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The Defunding of the Peace Movement

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Last December I wrote an [optimistic cover story](#) for *The Nation* predicting that "peace advocates will likely have the best funded antiwar message in history" during the coming election year, as "tens of millions of dollars will be raised for voter education and registration and get-out-the-vote campaigns through the 527 committees which disseminate election messages independent of partisan candidates."

A new network, it was believed, would take the linked messages of the Iraq War and economic recession to millions of voters beyond the previous reach of the peace movement. A total of \$12 million already had been expended on independent campaigns in Republican districts in late summer 2007, and much more greater cumulative funding was expected, from groups ranging from MoveOn, SEIU, members of the Democracy Alliance and wealthy Democratic donors who already had maxed out in candidate contributions.

It was downhill from that point, for reasons that may never be explained. For one thing, there was resentment that the \$12 million might have been wasted in top-down campaigns that failed to break the Republican support for Bush's war. Then in early September 2007, Senate Majority Leader Harry Reid and coalition coordinator Tom Matzzie were meeting with Democratic donors in New York City when a new setback occurred. The [MoveOn ad](#) attacking Gen. David Petraeus caused a severe Republican backlash, making already-nervous Democrats even more nervous at the association. Matzzie faded from view. Nevertheless, plans moved forward for an independent campaign on the "Iraq recession," but then there came a "complete drop-off of funding for antiwar organizing," in the words of Jeff Blum, director of US Action.

"I can't tell you how frustrating it is to watch each day go by with opportunities missed...just because we lack the resources to do what we know needs to be done," says UFPJ director Leslie Cagan. "If we, UFPJ, had \$100,000, a mere fraction of that \$100 million, we could put organizers in key states around the country and give them the tools to work with for several months." Blum adds, "We need an earned media effort that helps us reframe the war in a cross-cutting way that moves a substantial number of Americans to take the view that the war is wrong and connect it to a solution, namely, to safely, quickly and completely end the war, starting January 21, 2009." Blum believes an antiwar media message would be most effective around the upcoming presidential debates.

Ironically, the biggest single factor in the collapse of the massively funded peace project might have been the rising and unexpected primary campaign of Barack Obama, himself an antiwar candidate. Not only did unprecedented contributions flow online to Obama but the Senator also strongly disavowed the use of 527 committees (which are named after a section of the federal tax code covering independent contributions). In practical terms, this meant that big donors would not feel as "rewarded" for independent expenditures as they would for direct contributions to the presidential campaign and other party committees.

Furthermore, according to a usually reliable Washington insider, Democratic leaders Nancy Pelosi and Harry Reid lost some enthusiasm for highlighting the Iraq issue because it exposed the Democratic Congress's failure to defund and end the war.

As things stand today, if the projected millions are to be spent on an anti-Iraq, anti-McCain message, it will have to come through the Obama campaign or not at all.

But as Obama becomes more hawkish on Afghanistan, the antiwar movement and Democrats face a splintering process between those who want to militarily defeat the Taliban (the Vote Vets PAC, Tom Matzzie, Rand Beers and his "liberal" National Security Network etc.) and nearly all the mainstream peace groups who believe that Afghanistan and Pakistan are deepening quagmires. Obama's endorsement of a NATO role for Georgia will divide or alienate the rank-and-file even further.

Obama's solid peace position now seems to be against the war in Iraq or military escalation to Iran, which sets him apart from McCain. But Obama is sinking dangerously into orthodox paradigms on the war on terrorism, the new cold war and even the war on drugs in places like Colombia. His "[cast of 300](#)" foreign policy advisers, while emphasizing "soft power" approaches more than militarism, "fall well within centrist Democratic foreign policy thinking." Such "thinking" is often more about political positioning than substance, devoted to propping up the reputational interests of the United States as a superpower. It effectively dilutes Obama as a peace candidate while committing him to the path of "marching toward hell," the title of a [recent book](#) by Michael Scheuer, who tracked Osama bin Laden for the CIA.

An independent 527 campaign could clearly make the case that McCain represents those who originally manipulated Americans into the Iraq War, as well as those fomenting Georgia's current conflict with the Russians. [Randy Scheunemann](#), former leader of the Committee for the Liberation of Iraq, former director of the Project for the New American Century and recent paid lobbyist for the government of Georgia, is now McCain's senior foreign policy adviser. McCain and the neoconservatives' vision seems to be *There will be blood*. They are reigniting the cold war and rolling it into their "war on terrorism" as one seamless effort to scare America into voting for McCain. With that agenda, say goodbye to healthcare and the independent judiciary, for starters.

Obama will not deliver such a message, even if he believes it. But 527 committees and the blogosphere could carry be sharply questioning McCain's ability to keep us out of unnecessary, avoidable and costly wars, a perfect response to those who say Obama lacks experience.

Apparently such a well-funded message is not to be, and the election could hang in the balance, once again contrasting hope against fear.

MoveOn is so far alone among peace groups in having the ability to raise one or two million dollars in the coming months. SEIU's plans for antiwar funding are currently unknown or nonexistent. The Obama finance committee is under more pressure, literally, to pay Hillary Clinton's [debt to Mark Penn](#) than to fund any messages on war, recession and global warming.

However, having already built campaigns in many Congressional districts against Iraq War funding, the everyday antiwar movement is planning a huge One Million Doors for Peace campaign, to culminate September 20. A diverse coalition, including UFPI, Peace Action, US Action, Peace Voters, Pax Christi and others, is planning to contact a million voters at their doors with a peace petition as the presidential campaign and numerous Congressional races intensify. Those contacts will be followed up through election day, with the names of voters available through the Catalyst voter file. Alongside the organizing for September 20, there will be multiple opportunities for face-to-face as well as Internet messages against McCain's toxic vision of permanent war and crony capitalism.

One of the key "million doors" organizers, Tom Swan, thinks "we can literally knock on millions of doors on September 20 and get hundreds of thousands of petition signers from all fifty states. We have proven we can mobilize, now it is having these people talking with fellow voters. They can download turf and enter signers from the web or join local events. The social networking tools can really help mobilize here. Since we are sending a petition to Congress to end the war on a faster timeline than any campaign is talking about, the groups can participate. We are keeping it "issue" and not "candidate." The mainstream media and political class have tried to bury the issue. But if we organize this right and play the earned media well we move it front and center."

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