

Where Do We Go From Here?

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In 1985 the A. J. Muste Memorial Institute asked 35 activists to respond to a set of questions concerning the future direction of Leftist politics. The questions and Abbie's answers follow.

If we are headed inextricably towards nuclear war—as movement activists so often insist—shouldn't we de-emphasize other issues and concentrate solely on issues of war and peace?

We are not “headed inextricably towards nuclear war.” That is a terrible mindset for a generation or for peace activists. It is too depressive, cynical, despair-ridden. Peace activists who go around painting over and over again what The Day After will look like are lousy organizers and worse community therapists.

In my lifetime, nuclear war threatened on three occasions: in 1954 when the U.S. offered nuclear weapons to the French to use in Indochina, in 1962 during the Cuban Missile Crisis, and in 1970 when Nixon came close to using them in North Vietnam. Nuclear war will occur because of real (not imagined) regional wars where the superpowers get involved. Thus the correct strategy to oppose nuclear war is to fight against U.S. intervention in Central America.

Nuclear war can also come about through the battle with devils! As long as people persist in seeing Russians as slaves living in an evil empire, we are doomed to an irrational arms race. How many MX missiles to do in Lucifer? The answer, as Jerry Falwell will gladly tell you, is never enough. So people-to-people cultural exchanges with the Russians, as well as resistance to U.S. military intervention is essential to preventing nuclear war.

How do we explain the Soviet Union to the American people and so diffuse the Cold War?

We explain the Soviet Union to Americans by beginning with the commonsense argument that most people love their country. We explain that all we are permitted to know about Russia is food lines, dissidents and parades of military hardware; that we never see pictures of happy Russians on TV. Norman Mailer's odyssey in Russia in a recent issue of *Parade Magazine* (readership 23 million) set exactly the right tone for talking of Russia. We talk about Russians by stressing that they are just like us. What makes us different is that they have lost millions to war in their land, we have not. They are encircled, we are not. We are number one in just about everything technological, including military hardware, therefore we have to take the first steps.

I personally am glad the Dr. Strangeloves and Cowboy Generals in the Pentagon are not the only ones with nuclear weapons. I prefer this world with its balance of terror to one where all the terror is concentrated in one nest of hawks.

We encourage dissidents in Russia. Russia is no more static a society than the U.S. Dissidents never have an easy time. Sakharov and Lech Walensa, by the way, consider themselves patriots in their land and both are *not anticommunist*. We encourage detente by recognizing all of today's *isms*; i.e., capitalism, communism, socialism, etc. as *wasisms*. The world is moving towards a “Mixed Economy.” A mixed economy makes sense in a global village. Russia has a better medical program for all its citizens than does the U.S. It has a better daycare system. We have more individual rights and we also have MTV, blue jeans and the best pizza in the world!! We have a lot to offer each other to say nothing of what we could do with the TRILLIONS of Rubles and Dollars saved from the arms race.

What should the relationship be between the peace movement and electoral politics?

The gap is between doing something and doing nothing, not between electoral politics, protest demonstrations, civil disobedience, or even violent militancy. Building a movement means pluralism and a broad range of strategies and activities. What is counterproductive is the cultism of the left; its sectarian and un-American language; its pretensions to moral superiority; its eagerness to search for the *least* common denominator rather than the *most* common denominator.

The Environmental Movement in which I have been active for 7 years now in several local communities allows for organizing among people very different politically than make up the uninformed Left. Prove yourself to them on basic issues like the water they drink or on jobs and *then* lay your trip on them about Nicaragua or arms control. The so-called “Peace Movement” you talk about is a bunch of harpies who care more about correcting each others’ vocabulary than reaching millions of Americans. They are the folks who talk of reaching “the masses” and brag about not watching television, who have never talked to anyone who rode in the SMOKING section of an airplane. They emphasize defeats rather than victories.

Third Party politics are futile exercises in this country. Democrats are not *one* party anyway. Electoral politics have to be seen as something more than a once-in-4-year beauty contest between the Evil of Two Lessers and the Lesser of Two Evils. Politics is how you balance immediate short-range self-interests with long-range ones and those that serve the community and world at large; how you balance your time, money, ideas and energy. It’s always local and from the bottom up to be democratic. Of course I’ve never seen a local fight that was successful that didn’t build alliances with those fighting other issues and with those outside the “community.” You are forced to think and act globally in order to be successful locally. But our focus must be local. Talking about ending war, world hunger and the poisoning of the planet is religious lip-service that just produces guilt. The problems have to be phrased in manageable proportions. Problems should not even be presented without the simultaneous presentation of a partial solution. It just depresses people.

What role should civil disobedience and other forms of direct action play in the movement?

Civil disobedience is always a valid tactic because it is part of the American Experience. It is not should we work inside or outside the system. That is a false question. To me, the test is will a tactic—no matter if it’s confrontational or not—be understood within the context of the American Experience. Also, “The Movement” is not serious about the right things. It attacks the media because it is controlled by the ruling class. Sure that’s true. But activists still have to learn how it works. Ninety percent of peace activists I meet have less knowledge about how (as opposed to why) the media works than does any junior executive in an ad agency. They have less notion as to what motivates large numbers of people or individuals than your average door-to-door salesman. Elitism is when someone becomes too successful or too famous, not when people show up late to meetings or use up valuable group time droning on and on. There is an anti-success tendency in the movement and that is why many excellent organizers leave. You score points on the left for *not* being creative, for *not* being provocative and for *not* acting just as often as you score points in a big corporation. The difference is you have to produce in a corporation or you get fired. So you work on deadlines, you take notes, you show up on time, you compete hard as hell. Politics is more than a social or religious experience. Winning is what counts, and too often it’s frowned upon on the left as “macho,” competitive, arrogant, or whatever. . . . Vince Lombardi has more to say on that than A. J. Muste.

Many activists are committed to “alternative” politics, ignoring, when possible, programmatic reforms in favor of a more visionary stance. This was the strategy of the 1960s counter-culture. Is it valid today?

The strategies of the ’60s are applicable to the ’80s or any decade. But not the media definition of the ’60s. The ’60s began in 1960, not 1968. It included electoral politics, lobbying, door to door canvassing, teach-ins, forums, as well as demonstrations, guerrilla theatre, civil disobedience, and militant resistance. Alternative politics are not relevant, however, because the country has changed in basic ways: demographics and the economy— there is no “youth culture.” The U.S. after Vietnam is not the U.S. after W.W. II. The country is more tolerant of different political points of view. And it’s easier to organize “workers” now than in the days of “hippies vs. hard hats.” The counter-culture has been absorbed and hippies now wear hard hats. A politics built around drugs, or dress, or diet or even sex, race or age is not necessary because there is a chance to reach *all* Americans now. This option was not available in the 1960s. Black Power, a Woodstock Nation, a Lesbian Nation and other “nationalisms” were needed in

the '60s to give each of us pride in who we were. We can go beyond that now. The Rainbow Coalition is the correct vehicle for this. I am white, male, a member of the middle class and Jewish—whoever tries to make me feel guilty about that is either an agent for the FBI or an asshole. What people are they are. They should be proud of it but not project an air of superiority. It simply is *not* correct that sex, sexual preference, race, age or what people eat or smoke make them better than someone else. My Freedom of Information Act papers are an education in how the FBI and CIA exploited intergroup differences to disrupt activity and stifle leadership. We should stop demanding that we all become instant saints and be more tolerant of our comrades, especially if they are active. The cultism of the left often appears as three people, two of whom plot to kick the third out. It's always because of another *ism*. *Sexism*, *racism*, *elitism*, devia- tionalism. I'd rather see people kicked out because they don't follow through on their commitment. Let me be concrete: If an event should have SOO people or raise \$500 who in the left gets upset if it's not a success. But deviate from the manners and vocabulary of the party line and out you go! That's sick to me and self-defeating.



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