

This isn't about peace. It's about democracy.

by Mike Ferner

Minutes after landing at JFK from a five-flight, 48-hour return from Afghanistan, good friends Bill and Georgia deposited me at a church in Manhattan where my travel mates, Eric Stoner and Kathy Kelly, had begun a report on our trip. They had the advantage of returning two days before. I was still getting oriented to time and place.

Eric powerfully described the conditions we experienced. With maps, Kathy explained the significance of Afghanistan's location in central Asia. The specter of "No Preparation" began to loom from the back of the church, mocking my fuzzy efforts to think of something they might have missed. With no insightful analysis or political profundities to add to their articulate descriptions, I opened my remarks with a guarantee to be brief and not drool on myself. The good congregates were not disappointed.

I thought to compare other refugee camps I'd seen in Afghanistan with ones I'd visited previously, expecting to state that "the one in Kabul was the worst I've ever seen." But as I mentally listed some examples, I quickly realized that the people living in the Kabul camp, miserable as it was, were a bit better off in some ways than those I'd witnessed in Iraq and Honduras.

Suddenly, I realized the point wasn't "which is the worst?" One place may have been a little better or a little worse than the next, but the point was their similarity -- similarity in condition, in demographics and in intent. In each case the most common folk, the poorest, the least to blame, the swarthy had the

misfortune of being in the way of U.S. Empire.

A few decades ago in Honduras, on a hot, dusty expanse just north of the border with Nicaragua, several thousand brown-skinned, young Nicaraguans lived in U.N. tents because Ronald Reagan had determined the Sandinista revolution in their country could not be allowed to survive. For several years the U.S. Congress went along. Although millions of U.S. citizens objected and hundreds of thousands demonstrated, our faux democracy could not stay Empire's heavy hand.

U.S. agribusiness and banking companies had too much at stake in Nicaragua. Neighboring countries, with similar riches at stake, could not be permitted to see a successful example of people standing up to Empire. Nor could people in countries around the globe, including our own, be allowed to witness such an example.

In Iraq, scattered in and around Baghdad, on dusty bits of land and in burned-out government buildings, tens of thousands of mostly young people struggled to survive because Empire determined it was time for Saddam Hussein to go and chose invasion as the means. Although millions of people in the U.S. and tens of millions across the Earth objected and demonstrated, once more our faux democracy could not restrain Empire.

U.S. energy corporations and other companies with ravenous appetites decided the time was ripe to have the U.S. military take by force what would otherwise remain under someone else's control. With typical arrogance, the U.S. government wanted to remind the nations

of the world that painful things happen to those who don't bend to Empire's will.

In Kabul alone, 70,000 people shiver in tarp-covered mud huts, choking and dying from polluted air and water because George Bush and Barack Obama masqueraded this as "the good war." Congress and many citizens went along for several years. Now, despite a change in that position by the majority of Americans, the camps continue to grow with each military operation that "keeps us safe from global terrorism."

On February 15, 2003, the day 10 million people around the world said "NO!" to the March 20 U.S. invasion of Iraq, I was in Baghdad writing a statement of international solidarity with a Brazilian sociologist and a British bus driver. As news of the global demonstrations reached us, the driver's face grew momentarily cheerful at word of nearly a million people gathering in London, but then his countenance turned grim. "Our government is still going to war. This isn't about peace, it's about democracy," he mourned.

And so we return to the too-familiar, difficult question of what to do? As one person put it recently, "I mean what do we *really* do to stop these wars?"

Few still believe the answer is taking warm clothing and hand-knit caps to the people in Kabul's camps -- although I took along an extra suitcase of just those things.

Few still believe that marching with placards past empty offices in the nation's capital is much of an answer -- although I participate in as many of those as I can.

Few believe that having hundreds arrested in Washington or in government offices back home will bring change – although it is certainly critical to keep alive the spirit of protest.

We are mightily inspired by popular uprisings, most recently in northern Africa where people are remembering the importance of taking to the streets – and staying there. But how do we move from a relative handful of committed believers, to emulating Tahrir Square in every nation's capital, to halting and dismembering Empire?

There may be more ways than one to get there, but this much is certain: we, the relative handful of committed believers, aren't going to get there on our own. Gleanings from history and my own experience tell me the best way is still found in Joe Hill's last words: "Don't mourn for me, organize!"

Yes, it is basic and not generally considered exciting – not like the dramatic, adrenalin-rush of getting arrested, or the satisfaction of belting out three minutes of righteous anger at a protest rally, or marching, banners flying, with thousands of other true believers. In fact, when I write or speak about the "O" word I get a sense of yawns stifled, watches surreptitiously examined and tongues held from shouting, "Tell us something new. We've tried that already." In truth, one or two people will make a point of saying they were glad to hear the organizing message, but often add how difficult it is to get people to do it.

We each know many dedicated, persistent, passionate, at times downright heroic activists. Movements don't get anywhere without them. But it's also true that we won't get where we need to go if activism is all we do.

At this point the question invariably arises, "What's the difference between activism and organizing?" Volumes more erudite than these scribbles have been written on the theory and practice of organizing, but let me offer a serviceable definition for discussion's sake.

Activism includes all of the activities mentioned above: speaking, marching, picketing, leafleting, writing, calling, hosting speakers, getting arrested – clearly important things to do and yes, it takes

methodical, patient work to do them successfully.

But in practice we work diligently with our usual comrades to put on a rally or a march or compose a statement or present an educational forum, sometimes doing a bang-up job getting out the word.

What we very rarely do is take the time to meet with the leaders and members of groups with whom we don't typically meet, but who are our natural allies. We need to learn from them, find out what their issues are, break bread, invite them to do the same with us. In other words, build relationships.

From this kind of patient, methodical work that takes us out of our cultural and philosophical comfort zones, we can learn more about building movements powerful enough to make the change required.

And what is that change? More solar panels and mass transit for environmentalists? Better playgrounds and cleaner streets for neighborhood activists? Better housing? Good jobs? Troops out of Iraq and Afghanistan? Well yes...all this and something more: a better life that we deserve and are capable of creating, on a planet that will sustain life long after we are gone.

That means something more than fixing the wrongs. It means making the rules, defining the terms, running the show -- in a word: governing ourselves.

I believe the messages of the Program on Corporations, Law and Democracy (POCLAD) and Move to Amend, arguing the case for a self-governing citizenry, make good sense, no matter the audience.

It is because our lives are governed by powerful elites that this better life for the many eludes us. Instead, people's lives are shaped by systems – economic, transportation, education, healthcare, agriculture, etc. – that make the most money for the people running them – to hell with what makes a better life for all. The wants of the few continue to trump the needs of the many...for now.

It is precisely when we learn how to gain the power to govern ourselves – not just the power to fix the wrongs – that we will be able to reorder these systems to serve the common interest and create a better life. And not coincidentally, it is when we

begin to take organizing seriously that we will begin this journey.

SHOULD THERE NOT BE AN ENDING THAT BRINGS US BACK TO AFGHANISTAN?

Mike Ferner is the former president of Veterans for Peace and works with the Program on Corporations, Law and Democracy.

A Publication of the PROGRAM ON CORPORATIONS, LAW & DEMOCRACY

By What Authority (ISSN: 524-1106) is published by the Program on Corporations, Law & Democracy. The title is English for *quo warranto*, a legal phrase that questions illegitimate exercise of privilege and power. We the people and our federal and state officials have long been giving giant business corporations illegitimate authority. Today, a minority directing giant corporations and backed by police, courts, and the military, define our culture, govern our nation, and plunder the earth.

By What Authority reflects an unabashed assertion of the right of the sovereign people to govern themselves.

POCLAD is a group of 11 people instigating democratic conversations and actions that contest the authority of corporations to govern. Our analysis evolves through historical and legal research, writing, public speaking, and working with organizations to develop new strategies that assert people's rights over property interests.

BWA is a tool for democracy proponents to rethink and reframe their work. To that end we encourage readers to engage us with comments, questions, and suggestions.

POCLAD
P.O. Box 246
South Yarmouth, MA 02664-0246
508-398-1145; 508-398-1552 (fax)
people@poclad.org; www.poclad.org

POCLAD is a project of the Jane Addams Peace Association

David Cobb, CA
Karen Coulter, OR
Greg Coleridge,* OH
Mike Ferner, OH
Dave Henson, CA
Ward Morehouse, MA
Lewis Pitts, NC
Jim Price, AL
Virginia Rasmussen,* NY
Kaitlin Sopoci-Belknap, CA
Mary Zepernick,* MA

*BWA editorial board
†BWA editor

Distribution policy: POCLAD welcomes all interested people to join our mailing list. Please consider an annual minimum contribution of \$25 to support POCLAD's ongoing work (or whatever you can afford).

Copyright 2009 by the Program on Corporations, Law and Democracy. The content of BWA has been copyrighted only to ensure that it is not appropriated by others. POCLAD encourages the noncommercial reproduction and widespread distribution of material in BWA without prior approval, provided the material is unchanged and attribution is given both to BWA and the author(s). Please send us two copies of any material so reproduced.