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## **The San Francisco Uprising**

### **A Case Study of the March 2003 Anti-War Mobilization**

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America's latest war of conquest was met with massive resistance both in the United States and around the world. In particular, the response in San Francisco was inspiring, where over 20,000 people engaged in mass non-violent direct action to shut down the financial district. Over the course of four business days, beginning on March 20th, 2003 -- the day after the invasion began -- nearly 2600 were arrested for engaging in acts of protest and resistance. Protestors blockaded the offices of corporations invested in the mass destruction business (including Bechtel, Citibank and the Carlyle Group), a military recruiting station, the British consulate, and a Federal office building. Using tactics ranging from lock-downs to mobile blockades and Critical Mass bike rides, Bay area residents transformed the usually car-clogged consumption zone into a living statement of hope and life-affirming resistance to Bush's war for empire.

### **Anatomy of an Uprising**

Although this uprising was de-centralized and highly organic, it grew out of a foundation of organizing laid by the grassroots mobilization Direct Action to Stop the War (DASW). DASW's central organizing principle was the affinity group, clusters of approximately a dozen people who join together to support each other during an action and beyond. For the preceding two months, DASW had organized the uprising's launching pad through a weekly spokescouncil (where spokespeople from affinity groups meet to plan and discuss), a website ([www.actagainstwar.org](http://www.actagainstwar.org)), and the simple notion that a rational response to an illegal and unjust war for empire would be a mass direct action to shut down the financial district. The action was designed to speak to the global anti-war majority by shattering the assumption that Americans supported the war.

The plan was transparent from the beginning and wittily depicted through a fast food menu as an "Emergency Potluck to Stop the War." Twenty locations were identified as places for actions, a combination of "A Moveable Feast" of key intersections for blocking traffic into the financial district and a "Traditional

Sit-Down Dinner" of Government and Corporate offices. The action framework was completed with a "Take Out Menu" of Bikes Not Bombs actions as a means to directly confront fossil fuel addiction. At weekly spokescouncils, different affinity groups claimed different locations while updating each other on their ongoing work and actions to stop the war before it started.

The spokescouncil model was very successful in allowing people from different communities with different political analyses to work together and build a unity that didn't sacrifice our diversity of experience, analysis and tactics. As a result, the streets were flooded with people from different walks of life: soccer moms, black bloc anarchists, people of faith, students, queers, people of color, trade unionists, even a few anti-war corporate CEO's.

## **Build It and They Will Come**

The real success of the action came not only from the fact that several thousand people were pre-organized into affinity groups, but that tens of thousands of people joined us in the streets on the day of the action. Key components of the organizing and media strategy were concepts that have been explored by the *smartMeme* Strategy and Training Project ([www.smartmeme.org](http://www.smartmeme.org)) and may be useful to others organizing against the war in different communities. This article will examine three of these concepts: *Telling the Future*, *Psychic Breaks*, and *Articulating a Values Crisis*.

Starting in early March, 2003, DASW organized foreshadowing events that used the corporate media to "Tell a Future" in which if Bush bombed Iraq, Bay Area residents would rise up in a non-violent insurrection and shut down the financial district. These events ranged from a high profile press conference, to an open letter to the city, to pre-emptive actions before the war began in which 80 people engaged in civil disobedience to shut-down the Pacific Stock Exchange.

This media work was successful in its goal of getting DASW's website and the action meeting spot printed on the front page of the newspaper and carried on every major radio and television station. DASW organized an orientation process at the designated meeting spot in which the thousands of people who joined the action on the day after the invasion were rapidly briefed on the action goals, given legal and medical information, and then dispatched to support the pre-existing blockades.

## **An Inviting Insurrection**

One of the reasons that so many people joined the action was that it was timed to harness a predictable mass, "psychic break" - a point where the unfolding of events shatters people's illusions that the system reflects their values. A psychic break overrules ingrained obedience and leaves people open to new types of action. In an infamously progressive city like San Francisco, it was clear the invasion of Iraq would be a psychic break for many people. After all if you were paying attention to world events, even through corporate media sources, it was pretty hard to miss the fact that the Bush administration was launching a war based on lies. In order to take all these people beyond just screaming at their televisions, DASW created a framework to facilitate action and harness the mass psychic break into globally visible opposition to the invasion.

In creating a public image of the action, DASW focused on a values-based critique that worked to mainstream the concepts of non-cooperation and civil disobedience. The DASW website and kick-off press

conference featured endorsements from leaders of a cross section of Bay area communities - Queer, Labor, Faith, People of Color, Veterans, Seniors, even the former CEO of the Pacific Stock Exchange. Without sacrificing the opportunity to put out a systemic analysis, the organizing appealed to mainstream values - democracy, security, justice, belief in international law, patriotism - and used them to leverage opposition to the Bush administration's unprincipled war. This strategy of "articulating a values crisis" helped normalize resistance and expanded the appeal of the action. As part of this strategy, DASW attempted to avoid marginalizing terms like "protester" or "activist" in public statements. Instead press releases and statements used terms like "residents," "everyday people," and "people from all walks of life" to reinforce the fact that resistance was a widespread, common-sense, normal reaction to an illegal and unjust war.

This type of mass organizing may stretch the comfort zone of some radicals, however it has great potential to exploit some of the growing fault lines in U.S. society. Bush's naked imperial agenda is challenging a lot of American's vision of their country as an international beacon of democracy and justice. Regardless of the fact that much of America's national story has always been hypocritical mythology, there is an incredible opportunity to lay claim to widely held values like security, democracy, and national pride, and direct these energies into "imploding" empire. Let's ask ourselves how our resistance can galvanize anti-war sentiments into a deeper movement for fundamental change that articulates the values crisis - the disconnect between the values of empire and the values that ordinary Americans hold. In San Francisco, the strategy worked well enough that 20,000 people joined us in occupying the streets. With more refinement and widespread application, who knows what is possible?

## **Unmasking U.S. Empire Inc.**

Beyond just disrupting business as usual, targeting the financial district exposed the links between the corporate controlled world of poverty, exploitation, and ecological devastation, and increasing U.S. militarism around the world. The action not only physically challenged the ability of the US government to make war, but acted to uproot the entire system of corporate control, racism, anti-earth values and state violence that underlies the drive towards empire.

This is a critical time for the peace and justice movement in the U.S. Millions of Americans are questioning the Bush administration's motivations for the invasion and ongoing occupation. The weapons of mass destruction excuse is slipping and there is still no evidence of links between Saddam Hussein and the 9-11 attacks. Meanwhile, as U.S. and Iraqi casualties mount and the occupation's billion dollar a week price tag threatens cross-sector budget cuts, Bush's corporate cronies are making millions privatizing occupied Iraq. The time has never been better for social movements to explain that you can't understand U.S. foreign policy without using the words "oil" and "empire."

The San Francisco organizing attempted to contextualize the effort to stop the invasion of Iraq as just confronting a "piece" of the imperial schemes. The reality is that corporate globalization and U.S. militarism are working hand in hand to create a world of homogeneity, consumer monoculture, and domination. The Bush regime has been stunningly public about their vision of a "Pax Americana," their code phrase for U.S. global military domination. In fact, the word "empire" itself is yet again entering the U.S. political lexicon, slipping into Pentagon briefings, Washington Post articles, and NY Times editorials.

In light of this new level of ruthless honesty, we can't afford to talk about the occupation in Iraq in isolation. Over 150 countries around the world have some sort of U.S. military presence - from fighting "terrorists" in

the Philippines to protecting U.S. oil installations in Colombia. We need to connect all our local organizing into the stepping stones towards a true "peace" movement - a holistic intersection of movements struggling for justice, democracy, and ecological sanity, collaborating to confront the US Empire Inc. This means not only tackling the war in Iraq, but the war at home: corporate rule, the assaults on civil liberties and communities of color, the war against people who are poor, men's violence against women, and the ongoing war on the natural world.

DASW is working hard to keep the momentum rolling. Most recently, in September 2003, DASW organized with a number of local community and environmental justice groups to shut down ChevronTexaco's Bay area refinery where stolen Iraqi oil was already being processed. The action was organized in solidarity with the mass actions against the World Trade Organization in Cancun to show how U.S. militarism, corporate power, and the war at home (economic injustice, racism, police brutality etc.) are all part of the same destructive system. Some affinity groups are preparing to travel to Miami for the mass demonstrations against the Free Trade Agreement of the Americas and no doubt more local actions will be planned.

Around the world, battle lines are drawn between forces that exploit, destroy and conquer versus those that stand for life, justice and hope. But it is here, in the United States, inside the myopia of Bush's imperial fish bowl, that critical work must be done. Without the passive support of the U.S. public, the elite effort to remake the world cannot succeed. This empire, like all others, is built on pillars of sand. The military and corporate take over of the planet relies on the privileged to remain apathetic, ignorant, and silent. But times are changing. The flames of global resistance are slowly thawing the U.S. out of the imposed numbness of imperial routine. We are learning that our movements are stronger than greed or fear. And now it gets interesting....

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