

Post-war Postmortem

How the U.S. Got Away With It

Fifth Estate Collective

Although death and environmental destruction are continuing in Iraq and Kuwait, the Persian Gulf war is over in America. The remains can be seen in the dirt-streaked, plastic yellow ribbons sagging from trees and lampposts and at half-off sales for Desert Storm commemorative t-shirts and bumperstickers which brag “USA Kicks Ass.”

With the exception of officially sponsored extravaganzas featuring the exotic military technology of the war, its “stars,” and paid casts of thousands (such as the “victory” parades in New York City and Grand Rapids, June 4 and July 4), most welcome home celebrations for the troops have been surprisingly sparse given the immense support the war received in the polls. Some people interviewed by the media even expressed a “patriotism burnout” factor as to why they weren’t participating in the victory festivities.

In Detroit, a scant 1,000 people weakly cheered a ragged parade of high school marching bands and patriotic floats in May, a number no greater than the largest anti-war march in January. A sickening union-sponsored welcome home rally on June 23 brought out a paltry 250 people at the fairgrounds even though a host of UAW officials and local politicians were on hand to testify how “impressed” they were “by the military might that the U.S. displayed.”

Undaunted by a string of disappointing turnouts, organizers of the annual U.S./Canadian Freedom Festival predicted 100,000 spectators would line Woodward Ave. June 29 to view a grand victory march. Crowd estimates were as low as 5,000 according to the daily press.

Civic “Shame” Or Pride?

In San Francisco, a “Welcome Home the Troops” parade, which was intended by its organizers to overcome the civic “shame” of having the city be the scene of several 100,000+ anti-war demonstrations and thousands of arrests, drew only 20,000. Hundreds of anti-war protesters disrupted the event and several, including a Marine resister, jumped on the lead military vehicle and shouted anti-war slogans. 14 were arrested.

In Washington DC, a June 8 victory celebration was an obscene tribute to militarism featuring top war criminals and financed to the tune of \$8 million by the Pentagon. Another \$4 million in expenses was picked up by defense contractors and Middle East governments. Even so, the crowd of 200,000 people that passively lined the streets to view the spectacle was severely below the estimate of 1.4 million the organizers predicted would attend. The Jan. 26, 1991 anti-war march brought 300,000 protesters to the capital on a budget of \$250,000.

The foregoing is not to say the war didn’t enjoy high support, only that the support had the passive quality spectacles engender. Now that all of the hoopla and hype has waned, there is a palpable yearning among the masses (that’s what they allowed themselves to become) for a return to those exciting days of viewing the war on television and experiencing those intense feelings of pseudo-community it brought into being. That smart bomb Super Bowl, in which every American City wins the championship, has given way in the media to a return to the nagging banal-

ity of reports of crime, urban decay, other people's wars, official corruption and the crumbling U.S. economy—just what the war reportage had allowed them to ignore.

What shocked many of us who fought against the war was discovering there was more to people's belief systems than solely the domination of their information by a lying mass media. Everything Bush and the television neckties said seemed such obvious lies that we often thought a mere recitation of the truth of the situation in the Middle East would suffice to change a listener's mind.

It seemed so simple to us: wasn't this conflict part of a continuing pattern of imperial wars the U.S. employed to dominate Third World countries, in this case to control Persian Gulf oil production? But an enormous number wanted to believe in the war and a triumphant empire, and even when confronted with the facts which confounded the official version, they continued to mouth TV platitudes.

Questions To Answer

Hadn't the Republican Sen. Robert Dole of Kansas, said, "This war is about three letters, o-i-l"? Didn't Bush inner-circle memoranda published in the March 3, 1991 New York Times show that offensive military planning began as early as September 1990 and that a month later a timetable for launching an air war against Iraq in mid-January and a large-scale ground offensive for February had already been set? Didn't all this occur while Bush was claiming U.S. intent was solely to defend Saudi Arabia, and wasn't the planned troop build-up hidden from the American people until after the November elections? Didn't Landsat space satellite reconnaissance photos show no Iraqi troop movement near the Saudi border and the roads drifted with sand, giving lie to the whole basis for Operation Desert Shield?

Hadn't all of the preceding U.S. Secretaries of Defense, including the worst warmongers, and the last two heads of the Joint Chiefs of Staff and even the current one, Gen. Colin Powell, believed sanctions against Iraq would work if given enough time? Hadn't the Iraqi Gross National Product already been reduced by 50% by January due to the international sanctions, leaving the country with no foreign exchange?

Didn't the Pentagon admit to exaggerating the fighting capacity of the Iraqi army to justify the most intense bombing campaign in history? Weren't the 150,000 unwilling conscripts slaughtered in their bunkers more or less completely defenseless? Wasn't the war really won by 4,000 pilots who relentlessly bombed and destroyed Iraq and Kuwait and allowed the Army and Marines to walk past the remains of the aerial massacre?

Hasn't the United States consistently hidden Iraqi casualties including a predicted additional 175,000 children who will die as a result of famine and the collapse of the country's infrastructure due to the massive bombing? Didn't Bush through his calls for internal revolts against Hussein precipitate the Kurdish tragedy in the north of Iraq and that of the Shiites in the south? Didn't Bush and the U.S. generals allow the Iraqi Republican Guard to remain intact so they could repress the revolts which threatened to dismember Iraq? Didn't the war create five million refugees?

Didn't the war serve only to put the Emir of Kuwait back on his gold toilet seat while a vengeful pogrom is carried out against Palestinians and Bedouins in his country? Isn't Kuwait still a despicable, feudal nation that is little more than an oil company with a flag and a U.N. seat? Didn't Bush know Hussein had threatened to ignite the Kuwaiti oil wells as an act of war? Didn't the U.S. suppress even its own studies detailing the horrendous consequences of a war in the gulf both before and after the conflict, as even the staid Scientific American revealed in April?

Didn't Bush and his advisers want the war because they knew the U.S. would win handily with few casualties (although the figure of 700 total U.S. casualties incurred from all of Operation Desert Shield/ Storm is rarely heard)? Didn't Bush want the war so the U.S. would become the central player in the Middle East whereas had the sanctions been successful it would have been a joint United Nations effort denying a specific role for the U.S.? Didn't Bush want the war to keep the U.S. on a permanent military economy? Didn't Bush want the war to divert attention from his sagging popularity, his administration's scandals, the recession and the drift in popular will?

Well, Well, Isn't This All True?

Well, well, we ask them, isn't this all true? And, they answer, "Well, yes, but we had to stop him somewhere; he was another Hitler; we had a job to do," echoing the mindless phrases they heard on the last newscast. We are dealing here with a population not persuaded by facts or reason, but impelled by a twisted mass psychology of submission—people who by their exultation of the war's exploits exhibit themselves as loyal citizens of the empire, a community which worships at the feet of power.

Popular support for the war wasn't just dismaying, but also startling in the breadth of it. There had been the appearance, from a wide range of social indices, that a widespread malaise toward government and its auxiliary institutions of domination existed to the extent that one would have thought the war hysteria which prevailed would have been impossible to generate. The decline of trust in the major control mechanisms of this society, from Congress to the cops, from the media to business, suggested a population which knew it was being had and which was dramatically withdrawing from participation in official institutions. Such sentiments were voiced everywhere—in polls, on talk shows, in the streets.

This disaffection has been well chronicled for the last 15 years in these pages and recently in those of *Anarchy* by author and social theorist John Zerzan, whose articles listed everything from declining voter participation and student test scores to rising arson rates to indicate the potential for an authentic radical break from authoritarian society. His critics, including many of us at this newspaper, have always contended his statistics carried with them an ambivalent character suggesting that without a self-conscious redefinition of oneself as an opponent of this society and a vision of a liberated future, those fucking off at work and grouching about taxes could much more easily be re-organized back into the arms of the state. And, so it was.

An Embattled Minority/An Exotic Fringe

It was disheartening in the extreme to count up the opposing forces on an issue where the actions of the state and submission to it left little room for ambiguity, and realize that those of us who refused to be herded into the war hysteria were an embattled minority. In a society where reality is reduced to spectacular images on television, for all practical purposes, we were disappeared. The lying news commentators, the experts, consultants, military briefers and politicians presented themselves as representing almost everyone. The exotic fringe—those of us outside the official consensus—were given brief seconds on television as proof this was a democratic society, since no matter how minuscule the dissent, it was allotted its appropriate sound bite.

Although support for the war was indeed considerable, in reality (not the hyper-reality of television) there was substantial opposition to Bush. No matter what fraction of what poll we were counted in, our numbers totaled in the millions though an extraordinary effort was made to make sure when we were presented it was as marginalized sectors representing only the opinions of a few. In some polls, however, our numbers were reduced to zero, giving the impression that to stand outside of the consensus was to be virtually alone. Absent a community of support for one's ideas of dissent, the lone individual often has little psychic recourse other than to collapse into the mass.

Reaction to the control exerted over the mass media by the ruling class by people in the anti-war movement was often one of indignation. Implicit in their criticisms of the media's failure to present us "fairly" was an ignoring of the fundamental character of it: it is their media, set up for their purposes and it functioned exactly as intended. This, of course, was not lost on everyone by a long shot.

If anything, more people came out of the anti-war movement with a radicalized view of the official organs of bourgeois democracy—the Congress and the media in particular. For many, it came clearer into focus than ever that those institutions belong to the warlords and the landlords.

Never has it been more imperative to insure the existence of an independent terrain based on libertarian ideals which will nurture our ideas and culture and allow them to expand. Bush and the authoritarians who dominate this land are riding high now and they are not content with simply majority support. They want to drive us out of existence so not even a shred of resistance will remain to challenge the grotesque New World Order and its next horror show.

And let there be no mistake about it: the warlords and the powerful interests they serve are now on a frenzied free-for-all against all and any who desire social change or even to defend the already eroded conditions of their existence. The land and waters, basic living conditions, formal rights and free expression are all under a furious assault from the forces of the Brave New World Order. If the cliché “creeping fascism” ever made sense, now is the time.

These are grievous times when to maintain our basic humanity we must refocus and renew our opposition to Fortress America and the crushing empire it defends. We must do so for the future of the human community and the earth, but perhaps most of all we must do so for ourselves.

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<https://www.fifthestate.org/archive/337-late-summer-1991/post-war-postmortem>
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