

20 Years Ago, the World Said No to War

A look back at the history-making mobilization against the Iraq War that turned ordinary people into a “second superpower” — one we badly need today.

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Twenty years ago — on February 15, 2003 — the world said no to war. People rose up in almost 800 cities around the world in an unprecedented movement for peace.

The world stood on the precipice of war. U.S. and U.K. warplanes and warships — filled with soldiers and sailors and armed with the most powerful weapons ever used in conventional warfare — were streaming towards the Middle East, aimed at Iraq.

Anti-war mobilizations had been underway for more than a year as the threat of war against Iraq took hold in Washington, even as the war in Afghanistan had barely begun.

Opposition to the war in Afghanistan was difficult following the 9/11 terrorist attacks. Even though none of the hijackers were Afghans and none lived in Afghanistan, most Americans saw the war as a legitimate response — a view that would change over the next two decades, with the vast majority saying the war wasn’t worth fighting when American troops were withdrawn in 2021.

But Iraq was different from the beginning. There was always opposition. And as the activist movement grew, its grounding in a sympathetic public expanded too. By the time February 15, 2003 came around — a year and five months after the 9/11 attacks — condemnation of the looming war was broad and fierce.

Plans for February 15 had been international from the beginning, starting with a call to mobilize against the war issued at the European Social Forum in Florence in November 2002. With just a few weeks of organizing, the first internet-based global protest erupted.

On that day, beginning early in the morning, demonstrators filled the streets of capital cities and tiny villages around the world. The protests followed the sun, from Australia and New

Zealand and the small Pacific islands, through the snowy steppes of North Asia and down across Southeast Asia and the South Asian peninsula, across Europe and down to the southern tip of Africa, then jumping the pond first to Latin America and then finally, last of all, to the United States.

Across the globe, the call came in scores of languages: “The world says no to war!” and “Not in our name!” echoed from millions of voices. The Guinness Book of World Records said between 12 and 14 million people came out that day — the largest protest in the history of the world. The great British labor and peace activist, former MP Tony Benn, described it to the million Londoners in the streets that day as “the first global demonstration, and its first cause is to prevent a war against Iraq.”

What a concept — a global protest against a war that had not yet begun, with the goal to stop it.

Standing against the scourge of war



The February 15 mobilization was so broad that even it reached researchers in Antarctica. (Still from Amir Amirani’s “We Are Many”)

It was an amazing moment — a movement that pushed governments around the world to do the unthinkable: They resisted pressure from the United States and the United Kingdom and said no to endorsing Bush’s war.

The governmental opposition included the “Uncommitted Six” members of the UN Security Council. Under ordinary circumstances, U.S.-dependent and relatively weak countries like Angola, Cameroon, Chile, Guinea, Mexico, and Pakistan could never have stood up to Washington alone. But these were not ordinary circumstances.

With diplomatic support from “Old Europe,” including Germany and France who for their own reasons opposed the war, the thousands filling the streets of their capitals allowed the Six to resist fierce pressure from Washington.

The U.S. threatened to kill a free-trade agreement seven years in the making with Chile. (The trade agreement was quite terrible, but the Chilean government was committed to it.) Washington threatened to cancel U.S. aid, granted under the African Growth & Opportunity Act, to Guinea and Cameroon. Mexico faced the potential end of negotiations over immigration and the border. And yet all stood firm.

The day before the protests, February 14, the Security Council was called into session once again, this time at the foreign minister level, to hear the final reports of the two UN weapons inspectors for Iraq.

Many had anticipated that their reports would somehow wiggle around the truth — that they would say something Bush and Blair would grab to try to legitimize their spurious claims of Iraq's alleged weapons of mass destruction. Or at least they might appear ambivalent enough for the U.S. to use their reports to justify war.

But the inspectors refused to bend the truth, stating unequivocally that no such weapons had been found.

Following their reports, French Foreign Minister Dominique de Villepin responded with an extraordinary call, reminding the world that “the United Nations must remain an instrument of peace, and not a tool for war.” In that usually staid, formal, rule-bound chamber, his call was answered with a roaring ovation beginning with Council staff and quickly embracing the diplomats and foreign ministers themselves.

Enough governments said no that the United Nations was able to do what its Charter requires, but what political pressure too often makes impossible: stand against the scourge of war.

A new internationalism

On the morning of February 15, just hours before the massive New York rally began outside the United Nations, the great actor-activist Harry Belafonte and I accompanied South African Archbishop Desmond Tutu to meet with then-Secretary-General Kofi Annan on behalf of the protesters. We had to be escorted by police to cross what the NYPD had designated its “frozen zone” — not in reference to the bitter 18 degree temperature or the biting wind whipping in from the East River, but the forcibly deserted streets directly in front of UN headquarters.

In the secretary-general's office on the 38th floor, Bishop Tutu opened the meeting. He looked at Kofi across the table and said, “We are here today on behalf of those people marching in cities all around the world. And we are here to tell you, that those people marching in all those cities around the world, we claim the United Nations as our own. We claim it in the name of our global mobilization for peace.”

It was an incredible moment. And while we weren't able to prevent the Iraq war, the global mobilization pulled governments and the United Nations into a trajectory of resistance shaped and led by global movements. We created what the *New York Times* the next day called “the second superpower.” It was a new kind of internationalism.

Midway through the marathon New York rally, a brief *Associated Press* story came over the wires: “Rattled by an outpouring of international anti-war sentiment, the United States and

Britain began reworking a draft resolution.... Diplomats, speaking on condition of anonymity, said the final product may be a softer text that does not explicitly call for war.” Faced with a global challenge to their desperate struggle for UN and global legitimacy, Bush and Blair threw in the towel.

Someone called in the text to those of us backstage. A quick debate: Should we announce it? What if it wasn't true? What did it mean? A quick decision: Yes, the people have the right to know. Someone pushed me back out onto the stage to read the text.

Half a million people or more, shivering in the cold, roared their approval.

We didn't stop the war. But we changed history.

Our movement changed history, but we didn't prevent the Iraq war. While the AP story was true, it reflected the U.S.-U.K. decision to ignore international law and the UN Charter and go to war in violation of them both.

Still, the protests proved the war's clear illegality and demonstrated the isolation of the Bush administration's policies — and later helped prevent war in Iran in 2007 and the bombing of Syria in 2013. And they inspired a generation of activists.

February 15 set the terms for what “global mobilizations” could accomplish. Eight years later some Cairo activists, embarrassed at the relatively small size of their protest on February 15, would go on to help lead Egypt's Arab Spring as it overthrew a U.S.-backed dictator. Occupy protesters would be inspired by February 15 and its internationalism. Spain's *indignados* and others protesting austerity and inequality would see February 15 as a model of moving from national to global protest.

In New York City on that singular afternoon, some of the speakers had particular resonance for those shivering in the monumental crowd.

Harry Belafonte, veteran of so many of the progressive struggles of the last three-quarters of a century, called out to the rising U.S. mobilization against war and empire, reminding us that our movement could change the world, and that the world was counting on us to do so.

“The world has sat with tremendous anxiety, in great fear that we did not exist,” he said. “But America is a vast and diverse country, and we are part of the greater truth that makes our nation. We stand for peace, for the truth of what is at the heart of the American people. We *will* make a difference — that is the message that we send out to the world today.”

Belafonte was followed by his close friend and fellow activist-actor Danny Glover, who spoke of earlier heroes, of Sojourner Truth and Harriet Tubman, and of the great Paul Robeson on whose shoulders we still stand. And then he shouted: “We stand here today because our right to dissent, and our right to participate in a real democracy, has been hijacked by those who call for war. We stand here at this threshold of history, and we say to the world, ‘Not in Our Name’! ‘Not in Our Name!’”

The huge crowd, shivering in the icy wind, took up the cry, and “Not in our Name!” echoed through the New York streets.

Our movement's obligation as “the second superpower” remains. February 15 inspired a

generation. Now what we need is a strategy to rebuild the breadth and intensity of that moment, to build broadly enough to engage with power and to challenge once again the wars and militarism, the poverty and inequality, the racism and xenophobia and so much more oppression that still faces people around the world.

We have a lot of work to do.

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Featured image: Antiwar demonstrators protest against the looming Iraq War in New York, February 15, 2003. (Still from Amir Amirani's "We Are Many")

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