

Information Warfare in Miami

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On Wednesday, Nov. 26, labor leaders stood up at a press conference with environmental and global justice activists and blasted the Miami police force for using repressive tactics against those protesting the Free Trade Area of the Americas summit (FTAA). That same day, Amnesty International called for an independent investigation into the strong-arm tactics utilized by a militarized force of over 40 agencies against the demonstrators.

The stakes in Miami were very high for the Bush administration. Across Latin America, millions of people have expressed their opposition to corporate driven globalization and "free trade." Meanwhile, historic alliances have been forged between various movements inside the U.S. Gone were the messaging disputes between those who advocate "Fair Trade" and supporters of "No Trade" that had characterized previous demonstrations at trade negotiations. This time, unions and street activists shared a clear, common message: "No to FTAA."

Anti-war groups such as United for Peace and Justice joined with the more de-centralized, affinity group-based wing of the global justice movement to organize direct action. Powerful labor groups like the AFL-CIO and the United Steelworkers made clear that despite tactical differences, there was solidarity among resistance movements. To emphasize this point, AFL-CIO president John Sweeney visited the mobilization convergence center where art-making, training and planning was underway for un-permitted street actions.

Yet this powerful display of successful solidarity is not what Americans saw on their television or read in their newspapers.

What's Wrong With This Picture?

As veterans of mass mobilizations believe that the debates over top-down corporate globalization are increasingly won and lost in the stories that emerge from both the various trade summits and the demonstrations against them. Social and environmental justice movements have become increasingly adept at producing their own media and utilizing alternative avenues to articulate our experiences to friends and allies. Yet, as progressive activists we still find ourselves wondering whether mainstream outlets witnessed the same events as we did.

As self admitted media junkies, we sat together this past weekend and devoured taped television footage and stacked print coverage of the Miami protests. We sat glued to the TV set, watching anchor after anchor use descriptions that appeared to be completely disconnected to the scenes shown on screen. At one point, an anchor's voice-over described undercover agents being chased behind police lines by protesters, while the film repeatedly showed a small group of demonstrators aiding a friend who appeared to have been attacked by other protestors (undercover agents).

Reporters and commentators repeatedly slipped up and used the phrases that illuminated their bias. In one notable instance, as Channel 7 aired lived footage of armed policemen driving frightened protesters from the downtown area, the commentator enthusiastically declared "So far, we're winning!"

Justifications for pre-emptive police action were plentiful. "[The police are] prepared, have been preparing, are ready for any scenario. When something came up they put it out," one anchor said. "Everything is going according to script," declared another. When none of the chaos that had been promised materialized, the anchors cried triumphantly that this was a result of a "massive, well-prepared police force."

Live coverage was largely comprised of uneventful shots of groups of demonstrators gathered in clumps in parks or wandering down



streets, followed at close range by lines of riot cops and armored vehicles. A few repetitive shots of young masked protestors were peppered with hundreds of references by the anchors to "trouble makers", "rabble rousers," "bad seeds," "protestors looking for trouble," and, of course, the never defined but always scary "anarchists."

Controlling the Streets and the Story

The police effort to crack down on protesters in Miami was funded through the \$87 billion dollar War on Terror package. The money paid for over-time for the DEA, the ATF, Immigration and Customs, Miami Dade Police Department, and the US Fish and Wildlife Service officers, to name a just a few of those brought in to maintain "order." It also financed the state of the art weaponry on display on the streets of Miami, from de rigeur tear gas and rubber bullets to new and exotic toys such as taser guns, mobile water cannons, and electric shields.

What became clear in the lead up to the FTAA was that the "Miami Model" -- as law enforcement enthusiasts are calling it -- has goals that go way beyond merely keeping the peace. The bigger agenda of the Miami policing operation was to control the public perception of mass protest and grassroots movements. Only days after that FTAA protests on Nov. 23, the New York Times broke a story on the FBI's ongoing policy of infiltrating and spying on the anti-war and global justice movements. Miami was the mainstreaming of overt information warfare against non-violent protest.

Information warfare is defined by Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff Instruction Number 3210.01 as "actions taken to achieve information superiority by affecting adversary information, information based processes, and information systems."

The relevance of information warfare to social movements and political conflicts have been the subject of study of Rand Corporation researchers John J. Arquilla and David F. Ronfeldt. Over the past decade, they have written extensively about an aspect



of information warfare they call "netwar," which they define as: "trying to disrupt or damage what a target population knows or thinks it knows about itself and the world around it...It may involve public diplomacy measures, propaganda and psychological campaigns, political and cultural subversion, deception of or interference with local media."

One of Miami Police Chief John Timoney's first acts in controlling the story was to "embed" the media in the police operations. Appearing on camera in their special issue flack jackets and riot helmets, embedded TV correspondents helped reinforce the perception of the protests as a massive threat to public safety. The story was already defined as "protesters versus police," masking the reality that demonstrators included people from all walks of life. The Miami Herald's embedded reporter uncritically regurgitated Timoney's description of protesters as "punks," "trouble makers" and "knuckleheads," and the chief's vow to "hunt them like a hawk picking mice off a field."

The police propaganda efforts were clearly designed to disrupt the newly forming alliances. Starting with his first interview on Nov.20, Timoney attempted to create artificial dichotomies between the "credible" labor movement and the "suspect" direct action community. As he praised the labor groups for planning an orderly, non-violent march, Timoney described participants in the unpermitted events as "violent trouble makers" with no message. Police spokespeople used their tight relationship with the embedded media to spread rumors about schisms between the labor march and the other street actions.

Despite the repeated stories in the media pitting the "good protestors" against the "bad protestors," the reality on the ground was quite different. Not only was there clear solidarity among labor, community and direct action activists, but the police action against the labor march was just as harsh as against the activists. People trying to join the permitted rally and march were pepper sprayed, harassed, and, in the case of over a dozen buses, prevented from reaching downtown. One story that did find its way into the



mainstream media was that of Bentley Killmon, a 71-year old retired union member who was among a number of people arrested while trying to leave downtown after the march and held for hours without bail or food. Mr. Killmon's experience was telling proof of the chasm between police speak and reality.

It also seemed to be more than coincidence that there were a rash of armed robberies against independent videographers in Miami. At least five independent journalists reported their cameras and footage taken from them at gun and knife point. Brandon Jourdan, of the New York IMC described his experience as follows: "After shooting over 90 minutes of unprovoked police violence against demonstrators, I went to take my footage to a safe location. On the way, I was robbed by two clean cut men who were carrying stun guns. Eyewitnesses from the local community reported they had never seen these individuals before and that they were observed leaving the neighborhood with my camera."

Lessons of Miami and Beyond

Now that the tear gas has cleared from the streets of Miami, the battle for the long-term meaning of the demonstrations is under way. Both demonstrators and police are examining how the lessons of Miami will play out in future mass demonstrations.

The Bush administration is rapidly turning America into an Orwellian propaganda state. From calling clear-cut public lands a "Healthy Forests Initiative" to weakening air pollution protections with a "Clear Skies Initiative" to lying about their motivation for invading Iraq, the Bush administration is using its weapons of mass deception to manipulate public opinion. The staging of next year's Republican National Convention in New York, timed to coincide with the anniversary of 9/11, is just one more example of this ongoing spin war.

The convention is certain to be one of the next major flash points between the confrontation between the administration and the diverse grassroots movements for change. Judging by the experience in



Miami, we can expect more of the same: militarized streets and little respect for First Amendment rights.

The Bush administration will continue its military-style information warfare campaign, as well. It has already tapped one of its most seasoned propagandists, Jim Wilkinson, former Director of Strategic Communications at U.S. Central Command, to head up New York media operations for the RNC. The media will likely be "embedded" again, and Wilkinson has promised other tricks of the trade to leverage the spectacle.

Progressive movements must meet this spin machine with a more sophisticated definition of protest - one that prioritizes contesting power in the broader symbolic, cultural and ideological arenas rather than compete with militarized riot police for control of the street. We must learn to effectively fight the Battle of the Story - the competition to define public interpretation of a mass action, campaign or movement. The Battle of the Story is fought on the airwaves and in the newspapers as well as in the streets.

The New York convention offers a unique opportunity to win the battle if progressive movements can offer Americans a new narrative based on hope, dignity and true economic and political security. Good story telling relies on sympathetic characters clearly articulating the conflict they face. The list of victims of the Bush economy grows longer every day and represents one of the best weapons in the Battle of the Story. Imagine if teachers, steelworkers, disgruntled veterans, fire fighters and working mothers were able to speak to America about the impact of Bush's short-sighted policies on their lives. Imagine if the family members of U.S. soldiers were able to demand answers about the Bush case for war.

One power of mass mobilization is the creation of conflict and drama as any good story demands. Some mass mobilization organizations are calling for a million people to descend on NY to protest the Republican agenda. This type of momentum is certain to attract a lot of sensational coverage. We need to use this opportunity to weave an alternative narrative to the Bush story of fear and dominance, in order



to become more than just tabloid television coverage and background noise. We need to continue to use our alternative media outlets to document the real stories that compel change.

Our job is to keep tugging at the threads until the world sees that the emperor isn't wearing any clothes.

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