



WHY AREN'T TEENS POLITICALLY ACTIVE?

As the war in Iraq drags on into its third year, student advocate and leader Anna Robinson-Sweet wonders where all her fellow activists are.

As the American war and occupation of Iraq drags on into its third year it has drawn countless comparisons to the war in Vietnam. But unlike Vietnam, skepticism of the Iraq war does not seem to mean the surge in student political involvement it meant then.

Living in one of the most politically liberal cities in the country, New York, and attending an arts-oriented high school I have been surprised at the lack of activism among my peers.

It isn't that high school students don't know what is going on in Iraq or hold opinions about it. In fact most of the people I know are strongly against the war in Iraq but equally as strong is their stand that they will not get involved in protest or activism.

Activist has come to be somewhat of a dirty word in past years. It is associated with idealistic hippies of the Vietnam era. This is an idealism that many teenagers in New York have trouble connecting to after having lived through a threat the rest of the country only knows in abstract terms.

What does it mean to get involved?

For some this means getting more involved but for others it means being unsure of what getting involved will mean. Many wonder what activism can accomplish in the face of such a murky threat as terrorism.

Like Vietnam the majority of the soldiers fighting the "war on terror" are not much older than high school students and many of the Iraqis dying are kids, but we don't hear a lot of first hand accounts from these young people.

Instead the footage on the news is distant shots of army patrols or burning cars spliced with optimistic commentary from Army generals.

Students have seen through this to some extent and recruitment in high schools in New York has fallen.

Why this has not blossomed into more of a movement is for reasons entrenched in modern youth culture.

Undirected Anger

It is not that high school students like what the American government has done in past years; most of the teens I meet are unhappy or frustrated with it.

Today young people are less likely to act out against the establishment but rather to maintain a sort of undirected anger. This is heavily reflected in today's hip-hop culture.

Hip-hop has gone from a political outlet for under-privileged minorities to an industry controlled by white corporations that stifle the political aspect of the music and promote the violent and degrading aspects.

When rappers do talk about the neighborhoods they came from they are talking about how tough and gangster they were, making the violence that is the root of the problem seem cool. In keeping with these cultural icons teenagers are not concerned with fighting back against authority but in fighting against each other.

Today's jaded youth has come to expect bad things from the government and when scandal or corruption arise many just accept it with a shrug of their shoulders. The government only promotes this apathetic behavior.

In the years since the civil rights movement and the youth revolution our schools are still a mess, our neighborhoods degenerating, our voice still disregarded.

We have been told that we don't vote, that we don't care, that we are delinquents. We have been told this so much that we have begun to believe it.

In the past year I have been one of the leaders working to lower the voting age in New York's municipal elections to sixteen in hope that this will give the youth some sense of a voice. I have been countered with arguments from politicians telling us we need to pull up our pants before we can vote and that we wouldn't vote even if we had the opportunity. Unfortunately I have heard these very same arguments from students.

Education is key

So what can be done to change this? Is there any hope for student activism?

High school students could have an amazing effect if they got active. They need to be led there though. We lack the leaders and motivation available to students during the Vietnam War.

Anti-war groups and other activist organizations need to start tapping the reserve of students. Those who are already active need to take the initiative and encourage others to do the same.

Schools and the media won't tell us the things we need to know to inspire a political awakening, we need to educate ourselves.

We are a critical and large mass that can change the world and we need to become aware of our own potential because if our apathy continues we will find ourselves completely silenced.

-- A senior at New York's LaGuardia High School, Anna Robinson Sweet is active in many student political organizations including the movement to lower her city's municipal voting age to 16.

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