

DEMONSTRATE IT

By Michael Ventura

January 25, 1991

Americans were frightened of getting into this conflict, but it's clear now that what they feared wasn't war but failure. As I write on the fifth day of fighting, our pricey weapons seem to be working beyond expectations and Iraqi resistance has been pitiful. Experts say that American casualties thus far are what they'd expect from a military *exercise* with this many ships, planes and people. Saddam's missiles have done minimal damage to Israel. And now that it appears we are not going to fail, America doesn't much mind this war.

Crunch this: polls show 76 percent of American women and 87 percent of American men, agree with Bush's decision to go to war – over 80 percent of the country as a whole. More than 60 percent believe there should be no protesting while our troops are fighting. (“Wait till *after* the war to protest it,” seems to be their thinking.) Democrats of the lower middle class and poor support this war by three to one. Blacks were “overwhelmingly” against it a week before we attacked; they're split 50-50 now.

All of which could change tomorrow. The numbers will tilt wildly on the latest news break. But what the numbers say on any specific day doesn't matter much. What matters deeply is what these polls prove: that for the majority of Americans the war itself is not the issue; the issue is whether we're good at it. If, as in Vietnam, we're not, then the public might be coaxed into wondering whether we should be there; but if, as in the Gulf so far, we excel, then clearly their feeling is, “Go for it.”

The Bush administration has been smart enough to understand this. Smart enough to see that the debate was less about the morality of this war than about the hassle. Even “No Blood for Oil,” a pretty good slogan, plays less on conscience than on the fear of pain. As individuals, most Americans feel horror and grief at war; as parts of the collective, we feel fear that it might further disrupt our society. But these are very different feelings, with different motives, from different parts of the psyche. And Bush (like Reagan) understands that the emotions through which people connect with the collective, and not what they feel individually, are the heart of politics.

So while the left appeals to our individual consciences, Bush plays on our collective shame. While lefties make speeches trying to shame America into behaving, Bush understands that the majority can't bear any more national shame. The national psyche is bursting with shame at failure, shame at shoddiness, shame at collapse. For not only did we lose Vietnam, we lost Detroit and New York. The Vietnamese fought harder, the Japanese make better cars, the Germans do money better, while all over Europe and the Pacific Rim others are healthier, give their kids a better education, and enjoy safer streets. As if this weren't enough, in Vietnam we lost more than a war, we lost our reputation. We will never again be seen as clean. Not by others, not by ourselves. Success in the Gulf then, is a tonic. If we can't be happy or good, perhaps we can be, in the street sense, "bad." This is not a feeling to be underestimated in a people hooked on violent entertainment, arrogant music, and the conflict of sports. It is easily tapped.

The left always goofs when it comes to America's collective identity. Tragically, the right has a much better feel for things. It is usually understood that people act one way in privacy, another in matters of livelihood, and still another when they're thinking of themselves as part of a large group. The psychologist R.D. Laing analyzed this:

"Consider the metamorphoses that one man may go through in one day as he moves from one mode of sociality to another – family man, speck of crowd dust, functionary at an organization, friend. These are not simply different roles: each is a whole past and present and future, offering different options and constraints, different kinds of closeness and distance, different sets of rights and obligations, different pledges and promises."

The catch is that often your different selves or centers don't consult each other, aren't even aware of each other, yet they all speak with the same mouth and sign the same signature.

Thus many of us don't connect our heart's ideals to what we do for financial security. Our sensual and intellectual centers will have conflicting agendas. Or we'll judge our private and collective behaviors by entirely different standards. And we'll hardly know it. Otherwise sane people will marry someone whom all their friends can see is nearly psychotic. Whites who "believe" (with one part of their psyche) in integration and citizenship will send their children to a private school to avoid both. Artists passionately critical of the government will live off NEA grants. And people desperate for peace in their own lives support a war in the Gulf.

(Much of this will be defended by calling the heart's ideals "impractical" and the public life "real." But that's only a way of labeling, and assigning values to, one's fragments. Naming is a way of choosing. What would happen if we called our ideals "real"?)

The irony is that the right pretends not to understand psychology, while the left thinks it knows it all. Perhaps it's that the right *doesn't* understand, but finds collective thinking easier and so appeals naturally to wide numbers of people. While the left, believing that it understands, keeps trying to appeal to the wrong part of the psyche. For if you appeal to the individual part of the psyche for a collective purpose, you're on dangerous ground.

First, you tend to attract a kind of subcollective of people who (rightly or wrongly) think of themselves as individuals – bohemians like me, who look crazy on television. The inner split I spoke of happens in bohemians this way: we're very proud of looking and behaving differently from those of the middle class, and we love to criticize them; at the same time we want their money, demand to be included in their deliberations, and get piqued when they don't take our advice. Understandably, they're not very impressed with us and don't trust us. They have the idea that we're asking more from them than we're willing to give in return, and they're right.

Second, what unifies a movement? After we go home from the demonstration, *are* we still a movement? Only if we're grounded in a shared vision. "Give Peace a Chance" is not a vision, it's a sentiment. Having a vision means we have some fundamental ideas of how we want the world to be. On the pro-choice movement, the freedom of women to control their own bodies is a concrete step toward a very different world; that's a vision. But end the war and what? Go back to where we were a month ago? Six months ago? That's only a protest, not a movement. There's a difference. Protests will mean very little if the war proceeds successfully; a movement articulates something for the future, and that is always important.

What, then, should the left appeal to?

We should take our cues from Gandhi and Martin Luther King, Jr., and the people at Tian An Men Square and in Eastern Europe. King was a minister, Gandhi was a lawyer, they had deep respect for their communities, and wanted to give regular people

good reason for getting out in the streets. They *assumed* individual conscience, but appealed beyond it to the most common causes in their respective peoples, causes that could be felt collectively and positively. Which is to say, historically. They could make people feel not that they were resisting somebody else's history, but that they themselves were history.

With Gandhi, King, Tian An Men, and Eastern Europe, the core of the argument was a non-violent critique of their entire society. They saw the power of the state as resting purely on its capacity for violence, and they opposed that power bravely with a non-violent vision of an entirely different kind of state. They presented this vision not by shaming society but by *demonstrating* something better. That's what a demonstration means –it's certainly what it meant to Martin Luther King. You are there to demonstrate your belief, to show how it works. So King's and Gandhi's civil disobediences weren't hectic or frenzied or showoffish; they presented the world they wanted, they were dignified, courageous, peaceful. They articulated a great collective dream. When you see films of their actions, you know what they stand for by the way they behave.

King, Gandhi, and the Eastern Europeans achieved structural change. The behavior of the white American left has not. That speaks for itself.

A war that's being won is impossible to stop. A victorious government with 80-percent approval doesn't care about your protest. But the *country* (which is different from the government) can be made to care about your *demonstration*. It's not enough to be against the war. It's not enough to express our individualities. It's certainly not enough to accuse America of being rotten – not if we expect to change it. You must ask the questions that King and Gandhi asked: What kind of a world do you want for everybody? And how can that world be demonstrated?

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