

And What Do We Do Now?

article and photos by Mike Ferner

Last month, they emptied the storage locker and took all the displays to individuals' homes. On Saturday, May 10, an immense funeral pyre consumed the 6,800 wooden tombstones.

Members of the Northwest Ohio Peace Coalition (NWOPC) have decided they will no longer mount their "Arlington Midwest" memorial to the Iraqi and Afghan civilians and American soldiers killed in over a decade of war and occupation.

It cost about \$1,000 a year to store the massive display, but mostly it's ending because for some time now, nobody with a highly visible acre of land has been willing to offer their property to set it up. Fact is, when you ask people on the street, just about everyone says the wars are over – except for a heartbreaking number who respond, "What war are you talking about?"

The second anniversary of the invasion of Iraq, March 19, 2005, saw the debut of NWOPC's Arlington Midwest, at the University of Toledo. Overnight, on a rolling campus hillside 1,678 tombstones appeared, each labeled with the name and rank of a soldier and the date and place where he or she died. Laid out on a precise grid like the tombstones in Arlington National Cemetery, the wooden markers were arranged by state and within each state by dates of death.

It quickly became a major task to make enough markers to keep up with the hundreds and then thousands of names added to the "Killed in Action" lists from Iraq and Afghanistan.



No one knows for sure, but the hours the activists spent scrounging materials, painting, assembling, loading, transporting, setting up, staffing, taking down, re-loading, re-transporting, re-painting and storing the tombstones without a doubt numbered in the many thousands. For over eight years, Arlington Midwest was NWOPC's primary focus.

After "peace candidate" Obama took office in 2009, a growing portion of Arlington Midwest's tombstones wore black ribbons for the soldiers killed on his watch: 1,923 to date. A separate section was reserved for those who silenced their war-induced demons by killing themselves. And wherever it went, the exhibit included a large circle of posts, escalating in height,

listing the names of thousands of murdered Iraqi and Afghan civilians, even though the names were only a small fraction of the total.

Volunteers took unpaid time from work or vacation days to set up the memorial at the University of Toledo, Notre Dame, Kent State, Detroit's Tiger Stadium, churches and convents, county courthouses and the grounds of the Washington Monument in the nation's capital.

Family members of the dead would travel 100 miles and more to see the exhibit, place a flower or photo on a loved one's marker and water the ground with their tears. People in the millions saw the memorial via news media.

As Jeff Zenz, a Unit Control Operator at a local electric plant and one of the organizers of Arlington Midwest, said, "It was a protest of the human cost of war...a massive re-creation of Arlington cemetery on college campuses, church yards, and along highways, meant to put that cost in the face of folks, unavoidably. A lot of debates, arguments and conversations took place that wouldn't have without the draw of Arlington Midwest."

In addition to the sunburn, frostbite, sweat, frustration, blood and tears required to put the human cost of war "in the face of folks, unavoidably," many of the volunteers gained a greater sense of accomplishment, purpose and camaraderie than they'd

ever known or may ever experience again.

Indeed, just as the title of Chris Hedges' book, "War Is A Force That Gives Us Meaning," described how war energizes whole nations, one could also observe that "antiwar" was a force that gave meaning and a sense of purpose to a whole host of caring, dedicated campaigners across America.



But as more than one of them has asked, "...and what do we do now?"

Now that most people perceive the wars in Iraq and Afghanistan to be over, will this legion of tenacious, tireless citizens from backwoods, big cities and everything in between, redirect their energies and skills, perhaps to gain reparations for those harmed by the war, or to address concerns on the home front like the environment, healthcare, homeless veterans or human rights?

As a whole generation did 40 years ago when the war in Viet Nam finally ended, many people will again search their souls to discover the best way to keep on working for a better world and just as importantly, how to restore the deep sense of purpose they gained with their comrades by publicly opposing war.

The young among these stout souls will vow "never again." The old will recall saying those words long ago, only to have their hearts broken many times since.

So where can we invest our limited time, passion and skills to greatest advantage? How can we maintain a vibrant sense of purpose? How can we do more than just react to what the Empire throws at us? How can we strike at the very roots of war and poverty and injustice, not just at the branches, which forever spring anew?

Asking the same things two generations ago, I had no answers. Even having seen war's carnage first hand as a Navy corpsman I had only questions, just like so many others.

Initially I joined the environmental movement opposing nuclear power plants, then union organizing and opposing our proxy war in Central America, followed by a stint in public office that provided openings to demand we rebuild our cities with the "peace dividend" expected at the end of the Cold War. Eventually and to my utter revulsion, I had to join another antiwar movement.

But today, unlike the period following the war in Viet Nam, there is a movement that has a clear, fundamental goal that addresses these questions and a strategy to achieve it: to greatly expand democracy so that we the people, not corporations, do the governing; so our elections aren't sold to the highest bidder; so private interests can't determine national policy in healthcare or education or energy...or war.

What I'm talking about is MoveToAmend.org, a national grassroots campaign to amend the U.S. Constitution to remove corporate money from elections and end the insane practice of giving the legal fictions we call corporations the same constitutional rights as real human beings.

Of course we can continue doing what's comfortable – call it serial activism – and wage campaigns against drones, the F-35 fighter, the

rush to boil the oceans, the bankrupt policies in education, healthcare and criminal justice...or we can step back for a moment, take a deep breath and ask our heart of hearts what can we do that will make a truly essential difference so we can achieve a government that serves Us instead of Empire for a change.

Without a doubt we need fewer weapons, more renewable energy, better education, health care and criminal justice systems. But ask this key question: will we get any of those things without more democracy?

If we choose to work for greater democracy, we will begin to see the public interest prevail over the private. Our own government will eventually cease to be the biggest barrier to a better life because it will be owned by us and not by corporations and billionaires.

Human nature being what it is, fires will always break out and those dangers most surely deserve some of our time and energy. But if all we do is fight fires and react to Empire's evils then that is truly all we will ever do.



A particular point about Move to Amend deserves special mention here.

Across great swaths of the U.S., the peace movement or the progressive movement, as loosely defined, looks much like a loaf of Wonder Bread – maybe with a slice of whole wheat or

pumpnickel here and there, but by and large it's white bread. Move to Amend has addressed that shortcoming from the outset. Its leadership and its materials send the clear message that we won't get anywhere unless we get there together; that we have to stop dividing and start combining the most powerful forces in society working for radical change. That sounds to me like people who believe it's time we start playing offense.

Personally, I've been a chump on defense long enough and I'd like to start winning for a change. Move to Amend is the only game I know of with a vision to change the rules of the game so that "winning" actually means we start running the show, not just rejoicing that we've stopped a weapons system or elected Tweedledum instead of Tweedledummer.

This is my hope and my invitation to each of my fellow laborers in the peace movement when you start thinking about "what's next?"

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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.

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