

Police Riot

L.A. Police Storm Anti-LBJ Demonstration

H. Lawrence Lack

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The honor of launching the 1968 Presidential election campaign fell to the Los Angeles Police Department as Lyndon B. Johnson, fresh from meetings with his Communist counterpart, dropped in on June 23 at the Century Plaza Hotel in Los Angeles to grab a quick meal.

L.A. Police Chief Reddin summed up the day's events succinctly as he debriefed his heroes in the evening: "A perfect police exercise; I am very satisfied. You can't imagine how good you looked," he told them, obviously deeply moved. "We've got many movies of this, because it's some thing that's never happened in this country before... We proved to them that WE own this city, not the rabble."

The "rabble" consisted of 15 to 20,000 people who marched from Cheviot Hills Park up Avenue of the Stars in front of the hotel to demand an end to the war. As the Peace Action Council, one of the sponsoring organizations, had predicted, they were one of the largest demonstrations in the history of this city.

Chief Reddin, Mayor Yorty, and the regular press called them a "mob" and their march a "riot." By 9:15 p.m., as the gala banquet was winding up inside the Grand Ballroom, dozens of "rioters" were strewn bleeding on the streets of Century City, Rancho Park, and even Beverly Hills. About 75 were treated for injuries, and released, and an as yet unknown number were hospitalized, and 51 or more were arrested on a variety of charges.

1500 strong, the Los Angeles police, mobilized as never before, had done themselves proud. Miraculously, they did not resort to their guns, and as far as is now known, they killed no one.

Armed and equipped like the domestic Special Forces which they are, the white-helmets in full riot gear quick-stepped into four cordons between the marchers and the hotel. A cloak and dagger atmosphere of maneuvering and secret signals prevailed.

After the rally in the Park, at about 7:10 p.m., the marchers began to move up Motor Avenue toward the Century Plaza. A police sound truck rushed in, snarling orders at the crowd as though they were LAPD property: "If you depart before the time scheduled for your departure (7:30 p.m.), we will be forced to disperse you."

The Peace Action Council monitors raced up and down and pleaded for compliance with the police orders, and reluctantly the crowd moved back out of the street and milled around angrily, especially upset at seeing police attack the now-famous green Toyota truck which accidentally ran over an officer's toe. At 7:30 they began their march.

It was about a 20 minute walk to the area across from the Century Plaza. The transistors had told us that the Man had been in the hotel for some time. Avenue of the Stars is divided by a mall, and the agreement between the P.A.C. and the police called for the line of march to double back when it was past the hotel and to return to the Park via the southbound lane of the same street.

But on the northbound lane, directly in the focus of the concave side of the Century Plaza's crescent face, the crowd began to slow down. Soon many people stopped altogether:

According to many statements from march leaders and individuals at the head of the column, the police at this point arbitrarily and without any warning closed the street to demonstrators, leaving only the sidewalk open to

foot traffic. They also refused to allow marchers to double back onto the southbound side of Avenue of the Stars, which in any case was clogged with police and their equipment.

The great majority of the marchers were anxious to keep moving as per their instructions, as they wished to avoid legal violations. They were prevented from doing so, according to the leaders of the demonstration, largely by the actions of the police, who blocked the route. The few hundred demonstrators who sat down in the street in small groups were an insignificant obstacle to those who wished to continue on their way.

The tension grew as the police set up their formation. Helicopters (it is said they carried huge tanks of tear gas) swooped and veered close overhead. People were becoming very nervous, but they were unable to do anything, because there was nowhere to go.

Quite suddenly the polished boots slammed down the starter pedals and three dozen Harleys were roaring in unison. Subtlety of crowd control tactics, the mass motorcycle charge, was repeatedly employed on totally defenseless marchers.

And to clean up the people scattered by the cycles, the nightsticks went to work. Indiscriminate and unmerciful beatings were the cause of most of the anguish, fear, and unbelieving horror that left thousands of people in shock or uncontrollably hysterical.

The police had delayed their obviously pre-planned assault upon the crowd until every detail was in readiness. There was no provocation, and the story given to the press which stated that intelligence sources expected the crowd, consisting in large measure of flower children, professional people, and white-collar types, to storm the hotel across a quadruple curtain of heavies is absurd to say the least.

Especially savage treatment was meted out to the women in the march, and a large number of incidents of violence against children and obviously handicapped persons were also reported. The arm-banded P.A.C. monitors, who had, almost without exception, followed police instructions to the letter, were surprisingly well represented among the injured and the arrested.

Many of the demonstrators had marched up from a day of love and music at the "peace-in" in Cheviot Hills Park. The peace-in euphoria dissolved utterly in the face of wave after wave of remorseless sadism motivated by the uneasiness and fear the officers felt before the agitated crowd.

With every blow the nightsticks struck a few more layers of the rationalization and self-deception that insulates the lives of those in W.A.S.P. society from the violence of American wars and racist pogroms were stripped away. And in the nightmare of the late dusk, while LBJ inside was doubtless wishing he could pick his teeth, the Asian War that had been so far off was coming home.



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