'long march' and, to use the Gramscian language, it builds the counter hegemonic bloc to break up the political hegemony of our adversaries, and to accomplish our goals with a new, empowered, broad-based insurgent alliance.

War of Position, War of Maneuver

'The long march,' however, doesn't proceed in a straight line or at a steady speed. Any mass insurgency is full of twists and turns, ebbs and flows. Sometimes changes are very rapid; other times they move at a snail's pace. Gramsci dealt with this condition by advancing two concepts, 'the war of position' and 'the war of maneuver.' In doing so in the early 1920s, he was drawing on the powerful memories of 'The Great War,' or World War One, as we now call it. One of the first fully industrialized modern conflicts, it featured a long standoff between two sides, where they dug extensive networks of trenches and barriers, filled them with millions of troops, and kept them supplied through the growth of war industries in the rear. Building your strength this way was 'the war of position.' But when your troops climbed 'over the top' out of their trenches and made a frontal assault on the other side, this was 'the war of maneuver.'

The concepts of 'position' and 'maneuver' could be either strategic or tactical. One could try to secure a series of entrenched strongholds, while still launching an overall strategic offensive, as in, say, the D-Day invasion of Normandy. Or, conversely, one could focus strategically on building a secure

area, while still launching forays to eliminate or capture small groups of the other side, as both the Chinese and Vietnamese did in the early phases of 'people's war.' Either way you look at it – in modern politics or modern warfare – capturing, holding, consolidating key positions and then exercising power depends on effectively waging the war of position.

Gramsci developed these ideas, first, by studying how the Italian fascists had gradually built their strength and come to power, and second, by trying to find ways successfully to fight them. Essentially, he took these military concepts and expanded their implications into the arenas of politics, culture and ideology. On one hand, he wanted to counter a one-sided ultra-leftism that stressed a head-on 'class vs. class' offensive. On the other, he opposed a capitulationist reformism that failed to develop the strength and vision of the working people and their grassroots organizations.

Gramsci also recognized the necessity of an "inside/outside" approach to building a counter-hegemonic bloc. In addition to building new up independent, grassroots organizations *outside* traditional groups, a movement for radical change will only be successful if it also wages a long, careful war of position *inside* key economic, social, cultural and political institutions. A movement's ultimate success will depend on its capacity to contend for power and hegemony, in an incremental, step-by-step fashion, inside key institutions while concurrently developing independent, grassroots organizations, or base communities.

Significance for Today

What are the implications of these ideas for us? First, from this strategic perspective, a number of traditional and often divisive debates—mass direct action vs. electoral or legislative activity, civil disobedience vs. legal protest, working within the two capitalist parties vs. working only for third parties or no parties, working only with one class or working with all classes—need not be seen as mutually exclusive options. In fact, their possible interconnections gain importance. Second, they give us a positive vision of how a mosaic of local constituencies and groups can grow into an instrument of popular political power.

Setting the growth of a counter-hegemonic alliance as a mile marker also serves to measure how far we

have come and, more important, how far we still have to go. It compels us both to maintain our vision and to make utterly realistic assessments of conditions and our tasks.

For example, to address a question raised earlier, why has a majority of Americans expressed sentiment and opinion against the war, yet only a small minority has taken action against it? A critical reason is how the power of the hegemony of the current order is still reflected in their consciousness, keeping them isolated and divided. They may hate the war, but they believe they are powerless to do anything about it. Mass belief in powerlessness and the disconnectedness of individuals or small groups is required for the upper classes to maintain their hegemony. Some others may hate the war, but for reasons that are self-sabotaging. They may believe all Muslims are less than human, forever violent toward one another, and the whole bunch not worth a drop of blood of one more American soldier. Still others may hate the war, but fear ostracism for betrayal of the nation or religious faith, of being anti-patriotic, anti-Christian or anti-Jewish.

Each of these hegemonic elements in the thinking of the antiwar majority needs to be identified, exposed, neutralized and defeated. It requires a popular and democratic practice. From the perspective of individual people, it is important to provide them with opportunities for new experiences involving collective effort. In doing so, winning or losing this or that campaign is not nearly as important as gaining the experience of solidarity, of widening one's experience beyond familiar comfort zones. To do so, one must frame campaigns or activities that require the new activist to stretch a bit, but not so much that remaining passive wins the day.

But even more important is winning over a critical range of the institutions of civil society. The power of the existing order is mediated, to a large degree, through these institutions. Gramsci wrote:

The massive structure of modern democracies... set themselves up as the trenches and permanent fortification of the front in the war of position: they render the element of movement, which before was the 'whole' war, only 'partial.' (*Prison Notebook 13, Essay 7*)

If the War Party's power is to be challenged effectively, it has to be undermined in civil society

first, prior to any frontal assault. Since institutions are rarely won over all at once, they must also be challenged with new organizations created within their milieu, especially at the most basic levels.

A local Iraq Vets Against the War or Military Families Speak Out does wonders to undermine fear, isolation and jingoism in the military and the wider social base of the military-industrial complex among the people. Likewise for local churches: they provide social and moral authority, not only when they speak out themselves, but also when they build interfaith alliances, especially with Muslims. These are the experiences that challenge and undermine the 'clash of civilizations' notions reinforcing the prevailing hegemony.

Schools, workplace organizations, community groups, local political clubs, cultural and media venues – all are part of this contested terrain that the anti-war movement *must* win over if it is serious about moving from protest to power.

A good strategic orientation for this period, then, is the 'war of position' to build popular power. In culture, in the political arena, in economic life, we work to establish ourselves and accumulate strength, while disestablishing and weakening our adversaries. We start with building grassroots 'base communities' in insurgent constituencies, building organizations and coalitions outward and upward, in widening circles, into new constituencies that are not yet insurgent. At the same time, the anti-war movement needs to contend for power and influence *inside* key institutions, including the Democratic and Republican Parties.

The 'war of maneuver,' however, is required to make this process dynamic. In this context, this is comprised of the periodic 'speaking truth to power' mass mobilizations, direct actions and civil disobedience confrontations. These are both displays of the growing influence and creativity of the counter-hegemonic alliance, as well as a means for drawing in new forces.

One thing to keep in mind as the anti-war movement moves forward is something that Gramsci wrote cautioning that the war of position "... demands enormous sacrifices..." and "... an unheard of concentration of hegemony... because, in politics once the 'war of position' is won, it is definitively decisive." (*Prison Notebook 6, Essay 138*)

Broader Alliances, Electoral Capacity

In the period ahead, then, we face two major tasks in the war of position: broadening our alliances for mass action and developing our capacity for electoral intervention. The two need not be opposed to each other, but are interconnected and enhance each other.

A case in point on the importance of new alliances is the recent upsurge in mass protests focused on the rights of immigrants, bringing nearly a million people into the streets in several cities. This is clearly an insurgent constituency with a great deal of potential for political power. Immigrant rights are also connected to the question of war and peace, since many of the new restrictions on immigrant rights are being tied to national security and “the war of terror.” The same “America First” jingoism is used to justify both, and many peace and justice groups have taken up the defense of democratic rights for Arab and Muslim immigrants from the beginning.

It would be a mistake, however, to see widening the alliance to other nationalities as automatic or taken for granted. Even though a considerable majority of this constituency is antiwar, it also has a sector that has yet to break with the war. Latinos are disproportionately represented, for instance, among military recruits and casualties in Iraq. Polish, Irish and Asian immigrant communities may also have different views of the war than Latin Americans.

Nor can these alliances be made simply from the top down. Of course it helps to adjust your slogans and speakers, and get endorsements from national organizations and leaders. But most important is building relationships and finding common ground, on the most local level possible, at the grassroots. This is where it counts most for accumulating strength and mobilizing forces.

From Protest to Power

A more difficult transition is getting local peace and justice groups to develop an electoral capacity. A critical component here is a nonpartisan and local, bottom-up orientation. Community based organizations develop their electoral capacity by registering new voters, developing lists of voters and where they stand on issues, getting their own donors and campaign chests, making assessments of officials and candidates, training their members as

registrars, judges, poll watchers and other forms of electoral work. Nonpartisan means, in part, that this capacity belongs to the group itself, and not to the local branch or district of any political party. This way, on Election Day, the group has the ability to mobilize and deploy its own clout for whatever candidates or ballot propositions it chooses, if any.

This is not only important as an instrument of independent popular democracy. It also serves as a pole of attraction for more moderate forces within the two-party system, who would be more likely to break from the dominant political class *if they had something to break toward and form an alliance with.*

Another dimension of ‘nonpartisan’, moreover, is that none of those groups or individuals joining the alliance has to break, necessarily or immediately, with their current parties. Initially, they only have to break with the policies and programs we are challenging and contesting.

The nonpartisan alliance is a necessary starting point precisely because our country is currently saddled with a reactionary two-party electoral system, the worse in the industrialized world. The left and progressive movements have yet to create a mass struggle for electoral law reform, one that would establish instant runoff, fusion, preferential balloting and proportional representation. All these things are taken for granted in other capitalist countries of the West.

If you have these, you can make a multiparty system. If you don't, you're pretty much stuck with what we have -- a two-party system with a little safety valve that allows for marginalized minor parties as long as they remain minor and toothless. The third parties, under this setup, are thus usually part of the social control mechanism, too.

But the ball is in our court. It does little good to attack progressive elected officials simply for being within the two-party system without making an effective challenge to those conditions.

There's still another factor restricting progressive electoral options, although it is often unmentioned. Many progressive activists have been bought off, in a way, by 501C3 tax status. One of the first things said when starting a new group is often: 'Let's get a 501C3 and apply for a grant!' Fine, but what are the terms? Two things: your newly funded group has to

agree not to support any candidate and not to support any particular ballot proposition. In other words, in effect, the IRS is indirectly funding an anti-electoral, anarcho-syndicalist approach to change among nonprofit, nongovernmental organizations.

Of course, there are ways around this by going through additional hurdles. But many don't. They often say, 'Well it's too involved, and we don't care that much about candidates and parties anyway.' But that's just the point. They've boxed you in, even if some like the box. You're restricted to simple oppositionism.

Alternatively, if the approach outlined in this essay sounds like a plan for creating the building blocks of a new political formation—one that is popular, democratic and participatory—then you've got the right idea. This is what it means to move from protest to politics to power, from being an antiwar opposition to a counter-hegemonic force. Not only does it create the conditions for wider, systemic change, it is also arguably the most effective way to win a particular victory, such as ending the war and occupation in Iraq.

Carl Davidson is a co-author of 'Stopping War, Seeking Justice: Essays in a Time of Empire' (with Marilyn Katz) and 'Cyberradicalism: A New Left for a Global Age' (with Jerry Harris). Both are available at www.lulu.com/changemaker. He is also one of the founders of Chicagoans Against War and Injustice, as well as Peace & Justice Voters 2004.