

The D.C. rally and political belonging

Asma Barlas

By all accounts, the antiwar rally on October 26 in Washington, D.C. was the largest since the anti-Vietnam War protests, whether one puts the number of people who came at 200,000 (as the organizers did) or at 100,000 (as did segments of the media). The point is, “every spot in the 1.7 miles of marching area was full. In other words, we had the White House completely surrounded,” as a professor of English wrote on October 28 in a commentary for *Alternet.org*.

This wasn't the first public demonstration against the dangerous and opportunistic war-mongering policies of the Bush-Cheney-Rumsfeld trio; rallies now are taking place with increasing regularity around the country, reflecting people's growing frustration and anger with the administration's handling of domestic and foreign policy issues.

This rage and dissatisfaction were obvious in D.C. Speakers—who included grassroots and human rights activists, civil rights lawyers, union organizers, war veterans, Jesse Jackson, Al Sharpton, and Susan Sarandon—as well as the thousands of banners and placards that protestors were carrying made it clear that the Bush administration does not have the right to wage war and terror in the name of the American people, even those who lost relatives in 9/11. In fact, one of the most explicit and unsettling slogans that people periodically reverted to shouting was “Hey Bush, you corporate wh--e, we don't want your bloody war,” alongside chants of “End the violence, end the hate!” and “No more violence, no more war!”

In addition to opposing a war “on” Iraq, people also said that “regime change” needed to begin at home and that the war-mongering was meant to distract attention from domestic problems, such as gross corporate corruption and financial instability which have resulted in thousands of people being laid off and many losing their retirement funds as well.

People had not only come from far away cities to take part in the rally, but also all sorts of people had come: there were white and black and all possible shades of brown, the very young and the very old; the affluent (as was clear from such placards as “Suburban Middle Class Americans against the war”), and the working class, college and high school students and professionals; the militant and the “peaceniks,” and people of several different religious and spiritual persuasions.

Many Muslims were conspicuous because of their dress; two women, in hijab, held up a banner with a Qur'anic verse on it exhorting believers to stand as witness to justice while some carried banners with the *kalima*, and others Iraqi flags and placards denouncing US policies for their double standards.

Several demonstrators belonged to theatre groups and acted out various scenes as they marched by (some held coffins, others dolls representing dead children), many carried puppets several feet tall, mounted on cycles and operated by two or three people. The

placards also conveyed a wide range of messages, from “Power Puff Girls for Peace” (carried by a very young girl), to one with the following legend: “Drunk Frat boy drives country into ditch; starts war to cover up,” which elicited a lot of laughter.

Had I not been in D.C., I never would have seen this amazingly vibrant side of political culture in the US. CNN covered the rally for five seconds and said only that an estimated 200,000 people had taken part in it; the rest of the media, barring a few papers, either ignored or down-played it, or, worse, misrepresented it, as when a journalist for National Public Radio claimed that only 10,000 people had been at the demonstration.

In the twenty odd years that I’ve lived in the US, I’ve always heard that “the American people” have very little knowledge of, or interest in, what US administrations do to other people or in other countries. In fact, this has been one of my own pet peeves for a long time: that some pretty horrendous stuff gets done abroad in the name of the American people who seemingly are moved only by what they feel discernibly impinges upon their own immediate interests. And, yet, as I learned in DC, while that may generally be true, plenty of Americans not only are not as ignorant or as uncaring as they are made out to be, but they also are looking to make a difference in the only way in which people in a democracy know how to beyond voting: through peaceful, organized, protest.

I suppose I’ve known this all along, but I’ve never before felt personally invested in such political currents even though, as a first generation immigrant, I have been struggling to find a sense of political and personal belonging here. This has been difficult not only because there is so little cultural space for Muslims, but also because I have not found much in the way of official political culture that I can relate to, agree with, or respect. To the contrary, I feel angry, helpless, and mortified by the death and destruction that the US every so often inflicts upon others and with how most Americans confuse violence and war with patriotism.

In D.C., I found another expression of patriotism and while it is not necessarily patriotism that I seek to cultivate right now, it was a healing antidote for my anger, alienation, and marginalization. I have no illusions that I can live completely at peace in the US, but, on that sunny afternoon in the streets in D.C., I suddenly realized the truth of what I have been resisting for so long: that, for better or for worse, this is now my home and where I now belong; how I choose to express this is up to me. As a first step, today I registered to vote for the first time by becoming a member of the Green Party. One step at a time . . .