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The war in Iraq: - Opponents plan largest protest since the invasion

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By DANIEL STURM

Margaret Kingsbury believes there are as many reasons to demonstrate against the U.S. military operations now as there were a year ago, if not more.

"The information we obtained over the last year, that there were no weapons of mass destruction and there was no imminent threat, makes it all the more clear that we have attacked a country that had no ability to attack us," Kingsbury said.

Kingsbury is the coordinator of the anti-war march and workshops being sponsored in Lansing Saturday, March 20, by the Greater Lansing Network Against War and Injustice to mark the one-year anniversary of the invasion of Iraq. (Click here for events list)

The rally was inspired by the national anti-war organization United for Peace and Justice, which called for a Global Day of Action. Similar actions are planned in more than 200 U.S. cities and 50 foreign countries.

The Detroit-based Michigan Emergency Coalition Against War and Injustice will send two buses with more than 120 people. Organizers are expecting anti-war activists from across the state, but particularly from the Jackson and Battle Creek area. Similar rallies will take place in 11 Michigan cities, including Kalamazoo, Midland, Flint, Grand Rapids and Ann Arbor.

The slogan for the rally at the state Capitol is "Michigan Still Says No to War." Speakers will include U.S. Rep. John Conyers (D-Detroit); state Rep. Michael Murphy (D-Lansing); Abayomi Azikiwe of the Michigan Emergency Committee Against War & Injustice; Elizabeth O'Brien of Direct Action in Lansing; Adie Urley, Molly Leatherman and Anna Putnam of the Greater Lansing Youth for Peace and Justice; and Arnold Stieber of Veterans for Peace.

Stieber, of Grass Lake, near Jackson, said his personal message at the rally will be, "If you have to hurt someone to solve the problem, you are the problem." In 1969, after graduating from Michigan State University with a business degree, Stieber was drafted and spent 14 months in an infantry company in Vietnam.

After his return, Stieber said he was able to "shut it all off." He married and continued life as if he'd never taken part in the traumatic event. But last year, when the Bush administration announced it would go to war with Iraq, no matter what, "it was like a volcano. A lot of stuff was brewing underneath, to which I didn't pay much attention. I exploded in research."

After spending a lot of time reading books and other material, Stieber concluded that the "nicest thing I could say about George W. Bush was that he is an embarrassment. But it doesn't really matter who the president is, because they have all degenerated to puppets of big business. Billions of dollars are generated from wars. The plan to invade Iraq was made in the mid-1990s. They only needed a reason."

Stieber, secretary for the Veteran for Peace's Washtenaw County chapter, said it was difficult for him to understand why some Vietnam veterans still supported the invasion. One explanation, he believes, is the powerful American "culture of war."

"We are raised as children to believe that war is the answer," he said. "You play war games, or cops and robbers. You learn that there's only one way to solve a problem: shoot them up."

The Greater Lansing area has played an active role in the anti-war movement. Four weeks before the invasion, a statewide rally organized by the Greater Lansing Network against War in Iraq (the old name of the organization that is sponsoring Saturday's activities) attracted more than 2,000 protesters, making it the largest demonstration in Lansing since the Vietnam War protests in the early 1970s. Lansing residents joined 603 cities worldwide under the slogan "Say No to War in Iraq." Twelve million people on five continents took to the streets.

A few days later, Lansing City Council voted unanimously to take a stance against the war, calling upon Bush to pursue all possible peaceful diplomatic alternatives. Lansing became one of 100 cities to adopt a municipal resolution for peace.

It seems as if the anti-war movement has lost momentum over the last several months. Event organizer Kingsbury agrees, saying she believes the number of people active in the local anti-war movement is smaller than it was a year ago.

But anti-war activist Ben Burgis, who recently moved to Kalamazoo from East Lansing, said the anti-war movement is still "alive and kicking." Burgis thinks the rally will send out a strong message that no more American soldiers, Iraqi civilians or Iraqi resistance fighters should die.

According to Iraq Body Count, a research group that tracks civilian deaths as reported in 40 international newspapers and wire services, as many as 10,000 non-combatant civilian deaths have been reliably reported so far as the direct result of military actions. Since the beginning of the war, 566 U.S. soldiers have died and more than 3,300 have been wounded, according to www.antiwar.com.

And according to The Cost of War, a group that bases its analysis on data provided by the Congressional Budget Office, the government has so far spent more than \$106 billion to finance the war in Iraq. The nonprofit organization National Priorities Project estimates that Greater Lansing residents will have to pay \$64.5 million in federal taxes for war, occupation and reconstruction in Afghanistan and Iraq this year.

Burgis said the main reason he will protest is that the administration has lied about the real reasons for going to war. Initially, the U.S. government called for "regime change" because Iraq supposedly posed an immediate threat to the world's security. But since it didn't find any weapons of mass destruction in Iraq, the Bush administration changed its justification for war, saying it wanted to promote freedom and democracy.

Burgis thinks this is just another attempt to cover up the real objective, which was to take over Iraq's economic resources and expand U.S. hegemony.

"Whereas the Iraqis have been demanding direct elections, the United States hasn't been very eager to allow direct elections," Burgis said. "But what the U.S. has been eager to do is to go forward with the free market economy, to privatize the country and sell it off to foreign investors."

Due to its close alliance with the U.S. corporate sector, the Bush administration has been criticized for occupying Iraq in order to influence neoliberal economic reforms in the Middle East. To give an example, the Kellogg Brown & Root unit of Halliburton, an oil-services company formerly headed by Vice President Dick Cheney, controls Iraq's oilfields under a controversial, no-bid contract from the Army Corps of Engineers. Halliburton has been accused of price gouging on imported fuel.

Burgis, a philosophy student at Western Michigan University, thinks that the Bush administration's "neo-colonial" foreign politics are a reason to take the streets. He observed that Bush took the opportunity to send Marines into Haiti to "restore stability," as the country sat back to watch the Academy Awards on Feb. 29. This makes Haiti the third nation to be directly controlled and occupied by the United States military since 9/11, after Aghanistan and Iraq.

Burgis said he thought it was bizarrely ironic to see Bush, who was "appointed" by the U.S. Supreme Court, order the democratically elected president of Haiti to step down. "I would certainly say that the pattern between Florida and Haiti is that George W. Bush doesn't care very much about the voting rights of poor black people anywhere."

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