**Standing against wars**

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Twenty years ago – on February 15, 2003 – the world said no to war. People rose up in almost 800 cities around the world in an unprecedented movement for peace.

The world stood on the precipice of war. US and UK warplanes and warships – filled with soldiers and sailors and armed with the most powerful weapons ever used in conventional warfare – were streaming towards the Middle East, aimed at Iraq.

Anti-war mobilizations had been underway for more than a year as the threat of war against Iraq took hold in Washington, even as the war in Afghanistan had barely begun.

Opposition to the war in Afghanistan was difficult following the 9/11 terrorist attacks. Even though none of the hijackers were Afghans and none lived in Afghanistan, most Americans saw the war as a legitimate response – a view that would change over the next two decades, with the vast majority saying the war wasn’t worth fighting when American troops were withdrawn in 2021.

But Iraq was different from the beginning. There was always opposition. And as the activist movement grew, its grounding in a sympathetic public expanded too. By the time February 15, 2003 came around – a year and five months after the 9/11 attacks – condemnation of the looming war was broad and fierce.

Plans for February 15 had been international from the beginning, starting with a call to mobilize against the war issued at the European Social Forum in Florence in November 2002. With just a few weeks of organizing, the first internet-based global protest erupted.

On that day, beginning early in the morning, demonstrators filled the streets of capital cities and tiny villages around the world. The protests followed the sun, from Australia and New Zealand and the small Pacific islands, through the snowy steppes of North Asia and down across Southeast Asia and the South Asian peninsula, across Europe and down to the southern tip of Africa, then jumping the pond first to Latin America and then finally, last of all, to the United States.

Across the globe, the call came in scores of languages: “The world says no to war!” and “Not in our name!” echoed from millions of voices. The Guinness Book of World Records said between 12 and 14 million people came out that day – the largest protest in the history of the world. The great British labor and peace activist, former MP Tony Benn, described it to the million Londoners in the streets that day as “the first global demonstration, and its first cause is to prevent a war against Iraq.”

What a concept – a global protest against a war that had not yet begun, with the goal to stop it.

It was an amazing moment – a movement that pushed governments around the world to do the unthinkable: They resisted pressure from the United States and the United Kingdom and said no to endorsing Bush’s war.

The governmental opposition included the ‘Uncommitted Six’ members of the UN Security Council. Under ordinary circumstances, US-dependent and relatively weak countries like Angola, Cameroon, Chile, Guinea, Mexico, and Pakistan could never have stood up to Washington alone. But these were not ordinary circumstances.

With diplomatic support from ‘Old Europe’, including Germany and France who for their own reasons opposed the war, the thousands filling the streets of their capitals allowed the Six to resist fierce pressure from Washington.

The US threatened to kill a free-trade agreement seven years in the making with Chile. (The trade agreement was quite terrible, but the Chilean government was committed to it.) Washington threatened to cancel US aid, granted under the African Growth & Opportunity Act, to Guinea and Cameroon. Mexico faced the potential end of negotiations over immigration and the border. And yet all stood firm.

The day before the protests, February 14, the Security Council was called into session once again, this time at the foreign minister level, to hear the final reports of the two UN weapons inspectors for Iraq.

Many had anticipated that their reports would somehow wiggle around the truth – that they would say something Bush and Blair would grab to try to legitimize their spurious claims of Iraq’s alleged weapons of mass destruction. Or at least they might appear ambivalent enough for the US to use their reports to justify war.

But the inspectors refused to bend the truth, stating unequivocally that no such weapons had been found.

Following their reports, French Foreign Minister Dominique de Villepin responded with an extraordinary call, reminding the world that “the United Nations must remain an instrument of peace, and not a tool for war.” In that usually staid, formal, rule-bound chamber, his call was answered with a roaring ovation beginning with Council staff and quickly embracing the diplomats and foreign ministers themselves.

Enough governments said no that the United Nations was able to do what its Charter requires, but what political pressure too often makes impossible: stand against the scourge of war.

On the morning of February 15, just hours before the massive New York rally began outside the United Nations, the great actor-activist Harry Belafonte and I accompanied South African Archbishop Desmond Tutu to meet with then-Secretary-General Kofi Annan on behalf of the protesters. We had to be escorted by police to cross what the NYPD had designated its “frozen zone” – not in reference to the bitter 18 degree temperature or the biting wind whipping in from the East River, but the forcibly deserted streets directly in front of UN headquarters.

In the secretary-general’s office on the 38th floor, Bishop Tutu opened the meeting. He looked at Kofi across the table and said, “We are here today on behalf of those people marching in cities all around the world. And we are here to tell you, that those people marching in all those cities around the world, we claim the United Nations as our own. We claim it in the name of our global mobilization for peace.”

It was an incredible moment. And while we weren’t able to prevent the Iraq war, the global mobilization pulled governments and the United Nations into a trajectory of resistance shaped and led by global movements. We created what the New York Times the next day called “the second superpower.” It was a new kind of internationalism.

Excerpted: ‘20 Years Ago Today: We Didn’t Stop the Invasion of Iraq, But We Did Change History’.

Courtesy: Commondreams.org