

Today's war protesters put a new face on the peacenik

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Grant Segall

Plain Dealer Reporter

They're radicals and moderates. Teens, baby boomers and senior citizens. Laborers, professionals, students and veterans.

Meet today's peaceniks.

Then again, you've met them already. They're your colleagues, neighbors and friends.

"Do I look like a hippie to you?" asked the trim Carol Litzler, a retired teacher from Lakewood High School protesting Thursday outside the suburb's military recruitment office.

"We're about as normal as you can get," said Ken Owen, a warehouse worker from Brecksville protesting on Public Square.

After Vietnam, peaceniks became as scarce as bell-bottoms. But, with deaths escalating in Iraq, they're returning in wider varieties.

Greater Clevelanders who commemorated the 2,000th U.S. military death in Iraq this week didn't pass joints or toss firebombs. They mainly carried signs, lighted candles, recited the names of dead locals and honored an estimated 25,000 to 30,000 dead civilians.

One protester drove an electric wheelchair. Another pushed a baby carriage.

"We've learned something," said Stewart Robinson, who teaches history at Case Western Reserve University. "We need to be broad and diverse and practice what we preach."

Especially the tenet of nonviolence.

"If you use violence, it devalidates," said Noreen Lucic, 16, carrying a protest sign.

So does disrespect.

"There's some effort to find common ground and look less at people as the enemy," says organizer Greg Coleridge of the American Friends Service Committee in Akron.

The protesters are still far fewer than during Vietnam. But they're growing fast, and they're already more diverse, said John Green, who leads the University of Akron's Bliss Institute for Applied Politics.

Today's war foes include such mainstream groups as the AFL-CIO and the Catholic Church. Many protesters oppose all war, but others just oppose an invasion based on claims later debunked by federal panels.

During the years of the military draft, young adults tended to dominate protests and stage them at colleges. Today, with the draft gone and the Internet huge, people of all ages organize fast to protest at doorsteps across the country.

The 2,000th U.S. military death in Iraq took place Tuesday. On Wednesday, more than 100,000 people commemorated it nationally in 1,354 locations, including several in Northeast Ohio, according to the anti-war group MoveOn.Org.

Many others protested Thursday, including about 30 in Lakewood and 100 at Public Square.

The protesters say they face not so much opposition today as indifference.

"People are like So what? It horrifies me," says Betty Haase of Lakewood.

Yoshiko Ikuta says many people keep silent for fear of the White House, which has curtailed some civil liberties. Among other steps, the administration has seized library records, banned activists from flights and jailed people indefinitely without trials.

The protesters are tired of hearing their patriotism questioned.

"This is democracy!" said Carol Litzler, wagging her sign.

"I love my country," says Tim Musser of Cleveland, "but I hate what my government is doing."

They're also tired of being told to back the troops.

"I support the troops whole-heartedly," said Dylan Doss, 20, of Cleveland, who lost a childhood friend in the war. "It's the administration we're protesting."

And it's the administration that disrespects the troops, with bad equipment and a bad mission, says Susan Childs, a military mom from Cleveland Heights. Her son is one of many soldiers forced to stay on duty beyond their voluntary four years.

If peaceniks are gentler these days, so are the police. All Cleveland police get sensitivity training, and many get special lessons in handling crowds.

After a few clashes and arrests early in the war, local police and protesters have mostly chilled out together.

At the Cleveland National Air Show in September, peace activists surrounded a military plane with crime-scene tape. Police led the activists away but arrested none.

"The less we do, the better," says police Lt. Thomas Stacho.

For all the changes, critics say the protesters remain on the fringe of politics.

"It's still a small, liberal group of Americans who are hoping for a utopia where we wouldn't have to deal with any bad parts of the world," says John Kikol of Avon Lake, who leads a yearly motorcycle rally downtown for U.S. troops. "It's an impossible dream."

But analyst Green says the protesters could well make a difference: "If present trends in Iraq continue, we'll see these protests grow, and their potential impact on elections be even greater."

Plain Dealer reporter Jesse Tinsley contributed to this story.

To reach this Plain Dealer reporter:
gsegall@plained.com, 216-999-4187