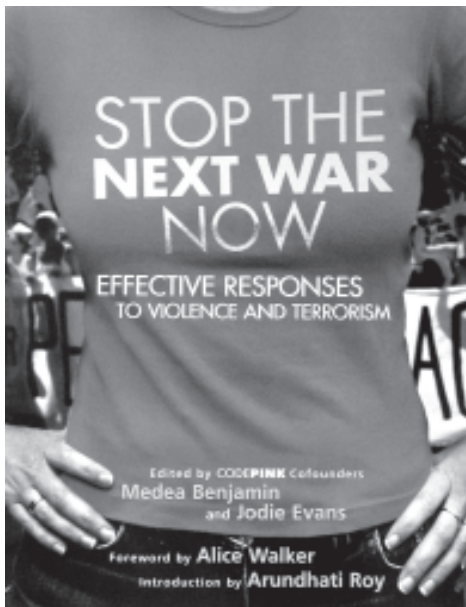


What makes **you** think you can **stop** a war?



Stop the Next War Now
Effective Responses to Violence and Terrorism
 2005. Medea Benjamin, Jodie Evans, eds.
 Inner Ocean Publishing, Hawaii

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War is usually the domain of presidents, kings and generals, fought for reasons of sovereignty, control of resource or territory, or in defense against external aggression. When decisions to wage war are made, the citizen is either exhorted to support the war, and sometimes asked to become part of the machinery—as warriors, as producers of arms, or as parents consenting their children become warriors. On the other hand, the cause of peace is less straightforward and articulated. Citizens are not normally asked to work for peace.

Citizen Power

It is this concept of citizen power that is being foregrounded in the book *Stop the Next War Now: Effective Responses to Violence and Terrorism*. It argues that ordinary citizens can exert enough pressure to turn around a government hell-bent towards war.

This book is a pacifist manual of pragmatic perspectives and actions stemming from experience. However, it is not aimed at a global audience, although there is much here that is useful in lobbying many countries around the world. This book is specifically aimed at an American audience: the same American audience that in the 1970s successfully lobbied its government to end the Vietnam War, the Americans who vote for their leaders, the Americans who consume the oil that drives the war in the Middle East.

Editors Benjamin and Evans compiled this collection of essays, excerpts and first person accounts from several years of organising around the banner of the anti-war feminist organisation CodePink. A reference to “pink slips” to end the office term of President George W. Bush, CodePink engaged the media by taking personas as anti-war activists in

pink negligees and other outrageous images. CodePink was catapulted into prominence among anti-war activists and the media because of the sometimes flamboyant, oftentimes incisive, and sustained noise and clamor they raised about the US invasion of Iraq in 2003.

But in the years that followed, other protests subsided, and critics were relegated to obscure talk shows and non-mainstream media. Meanwhile, the war went on. Even as one scandalous revelation after another was aired in media about the unreliable evidence that drove the decision to invade Iraq (no weapons of mass destruction? faulty intelligence of Al Qaeda links? US soldiers act out perverse torture schemes?) the war rumbled on, with casualties mounting among American and Iraqi civilian and military personnel. CodePink's book chronicles how people sustained their commitment to ending the so-called Iraq War.

But where does one start ending a war?

Diane Wilson, founding member of CodePink, in the essay "The Art of Misbehavin,'" describes how CodePink began. The founders saw how ordinary protest actions did not work anymore: "When we say we don't want war, those can't be just words," she says. "Stopping a war takes a real commitment, and that means putting ourselves at risk." The group held protest actions in the center of Washington DC and at the UN in the weeks before US planned to invade Iraq. When it was clear that war was imminent, CodePink also made a point to know more about Iraqi realities by visiting Iraq just before the bombs fell.

One can safely skim through the more creative expressions of nonviolence and

anti-war sentiments—the poetry, the diary entries, the mini-essays infused with some hazy ideology. Because what makes this book significant is that it is as much a lobbying manual as it is a collection of anti-war literature and rhetoric. As a manual, this book looks at several aspects and target areas for lobbying, organising and paradigm shifts. On a practical level, it provides specific lobbying strategies, legislation, organisations' names, contact information and even insights from war-weary legislators. Meanwhile, it identifies cultural and ideological structures that need to be challenged to avert war. The contributors to this volume are an interesting mix of politicians, long-time activists, families of soldiers, social theorists, media practitioners, representing a range of perspectives on conflict and US global military aggression.

One area identified for change is the army itself: to make soldiers and their families realise the futility of war and the social costs of waging one. Several essays detail the organising among war veterans and families of soldiers to change their attitudes towards war.

A significant modality presented for peacebuilding is the role of citizenship and democratic processes. As contributor Doris Haddock writes, "Democracy is a lifestyle, not a fringe benefit of paying your taxes. Self-governance is a lot of work." Her essay emphasises the value of promoting a sense of community, and of citizens acting within a community to create the necessary changes, one community at a time. Citizens can step up their role in peace building by activism. Phyllis Bennis of the Institute for Policy Studies, suggests in her essay "Activists as Ambassadors," building a global movement of peace



www.codepink4peace.org

A CodePink activity

activists who would continue pressuring governments to end conflict by lobbying at the UN security council and countries involved in conflict. Mary Ann Wright, a former US ambassador to Sierra Leone, urges citizens to sustain a dissenting attitude towards their government. She herself made her own point by resigning as US ambassador to Sierra Leone.

Environmental activist Julia Butterfly Hill takes a different tack and suggests abandoning the consumerist throwaway lifestyle that has become characteristic of western-style living—plastic packaging, rapid obsolescence of material goods, and reliance on fossil fuels. She says “One way towards pacifism is to simplify one’s lifestyle.” She also urges the use of civil disobedience, including the non-payment of taxes and channeling money instead into environmental community-based projects.

Legislative reforms as official channels for change are discussed as well. Former congressperson Lynn Woolsey is supporting a bill in the US legislature that outlines preemptive actions for acts of terrorism, including addressing terrorism’s root causes through foreign policy that promotes democracy building, human rights education, sustainable development, education for women and girls as an aid priority, and re-prioritising the US government’s spending away from military activities and into social projects.

Still, the book seems inadequate because it does not question certain assumptions about terrorism, such as oversimplified notions of the use of violence to further a cause. Also, while it does try to get non-American perspectives about the “war on terrorism” as well as on US military dominance, it does not in itself look at other forms of conflict in which the US is engaged.

What about changing public opinion?

I consider a highlight of this book the entire chapter devoted to media reform. As each contributor in this section points out, the media in the US represent an influential industry that extends its power throughout the world. Within the US itself, the media have a monolithic character, are dominated by a small number of players, are driven by profit motives, and tend to follow the official line on matters of “national security,” thus breeding a conservative culture uncritical of war and more concerned with sensationalism. In 2003, the US mainstream media was given permission to work closely with the military forces deployed in Iraq, a practice called “embedded journalism.”

Critics of the war pointed out how “embedded” journalists compromised their integrity by becoming dependent on the military unit with which they worked 24/7. At the same time, the high visibility of military personnel as resource persons in broadcast media also limited the opinions about the war on mainstream television. Ultimately, media coverage shapes public opinion on war, an effect that is exploited by US leaders to further their stubborn conflict-centered foreign policy agendas. Media inordinately fan the flames, and there are few media controls, nor opportunities for naysayers to be heard.

Andrea Buffa, peace campaign coordinator of Global Exchange, writes on the need to improve quality and quantity of programming to counteract the trend of narrow and shallow coverage of war. She argues for a restructuring of media ownership, so that a more diverse media can deliver varying perspectives and viewpoints; reestablishing the Fairness Doctrine in media practice, allowing opposing viewpoints in interviews; pushing for the licensing of low-power FM radio stations (community radio); making broadcasters pay for their use of the spectrum (pay for broadcast licenses) to minimise the monopoly of large media players; enforcing requirements for local programming and encouraging more public affairs programming; granting more licenses to community and nonprofit stations; and the dismantling of the new Telecommunications Act, which leads to the establishment of monopolistic media. She makes an important point: “Convincing Americans of the importance of peace and justice requires peace activists to be media activists as well.”

Feminists to lead the way

Even more radical transformations are necessary, says two feminists Riane Eisler and Barbara Ehrenreich. Eisler, a sociologist, studies ancient societies and has looked at the ascendancy of the “dominator” model (characterised by authoritarianism and institutionalised violence) over the “partnership” model (characterised by valuing caring and non violence, and economically and politically democratic society). Her “four cornerstones” for a just and caring society propose dismantling the environment of structural violence and creating the basic structure for fostering partnership culture. This consists in childhood education on nonviolence, gender equality, women focused development policies, and a spirituality grounded on creating a non-violent world.

Barbara Ehrenreich, seeing feminism as a strategy to counter terrorism, refers to how changing the role and status of women in Islamic societies might curb terrorism. Her prescriptions have some merit in themselves—putting US foreign aid into girl’s education in places with low female literacy; expanding grounds for asylum to all women fleeing gender to talitarianism; reversing the Bush administration policies on global family planning; eradicating the global business of trafficking of women; leaning on the US to ratify CEDAW. On the other hand, she engages in questionable reasoning when she connects Islamic societies with breeding grounds of terrorism, ironically falling into the trap of equating terror with Islam or Islamism. To be fair, she does qualify

her statements by saying “I’m not expecting such measures alone to incite a feminist insurgency within the Islamist one.” Perhaps, however, if she had used a broader characterisation of terrorism, her critique would resonate better.

Views from elsewhere

Looking beyond the anti-war experiences in the US, conflict resolution in other countries seems to work best with a committed participation of citizens. Neela Marikkar, businesswoman and founder of Sri Lanka First, who negotiated a settlement between the Sri Lanka government and the Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE), for example, considers the achievement as having been brought about by dogged organising and the involvement of the private sector in peace efforts.

Sonali Kolhatkar of the Afghan Women’s mission makes a poignant message about the falsehood of liberation. Blue veiled women looking out through little windows were used in media as symbols of the oppressed and to drum up an emotional rationale for war. “The rhetoric of ‘liberation’ victimises and dehumanises women,” she says. “It denies them their ability to determine their fate and instead subjects them to the whims of the ‘liberators’ .” What she asks is that instead of a military

intervention, the better solution would have been to foster a sense of solidarity among the Afghans themselves. “Clearly the people of the world, especially the Afghan women, do not need liberating. They need us to rein in our government, and its support of misogynist forces like the Northern Alliance and the Taliban, so that they can continue the difficult task of achieving their own Freedom. Our solidarity must enable indigenous struggles to attain freedom by preventing the interference of imperial governments.”

Solidarity among peacebuilders

Whether done through organising, expressing dissent, teaching nonviolence or prioritising more basic issues of gender equality and the environment, peacebuilding is now an urgent necessity. Solidarity and commitment are called for, and the challenge is to find real solutions to the ancient cycle of conflict, and division. If at all possible, peaceloving citizens of all countries currently engaged in war should come out with similar books, to bring together the best ideas of humankind to halt the madness of war. ♻

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