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10 Good Things About a Bad Year

 By [Medea Benjamin](#), [AlterNet](#)

January 1, 2004

No two ways about it, 2003 was a demoralizing year for those of us working for peace and justice. With George Bush in the White House, Arnold Schwarzenegger in the California State House, and Paul Bremer ruling Iraq, it was a chore just to get out of bed each morning. But get out of bed we did, and we spent our days educating, strategizing, organizing and mobilizing. As we greet the new year, let's remember and celebrate some of our hard-fought victories in a time of adversity.

1. We organized the most massive, global protests against war the world has ever seen. On February 15 alone, over 12 million people came out on the streets in over 700 cities in 60 countries and on every continent. So impressive was this outpouring of anti-war sentiment that the New York Times, not known for hyperbole, claimed there were now two superpowers: the US and global public opinion.
2. Over the last few months, mainstream Americans have been buying progressive books by the millions. Authors such as Michael Moore, Al Franken, Molly Ivins, Paul Krugman and David Corn have seen their books soar to the New York Times bestsellers list. With humor and biting exposes of the Bush administration, these authors helped our movement gain legions of new converts. No more preaching to the choir this year!
3. When the World Trade Organization met in Cancun in September to promote global rules that give even greater power to transnational corporations, they were met by well coordinated opposition from countries in the global south, hundreds of non-governmental organizations and thousands of activists. When our movement's sophisticated inside-outside strategy forced the talks to collapse, there was "gloom in the suites and dancing in the streets." And as a counter to these corporate-dominated global institutions, the fair trade movement had a stellar year.
4. The poorest country in South America, Bolivia, proved that people power is alive and well. Sparked by the Bolivian president's plan to privatize and export the nation's natural gas, an astounding grassroots

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movement of peasants, miners, workers, and indigenous people poured into the streets to demand his resignation. After five weeks of intense protests and a government crackdown that left 70 dead, Sanchez de Lozada was forced to resign. Now that's regime change!

5. The silver lining in the budget crisis affecting the states throughout this nation is that from Louisiana to Texas to Michigan – and even in Arnold Schwarzenegger's California – state governments are cutting prison budgets by releasing non-violent drug offenders. The year has been marked by a steady move toward treatment instead of incarceration and a greater understanding that drug abuse should be handled in the doctors' office, not the prison cell.
6. For so long, celebrities have put their careers above their beliefs. This year witnessed a "coming out" of all types of celebrities on all manner of progressive issues. Jay-Z and Mariah Carey railed against the racist Rockefeller drug laws, Bono and Beyonce Knowles called for the world to fight AIDS, and a host of celebs such as Sean Penn, Susan Sarandon and Laurence Fishbourne courageously took a stand against the invasion of Iraq.
7. Progressives now have a powerful new tool for organizing: the Internet. E-activism through venues such as [MoveOn](#), [Working Assets](#) and [Meetup.com](#) have allowed ordinary people to challenge big money and powerful institutions. We raised millions of dollars to run ads, we've confronted corporate-dominated institutions like the Federal Communications Commission, and e-activism has allowed an anti-war candidate, Howard Dean, to become a frontrunner in the 2004 elections.
8. In an unprecedented outpouring of local opposition to the assault on our civil liberties, over 200 cities, towns, counties and states across the country have passed resolutions against the Patriot Act. In fact, the outcry has been so profound that plans for a successor act, dubbed Patriot Act II, that would further broaden federal investigatory powers, have been scuttled.
9. While eclipsed by the war in Iraq, the corporate scandals that topped the headlines in 2002 continued in 2003, with indefatigable New York State Attorney-General Eliot Spitzer exposing the trading abuses in the mutual funds industry. The Enron, WorldCom and accounting scandals produced some positive legislation against corporate crime and forced institutional investors like pension funds to become more active. And anti-corporate crusaders joined with peace activists to expose the obscene war profiteering of Halliburton and Bechtel, with more exposes to come in 2004!
10. Despite the conservative takeover of the courts, this year produced several landmark rulings we can be proud of. The Supreme Court upheld affirmative action, giving a sweeping victory to the University of Michigan and colleges all over the country. It struck down sodomy laws criminalizing gay sex, affirming the constitutional right to privacy. The Massachusetts Supreme Court

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ruled that gays should be able to marry. The Appeals Court ruled that the US military could not detain American citizen Jose Padilla as an "enemy combatant", and in an even more significant decision, found that all 600 detainees at Guantanamo Bay should be granted access to lawyers.

There are many more – the immigrants' freedom march that crisscrossed the nation to counter the anti-immigrant backlash, the amazing youth movement that is bringing new culture and vibrancy to organizing, the renewed women's activism through groups like Code Pink, the awarding of the Nobel Peace Prize to an Iranian woman, Shirin Ebadi. And each one of us could add to the list.

So while we lament the present state of the world and the present occupant in the White House, just remember that even in the gloomiest days of 2003, we kept slugging away-and sometimes even winning. Now let's move on to score the *big* victory in 2004 by sending George Bush back to Crawford.

Medea Benjamin is co-founder of Global Exchange and the women's group Code Pink.

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