

CONA TODAY

CITIZENS OFFERING NEW ALTERNATIVES

Winter 2004

P.O. Box 649 , Newcastle, ME 04553

Engaged, not enraged: Coming together

To CONA members: Your board gave considerable thought to finding an appropriate theme for this issue, which was begun before the election, but comes out after it. A national election inevitably heightens separation among people holding different views, but I think that this time the separation has been particularly harsh. We witnessed in our own little community great divisions, primarily over the issue of the Iraq War, but also over local issues. There was a strong feeling that there would be a need for serious work, no matter which candidate became president, in order for us to come together as a nation and as a community.

I hope this issue of CONA Today provides some ideas for reflection and action.

Doris Balant

Dear Mr. President

An editorial by Tom Schmidt, President of CONA

This started out to be a letter to President Bush. It was to be filled with good advice about what he should be doing to help reunite our divided country. I suggested to our newsletter editor, Doris Balant, that the letter would also serve as a *CONA Today* editorial. I could send the letter to the president, maybe even the CONA board of directors would endorse it as a policy position, and all of us getting the newsletter could read it.

I sat down to write it and then stopped dead. The reality is that President Bush wouldn't read it. At best some staffer would categorize it for a data base, probably carelessly. So why even waste the energy in pointing out what our president should do. Then I remembered what my Mom used to say, "Just understand, Tom, when you point a finger at someone you still have three fingers pointed back at yourself." Hmm. Maybe now it is time to give Mom's advice a little attention. Maybe a different letter is called for. I wonder what she might say.....

Dear Tom,
Now that the election is over, and your man lost, I think you should consider some actions that could help make this country of ours a more

thoughtful and inclusive society. All during the run-up to the election you railed against those on the right and the left who used scare tactics, exaggeration and lies to divide us. You turned off the television because you could not stand even seeing the candidates. You pounded the table, shouting that the stench of mindless and partisan obfuscation was fouling the air. By November 2nd you were quite frankly not very nice to be around. But now that the election is over it is my duty as your mother to ask you what it is that you intend to do about this fractured and divided society. Are you part of the problem my son, or are you willing to be part of the solution? I know you pretty well, so bear with me while I make some suggestions:

First: Don't be discouraged. No matter how much you may dislike the Washington leadership, no matter how ineffective our elected representatives may be, no matter how deep our divisions may be, our country has seen even more acrimonious divisions and seen equally or more inept and devious leadership in our nation's short history. We are, and remain, a resilient nation. You do this nation no favor if you fall into rage or apathy.

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Second: Get smart about using the resources you have. You live in a state full of like-minded folk who also do not see war as a way of bringing peace, who are not afraid of a government who might wish to provide a national health care system, who will fight for their civil liberties, who want to control rampant capitalism and wish for better leadership. What steps will you take to marshal those resources?

Third: Listen. Do you really know any folk who voted for the "other guy"? Have you ever listened to their concerns? Maybe at the human level they and you have a lot in common. Effective nations are built by making that underlying commonality explicit. Are you listening, and acting on what you hear?

With love, Mom

War and peace in our community Gretchen Hull talks about Bridges for Peace

We have always been standing on bridges in Maine - for many towns along the coast the bridge is like the town common. Many of us were out on the very same bridge protesting the war in Viet Nam, and then the first Gulf War, both of which seem so long ago now. Bridges for Peace, this time around, began in Wiscasset in November of 2002, expanded to Damariscotta, then to Bath, and grew to over 40 bridges around the state as the idea spread that we could participate in a wider demonstration if we gathered together at the same time in our towns. As the war began we had people on bridges in Maryland and even a few on the George Washington in New York. It was my philosophy that all those who passed us by saw the connection of the bridges, and that even those who objected to our message and responded with looks and gestures had to have taken a moment to think about our views in order to respond. I waved and smiled at them and knew they had for a split second considered that there was another approach.

Once the war started, we increasingly found ourselves accompanied by others bearing tremendous American flags, who wished to demonstrate their support for the President's actions. I speak carefully, for it became apparent to me that their support of the war was driven as much by their fears as by their support for their President. It was a bit of a quandary for me personally, as I had considered these to be vigils for peace and non-violent resolution of conflicts. The NO War in IRAQ signs expressed

it perfectly. Once the war began, the signs began to change and became more partisan, "sides" were taken, and we claimed what the other side was taking. We had a time when we hesitated over carrying the American flag ourselves, and a time when we "took back the flag as our own". We had a time when we objected to the "Support our Troops", and a time when we began to carry signs that read "Support our troops-bring them home". Here in Damariscotta we recognized those behind the huge flags, waited to see what they would bring each week, and began to nod our greetings to them every Sunday.

I was on the bridge in Lewiston the morning that violence came to my bridge here, and was deeply saddened. The Sundays became tenser each week, as people became conflicted. Numbers on our side dwindled as people became uncomfortable. I found myself taking a stand- surprising myself- walking up to people standing with me, asking them to put away the more offensive signs and to replace them with "Peace starts here" or "Peace begins with dialogue". A number of us made a strong effort to cross the bridge and talk to those who opposed us, and although we were often quite noisily rebuffed, we continued.

After several weeks, I noticed a small lady with several cameras around her neck, snapping pictures on both sides of the bridge. Olive Piece, a photojournalist from Rockland, who had recently had a show of her photographs of Iraqi

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children in Baghdad, was capturing the pain that both sides were feeling. It occurred to her and a number of us that we needed to encourage the town to see these photographs of our community. We were soon meeting with the head of the American Legion Auxiliary to set up an exhibit of the photographs at a reception at the American Legion Hall in Damariscotta.

When the day came, there were many peace people in attendance, and a small number of American Legion members. Everyone admired the photos of themselves and sipped punch. Some of us had some wonderful conversations "across the bridge" and realized that we could converse. What is more, we could disagree and continue to converse.

For myself, the evening ended in one of those moments that change your life. Realizing that there were others in the bar downstairs who felt uncomfortable with our invasion of the American Legion Hall, I invited myself down to continue the conversation. It was the last place I expected to be, wearing my peace buttons. A number of us listened, spoke, laughed together as we realized that we agreed on more than we disagreed on. We did not like this war, we realized that probably we were all misled by the claims of WMD, many of us would not vote for this administration the next time around, and many of us had in one way or another experienced the effects of another (wrong?) war- Viet Nam. Several of us, American Legion and peacenik, realized that we had stood together in the early seventies on the Damariscotta Bridge together protesting that one. When I realized that, I laughed "Maybe we will be on the same side of the bridge when the next war comes!" "No," the American Legion member replied, "but if we are not, we will be able to talk to each other!"

From my conversations, I realized that many of those behind the big flags and the yellow-support- the- troops signs were very frightened that these troops would come home as they had, to find that the country

thought they had done wrong. I understood that.

It is my hope that we can find some common ground, some common concern, that will allow us to come together again. Building even small bridges is more important than standing on them.

What Now?

In response to the results of the presidential election the CONA Board has begun a discussion reexamining our relevance to our wider community and our effectiveness in reaching out beyond members and other like-minded citizens.

We posed the question, "What does CONA want to be:

- an agent of reconciliation?
- the loyal opposition?
- the revolutionary opposition?
- all of the above?

This will be an ongoing discussion as we search for a positive direction and activities that will strengthen CONA's relevance and effectiveness in our community.

We invite all members to become part of this important discussion. Please let us hear your thoughts and ideas! Contact Doris Balant at 563-1216, balant@lincoln.midcoast.com.

Mission Statement

CONA's mission is to provide education, research, discussion and action around such issues of peace and justice as poverty, rising income disparity, overpopulation and environmental degradation.

At the same time CONA members continue to support the Comprehensive Test Ban Treaty and the dismantling of nuclear arsenals both at home and abroad. They deplore the buildup, sale and proliferation of arms worldwide.

Our approach is to respect diversity. We wish both to be a community for our members and also to serve the larger community by providing opportunity for open, participatory discussion of alternatives to pressing problems of peace and justice at home as well as globally.

Books

The task of reclaiming democracy requires at least these steps: 1) face the problem- here is where we are, 2) seek a better vision to strive for, and 3) develop a strategy for action and implement it. There are so many good non-fiction books out lately on these topics that it is hard to decide which ones to read. Here is a random pick.

Carol Brightman's *Total Insecurity: The Myth of American Omnipotence* (Verso, \$24.95) " is a story about how the United States lost its way". In it the Maine author examines the latest imperial escapade, comparing it with those perpetrated by earlier administrations, Democrat and Republican. She warns of the rise of Iraqi nationalism provoked by U.S. actions and analyzes the U.S. abandonment of international treaties and security arrangements as more countries - including Iraq in 2000 - have switched or threaten to switch from dollars to euros for oil trading (and consequently as the preferred reserve currency). *Total Insecurity* presents a forceful argument that it will take more than mere regime change in Washington to dispel the myths and illusions about unilateral American power, beginning with the ruse called the "war on terror".

After The Empire: The Breakdown of American Order by Emmanuel Todd (Columbia U.Press, \$ 29.95) is a European's perspective on imperial America with a poignant twist: French demographer Todd is among the few who predicted, years in advance, the fall of the Soviet Union. In *After the Empire* he argues that the United States, having squandered its abundant resources and industrial base, and amassed a foreign debt now growing at the rate of nearly a half billion dollars a day, has become economically dependent on an increasingly educated and interconnected world that no longer

needs U.S. protection, and is ever less tolerant of foreign military domination. U.S. military and economic power rests increasingly on illusion, not unlike the 1990's high tech stock bubble, which rested in large measure on accounting fraud. *After the Empire* is essentially a call to a world distressed by U.S. arrogance to pull away and let the U.S. move down the slippery slope of isolation and decline of its own making. Beyond distinctive insight and intelligent analysis Todd offers no advice, nor soothing answers to the American dilemma.

For that we have to turn to books like Jeremy Rifkin's *The European Dream* (Tarcher/ Penguin, \$25.00) and *The Second Bill of Rights: FDR's Unfinished Revolution — and Why We Need It More Than Ever* by Cass. R. Sunstein (Basic books, \$25.00). The set of beliefs we call the American Dream underlies one of the great success stories and an unbroken cultural ascent that has lasted for over 200 years. But, social thinker Rifkin argues, that Dream has turned into a liability that has Americans clinging to an outmoded past. A different vision of life - and democracy - is now emerging in Europe, built, in part, on updated American insights. This new vision may yet turn out to be the world's best hope for negotiating a shared global future.

In *The Second Bill of Rights*, Sunstein recalls the social rights (the right to work for a living wage, to health care, to education, to decent retirement benefits, etc.) outlined in FDR's fourth inaugural address, and traces their evolution in constitutions and international treaties around the world. Social rights, alas, still go unrecognized in U.S. law and Constitution, even though they have become part of the constitutions of European democracies and have been incorporated in the United Nations Charter - in part because of American insistence. Go figure!

Paul Kando

Poetry and.....

To Think of the Life of a Man

In a time that breaks
in cutting pieces all around,
when men, voiceless
against thing-ridden men,
set themselves on fire, it seems
too difficult and rare
to think of the life of a man
grown whole in the world,
at peace and in place.
But having thought of it
I am beyond the time
I might have sold my hands
or sold my voice and mind
to the arguments of power
that go blind against
what they would destroy.

Wendell Berry

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Potluck and Poetry

Martin Steingesser returns

On Wednesday, December 8th CONA's very popular evening of potluck and poetry will feature Martin Steingesser. As one critic put it (trying to capture Martin's talent in a single sentence), "A fast ride on a Brooklyn trolley, the moon marries a butterfly, and a wild man tells his own story in the poems and shows of Martin Steingesser."

Martin is an old friend of CONA, contributing in past years his time and talent not only to Potluck and Poetry, but to the Peaceful Beginnings celebration.

The evening is an offering to the community and to CONA members and friends. The only price of admission is a dish to share at the potluck. Bring your own poetry to read or perhaps your favorite poem of another. At St. Patrick's Church Parish Hall, Newcastle. Potluck at 6:00 PM. Poetry at 7:00 PM. For more information call 529-5302.



Peaceful Beginnings

Join us in celebrating the New Year at CONA's open house for the community. This year's celebration will convene at Skidompha Library in Damariscotta from noon until 3 P.M. There will be poetry readings by local poets, songs, music and dances throughout the afternoon. The public is invited to bring finger-foods to share; beverages and other refreshments will be provided. This year's community project will focus on making household peace flags.

A puppet-making workshop overseen by local artists will provide opportunities to craft all kinds of puppets. Throughout the afternoon Melissa Glendinning and Midcoast Puppeteers will perform puppet shows. We hope to see everyone at this wonderful annual event, which brings the community together. For questions or to help with Peaceful Beginnings, please call Jenny Begin at 563-3781.

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Board Changes

There have been some changes in the CONA Board of Directors since the Annual Meeting. **Suzanne Hedrick** has resigned as Chair of the Public Liaison Committee. Her enthusiasm and conviction will be missed greatly. **Doris Balant** has volunteered to be the new editor of our newsletter. She brings to the board not only her skills as an editor, but also her extensive volunteer experience in the community.

Volunteer Needed

CONA is looking for a volunteer with computer skills who could update and maintain our website. Call Tom Schmidt at 529-5302 if interested.

President:	Tom Schmidt	Steering Committee:	Jean Harris, Julia Myers, Jenny Begin
Vice President:	Open	Membership List:	Linda Pope
Secretary:	Millie Baggs	Meet, Greet and Eat:	Charlie Hedrick
Treasurer:	Caroline Walker	Newsletter Editor:	Doris Balant
Past President:	Joanne Clauson	Peaceful Beginnings:	Jenny Begin
Reps-at-large:	Sally Snyder, Donald Means, Michael Stevens, Sharon Crosbie	Publicity:	Jenny Begin
Forum Program:	Kay Liss	Public Liaison:	Open
		CONA at the Movies:	Paul Kando

Annual Membership Form Enclosed

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PO BOX 649
NEWCASTLE, ME 04553

