

Dark Days

As war on Iraq unfolds, peace activists persevere.

The bombardment of Baghdad has begun.

Despite the vocal opposition of millions of Americans, President George W. Bush declared war on Iraq at 10:15 pm EST March 19. Explosions from the first U.S. air strikes rocked the suburbs and the city center of the Iraqi capitol in the early morning hours of March 20.

All who paid attention to the obsessive manner in which Bush pursued his course knew in their hearts that war was inevitable, that inspections were never meant to work, that a diplomatic solution was never a real priority. Yet, as footage of the air strikes flashed across our television screens, we were heartbroken, angry and fearful — fearful for the Iraqi people, for the stability of the Middle East, and for the future of our own country as it charts its dangerous, unpopular course toward imperialism.

Still, people are in the streets, protesting and chanting and committing civil disobedience, staging die-ins and sit-ins and walk-outs, phoning, faxing and e-mailing their representatives, circulating petitions, marching and showing no sign of letting up. The massive energy and momentum that went into the antiwar movement over the past few months is being funneled into continued and vigorous action. Millions have signed up at www.MoveOn.org and put lights in their windows to signal their ongoing commitment to antiwar work. Protest campaigns organized by the broad coalition Win Without War and United for Peace and Justice are in full swing.

Our visible efforts will let our friends, in Europe and Asia and Latin America and everywhere else where people have declared their opposition to the war, know that Americans continue to stand with them in solidarity despite the actions of our government.

But as intent as we are on the work of waging peace, we must also turn our attention to the future, because we have another vital mission to fulfill next year. Starting today, we must set our sights on this goal: regime change in the White House in November 2004. If nothing else, Bush taught us a useful lesson: persistence in the face of overwhelming opposition. If we employ the same resolute, stubborn determination he used to push our nation into war, we will surely prevail in the 2004 presidential election.

And what now, as the bombs pound Baghdad and terrified residents cower, as a new generation of American soldiers experiences the horror of killing other human beings. What now?

Uppermost in our minds should be our responsibility to help feed and care for those who will bear the brunt of this war, which

could create more than a million refugees in Iraq and neighboring countries. Sixty percent of Iraq's population depends for basic sustenance on the oil-for-food program, which was suspended as soon as Bush issued his ultimatum. Online donations can be made to the U.N.'s World Food Programme, Aid International, Oxfam America, and Working Assets Iraqi Emergency Relief Fund.

And what of the troops? "Honor our Troops, Bring them Home, Peace Is Patriotic," reads the marquee on my local movie theater. We wholeheartedly support the idea of protecting the lives of our soldiers by bringing them safely home. Our opposition to the war is based on respect for human life, be it an Iraqi grandmother or a private in the U.S. army. But we do not support the mission these soldiers have been sent on: to kill thousands of Iraqis. So how can we in good conscience honor

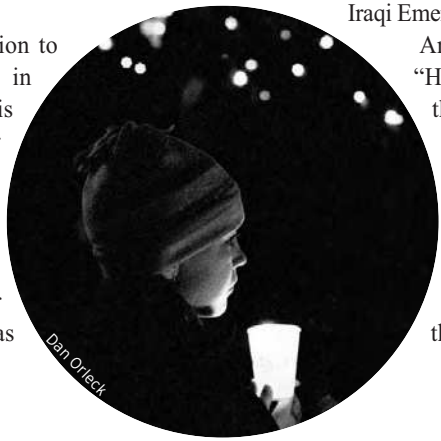
the military?

Our own commander-in-chief has shown little respect for the men and women he has sent into harm's way. Even as Bush has ordered more than 200,000 troops into combat, the Republicans in the House Budget Committee voted to cut \$25 billion from the Department of Veterans Affairs' budget over the next 10 years; just when wounded or ill Gulf War II combat vets are sure to need benefits the most. This is unprecedented; it is always difficult to get money for vets in peacetime, but to slash veterans' pensions and disability compensation at the beginning of a war defies belief. So when someone questions the patriotism of antiwar protesters, remind them of the administration's hypocrisy.

What to do with our discouragement, our horror, our exhaustion? If you have invested any of your energy and heart in resisting the war efforts of Bush, Cheney, Rumsfeld et al., depression is going to be your occasional companion. We can try to avoid despair in these dark times by recognizing that we each have a valuable place in the continuum that is the struggle for peace, which has existed as long as there has been war. "It is not necessary for you to complete the work, but neither are you free to desist from it," said the Talmudic sage Rabbi Tarphon.

There is a roar of protest around the world that is rising in volume even now. One month ago, many of us took part in the largest coordinated single-day antiwar demonstration in the history of the world. Bush did not listen to us, but we heard each other. When the wartime blues begin to get you down, remember: There is a one-term president in the White House, and that good fight has just begun. **EW**

Tal Moses is senior editor of AlterNet (www.alternet.org).



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