

Rules are Made to be Broken

I stopped eating. The war had just begun. President Bush claimed that there was concrete evidence of weapons of mass destruction in Iraq. I was pissed off at the Bush administration for putting thousands of lives on the line over a lie. These thousands of lives were from America, Iraq and all over the rest of the world. I was a sophomore in Berkeley High School. My grades had gone down because I couldn't concentrate on my classes or schoolwork.

I constantly ask this of myself. How could someone jeopardize this group of people, or have such a small heart? I tried to put myself in the mindset of 'our' president and still couldn't find the drive behind all this violence. Then the real question dawned on me. What can I do to stop this? I was listening to what one of my real world idols had to say. Michael Franti wrote a song called "Bomb the World" where he sings "We can chase down all our enemies, we can even bring them to their knees, we can bomb the world to pieces, but we can't bomb it into peace."

The solution I came up with was to protest these terrible injustices. There are many ways of doing so, but I chose to follow the peaceful path of Ghandi and Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. I decided that along with protesting in the streets of San Francisco with hundreds of thousands of other Americans, another vital way to fight against the war was to do a small, personal protest. On the day after the war against Iraq 'officially' started I began my three week long hunger strike. I had fantasies about being in the news for doing something revolutionary, even though I knew this was not my main motivation. I needed to do something that helped me think about my position as a white middle class kid with compassion. I was engaging in a personally significant protest that I will remember for the rest of my life.

I was just an innocent white kid in America, but I needed to feel the pain and suffering of the Iraqi people, as well as the pain of innocent American kids who were sent to fight a dishonest war. By depriving myself of food while focusing on the war and making it part of my life—and that of everyone around me—I learned what real pain was, and am now able to feel something that most can't—real empathy.

I know that I can't change the past, and I'm sorry to say that if I could, I would. I would have at least made an attempt at publicizing my strike. I would have traveled to Washington, D.C. to throw myself in the faces of the politicians and force them to recognize the opposition to their horrendous and injurious war. The government needs to understand the opposition that the American public feels.

We live in a society of fear. Our president tells the media to control what his citizens see, giving most Americans the impression that duct tape and canned foods will be our life savers. They are wrong. Code yellow, code red, what's the difference? The Second Amendment to our Constitution in the Bill of Rights gives complete freedom to the press. Sure, the press can say whatever they want to say without getting in trouble with the government, but when every news resource is owned by a few obscenely large corporations (like Clear Channel), reporters are rarely permitted to have opinions differing from their bosses. Because of that I would have had to build more support than I knew how to, in order to publicize my strike. Even then I wouldn't have any assurance of getting honest media coverage, which is less common than a dinosaur, these days.

I live in the beautiful Bay Area where everyone is left-minded and angry at the government, but even in my little liberal bubble, I see how the media represses dissent.

As a young activist, I struggle with being and finding others who are honest, sincere, and effective. This is a major challenge because of the politically and socially instilled fear of almost all of America's culture.

My own immediate form of protest against the war in Iraq (besides attending many marches and rallies in San Francisco) was a hunger strike. Many people used alternative forms of protest. The Friday after war broke out, thousands of Bay Areaans blocked traffic with in the busy streets of San Francisco. Because it was a workday, many protesters skipped work or school to voice their opinions. Among the hooky masters was a well-respected technology reviewer for the San Francisco Chronicle by the name of Henry Norr. He was arrested with the masses on that painful but beautiful day in March, but his situation got more complicated the next week when he went back to work only to find out that he was fired for 'missing work'. This level of repression of an individual's right to engage in peaceful protest scares me.

It scares me enough to want to continue finding effective ways to stand up and be heard. Though I didn't go for press play, I affected the people around me. My friends were very supportive of me. They were proud that I was taking such a strong stance about my feelings and they even seemed moved by my dedication to my beliefs. They told me how courageous I was, but I didn't feel like I was doing enough. I still don't feel that way.

Sadly, there aren't many ways that come to mind when thinking of new effective ways to protest. The only thing that seems to have not been tried has been violent dissent, which I normally disagree with greatly, but now I can see where revolutionary groups from the '60s were coming from—there really isn't any other way to be heard. Violence is and always should be a last resort, and we can keep singing Kumbaya and protesting peacefully in the streets, but it seems that our voices haven't been heard in the White House or in any of the decision-making bodies of our government. Conservatives control each branch of the government which gives them the opportunity to do anything they want without the input of the crazy liberals. We need to come up with a way of making our voices heard. I've seen people with shirts that say 'My Vote Counts,' which is very true, but one voice out of three hundred million isn't much. Everyone needs to be heard, but how? The electoral system certainly is not a way to give voice to everyone who votes. People go to the polls once a year to cast their vote and then say they've done their part and contributed to our democratic society, but if our society is democratic, then why doesn't anyone hear my voice? Does anyone hear yours?

We need change, and we need it now!

Peace, Love, Revolution,
Jesse Strauss