

Resisting the War at Home

An appeal to the Anti-War Community:

by Tom Cordaro, September 2008

Over the last five years many of us have poured our hearts and souls in to the effort to prevent and then stop the wars in Iraq & Afghanistan. This has exacted a huge toll on us, emotionally, physically, spiritually and even economically. And it is easy to become disheartened when we find that even though we have succeeded in convincing the vast majority of our fellow citizens that the war in Iraq was a mistake, we have not been able to bring this war to an end.

What I would like to invite each of you to do for the next few hours, is to step back for a moment and to look again at the big picture. It is important now and then to remind ourselves that the war in Iraq and in Afghanistan is part of something much bigger called, the “Global War on Terror” (GWT). It is the GWT that drives everything that happens in Iraq, Afghanistan, Pakistan, and the Middle East and, as I will try to point out, it also drives many of the major domestic issue—especially issues related to immigration.

So what do the government and its media echo chamber tell us about the GWT? We are told that we are being victimized by a terrorist threat that seeks to destroy our democracy and our way of life. We are told this new enemy attacked us without reason or provocation and that this enemy is irrational and not bound by our civilized moral standards; therefore they cannot be reasoned with. We are told that this threat is so new and radically different that the past cannot provide us with clear direction or context for dealing with it. Because of the nature of this threat, we cannot operate in the same way we did when confronting threats in the past. And we are also told that notions such as the rule of law, civil rights and international treaties must be set aside in order to deal with this radically new threat.

One might be tempted to question how it is that a small terrorist group living in the caves of Afghanistan can pose such an existential threat to the most powerful nation on the planet. But to even ask that question is to be guilty of political heresy; it would dishonor our noble dead (those who died on 9-11 and those who have died in Iraq and Afghanistan); and would amount to giving aid and comfort to our enemies.

But what is GWT really all about?

Like so many similar situations from our past, the GWT is a mechanism for exercising control for the purpose of furthering the interests of the powerful. This is why the administration wants to decouple this crisis from history; to be tempted to apply lessons from the past would be to invite unwelcome historical comparisons.

And the engine that drives this mechanism is FEAR. While I do not subscribe to the many conspiracy theories that claim that the terrorist attacks of 9-11 were somehow engineered or allowed by the Bush Administration, I do think that the attacks of 9-11 provided the administration a unique opportunity to achieve goals that it always had in mind, but lacked the justification & public support for doing so.

Dick Cheney and the Neo-Cons have been trying for nearly 3 decades to restore the power of the imperial presidency. The attacks of 9-11 allowed them to do so. The Neo-Cons and the inner circle of the Bush Administration had been advocating since the mid-1990s that the U.S. use military power to overthrow Saddam Hussein in order to establish a new order in the Middle East that would solidify US military and economic global hegemony and control the flow of oil from the Arab World. The attacks of 9-11 allowed them to do so.

Under normal circumstances the American people would not support such actions; most Americans are not interested in the United States becoming an imperial global overlord and even fewer are interested in re-establishing an imperial presidency. But if the American people can be sufficiently frightened, they would be willing to accept these things and more for the promise of security.

The goal of the GWT is to sustain a level of fear and uncertainty within the American society that will convince the American people to sell their birthright of civil rights and constitutional protections for a bowl of security porridge. Who needs to be frightened? ... All of us. Who needs to be controlled? ... Any one who would challenge the dominant power relationships, both globally and domestically.

What kinds of control are involved in the GWT?

The GWT is about Economic Control: It is about creating a global economic system of institutions and treaties that will protect and strengthen the already existing power relationships. Countries placed on the “supporters of terrorism” list can find themselves cut off from the global economy and can become the target of economic sanctions. You either accept your place in the global order or you risk being labeled a state sponsor of terrorism or a terrorist sympathizer or a country that supports terrorism. We have already seen how the Bush Administration has used this tactic against Iran, Syria and North Korea. In recent years we have even seen it used against countries like Venezuela and Bolivia. (And again, we are warned not to make historical comparisons to the way our government used the “Communist” label to vilify any who stood in the way of U.S. global hegemony.) The GWT is also about creating a national economy that is subservient to this global system and is able to control the expectations of U.S. workers so they come to accept their role in the global economy.

The GWT is about Social Control: It is about imposing social taboos against dissent and replacing political & human rights with an ever increasing multitude of consumer choices that constitute the new forms and meaning of freedom. It is about keeping ordinary people from coming together and organizing for change across racial and economic lines by pitting one group against another and by providing scapegoats on which to place blame for any hardships.

And finally, the GWT is about Political Control: It is about narrowing the political choices between the two major political parties that are lock-step in executing the GWT. It is about allowing debate on tactics, but not allowing any questioning of the fundamental premises that sustain the GWT. It is about installing pliable puppet regimes in control of strategic resources around the world that are willing and able to control their local populations in service to the global system of wealth creation.

And because it is a GLOBAL War on Terror it has both international and domestic components. Most of us, when we think of the domestic component of the GWT think about the U.S. Patriot Act and other laws and government directives that violate our civil liberties and undermine the rule of law.

But what we don't often think about, is how the GWT makes use of our broken immigration system as a tool of control that is driven by fear. In fact, starting the day after the 9-11 attacks, our immigration system has been one of the most deadly weapons used in GWT in this country.

Over the past seven years thousands of Arabs and South Asian have been rounded up and deported from this country on the most minor of immigration violations. And in some cases the government did not even bother to present evidence or hold hearings. Parallel with this attack against Arabs & South Asian immigrants, were the vicious attacks that rose against immigrants communities of color—especially Mexicans in the run up to the vote on comprehensive immigration reform and in its aftermath.

The War at Home being waged against Arabs and South Asians in the name of homeland security uses our broken immigration system for the purpose of expelling as many of them as possible from our country. The War at Home being waged against undocumented immigrants in the name of homeland security is for the purpose of controlling these communities by keeping them from exercising their political & economic power.

When immigrants marched in cities across the country in the hundreds of thousands it scared White communities from coast to coast. Before these marches, for many White Americans, these immigrants were virtually invisible; cleaning our office buildings, serving our food, cutting our lawns, harvesting our crops and bagging our groceries. Now here they were in the streets demanding to be treated with respect and dignity. But many Americans were not prepared for this, nor would they accept them striving to achieve anything more than being invisible laborers.

There were a lot of reasons for the failure of the comprehensive immigration reform bill. However, one of the biggest reasons was the campaign of fear and hatred directed by the far right towards immigrants—Mexicans in particular. Many right-wing radio talk show hosts regularly equate undocumented Mexican immigrants with terrorists and many politicians use code words that sought to portray these immigrants as a threat to our national security and to our racial purity.

These voices of intolerance and hate operated under the premise that as long as they put the word “illegal” before the word “immigrant,” they could get away with saying the most outrageously racist and xenophobic things. Even Republican conservatives like Sen. Trent Lott and President Bush publicly criticized the level of fear and hate being espoused by these folks. But the GWT unleashed the forces of fear and hatred, and like the release of the dogs of war, once unleashed they are impossible to control.

Now that a path to citizenship is no longer seems open we are seeing an increase in raids and harassment from federal Immigration & Customs Enforcement agents; we are seeing a more

direct role being taken by Homeland Security in immigration enforcement; we are seeing more local police forces being used to enforce federal immigration laws and we are seeing more local communities virtually outlawing undocumented immigrants and passing English only ordinances.

And most troubling of all the same right-wing forces of fear and hatred that killed immigration reform are encouraging new forms of vigilantism, not only at the border but everywhere there is a sizeable immigrant population. (Organizations like the Southern Poverty Law Center have documented an increase in both the number of anti-immigrant hate groups and the number of hate crimes committed against these communities.) The right-wing talk radio shows and their allies in the blogosphere have been able to whip up their followers to a fever pitch.

Although they do not represent a majority of Americans (and may not even represent a majority of Republicans) they have been able to dominate the public discourse on immigration. Not content with defeating comprehensive immigration reform, these right wing forces of hate in conjunction with the Bush Administration's increasing crack-down on the immigrant community to appease the Republican base, has created a climate of fear and intimidation.

The importance of the struggle of the immigrant community to the anti-war movement becomes clear when we start calling things by their right name. While many on the far right use the language of "legal vs. illegal" in discussing the "immigration problem", it is only a cover for launching racist attacks on immigrants of color in this country. We need to call it as it is and help the nation see beneath the code words being used to spread the fear and hate.

In understanding the dynamic of racism in the anti-immigrant campaign being waged across the country by elements within the Republican Party it is important to recognize the two distinct roles being played. The "White Collar" Racist like former Governor Mitt Romney and Rep. Tancredo do not make many openly "racist" comments. They function to create space within the public discourse that makes racist attitudes and behaviors "legitimate." By parsing their anti-immigrant statements with the adjective "illegal" they can deny the humanity of immigrants-- as well as their human rights. (This is similar to the way the phrase "enemy combatant" is used to deny the humanity and human rights of Guantanamo prisoners.) The space opened up by the "White Collar" Racists is then filled by the "White Sheet" Racists that populate right-wing talk radio shows and the blogosphere who do not feel constrained by "political correctness."

While elements within the Republican Party are fueling the racism within the anti-immigration movement, it is becoming clear that the Democrats are not willing to risk any of their political capital to defend these immigrant communities. Unless we can change the dynamics of this anti-immigrant discourse, this country will be driven into deeper levels of paranoia and fear, making the dominant narrative of the GWT more powerful.

So far the anti-immigration campaign being launched by the right has not been seen or understood for what is really is; a low intensity war being waged against immigrant communities of color for the purpose of keeping them from exercising their economic and political power. And it is a war being waged against Arab and South Asian communities for the purpose of

driving them out of the country. The racists are drumming up fear against Immigrants of Color by playing on American's economic fears and anxieties and they are drumming up fear against Arabs and South Asians by playing on American's fear of terrorism.

This war at home has its roots in a worldview that sees foreigners as potential enemies and sees threats from everything that is not truly American (i.e. White). This war is not only being waged in Iraq and Afghanistan. It is being waged in small towns and villages across the country. It is being waged in factories and farms and at day laborer construction sites. It is being waged in city halls and in county governments. And it is becoming a rallying cry among conservative candidate who will want to rally their base in order to win elections.

How does this relate to our anti-war movement?

It is becoming clear that if our efforts to stop the war in Iraq are going to be successful we need to broaden our coalitions and we must become something more than a White Middle Class liberal movement. Most successful social movements in this country's past were able to build a broad base of support across racial and ethnic dividing lines. Moving the anti-war movement to the next level will require the same.

There exists an opening for us to build a broader coalition because the fear that drives the anti-immigration movement is the same fear that drives the GWT. The anti-war movement can play a major role in changing the dynamics of the national discourse on the GWT by making the link between the war in Iraq and the war being waged against immigrants in this country.

But as long as the Latino, Arab and Southeast Asian Immigrant Communities stands alone in this struggle they will continue to be an easy target of the racist campaign of fear and hatred. Until a sizeable community of Whites and other Communities of Color begin to stand with these communities, they will continue to be seen as foreigners making claims to rights that they don't deserve.

I am not suggesting that the anti-war movement stop what they are doing to end the wars abroad. What I am asking is the following: In our public statements can we begin making the links between the war in Iraq and Afghanistan the war at home against immigrant communities? Can we begin to build accountable relationships with communities working on immigrant rights in order to build a genuine anti-racist multi-cultural movement capable of challenging the dominant narrative that drives the GWT? Can we begin to speak publicly against the racism being used by the anti-immigrant forces in our communities?

I believe that this war at home constitutes one of the most important challenges facing the anti-war movement at this time. History will judge us on whether we were able to rise to challenge of moving beyond our predominantly White Middle Class liberal ghetto in order to build an authentic anti-racist multi-cultural movement for peace with justice that is accountable to People of Color around the world and on the other side of town.

Because of our commitment to becoming an anti-racist Catholic peace movement, Pax Christi USA is well positioned to play an important role in this challenge, if we have the courage to make the commitment to do this difficult work.