



Washington's Wars and Occupations **Month in Review #62**

by Max Elbaum, War Times/Tiempo de Guerras

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PASSING THE TORCH

I've been the main author of *War Times* "Month in Review" column since its launch five-plus years ago. This will now change. Starting next month, a talented group of nearly a dozen younger writer/organizers will take over authorship, writing in rotation. They will also write, and *War Times* will publish, additional analytic and/or feature pieces each month. I will transition to the role of mentor-editor.

War Times has been laying the groundwork for this transition for some time. Over the last few months we've held a series of analysis-and-writing workshops bringing together long-time collective members with these new writers. All of us have learned from the sessions and they have already started to produce results. Last month's column focusing on militarism in Afghanistan, Gaza, Arizona and beyond was decisively shaped by our expanded collective discussion. In preparation for the U.S. Social Forum, a member of this new team, Michael Reagan, wrote "Previewing Peace: The Antiwar Movement Heads for Detroit," which *War Times* published two weeks ago.

We are excited about the potential this new arrangement can unleash. For starters, it will allow *War Times* to up our contribution to the antiwar movement. We will generate more articles and cover more dimensions of the multifaceted fight against war, empire-building, militarism, racism and all their inter-connections. The fresh voices of activists whose ongoing work is in many different organizations and struggles will bring new perspectives to an antiwar movement much in need of revitalization.

Along with others, *War Times* believes that a key to re-energizing the fight for peace is rooting anti-militarist perspectives more strongly within grassroots movements of workers, communities of color, immigrant communities and other specially impacted constituencies. Fights for jobs, housing, education, social programs, immigrant rights, to end oil dependence, and to protect the environment drive the most vibrant movements in those sectors today.

War Times has focused on the links between empire-building, racism and attacks on the most vulnerable populations "at home" since this project's inception. We have tried to make our materials of most use to organizers rooted in these very communities. But since we were forced to cease publication of our bilingual in-print tabloid in 2004, our capacity to accomplish this has been limited. This transition provides an opportunity to do better. Drawing on these new writers' rich experiences in key grassroots movements, *War Times* articles – in greater quantity and supplemented by flyers, fact sheets and even blog posts, along with more material in Spanish –

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can better serve on-the-ground campaigns from “move the money” to fights against militarization in high schools.

There is a long haul consideration in this shift as well. The goal is not only or even mainly to make this particular antiwar project more useful for the next few years. It is to help develop the analytic and journalistic skills – and amplify the voices – of activists from the generation that must provide leadership in the decades ahead. Organizers in their 20s and 30s already provide the majority of leadership in direct on-the-ground organizing. This is one opportunity to develop leadership skills in writing, in assessing the motion of global and national politics, in offering strategic direction.

Details about this new team of writers and *War Times*' expanded efforts will be forthcoming soon. A major upgrade of the *War Times/Tiempo de Guerras* website will be part of this transition. Besides a new design, the site will be updated much more frequently. We hope by the end of the year to feature new material daily, especially spotlighting the on-the-ground experience of anti-war organizations and individuals in campaign, education and base-building work.

THE RIGHT TIME: A MOVEMENT IN TRANSITION

The timing of this shift doesn't stem only from the logic of *War Times*' development or the general importance of fostering new leadership. Another factor is that the antiwar movement as a whole is in the midst of a major transition. The period of 2003–2008 – when Iraq was overwhelmingly the movement's central focus and the “invade-torture-and-proud-of-it” Bush administration was in power – is behind us. U.S. wars and occupations continue – indeed military spending has even increased. But the political landscape has changed. So organizers are compelled to change as well.

The focus of mobilization is shifting to Afghanistan and U.S. backing for Israeli colonialism. We confront an administration brought to power with many votes from antiwar constituencies, one whose policy mix and more so its rhetoric is different, and which is under attack from the racist right even as the peace movement protests its policies. All in the context of economic and environmental crises that have moved much public attention away from issues of war and foreign policy. In these changed conditions the antiwar movement is still searching for effective ways to build an ever-broader base and large-scale political clout.

Activists in their 60s – activists of all ages – can and will contribute to revitalizing the movement. But in my opinion it is people between their late 20s and early 40s who are best positioned to provide the most insightful leadership. This generational cohort has the combination of substantial experience, immersion in new cultural and media trends, and prime-of-life energy that it takes to take chart a new path. As “movement elders” we over-60-year-olds bring additional experience and hopefully a broader historical sense. But it is hard for a generation whose politics were so deeply shaped by the world of the 1960s to be at the cutting edge of new trends in the 2010s.

An inter-generational movement is an absolute must. But it is time to rearrange the relationship within such a movement between us baby boomers/“sixties people” and radicals who have come of age in the post-Cold War, “neoliberal” era. The dynamism of the just concluded U.S. Social Forum in Detroit is due in good measure to that re-arranged inter-generational relationship. The Forum's example is powerful incentive to spread it out to other institutions and movements, the peace movement not least.

RIGHT TIME IS A CHALLENGING TIME: AFGHANISTAN

A transition in generational roles should not mean a reduction in the efforts of any generation. To the contrary, *War Times* hopes this shift will result in heightened commitment and more effective work from all of us. Certainly the need is urgent. And there are new opportunities that can be taken advantage of if we are skillful and swift.

The flap over the *Rolling Stone* profile of General Stanley McChrystal and his staff, followed by Obama replacing McChrystal with David Petraeus, highlights the perilous balance right now in Washington's Afghan war. Garry Wills cut through piles of gossip to get to the heart of the matter in a *New York Review of Books* blog post:

The initial reaction to Michael Hastings's *Rolling Stone* article was disturbing. The emphasis has been on McChrystal's dismissive attitude toward the President and his administration. Instant discussion focused on the person McChrystal – should he be fired, or resign, or have his resignation accepted? That does not matter. The Hastings article is powerful and important because of what it goes on to report from Afghanistan, building to a crushing conclusion, that the general was unable to command even the respect of Hamid Karzai and McChrystal's own troops – for the very good reason that he has been given an impossible assignment, one that gets more surreal and absurd every day. His removal will not make the Afghan war go any better, for the simple reason that nothing will do that.

The parallel with Truman's firing General MacArthur was quickly bruited... But firing MacArthur did not improve things in Korea. The war ground on in blood and frustration for another two grisly years, and was settled only when a new administration settled for peace terms that would have been available years earlier. Do we have to wait for a new administration to make a similarly sullen settlement in Afghanistan after further prolongation of what is already America's longest war? No other general is going to succeed... The overwhelming lesson of Hastings's article is not: 'Get rid of McChrystal.' It is, simply: 'Get out!'"

Illustrating the same point from a different angle, here William Dalrymple giving us a first-hand report from Afghanistan in Britain's *New Statesman*:

After the jirga was over, one of the tribal elders came over and we chatted for a while over a glass of green tea: 'Last month some American officers called us to a hotel in Jalalabad for a meeting. One of them asked me, 'Why do you hate us?' I replied, 'Because you blow down our doors, enter our houses, pull our women by the hair and kick our children. We cannot accept this. We will fight back, and we will break your teeth, and when your teeth are broken you will leave, just as the British left before you. It is just a matter of time.' What did he say to that? 'He turned to his friend and said, 'If the old men are like this, what will the younger ones be like?' In truth, all the Americans here know that their game is over. It is just their politicians who deny this.'

The latest polls show a slight majority of the U.S. populace agrees that the Afghan war is not worth fighting. The revelations about how badly the war is going that accompanied McChrystal's firing – with even Thomas Friedman joining Maureen Dowd on *The New York Times* Op-Ed page saying that the war is lost – are bound to increase that number. So is the news finally breaking into the mainstream that the Pakistani leadership also thinks the U.S. has lost and is angling for a settlement favorable to its own interests. (See *The New York Times* front page June 25). All this creates new openings for a re-energizing peace movement to reach out broadly and apply some serious pressure for U.S. withdrawal.

It won't be easy. The President's main emphasis in his McChrystal/Petraeus announcement was that the war policy in Afghanistan would continue as is. Petraeus is an ambitious stay-the-course general lionized by both Republicans and Democrats to the point where he has large – and extremely dangerous – political influence. Putting him in position to say "I need more time and more troops" can turn into a huge obstacle to amassing the popular support needed to force the U.S. out.

U.S.-ISRAEL RELATIONSHIP MOVING TO THE FORE

From the vantage point of most of the world, Washington's backing for Israel has always been central to the conflict between the U.S. and the peoples of the Arab and Muslim worlds. But it is only at rare moments that serious examination of this stance breaks into mainstream U.S. debate. The Israeli assault on the Gaza aid flotilla marks one of those moments.

Internationally, the flotilla attack has already been somewhat of a turning point. The fact that Israel has been forced into a series of retreats via the actions of civil society activists combined with a tough stance by Turkey has brought a new dynamic into play. An excellent assessment of what has and has not been achieved via such pressure, and of Israel's announcement that it will "ease" but not end the Gaza blockade, is offered by Phyllis Bennis here:

www.huffingtonpost.com/phyllis-bennis/turning-points-israel-cav_b_621958.html

Within the U.S., an unusually large number of voices critical of the Gaza siege and continued Israeli land grabs made it into the mainstream debate. But the battle for public opinion remains uphill. A *Wall Street Journal* poll in early June showed a higher percentage of U.S. respondents believed Israel's actions against the flotilla were justified (34%) than not justified (29%); another 32% said they did not know enough to express an opinion. This is against a backdrop of a populace that, when asked in general whether their sympathies lie more with Israel or the Palestinians, responds about 6-1 in favor of Israel. Likewise, while there is a definite shift underway among longtime Foreign Service officials, think-tank analysts and leading figures in liberal American Jewish circles, among elected officials of both parties there are few dents in longstanding blank-check-for-Israel positions.

Obviously there is a long way to go. But the very fact of that debate has entered the mainstream, and the incredibly shrill tone of the arguments coming from the Israel Lobby, Christian Right and Neocon diehards, indicates that for the first time since the first intifada of the late 1980s the Palestine solidarity side has gotten a foothold in the overall public square.

WINNING PEACE MEANS A MARATHON, NOT A SPRINT

Much is happening on other battlefronts from Iran to Honduras, from struggles to end torture to fighting the runaway military budget. All these challenge peace activists to find ways to respond to immediate crises and seize moments of opportunity while building a movement with roots, durability and strength for the long haul.

I have been part of efforts to meet such challenges for some 45 years now. Like my generational peers I experienced much pain and agony during the often-romanticized 1960s. But it was also a time when participation in social movements could provide a unique education. Spurred by the pioneering example of the Civil Rights upsurge, the anti-Vietnam War and other movements of the 1960s brought all class and social forces out onto the political stage. Even an inexperienced young student could, through the networks and organizations of the time, take part in nationwide movements and feel connected to a significant historical process. That direct link drove political lessons home: "sixties radicals" got a crash course in hard-headed "realpolitik" – in the scope, breadth and complexity of politics in a society as large and diverse as the U.S. At

the same time, we received a grounded-in-direct-experience appreciation for how grassroots movements can open new possibilities and drive forward social change.

Those political lessons were nearly as significant for me as the moral education I was so fortunate to receive. Those who sat down in Greensboro, marched in Selma, went on strike in Memphis and California's Central Valley, told the truth about what happened at My Lai, were imprisoned on Robben Island, lost their lives in the Plaza de las Tres Culturas in Tlatelolco, Mexico City – they provided the model: An injury to one is an injury to all. Take a stand for equality, dignity and peace. "Give back" with your time, energy, money, thought and when necessary personal risk. Try to practice the golden rule.

In short, I was imprinted by my experience in the 1960s with certain imperatives: try to root political activity in hard-headed "big picture" political assessments, confidence in grassroots movements, and a sense of morality and generosity of spirit. I have tried to infuse these columns, and all my efforts at *War Times*, with that combination. I intend to carry those imperatives into this new phase. I will write on occasion and I will continue to be part of *War Times/Tiempo de Guerras* leadership team. I have my hand in some other political projects. And I am training now to run my annual **Marathon for Peace** this fall, trying to raise funds to finance the expansion of *War Times* work described above. Get your checkbooks ready!

But the most important thing I think I can do in this next phase is pass on anything of value that I have learned to a new generation of peace and justice activists. So keep your eyes on your inbox, and please join me in giving this project's new writers feedback, encouragement and comradely support.

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