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War and Volunteers: History Repeats Itself

By [Susan J. Ellis](#)

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The war in Iraq is the overwhelming news story of the moment. As an American committed to building an international community for our field, I want to go on record as being deeply opposed to this military invasion. Regardless, I'm sure we all want the fighting to end quickly, with a minimum of bloodshed and an outcome that improves the world.

A leopard can't change its spots and I can't see a situation without thinking about volunteers. So this month I'd like to ruminate on conflict, politics, protest, and volunteering.

When Katie Noyes Campbell and I wrote the first edition of *By the People: A History of Americans as Volunteers* in the 1970s, we were disconcerted to realize that logical chapter breaks most consistently fell just before or just after a war. Military action evokes citizen action, and such activities have been remarkably similar from war to war. Yes, we now have the Internet as a new twist, but the purpose of the communication it fosters is the same: mobilizing people to a cause. As a point of information, the first American peace/resistance movement began at the time of the Revolutionary War.

Take a volunteer perspective on the Iraq conflict and observe global response:

- Whether for or against the military action, it's citizen activists - volunteers - who are taking to the streets to express their opinion and engage in public demonstrations. Tactics range from peaceful candlelight vigils to civil disobedience with the intent of being arrested (such as blocking traffic with a "die in" of bodies all over Fifth Avenue in New York). There are many Web sites devoted to either or both sides of this emotional topic. A few to check out are: United for Peace: <http://www.unitedforpeace.org/>, the BBC News "talking point" feature: http://news.bbc.co.uk/2/hi/talking_point/2742687.stm, Rally for America (Glenn Beck): <http://www.glennbeck.com/?s=Rally+for+America>, International Answer: <http://www.internationalanswer.org/>, and the Independent Media Center (<http://www.indymedia.org/>) where you can read reports from dozens of countries.

- Projects conducted by volunteers to support the troops range from collecting/sending lip balm and sun screen to making it possible for deployed parents to read bedtime stories to their children from overseas. See many more opportunities described by the USA Freedom Corps at: http://www.usafreedomcorps.gov/for_volunteers/spotlight/articles/200303-...
- There are also many organizations from dozens of countries sending humanitarian aid to Iraqi civilians, especially food and medicine – all with donations of time and money from volunteers. For just a few examples, see the list provided in Network for Good (*no longer available*).
- Great effort is going into lobbying government officials in the US, the UK, and Australia to protest the war or to recommend subsequent actions. Volunteers are involved in building information Web sites (and posting to them), writing to legislators (or calling, faxing, and visiting), circulating petitions, and other actions to get attention.
- There is a growing worldwide movement to boycott American products. One German Web site (with a choice of four different languages), www.consumers-against-war.de, calls for boycotts of 27 top American firms from Microsoft to Kodak while another, www.adbusters.org, urges the "millions of people against the war" to "Boycott Brand America." This, naturally, is a counterpart to the emergence of "freedom fries" (as opposed to "French" fries) and drinking American sparkling wines rather than champagne. And if you think this is anything new, remember that the historical reason Americans drink so much coffee is that the colonists refused to pay the British tea tax in the 1700s.

Some will automatically note: "And don't forget that our military is an all-volunteer fighting force." It is true that in some wars (maybe even in this one) individuals enlist specifically to support that cause. But, in truth, the American military is "voluntary," meaning non-draft, rather than "volunteer." Service people receive a salary and benefits and, for most of those in the military prior to March 19, enlistment was a job choice unconnected to any specific conflict (even in the hope that no combat will be experienced). All of the protest/support activities just listed above are done without financial remuneration and separate from what participants might do to earn a living.

Much of this activity is what we call "spontaneous" volunteering, akin to the outpouring of service that occurred immediately after September 11th. Apart from the very real political beliefs expressed, consider other possible motivations for these volunteers:

- War, just as natural disasters, leaves people frightened and feeling helpless. The act of *doing* something useful channels these emotions and allows volunteers to regain some sense of control over at least one small part of the situation.
- Isolation increases fear. Volunteering brings people together with others who are experiencing the same crisis and reacting in the same way - in this case, with those who are for or against the war. It's "mutual coping" through support of one another.
- Sitting at home listening to news reports requires patience and trust of the news sources. But helping out on site puts the volunteer "in the know," seeing what is going on first hand and being a part of it.

- If a loved one is involved (most especially if serving in the military right now), volunteering is a way to avoid panic and fear. It might be categorized as “therapeutic self-help.”

As can be seen above by only the partial list of things that volunteers are doing right now, the activities are incredibly diverse and not every one offers emotional support. But the actual activity may not be as important as the doing of it. Volunteering is *engagement*. It requires getting up and out, affiliating with a cause, joining forces with others. In this way it is personally powerful.

I find myself asking some questions to which I don't know the answer, but would value the responses of colleagues:

- Do the ferocity and volume of anti-/pro- war action around the world belie the common wisdom that “people just don't want to get involved”?
- Can agency-based volunteer programs and all-volunteer membership associations capitalize on the current situation, channeling the urge to “go public” with a political point of view into necessary community service work? How?
- Is there negative, positive, or no effect if we practice business-as-usual in these serious times?

As Kristin, our Webmaster said in reaction to reading a first draft of this essay:

Why does war bring out all kinds of volunteers but situations that can be equally devastating to the lives of individuals - lack of national health insurance in the U.S., over- development of land, over-population - don't cause the same reaction? What can we do to make people see how immediate and devastating these things are and rally the same kind of volunteer support?

In your responses, please stay focused on the volunteerism perspective on war (you are welcome to share other examples of war-related volunteering, too). My Webmaster made me hold back from sharing more of my political views and I am asking others to do the same! However, if you'd like to have a personal discussion with me about the war, feel free to e-mail me privately.

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Submitted on 30Apr03 by Frank Pomata, Director, MS 172 Beacon Program, New York, USA

I am very surprised that this hot topic did not elicit a greater response than what I see posted on the website as of today.

Submitted on 7Apr03 by Sarah Jane Rehnborg, Ph.D., RGK Center for Philanthropy and Community Service, LBJ School of Public Affairs, Austin, TX

Although there is much to be said about the war itself, I continue to be struck by the small turn-out in virtually every US election. I have printed out voter registration forms (generally available on internet sites as well as local government offices, etc.) and am making them available. When my own son turned 18 this past year, he received a voter registration form in his birthday card from me. Likewise, as long as my sons depend on me for support, I require that they vote. Hopefully this habit

will be one that stays with them. Voting does matter and we must promote this most basic, voluntary civic duty. Now is a great time to do so.

Submitted on 5April03 by anonymous

I believe that agency-based volunteer programs and all-volunteer membership associations can definitely capitalize on the current situation. The war is blasted into people's living rooms via the TV in such a way that it's obvious what to protest - i.e. the war. Whereas the underlying problem - those in power and their daily control over those they govern - isn't quite so obvious to most people. The war has made people get off their seats, stand up and say something. While their attention is caught, now is the time to educate and get them rallied to address the core of the problem. This could be through volunteering in political programs, or simply making people more aware of their fellow citizens that are suffering around them by getting them volunteering in direct service work.

We working in non-profit organizations, working for the greater good of humankind, would be crazy to miss this wonderful opportunity to help people understand what needs to happen to make the world change. Those in power are displaying their true colors beautifully. The time to react and make long term change is now.

If we carry on as business as usual, it will be a missed opportunity, and therefore negative in that it will take longer to achieve a more peaceful and loving world. In terms of recruitment, trends may stay the same, or those agencies already with great PR may see an increase in numbers simply due to heightened enthusiasm to help, rather than more aggressive recruitment on behalf on the agency. If we carry on as business as usual, I see no positive outcomes.

I wish to remain anonymous as I am writing on behalf of myself as a concerned citizen, and not on behalf of the agency I represent.

Submitted on 5Apr03 by anonymous

I am a volunteer manager and had one volunteer exhibit extreme rudeness to another because he came from a country that didn't support the war. I reminded my volunteers while they may have their opinions, it is not polite to demonstrate against others who may feel otherwise.

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