

# **Breaking the Cycle of Complacency**

## Remarks of Rocky Anderson

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The 1960's and early 70's were a time of new ideas, a questioning of just about everything, and effective activism by ordinary – and some not-so-ordinary – citizens intent on making the world a more peaceful, healthy, compassionate place. Concerned citizens, through their activism, helped bring to an end a monstrously unjust war. Through such activism as the first Earth Day celebration in April 1970, which brought 20 million Americans together for peaceful demonstrations advocating environmental reform, they created a national consciousness about responsible environmental practices so powerful that Richard M. Nixon called for the creation of the Environmental Protection Agency, which he wanted to be, in his words, “a strong, independent agency.” And they marched, at great risk to their own safety, to achieve the Civil Rights Act.

When we look back at that time, it was a time of upheaval, excitement, high expectations, outrage toward abuses of governmental power, and the vigorous exercise of the rights of speech and association. People of all ages were speaking their minds, marching in the streets, demonstrating on campuses, and making clear to elected officials their expectations and demands. Artists, particularly musicians, were expressing the dissatisfactions of the times and the demands for a better nation and a better world.

Today, we sit back while a genocide rages for the fifth year in the Darfur region of Sudan. Some of us may gripe, but we accept with not much more than a whimper the transformation of the presidency into a dictatorship that is above laws passed by Congress, above our most fundamental treaty

obligations, and above the constitutional guarantees of individual rights. We allow our Congress to disregard the millions of people who have no health care coverage, while the parasitic insurance industry sucks up every year one-third – \$350 billion – of the funds that are paid for health care coverage. We keep electing people who fail to compassionately resolve the immigration dilemma. We condone, through our inaction, government manipulation of science and the continuation of disastrous energy policies and practices that are rendering our fragile planet a much more dangerous, uninhabitable place for our children and later generations. We permit an administration to stay in power even after it has defrauded us into the invasion and devastating military occupation of a nation that posed no threat whatsoever to us and which engages in illegal, heinous human rights abuses characteristic of tyrannies from which we used to so proudly distinguish our nation.

While the 60's and early 70's will be remembered for a commitment to conscience and a citizen activism that forced our government to respond, the beginning of this century will be remembered for the timidity, the complacency, and the lethargy of the American people. The people of our time in this nation generally will be remembered for their astounding credulousness, believing a president who lied us into a disastrous war and declared "Mission Accomplished" before hundreds of thousands more were to die, suffer lifetime injuries, and be forced from their homes as a result of the continued occupation of Iraq. For those who didn't believe, for those who objected, about the most that can be said of many of them is that they showed up once in a while for demonstrations then went back to business-as-usual. All in all, we mostly have been spineless, neglecting the powerful tools for change made available by our great Constitution, while the world became a far more hostile, dangerous, unhealthy place.

We have heard hardly a peep from musicians (except, of course, 60's artists like Neil Young), and some of what we *have* heard has been an embarrassing reminder of the wimpiness of our times. Recall Edwin Starr singing "War, what is it good for? Absolutely nothing." Recall Country Joe and the Fish, John Lennon's "Imagine," Jackson Browne, and Marvin Gaye's "What's Going On." Now consider the pathetic lyrics of the recent John Mayer song, in which he whimpers about what's going wrong and about the craven resignation brought about by the supposed powerlessness of young people to change anything. John Mayer sings:

Me and all my friends [he snivels ungrammatically]  
We're all misunderstood  
They say we stand for nothing and  
There's no way we ever could

Now we see everything that's going wrong  
With the world and those who lead it  
We just feel like we don't have the means  
To rise above and beat it

So we keep waiting  
Waiting on the world to change  
We keep on waiting  
Waiting on the world to change.

\* \* \* \*

One day our generation  
Is gonna rule the population  
So we keep on waiting  
Waiting on the world to change.

Just give up and wait for things to change?! Excuse your complacency by whining that you don't have the power to challenge wrongdoing? Don't rise above what's wrong and fight it?

Imagine the world today if Cesar Chavez, Gloria Steinem, John Brown, Rachel Carson, Martin Luther King, Jr., Upton Sinclair, Robert Kennedy, Gandhi, Jesus, Daniel Ellsberg, Archbishop Tutu, Norman Cousins, and the Dalai Lama had just resigned themselves to the status quo because the fight was too tough – if they had just said they would sit back and wait on the world to change. What cowardice. What a reflection of the utter irresponsibility of the people of our nation during these most dangerous times.

I suspect that if John Mayer and his cohorts were being drafted to fight in Iraq and Afghanistan, they would be singing a very different song.

The question then arises, have we become a nation, have we become a people, that will not stand up, that will not take action, that will not fight for

what is right unless we perceive that our narrow, personal interests are at stake?

No doubt the Bush administration figured that out long ago. Don't institute the draft. Make sure that the poor and the powerless do the fighting, killing, and dying. And give those who vote tax breaks, leaving later generations to pay the trillion dollar-plus tab for the debacle in Iraq. If each of us is not at risk of having to fight or pay for the fighting, then, as the Bush administration has suspected, too many of us turn a blind eye to the outrages and just sit it out, "waiting on the world to change."

A cycle of complacency has gripped our nation. The cycle works like this: We elect government officials, thinking they are the ones who will respond to mass atrocities committed toward others. Our government officials learn of atrocities, but, with rare exceptions, they take no action because they perceive, from the silence of the people, that their constituents just don't care. They also get the sense that things aren't really all that bad because little or nothing is being said about it in the media. And because the media and our elected officials are so quiet, the people are lulled into their moral slumber, failing to demand that government officials take action.

It is not a unique situation. However, it is shameful – and tragic in its consequences. The cycle of complacency often leads to massive human misery, betraying a hypocrisy by people who claim they care about what happens to others, who claim to abide by the Golden Rule, who claim that when one knows of injustice and cruelty one has a duty to act to stop it.

People have good intentions. We know that, because those good intentions line the highway to hell – the hell often lived on this earth by people who must be wondering – as they are raped, as they are forced from their homes, as they are tortured, as they are kidnapped and disappeared, as they and their families are killed – where are those who truly care? Where are those who could act to make a difference? Where are those who could break the cycle of complacency?

Following the Holocaust, we said, "Never Again" – never again would we allow mass atrocities to be committed against men, women, and children anywhere in the world. However, the United States and the international community have betrayed that promise and, instead, have failed

and refused to stop the slaughter and enslavement of people again and again and again.

During the Holocaust, the United States government refused immigration for all but a few European Jews and discouraged other nations from allowing them to emigrate.

In 1942, the Jewish Labor Bund in Poland reported that 700,000 Polish Jews were killed by the Nazis. The Bund Report concluded that millions of Polish Jews faced imminent death. The first newspaper account of the Bund Report was in the *Boston Globe* – at the bottom of page 12. The *Seattle Times* reported on the slaughter on page 30, under a small headline, “700,000 Jews Reported Slain.” The *New York Times* devoted two inches to the story, although the brief article recounted that “to accomplish this, probably the greatest mass slaughter in history, every death-dealing method was employed – machine-gun bullets, hand grenades, gas chambers, concentration camps, whipping, torture instruments and starvation.” The “greatest mass slaughter in history” – and the *New York Times* devoted two column inches to it.

In August of the same year, a World Jewish Congress representative learned of Hitler’s plan to systematically murder all European Jews. The State Department was skeptical of the report and asked American Jewry’s foremost leader, Stephen Wise, to withhold public comment until it could be verified. Incredibly, he complied with the request and refrained from letting Americans know of the report. More than three months later, the report was confirmed.

By that time, two million Jews had been killed. The information was finally released to the media. The media’s response was as anemic as when the Bund Report was virtually ignored. How was the story of Hitler’s plan to annihilate European Jews reported in the United States? The story appeared in the *New York Times*, 7 ½ inches on page 10. *The Washington Post*, three inches on page 6.

The US government response was as feeble as the news reporting. Nothing was done to save European Jews from their fate. And hardly any call from the public was made for the US to do anything.

Freda Kirchwey, Editor of *The Nation*, stressed the individual culpability of the American people, when she wrote:

In this country, you and I and the President and the Congress and the State Department are accessories to the crime and share Hitler's guilt. . . . What has come over the minds of ordinary men and women that makes it seem normal and indeed inevitable that this country should stolidly stand by and do nothing in the face of one of the world's greatest tragedies?

The cycle of complacency was, in part, broken by a man named Hillel Kook, who took on the name of Peter Bergson. He organized pageants to educate people about the Holocaust in several major cities. He raised money and placed dramatic full-page ads in newspapers around the country. It was through those ads that many people in the United States learned about the ongoing campaign of the Nazis to annihilate European Jews. Through Bergson's heroic efforts, often undermined by mainstream Jewish leaders who didn't want to rock the boat in anti-Semitic America, the War Refugee Board was finally formed, saving tens, perhaps hundreds, of thousands of European Jews.

During the Cambodia nightmare under the savage rule of the Khmer Rouge, when two million people lost their lives, many of them horribly tortured first, there were a few, like William F. Buckley and George McGovern, who sought to break the cycle of complacency in the United States.

However, the news media was virtually silent. During the entire three and a half years of Khmer Rouge rule, the networks devoted, on average, less than thirty seconds per month to Cambodia. There was no public call for a change in US policy, so our nation sat on its hands while two million people perished.

The same thing happened in 1994, when 800,000 people were slaughtered in Rwanda during 100 days, with no grass roots call in the US for action to be taken and nothing done by the international community to stop the killing. The same thing happened for several years during the Bosnian genocide. The same thing has been happening for 5 years in Sudan as the genocide rages in Darfur. The same thing happens, year after year, as over a million women and young girls are forced into sex slavery, although

it could be largely stopped were there the will to do so by the United States and the international community. And the same thing is happening as the world becomes hotter and more hostile toward life as a result of the reckless emission of billions of tons of global warming pollutants into the fragile atmosphere.

The most crucial question of our time is whether we will permit the cycle of complacency to continue. Or will we exercise our humanity, will we take action as moral actors, in doing all we can to stop the outrages, to prevent the continued abuses, and to provide for a safer, healthier, more just future on our planet?

We know that electing the right people is never sufficient. Change depends upon each of us, tenaciously pushing together for a better way.

In his book, *God's Politics*, Jim Wallis points out that Washington, D.C. is teeming with politicians who go around putting their fingers up in the air after licking them, trying to determine where the winds are blowing. Even those who want to change things know they need the support of the public to make it happen. And they almost never find that support. The mistake, according to Wallis, is for us to believe that by replacing one wet-fingered politician with another, we will achieve major social change. It never happens, and when it doesn't we get discouraged and cynical. Then some of us just want to give up altogether – to sit back and wait for the world to change. The people who have brought about social change have known that to change things fundamentally, it is never enough to just elect the “right” person. They knew that to make things better *we* need to change the wind.

That's our challenge. That's our responsibility. And that's our honor, as true patriots who care for our country, and as moral human beings who care for our fellow brothers and sisters. Let us join in changing the wind together.

That's what High Road for Human Rights is all about. With remarkable Boards that include Dean Robert and Vicky Newman, Deen Chatterjee, Mary Dickson, Skip Branch, Jill and Richard Sheinberg, GERALYN Dreyfous, Michael and Diane Zimmerman, and Terry Tempest-Williams, and with an Advisory Committee that includes Elie Weisel, Bill McKibben, Lester Brown, Harry Belafonte, and Yoko Ono, we are recruiting members

and building chapters in communities throughout the country, organizing members so we can speak with a unified, powerful voice to change the wind. As we tenaciously raise consciousness in each community about genocide, human trafficking, climate change, and torture, then advocate for concrete steps toward solutions, we will help change our nation's policies and practices in ways that will stop or prevent serious human rights abuses. Please join us by adding your voice and your actions to those of others throughout the nation as we build a unique, effective organizing effort that will make a real difference.

[TOAST:] There are great leaders in this room, many of whom work tenaciously to break the cycle of complacency. May you have good health and long, productive lives as you battle for justice against the forces of greed, deceit, and cruelty. To you, to those who do not condone, through your words or your actions, the wrongdoing being committed in our name; to you who strive in your lives to build a safer, more livable, more compassionate world – we toast you.