

A Peaceful Superpower: Lessons from the world's largest antiwar movement

By David Cortright. New York: New Village Press, 2023. 257 pages. \$22.95 (paperback). ISBN: 978-1613322031

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A Peaceful Superpower by David Cortright is a critical and vital reflection on the movement against the war in Iraq during the 2000s by one of the world's leading scholar-practitioners of peace movements. Cortright has been fighting for peace for almost his entire adult life, beginning with advocacy as an active-duty soldier during the Vietnam War. This activism evolved into a profession, manifested in leadership positions in organizations such as SANE (the Committee for a Sane Nuclear Policy) and the Kroc Institute for International Peace Studies at the University of Notre Dame. His many books include *Peace Works: The Citizen's Role in Ending the Cold War* (1993), which offers a similarly optimistic perspective on peace activism that aligns with the one advanced in *A Peaceful Superpower*.

The 2023 edition of *A Peaceful Superpower* is not branded as a "Second Edition," but it is a second edition in important respects. I first encountered *A Peaceful Superpower* almost 20 years ago when Cortright's *A Peaceful Superpower: The Movement against the War in Iraq* (2004) was published by the Fourth Freedom Forum. As a young scholar who was just beginning a decades-long research project on the antiwar movement, this book was an essential starting point for my research. It presented a detailed, insider's view on the formation of the leading organizations and coalitions in the movement, including their leaders, objectives, structures, and tactics. The book explained the earliest events of the movement—such as the coordinated, worldwide protests against the war on February 15, 2003—as a function of organizational and coalition processes. Its coverage of subgroups in the movement, especially religious communities, labor, business, communities of color, and women, was especially illuminating. Cortright did this earlier and with greater clarity than other scholars, which was of great value to those of us studying this topic.

The 2023 edition is a substantial expansion of the 2004 edition with the length of the text roughly doubled. While the 2004 edition was constrained to examine only the earliest period of the movement leading up to the 2003 invasion of Iraq and its immediate aftermath, the 2023 edition offers the benefit of hindsight on a movement that would span about a decade (depending on how the beginning and end points are marked). In adding this material, the book's subtitle is appropriately changed to *Lessons from the World's Largest Antiwar Movement*. By making this extension, Cortright covers both new events (such as antiwar protests among

military personnel and their families, and the election of Barack Obama and its relevance to the movement) and places earlier events in historical context to a greater extent than was possible in 2004.

One thing that remains unchanged about the new edition is its leading title, *A Peaceful Superpower*. This title derives from the writing of *New York Times* author Patrick Tyler, whose coverage of the February 15, 2003 protests suggested that the antiwar movement had become another “superpower.” As a peace activist, Tyler’s phrase inspired me. It amplified my perspective—as a participant in large protests—that the government *had* to listen to us. Likewise, seeing it repeated by Cortright in 2004 encouraged my research.

Yet the government did *not* listen to us in any meaningful sense. Thus, it is appropriate to reflect on whether we should continue to refer to the movement as a superpower and what the consequences of doing so might be. Cortright’s book is an example of what is, in my view, an overly celebratory tradition in social movement research. Most of us who research and write about social movements do so because we *believe* in social movements and the causes they espouse. Thus, we have a desire to present them in the best light possible. Indeed, it is hard to imagine living in a world that did not protest the crimes of the Iraq War. What an awful world that would be. But, as scholars, we are also obligated to come as close as possible to an “objective” assessment of movements and their outcomes. If we think they are superpowers (and we, by extension, are “superheroes”), it may be cognitively dissonant to engage in critical reflection. Instead, we must ask, what did the antiwar movement really achieve? This brings us to the main point on which Cortright and I disagree.

The question of the ultimate impact of the antiwar movement turns to interpreting the meaning and consequences of the election of Barack Obama as President of the United States in 2008. Cortright correctly identifies Obama’s antiwar stance as the (perhaps decisive) issue that gave him an edge over Hillary Clinton in winning the Democratic nomination in 2008. But did Obama’s election make a difference in the trajectory of the Iraq War? It is true—as Cortright notes—that Obama established a timeline for withdrawal from Iraq. However, the actual timing of withdrawal followed the schedule that Obama’s predecessor, President George W. Bush, had previously agreed to. Hence, there is no unambiguous evidence that Obama implemented a policy on Iraq that was any different than what Bush would have implemented if he had another term as president. This fact leaves the very plausible view that the movement exerted no substantial influence over the implementation of American foreign policy.

Cortright generously and fairly engages my own research on this subject, including my book with Fabio Rojas, *Party in the Street: The Antiwar Movement and the Democratic Party after 9/11* (2015). He ultimately concludes that “Opponents of the war generated political pressures that eventually ended the conflict, demonstrating the power of social action to shape the course of history” (204). Yet Rojas and I show how Democratic activists and organizations in the movement withdrew their pressure on Obama before he delivered any concrete policy changes, thus giving him a free pass to continue his predecessor’s path. These activists chose to settle for a partisan victory over a policy victory. Their individual and collective decisions left a much smaller group of nonpartisan and minor-party-affiliated activists to continue the struggle without possessing critical mass.

To some readers, my response to Cortright might appear to be a modern illustration of scholars debating about the number of angels dancing on the head of a pin. Obama was elected. The war ended. Why debate this issue any further? Does it really matter what the ultimate cause of the war’s end was? Is it relevant whose strategies exerted real force and whose did not? My perspective is that it does matter because it affects the lessons about strategy that we draw from



these events. How should social movements challenge the next wars? They are already here, by the way.

Cortright neglects to recognize that a key weakness of the antiwar movement after 9/11 was its collective decision to marry its mobilization process to the choices of the Democratic Party. The temptation to do so was overwhelming because of the hyper-partisan polarization of American society in recent decades. Still, social movements would be well advised to seek ways to neutralize the partisanship of their mobilization so that they appeal to Democrats, Republicans, supporters of third parties, and nonpartisans alike. Such an approach could make movements more resistant to the fluctuations of electoral cycles. In the case of the antiwar movement, doing so might have enabled the movement to continue pressuring the United States on the issue of Iraq after Obama ascended to the presidency—instead of immediately collapsing, as it did.

An example of the nonpartisan strategy at work is offered by the Black Lives Matter (BLM) movement, especially from 2013 to 2020. The movement registered relatively low levels of partisanship among its activists and explicitly rejected parties in its formal organizational positions, to the extent that it took them. Its interaction with potential Democratic allies, such as Hillary Clinton and Bernie Sanders, was sometimes clumsy. No one doubts that, for the most part, these people are usually not Republicans. Nevertheless, BLM offers an outline of what a nonpartisan movement might look like in the contemporary era.

A Peaceful Superpower is an important book and it deserves attention by all serious scholars of peace and social movements. My disagreement with some points in Cortright's argument should not be taken to discount the tremendous value produced by this careful and broad-ranging monograph. Indeed, it is only by closely scrutinizing the actions and inactions of real social movements that we can hope to learn how to promote peace by giving power to the people through activism.

AUTHOR BIOGRAPHY

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