

The War's Over, But the Fighting's Getting Worse

By Todd Gitlin

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The combat in Iraq may be over, but political combat at home threatens to swell. Bitterness is likely to thrive for the duration of the Bush administration, not only because of domestic policy differences between the right and the left, but because of continuing anger on both sides stemming from their fight over the Iraq war.

The warriors who supported Bush's Iraq policy, mostly on the right, are still facing off against the antiwarriors, mostly on the left. At first glance, this doesn't look like much of a fight. The antiwarriors mustered large demonstrations but were outmuscled by a Republican-dominated government and overwhelmed by an eventual popular majority.

But this isn't the impression left by right-wing talk shows, Web sites and commentators. They portray the antiwar left as dangerous, feral and shockingly, awesomely effective. Accordingly, ultra-conservative rhetoric, already elevated before the war began, remains at high pitch -- a flaming red alert. A few examples:

- Syndicated columnist Michelle Malkin writes about antiwarriors in an April 9 commentary: "They've trashed 9-11 memorials. Blocked streets. Burned flags. Shut down bridges. Marched on Broadway. And trampled across the National Mall. They've thrown stones at a uniformed female member of the Vermont National Guard, and hurled pie at a Bay Area television reporter deemed too pro-war. They've carried signs that read, 'We support our troops when they shoot their own officers,' and, 'Don't impeach Bush . . . execute him.' They've publicly wished for 'a million Mogadishus' and privately hoped for 100 new bin Ladens.'" And that's before she catches her breath.

- Rush Limbaugh calls liberal New York Times columnist and Princeton economist Paul Krugman "ferret-like" and groundlessly accuses him of peddling "idiotic kook conspiracy theories."

- FreeRepublic.com, a right-wing super-site based in Fresno, Calif., rails against "terrorist supporting leftists," and gives "Garofalo Awards" (after antiwar comedian/actress Janeane) for excessive defeatism about the Iraq war. (Prize: "a stuffed ready-to-eat crow on a silver platter.")

Judging from the right's unremitting ferocity, a visiting Martian might expect to discover the United States and Britain (sorry, "the coalition") trapped knee-deep in the big sandy of Iraq, and Saddam Hussein still ripping the tongues out of the mouths of dissenters. The traditional itch to see who stabbed the innocents in the back would then have a certain, albeit perverse, logic. For there is the smell of fear in these rants -- fear that the country is

about to be overrun, and not by al Qaeda alone, but by all the enemies of what the right likes to call "normal Americans." With all the uproar about antiwar celebrities, you'd think that Susan Sarandon was about to displace Jack Valenti as the head of the Motion Picture Association of America, if not Donald Rumsfeld as secretary of defense.

Something other than logic is at work here. Republicans, right-wingers at that, control every branch of the national government -- the White House, both houses of Congress, the Supreme Court and, increasingly, the lower federal courts. Why, then, this intense wounded rage?

Paradoxically, there is on the conservative side of the spectrum both the thrill of triumph and the sense of victory thwarted. The far right thinks it should have prevailed by now on every front. Conservatives weathered long years in the wilderness until the country came to its senses -- first with Ronald Reagan in 1980, and then (after a regrettable hiatus and the election of that rascal of rascals, Bill Clinton) with Newt Gingrich in 1994. They think they have come such a long way that the question must arise of why the world remains at all impervious to their ideas. Even the presidential designation of George W. Bush as the 2000 winner against what were -- in their view -- the wily legal maneuvers of those chad-scouring Democratic sneaks didn't bring them a sense of relaxed redemption. Only stabs in the back can have postponed the redemptive moment and kept the country from going entirely their way.

They have concluded that secularism, liberalism, feminism, cultural permissiveness and various other '60s-era beliefs are so deeply entrenched that it takes more than elections and pulpit fulminations to root them out -- thus the fury and frustration of the cultural right when the Clinton impeachment effort failed to arouse a Senate majority in 1999.

Another target of unending disdain is that hardy perennial, "the liberal media" -- a useful legend, as Eric Alterman argues in his new book, "What Liberal Media?" Meanwhile, the drumbeat of Fox News boosts conservative giddiness: We won, and at last, the forces of righteousness are on the march. If the juxtaposition of these two elements -- snarling resentment coupled with giddy expectations -- sounds familiar, that's because it fits snugly into the millenarian tradition. Even when the far right is not specifically Christian, much of its thinking is colored by the style of Christian millenarianism. Christian rightists ask the same question -- what is holding back the kingdom of God on Earth? -- and deliver the equivalent answer: the Antichrist, that cunning deceiver.

For its part, much of the left now is drawn toward melodramatic good-guy, bad-guy polarization -- or rather, would be so drawn if it could settle on who, if anyone, might occupy the positive pole. Actually, its iconography is sadder than that. A few activists cannot bring themselves to curse Saddam Hussein and other tyrants very loudly as long as American presidents are cursing them, too, but many more feel bereft of true leadership, bereft of regimes, bereft of bright affirmations altogether. Bush is clearly the bad guy, but who's the good? If there's an angelic force, many in the antiwarrior movement think, it must be the movement itself, which logged the considerable achievement of existing in the first place and suddenly mushroomed into a global

phenomenon. Some even argue that the movement itself is the new transforming force in the world . . . or would be if not for the *conservative* media. The argument gets vague at this point.

When the antiwar left peers within, it comes up with mixed feelings. Some redouble their helpless rage, but the war's effectively over and demonstrations have dwindled. Activists with whom I've spoken in recent weeks shared with the great majority of the American people -- indeed, with the Bush team -- the joy of seeing Iraqis hauling down Saddam statues and opening up torture chambers. They can rejoice, grieve and worry at the same time. They say: Not only do Iraqi casualties go uncounted; not only were precious objects looted, ruined and destroyed at the national museum and library; not only are fundamentalist Islamists out and about; but the prospects for a decent Iraqi democracy seem, to put it mildly, remote.

The antiwarriors worry about more wars to come and maintain that there were less destructive, more just ways to contain Saddam Hussein. But against the war's apparent successes (never mind that they are not yet the successes Bush promised, such as finding and confiscating weapons of mass destruction), they are reduced to arguing that the other shoe hasn't dropped: that al Qaeda will dine out on this war for years to come. But that's prophecy talking -- abstract prophecy at that. It's always hard to argue with success, and that's what the antiwar stalwarts are doing. This would leave anyone feeling thwarted and bewildered.

Where their emotions find common ground is in the belief that Bush is destructive -- empire incarnate, recklessness rampant, cluelessness recrudescing. So the more strategic thinkers on the left (as in www.moveon.org and www.winwithoutwar.com) are turning to 2004. Absent a plausible candidate to call their own, they try to keep heartened with thoughts of Father Bush's 1991-92 popularity plunge after his Gulf war. They argue that, at home, Bush stands for an economic plan that beggars the majority, and right-wing judges who threaten abortion and gay rights. They see Bush piling up gigantic deficits that will stretch into the next decade while the states and cities thrash around in fiscal crisis. This, they think, is how Bush stands to shrink the federal government as Reagan only dreamed of doing -- all but the military and surveillance sectors.

The conservative blogger Andrew Sullivan has opined that the antiwar left is expressing "some kind of rage at reality," and there's something to that. Helplessness is the main note. Where right-wing resentment is the resentment of the entitled and disappointed, left-wing resentment is the resentment of the forlorn. It is not part of the left's frame of mind to offer smart domestic security programs to counter Attorney General John Ashcroft's heavy hand. And perhaps most damaging, the left is not in the habit of proposing a constructive foreign policy. If empire is doomed, then what? If American or micro-coalition intervention is a bad idea, what is the role of liberal intervention -- by the United Nations or NATO or anyone?

The left is left with its "no." A no has its occasions. But for a force that aims for power, it won't do.

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