

# Antiwar Battle at the Pentagon

Thorne Dreyer

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WASHINGTON, D.C. Liberation News Service—On October 21, 1967, the white left got its shit together.

The gala Pentagon confrontation, long billed as a move from “protest to resistance,” was a dramatic and intense political event. Many had been dubious; few can now deny that a new stage is upon us.

*Battle of the Pentagon, October 21, 1967. Photos: Bob Evans, Frank H. Joyce, Liberation News Service (originally filled the back page of Issue 41, November 1–15, 1967.*

Certainly the most significant aspect of the confrontation at Washington was the spontaneous way in which the demonstrators began to relate to the soldiers. And the remarkable occurrence of two, possibly three GI's throwing down their weapons and defecting to the side of the demonstrators.

The confrontation itself created a dynamic spirit of community. The actual storming of the Pentagon was something few had really expected. So there was no pre — established structure to deal with the situation; people had to use their heads and work together.

There were two main battle fronts. These were the steps and plaza leading to the main entrance to the Pentagon, and a large area to the west, which we have called the “left flank.” Leadership on both fronts was assumed by Students for a Democratic Society organizers.

The confrontation went through two distinct phases. The first was a period of strength and vitality. People were on the move. They related to each other in very real ways. There were thousands of people jammed together, maybe scared but certainly exalted.

To the left of the center area, and dividing it from the left flank, was a low wall. Tom Bell, an SDS organizer in Washington, climbed up with sound equipment and began addressing the crowd. A U.S. marshal immediately grabbed him and attempted to push him off. Brother Bell wrestled with the officer. He got a grip on the marshal's billy club and pushed him back. The marshal backed away, surprised by Tom's resistance to his authority. The crowd cheered and the wall was won.

You've got to realize there were thousands of people storming the Pentagon, not just a few hundred ‘crazies.’ Those people were into a new thing. And these were, to a great extent, young kids. The majority were under 25. Many were under 20. Tom Bell talked to people about sitting down. It seemed that this would put us in a stronger position then. Some demonstrators in the front were baiting the GI's and there was a real danger of people being trampled on the steps in case of panic.

But panic never proved a danger. People just didn't lose their heads. They had a real sense of acting as a community.

Soon diggers started bringing in food, and joints were in evidence. A real festival atmosphere was in the air. People laughed and hugged the soldiers.

We began to talk to the troops on the mikes. We said we're on the same side. It's those generals, those officers that make you come out here and stand in the cold and beat on us, when that's not what you really want to do. Look,



they're fucking with your lives just like they fuck with ours. It's not you we're against; it's those generals, those guys in that Pentagon who keep making wars.

Look at us. We've got food. Grass—we'd love to turn you on. We're digging each other. And we're doing something that we believe in. Won't you join us? WONT YOU JOIN US?

And an amazing, magic was created. Everyone chanted "JOIN US! JOIN US!" And they really meant it. That was why it was important. It wasn't just empty rhetoric, as it would become later in the night.

We were speaking from a position of power. We knew we had something to offer, something good, and maybe for the first time we realized who the real enemy is.

You know, I think those GIs could feel the sincerity of what was happening. They began to kind of talk among themselves.

Meanwhile numerous campfires had been started. Originally, it was just draft card burning. First one, then a few, and then everywhere, in all directions, hundreds of draft card torches. Dozens of little bonfires were created, all over the Pentagon lawn. Guys ran out of draft cards so they threw on paper and then they took down the rope fences that were supposed to have kept them out and burned the wooden supports, which they obtained by using the ropes to scale walls. As it grew darker and colder, many huddled around the fires, telling stories, talking strategy, singing.

One was excited by the romantic version of this beautiful revolutionary army, occupying the lawn of the Pentagon.

And the soldiers just had to stand there at attention and watch all this. When the first one defected to our side the reaction was overwhelming. We yelled and cheered and it shook the whole place and people chanted "We Love You" and "We are All Brothers"—which I would have thought maudlin shit if it hadn't been that we really felt it.

The second phase of the demonstration was pretty much a bad scene. And I'm not sure why. For one thing, they kept changing the troops. Whenever we'd start really talking to guys, they'd move them out. Maybe they finally brought in their "crack" troops. Lots of people left. It got dark and cold. But this is most important: there was a tactical vacuum. We were in a box.

Suddenly we were defensive and scared. We sang "We are Not Afraid." Earlier, we did not have to sing it. There was no communication with the troops now. We chanted "Join Us!" and "We Love You" and it was meaningless rhetoric. People kept bringing more and more food and we gorged ourselves and that food became really obscene.

The cops began to get really brutal, moving into the group in a wedge and smashing heads with billy clubs. These beautiful little hippie chicks had tears streaming down their faces, but they weren't about to move. These kids were really brave.

Now I don't want to give you wrong ideas about what happened. Soldiers beat people. Brutal. Much, probably most, of the beating came from Federal marshals, but GIs did a lot, too. And it certainly wasn't all love and flowers from our side.

There were people who baited the soldiers, threw objects at them. But there are two reasons I emphasize the other so much. First, it was such an overwhelming spirit, such a moving thing. Second, it reflected the real changes that are going on in the movement. People are getting less defensive about where they're at.

They feel they have something really important to offer, probably the only thing of value this society has to offer. And there is a growing realization that the movement must speak for America, not against it. That it's those fuckers in the Pentagon, and those social institutions that enslave us, that we must fight. And we have to see those soldiers as brothers who are being victimized.

That doesn't mean we lie down and get clubbed and we don't create these kinds of confrontations, get bayoneted moaning "I Love you."

Maybe it means we move into the communities and start talking to people as people. Maybe it means we start creating real draft resistance unions in communities—not social service organizations that help middle class kids figure out how to get bigger and better deferments.

Maybe it means we finally have the makings for a second American revolution—but unless we're just playing out our guilt with a lemming-like desire to purge our souls of our country's sins by getting our guts shot out, we better had stop this moral witness crap and get down to the business of making the revolution.

## Related

- *Fifth Estate's* Vietnam Resource Page.
- Hell No to the Draft, in this issue, FE #41, November 1–15, 1967
- Did GIs Really Defect? FE #42, November 15–30, 1967



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