

Shouldering the Burden of War: Protests End and War Continues

by Paul Gottfried

About three years ago, when antiwar panels and antiwar sloganeering were the order of the day at my college, I predicted such impassioned protests would end -- not when American military involvement in Iraq and Afghanistan was terminated -- but when a Democrat, and preferably one on the social left, became president.

I was right. These days, as I walk among my formerly pacifist colleagues and read their preferred news sources, I don't hear a murmur of complaint about "the president's strategy" for extricating our troops from military danger. It is as if we were living in messianic times, when the wolf is lying down with the lamb. This is all because we now have Obama in the White House and overwhelming Democratic majorities in both houses of Congress.

Once I was naïve enough to wonder why the critics of our war in Iraq on the right and on the left did not join hands in a common enterprise. The answer is that the Democratic Left, with few exceptions, was never opposed in principle to military entanglements overseas. While rightwing opponents of Bush's foreign policy were marginalized and vilified for their dissent by GOP commentators and the mainstream conservative movement, the Democratic Left engaged in griping as a means of taking power.

As I noted in a column two years ago, the only "conservative" columnists featured in the *New York Times* were frenetically in favor of an American mission to impose democracy by force. Not coincidentally, these columnists, David Brooks, Bill Kristol, and David Frum, are closer to the liberal left on social issues than to many on the antiwar Right. Domestic politics for most of the Left has always trumped mostly bogus antiwar rhetoric. The Left can take or leave that issue, depending on other interests.

Pacifist sentiment on the left has usually been selective, in the same way that the Democratic Left only began to notice the House Committee for Un-American Activities, organized by Congress to fight subversion in 1938, when Communist sympathizers were being called to testify in 1946. When the same committee went after those who were suspected of being pro-fascist during World War II (that is, during what historians call the Good War), the Left found no reason to object, any more than it now cares to notice the threat to our civil rights posed by the hate crime legislation that the Democratic Congress is getting ready to pass.

Despite my habituation to such hypocrisy, I was nonetheless taken aback by a recent column by *The New York Times*-syndicated columnist Bob Herbert about shouldering the burden of war. Herbert, who had protested the belligerence of the Bush administration, still believes that "the war in Afghanistan made sense once but does so no longer." Moreover, "the war in Iraq never did."

In spite of these reservations, Herbert's thinking about the war has changed in the last year. He began to perceive that "so few are willing to serve at a time when the nation is fighting two long

wars is a profound indictment on the society.” Herbert would like to deal with this imbalance by reinstating the draft, although he admits that it might not work. He reminds his readers that “we should all be pitching in. We shouldn’t be leaving the entire monumental burden to a tiny portion of the population,” namely to those unlucky few who keep going back on multiple tours in Iraq and Afghanistan.

The question is how to furnish the government with more troops, particularly since “instead of winding down our involvement in Afghanistan, we are now ratcheting it up. Herbert cites “a comment that President Barack Obama made in a recent address to the Veterans of Foreign Wars. “ Here the president, while “not chiding those who are not serving,” also noted that “less than one percent wears the uniform.” Although Herbert no longer sees any sense in increasing our commitment to the pacification of Afghanistan, and presumably to sending more soldiers there, he also wishes us to jump to our feet when his adored leader gives marching orders.

I doubt such a column would cause any discomfort among my selectively antiwar colleagues or among those Church of the Brethren intellectuals, whom I heard for years denouncing Republican war-hawks at our college assemblies. Such people have no problem with military engagements or infringements on civil liberties, providing they are not being carried out by Republicans or others identified with the Right. Although anti-Republican war protestor Herbert may take the cake for utter hypocrisy, I could easily imagine millions of onetime shrieking opponents of “Bush’s wars” demanding that we stand united behind Obama’s ratcheted-up struggle in Afghanistan. It is our redeemer president who is asking us to put our lives on the line for *his* war. In the world of partisan politics, that is entirely different from having a Republican president doing the same.

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