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Turn Your Back On Bush

Experiments in Direct Action at the Point of Assumption
by Doyle Canning; March 12, 2005

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January 20th 2005 was a day of profound public theater, and a grotesque spectacle of power. The Inaugural ceremony was a stunning ritual consecration of control; each marching band, each sleek stretch SUV limo, each biblical declaration, each tank and each soldier, was meant to speak power in spectacle and force.

But this spectacle did not go unchallenged—indeed there were other actors who took the stage that day. Shoulder to shoulder with placard wavers and cat-callers was a sizable contingent engaging in a very different act of resistance, publicly withdrawing their consent from the Bush regime with nonviolent direct action.

A group of 5,000 people from all walks of life—from Iraq war Veterans, to students from Ohio; from first responders, to punk anarchists—quietly turned their backs on George W. Bush as his motorcade slunk down Pennsylvania Avenue. Their simple and solemn act sent a powerful message of non-cooperation, and directly challenged the Bush power-spectacle.

The “Turn Your Back on Bush” (TYBOB) action itself was a moving moment that galvanized key constituencies to publicly display their dissent to the Bush agenda. This simple act of turning our backs was a potent symbol of the opposition movement inside the empire, and has a symbolic resonance that can carry more complex meanings.

Turn Your Back on Bush used an organic synthesis of organizing and messaging strategies, and an arsenal of nonviolent tactics, to

bring people from over 40 states and bounce the TYBOB story in hundreds of media outlets worldwide, reaching over 50 million people.

TYBOB was not only an overwhelming “tactical” success, it was also an important strategic laboratory of resistance, and in that way it was also a “movement building” success. The action was an organic process of creative collaboration that combined a number of age-old organizing techniques, as well as innovative strategies, that are can serve as models for informing grassroots direct action in the months and years ahead.

Harnessing the “Psychic Break”: November 3rd 2004

Turn Your Back on Bush (TYBOB) was an idea hatched by community organizers in the lead up to Nov 2, who were grappling with the question of, “What’s next?” At 3 AM on Nov 3rd, the website TurnYourBackonBush.org was launched, and by mid December, almost 10,000 people had joined the email list.

The action was designed to harness the “psychic break”—the moment when people realize the system is out of alignment with their values, and they are able to break through the barriers that have kept them from taking action.

This element was successful, as people from across the country—who had never been active as organizers in public demonstrations before—made commitments to get involved, and explore a new kind of activism outside of the electoral arena.

Some of these folks had been volunteers for efforts like MoveOn PAC, or even worked for the Kerry campaign. Some were pissed off voters, or disenchanting non-voters. When the psychic break hit, and folks realized that the Democratic strategy had failed and Bush was still President, many of these kinds of folks put their time towards mobilizing to bring busloads of people to Washington to turn their backs on Bush en masse. The action was an anecdote for despair, and effectively channeled grief or rage energy into organizing.

Not Just on the Internet: Real Organizing in the Real World

Turn Your Back on Bush had a sophisticated online strategy, building an impressive email list, and putting up online forums for folks to connect about anything from the post-election blues, to the best deals on busses from Wisconsin. The URL was well branded through the organizers' media work, and during the week of action, downloadable flyers, scenario updates, and DC maps made it a great way to plug in to the action.

This online strategy was used as way to drive organizing on the ground, in the real world. The TYBOB core team recruited 41 state level organizers, who were working in their home state, coordinating local groups and feeding information from the grassroots to Washington, and vice versa. A map on the website, showing states where there were and were not organizers, drove email traffic to the local organizers, or drove people to volunteer.

All of these people were volunteers. They were, for the most part, folks who had a psychic break and contacted the website saying, "I want to do something!" There were hundreds of emails like this. With a thoughtful email, and then a phone interview, they were recruited by the TYBOB organizing director to plug into the mobilizing machine. Those who could make the commitment of 15-20 hours a week were given the responsibility of "state organizer."

Because the project was operating without much funding (all monies raised were from individual donors, and half was raised on the website) there wasn't much material support to give to these folks. The support was in the form of one-on-one phone conversations, email updates, and state organizer conference calls.

TYBOB was able to plug people in who had never considered themselves activists, let alone organizers. The empowering organizing structure built up confidence, deepened commitment, and activated new networks of folks.

The response was overwhelmingly positive, and refreshing. As state organizer said, "I've never done anything like this before, but I organized my kid's class trip to Washington, and this isn't that different!" The organizing vehicle that was built was strong, and the action was well executed. It was a dynamic mix—soccer moms, clergy, military families, hopeful young Deaniacs, with veteran labor organizers, antiwar movement activists, and direct action-ites.

The TYBOB Meme

A "meme" is a unit of self-replicating cultural information—a slogan, melody, image or idea that bounces through the culture. Turn Your Back on Bush, with its viral organizing structure and simple and powerful imagery, was really in many ways a "meme campaign."

The idea of the action was simple, and had clear logic to it. Anyone could participate, and there was support for people to do so. The name of the action framed it with an embedded story (i.e. message, logic, and actors).

The meme spread through the media, on the web, and through word of mouth. A sophisticated and strong media plan moved the meme in the mainstream—from Saturday Night Live, to the Washington Post, to the Wisconsin State Journal, to BBC World News Tonight. Targeted outreach and organizing moved the meme through various networks and constituencies—from Black Voices for Peace to students in rural Pennsylvania to military families in Georgia.

The TYBOB meme spread organically, across the US and even overseas. On January 20th, students in London showed up at 10 Downing St. wearing the slogan "Turn Your Back on Bush" on their backs. On February 16th, two women in New Hampshire turned their backs on Bush at a photo op about social security.

There was no global orchestration of this and other TYBOB actions that took place simultaneously to the Inaugural parade—rather, it was a good idea and took on a life of its own. That's

what memes do, and how a good meme campaign can work.

“SmartMemes” are containers for collaborative story telling that empower people, and have the power to challenge assumptions about power. The smartMeme of TYBOB was its ability to inject the action idea into the culture, creating an image that represents resistance (backs turned), and an action that anyone can take (i.e. one need not hang from tall buildings or lock themselves to things in order to participate.) TYBOB became a space for the collaborative power of a story about resistance that challenged the assumption of Bush’s legitimacy and mandate.

Direct Action at the Point of Assumption

Turn Your Back on Bush publicly removed support for the agenda of the Administration and interrupted the message from the White House—the message of “mandate.” Placing key constituencies turning their backs along the parade route—military families, veterans in uniform, first responders, clergy, students, and people of a multiplicity of faiths, races, ages and backgrounds—TYBOB told a story that challenged those assumptions and showed the American people turning against Bush.

The traditional points-of-intervention of the Left are interventions in physical space: the point of production (workers strike), the point of destruction (blocking logging trucks), the point of decision (take over a congressional office). Rather than a protest looking to hold tactical, physical space in the streets, TYBOB was an intervention in “idea space.” TYBOB was a “Direct Action at the Point of Assumption:” an action that contested the meaning of the inauguration and created space in the realm of assumption and idea for a critique of Bush and his empire-building policies.

It was an effort to compete on the playing field where the Bush regime has shown considerable strength (with their control-memes of WMD; partial birth abortion; ownership society; etc.). It was also an effort to expose their considerable weakness by showing the reality of an increasingly wide and deep opposition movement of people from all walks of life. It was an action to

show that key actors in the Administration's story about their war (troops, military families, first responders) are leaders in the ranks of an increasingly diverse peace movement. It was specific about interrupting the Bush message of mandate—the assumption of power and consensus—with a simple, elegant act of resistance.

Turning Towards New Strategies

Turn Your Back on Bush is more than an action—it is a story, and it is a political space. As we turn our backs on Bush, we are turning towards each other to explore new strategies. And as we enter the next four years, we must explore new strategies; we must make this story real with a movement of organized resistance.

The next step for the TYBOB team and for the smartMeme collective was to co-sponsor the “people powered strategy to stop the war” (www.globalejusticeecology.org/peoplepower) proposal at the national assembly of United For Peace & Justice in St. Louis Feb 19-21. This proposal is an attempt to articulate an evolving strategic framework to end the occupation--to weave a more coherent story and strategy about the work that is already going on every day at the grassroots level.

In 2003 the default strategic framework was to stop the war before the US strike; the US went to war anyway. In 2004 the default strategic framework was to un-elect the war makers; the Bush Administration took the White House, and more. In 2005?

It's going to take people power to stop the war in Iraq and the related atrocities of the project of empire. No one in Washington is going to do it for us. In order to mobilize the latent anti-war sentiment that already exists in the U.S. we need to overcome the assumption that we don't have the power to stop the war.

Let's learn some lessons from the TYBOB experiment: Let's learn how to effectively harness psychic breaks—people are ready to join this movement if we give them a chance and have clear and accessible organizing models. Let's explore the viral structure of

meme campaigning, and combine real time organizing on the ground with the power of the internet and the media to move our action ideas. Let's scout for interventions in idea space, and engage in mass nonviolent direct action at the points of assumption. Let's mobilize mass non-cooperation with the US occupation of Iraq and the brutal realities of this endless war. Let's build a movement to stop this war that can remake assumptions about power, and ultimately remake our society.

Let's turn our backs on Bush, and turn towards each other to have conversations about our strategies—to tell each other our stories—about how we are going to stop this war and strengthen the democracy movement. As we turn our backs on Bush, we got each others' back—with solidarity, story, and the strength that comes from strategies made of hope.

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