

# Charles Shaw: Regulated Resistance

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Opinion: Charles Shaw

## Regulated Resistance: Is It Possible To Change The System When You Are The System?

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In February of this year, [United for Peace and Justice \(UFPJ\)](#), a coalition of more than 800 peace and justice groups throughout the United States, [held their second annual Assembly](#) to hear and vote on proposals for a 2005 “action plan.” With the war in Iraq fast approaching its second anniversary, and the larger “War on Terror” crossing its third and half year, close to 500 delegates from 275 member groups traveled to St. Louis in the hopes that the “anti-war movement”—which emerged with unprecedented speed and size just prior to the US invasion of Iraq in spring of 2003—could be resuscitated. Despite impressive beginnings, the movement as a whole has yet to make any significant impact on US policy, or achieve any lasting public resonance. More disturbing is the fact that since Bush’s victory in November, it has gone completely MIA.

One week after the election, the US launched a massive, sustained offensive on the Iraqi city of Fallujah, which absolutely leveled the metropolis of 350,000. Virtually everyone in the “movement” knew this offensive was a forgone conclusion should Bush be reelected (though few understood that the offensive would likely have gone ahead regardless of who won). Yet, despite this foreknowledge, the streets of America remained empty. In San Francisco, the usual hotbed for anti-war activism, barely 500 people showed up to a demonstration organized by the local chapter of [International ANSWER](#), and endorsed by Global Exchange & Code Pink, the two most prominent activist groups in the Bay Area.

Most rationalized the poor turnout by claiming the movement was “saving its energy for the Counter-Inaugural

Protests.” It was believed by activists and [even by FEMA](#) that the protests would be the largest and most volatile since the reelection of Richard Nixon in 1972. But instead, the Counter-Inaugural became an organizing boondoggle, and in the end an anemic gaggle of less than 10,000 protestors showed up in Washington, DC. The Inauguration itself turned out to be one gigantic Republican hootenanny with over 400,000 fur-clad Bush supporters turning out to hail their Chief. So innocuous were the protestors that Bush backers actively harassed and on a few occasions even physically attacked them in the street.

Even though the hard core members of the anti-war movement had been protesting for three and a half years—since the days following 9/11 when the Bush Administration leapt immediately and, some argued, recklessly into war mode, audaciously proclaiming “a war that will not end in our lifetime”—it was clear that whatever the “movement” was doing, it wasn’t working. It sadly had become the proverbial tree that falls in the forest, unseen, unheard, and unheeded. By the time the UFPJ Assembly came around, it was clear that time had come to consider radical new possibilities.

Unfortunately, the Assembly was far from radical. What emerged from that conclave was [a benign and puzzling collection of campaigns](#) utterly lacking in passion, outrage, or threat. There was really no way to explain such politically correct palaver as “Presenting the Cost of War to Local Communities”, and “Supporting Clergy and Laity”, and tacit lip service was paid to [a series of fourteen other proposals](#) which UFPJ stated they “will support through website publicity, email announcements, and/or other similar means.” Some of these, such as War Tax Resistance, Counter-Recruitment campaigns, and Direct Actions on SUV manufacturers for contributing to oil dependence, are substantially more important, more powerful and, many would argue, more necessary tactics than letting the local priest know you’re down with his peace efforts.

I spoke with many attendees who left the Assembly wondering what had happened to the “resistance” in the resistance movement, and why the “anti-war movement,” in its present incarnation, is not addressing the root causes of our war policies.

Janice Matthews, a mother of six from Kansas City, Kansas, two of whom are draft age, has been involved with the [9/11 Truth Movement](#) since its inception more than two years ago. She and seven colleagues attended the Assembly to present a campaign to raise awareness of the government cover-up of the real facts behind the September 11th attacks. She believes that the proposals that were adopted at the Assembly speak pretty clearly to the direction of UFPJ and, more importantly, their seeming lack of willingness to accept or participate in any risk.

“It was a contingent of mainly middle-aged, middle-class Liberals who chose very safe, mostly easy proposals,” Matthews said, “and rejected the more powerful and potentially more ‘dangerous’ proposals—the ones that might have had a real impact. It also seemed like they alienated the youth contingent by flatly rejecting all the Direct Action proposals. I fear this will come back to haunt the movement.”

It was über-activist David Solnit who helped meld eight individually proposed Direct Action campaigns into one comprehensive “People Power” proposal. Solnit (who is so well-respected The Simpsons did an episode which parodied a composite of him and Julia Butterfly Hill called “Lisa the Treehugger”) disagrees with Matthews, even though his proposal was voted down.

“Those of us who brought the ‘People Power’ proposal did not expect it to pass for a number of reasons,” Solnit said. “But felt we had achieved our goals of raising the discussion of strategy and of a people power approach that moved from influencing to asserting power.”

Jim MacDonald of DAWN (the DC Anti-War Network) rebuffs Solnit’s acceptance of UFPJ’s refusal to adopt Direct Action plans. “I see a contradiction between pressuring Congress and nonviolent resistance because the rationale used for engaging in nonviolent resistance (especially nonviolent civil disobedience) is the belief that democracy and the democratic process are broken. I believe that one should always engage in negotiation rather than resistance if one still has the slightest hope. But many of us who engage in nonviolent resistance believe

that the system is hopelessly broken, and do not believe that it can be remedied at all.”

*People’s strategies of public opposition... are in my opinion unlikely to succeed until they expose the unjust secret arrangements and deals on which these official policies are based. The US political establishment, seemingly unassailable on its surface, becomes more vulnerable when the private, covert, and sometimes conspiratorial origins of what passes for public policy are exposed.*

- Peter Dale Scott, Oil, Drugs, and War

In social movements, such tactical conservatism is often linked to an underlying unwillingness to address root causes. At the UPFJ Assembly, this tendency played itself out in the marginalization of the “9/11 Truthers.”

Even though Matthews knows that she and fellow 9/11 Truthers are not popular people, that people say derogatory and mean-spirited things about them and the work they do, call them “crazy” and “conspiracy nuts” or just plain “freaks,” and make the ubiquitous snide remarks about tin foil hats when they are not around, she thought that they’d get at least a fair shake, considering that 9/11 is the lynchpin for the entire “War on Terror.” But despite meticulous research, well produced media presentations, and reams of compelling evidence that shows, at the very least, significant holes in the “official story,” Matthews soon learned that when Truthers do speak up, more often than not they find themselves marginalized out of the public debate.

“We submitted a proposal which summarized how 9/11 impacts the issues UFPJ and all their member groups take on regularly and therefore why it matters to them. We really asked for very little—simply that UFPJ publicly acknowledge the need for a real investigation into 9/11. Some of the members individually were very kind to our faces, and heaped lots of praise and bluster on us for our ‘courage’ and the ‘importance’ of our work, but in the end I don’t think they had any intention of taking us seriously. The fact that ‘second-tier’ proposals like ours, which didn’t ask for much in the way of UFPJ resources, were not even allowed into debate in the general Assembly didn’t help. Worse still, without even hearing pro and con statements or having an opportunity to ask questions about our proposal, it was voted down.”

Matthews colleague Gabriel Day believes those delegates who voted against 9/11 Truth did so because they only will let themselves believe in the safe “blowback” theory of 9/11, which asserts that the US was attacked solely by radical Islamic fundamentalists because of its policies in the Middle East, and that the Bush Administration chose to “hijack” this catastrophe to serve their own purposes, but had no idea the attacks were coming, nor had any complicity in organizing or facilitating them.

“This approach completely ignores mountains of evidence pointing to government foreknowledge and even potential complicity in the attacks,” said Day. “[UFPJ] are more concerned with ending the current hot conflict in Iraq and still fail to see the huge potential to derail the whole PNAC war machine by exposing the criminal, treasonous acts of 9/11.”

Rejection is something Matthews and her ilk have grown used to in this work. For strength, she has latched on to a quote by Michael Rivero which she thinks sums up the individual public resistance to 9/11 Truth:

*“Most people prefer to believe that their leaders are just and fair, even in the face of evidence to the contrary, because once a citizen acknowledges that the government under which he lives is lying and corrupt, the citizen has to choose what he or she will do about it. To take action in the face of corrupt government entails risks of harm to life and loved ones. To choose to do nothing is to surrender one’s self-image of standing for principles. Most people do not have the courage to face that choice. Hence, most propaganda is not designed to fool the critical thinker but only to give moral cowards an excuse not to think at all.”*

“Our issue took thought, reading, education, questioning,” Matthews says, airing a long, painful sigh. “‘Pressuring Congress & Elected Officials to Bring the Troops Home’ (one of the five proposals that passed) doesn’t take any thought, any courage, or outside-the-box thinking and is very easy to vote for. It also takes no

effort to get your membership to 'go along' with it."

In the end the UFPJ assembly appeared to have more in common with the recent Republican and Democratic conventions than it did with the now infamous 1969 SDS conference in Chicago. That loose analogy had been drawn on a few occasions preceding the gathering, owing to the crucial dilemma in which the "movement" now finds itself. It was, to many, a cliquish, backslapping exercise in self-adulation by the ruling elite of the "movement" within a rote setting where everything was predetermined and stage-managed. This was reflected not only in the tepid proposals passed by the Assembly, but also by the fact that "Steering Committee" membership turnover was nominal at best, even though the previous leadership had failed to make any sort of lasting impact on the American consciousness, and the "movement", as stated earlier, was floundering in obscurity.

Looking at the UFPJ 2005 "action plan" to end the war, one is reminded of the passage in Joyce's *A Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man* where eternity is described as a mountain of sand the size of Ireland, over which every million years a bird flies, swooping in to remove one single grain. But the question no one seems to be asking is, why did they approve such a milquetoast plan of action? What, if anything, was influencing their decisions?

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For a growing number of activists and concerned citizens, the American "anti-war movement" should not be only about protesting our one unpopular war in Iraq. It should be about bringing an end to this Leviathan known, speciously, as the United States Department of Defense (DOD), specious because it has a peculiar understanding of the word "Defense". With an annual budget of almost half a trillion dollars, the United States [funds a global garrison of 130 overseas military bases](#), fleets of air and water craft which control air space and shipping routes, a battalion of classified technology satellites with the ability to read a wristwatch, a standing army of 1.7 million of the most heavily armed professional soldiers on earth, and [an arsenal of 10,600 nuclear weapons on 15 minute alert](#) which have the capability to destroy the world a dozen times over.

The US is presently engaged in two hot wars in Central Asia, and plays a significant military role in the ongoing conflicts of Colombia, Georgia, Indonesia, the Philippines, and the Horn of Africa, which includes Ethiopia, Somalia, and the Sudan. It is currently engaged in diplomatic warfare against Iran, North Korea, Syria, Cuba, and Venezuela, and a hot conflict with one or more of the above is by all accounts imminent. The DOD routinely engages in arms deals with other nations in service of the weapons industry, which are used to foment civil wars and transnational conflicts and secure the illegal drug trade. The US also exports military training in "advisory" roles, generally a euphemism for providing intelligence and Special Forces support to indigenous armies.

And in what is perhaps the most contentious issue, the US gives somewhere in the neighborhood of \$11 billion annually in direct and indirect military aid to Israel, which the Israelis have used to build the fourth largest armed forces on earth, a secret stockpile of an estimated 200 nuclear warheads, and to continue the 38-year-old brutal occupation of Palestine. This aid, and the ongoing diplomatic cover the US gives Israel in the United Nations, is the bedrock of anti-American hatred in the Middle East, yet it goes largely misunderstood in the American public, and is intentionally censored by the "anti-war movement" [due to the strong pro-Israeli interests of the Democratic Party, their corporate benefactors, and the mainstream media, which plays a substantial role by intentionally misreporting and distorting news emerging from the Occupied Territories](#).

Recently, the US has consented to sell big-ticket arms to both India and Pakistan, irrespective of the fact that, of all the potential wars facing the world today, this one is considered the most likely conflict to end in a nuclear exchange.

The American people appear to have willingly acquiesced to a prevailing social culture of war and militarism, reflected in the biased reporting of corporate media and a flood of television, film, and [corporate promotions](#)

glorifying the military. The domestic impact of these war policies has had a devastating impact on federal social programs and state assistance. Moreover, with the Patriot Act and Department of Homeland Security, civil liberties and Constitutional protections have found themselves undermined, putting our very freedom in jeopardy.

This glaring policy disaster on the part of the leadership of the “anti-war movement” was discussed in an article by Virginia Rodino that appeared in Dissident Voice, “[How US Anti-War Activists Can Help Topple the Empire](#)”:

*The first implication is to simultaneously build an anti-imperialist movement, as we build the anti-war movement. An anti-imperialist movement will situate within our present work US military endeavors since World War II, and give our movement a history and theoretical foundation which is today in a weakened state. Deconstructing imperialism will also allow our movement to identify with current domestic crises, and give us the theoretical tools to identify and build broad coalitions with the masses of working people in the United States who also suffer from imperialism through such projects as the War on Drugs, union-busting, the prison-industrial-complex, and the two-corporate-party electoral system.*

*The anti-war movement must develop an understanding that the war in Iraq is linked inextricably to the entire neo-liberal project. As New York Times' columnist Thomas Friedman has unequivocally stated in an analysis cheerleading Madeline Albright's State Department, "The hidden hand of the market will never work without a hidden fist—McDonald's cannot flourish without McDonnell Douglas, the builder of the F-15. And the hidden fist that keeps the world safe for Silicon Valley's technologies is called the United States Army, Air Force, Navy, and Marine Corps."*

Rodino is a member of the UFPJ Steering Committee, and was compelled to put a disclaimer on this article clarifying the opinions stated therein were “solely her own.”

This omission of anti-imperialist rhetoric, and Rodino's forced disclaimer, speaks volumes to the present political climate, where it is “suicide” to challenge the legitimacy of the Leviathan. Americans have watched the Democratic Party becoming more and more unabashed about their support for the bloated and ever escalating “Defense” budget, and have stood in befuddlement as Democrats come out of the closet in droves regarding their support for the war in Iraq and developing conflicts with Iran and Syria. Listening to Howard Dean, Hilary Clinton, Chuck Schumer, Joe Lieberman, Joe Biden, Carl Levin, or even Barak Obama these days, one is hard pressed to differentiate between their rhetoric and that of the Neocons. Even ostensible “progressive” heroes like Barbara Boxer, John Conyers, Ted Kennedy, and Dick Durbin are mum on the Empire question.

Moreover, lest we all forget, the Democrats ran a pro-war candidate for President last year, and odds are they will run a pro-war candidate for President in 2008. This, to say the least, has presented a fundamental paradox within the “anti-war movement.”

UFPJ's most notable achievement—the half-million strong march during the RNC—was done under the slogan, “We Say No to the Bush Agenda!” But it's clear war is not just the Bush agenda, it is bipartisan Foreign Policy, as the Democrats have signed off on every dime Bush has bilked from the American people.

Eric Ruder, reporting on the Assembly for the Socialist Worker wrote, “Throughout the weekend, no one addressed the elephant in the living room—the decision of leading members and forces in UFPJ to campaign for John Kerry. For most of last year, the antiwar movement was at a standstill—even as the potential audience for antiwar opposition increased, and the US occupation was shaken by the Abu Ghraib torture scandal and a growing Iraqi resistance.”

Perhaps a smaller elephant to consider is how UFPJ got away with its surreptitious campaigning for Kerry when it is prohibited by law from doing so, under the very not-for-profit rules that keep it from adopting a more appropriate radical anti-imperialist, anti-war agenda.

Two things become have become readily apparent. The first is that it has been clear for some time that the Democratic Party is not particularly interested in peace. So long as the “anti-war movement” remains in bed with the Democratic Party, regardless of whatever dubious claims they make about the anti-war sentiments of “the rank and file” of the party, they will never be permitted to address the legitimacy of the Leviathan.

The second is that Iraq truly is a huge and magnificent pissing match between the two ruling parties and their respective corporate benefactors. This schism can more properly be described as two competing forms of Neoliberal expansionism. And they are fighting it out any way they can, including flooding millions of dollars through various establishment foundations down into the not-for-profit activist sector, where a few, highly visible members of the “progressive left” have imprisoned the “anti-war” debate inside Iraq like an ideological Abu Ghraib.

Next week: *Who and What are “The Gatekeepers of the So-Called Left”?*

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