



Sundial file

BREAKING THE WAR MENTALITY

By Barack Obama

Most students at Columbia do not have first hand knowledge of war. Military violence has been a vicarious experience, channeled into our minds through television, film, and print.

The more sensitive among us struggle to extrapolate experiences of war from our everyday experience, discussing the latest mortality statistics from Guatemala, sensitizing ourselves to our parents' wartime memories, or incorporating into our framework of reality as depicted by a Mailer or a Coppola. But the taste of war—the sounds and chill, the dead bodies—are remote and far removed. We know that wars have occurred, will occur, are occurring, but bringing such experience down into

our hearts, and taking continual, tangible steps to prevent war, becomes a difficult task.

Two groups on campus, Arms Race Alternatives (ARA) and Students Against Militarism (SAM), work within these mental limits to foster awareness and practical action necessary to counter the growing threat of war. Though the emphasis of the two groups differ, they share an aversion to current government policy. These groups, visualizing the possibilities of destruction and grasping the tendencies of distorted national priorities, are throwing their weight into shifting America off the dead-end track.

"Most people my age remember well the air-raid drills in school, under

the desk with our heads tucked between our legs. Older people, they remember the Cuban Missile Crisis. I think these kinds of things left an indelible mark on our souls, so we're more apt to be concerned," says Don Kent, assistant director of programs and student activities at Earl Hall Center. Along with the community Volunteer Service Center, ARA has been Don's primary concern, coordinating various working groups of faculty, students, and staff members, while simultaneously seeking the ever elusive funding for programs.

"When I first came here two years ago, Earl Hall had been a holding tank for five years. Paul Martin (director of Earl Hall) and I discussed our interests, and decided that ARA would be one of the programs we pushed." Initially, most of the work was done by non-student volunteers and staff. "Hot issues, particularly El Salvador, were occupying students at the time, consequently, we cosponsored a lot of activities with community organizations like SANE (Students Against Nuclear Energy)."

With the flowering of the nuclear Freeze movement, and particularly the June 12 rally in Central Park, however, student participation has expanded. One wonders whether this upsurge stems from young people's penchant for the latest 'happenings', or from growing awareness of the consequences of nuclear holocaust. ARA maintains a mailing list of 500 persons and Don Kent estimates that approximately half of the active members are students. Although he feels that continuity is provided by the faculty and staff members, student attendance at ARA sponsored events—in particular a November 11 convocation on the nuclear threat—reveals a deep reservoir of concern. "I think students on this campus like to think of themselves as sophisticated, and don't appreciate small vision. So they tend to come out more for the events; they do not want to just fold leaflets."

Mark Bigelow, a graduate intern from Union Theological Seminary who works with Don to keep ARA running smoothly, agrees. "It seems that students here are fairly aware of the nuclear problem, and it makes for an underlying frustration. We try to talk to that frustration." Consequently, the thrust of ARA is towards generating dialogue which will give people a rational handle on this controversial subject. This includes bringing speakers like Daniel

Ellsberg to campus, publishing fact sheets compiled by interested faculty, and investigating the possible development of an interdisciplinary program in the Columbia curriculum dealing with peace, disarmament, and world order.

Tied in with such a thrust is the absence of what Don calls "a party line." By taking an almost apolitical approach to the problem, ARA hopes to get the university to take nuclear arms issues seriously. "People don't like having their intelligence insulted," says Don, "so we try to disseminate information and allow the individual to make his or her own decision."

Generally, the narrow focus of the Freeze movement as well as academic discussions of first versus second strike capabilities, suit the military-industrial interests, as they continue adding to their billion dollar erector sets. When Peter Tosh sings that "everybody's asking for peace, but nobody's asking for justice," one is forced to wonder whether disarmament or arms control issues, severed from economic and political issues, might be another instance of focusing on the symptoms of a problem instead of the disease itself. Mark Bigelow does not think so. "We do focus primarily on catastrophic weapons. Look, we say, here's the worst part, let's work on that. You're not going to get rid of the military in the near future, so let's at

least work on this."

Mark Bigelow does feel that the links are there, and points to fruitful work being done by other organizations involved with disarmament. "The Freeze is one part of a whole disarmament movement. The lowest common denominator, so to speak. For instance, April 10-16 is Jobs For Peace week, with a bunch of things going on around the city. Also, the New York City Council may pass a resolution in April calling for greater social as opposed to military spending. Things like this may dispell the idea that disarmament is a white issue, because how the government spends its revenue affects everyone."

The very real advantages of concentrating on a single issue is leading the National Freeze movement to challenge individual missile systems, while continuing the broader campaign. This year, Mark Bigelow sees the checking of Pershing II and Cruise missile deployment as crucial. "Because of their small size and mobility, their deployment will make possible arms control verification far more difficult, and will cut down warning time for the Soviets to less than ten minutes. That can only be a destabilizing factor." Additionally, he sees the initiation by the U.S. of the Test Ban Treaty as a powerful first step towards a nuclear free world.

ARA encourages members to join buses to Washington and participate in a

March 7-8 rally intended to push through the Freeze resolution which is making its second trip through the House. ARA also will ask United Campuses to Prevent Nuclear War (UCAM), an information and lobbying network based in universities, nationwide, to serve as its advisory board in the near future. Because of its autonomy from Columbia (which does not fund political organizations) UCAM could conceivably become a more active arm of disarmament campaigns on campus, though the ARA will continue to function solely as a vehicle for information and discussion.

Also operating out of Earl Hall Center, Students Against Militarism was formed in response to the passage of registration laws in 1980. An entirely student-run organization, SAM casts a wider net than ARA, though for the purposes of effectiveness, they have tried to lock in on one issue at a time.

"At the heart of our organization is an anti-war focus", says junior Robert Kahn, one of SAM's fifteen or so active members. "From there, a lot of issues shoot forth—nukes, racism, the draft, and South Africa. "We have been better organized when taking one issue at a time, but we are always cognizant of other things going on, and collaborate frequently with other campus organizations like CISPES and REEL-POLITIK."

At this time, the current major issue is the Solomon Bill, the latest legislation from Congress to obtain compliance to registration. The law requires that all male students applying for federal financial aid submit proof of registration, or else the government coffers will close. Yale, Wesleyan, and Swathmore have refused to comply, and plan to offer non-registrants other forms of financial aid. SAM hopes to press Columbia into following suit, though so far President Sovern and company seem prepared to acquiesce to the bill.

Robert believes students tacitly support non-registrants, though the majority did not comply. "Several students have come up to our tables and said that had they known of the ineffectiveness of prosecution, they would not have registered." A measure of such underlying support is the 400 signatures on a petition protesting the Solomon Bill, which SAM collected the first four hours it appeared. Robert also points out that prior to registration, there were four separate bills circulating in the House proposing a return to the draft, but none ever got out of committees, and there have not been renewed



