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'Globalization' and its malcontents

One of the big media buzzwords to emerge in recent years is "globalization." By now, we're likely to know what it means. That's unfortunate — because at this point the word is so ambiguous that it doesn't really mean much of anything. News outlets have reported that key international pacts like NAFTA and the World Trade Organization gained U.S. approval during the 1990s because most politicians in Washington favor "globalization." According to conventional media wisdom, those globalizers want to promote unfettered communication and joint endeavors across national boundaries.

Well, not quite. These days, at the White House and on Capitol Hill, the same boosters of "globalization" are upset about certain types of global action — such as the current grassroots movement against a war on Iraq. For the most part, the same elected officials and media commentators who have applauded money-driven globalization are now appalled by the sight of anti-war globalization. The recent spectacle of millions of people demonstrating against war on the same day around the world was enough to cause apoplexy at the White House.

That's consistent with a recurring pattern: "Pro-globalization" forces are unhappy to see the globalizing of solidarity for labor rights, economic justice, the environment and alternatives to war.

A similar contradiction belies the media image of "anti-globalization" activists as foes of internationalism who want to rigidify national boundaries, reinforce isolation and prevent worldwide interactions. On the contrary, advocates for human rights, environmental protection and peace — while largely opposing global superstructures like NAFTA and the WTO — have been busily creating ways to work with like-minded people all over the planet.

The form of "globalization" deemed worthy of the name by media is corporate globalization, which gives massive capital even more momentum to flatten borders and run roughshod over national laws. Deluging every country with Nikes, Burger Kings and ATMs is presumptively indicative of progress, no matter how bad the

working conditions, how unhealthy the products or how unjust the economic consequences. Meanwhile, fans of "globalization" routinely contend that protection of labor rights or the environment amounts to unfair restraint of trade, retrograde protectionism and antiquated resistance to "reforms."

By itself, "globalization" is much too simplistic a word to tell us anything. The term is so murky that we may need to discard it, or at least develop some new phrases to bring realities into focus.

Today, the war-crazed Bush administration and the bipartisan majority of enablers in Congress are fervent proponents of what might be called "isolationist intervention." Sure, the present-day American leaders proclaim their global vision and declare that they want to engage with the world, but on their own terms — with the U.S. government reserving the right to determine its policies in isolation from any nation that fails to offer subservient support. With hefty corporate backing, they insist that the United States has the right to intervene militarily overseas. Why? Because they say so.

The gist of this approach to "globalization" was well expressed by the glib pundit Thomas Friedman, whose 1999 book "The Lexus and the Olive Tree" lauded the tandem roles of corporate capitalism and American militarism. "The hidden hand of the market will never work without a hidden fist," he wrote. "McDonald's cannot flourish without McDonnell Douglas, the designer of the U.S. Air Force F-15. And the hidden fist that keeps the world safe for Silicon Valley's technologies to flourish is called the U.S. Army, Air Force, Navy and Marine Corps."

This veiled hand-and-fist stance is being actively rejected by millions of people marching through cities in many parts of the world. And the leaders of numerous countries are giving voice to that rejection. Speaking to the U.N. Security Council on Feb. 18, Malaysia's prime minister Mahathir Mohamed — the incoming chair of the Non-Aligned Movement — combined realism with idealism. "We have no military or financial strength," he said, "but we can join the world movement to oppose war on moral grounds."

The globalization of that movement is something to behold. And nurture. ■