

# A Strategic Blind Spot for Progressives

By Rick Jahnkow

Advocates of progressive social change in this country are asking important questions about possible directions to follow after the 2008 election. For the peace movement, this question is particularly challenging because, while there is good reason to celebrate the defeat of the Republican Party and the election of the first African American president, there is also a real danger that Obama's victory will undercut anti-war protest if he doesn't move quickly to end the Bush administration's two wars.

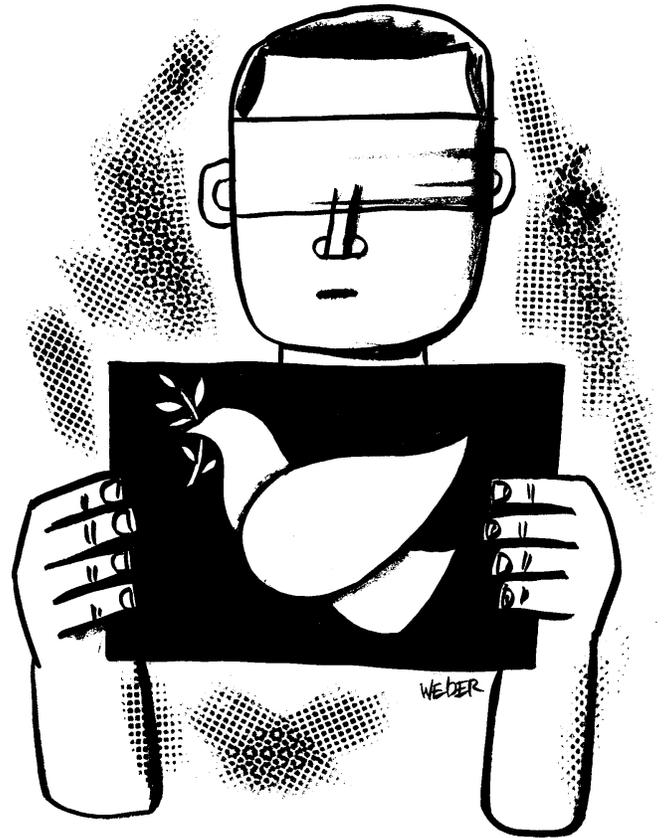
Many liberals might feel overly confident about the degree of change that is coming and decide that the new administration deserves to be given breathing space. It would then become much harder to mobilize opposition if Obama made good on his promise to shift the emphasis on military action from Iraq to Afghanistan.

Max Elbaum comments on this likely problem in the November 30, 2008, issue of *War Times/Tiempo de Guerras*:

On the positive side, conditions are more favorable than before to spread and consolidate sentiment that has gained ground as the public's "common sense" . . . At the same time, this new set of circumstances is likely to make it difficult for the antiwar movement to demonstrate significant clout and turn sentiment into mass action when acting on its own.

He goes on to predict that anti-war demonstrations would be smaller than in the past and that "new rounds of antiwar education and organizing constituency-by-constituency will be required before the streets can again be filled."

Cross-constituency organizing may be the peace movement's best hope for avoiding severe irrelevancy in the near future. Unfortunately, it also has always been a difficult challenge for the peace movement, in part because its membership has traditionally come from a disproportionately white, college-educated, professional-class base. To stimulate anti-war activism beyond this relatively privileged demographic, Elbaum and others have correctly urged the peace movement to broaden its scope and find ways to actively support other social movements, especially those whose constituencies are greatly victimized by the economic and discriminatory aspects of



war and militarism. It's not just a politically correct strategy, it's a necessary one if the peace movement wants to become a more relevant, effective and sustainable force.

In addition to reaching out to other movements, there is another level of strategic thinking that is badly needed and is key to all grass-roots movement building, yet it has generally been ignored by the peace movement and most other progressive organizations. Essentially, it boils down to this: Peace and other progressive movement organizations in the U.S. are usually quick to engage in activities to mobilize people, such as electoral campaigns, legislative lobbying, and street protests. But most of them have a blind spot when it comes to understanding and affecting the basic long-term factors, like the educational system, that shape the general public's perception of issues and its willingness to embrace change.

Failure to include this level of strategic thinking makes it difficult for a movement to develop a proactive plan to grow its base and relegates it to relying on unpredictable events, usually crises, to build public support. Over time, this approach severely limits a movement's effectiveness and sustainability, and it also creates an opening for those on the opposing side of an issue to proactively step in with a long-term strategy that will give them the upper hand.

## The Impact of Basic Education on Social Change

Most people think that individuals form their political opinions as adults. But actually, the cultural views and beliefs that shape political choices are set at a much younger age through the process of socialization. Institutions responsible for this process include the family, religious organizations, mass media, peer groups and others.

One of the most important institutions of socialization is the educational system. It exerts an extremely powerful influence because of the large amount of time that young people spend in the school environment during their peak formative years, and because enormous pressure is placed on students to internalize the lessons and information imparted there. Much of that information is designed to cultivate a particular perspective on history and human relationships, including biases that are later relevant when children grow up and become part of the political consensus on which governments depend. Some of them also carry the early lessons they've learned into careers with the media and other influential institutions, making socialization a circular process.

Given the central role that schools have in shaping the perspectives and behavior of young people — and thus the political consensus of the country — it is understandable why religious conservatives have traditionally put a high priority on influencing school board elections and school curricula, especially with regard to such issues as sex education and the teaching of evolution. Their goal has been to ensure that their particular value system is reflected in learning content, and thus exert an influence over the social and political environment. Corporations have been pursuing a similar strategy by using partnerships and monopolistic product contracts with schools that permit them to promote consumerism and establish early brand loyalty among young people.

Despite the general rightward drift that this ongoing effort by conservative forces can stimulate, there has been no equal, corresponding effort by progressive organizations to provide a counter-balance. It is not surprising, then, that past gains around issues like reproductive rights, racial tolerance and economic justice in this country are sometimes reversed or require continuous struggle.

### Selling Militarism, K-12

There is another entity investing itself in schools that presents an even greater threat to progressive social change movements and therefore deserves their serious attention: the U.S. military.

In 1978, after the Pentagon had been forced by the anti-Vietnam War movement to give up con-

scription, an interesting statement was made by Thomas Carr, the Pentagon's then-Director of Defense Education. Carr said that in the future, with the involvement of a large proportion of young people with military service, the military would "become a major instrument for youth socialization — assuming a large portion of the role once dominated by the family, the church, the school and civilian work setting."

It's important to understand the context for Carr's statement. At the time, he was in a good position to know something about the Pentagon's plans for coping with the serious challenges it faced in the post-Vietnam climate. The popularity of the military as a career was at a low point, and the government could no longer simply draft cannon fodder for its wars. To restore its image and fill its ranks, the military was about to mount aggressive recruiting and mass marketing campaigns designed to popularize the idea of soldiering.

Eventually, with significant increases in recruitment funding and the help of some of the most experienced advertising firms, the effort to reach out to and influence young people grew steadily in sophistication and scope. As it did, Thomas Carr's prediction began to come true without even requiring a large number of young people to actually join the military.

The effort to militarize youth has advanced so far that today, some 30 years later, military training programs are indoctrinating half a million students who attend daily Jr. ROTC classes in approximately 3000 secondary schools. Many of these campuses include rifle ranges where students learn to shoot with pellet guns, in stark contrast to zero-tolerance for weapons policies. A few districts have gone so far as to begin converting some of their public high schools into actual military academies (Chicago leads the nation with six).

The lessons students are taught in Jr. ROTC emphasize treating each other according to military ranks, studying "followership," and learning obedience to all authority. After reading many of the Jr. ROTC textbooks, I can attest that they also provide a heavy dose of edited history and selective civics lessons, spun with a conservative military bias. Martin Luther King, Jr., for example, is mentioned as a civil rights advocate, but nothing is said about his uncompromising opposition to all violence and war. And students are told the U.S. went to war with Spain in 1898 to free Cuba from Spanish rule, ignoring the fact that our goal was to bring Cuba into our own exploitive sphere of influence and take over as ruler of the Philippines, Guam and Puerto Rico.

At lower grade levels, programs like the Young Marines are teaching thousands of children in elementary and middle schools to march and follow

commands. Militaristic grooming is also aided by an expanding network of military/school partnerships, through which groups of children are sometimes taken on field trips to military bases and ships.

Because of legislative intervention by the U.S. Congress and an affirming decision by the U.S. Supreme Court, secondary schools and colleges have been forced to give military recruiters access to students and campuses, thereby eroding local educational autonomy and the important principle of civilian rule. But even when it's not mandatory, most secondary schools have been willing to grant special access privileges to the military. For example, approximately 14,000 high schools now use the military's enlistment screening test, the ASVAB, as their method of vocational aptitude testing. Schools have a right to block recruiter access to the highly personal information gathered via the ASVAB, but according to Dept. of Defense statistics, they fail to do so for 90% of the 600,000 students who take the test each year.

These are a few examples of how youths have been the target of militarism inside our public school system, but outside the school environment there are equally alarming patterns. For instance, the military is now licensing large department store chains, like Sears, to mass-market clothing with official military logos. The Army has spent millions developing and distributing free computer gaming software, and now it is experimenting with a \$12-million virtual warfare simulator near Philadelphia. Essentially a recruiting device the size of three basketball courts, this "Army Experience Center" is open to members of the public as young as age 13.

## Dangerous Parallels

One San Diego Indymedia writer, Rocky Neptun, has recently looked at similarities between the militarization of education in Nazi Germany and the trend in U.S. schools. Considering the type of lessons taught by Jr. ROTC and the exposure it gives students to weapons training, it's startling to read comments that Neptun found from German General Hellmuth Stellrecht, like the following taken from a 1937 lecture (emphasis added):

All that has been learned serves, from a military point of view, nothing but to get close to the enemy and to bring arms into effect. The entire education and training remains without value if it does not lead to the full effect of the weapon against the enemy. All training therefore culminates in training in shooting. It cannot be emphasized enough and because shooting is a matter of practice one cannot start too early. **In the course of years we want to**

**achieve that a gun feels just as natural in the hands of a German boy as a pen.** It is a strange state of mind in a nation if, through years, many hours every day are spent in practicing penmanship and grammatical writing but not a single hour in practice-shooting. Liberalism put the following slogan above school doors: "Knowledge is power". We, on the other hand, have found . . . that the power of a nation, in the last analysis, always rests on its arms and on those who know how to handle them.

**He who cannot give orders to himself, must get used to obeying the orders of others** and to feel the obligation [to do so] so strongly that even at the most dangerous moment it does not fail. It is a fine thing when a man of 20 learns to obey unconditionally but it is much better when the boy of ten starts to put his own wishes aside, to renounce, to give in, and to serve the will of the community.

Interestingly, as the director of military education during the Nazi regime, Stellrecht would have been the counterpart of Director of Defense Education Carr, who 40 years later predicted that the U.S. military would take over "a large portion of the role once dominated by the family, the church, the school and civilian work setting."

Given the part that militarized education played in the Nazi effort to socialize and manipulate German youth for the Third Reich, one would think that any remotely similar approach would be quickly rejected here. It was, after all, early leaders of this country who repeatedly spoke against allowing the military establishment to extend its influence into civilian affairs, because military values, they understood, directly conflicted with democratic values. Samuel Adams, for example, warned in 1768 that "where military power is introduced, military maxims are propagated and adopted which are inconsistent with and must soon eradicate every idea of civil government."

Unfortunately, while the process of youth militarization in the U.S. has now been visibly detectable for three decades, there has been no serious national debate on the issue. A small number of grassroots organizations have been working since the 1980s to contest the military's growing presence in schools, and current U.S. wars have stimulated heightened awareness of aggressive recruiting, but the overall trend of school and youth militarization is getting relatively little national attention. Even the U.S. peace movement has failed to make it a primary focus for protest.

## The Window is Open — For Now

When the U.S. war in Vietnam finally came to an end, many of us who had been protesting the war could not imagine that such a thing would ever happen again. No one, we assumed, would fall for the same pattern of government lying to justify a war, and the government's fear of the so-called Vietnam Syndrome would discourage military aggression in the future. As later events proved, those of us who believed this were obviously mistaken, in part because we underestimated what it would take to bring about genuine change to the U.S.

When many people shifted their attention to other issues after the Vietnam War, or simply dropped out of political activism, the conservative forces that had lost ground during the upheaval of the 1960s and '70s, including the Pentagon, adopted a

relatively quiet, values-based strategy to gradually rebuild their influence and political power. The result was resurgent militarism, along with 28 years of destructive policies under Presidents Reagan through Bush #2.

The challenge for us today is to not repeat the mistake of being lulled by a momentary promise of change. We have to recognize that history will keep recurring if we don't move beyond the short-term strategies of the past. Yes, we need to be ready to protest when legislators and the Obama administration don't live up to our expectations, but we also need to give a high priority to addressing the socialization process that underlies the social and political climate. Toward that end, one of the most important immediate goals to pursue is the demilitarization of our schools.

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