

From Global Justice to Antiwar and Back Again: A Personal Chronicle of a Season of 'Better to Laugh than Cry' Antiwar Activism.  
by Ben Shepard

The months of activism from February through March were some of the most exhilarating, depressing, riveting, and charged as any I can remember. If a mood became too intense—another bombing or jump in public opinion—shifted the political climate with a bit of relief or more bad news. The ground remained in constant flux.

After grieving for what felt like a loss of the global justice movement, one of the most amazing movements of our lifetimes after 9/11, autopsies proved premature. Fall of 2002, the antiwar movement built the infrastructure of the global justice movement to create a momentum unprecedented in any peace movement in history. I will never forget hearing the roars at Reverend Billy and the Church of Stop Shopping's 9/11 first anniversary show. Kurt Vonnegut spoke about *Slaughterhouse Five*. People were hooting and hollering in the standing-room-only rally/ service at St. Mark's Church. Somehow, a year's worth of somber memories and frustrations were released. In the months to follow, more and more citizens stood up to challenge the buffoonery of the notion that the most appropriate response to the slaughter of innocent lives was killing more of them. "War is so 20th Century," signs at rallies read. "Somewhere in Texas, there is a village missing an idiot," another sign proclaimed on February 15th, the largest day of simultaneous protest in world history. Building on the lessons of the global justice movement, this new antiwar movement of protest would be funny, full of joy, engaging and entertaining at the same time. It would challenge the banality of the "bomb first, ask questions later" approach of the Bushies. And it would succeed in mobilizing people across the country to speak as world citizens in solidarity with people across the globe. Labor unions, church groups, civil libertarians, women's and queer groups would speak out about common fears of a loss of civil liberties and anger over the inequality-expanding economic agenda disguised by this war. The New York city council would pass a resolution opposing the war. Within this opposition, a global peace and justice movement took hold, pulling in masses in ways the global justice movement in North America had never done. The following is a personal account of the peak months of antiwar activism, as a movement found its footing.

In the days before the October 27th demonstration in Washington, members of Reclaim the Streets, the New York City Direct Action Network and the Lower East Side Collective organized to form Mobilize New York and An Absurd Response to an Absurd War. Together we began to plan for a carnival block for the DC march. In addition to going to march, Mobilize New York helped organize a list of pithy weekly antiwar action alerts with thousands of members. Every time someone signed up for our mailing list, we gave them stylish pink and black "All War All the Time?" stickers advertising "log on, plug in, stop the war - weekly antiwar alerts." By December 2002, these stickers could be witnessed on sidewalks, lampposts, bumpers, subways, and phone booths throughout the city. We signed up high school kids, parents, the usual suspects from direct action circles and Upper West Side liberals. People from all walks of New York life signed up for the list, ready to speak out and take action against the war.

Activists chained themselves together in Hillary Clinton's office the day she voted to approve the war. Increasingly, people were becoming aware this war was going to happen regardless of whether voters wanted it or not. The President's "National Security Strategy of the United States," submitted to Congress in September 2002, said as much: "The United States will not hesitate to strike pre-emptively against its enemies, even if it faces international opposition, and will never again allow its military supremacy to be threatened.... In the new world we have entered, the only path to peace and security is the path of action." War is peace. 1984 had ceased to be a cautionary tale. "Ignorance is strength" had moved from satire to serious. And people from all walks of American life were smelling bullshit (see Shepard, HYPERLINK "<http://www.journalofaestheticsandprotest.org/1/BenShepard/index.html>" <http://www.journalofaestheticsandprotest.org>). As the global justice movement contended with the 9/11 backlash, with military troops on the ground, the question remained: What was the appropriate response?

The night before the massive February 15th rally and marches, a group of culture jammers—many from RTS/Mobilize New York—organized what they thought was the ultimate culture jam moment: a completely straight, i.e., not satirical, response to the war. In the middle of the Times Square military recruiting station, the group laid out candles and posters reading: "Bring Them Home Now." The posters aimed to reclaim the icon of the yellow ribbon – a peace sign co-opted during the previous Gulf War. To really be patriotic, this group suggested Americans had to call get the troops out of harm's way. Of course, the following day was one of the largest protests in world history, with over a half million clogging the New York City streets and streets around the world. Two days later, the New York Times cover story compared the weekend's mobilization with the Velvet Revolution of 1989 and the Revolutions of 1848 ( HYPERLINK "<http://www.counterpunch.org/shepard02182003.html>" <http://counterpunch.org>).

Within a week of F15, Turkey, the model of Arab democracy, and one praised by the administration, voted to reject the American offer of billions for the use of their land for a northern front in the war. Later in the week, press secretary Ari Fleisher was laughed off the stage during his press briefing for denying the US was trying to bribe foreign nations for UN votes. The Bush Administration was facing an obstinate foe. The Times article after the week's demonstrations suggested, "The fracturing of the Western alliance over Iraq and the huge antiwar demonstrations around the world this weekend are reminders that there may still be two superpowers on the planet: the United States and world public opinion." The problem was, the Bushies were not listening.

"If Bush attacks Iraq, Protest 5:00 PM Times Square," the pink and black Mobilize New York stickers designed by L.A. Kauffman suggested. By mid March, many of us were aware that day was quickly approaching. By March 20th, we received Kauffman's ominous e-mail: "The war has begun; it's time to get out in the streets! However you choose to express your feelings on this sad and ominous day - through solemn vigils, loud marches, or nonviolent direct action - we urge you to take immediate and visible action." A special Mobilize New York Alert announced: "Dear friends, The unthinkable is happening. Right now, the United States is bombing Iraq. Despite a brick wall of opposition, George W. Bush and his minions are pressing forward... This afternoon (Thursday), TAKE TO THE STREETS. Bring your rage, your grief, your love and respect for democracy and human life." I don't know if we won much anything that rainy, dark afternoon, as the skies poured. The police restricted the movement of most activists on the ground, coraling and beating many of the activists who had arrived. Yet, to a degree, they did the activists a favor, clogging up most the streets and creating highly dramatic scenes for the TV news cameras. By merely calling for a demo, the police shut it down Times Square for the activists and commuters alike. News throughout the evening followed reports of demonstrations across the country. It detailed the rise of a new kind of patriotic antiwar activism, stories on Bush's failed diplomacy, the NYC demo in Times Square, the Dixie Chicks against the war, those amazing San Franciscans, 1000 of whom got arrested for really shutting down the San Francisco Financial Center. Whether the Bushies wanted to hear it, a real debate about peace and justice was emerging.

In the days after the US invasion, a number of observers compared this time to that of Weimar Berlin. Jimmy Breslin quoted from Hitler's speech justifying pre-emptive invasion of Poland in 1939. "As always, I attempted to bring about, by the peaceful method of making proposals for revision, an alteration of this intolerable position" but diplomatic measures failed, Hitler explained. Certainly, these comparisons are the are the highest of drama. Yet, the words remained eerie, strikingly familiar, and threatening. An executive producer of a CBS miniseries about Adolf Hitler's rise to power was been fired for making a similar comparison ("Hitler" producer fired for comparison to US, Thu, Apr 10). In an essay entitled, "Fear American Style" Historian Corey Robin reminds us the majority of the persecution, which occurred during the McCarthy period occurred not by government but took place in Civil Society through dismissals such as this. So, for those with the propensities to barrow and compare with other similarly reaction periods of US and world history, there was plenty to be considered. Certainly, there are similarities between the fascism's melding of corporate industrial power and government and the current scene. But there are also differences. As many would point out Hitler, for example, was elected to power by a clear majority.

Yet, the question remained - what if it we were living in an era not unlike Weimar Berlin? The culture of that era – the Fritz Lang movies, the literature – Sigfried Kracauer, the arts – from Bauhaus, to DaDa to Agit prop, Max Beckman, Otto Dix to, the decadence, they offer us the most eloquent stories of a diagnosis of decline.

They offer us testimony of the best in living that people could do. Psychologically, there is a flip side to destruction and that is generativity. In the days after 9/11 the city was filled with that sort of creativity. Reverend Billy performed show after show after the bombing, presenting the stories those who were killed in the bombing who left messages of "I love you... I've loved the life we had together," on answering machines and in the cosmos. In the weeks after 9/11, the city's public commons, Union Square, "was like a Fellini movie there, artists of all kinds, painting, breakdancing, people arguing like Hyde Park in London, a real culture-making center," Reverend Billy observed, imploring activists to continue the energy. Yet, the "I kill you's" quickly took hold of the paradigm as the Bushies used the tragedy for their own ends.

### Joyous Resistance

Once the war started, a spirit of activism and cultural resistance became perhaps the most important tool we had. March 22, just two days after the bombing, United for Peace and Justice had already scheduled yet another city wide rally "Peace and Democracy." Once again, light blue and black stickers for the event could be found around city. Yet, unlike on February 15nd, this rally had been awarded a permit. I showed up Saturday expecting a bit of a funeral march. The war had started, the rainy protests in Times Square made for film nourish sights of activists scuffling with police in the rain, as the ANSWER sound system, permitted by the police, droned through the night. In the week before the rally, few of us in the normally festive affinity group Reclaim the Streets/ Mobilize New York few were feeling festive. It was hard to be ironic with people really dying on the streets. We put out a call for Funeral Block at the rally, asking people to come as pallbearers, hysterical mourners. "Bring your prayer beads and talismans. Wear Black. Grieve with Righteous Anger. And get ready to march for our ailing democracy... Reclaim the Streets Says: Mourn with Militance..." We'd meet at the Public Library, between the Lions (5th Ave at 41st St) and join the rest of the March at Broadway and 40th Streets.

Yet, Saturday was joyous. Two nights before the rally, a call went out from a renegade RTSer calling for a "French Block" to protest the anti French tide taking across the country, while thanking them for their hard line against the war. What emerged was just what was called for: "A wildly militant march of folks celebrating everything French, wearing berets, blue and white striped shirts, smoking Gauloises, and pumping their baguette-clenched fists up and down in the air, shouting "Tous ensemble! Tous ensemble! Oui! Oui! Oui!" (a chant from a French anarchist syndicate which means "All together! All together! Yes! Yes! Yes!"). Everyone was wearing berets, brie, bad accents, moustaches, Marseillaise lyrics, etc. What we encountered was a profound energy even after days and weeks of constant action. The day of the rally was a strikingly bright and energetic. While I was not as immediately ready to be silly, there was a certain ring to the "French kiss for peace" and "eat the props" chants members of affinity group screamed as we munched on baggets. The exuberance of the day was undeniable - the tranny brigade, chanted - "we're queer!! we're cute!!! we're antiwar to boot!!!!" Reverend Billy made peace with authentic protestors, while others screamed at the ANSWER folks, "March, march! Chant, Chant! Rhetoric, rhetoric! Rant, rant!..." The Glamericans wore their feather boas and carried signs proclaiming "War is Tacky, Darling" and "Peace is the New Black." ACT UP screamed, "War is so heteronormative..." and so on and so on... The action was striking. There are times when I do this work and feel like we are coming so much closer to imagining and actually even creating a far more caring world, that I am in awe. I just couldn't believe how many people were out dressed to the nines, the Frenchies who spoke for all our "nausea," the Housing Works procession with their 'money for aids, not for war' banners... The ACT UP call was clear: "Given the impact the war will have on innocent civilians and the outrageousness of the breach of international law, combined with the likelihood that human needs such as AIDS funding will be slashed, we urge you to demonstrate for an end to the war. Money for human need, not the war machine." Inevitably, the police tried to control end of the march. The result was a disaster as countless activists were arrested for standing in a park. Still, all in all a quarter of a million people marched against the war that Saturday; the rally was a great success. While we were not against the troops or America haters, it was necessary to tell the rest of the world, there are New Yorkers out there against the non sense. And certainly, many of us felt that energy as it comes back to us, in spite of what the destruction happening out there.

### Enter M27

As the political stage shifted, many worked to identify and work with the core themes that have made the direct action global justice movement, with its emphasis on diversity, flexibility, and deep democracy, so effective. In the days after the war broke out, San Francisco set the standard for the country, becoming a national epicenter for antiwar activism. The organizational forces of the global justice movement style of loosely coordinated affinity groups facilitated the antiwar goal of shutting down the San Francisco Financial Center. One group after another swarmed in to block traffic centers, clogging traffic with their bodies. Not to be upstaged, New Yorkers from the direct action communities of ACT UP, and the more radical types within United for Peace and Justice formed an ad hoc coalition to plan a massive non-violent civil disobedience through decentralized, autonomous actions at 8 AM the following Thursday, March 27.

The target of the action was media/government collusion promoting this war for corporate interests. The goal was to stop business as usual. The Rockefeller Center area was chosen as the target since many media and corporations have offices there or nearby. The plan for the day was for a massive die-in on 5th Avenue at Rock Center, with coordinated actions planned by affinity groups throughout the city. In between work, dwindling personal lives, and six months of anti war activism, few within the RTS/Mobilize New York would be able to participate within the day's direct action. The previous week, many of us had contemplated committing civil disobedience but the thundering rain, police, and lack of a coherent target made the proposition of CD seem less appealing in Times Square. Rockefeller Center, home of NYC media, on the other hand - that was a target. The ACT UP tradition of the die in was incredibly enticing.

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I arrived that Thursday morning knowing I had only about thirty minutes to participate and then get the hell out of there. Yet, I was certainly glad I made it. The sidewalks from 5th Ave. were completely clogged as activists mulled about, chanted within police pens. 8 came and went and the police, who'd blocked the entrance to Rockefeller Center, stood not knowing what to think. Suddenly, a horn went off and activists stepped pushing over the police pen, laying in the streets. Crowds of protestors roared with approval as chaos literally took hold. Traffic stopped. The police pushed to re establish control, trying to re push up the pens dividing the protestors from the streets. Cameras, journalists and police were everywhere. Always the media whore, I mugged for several of the cameras as I cheered the activists, hoping to see my photo the following day in the news, only to realize the new paparazzi I was oozing for had no press credentials. They were police, released to photograph activists (see "Domestic Spying Pressed Big-City Police Seek to Ease Limits Imposed After Abuses Decades Ago" By Michael Powell, Washington Post, November 29, 2002). Still, the energy of the action was electric. As bodies filled the streets, the air filled with more and more chants of "No Blood for Oil." News stories of the theatrically dead bodies on the streets of New York appeared around the world.

On the less creative side of the antiwar spectrum, International ANSWER was sponsoring yet another march in Washington for April 12. Their stickers promoting the action proclaimed, "STOP THE WAR, SURROUND THE WHITE HOUSE," in light blue, black, and white fonts with the ANSWER website listed below, not unlike those designed by L.A. Kauffman for Mobilize New York and UFPJ. Sigh. Instead of involving itself in any of the exciting or fresh direct action stuff which involves not getting a police permit or lining up speakers to preach to the converted, ANSWER was doing their best ground hog day routine pushing for its third march in DC in

six months. There is riveting activism, and then there are the blogs which take everything creative in their path, ingest it, and rehash it in its own design. Back in January, Mobilize New York received a great deal of heat for promoting the ANSWER antiwar march in DC by referring subscriber's to its anti war bulletin to ANSWER's own position statements. "For details on how you can attend the event, and background on the group sponsoring it, visit this humorous and helpful new site: [HYPERLINK "http://AuthoritarianOpportunistsWhoCozyUpToGenocidalDictators-forPeace.org"](http://AuthoritarianOpportunistsWhoCozyUpToGenocidalDictators-forPeace.org) <http://AuthoritarianOpportunistsWhoCozyUpToGenocidalDictators-forPeace.org>

The site included articles by ANSWER members about their support for dictators from Serbia to North Korea and other reports (see [HYPERLINK "http://shadow.autono.net/sin001/clark.htm"](http://shadow.autono.net/sin001/clark.htm) <http://shadow.autono.net> ). Mobilize New York got countless calls thanking us for informing them about the group; others suggested we were redbaiting for publicizing ANSWER's own position statements.

### **On the Right Track - Protesting War Profiteering at the Carlyle Group**

In the week following M27, the amalgam of anti-war groups which organized the civil disobedience actions continued to meet. The coalition was bound by three central points: calls for additional massive non-violent civil disobedience during the national day of action scheduled for April 7th, a respect for decentralized, autonomous direct action affinity groups on this day, and corresponding legal protest to stop business in New York while people die in this war and money for our the future bombed away. April 7th, the M27 coalition planned to target the Carlyle Group. If ever there was a time when I felt like I was onto the right on target, April 7th was it.

#### **War == \$ == freedom, was one of our 1984 slogans for the day.**

Our story was pretty simple for the day. Reclaim the Streets was working with the GLAMERICANS, a new direct action group, and Circus Amok, a queer performance art/free circus in NYC, to create a bit of an aesthetic intervention in the often dour antiwar protest scene. The GLAMERICANS organized a call for protest just the week before. At our one joint meeting, we all agreed that no one wanted to get arrested. Sadly, in order to even have a crappy apartment in New York you have to get a real job with responsibilities and accountability these days. First we were going to go as all things French to counter protest the xenophobic "no French fry" movement. But as we talked about protesting the war-profiteering Carlyle Group, we decided to go as mock billionaires. The Carlyle Investment fund was making billions buying cheap defense contractors low and watching their stock prices climb as the war continued. The group was run by Bush 41, with his secretary of state Baker, as their counsel, and former Tory leader, John Major, Bush's main ally on Gulf War I, among others. Some have even noted that the Bin Laden family was part of the group. The Carlyle Group had done nicely with their connections with the Bushes, the Saudi Royal Family and their investments in munitions and oil companies to the tune of \$14 billion. The scenario was simple enough. The protestors would converge at the Carlyle Group offices at Madison Avenue between 58th and 59th as the emblem of the war-mongering profiteers. War is about making money; American socialist Jack Reed said it during WWI, and we were repeating the mantra.

The Glamericans did the heavy lifting, made the signs, wrote up the call which we sent out everywhere, including to the New York Billionaires, who shot it around. "Looks like RTS is also joining in as Billionaires," one of their posts noted. The GLAMERICANS's call read: GLAM ALERT #1: BILLIONAIRES SELL-ABRAE THE WAR! MONDAY, APRIL 7: As part of the National Day of Direct Action we are amassing our weapons of mass distraction and coming out to help our president in getting his message across - MORE BLOOD FOR OIL! So we say - celebrate this paradigm of capitalism! Join Glamericans, Reclaim the Streets, Circus Amok, and other fabulous protesters in our mock pro-war stance. We're talking over the top and we need you to help make it over-the-topper!?? The attire was a simple, we called for activists to come in corporate drag - business suits or fancy dress. SLOGANS: "MORE LIVES TO THE GALLON" "WAR IS GOOD FOR YOUR PORTFOLIO" "STOCKS AND BOMBS!" "STOCK AND AWE!"

The demo was supposed to start at 8am Monday morning. I was running late, of course. It took a while to find the top hat I'd used the last time I dressed as a billionaire during the WEF protests last winter. Running down from F train at 63rd, I'd lost the exact address of the protest. So, I just followed the riot cops I noticed running through the streets and the roars of the crowd. The police lead me straight to the faaabolous, decadent looking billionaires, dressed with gothic vampire makeup most appropriate for sucking the blood out of local economies. Yet the protest was ending. Everyone was like, 'hi ben' a bit surprised, like where the hell have you been and getting ready to leave. The civil disobedience at the entrances across the street blocking the entrances across the street had just ended. Around 8:35 the police, who'd surrounding the entire group, started squeezing in. They're going to arrest us, a few people started saying. Nah, I'll go talk to them, I said. Can I go to class? I asked. I have class at 9 and would love to leave. I told one cop. No comment. Nothing. A few of us busily called in to work, to cancel appointments and watched the police start arresting folks. Oy ve. I grabbed the one other RTSer right there, we stayed close, mugged for the cameras, and got locked up. We were neither charged nor or told to disperse. We were just arrested. When asked on what, one policeman said they'd figure something out later. Slowly, the police then began arresting people, random people, standing on the sidewalk exercising their First Amendment right to protest the war on Iraq. All in all, some 115 people were arrested.

We were taken down to 1 Police Plaza, where activists commiserated and conspired. A short history of New York activism could be read in the stickers throughout the cells, fading "Mayday is Jay Day," from the Million Marijuana March of 1999 and Spanish "silenzio ==muerte ACT UP Wall Street" stickers could be seen everyone. The cells even had a few old June 18th, 1999 RTS stickers from the worst RTS demo ever when the police arrested the only people who had any idea of what the plan for the action would be.

Within the confines of the holding cell, the consensus was that the police were once again squeezing out dissent, making it all the more intimidating for us to even make an appearance at a protest. But of all the protests we've done outside of corporate targets, I've never seen the police move in so fast. It was most certainly on a call from above. And the police seemed fine with doing the war contractor's bidding. For the Carlyle Groups, there was certainly little interest in a story getting out connecting war profits Bush 41 is making that 43 stands to inherit.

I was out by 6 PM, which wasn't bad. Others were in until after 11PM. Our charges were disorderly conduct and failing to disperse. Yet the police never gave us word to disperse. I barely arrived before I was arrested.

The news that night was dominated with more information about Hussein maybe being shot and perhaps there being weapons of mass destruction in Iraq. We're fighting to plant a democracy in Iraq while tax payers are being arrested for speaking out in the streets of New York and activists are being shot with wooden dowels, "sting balls" and sand bags outside the port of Oakland.

The following day activists shared their accounts of their experiences of being been arrested. Many were interrogated about their political associations. The following day, the NY Times reported that the NYPD reported they had ceased using the "demonstration debriefing form," ("Police Stop Collecting Data on Protesters' Politics" - April 10, 2003). Another lie. Oh well.

New York University professor Steve Duncombe, who was also arrested that day, explained: "I've been going to legal protests in New York City for more than a decade and I've never seen anything like this. They arrested us for peacefully standing on the sidewalk and with no warning. Is this what's happening to the Constitution in this country?"

**Spin, spin, spin**

That's how the Mobilize New York Alert read the week as the military campaign winded down. "One clip of a toppled Saddam statue shown again and again does not a victory make. We appreciate the corporate media's attempt to package this as a tidy, glorious finish. (So considerate!) However, in the past three weeks, this war did a lot of murdering, maiming and orphaning. In addition to the happy Iraqis dancing on CNN, there are a great deal of thirsty, hungry, homeless Iraqis." In the meanwhile Iraq's museum of artifacts from the fertile crescent of civilization have been lost to history. Speaking of that whole heroic statue being torn down, the Canadian website Global Search <http://globalresearch.ca/articles/NY1304A.html> reports it was a staged media event. "Does this scene look like the fall of the Berlin Wall?" reads a caption of photos from Reuters of an empty square, with a few U.S. troops, reporters and U.S.-friendly Iraqis. And that wasn't the only fib. If recent months suggest anything: we live in an era of the big lie. Beyond the fabricated story of Jessica Lynch's rescue (see BBC documentary 'Saving Private Jessica: Fact or Fiction?'), perhaps the greatest deceit is Administration's condescending view of that no one should really care if no weapons of mass destruction are found in Iraq or Deputy Defence Secretary Paul Wolfowitz's confession that weapons of mass destruction were, 'Just A Convenient Excuse For War.' Tax cuts don't equal deficits (equaling some 44 Trillion, reported by former Bush Treasury Secretary Paul O'Neil before he was booted); War = democracy and peace, and so on. We live in the era of pastiche. In a 1939 essay entitled, "Avant-Garde and Kitch" cultural critical Clement Greenberg suggested that commerce intersects with cultural and political forces with the grace of a used car sales drive. He explains "... a great sales apparatus has nevertheless been created for it, which brings pressure to bear on every member of the society. Traps are laid even in those areas, so to speak, that are the preserves of genuine culture..." Given this, "It is not enough, in a country like ours to have an inclination towards the latter; one must have a true passion for it that surrounds and presses in on him from the moment he is old enough to look at the funny papers."

I have often wondered what in us drove us to reject the politics of authenticity and embrace a brash, bratty absurdity during the anti war mobilizations, especially after the war started. "Camp and tragedy are antithesis," Susan Sontag once explained. Its an important point to understand as we anticipate more cheese and kitch, blatant omissions and flagrant lies during the Republican Convention's attempt to appropriate the legacy of the dead in New York City during the 9/11 anniversary September 2004. Sontag contines: "The whole point of camp is to dethrone the serious. Camp is playful anti serious." Instead of frothing with anger, this engagement allows us to maintain, "a new more complex relation to the serious." From here activists will continue building counterpublics and liberatory spaces, while expanding on the Patriot Act Free Zones popping up from Hawaii to Alaska.