

Heart-Attack Iraq: Lessons From an Antiwar Movement

Written by Tom Hayden | The Nation
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On October 21, when President Obama announced that all American troops would be withdrawing from Iraq, I learned that I needed surgery on a blocked carotid artery, and soon. Ten years earlier, between the 9/11 attacks and the US invasion of Iraq, I was having quintuple bypass surgery. The Cedars-Sinai doctors even delayed the operation in case Los Angeles was struck that day.

For ten years, though, my heart kept its faithful beat. For 3,500 straight days and nights, I researched, wrote, spoke, taught and lobbied against the Iraq War. I tried to avoid pepper spray and being stomped, but for everything else, the beat was steady. When Obama made the withdrawal announcement last week, it was as if my heart was saying, Take me back to the repair shop. And so I will go once more, and will, I hope, come out battling against the wars and injustices of the next decade.

On Saturday, the day after Obama's statement, my heart felt good as I introduced Representative Barbara Lee at a Los Angeles fundraiser. In the lightness of her mood I sensed a burden had been lifted from her heart as well.

Some of the hundred people in the room were baffled by the Obama withdrawal decision—understandably so, after a decade of several wars, a stolen election that led directly to Bush's Iraq invasion, and now a Great Recession greatly worsened by trillions of tax dollars spent on Iraq, Afghanistan and Pakistan, instead of Wisconsin, Ohio and Pennsylvania. A certain jadedness has affected our consciousness after this very bad decade. Some people in the room didn't believe Obama was actually going to pull out of Iraq. He would sneak in 5,000 manipulative mercenaries to take over from the last of the American troops. And what about those other wars? Wasn't he worse than Bush? Yada yada yada, ad nauseam.

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I think the American troops will leave Iraq. The Iraqi people, who are regaining their sovereignty, will welcome their departure. So, too, will the American people who made the peace necessary through ten years of struggle on many fronts, including the election of Barack Obama. Yes, the other wars will continue, corporate power will continue, global warming will continue, but the lessons of the campaign against the Iraq War may be helpful as we face these other challenges.

Ending the war in Iraq was not inevitable. Angered by 9/11, ignorantly indifferent to Muslim lives and arrogantly filled with superpower delusions, the American people could have backed an all-out and permanent invasion with 1 million troops and saturation bombing. The Iraqi people, liberated from Saddam Hussein, could have submitted to American dominance, or been conquered through internal divisions, instead of resisting.

But the feverish neocons and the myopic political establishment were deluded in two ways: they were blinded to the strength of militant Iraqi nationalism, and to the potential of a peace movement in the United States. Winning the war and ushering in the world of their dreams, they thought, would be a cakewalk.

Iraq became the focal point of many contradictions in the world: between Third World nationalism and Western imperial designs; between the capacity of the US/NATO forces and imperial overreach; between oil imperialism and sovereignty; and between budgeting for a Long War versus budgeting for American needs.

In their smugness, our would-be rulers thought we could be panicked into a permanent state of war. They underestimated our consciousness, including a healthy skepticism toward the claims of power, bred deeply in us since the 1960s. In their initial reports on the antiwar movement, both the *New York Times* and NPR were dismissive and dramatically understated the number of protesters who attended the first major demonstration, in Washington in October 2002, which brought 100,000 to the capital (both later apologized). Like the characters in José Saramago's book *Blindness*, they were unable to see the marchers before their eyes.

My history of the peace movement is detailed in *Ending the War in Iraq* (Akashic, 2007). I won't repeat it here. But I would argue that there is a science to the strategy and tactics of winning a

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focused effort like the campaign against the Iraq War. A few lessons of strategy and tactics, borrowed from the experience of community organizing, might be helpful to summarize here.

There seems to be little science, strategy or tactics in our developing culture of activism. When, for example, I hold an organizing workshop and ask the question, “What are your goals?” the answers are usually all over the place. Few people say, to end the Iraq War. Instead, they say their goals are to expose the 9/11 conspiracy (although that one has significantly faded), to achieve world peace, to oppose the two-party system, to win self-determination for Palestine, to implement solar energy, to spread nonviolence and the message of the Dalai Lama, to free all political prisoners, and so on.

For most activists, ending the war in Iraq has been only one of many goals. The longer the war went on, the more goals were added—for example, the impeachment of Bush. It’s only natural to juggle multiple goals, but it also results in a spreading thin, entropy, dissipation, call it what you will, an inability to concentrate all possible force on the weakest link in a system you are trying to oppose. Frustrated at the problems of achieving one demand, we often think the solution is to escalate.

A single-issue approach is necessary in order to concentrate force. This doesn’t mean other causes are unimportant in the least. It means prioritizing time and energy, making other important causes secondary, trusting that other people caught up in those other causes will lend a hand in yours, and vice versa.

Another element of strategy and tactics is emphasizing outreach to the undecided and building the base of one’s organization. Wherever I have spoken in the last decade I have carried a yellow pad and asked people to sign up for future communications and analysis about Iraq. The list is well over 40,000 local peace, justice, environmental and Democratic activists—working in more than fifty cities—plus activist networks in NATO countries. They are the beating heart of community activism, the planters of the harvest of public opinion, and absolutely critical in our typically close elections.

The message “Out Now” was suitable as a persistent expression of anger, but in my experience it did not change the minds of many who were undecided. Nor did it effectively engage insiders in the world of power who were looking for ways to disengage from catastrophe. Nor did it work for politicians trying to reverse a policy without sounding, well, nutty. Some say taking an absolute stance like “Out Now” led to the rise of more moderate stances such as setting

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withdrawal deadlines. It only meant that the strongest opponents of intervention left a vacuum for moderate latecomers to fill.

Over time, many activists extrapolated upon slogans like “Out Now” to more elaborate versions: All troops out. All advisers out. All mercenaries out. All CIA outposts closed. Being absolute on these demands, however, also complicated the process of reaching many of the undecided—for example, those in feminist organizations who hated the Islamist fundamentalists and leaned for a time toward “humanitarian” military intervention, or those who believed there was a genuine terrorist threat that the peace movement was simply ignoring.

The most effective demands of the anti-Iraq War movement turned out to be a pragmatic blend based on several key factors:

§ the moral dimension, especially the opposition of the clergy to America’s descent into secret and tax-subsidized torture, which also tarnished the government’s global reputation;

§ the casualties suffered in a stalemated, seemingly endless war, which allowed growing outreach to military families;

§ the budgetary costs, which amounted to trillions for decades to come. An overall demand for the truth emerged as well, as Americans realized that the administration was lying about its intentions, the casualty numbers and the true taxpayer reckoning.

Yet another element of strategy and tactics is the ability to employ an “inside-outside” strategy, as groups like Progressive Democrats of America has attempted. I believe social change always begins at the margins, unexpectedly. But if a social movement is to grow, it must enter and blend with mainstream opinion and institutions.

Some people in the prophetic spiritual or revolutionary political traditions believe in the sanctity of the margin. They resist entering the mainstream dens to avoid the snakebeds of power. We do need the prophetic minority. But they are seers, not strategists. As an idea like ending the war gains support—which, lest we forget, is the point—it inevitably becomes debated, co-opted,

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diluted, rebranded, and morphs into an issue with politicians, the mainstream media and other powerful forces. It is much too simple—and worse, disempowering—to dismiss and deride this inevitable process as merely “selling out” for “watered down” goals.

Think, for example, of the importance of the Radical Republicans in the history of the Civil War and Reconstruction, or the role of politicians like Bella Abzug, Mike Gravel, Eugene McCarthy, Robert Kennedy and George McGovern during the Vietnam conflict. They were not the catalysts, the visionaries or the prophetic radicals, but did they not have a profound role to play? They were the insiders, who were awakened and given purpose by the outsiders, and who used their parliamentary skills to enact profound policy changes.

Over time, social movements divide into more militant (radical) or more moderate (pragmatic) wings, often mired in serious disputes between and among themselves. Concurrently, the power elites divide along similar lines, between the hard-core establishment fundamentalists and those moderates who have either been won over to the sensibility of radical reform or want to protect their incumbent power through that reform. We have seen these patterns in the conflicts in Vietnam, Central America, Iraq and now Afghanistan: establishment figures emerging to embrace various exit strategies, but only when the costs of the wars exceed any measurable worth.

Does this mean that the ending of a particular war will restore the structures of empire? In a sense, yes, but it is restored in a weakened state. And if the original peace movement demand had been the “end of empire” or “the seventh war from now,” that would be an important educational project but with little significance for ending this particular war. It would be better to end the war and engage in an educational campaign to teach the lessons of Iraq than the other way around.

“[Step by Step](#)” is the name of my friend Richard Flacks’s blog, invoking another core aspect of strategy and tactics. These days there is a lot of talk about “toppling the corporate state,” as if that could be accomplished with enough broad-based passion and insurgent direct action. Maybe. The United States has faced mortal threats to its stability before, most obviously in the Civil War. But other eras of destabilizing confrontations—during the 1930s and the 1960s, for example—ended neither in revolution nor repression but in a medley of reforms that were regarded as radical in their time and still hold lasting significance. There was no “toppling” of basic institutions, as in the Soviet Union, but there was democratic restructuring. One of the reasons for the rise of Occupy Wall Street today is the steady erosion of past New Deal and 1960s reforms coupled with the complete inability of the government, so far, to prevent the grinding assault on poor, working-class and middle-class Americans. History suggests that

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significant reforms can last a few decades before their defenders tire and a threatened counter-movement like the Tea Party arises.

The war in Iraq is ending in a step-by-step process. So, too, will the wars in Afghanistan and Pakistan, if the proper lessons are applied. The antiwar movement grew from the streets, where there were at least ten demonstrations greater than 100,000 in number, to the communities and political precincts, where millions of Americans still remain a complicating factor in the minds of candidates and incumbents.

An early step was the presidential candidacy of Howard Dean. Then came the 2006 Congressional elections—which ended Republican dominance—followed by the primaries and presidential campaign of 2008, centered on the rise of Barack Obama, who promised to end the “dumb war” in Iraq. Perhaps fearing the rise of Obama, our secretive intelligence and military establishment brokered a Status of Forces Agreement (SOFA) even before President Bush left office, outlining a withdrawal process that the hawks felt would guarantee them more time than a precipitous departure. The experts at one hawkish Democratic think tank, the Center for New American Security, worried that the war would be forced to an end by our democratic elections rather than by what they considered the appropriate maneuvers of the foreign policy elite.

Barbara Lee was the first California elected official to endorse Barack Obama, and she did so with her eyes wide open. Representing an Oakland-Berkeley district, Lee was a perfect blend of the outside and inside cultures. Her place in history was achieved through the bold act of being the only Congressional opponent of the authorization leading to the Iraq War. She never quit or slowed down. When Obama became president, Lee began introducing annual bills to curb funding for the war, then both wars, then to cut off all funding except for what was needed to “redeploy” the troops. She also tried to force hearings on the SOFA. She offered amendments to prevent any permanent bases. She collaborated with more moderate efforts by Representative Jim McGovern to maximize the number of House members to support nonbinding resolutions calling for timetables and exit strategies. One of her smartest moves was to introduce a resolution at the Democratic National Committee last February calling for a “rapid withdrawal” of troops from Afghanistan.

The inside part of the inside-outside strategy was effective. The White House waived any objections to the DNC resolution on Afghanistan. The AFL-CIO, which in 2005 had opposed the Iraq conflict, took a position against Afghanistan shortly after the DNC resolution passed. Lee’s amendment to end Afghanistan funding achieved almost 100 votes this year. McGovern’s resolution reached 204. Lee’s amendment banning permanent bases became law. When rumors began flying that Obama or the Pentagon wanted to break the Iraq agreement and keep

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tens of thousands of troops in Iraq, Lee sent another letter to the president, signaling that such a compromise would go too far. Ninety-one House members quickly agreed to sign it.

Anyone paying attention (which, it turned out, was not too many) could see that Obama was “leading from behind,” in a political sense, on both Iraq and Afghanistan. In Bob Woodward’s history *Obama’s Wars*, the president is quoted as saying in private, “I can’t lose the whole Democratic Party.”

It is never a great idea for an organizer to rely on the words of a decision-maker, especially a president, without the most careful scrutiny. This is especially true in the case of a president who also is a writer, like Barack Obama, but it goes with the nature of the institution. More than anyone else, a president is always speaking to multiple and contradictory audiences, from wavering political constituencies to the suspicious intelligence agencies of rival countries to jittery investors in the stock market. Often a president will try to sound hawkish when his intent is to disguise a dovish maneuver. A Machiavellian leader of a superpower cannot even appear to lessen its reputation.

For a candid explication of this reality, one can read “What Would Nixon Do?” (*New York Times*, June 25, 2011), by Gideon Rose, editor of the major organ of the foreign policy elite, *Foreign Affairs*, especially the following rules:

§ “The first rule of withdrawal is you do not talk about withdrawal.”

§ “The second rule of withdrawal is to lay down suppressive fire so the enemy cannot rush into the gap you leave behind.”

§ “The third rule of withdrawal is to remain engaged, providing enough support to beleaguered local partners so they can fend off collapse for as long as possible.”

I suggest this is what Obama has been doing in Iraq and what he will most likely do in Afghanistan and Pakistan. The peace movement, and figures like Barbara Lee, can speed up

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the timetable, impose a political price for backtracking and ensure the maximum withdrawal number. But in opposing a president's policies, as the peace movement should, we must be aware that we are helping compel him to act and providing him cover at the same time.

We will never know—cannot know and perhaps should not know—what is in a president's mind, a kind of computer that is storing, retrieving, sending and deleting all at the same time, delivering outcomes that are a mixture of desire, presentation and necessity, all with an inaccessible hard drive.

Let's consider the exhausting insider debate over whether Obama was going to leave a "residual" force behind in Iraq. In February 2009, one month after his inauguration, he called for all American troops to be out of Iraq by the end of this year. In 2008, however, Obama had advocated a residual force in Iraq after a phased withdrawal, in keeping with the Baker-Hamilton Report (*a?k?a* Iraq Study Group) of late 2006. That he included the word "all" in his February 2009 announcement was noticed by few outside the Pentagon and CIA. Those who wanted US troops to stay beyond 2011 started a pressure campaign against the fixed deadline. One of them was Gen. Stanley McChrystal, who was given the boot allegedly for his insubordinate remarks to a *Rolling Stone* reporter. Another was Gen. David Petraeus, who found himself "promoted" to the post of CIA director, where he could continue his many secret operations but without the ability to voice his disagreements with the president.

Then there were the Iraqis. Some who had supported the Sunni-led insurgency against the United States now wanted the Americans to stay as a bulwark against the Shiites and Iran. Others who had been recipients of US largesse in the past now wanted the Americans to leave. The longtime CIA asset Iyad Allawi called on the Americans to go. Public opinion was a huge factor influencing the Iraqi government, as an overwhelming majority supported total US withdrawal.

Never making a definitive statement, Obama, like the Sphinx, supported the Pentagon's intense efforts to persuade the Iraqis to ask us to stay. Obama allowed that he was "open" to a residual force, but only if the Iraqis themselves insisted. Didn't he know the Iraqis would never make such a request, especially since the Pentagon was insisting on immunity for any American troops left behind? I think Obama knew, but what do I know? It's an intuition. When it became clear that the Iraqi Parliament was not going to make the request, Obama seized the moment to announce the total withdrawal on October 21.

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The assassination of Osama bin Laden on May 2 may be related to these events as well. Why George Bush dropped the pursuit of bin Laden is a mystery for historians to pursue. But Obama—the black candidate, the liberal candidate, the antiwar candidate, the candidate with not a moment of military experience—certainly saw a strategic opportunity to focus laser-like on bin Laden, from the 2008 primaries right through the first two years of his presidency.

Sometime in late 2010, Obama's closest advisers began the countdown to taking out the Al Qaeda leader. Was this high-risk raid planned on a parallel track with the strategy for withdrawing from Iraq and beginning withdrawal from Afghanistan? Just because there is no way of knowing doesn't mean the dots were unconnected. In any event, Obama knew his preference for Iraq by May–June, and made his announcement of withdrawing 33,000 Americans from Afghanistan on June 22, just weeks after the death of bin Laden. Obama—now immunized by the killing of bin Laden and other iconic enemies—has since then been on track to campaign for next year's presidential election on a platform of ending or trying to end two wars. In an unusually gross advertisement of the campaign rhetoric to come, his adviser David Axelrod said last week, "When you say he wasn't prepared, maybe you should go ask Osama bin Laden if he thought he was prepared."

When social movements seem to succeed, the victory is a muddy one. Lyndon Johnson chose escalation in Vietnam to offset Barry Goldwater. Then he signed the historic Medicare legislation (July 30, 1965) and the Voting Rights Act (August 6, 1965)—the latter the same week as the Gulf of Tonkin raid, which led to the fiscal ruin of the Great Society in Vietnam.

Regarding the Iraq withdrawal, some questions still remain unanswered, but behind-the-scenes discussions are rarely reflected in public anyway. Hillary Clinton is busy issuing warnings to Iran that the United States intends to stay committed to Iraq, words that will be viewed in Teheran as a face-saving bluff. Rumor has it that Baghdad officials and the Pentagon are still discussing joint training missions. Paranoids, who sometimes are proven right, are convinced that several thousand mercenaries and the world's largest embassy are further evidence that Washington plans to secretly run Iraq for years to come. There is nothing new, however, about governments deploying as many spies and informants as they possible can, especially in a center of Middle Eastern intrigue like Baghdad. Half the Iraqi government has been on the US payroll at one time or another, for heaven's sake, and still, the very government we bought and paid for wants us to leave.

For the record, there will be 5,000 security contractors in Iraq when the troops leave, plus 4,500 supporting aides. That compares to 15,200 American contractors in June 2009, and 9,500 currently in Iraq. In addition, there will be 1,400 Americans on the State Department payroll in

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Iraq (AID, Treasury, Commerce, Agriculture and Homeland Security). That doesn't seem to count foreign contract labor, but according to ABC News, the official number is roughly the same for US complexes in India, China, Mexico or Egypt today. The latest word, according to a *New York Times* headline, is that the United States is cutting back funding for Iraq anyway, "amid fiscal and security concerns." US consulates planned for Mosul and Kirkuk have been shelved, and the plans for a US branch office in Diyala province have been abandoned too. A projected 350 US contractors for police training has been slashed to 100.

Barbara Lee is elated but still suspicious. She plans a trip to Iraq this winter to monitor the US withdrawal, particularly her ban on permanent bases. "You know these people," she said, laughing. "They might build a base and call it a shopping center." She made my heart feel good.

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