

Winter Soldiers Hit the Streets

By [Dahr Jamail](#)

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SEATTLE, Jun 3 (IPS) - In a clear change of strategy to energise public anti-war sentiment, Iraq veterans led a determined demonstration of hundreds through the streets of downtown Seattle last Saturday, following regional Winter Soldier hearings at the Seattle Town Hall.

A larger Winter Soldier event occurred at the National Labour College in Silver Spring, Maryland from Mar. 13 to Mar. 16 earlier this year. But the strategy for those hearings appeared to be based on keeping the event from being directly affiliated with any demonstrations or anti-war activities in an attempt to reach a broader audience. Those hearings were closed to the public, and no demonstrations or other overtly public actions were tied to the event.

This tactic was apparently meant to draw in more national mainstream media coverage of the event, which, with few exceptions, did not materialise.

Chanan Suarez Diaz, the Seattle Chapter president of Iraq Veterans Against the War (IVAW), which organised last weekend's event, had told IPS that his chapter, along with others in the northwest region, intended to make a major effort to draw the public into both the testimonials and taking action afterwards.

The Seattle regional Winter Soldier event was open to the public.

A late April poll conducted by CNN/Opinion Research Corp. found that nearly three-quarters (68 percent) of respondents opposed the Iraq war. The strategy of the regional IVAW groups is clearly meant to capitalise on the growing opposition to the occupation of Iraq among the U.S. public.

Christopher Diggins, a psychotherapist who attended the demonstration, reflected the feelings of many — that this strategy is important.

"This tactic is better because you have to get the community involved," Diggins told IPS. "You have to have community awareness and support."

"I want to show my solidarity for vets who are against the war, because it is the only way this war is going to stop," he added. "It's hard to have the war if nobody is going to fight."

Diggins founded the Soldiers Project Northwest in Washington State (www.thesoldiersproject.org). The project is a group of therapists that volunteer to work one hour per week each with soldiers and their families who need assistance.

Saturday's event found veterans leaving their testimony to lead a crowd directly onto the

streets to begin a demonstration. Protestors chanting “U.S. out of the Middle East, No Justice, No Peace,” and carrying signs such as “You Can’t Be All You Can Be If You’re Dead!” stopped traffic for nearly an hour.

“I’m here to support the war resisters,” Theresa Mosqueda, a Seattle resident who works on health policy advocacy for children and marched behind members of Iraq Veterans Against the War (IVAW), told IPS, “They are the core part of ending this war. This is an illegal and immoral war, and the resisters have the power to stop it.”

At least one Iraq war veteran joined IVAW as a result of attending the hearings last weekend.

Several of the vets urged onlookers to join the march, and many did as the demonstration passed by Seattle’s bustling Pike Place Market.

Nick Spring, a student from Western Washington University in Bellingham, Washington, was one of the marchers. “I came down today because it’s a great way to be informed by the vets, support GI resistance, and try to end the war,” Spring told IPS.

The regional winter soldier hearings were a smaller event, and there was no national mainstream media coverage. However, there was heavy local and alternative media coverage. At least one of the major Seattle television stations covered the testimonials, as well as the Seattle Post-Intelligencer, the largest paper in the region.

The group Just Foreign Policy estimates that over 1.2 million Iraqis have died since the U.S.-led invasion began in March 2003. The Opinion Business Research group in Britain estimates the same number.

According to the U.S. Department of Defence, at least 4,086 U.S. soldiers have died in Iraq.

Many of the demonstrators were vets themselves who had just given testimony about their time in Iraq. They included Josh Simpson, Sergio Kochergin, Seth Manzel, Mateo Rebecchi, Jan Critchfield, Doug Connor, and many others.

Children numbered among the demonstrators as well. Nine-year-old Wes Cunningham, accompanied by his father, was asked by IPS why he was in attendance.

“It’s a cool march,” he said. “And I think it’s bad to kill other human beings.”

IVAW now boasts over 1,200 members, a 50 percent increase since the March Winter Soldier hearings in Maryland. The fastest growing segment of their membership is active-duty soldiers.

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Articles by: **Dahr Jamail**

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