



**Notes Toward More Powerful Organizing:  
Pitfalls and Potential in Counter-recruitment Organizing  
Matt Guynn**

It's not necessary to go to Washington for a protest to significantly engage key issues related to the War on Terrorism. Try going to a local coffee shop or any other public place where you can strike up a conversation with youth or young adults about the choices and paths that the young people in your community see in front of them.

I tried this recently, when I began talking with a camouflage-fatigued young man next to me in the airport. He was in his third year in the US Army, about to be shipped to Iraq next week. "Why did you join?" "My town (in central Oregon) was boring." The refrain from young people in many communities across the United States is that there is nothing to do: Nowhere to get a job (or a job that anyone wants). Little help available for education. Few paths toward a life of meaning and wellbeing. Too little accompaniment, mentorship or assistance.

Military recruiters walk onto this scene offering what seem to be easy steps toward job training, adventure, education, and personal fulfillment – toward goals that are often held by young people across the country. Lacking non-military options for accomplishing life goals, and promised the sky by their recruiters, young men and women from across the country are shipping out to Ft. Bragg and Ft. Benning and from there to Karbala and Baghdad.

In January 2008, the National Network Opposing the Militarization of Youth<sup>1</sup> reports ninety-seven distinct groups across the United States and Puerto Rico that are working to resist military recruitment and generate positive alternatives for youth, commonly called the "counter-recruitment," "truth-in-recruiting," or "positive alternatives to the military" movement.

I write as a participant-observer in the counter-recruitment movement, in my role as coordinator of peace witness for On Earth Peace, a Church of the Brethren peace education and action agency. Since early 2005, On Earth Peace has specifically committed itself to capacity-building for the counter-recruitment movement. Capacity-building means that we invite and support organizers to get involved, *and* that we create opportunities for organizers to grow and reflect on their work so they can do it more effectively. We support and nurture organizers through one-on-one support calls, providing general orientation to the movement and strategy consultation, and most importantly, through regular national networking calls which incorporate theological reflection, reflection on lessons learned, and training in strategy perspectives.

I have a concern that counter-recruitment activists learn from our experience in order to grow and accomplish the large tasks that stand before us. Operating out of habit (activist habit, cultural habit), often limits our ability to powerfully address the vexing social problems before us. I see the counter-recruitment movement's long-term potential to be

the transformation of communities into vibrant places where people can find support, salary, and meaning.

This article provides brief overviews of the mechanisms recruiters use to get access to young people, groups of people involved and some core approaches of the movement, in addition to identifying some pitfalls and potentials related to counter-recruitment organizing. It points toward a broader framework for nonviolent social transformation with regard to counter-recruitment organizing, moving up a level from a focus on specific resistance tactics and toward a broader perspective which holds a vision for community change.

In its most effective role, the counter-recruitment movement can both *resist* militarism and military recruitment and *build* alternative paths for young people who might be drawn to the military. When less effective, movement organizers remain trapped in their group's age or racial/ethnic groups of origin, or get stuck vilifying their opponents, or, lacking the commitment or skills to engage underlying issues, remain at a surface level, decrying symptoms and failing to make a case for addressing underlying conditions.

Two older gentlemen were in the crowd at an evening Bible study in a community congregation in the Puerto Rican mountain community where I was speaking. One was a veteran from the Korean War, the other a veteran of Vietnam. As we described On Earth Peace's work with ministries to support veterans returning from war and with young people considering the military, they became active and engaged in the conversation. "I didn't know any other alternative at the time." "It was the clearest path for a young man from the mountains." "The effects of war have lasted forever."

Two days before, two younger men, had participated in a workshop we had led at another congregation nearer the Puerto Rican coast. Francisco (name has been changed), in his thirties, shared that after a brief stint with a corporation hadn't panned out, and seeing few other options for work and salary on the horizon, he had signed up for the US Army. After four years in Guantanamo and Iraq, including active combat tours, he withdrew from the service, staying home after a weekend pass, and seeking assistance to renounce his military commitment from his church denomination's office in Washington, DC.

The second, a younger friend of his, José (name changed), in his mid-twenties, was the highest elected official in his congregation. José was drawn to the military by their promises of scholarships and job training. He had been promised a food service position. But after Francisco's experience in the armed forces, Francisco helped José, whom he knew through the church community, to see the realities underlying the enlistment contract that he was promised. Francisco's accompaniment led to José withdrawing from the Delayed Enlistment Program. Francisco worked with José and his recruiters to ensure that his withdrawal was processed completely and helped him interpret the choice he was making.

These men and many young women and men like them exist in real contexts of economic opportunity or lack thereof, availability or lack of educational access, job training, travel, adventure, honor, a salary. Keeping the specific conditions at the forefront helps to maintain awareness of some of the terrain through which counter-recruitment organizing navigates. Young men and women, discouraged because of lack of opportunity or clear paths for success, are drawn toward a military recruiting machine, which seems to be the biggest job provider in many communities.

I offer these anecdotes to help ground the discussion in the real experiences of veterans and young people attracted to the military. It is these individuals and their communities

whom any counter-recruitment movement needs to support and serve; these are the real people that the counter-recruitment movement needs to connect with in order to accomplish its promise.

Too often the movement remains fixated on the military's entry points, resisting the five main mechanisms that the recruiters use (Table 1), while failing to step up to the challenge of addressing the underlying conditions that create success for recruiters.

<b>Table 1. Five Key Mechanisms of Military Recruitment.</b> <b>From <i>Before You Enlist And After You Say No, AFSC'S Counter-recruitment Training Manual</i>, Hannah Strange and Daniel Hunter, Philadelphia: American Friends Service Committee, 2006), 74-75.</b>	
<b>School Visits</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Depending on the school system, recruiters can come to schools anywhere from once a year to every day.</li> <li>Recruiters staff tables in cafeterias, run extracurricular activities, make classroom presentations, host assemblies, get recruiting vans to come to school and set up interactive displays.</li> </ul>
<b>JROTC</b> Junior Reserve Officer Training Corps	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Established by Congress in 1916 to develop citizenship and responsibility in young people</li> <li>According to Department of Defense testimony before Congress, approximately 40 percent of those who graduate from JROTC eventually join the military.</li> </ul>
<b>ASVAB</b> Armed Services Vocational Aptitude Battery	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>ASVAB is the admissions and placement test for the U.S. military. Though designed to help place new military recruits in their military jobs, it is administered in high schools (often mandatory) as career placement testing.</li> <li>The military uses ASVAB to do targeted recruitment of students in the 11th or 12th grade who meet minimum standards.</li> <li>Recruiters consider the ASVAB to be a helpful tool in streamlining the recruitment process. By using school time, they find qualified recruits, saving themselves time and money.</li> </ul>
<b>JAMRS</b> Joint Advertising Market Research & Studies	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Central database of personal information of 30 million U.S. residents who are 16-25 years of age.</li> <li>Provides recruiters with young people's names, addresses, email addresses, cell phone numbers, ethnicities, social security numbers and areas of study.</li> <li>Designed to "help bolster the effectiveness of all the Services' recruiting and retention efforts." (<a href="http://www.jamrs.org">www.jamrs.org</a>)</li> <li>Conducts market research on attitudes towards enlistment.</li> </ul>

These mechanisms of recruitment are being responded to by a wide variety of citizens and community members. Here are examples of some of the groups involved:

- Impacted/ recruited youth of many racial and ethnic backgrounds, urban and rural, from California to Connecticut, who resist the recruiters that are a daily presence in their schools, either by ignoring them or with active rebellion such as walkouts, or organizing their fellow students to “opt out” of military data collection;
- Parents of middle and high school students who encourage their children to think twice about what recruiters promise;
- Members of the military who refuse to fight by withdrawing after partial service or by renouncing their enlistment, then often speak out or counsel other young people considering service;
- Conscientious objectors from the World War Two, Korea, and Vietnam eras who continue decades of persistent effort to bring a word of peace in their communities through outreach about conscientious objection and current military recruitment myths and facts;
- Church folk and other people of faith and conscience across the country concerned about the future of youth in their communities, who reach out to youth in terms of either moral formation as conscientious objectors or as mentors and allies for young people finding the life they dream about;
- College students who are directly impacted by recruitment and attempting to shut recruiters out of their own campuses, or who are reaching out to high school youth in their communities to assist with resisting recruiters and generating alternatives; and
- Parent-Teacher Associations and others concerned about recruiters’ presence in school hallways and cafeterias, who limit recruiter access to their children by taking action at the school, district, or city council level.

The counter-recruitment movement has been a channel for many people dissatisfied with the George W. Bush administration’s approach to the War on Terrorism and specifically the wars in Iraq and Afghanistan. It has captured the imagination of both long-time peace activists who are using it as a new expression of long-standing concerns about peace and militarism, as well as connecting with the felt needs of impacted youth and communities who may not identify as peace activists but are resisting recruitment as a way to protect their communities.

**Pitfalls, potentials and a broader strategy**

Whether movement activists have been involved longer-term or are just starting, there are several key pitfalls into which the counter-recruitment movement sometimes falls. (Incidentally, these pitfalls are also common in broader progressive and peace movement organizing.) Each pitfall has an attendant potential which could help the movement grow and increase its effectiveness. Please review these several pitfalls and potentials in chart form, before moving to the broader discussion of them in the context of nonviolent methodology.

**Table 2. Pitfalls and Potentials of Counter-recruitment Organizing**

PITFALL	POTENTIALS
Isolate within own age, class, or culture groups	Form intergenerational, multi-racial and multi-class coalitions
Focus activity within current activist circles	Activate multiple social sectors (education, government, youth, religious communities, nonprofit, business, women and minority groups)

Present a largely “anti” or “negative” message which focuses mostly on raising awareness about the evils of system	Frame concern as a problem that various segments of the community can join together to solve. For example, “Access to jobs and educational opportunities.” “Meaningful and well-paid employment without having to go to war.” “Positive life paths for every young person in our community.”
Focus only on resisting immediate symptoms (for example, NLCB/ Opt Out, School Visits, ASVAB, JROTC, JAMRS)	Use symptoms or surface issues as entry points for engaging long-term needs of communities (economic opportunity, hopeful future, education and job training), engaging the underlying issues of poverty, racism, and justice

Examining these specific pitfalls and potentials presented in brief form above comes in the context of moving from a reactive activism of protest toward a proactive activism which accepts the challenge to work at the roots of social problems. What follows are several reflections and recommendations related to making counter-recruitment organizing more effective and powerful.

**1) Accept the challenge to move beyond habit and reflex to discipline and focus.**

The counter-recruitment movement runs the risk of falling short of its potential by staying safe in habitual patterns and “anti/negative” practices rather than growing to address root community needs and act for significant and long-term social transformation. Growing toward effective organizing will require discipline, focus, strategy, and continual personal and spiritual growth. It will benefit from learning from and further honing the tools and methodologies for nonviolent struggle that have been developed in the past.

Don’t get me wrong: It is *normal* to work with folks who look, talk or think like us. It’s *normal* to see clearly the critique of society (which generates righteous indignation and anger), rather than focusing on lifting up a catalyzing vision that will engage broader sectors of society in your initiative. It’s *normal* to want to stop the bad things we see (recruiter presence in schools, for example). All these “pitfalls” are normal and to be expected. They just won’t help develop a broad base in order to activate communities for proactive social change and long-term impacts.

**2) Create a frame that elicits support and engagement from your community.** A proactive nonviolent strategy involves an initial framing of the problem in a way that various sectors of the community can join your initiative and effort. This means creating a “frame” or a statement of the problem that the community is experiencing and/or the goal to achieve, in a way that invokes the interest and participation of people far beyond current “activist” circles<sup>2</sup>.

Many counter-recruitment activities publicly lead out with a focus on resistance against military recruiters. Sample ways of describing the goal or purpose of activities in this vein, for example, might include, “Shutting down the recruiting center,” or “Ending JROTC.”

Organizing which is primarily anti/negative organizing can feel personally cathartic or satisfying. But it is a tempting misstep to see the recruiters and recruitment activities themselves as the central problem. So you shut down the recruiting center for a day. Then what? So you end the JROTC program in your school system. How have you helped the young people it was serving to meet their needs via alternative routes? Recruiters and their practices are a symptom of underlying needs produced by economic injustice, racism, and lack of opportunity.

If activists experiment with this perspective that military recruiters are not themselves the problem, but rather a symptom of underlying conditions (for example, poverty, racism, community stagnation, lack of support for young people), we are led along the track to framing the problem in different ways. For example, “access to jobs and educational opportunities,” or “meaningful and well-paid employment without having to go to war,” or “helping our youth get a good education without having to kill or be killed.”

This “positive alternatives for young people” approach is already strongly present in the counter-recruitment movement. Pamphlets and print resources are now proliferating which point toward scholarship programs and vocational discernment<sup>3</sup>. But these print resources are only one tactic within a comprehensive initiative to help young people find their preferred futures without going into the military, and are not sufficient by themselves. They need to be integrated into a broader framing of the core problem, which leads to specific initiatives to accompany and assist young people to actually get where they want to go.

Beginning from a frame such as “access to jobs and educational opportunities,” leads activists down a path that is very different from negative campaigns that are focused personally on recruiters or school administrators. It will require activists to help foment the process of producing significant solutions to shared community problems.

**3) Use a campaign approach rather than scatter-shot activities.** What is the sequence of steps or strategy that your group believes will address these problems and accomplish your goals?

Using a disciplined nonviolent approach means laying out a set of plans to accomplish a specific goal, rather than planning a variety of one-time events which simply make statements. Campaigns identify clear goals and focus resources of activists on attaining those outcomes.

This contrasts with either an approach focused on protests and rallies or planning a series of events which are on the topic but not focused on specific outcomes. For example, counter-recruitment activities fall into this trap by doing leafleting in isolation from a specific goal to impact a certain number of youths’ vocational choices, or by (only) setting up an “alternatives” table presence whenever recruiters are in the schools<sup>4</sup>.

**4) Build cross-class, cross-racial, and intergenerational coalitions.** Counter-recruitment, like much peace movement organizing, regularly stumbles over ingrained habits of race and class separation which replicates mainstream society’s divisions and separations. Concretely, this means that activists work primarily or only with those already in their existing groups and/or do not accept the challenge to reach beyond social circles circumscribed by habit, rhetoric, and existing relationship. This limits effectiveness and can prevent organizers from winning. Addressing social problems effectively requires engaging the creativity, perspective, and energy of many impacted groups, not just acting on behalf of those groups.

I write as white middle-class person to other white middle-class activists. It can be tempting to reach out first or primarily to those most like us. It’s easiest and most natural to speak our preferred language (rhetoric or tone of voice), on our terms, with those who already are open to our kind of language. However, counter-recruitment organizing by (middle class) white folk will founder on the shoals of rhetoric unless bridges can be built to those directly impacted by and attracted to military recruiters’ sales pitches. By doing so, community solutions can be generated to address underlying conditions.

No matter what the race or class of a group, youth and adult allies need each other in order to develop the most powerful campaigns. Frankly, each group has access that any serious campaign will need. Youth have access to school hallways, access to impacted/recruited youth, and are often motivated by a personal stake in the issue; adult allies may offer stronger access (initially at least) to decision-making structures and information about other sectors of the community.

In my opinion, this is part of the promise that counter-recruitment organizing offers to the broader "anti-war" peace movement: In order to thrive in counter-recruitment efforts, (white and middle class) counter-recruiters are going to have to make common cause across race and class and generational lines. White anti-war activists too often avoid this kind of coalition-building by remaining in the somewhat abstract realm of proclamation and righteous statements rather than connecting with groups where the issues touch the ground.

**5) Move beyond the "activist ghetto" to tap broader constituencies.** Parallel to the challenges of moving outside of race/class/age demographics is the challenge of mobilizing people from social clusters and institutions beyond the initiating activist group.

In Martin Luther King, Jr.'s nonviolence methodology, there are six categories of leadership in any community that are available to be tapped to help address and solve pressing social problems: Religious leaders, government, progressive and voluntary organizations, women's and minority groups, youth organizations, and education. Each of these categories will have a perspective and possible insights into addressing a clearly framed issue.

Effective campaigns tap and mobilize these categories of leadership to solve a shared problem (the frame concept, mentioned above) rather than only gathering a few of the righteous to rail against the purveyors of wrongdoing.

### **Not Just This movement: Maximizing the Power of the Human Race**

While the experiments and realities I have discussed to this point are already in play in school board meetings and high school hallways and cafeterias, there is a much larger context to our efforts to maximize the power and impact of counter-recruitment organizing. Positive, strategic and active engagement on the issue of military recruitment and positive alternatives for youth is a contribution toward humanity's capacity to face its problems boldly and without slaughtering our opponents (physically or psychically).

Wherever one lives on the globe, by living at this point in human history, we get to be part of an immense and centuries-long experiment: learning how to transform oppressive social situations without recourse to killing. This experiment has been one of the human race's biggest learning edges in the last two centuries.

Social movements that have advanced the nonviolence experiment include but extend far beyond this list: The Indian independence movement and Badshah Khan's nonviolent warriors in Pakistan; the South African freedom struggle; the abolitionists, women's suffrage, labor, civil rights, and gay rights movements in the United States; the toppling of dictatorships in Eastern Europe in the late 1980s and Yugoslavia's Otpor youth movement in 1998-2000; the People Power movement in the Philippines; Wangari Maathai's ecological "Greenbelt" in Kenya; and indigenous resistance to colonialism and empire in North, Central, and South America.

In a time when so many humans are war-weary and might be open to alternatives, it is time to step up to the plate in terms of learning to rise above violence itself, and to rise above vilifying or destroying our opponents, which is a form of dehumanization that psychologically or spiritually steps down the same path that leads to war.

By experimenting with nonviolence as a creative and active discipline, we are contributing to the extension of the human race's ability to address its own problems without resort to violence. For this reason, it matters how we plan our counter-recruitment campaigns, the slogans we create, and what relationships we build to advance our cause. We are acting for our own schools, communities, and futures, and we are helping to raise the bar for how well we as a human race can solve our problems.

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## References

1 <http://www.nnomy.org/joomla/index.php>

2. For further information on establishing frames for nonviolent campaigns, see *The Leaders Manual - A Structured Guide & Introduction to Kingian Nonviolence: The Philosophy and Methodology*, by Bernard LaFayette, Jr., and David C. Jehnsen (Galena, OH: Institute for Human Rights and Responsibilities), [www.kingiannonviolence.info](http://www.kingiannonviolence.info).

3. See for example, "It's My Life! A Guides for Alternatives after High School," a national-level publication by the American Friends Service Committee (available via [www.afsc.org](http://www.afsc.org)) . Many guides exist for different states or regions, from tri-fold pamphlets to extended guidebooks.

4. Those interested in campaign approaches are commended to the brief essay, "Campaigning for Social Change: Beyond Just Protesting for It!" by Daniel Hunter, included in *Before you Enlist and After You Say No*, pp. 204-209.