

MARCH 10

MoveOn.org: Making peace with war in Iraq

Sadly, it has come to this. Two years after the invasion of Iraq, the online powerhouse MoveOn.org – which built most of its member base with a strong antiwar message — is not pushing for withdrawal of U.S. troops from Iraq.

With a network of more than 3 million “online activists,” the MoveOn leadership has decided against opposing the American occupation of Iraq. During the recent bloody months, none of MoveOn’s action alerts have addressed what Americans can do to help get the U.S. military out of that country. Likewise, the MoveOn.org website has continued to bypass the issue – even after Rep. Lynn Woolsey and two dozen cosponsors in the House of Representatives introduced a resolution in late January calling for swift removal of all U.S. troops from Iraq.

That resolution would seem to be a natural peg for the kind of kinetic activism that established MoveOn’s reputation. A movement serious about ending U.S. military activities in Iraq could use the resolution as a way to cut through political tap dances and pressure members of Congress to take a stand. Down the road, generating grassroots support for a get-out-of-Iraq resolution has potential to clear a congressional pathway for measures cutting off funds for the war.

But, tragically, MoveOn’s leadership is having none of it. Over a period of recent weeks, the word “Iraq” appeared on the MoveOn.org home page only in a plug for a documentary released last year. Inches away, a blurb has been telling the website’s visitors: “Support Our Troops: Contribute your frequent-flyer miles so that American troops can get home.” (But not stay home.) Many soldiers are returning to the killing grounds of Iraq, while a growing number are vocally opposed to this war.

Why won’t MoveOn “support our troops” by supporting a pullout of our troops from Iraq? “We believe that there are no good options in Iraq,” MoveOn.org’s executive director, Eli Pariser, told me. “We’re seeing a broad difference of opinion among our members on how quickly the U.S. should get out of Iraq. As a grassroots-directed organization, we won’t be taking any position which a large portion of our members disagree with.”

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In sharp contrast, early in the 2004 primary campaign, MoveOn committed itself to endorsing any Democratic presidential candidate receiving more than 50 percent of the Internet ballots cast by its activists. (Howard Dean fell shy of a majority, so there was no MoveOn endorsement.) But now, evidently, a majority of MoveOn members in favor of swift withdrawal from Iraq would be insufficient if a "large portion" disagreed.

When I asked Eli for clarification, he replied: "We've been talking with our members continuously on this issue. We've surveyed slices of our membership in January and in December, and surveyed our whole membership last spring. That's how we know there's a breadth of opinion out there."

But last spring was a year ago. And any surveying of "slices of our membership in January and in December" came before the Woolsey resolution offered an opportunity to find out how the MoveOn base views the measure. In any event, there will always be "a breadth of opinion" about this war – a fact that does not trump the crucial need for clarity of purpose.

If MoveOn leaders were willing to submit the House get-out-of-Iraq resolution to MoveOn's rank-and-file in an up-or-down vote, the chances of a substantial majority would be excellent. Too bad the leadership of MoveOn.org is currently unwilling to find out.

The 29 members of the House now sponsoring the resolution are hardly radicals. They recognize the kind of grisly consequences of equivocation that occurred during the Vietnam War: Refusal to speak forthrightly about the urgent need to end military involvement only fuels the war's deadly momentum.

It's all well and good for MoveOn.org to do superb work in the current battle over the future of Social Security. And it's very helpful to excoriate President Bush for his many big lies in the lead-up to the invasion of Iraq. But such activities don't make up for going along with the basics of the present-day Iraq war.

When a large progressive organization takes the easy way and makes peace with war, the abdication of responsibility creates a vacuum. Ironically, a group that became an Internet phenom by recognizing and filling a void is now creating one. And other groups are bound to emerge to fill it.

Among the emerging organizations is Progressive Democrats of America (www.pdamerica.org), a fledgling national group with an activist focus on the Iraq war that is laudably straightforward. "We're organizing a new campaign in every Congressional District we can to call for the end of funding for war and occupation, and for the transfer of reconstruction assistance to Iraqis themselves," says Tim Carpenter of PDA. He contends that "public pressure can awaken Congress to an opposition role."

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War in Iraq requires continual funding, of course, so President Bush's new supplemental boost of \$80 billion in war appropriations has been moving through Congress in recent days. Tacitly accepting the war's continuation, MoveOn declined to take a stand against the essence of congressional backing for the war – the money that keeps paying for it. Meanwhile, PDA launched an effort against the \$80 billion; the organizing included a National Call-In Day aimed at members of Congress on March 10. MoveOn.org pioneered the use of email and web technologies as creative tools to further its political agenda. Now that the MoveOn agenda on the Iraq war has tumbled into the shallow depths of the Potomac, some similar online activism will be needed if MoveOn's dive is going to be merely temporary. So, to help get the cyber-ball rolling, please forward this article around the Internet and post it where appropriate.

Friends don't let friends drive drunk, and peace advocates do a lot more than shrug when a previously great antiwar organization starts to get lost.

If MoveOn continues to abandon its antiwar base, that base will get the picture – and move on.

Norman Solomon's latest book, "War Made Easy: How Presidents and Pundits Keep Spinning Us to Death," will be published in early summer. His columns and other writings can be found at: www.normansolomon.com