

Whatever Happened to the Antiwar Left?

Now, as we face the prospect of new global conflict, it is everyone else's turn to say "Not In Our Name."

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On Feb. 15, 2003, 14 million people poured into the streets of 800 cities worldwide to oppose the U.S.-led invasion of Iraq. It was a preemptive response to the preemptive war hatched by Bush administration, and according to the Guinness Book of World Records, it was [the largest protest ever in human history](#). Yet the 2003 protest was also a swan song of sorts: the movement that gave rise to it is now all but defunct—namely, the antiwar left.

Two decades later, as U.S. hawks press for relentless escalation against nuclear Russia, and as European leaders unfailingly toe Washington's line, there is no major movement of the left to channel dissent. Nor are there commanding antiwar figures comparable in stature to the likes of Archbishop Desmond Tutu and Labour M.P. Tony Benn, who spoke for the movement in 2003. Old antiwar groups, like the ANSWER Coalition, are either silent or struggling to be heard.

Some two-dozen House progressives on Monday called for diplomacy, but antiwar leftists who championed the likes of Sen. Bernie Sanders and The Squad must surely be disappointed, as the few elected socialists on Capitol Hill dutifully [voted "Yes"](#) on one

massive Ukraine military-aid package after another. Some veteran left-of-center restrainers, meanwhile, such as former Ploughshares Fund boss Joe Cirincione, sound downright Kristolian, what with the calls to smoke out a [“pro-Putin axis.”](#)

The post-9/11 atmosphere of pro-war conformity has returned—only, instead of dour “security moms,” it’s enforced by irony bros with Ukraine flags and pronouns in their bios. As I noted in these pages soon after Russia’s invasion of Ukraine, the same simplistic moral binaries that had been used to demand obeisance to the Covid regime were transferred to the war. Suddenly, progressives who were supposed to be post-nationalist became the most ardent nationalists, prepared to ignore even the most unsavory aspects of Ukrainian nationalism. Meanwhile, the street theatrics that used to be hallmarks of left-wing antiwar agitation are now used to [promote no-fly zones](#) (i.e., World War III).

Were leftists always this uncritical of the claims of NATO and the military-industrial complex? Was the early post-9/11 era a grand hallucination? What changed? The answer proffered by defenders of the progressive status quo is that there has been no change at all. The left was right to oppose America’s unjustified wars after 9/11, just as it is right to oppose Russia’s war of aggression today. *Sancta simplicitas!*

But this is painfully glib. A progressive can condemn the Kremlin’s invasion of Ukraine without signing up for the everything-but-troops response adopted by hawks in Washington and London. Yet that is exactly what many on the left have signed up for. Flooding Europe with weapons, fighting Moscow to the last Ukrainian, contemplating another endless war, fantasizing about inflicting a “strategic defeat” on the Russians, potentially at the cost of a nuclear exchange—all this runs contrary to progressive principle, if anti-imperialism and anti-militarism remain progressive principles.

The real answer lies elsewhere. Three explanatory factors stand out:

The first is the shifting nature of the American and Western way of war. As Yale Law School’s Samuel Moyn documented in his illuminating book *Humane*, published last year, precisely by seeking to bring war within the ambit of liberal norms, the United States has made it possible to wage more war with a clean conscience. To this fact we might add the shift toward proxy wars fought by foreign clients and mercenaries, rather than “our boys (and girls).” This has removed the domestic sting of armed conflict—again, making it easier than ever to call for escalation without feeling unduly bothered by the thought of unclean hands.

Second, there is cultural progressives’ conquest of America’s security apparatus (along with most other elite institutions). It is true that the business end of American empire has been “woke” for a very long time—that is, it has always reflected the liberal cultural preferences of U.S. elites, [as the writer River Page has brilliantly argued](#). Still, there is something genuinely novel about our moment, when the CIA publishes recruitment videos touting intersectional spooks with Latinx grievance politics and anxiety disorders worn as badges of honor. The counterculture of yesteryear has fully come to dominate the culture, but this has come at a price for old-left commitments. You take over the Pentagon, and you own the thing; that means you operate it, and operating it means waging war.

And whom do you wage war against? Here, we come to the third factor: the recasting of non-Western powers like Russia and China as reactionary forces to be stamped out by U.S.

and Western power. Whatever remained of the Vietnam left's cynicism about the dark undercurrents of American power in relation to the non-Western world is now gone. The world "out there" is bestrode by avatars of patriarchy and repression, who [impose modesty on women](#), [restrict reproductive freedom](#), and [limit LGBTQ representation](#). Similar elements are resurgent back home. Progressives are confronted with a single battle line: the Dnieper flowing into the Potomac, and enemies foreign and domestic blurring into each other.

Against these belligerent and apocalyptic tendencies, it is up to the rest of us, including the remnants of the old left, to resist the logic of total ideological war, of conflicts waged to advance simplistic moral binaries. In doing so, we might take up one of the great slogans of the 2003 protest: "Not In Our Name."

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Featured image: Brendan Bell-Taylor, Action Corps Idaho organizer, and Laura Burton protest the war on Yemen in front of the Idaho State Capitol, in Boise, on January 25, 2021, as part of a Global Day of Action: World Says No to War on Yemen. Sen. Jim Risch, U.S. senator from Idaho, is the top Republican on the Senate Foreign Relations Committee. [Source: twitter.com]

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