

HOW WE STOPPED THE WAR

Stephen Bergman, M.D. 11/21/05 (revised)

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With increasing frequency writers are likening the Iraq invasion and occupation to the war in Vietnam. The latest, Melvin Laird, was Secretary of Defense during the Nixon administration from 1969-1973. Perhaps it is time to look at how we stopped the Vietnam War, and see if the same methods might work now, or if not, why not.

In those years the Nixon administration realized that it could not win, and set out to end it. The killing would go on for years, but a divided country was turning against the mission. There were three major reasons:

The student resistance movement and the draft. The fact that every student was eligible to be drafted and perhaps be sent to Vietnam created great anxiety and, with time, organized resistance to the war. One of the first nonviolent protests was in 1967 by students at the University of Wisconsin. The students occupied a hallway, preventing Dow Chemical, makers of napalm, from job recruiting. The administration called in the Madison City police. All hell broke loose, with injuries on both sides. The brutality solidified the resistance; the students there and elsewhere went out on strike. By Kent State in 1970 there were countless acts of nonviolent

resistance, violent police actions, and redoubled resistance. Marches on Washington, hundreds of thousands strong. Many returning soldiers joined in, as did families and loved ones of students and soldiers alike.

The media. TV newscasts at that time showed an incontrovertible truth: real bleeding bodies were brought into everyone's living room and kitchen. Screams of the wounded were heard. Dead bodies were seen sprawled in the graceless horror of death. Both Americans and Vietnamese dead and wounded were shown. There was a nightly tally of American dead and wounded—and Vietcong as well. Coffins draped with flags were given air time. Commentators were believed to be trying to bring us the truth. When the government was caught in lies, people cared. When Walter Cronkheit stated that it didn't seem we could "win" this war, something in the mainstream trembled, and shifted. TV and print news, not owned by mega-corporations, was independent and brave. The Pentagon Papers were published despite obvious legal and retributive risk. Journalists were smart, and had spine. Reporters, both TV and press—like Michael Herr and Sy Hersh—would never "imbed" with the military. Accept censorship? They went out on their own.

Leaders. Both within and outside of Congress there were great leaders—not mere politicians, statesmen who believed in a vision of America that was

not imperialistic, who walked the walk. In 1968 Robert Kennedy and Martin Luther King were assassinated, men who, with the student Civil Rights movement, would put the laws on the books. Leaders spoke to the link between racism and classism and the obscene images on the TV and in the papers. Congressional leaders stood up—McCarthy, Fulbright, Ted Kennedy, McGovern among many—and, in his most impassioned moment, a young soldier named Kerry, back from Vietnam, asked a Senate committee, “How do you tell someone that he’s the last man to die for a mistake?” Many of our leaders were fearless, talking truth to power in a way that has not been seen since.

What is the message in this, from Vietnam to Iraq?

Introduce legislation to institute the draft. At once, no exceptions, not even gender. The purpose would be to hold all Americans—regardless of race or class—responsible for any further or future war effort. Mothers, fathers, and their children would be in the streets. There might be a violent response. The resistance to the “war” would focus. Many returning soldiers and their families and loved ones would join in.

The media. Corporate-controlled, it is probably beyond repair. Some of the alternative and foreign media are often more reliable truth-tellers. But there is one question for the TV commanders to which we must demand an

answer: why are you not showing the bloody bodies of the wounded and dead Americans and Iraqis?

Leaders. The only leader of national note is a dead soldier's mother, Cindy Sheehan. The Congress, with few exceptions—Maxine Waters, Barbara Lee, Russ Feingold and John Murtha—is as quiet as five hundred invertebrates. In this silence is opportunity. Most Americans see Iraq as a mistake. If a leader of some stature stands up and asks—and keeps on asking in her or his own way—“How do you ask someone to be the last person to die for a mistake?”, there will be an audible sigh of national relief. A simmering movement will ignite. This requires a certain courage, probably from someone outside of Congress—Wes Clark or John Edwards, men of character who lately have been fearless and on fire, come to mind. It may seem risky to take that stance, but there's a good chance that the person who stands up will be a beacon of hope for the restoration of the American values shredded by the Bush gang. That person might well be elected President in 2008.

Stopping a war is difficult, especially given the hubris, spin and tragic incompetence of the Bush-Cheney administration. Yet even Kissinger and Nixon were able to manage it, however clumsily and with a great cost of lives on both sides—although Bush and Cheney make Nixon and Kissinger

look like FDR and Eleanor. We Americans can stop it in time to save many thousands of wounded and dead. Now.

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