

Harper's Magazine

<http://www.harpers.org/archive/2007/10/0081720>

Specific suggestion: General strike

By Garret Keizer

October 2007

*Awake and sing, ye that dwell in dust.*

—Isaiah 26:19

Of all the various depredations of the Bush regime, none has been so thorough as its plundering of hope. Iraq will recover sooner. What was supposed to have been the crux of our foreign policy—a shock-and-awe tutorial on the utter futility of any opposition to the whims of American power—has achieved its greatest and perhaps its only lasting success in the American soul. You will want to cite the exceptions, the lunch-hour protests against the war, the dinner-party ejaculations of dissent, though you might also want to ask what substantive difference they bear to grousing about the weather or even to raging against the dying of the light—that is, to any ritualized complaint against forces universally acknowledged as unalterable. Bush is no longer the name of a president so much as the abbreviation of a proverb, something between Murphy's Law and tomorrow's fatal inducement to drink and be merry today.

If someone were to suggest, for example, that we begin a general strike on Election Day, November 6, 2007, for the sole purpose of removing this regime from power, how readily and with what well-practiced assurance would you find yourself producing the words "It won't do any good"? Plausible and even courageous in the mouth of a patient who knows he's going to die, the sentiment fits equally well in the heart of a citizenry that believes it is already dead.

2.

Any strike, whether it happens in a factory, a nation, or a marriage, amounts to a reaffirmation of consent. The strikers remind their overlords—and, equally important, themselves—that the seemingly perpetual machinery of daily life has an off switch as well as an on. Camus said that the one serious question of philosophy is whether or not to commit suicide; the one serious question of political philosophy is whether or not to get out of bed. Silly as it may have seemed at the time, John and Yoko's famous stunt was based on a profound observation. Instant karma is not so instant—we ratify it day by day.

The stream of commuters heading into the city, the caravan of tractor-trailers pulling out of the rest stop into the dawn's early light, speak a deep-throated Yes to the sum total of what's going on in our collective life. The poet Richard Wilbur writes of the "ripped mouse" that "cries Concordance" in the talons of the owl; we too cry our daily assent in the grip of the prevailing order— except in those notable instances when, like a donkey or a Buddha, we refuse to budge.

The question we need to ask ourselves at this moment is what further provocations we require to justify digging in our heels. To put the question more pointedly: Are we willing to wait until the next presidential election, or for some interim congressional conversion experience, knowing that if we do wait, hundreds of our sons and daughters will be needlessly destroyed? Another poet, César Vallejo, framed the question like this:

A man shivers with cold, coughs, spits up blood.  
Will it ever be fitting to allude to my inner soul? . . .  
A cripple sleeps with one foot on his shoulder.  
Shall I later on talk about Picasso, of all people?

A young man goes to Walter Reed without a face. Shall I make an appointment with my barber? A female prisoner is sodomized at Abu Ghraib. Shall I send a check to the Clinton campaign?

3.

You will recall that a major theme of the Bush Administration's response to September 11 was that life should go on as usual. We should keep saying that broad consensual Yes as loudly as we dared. We

could best express our patriotism by hitting the malls, by booking a flight to Disney World. At the time, the advice seemed prudent enough: avoid hysteria; defy the intimidations of murderers and fanatics.

In hindsight it's hard not to see the roots of our predicament in the readiness with which we took that advice to heart. We did exactly as we were told, with a net result that is less an implicit defiance of terrorism than a tacit amen to the "war on terror," including the war in Iraq. Granted, many of us have come to find both those wars unacceptable. But do we find them intolerable? Can you sleep? Yes, doctor, I can sleep. Can you work? Yes, doctor, I can work. Do you get out to the movies, enjoy a good restaurant? Actually, I have a reservation for tonight. Then I'd say you were doing okay, wouldn't you? I'd say you were tolerating the treatment fairly well.

It is one thing to endure abuses and to carry on in spite of them. It is quite another thing to carry on to the point of abetting the abuse. We need to move the discussion of our nation's health to the emergency room. We need to tell the doctors of the body politic that the treatment isn't working—and that until it changes radically for the better, neither are we.

4.

No one person, least of all a freelance writer, has the prerogative to call or set the date for a general strike. *What do you guys do for a strike, sit on your overdue library books?* Still, what day more fitting for a strike than the first Tuesday of November, the Feast of the Hanging Chads? What other day on the national calendar cries so loudly for rededication?

The only date that comes close is September 11. You have to do a bit of soul-searching to see it, but one result of the Bush presidency has been a loss of connection to those who perished that day. Unless they were members of our families, unless we were involved in their rescue, do we think of them? It's too easy to say that time eases the grief—there's more to it than that, more even than the natural tendency to shy away from brooding on disasters that might happen again. We avoid thinking of the September 11 victims because to think of them we have to think also of what we have allowed to happen in their names. Or, if we object openly to what has happened, we have to parry the insinuation that we're unmoved by their loss.

It is time for us to make a public profession of faith that the people who went to work that morning, who caught the cabs and rode the elevators and later jumped to their deaths, were not on the whole people who would sanction extraordinary rendition, preemptive war, and the suspension of habeas corpus; that in their heels and suits they were at least as decent as any sneaker-shod person standing vigil outside a post office with a stop the war sign. That the government workers who died in the Pentagon were not by some strange congenital fluke more obtuse than the high-ranking officers who thought the invasion of Iraq was a bad idea from the get-go. That the passengers who rushed the hijackers on Flight 93 were not repeating the mantra "It won't do any good" while scratching their heads and their asses in a happy-hour funk.

An Election Day general strike would set our remembrance of those people free from the sarcophagi of rhetoric and rationalization. It would be the political equivalent of raising them from the dead. It would be a clear if sadly delayed message of solidarity to those voters in Ohio and Florida who were pretty much told they could drop dead.

5.

But how would it work? A curious question to ask given that *not* working is most of what it would entail. Not working until the president and the shadow president resigned or were impeached. Never mind what happens next. Rather, let our mandarins ask how this came to happen in the first place. Let them ask in shock and awe.

People who could not, for whatever reason, cease work could at least curtail consumption. In fact, that might prove the more effective action of the two. They could vacate the shopping malls. They could cancel their flights. With the aid of their Higher Power, they could turn off their cell phones. They could unplug their TVs.

The most successful general strike imaginable would require extraordinary measures simply to announce its success. It would require sound trucks going up and down the streets, Rupert Murdoch reduced to

croaking through a bullhorn. Bonfires blazing on the hills. Bells tolling till they cracked. (Don't we have one of those on display somewhere?)

Ironically, the segment of the population most unable to participate would be the troops stationed in the Middle East. Striking in their circumstances would amount to suicide. That distinction alone ought to suffice as a reason to strike, as a reminder of the unconscionable underside of our "normal" existence. We get on with our lives, they get on with their deaths.

As for how the strike would be publicized and organized, these would depend on the willingness to strike itself. The greater the willingness, the fewer the logistical requirements. How many Americans does it take to change a lightbulb? How many Web postings, how many emblazoned bedsheets hung from the upper-story windows? Think of it this way: How many hours does it take to learn the results of last night's *American Idol*, even when you don't want to know?

In 1943 the Danes managed to save 7,200 of their 7,800 Jewish neighbors from the Gestapo. They had no blogs, no television, no text messaging—and very little time to prepare. They passed their apartment keys to the hunted on the streets. They formed convoys to the coast. An ambulance driver set out with a phone book, stopping at any address with a Jewish-sounding name. No GPS for directions. No excuse not to try.

But what if it failed? What if the general strike proved to be anything but general? I thought Bush was supposed to be the one afraid of science. Hypothesis, experiment, analysis, conclusion—are they his hobgoblins or ours? What do we have to fear, except additional evidence that George W. Bush is exactly what he appears to be: the president few of us like and most of us deserve. But science dares to test the obvious. So let us dare.

6.

We could hardly be accused of innovation. General strikes have a long and venerable history. They're as retro as the Bill of Rights. There was one in Great Britain in 1926, in France in 1968, in Ukraine in 2004, in Guinea just this year. Finns do it, Nepalis do it, even people without email do it . . .

But we don't have to do it, you will say, because "we have a process." Have or had, the verb remains tentative. In regard to verbs, Dick Cheney showed his superlative talent for *le mot juste* when in the halls of the U.S. Congress he told Vermont Senator Patrick Leahy to go fuck himself. He has since told congressional investigators to do the same thing. There's your process. Dick Cheney could lie every day of his life for all the years of Methuselah, and for the sake of that one remark history would still need to remember him as an honest man. In the next world, Diogenes will kneel down before him. In this world, though, and in spite of the invitation tendered to me through my senator, I choose to remain on my feet.

"United we stand," isn't that how it goes? But we are not united, not by a long shot. At this juncture we may be able to unite only in what we will not stand for. The justification of torture, the violation of our privacy, the betrayal of our intelligence operatives, the bankrupting of our commonwealth, the besmirching of our country's name, the feckless response to natural disaster, the dictatorial inflation of executive power, the senseless butchery of our youth—if these do not constitute a common ground for intolerance, what does?

People were indignant at the findings of the 9/11 Commission—it seems there were compelling reasons to believe an attack was imminent!—yet for the attack on our Constitution we have evidence even more compelling. How can we criticize an administration for failing to act in the face of a probable threat given our own refusal to act in the face of a threat already fulfilled? As long as we're willing to go on with our business, Bush and Cheney will feel free to go on with their coup. As long as we're willing to continue fucking ourselves, why should they have any scruples about telling us to smile during the act?

7.

Between undertaking the strike and achieving its objective, the latter requires the greater courage. It requires courage simply to admit that this is so. For too many of us, Bush has become a secret craving, an addiction. We loathe Bush the way that Peter Pan loathed Captain Hook; he's a villain, to be sure, but he's half the fun of living in Never-Never Land. He has provided us with an inexhaustible supply of editorial copy, partisan rectitude, and every sort of lame excuse for not engaging the system he

represents. In that sense, asking “What if the strike were to fail?” is not even honest. On some level we would want it to fail.

Certainly this would be true of those who’ve declared themselves as presidential candidates and for whom the Bush legacy represents an unprecedented windfall of political capital. One need only speak a coherent sentence—one need only breathe from a differently shaped smirk—to seem like a savior. Ding-dong, the Witch is dead. Already I can see the winged monkeys who signed off on the Patriot Act and the Iraq invasion jumping up and down for joy. Already I can hear the nauseating gush: “Such a welcome relief after Bush!” Relief, yes. But relief is not hope.

How much better if we could say to our next administration: Don’t talk about Bush. We dealt with Bush. We dealt with Bush and in so doing we demonstrated our ability to deal with you. You have a mandate more rigorous than looking good beside Bush. You need a program more ambitious than “uniting the country.” We are united—at least we were, if only for a while, if only in our disgust. If only I believed all this would happen.

I wrote this appeal during the days leading up to the Fourth of July. I wrote it because for the past six and a half years I have heard the people I love best—family members, friends, former students and parishioners—saying, “I’m sick over what’s happening to our country, but I just don’t know what to do.” Might I be pardoned if, fearing civil disorder less than I fear civil despair, I said, “Well, we could do this.” It has been done before and we could do this. And I do believe we could. If anyone has a better idea, I’m keen to hear it. Only don’t tell me what some presidential hopeful ought to do someday. Tell me what the people who have nearly lost their hope can do right now.