

GI SPECIAL 6C5:

**THIS IS WHAT THEY WANT TO KEEP ON
KEEPING ON**



U.S. soldiers of the 3rd Brigade Combat team, 3rd Infantry Division & U.S. Militia members after the second roadside bomb explosion of the day during the Sukhumi clearing operation in the area of Al-leg, some 60 kilometers (40 miles) south of Baghdad, March 7, 2008. (AP Photo/Petros Giannakouris)

**Top Politicians Promise
Not To End The War:
You Get To Choose Which One!
Wow! Democracy!**

“Tens Of Thousands” Of Troops To Stay In Iraq If Clinton Or Obama Win:

Democrats Say Troops Will Go On Fighting “Terrorists”

“When Voters Go To The Polls In November They Won’t Be Able Bring American Involvement To A Quick End”

Comment: T

[The overwhelming majority of Americans have decided this war must end. So have the overwhelming majority of the members of the Armed forces.

[If the Imperial traitors in DC won’t do it, then, as in Vietnam, the armed forces will rebel wholesale, end the war themselves, and, if necessary, arms in hand, have a word with the politicians in DC.

[Americans will certainly “support our troops” then. Bring that on. The politicians leave no other option. They’re willing to kill U.S. troops and Iraqis to maintain their power and privilege.

[They need to be forcefully instructed in what democracy means: the majority rules.

[One way or another.

[The sooner the better.]

2.29.08 By YOCHI J. DREAZEN, Wall Street Journal [Excerpts]

WASHINGTON -- Despite the rhetoric of the Democratic presidential candidates, significant numbers of U.S. troops will remain in Iraq regardless who wins in November.

In their final push to win the nomination, Sens. Barack Obama of Illinois and Hillary Clinton of New York are repeating their vow to start withdrawing U.S. forces shortly after taking office.

But both candidates draw a distinction between “combat” troops, whom they want to withdraw, and “noncombat” troops, who will stay to battle terrorists, protect the U.S. civilian presence and possibly train and mentor Iraqi security forces. [What complete bullshit hypocrisy.]

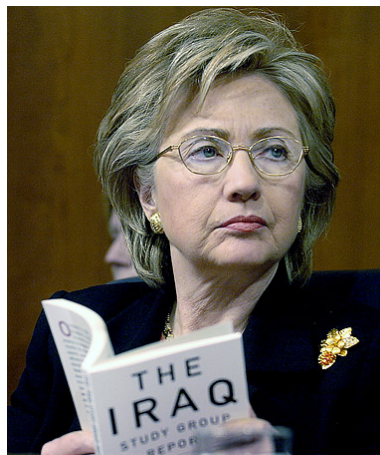
Conducting such missions would likely require the sustained deployment of tens of thousands of American military personnel, foreign-policy advisers from both campaigns acknowledge.

“No one is talking about getting to zero,” said a foreign-policy adviser to Sen. Obama.

The upshot: When voters go to the polls in November, they will face a stark choice about the future direction of the Iraq war, but they won’t be able bring American involvement to a quick end.

Obama foreign-policy adviser Dennis McDonough says the Democratic front-runner wants the residual U.S. forces to focus on counterterrorism – “largely directed against al Qaeda in Iraq, the homegrown extremist organization responsible for the deaths of thousands of Iraqi civilians” -- and protecting the enormous U.S. embassy in Baghdad.

**NOT ANOTHER DOLLAR?
NOT ANOTHER LIFE?
NOT ANOTHER DAY?
NOT ACCORDING THEM:**



[powerlineblog.com]



[washingtonpost.com]

You're Ready To Kill And Die For Their Imperial Dreams Too, Right?

IRAQ WAR REPORTS

U.S. Soldier Killed In Iraq Chopper Crash

Mar 4 (AFP)

A Russian-made helicopter belonging to the Iraqi military has crashed in northern Iraq, killing eight people on board, including a US soldier, a US military official told AFP on Tuesday.

"There were eight onboard, including one coalition force member. Recovery operations have been completed and there are no survivors," said US Lieutenant Michael Street.

Pittsford Native Injured In Explosion In Iraq Dies



02/25/2008 WHEC-TV

22-year-old Army specialist Kevin Mowl was surrounded family at the Naval Medical Center in Maryland, when he passed away Monday morning. Mowl, a Pittsford native suffered a devastating head injury when a bomb exploded near his humvee in Iraq last August.

Mowl's sister Carlene said, "You never think its going to happen, it was such a long seven months for Kevin. We're glad he's finally at peace."

Mowl's family says they are now at peace too. "Knowing that he was comfortable and knowing that he's not suffering anymore its makes us feel a lot better," Carlene said.

Since the injury, Mowl's parents have kept a web journal, profiling every improvement and setback.

"Kevin was doing great," Carlene said. "He was brought from rehab back to the medical center in begin February for an issue in his head. It seemed surgery had corrected that problem."

The entry on the web journal from last Monday says, "Kevin seems to be recovering nicely from the decompression surgery."

But just a week later, the family said a piece of Kevin's feeding tube broke off cutting his intestines causing an infection. Back here in Rochester, the news of his death took friends off guard.

Paul Holmes with the Rochester School for the Deaf said, "Everyone cared very much for Kevin and the family and we were all pretty much shocked."

Kevin's father is the superintendent of the Rochester School for the Deaf. At the school, he's remembered with a yellow ribbon around a nearby tree.

Mowl's sister is remembering him by talking about the good times. She said, "When Kevin would get bored when he was in Washington State sometimes he would call me and I would pull out my trivial pursuit game. I would read him the questions on one of the cards. I remember one night when he got every single question right on one card. It just blew me away."

Kevin Mowl was a Purple Heart recipient. President Bush held that ceremony for him at his bedside.

Slain Ardmore GI Went 'Extra Mile'

February 26, 2008 By Julie Bisbee, Staff Writer, NewsOK

ARDMORE — When Pfc. Micheal Phillips was 5 years old, he told his parents he wanted to grow up and be GI Joe.

It was no surprise when he decided to join the Army while still in high school and left for basic training shortly after graduation. Phillips knew he would be going to war.

Phillips, 19, died Sunday morning near Baghdad after the vehicle he was in was hit by an explosive device. Phillips was a member of the 101st Airborne based in Fort Campbell, Ky. The other men in the Humvee escaped with minor injuries, said his mother, Anglia Phillips, who was informed of his death Sunday afternoon.

"He was a hero," she said. "What I've heard from his squad is that he was an excellent soldier who was always trying to improve himself and was always willing to go the extra mile. He's more of a man than most will be."

Micheal Phillips, who went by the nickname "Pokey," had written to his family and teachers at Ardmore High School while in Iraq. When he was home on leave, Phillips visited his 18-year-old brother and other students at school.

"He had an infectious smile," said Jake Falvey, assistant principal at Ardmore High School. "He was an outgoing kid, and you could see the maturity in him; he had grown up quite a bit."

In a recent letter to Falvey, Phillips, a 2006 Ardmore High School graduate, talked about how happy he was to be in the military.

"He had written about how happy he was," Falvey said. "He said, 'I'm doing this for me, my family and for America.'"

Phillips is the oldest of four children and was close with his siblings, his mother said.

"We're a really tight-knit family," she said.

Phillips was an astute student who loved history and ran track and cross country. He excelled at drawing and had been offered admission to the San Francisco Art Institute, his mother said.

But he held duty to country higher, she said. "He came home one day and said he wanted to join the Army, and we got in the car and went down to the recruiting station," Anglia Phillips said. "He said terrorism was like a virus. It had to be stopped. It had to be contained."

She said her son was re-enlisting.

"He had already decided to join up for two more years," she said. "He didn't want to leave his squad, his guys."

Plans for a memorial service are pending.

Five U.S. Soldiers Wounded In Al-Siedyeh

March 4 (KUNA)

Five US soldiers were injured as a result of an improvised bomb attack south of Baghdad on Tuesday, Media Consultant for Iraqi Multi-National coalition forces Abdul-latif Al-Rayyan said.

Al-Rayyan told KUNA that the improvised bomb targeted a US military patrol in Al-Siedyeh area south of the capital.

Al-Leg Welcome Mat Is Out



A damaged U.S. military vehicle after a roadside bomb explosion during the Sukhumi clearing operation in the area of Al-leg, some 60 kilometers (40 miles) south of Baghdad, Iraq, March 7, 2008. Two roadside bombs exploded during Friday's operation, the first one in the morning, damaged a U.S. army vehicle, and the second one in the late afternoon, wounded five U.S. funded Iraqi volunteer civilians. (AP Photo/Petros Giannakouris)

**GUESS WHO'S WORRIED
GUESS WHO ISN'T
GUESS WHY**

ALL HOME NOW



A US soldier patrols the Jisr Majid district on the outskirts of Baghdad on February 9.
(AFP/File/Ali Yusef)

AFGHANISTAN WAR REPORTS

2 Foreign Occupation Soldiers Killed, 4 Wounded By Attack In Yaqoubi; Nationality Not Announced

March. 4, 2008 AP & Reuters

KABUL, Afghanistan - An attack on a government office guarded by Afghan and NATO troops in eastern Afghanistan left two alliance soldiers dead and four more wounded, a U.S. military spokesman said Tuesday.

After insurgents opened fire, the bomber rammed an explosives-laden car into the gates of the building in the Yaqoubi district of Khost province on Monday, causing a guard post to collapse and trapping soldiers inside, officials said.

Sgt. 1st Class Brian Lamar, a U.S. military spokesman, said two NATO soldiers were killed and four others wounded in the attack. Lamar would not disclose the soldiers' nationalities.

The vast majority of ISAF troops in Khost are American.

The explosion also wounded three Afghan policemen, said provincial police chief Gen. Mohammad Ayub.

Militants Attack 3rd Mobile Telecom Signal Tower In S. Afghanistan

March 6 (Xinhua)

Taliban militants attacked a signal tower of a mobile telecommunication service company in Zabul province of southern Afghanistan, destroying a guards room near the tower, the police said Thursday.

"Armed Taliban insurgents attacked the tower and the guards room of Areeba, a mobile phone service company, in Shar-e-Safa district of Zabul Wednesday night, destroying the room and power generator, but failed to damage the antenna," provincial police chief Mohammad Yaqub told Xinhua via phone.

It is the third time over the past two weeks that the anti-government insurgents have been attacking mobile phone towers in south Afghanistan since giving ultimatum to shut down signaling during nighttime.

Taliban militants in a warning to mobile companies on Feb. 25 asked them to stop operation from 5 p.m. till 7 a.m. in Taliban-held areas, saying Afghan and foreign forces can track down militants through mobile phone signals.

TROOP NEWS

**Public Enemy #1 For March 2008,
So Far;
Lunatic Major-General Hertling Says
U.S. Troops To Remain Until Iraq**

Solves Unemployment Crisis And Has Better Public Services

Mar 5, 2008 By Michael Holden (Reuters)

The United States may be forced to halt planned troop withdrawals from Iraq unless Iraqi authorities move faster to create jobs and improve basic services, a top U.S. general said on Wednesday.

Major-General Mark Hertling, commander of U.S. forces in northern Iraq, said both central and regional authorities had to take action if hard-won security gains were not to be reversed.

"I think we have six months to make a difference and this today is the start line," he said in an interview with Reuters and another agency at a conference where governors from seven northern provinces aired grievances with government ministers.

Asked what would happen if no progress was made on improving Iraqis' quality of life, he said: "It's going to be harder.

"I'm going to see more soldiers hurt and killed and we are not going to be able to reduce the number of forces ... because there's going to be more people out there planting bombs and shooting people."

[Out of his mind. If the USA can't solve it's own unemployment problem, growing every day, and provide good public services, instead of poor quality high cost shit that huge numbers of people can't access or afford, the only thing sure is that the U.S. government has no intention whatever of those social problems in Iraq.

[That being the case, the general's yardstick for when the troops can leave means endless death for his troops, as surely as if he put a weapon to their heads and blew their brains out on the floor. T]

Training U.S. Troops To Train Iraqis: Mission Ridiculous -- Only 6% Of Instructors Have Had First-Hand Experience As Advisors: "This Assignment Won't Hurt Your Career' And, As Long As Soldiers Don't

Hope For Promotion, ‘You Have Been Told The Truth’”

February 29, 2008 By Yochi J. Dreazen, Wall Street Journal [Excerpts]

FORT RILEY, Kansas -- In the political fight over Iraq, there is one piece of common ground: The U.S. Army needs to do a better job training Iraqi security forces.

But the Army is struggling to adjust to this mission and is divided over how to carry it out.

Some young officers want to revamp the effort and create a permanent “advisory corps” that could help in Iraq and take the lead in future efforts to stand up large foreign militaries.

Skeptics, including many senior officers, counter that the U.S. is unlikely to find itself in another Iraq-size nation-building effort anytime soon, and that the Army should focus on killing enemies, not working with foreign soldiers.

Soldiers assigned to training teams for Iraq and Afghanistan are watching the bureaucratic struggles closely because their chances for advancement hang in the balance. Many worry that serving as trainers will leave them less likely to be promoted than soldiers with combat command experience.

A widely circulated email written by an officer who worked with military trainers in Afghanistan captures the mood.

Written as a mock welcome letter for new trainers, it begins: “You have a pulse and have not been selected for command. Congratulations on your assignment!” The letter goes on to note that “the Army has told you that this assignment won’t hurt your career” and, as long as soldiers don’t hope for promotion, “you have been told the truth.”

Senior Army commanders want at least 33% of the instructors and other personnel assigned to the training mission at Fort Riley to be former military advisors with experience in Iraq or Afghanistan. Manpower shortages and bureaucratic misfires have pushed the numbers lower.

Of the 825 instructors and other personnel assigned to the training mission here, just 50, or about 6%, have had first-hand experience as advisors.

The uneven quality of the military personnel assigned to staff the advisory teams that are bound for Iraq or Afghanistan means that instructors here are forced to spend more than three-quarters of the 60-day training course going over basic military tasks like marksmanship.

That leaves an “inadequate amount of time” for specific instruction in how to “train, advise and assist,” the Army report found.

**NOT ANOTHER DAY
NOT ANOTHER DOLLAR
NOT ANOTHER LIFE
ALL HOME NOW**



Staff Sgt. Carla Williams-Jackson kisses her 3-year-old daughter, Shakeyvia, goodbye before boarding a deployment bus outside the Kieschnick Physical Fitness Center on Fort Hood, Texas, Tuesday March 4, 2008. Williams-Jackson was deploying to Iraq with the 13th Sustainment Command (Expeditionary). (AP Photo/Killeen Daily Herald, John A. Bowersmith)

**Poll Finds U.S. Troops’
Iraq Morale In The Shitter:
“Eleven % Of Those Polled In Iraq
Said Their Unit’s Morale Was High Or
Very High, Compared With 7% The
Previous Year”
“Individual Morale Was Reported
High Or Very High Among 20%,**

Compared With 18% The Previous Year”

“Depression” Up Among U.S. Forces In Afghanistan

03/06/08 (AP)

U.S. troop morale improved in Iraq last year, but soldiers fighting in Afghanistan suffered more depression as violence there worsened, an Army mental health report says.

And in a recurring theme for a force strained by its seventh year at war, the annual battlefield study found once again that soldiers on their third and fourth tours of duty had sharply greater rates of mental health problems than those on their first or second deployments, according to several officials familiar with the report.

Soldiers in Afghanistan had rates of mental health problems similar to those in Iraq in 2007 with the exception of depression, officials said the new study showed.

The percentage reporting depression in Afghanistan was higher than that in Iraq, and mental health problems in general were higher than they had previously been in Afghanistan.

They gave no statistics, but a 2004 study conducted in the states with troops before and after they deployed to Afghanistan found that roughly one in 10 developed a mental health problem requiring treatment.

Troops' mental health problems are linked directly to the amount of exposure they have to combat, and officials said that last year the level of violence was more pronounced in some places of Afghanistan than it was in Iraq. Some 83% of soldiers in Afghanistan reported being exposed to mortar fire and similar action as fighting heated up against Taliban and al-Qaeda fighters, compared with 72% in Iraq, according to the study.

Having troops spread out and more isolated over the rugged terrain in a less developed Afghanistan made it necessary at times to bring soldiers in by helicopter when they needed mental health care, one official said.

Eleven percent of those polled in Iraq said their unit's morale was high or very high, compared with 7% the previous year.

Individual morale was reported high or very high among 20%, compared with 18% the previous year.

**“Soldiers Reported An Average
Of 5.6 Hours Of Sleep Per Day
In Iraq;”**

**“One-Third Of Troops In
Afghanistan Were Highly
Concerned That They Were Not
Getting Enough Sleep”**

**“Less Than Needed To Maintain Their
Best Performance”**

**“Officers Appeared To Underestimate
How It Could Have That Effect”**

Mar 6, 2008 By PAULINE JELINEK Associated Press Writer [Excerpts]

A report the Army released Thursday recommends sending civilian psychiatrists to the warfront, supplementing members of the uniformed mental health corps.

Surveying a force strained by its seventh year of war, officials found that more than one in four soldiers on repeat tours of duty screened positive for anxiety, depression and other mental health problems. That was comparable to the previous year.

Soldiers reported an average of 5.6 hours of sleep per day in Iraq — significantly less than needed to maintain their best performance — yet officers appeared to underestimate how it could have that effect.

Nearly one-third of troops in Afghanistan were highly concerned that they were not getting enough sleep and about a quarter reported falling asleep during convoys last year.

Sixteen percent reported taking mental health medications and about half of those were sleep medications.

IRAQ RESISTANCE ROUNDUP

Resistance Action

04 Mar 2008 (Xinhua) & Reuters & March 5, 2007 AP & 3.6.08 (Reuters) & March 07, 2008 Xinhua

Up to five policemen were killed and 33 people injured in the Friday morning car bomb attack on a police station in the city of Mosul, the capital of the northern Nineveh province, a provincial police source said.

“The death toll rose to five policemen and 33 people were wounded, most of them were policemen,” Brigadier Khalid Abdul Sattar, spokesman of Nineveh’s police operations office told Xinhua.

The attack took place at about 7 a.m. (0400 GMT) when a bomber rammed his explosive-laden car into the Waqqass police station in central the city and blew it up, Sattar said.

The powerful blast destroyed parts of the police station’s building, along with several number of nearby houses and shops, he said.

Three policemen were wounded when a roadside bomb detonated near their patrol in eastern Mosul, said Brigadier-General Khalid Abdul-Sattar, Iraqi security spokesman in Nineveh province.

Guerrillas shot dead a policeman near his house in western Mosul, police said.

Two members affiliated to local U.S.-funded Awakening Council armed groups were killed and three others injured in shootings in Salahudin province on Tuesday, a provincial police source said. The two were killed Tuesday when insurgents showered their car with bullets while they were driving in the al-Dour town, 15 km east of Tikrit, the capital of the province, the source told Xinhua on condition of anonymity.

In a separate incident, three more U.S.-funded fighters were wounded when another armed group attacked their checkpoint on Monday night in the town of Yathrib, 70 km north of Baghdad, the source said.

Samarra U.S. funded Awakening Council members shot at a bomber approaching their checkpoint but he still managed to detonate the car. Six Council members were wounded in the blast.

Guerrillas killed four off-duty prison guards in Mosul on Wednesday, police said.

During a raid south of Tal Afar, 420 km (260 miles) north of Baghdad, on Sunday three members of the Iraqi SWAT team were killed and three wounded.

**IF YOU DON'T LIKE THE RESISTANCE
END THE OCCUPATION**

FORWARD OBSERVATIONS

“What country can preserve its liberties if its rulers are not warned from time to time that their people preserve the spirit of resistance? Let them take arms.”

Thomas Jefferson to William Stephens Smith, 1787.

“When someone says my son died fighting for his country, I say, “No, the suicide bomber who killed my son died fighting for his country.”

-- Father of American Soldier Chase Beattie, KIA in Iraq

One day while I was in a bunker in Vietnam, a sniper round went over my head. The person who fired that weapon was not a terrorist, a rebel, an extremist, or a so-called insurgent. The Vietnamese individual who tried to kill me was a citizen of Vietnam, who did not want me in his country. This truth escapes millions.

**Mike Hastie
U.S. Army Medic
Vietnam 1970-71
December 13, 2004**

March 6, 1967: Honorable Anniversary



Carl Bunin Peace History

Muhammad Ali was ordered by the Selective Service to be inducted into military service. He refused, citing his religious beliefs that precluded him from killing others.

"I ain't got no quarrel with those Vietcong."

March 7, 1932; Five Ford Workers Killed And Nineteen Wounded By Police And Company "Security" Armed With Pistols, Rifles And A Machine Gun



Carl Bunin Peace History March 3-9

The Ford Hunger March began on Detroit's East Side and proceeded 10 miles seeking relief during the Great Depression.

Facing hunger and evictions, workers had formed neighborhood Unemployed Councils. Along the route, the marchers were given good wishes from Detroit Mayor Frank Murphy as well as two motorcycle escorts, and thousands joined the marchers along the route.

At the Detroit city limit, the marchers were met by Dearborn police and doused by fire hoses. Despite the cold weather, they continued to the Employment Office of the Ford River Rouge plant, from which there had been massive layoffs.

Five workers were killed and nineteen wounded by police and company "security" armed with pistols, rifles and a machine gun.

According to Dave Moore, one of the marchers, “That blood was black blood and white blood.

One of the photos that was published in the Detroit Times, but never seen since, shows a black woman, Mattie Woodson, wiping the blood off the head of Joe DiBlasio, a white man who lay there dying . . . It’s been 75 years, but when you drive down Miller Road today, your car tires will be moistened with the blood that those five shed.”

Grave markers with the words “His Life for the Union” pay tribute to them in Woodmere Cemetery on Detroit’s West Side.

March 7, 1965: Anniversary The First March From Selma: A Day That That Shook The World



Alabama police attack Selma-to-Montgomery marchers

Carl Bunin Peace History; Americaslibrary.gov [Excerpts]

March 7, 1965

When 525 people started a planned march from Selma to Montgomery, Alabama, on Sunday March 7, 1965, it was called a demonstration. When state troopers met the demonstrators at the edge of the city by the Edmund Pettus Bridge, that day became known as “Bloody Sunday.”

In Selma, African Americans made up almost half the population, but only two percent were registered voters. Discrimination and intimidation tactics aimed at blacks kept them from registering and voting. The demonstrators marched to demand fairness in voter registration.

The sheriff warned the people that they had two minutes to break up the march, but the deputies attacked sooner. The demonstrators were tear-gassed, clubbed, spat on, whipped, trampled by horses, and jeered by others for demanding the right to register to vote.

Television and newspapers carried pictures of the event that became known as “Bloody Sunday.”

The images sickened, outraged, and electrified people throughout the country.

Within 48 hours, demonstrations in support of the marchers were held in 80 cities. Many of the nation’s religious and lay leaders, including Martin Luther King, flew to Selma. After one more failed attempt, King led a peaceful march from Selma to Montgomery. Congress responded to these events by enacting the Voting Rights Act of 1965.



March 8, 1965; Unhappy Murderous Imperial Stupidity Anniversary

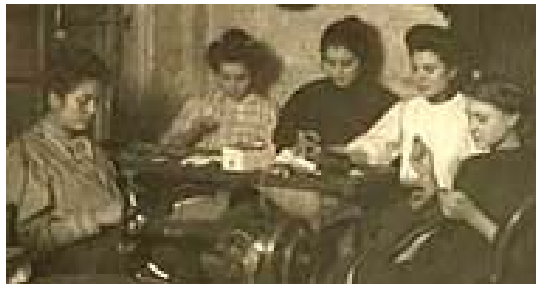


Carl Bunin Peace History

About 3,500 U. S. Marines became the first American combat troops in Vietnam, landing near the coastal city of Da Nang. The USS Henrico, Union, and Vancouver, carrying the 9th Marine Expeditionary Brigade under Brig. Gen. Frederick J. Karch, took up stations 4,000 yards off Red Beach Two, north of Da Nang.

Two Magnificent Anniversaries In The Fight For Human Liberation:

#1: March 8, 1908: New York City Women Strike For Higher Wages, A Shorter Workday And An End To Child Labor



Carl Bunin Peace History; un.org [Excerpts]

March 8, 1908

Thousands of workers in the New York needle trades (primarily women) demonstrated and began a strike for higher wages, a shorter workday and an end to child labor.

This event became the basis for International Women's Day celebrated all over the world since March 8, 1945.

#2: March 8, 1917 With 2 Million Russian Soldiers Dead In The War, Women Ignore

The “Political Leaders” And Lead A Revolution To Overthrow The Imperial Tyrant Czar Of Russia



*Two old women lament
Old days of sorrow,
When prayers went unheard
And the grave was relief.*

*But no more does the stick
Fall upon women's shoulders.
Free and equal they march,
Comrades of men!*

March 8, 1917

With 2 million Russian soldiers dead in the war, Russian women again chose the last Sunday in February to strike for “bread and peace”.

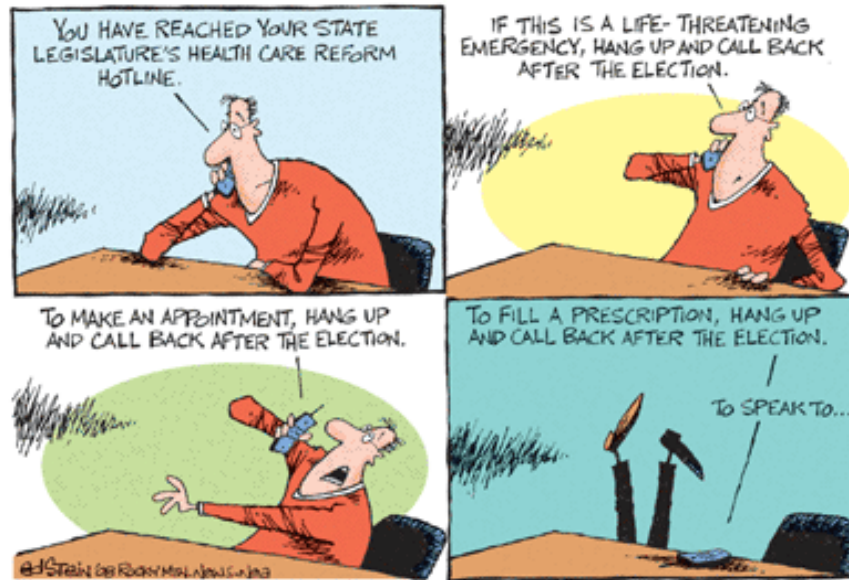
Political leaders opposed the timing of the strike, but the women went on anyway.

The rest is history:

Four days later the Czar was forced to abdicate and the provisional Government granted women the right to vote.

That historic Sunday fell on 23 February on the Julian calendar then in use in Russia, but on 8 March on the Gregorian calendar in use elsewhere.

DANGER: POLITICIANS AT WORK



Troops Invited:

What do you think? Comments from service men and women, and veterans, are especially welcome. Write to Box 126, 2576 Broadway, New York, N.Y. 10025-5657 or send email contact@militaryproject.org:. Name, I.D., withheld unless you request publication. Replies confidential. Same address to unsubscribe.

CLASS WAR REPORTS

Activists Bare Teeth Over Foreclosures; “Nobody Likes Our Tactics, Which Is Precisely Why We Use Them”

[Yeah, it's long, but how many stories do you see about people tired of getting shit on by the rich and powerful organizing to give it back as good as they get.? T]

[Thanks to Pham Binh, Military Project & Traveling Soldier, who sent this in.]

Mar 1 By ADAM GELLER, AP National Writer [Excerpts]

Folks on Humphrey Hill Drive were still waking up on the icy Saturday morning the shark hunters came to town.

They rounded the suburban traffic circle in a pair of rented school buses after a half-hour ride from far more modest neighborhoods, rumbling to a stop at the Garmone family's driveway. Forty-two caffeinated Clevelanders piled out, their leaders carrying bullhorns.

Their quarry, Mike Garmone — a regional vice president at Countrywide Financial Corp., the nation's largest mortgage lender — didn't answer his door.

So they deployed, ringing bells at the big homes with three-car garages, handing out accusatory fliers and lambasting Garmone and his company's loans.

Before departing, they left their calling card — thousands of 2 1/2-inch plastic sharks — flung across Garmone's frozen flower beds, up into the gutters, littering the doorstep.

The commotion was the work of an in-your-face activist group called the East Side Organizing Project, with a paid staff then of just two, mobilized to battle Cleveland's mortgage "loan sharks."

Years before the rest of the country was rocked by the fallout from aggressive lending, their neighborhoods were already home to the nation's highest concentration of foreclosures — and they were fed up.

ESOP's people are proudly loud and abrasive, and they've long reveled in needling people with pull. But could they get a distant behemoth like Countrywide to the table?

On that morning in February 2006, ESOP executive director Mark Seifert had his doubts. For starters, he wasn't sure his group's research on Garmone even had the family's correct address.

Until two evenings later, when Seifert checked his e-mail and found a message from a top public relations executive at Countrywide's California headquarters.

We need to talk, it said.

Seifert broke into a wide grin.

Now that David had Goliath's ear, he wasn't about to let go.

The foreclosure epidemic that has infected Cleveland's neighborhoods started earlier and has been even more punishing than the crisis much of the rest of the country is

enduring. It's a symptom of the lax lending that became widely common, without the run-up in home prices that long camouflaged it.

"The problems that exist everywhere now ... showed themselves earlier here because there was no getting out of them," says Zach Schiller of Policy Matters Ohio, a Cleveland nonprofit focused on the state's economy.

The problem is well documented — Cleveland and the surrounding county saw more than 15,000 foreclosures last year. But to grasp its impact, walk with Nita Gardner down the block of East 113th Street where she raised two boys.

When Gardner, a retired machinist, bought the gray wood-frame house 33 years ago, this part of the Mt. Pleasant neighborhood was filled with families. Their homes on small lots were modest, but maintained with pride.

Have a look at what's left.

The white house on the opposite corner — its front porch ripped away by scavengers — fell to foreclosure last year. The home behind it — blue with plank-covered windows — went soon after.

A few doors down from Gardner, three homes in a row are abandoned. Three of the four across from them are vacant, too. It's not like some manicured suburban neighborhood, where it's a guess if a house is empty. Here, shredded curtains flap from holes where windows used to be. The silver fringes of insulation hang from walls where aluminum siding has been stripped for resale.

In early 2006, Gardner's adult sons — who had bought the house from her — fell behind on their mortgage and the lender, Countrywide, began foreclosure.

Gardner stepped in to fight, although looking at the home's drab exterior and the surrounding neighborhood, it's not immediately clear why.

Until, that is, Gardner opens the front door and light spills over the floor to a mural of an Egyptian pharaoh she painted in gold and azure across the living room wall. Upstairs, a closet door still bears the markings in pen where her sons charted their heights, year after year.

"I just feel like I'm a whole person with this house," says Gardner, explaining her battle to save it. "Because this is not just a house. It's me."

When ESOP held its annual meeting in 1999, organizers were surprised to see empty chairs. They called the missing and found many phones had been disconnected. They knocked on doors and found empty homes.

It was the first sign, Seifert recalls, that people in some of Cleveland's poorest neighborhoods were losing their homes to foreclosure.

ESOP's organizers, until then working with parents on safety around public schools, knew nothing about mortgage lending. But they did know how to raise hell.

That was clear in the mid-1990s, when ESOP demanded that Cleveland officials give money seized in drug busts to struggling city schools.

When Mayor Michael White put them off, ESOP members picketed White's church and ask the pastor to excommunicate him. They set up outside the house of the mayor's father, demanding he talk with his son.

To drive the message home, ESOP activists figured out the married mayor had a girlfriend and went to her door with a letter demanding the cash.

The tactics came back to bite them.

"We lost about 90 percent of our funding overnight," Seifert recalls.

The nonprofit staggered. If it was going to be confrontational, it needed to keep the foundations that fed its budget in the loop.

Fighting foreclosures became their new cause. But they brought along old tactics — a brand of confrontation honed by Saul Alinsky, the legendarily radical Chicago organizer.

"Power is not only what you have," Alinsky schooled his followers, "but what the enemy thinks you have."

ESOP was banking on anger. Clevelanders were losing their homes, organizers concluded, because aggressive lenders had put people in mortgages they couldn't possibly afford.

In 2002, the group began going after lenders, servicers and mortgage brokers.

At one protest outside a branch of Charter One Financial Inc., a police officer confronted an ESOP volunteer in a shark suit.

"Are those your sharks?" the officer demanded, scooping plastic predators from the ground.

"No," protester Christine Regula replied. "I had my tubes tied."

They also pressed public officials to stall foreclosures proceedings.

One, Steven Bucha, chief magistrate in charge of foreclosures in Cleveland's courts, recalls being invited by ESOP to a public forum. More than 200 people packed a church basement. Bucha was seated as far as possible from the door.

"A woman gave a fiery speech about how the system had done her wrong, how the system was in collusion with the court — and here's the guy responsible! And she pointed at me. I really couldn't get a word out," Bucha says. "It was like nothing else I've ever experienced in my life."

Bucha and others say the “guerrilla warfare” approach was counterproductive.

“Nobody likes our tactics, which is precisely why we use them,” Seifert says.

One after another, the group squeezed and cajoled eight companies and their subsidiaries into signing pacts giving it direct access to a single executive with the authority to restructure problem loans.

The companies have agreed to cut interest rates and waive penalty fees and past-due balances.

Last year, ESOP — one of four groups that counsel homeowners referred by Cuyahoga County’s foreclosure rescue program — says it got mortgages reworked for about 1,500 homeowners, most already in foreclosure.

“You know, there’s a fine line,” says Rocky Ortiz, the local director of the Catholic Campaign for Human Development, which provides part of ESOP’s funding. “Mark and his people have learned to walk it.”

Maybe, but in early going, some of ESOP’s targets were local or relatively small. Even some of the biggest were vulnerable, or at least open to discussion.

Could ESOP take on the biggest lender in the country? It was time to find out.

It’s called a “rank ‘em and spank ‘em.”

Nominally, it’s a meeting. But that sounds too polite, longtime ESOP volunteer Barbara Anderson says. It’s a venting session, about as calm as a trading pit. At a rank ‘em in January 2006, ESOP organizers declared Countrywide their villain of choice.

A month later, they “hit” Garmone’s house in suburban Painesville.

“Please call Mike at home ... and tell him to do the right thing: produce his boss to a meeting with ESOP!” the group urged its followers.

ESOP didn’t want just any boss. They demanded Angelo Mozilo, Countrywide’s chairman and CEO.

They got a meeting with a pair of executives at the Cleveland office of the NAACP, in May 2006. After 20 minutes, ESOP negotiators walked out because Countrywide’s representatives would not sign a pledge to negotiate.

Countrywide will not answer questions about its dealings with ESOP.

“We want that relationship (with ESOP) to continue to improve so together we can help more borrowers,” Rick Simon, a company spokesman, said. “Going back to the past doesn’t help those borrowers.”

But letters Countrywide executives sent to ESOP make clear the company's sharp disagreement with the activists' criticism and its irritation with their tactics.

ESOP organizers and Countrywide executives met again in the fall of 2006. The activists also sat down with officials from the federal agencies that oversee housing, trade and banking to voice concerns about Countrywide.

But the group was having trouble convincing local officials that Countrywide was the villain they said it was, Seifert says. The campaign moved to the back burner as ESOP negotiated an agreement with another lending firm.

The standdown, though, was temporary.

ESOP organizers got Mozilo's personal phone number and instructed homeowners to call him in the middle of the night.

They flooded faxes at Countrywide offices with hundreds of copies of identical forms detailing Cleveland homeowners' problem loans.

They posted signs on the front of abandoned homes owned by the lender: "Countrywide's idea of the American Dream! Tell their executives what you think!"

In April 2007, ESOP ferried two dozen volunteers to a Countrywide office in suburban Woodmere.

They walked into the tiny office, located on the town's main shopping strip, throwing plastic sharks, handing out mock foreclosure notices and demanding a meeting with Mozilo, then left when local police arrived.

"We strongly believe that confrontational tactics and deliberate misinformation are not the way to build productive relationships that help Cleveland's homeowners," a Countrywide executive wrote afterward.

In June, a pair of Countrywide executives came to ESOP's offices to meet with borrowers, promising to work with individual borrowers but again refusing to sign the memorandum.

Nine days later, ESOP showed up at a Countrywide office in the University Circle neighborhood, sharks in hand.

In late July, an ESOP regiment headed to Hudson, an outlying suburb, and tried to shove their way into the office of the lawyer representing Countrywide in its Cleveland foreclosures. The company that had been selling the group its plastic sharks heard about their tactics and cut off the supply.

Countrywide, too, was taking notice and it was not happy.

"During efforts to physically force your way into the office, one of the firm employees was actually bitten by an ESOP member," Countrywide's chief counsel, Sandor Samuels, wrote afterward. "We will not enter into relationships with organizations that desire to subject our employees, contractors and Chief Executive Officer to harassment."

Countrywide insisted it was cooperating, saying it had restructured dozens of loans ESOP had brought to its attention.

But the activists said that was not nearly enough, that it was seeking more than piecemeal solutions.

Then, in October, a letter on gold-embossed stationery arrived.

“I am hopeful, for the sake of these families, that ESOP and Countrywide will move forward and work together in a constructive manner to find workable solutions to our customers’ issues,” it said.

It offered a meeting with the lender’s senior management. It was signed: “Sincerely, Angelo R. Mozilo.”

On a Wednesday in December, Samuels led a Countrywide delegation to Cleveland. ESOP rented a trolley, seated the executives in the front row for a neighborhood tour and filled the rest with homeowners.

Two rows back sat Lisa Pass, who stood to tell the story of her father-in-law’s loan and the home it had put in jeopardy. She was surprised to find the executives were much nicer than she’d imagined. And they were listening.

Nita Gardner was there, too, and she laid out the paper trail she’d assembled chronicling her efforts to hold on to the house. The papers, she says, showed she had repeatedly made the payments Countrywide demanded, but the company still rejected her offers to buy back the house.

Afterward, one of the executives asked her how far she was willing to go to keep the house.

“Do you know what obese is?” Gardner says she answered. “Well I’m the medical standard of obese ... and I’m willing to walk the double yellow line of the Shoreway buck naked to get that house back.”

When the tour ended and lunch was served, ESOP President Inez Killingsworth turned to Countrywide’s Samuels. Would he sign a promise to negotiate?

It was the same memorandum the lender had rejected for nearly two years.

Samuels paused. Then he reached for a pen.

Rising from their seats, ESOP’s army cheered.

A few days after New Year’s, Nita Gardner’s phone rang. If she had money, Countrywide was prepared to sell her her house back.

When real estate agent Jeff Swiecicki, dispatched by the lender, arrived soon after, Gardner was still skeptical. But she signed a contract and handed over a check.

"I signed the paper and I cried," she says. "I told him, you can't go back on this."

Countrywide's decision is one of 50 to 60 loan workouts it has agreed to with homeowners represented by ESOP since December, Seifert says.

In December, the activists expected to reach a comprehensive agreement with Countrywide within four months. A few weeks later, Countrywide agreed to a \$4 billion deal that will see it bought and merged into Bank of America Corp. But it has continued to negotiate.

That has the activists looking ahead. The foreclosure problem isn't going away anytime soon. They're changing their name to Empowering & Strengthening Ohio's People, to reach beyond the Cleveland area.

And they're already talking about the next lender they want to go after. They've even got the home phone number for a certain CEO.

Now, Seifert says, all they need is a new supply of plastic sharks.

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