

We are not the enemy

Police Attack Protests in Portland

William Rivers Pitt

2002

Saturday, 24 August 2002
(www.truthout.org)

The image is chilling. A middle-aged woman, plainly dressed, with a puff of auburn hair, is clutched in a hamperlock by a Portland police officer dressed in full riot gear. His riot baton is jammed high under her chin. Around her, three more armor-clad police officers swarm in, face-masks down. The woman's face is contorted in terror. In her hand is a sign protesting George W. Bush.

This was the scene on the streets of Portland, OR, on the evening of August 22nd as captured by a photographer for the Associated Press. Thousands of peaceful protesters had descended upon the Hilton Hotel where Mr. Bush was attending a political fund-raiser for Senator Gordon Smith. They held signs reading, "Drop Bush, not Bombs," and other similar slogans. Among the protesters were pregnant women, parents with infants and small children, elderly citizens, and citizens in wheelchairs.

According to a report by CBS News, the protest became unruly when some of the fund-raiser attendees were "jostled" as they moved through the crowd towards the entrance to the hotel. At that point, the riot police swarmed in, swinging clubs and dousing the crowd with pepper spray. Rubber bullets were also fired into the crowd, and snipers were seen on the roofs surrounding the scene. The protesters responded by hammering on the hoods of police cars and screaming, "We are not the enemy!"

A man named Randy, who attended the protest, reports the sequence of events as follows:

"I was between 5th and 6th on the sidewalk. Maybe the ones in front were warned to move, but I didn't hear any warning. It had been a peaceful protest. Suddenly the police came forward spraying pepper spray. A man nearby with an infant in a backpack got hit real good. The baby's face was so red I thought it had quit breathing. From the other direction came cop cars through the crowd and rubber bullets were fired at those closest to the cars. I kept retreating but the cops kept spraying. Lots of people were sprayed, including the cameraman from Channel 2 KATU."

Other eyewitness accounts from the streets of Portland similarly describe what appears to have been a terrifyingly violent response from the police to a peaceful protest by assembled American citizens.

This is a profoundly disturbing turn of events. Mr. Bush is protested wherever he goes these days, and the crowds which attend them are growing. These are not black-clad anarchists kicking in windows, however. The woman who was attacked by the police looked as ordinary as any small-town librarian, and anarchists are smart enough to leave their children at home if there is a riot in the offing. The streets of Portland were filled on August 22nd by average American citizens seeking to inform the President of their disfavor regarding the manner in which he is governing their country. They were rewarded with the business end of a billy club, a face-full of pepper spray, and the jarring impact of a rubber bullet.

If America needed one more example of the cancer that has been chewing through the guts of our most basic freedoms since Mr. Bush assumed office, they can look to Portland. The right to freely assemble and petition the government for a redress of grievances has been rescinded at the point of a gun.

The imperative is clear. Such violence by the authorities cannot go unchallenged. The next time Mr. Bush appears in public, there must be even more concerned Americans to greet him. They must face the baton and the pepper spray, they must stare into the shielded faces of the police, and they must stand in non-violent disobedience of the idea that they are not allowed to be there. The men and women who faced the brunt of police fury in Portland are to be lauded as American patriots, and their actions must be duplicated by us all. The groups which organized this protest, and the ones to come, deserve our praise.

The media, which spent much of the evening reporting that only a few hundred protesters were in attendance, must be browbeaten into reporting the facts from both sides — from the police, who reportedly detained people like the woman in the picture “for their own safety,” and from the protesters who took a savage beating for daring to stand against Mr. Bush. If the battle of Portland is allowed to cast even more fear into the hearts and minds of Americans, we have lost yet another swath of freedoms. Stand and be counted if you can.

The whole world is watching.

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“Above all, continue to Gather, in twosees and threesees, in tens of thousands. Continue to spread the ideals of a multicultural caring and sharing world. That’s the hope and the vision. It always has been since the dawn of human society-that we people will learn to live in peace with each other.

“It isn’t going to come from the governments and the corporations. It’s going to come from people, young and old, learning how to make do together, and the Gatherings are one way that people can learn and have that experience. Civilization is going to have to make a choice between a New World Order and a New World Culture.”

—Garrick Beck (son of Julian Beck & Judith Malina), May 2002, just before “doing time” for challenging US Forest Service regulations at the 2001 Rainbow Gathering

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