

Washington

Anti-war protest, November 15, 1969

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WASHINGTON (LNS)—Karl Marx once said that a revolution is the festival of the oppressed and exploited. Washington wasn't that. But it was some kind of festival. It was Woodstock without the rain or the mud. It: was the great silent majority of American youth come together and digging it. Quiet kids, kids who didn't get really excited about any of the speeches they had come to hear, come to hear nothing more than what they already knew—that the war was bad, that the killing had to be stopped.

They didn't applaud vigorously or chant loudly. Sometimes it was hard to tell if they listened, except when Arlo Guthrie sang and Dick Gregory joked.

But they came to Washington from all over the eastern half of the United States. March organizers in Detroit estimate that at least 20,000 persons from Michigan made the trip by bus, plane, train and private cars.

They came to say by their presence that it was time to bring the troops home. And they came most of all to be around other people who felt the same way, to be part of a community of people who want peace.



Many of them knew astonishingly little about the war, didn't know whether fighting was going on in the north or in the south, didn't know how long the war had been going on or how it had started.

But they felt it was wrong. They made this the youngest mass peace demonstration of all the demonstrations that have massed against the war.

Pushing across the turnpike from Michigan gave you a sense of what it was going to be like.

The rest stops were jammed, not with squabbling families and morose salesmen guzzling coffee, but with hundreds of kids in no particular rush to get anywhere, sitting around on the scraps of grass outside the restaurant and on the chairs, floors and windowsills inside, joking, talking, and clearly enjoying being for once the dominant group.

It was the same when you got to Washington. The streets were teeming with people carrying knapsacks and sleeping bags, wandering aimlessly, but glad to share a peace sign or a fist with others there for the same purpose who drifted past in an endless, directionless stream.

They didn't seem to really mind the fact that it was damned cold, and that it was hard to find a place where you could get anything to eat or use a bathroom without standing in line for hours. They didn't seem at all worried that Washington's police had been preparing for them for weeks and had done their homework well.

Some of them found out about it first hand Friday night.

Several thousand young people had gathered in Dupont Circle by 8:30 p.m. "We're going to take the Saigon Embassy!" an excited kid in an army jacket told a passerby.

In the middle of the circle were clusters of red flags and black flags and NLF flags.

The organizers of the demonstration had planned an attempt to plant a NLF flag on the turf of the South Vietnamese-Saigon embassy, and serve an eviction notice on the puppet government, reclaiming the place for the Provisional Revolutionary Government as the true representative of the South Vietnamese people.

The federal government was not prepared to lose the embassy, however, and the crack cops of the "Special Operations Department" of the DC police, easily dispersed a group of marchers who broke away from Dupont Circle before the scheduled speeches could be made.

The speeches never were made that night; bands of people made several sprints for the embassy, but were almost effortlessly repelled by the cops' CS tear gas.

Along Connecticut Avenue, where many of Washington's exclusive boutiques and shops are located, there was massive window-breaking, and the next day the newspapers reported that 50 police cars were damaged.

Friday evening was the first opportunity that the DC police had that weekend to show their power. And there can be little doubt that the demonstrators hadn't realized what they would be up against.

The DC police force is one of the most "advanced and professional" in the country, and the man who made it that way is Patrick V. Murphy.

He sandwiched a stint as Public Safety Director of Washington in between a career as Director of Training for the International Association of Chiefs of Police and his present job as head of the Law Enforcement Assistance Agency of the Justice Department.

His task now is to spread the new cop technology around, and some say, to lay the ground work for forging an effective federalized police force out of the nation's Officer Obies.

One of the keys of the new cop technology is tear gas, and Washington cops specialize in its use.

During the black rebellion that followed Martin Luther King's assassination, gas could be seen rising for days over the ghetto: block after block was saturation-gassed to clear the streets and keep them cleared.

For the march weekend, the cops had broken out a massive supply of CS, a strong variant of tear gas, which, as countless kids learned after splashing water on their faces to relieve the burning, is an oil soluble gas whose effects are intensified by water.

While all this was happening, impervious to anything they might have heard of the CS attacks and defying the cold and a vicious hail-storm that hit them the next day, the March against Death plodded resolutely past the White House.

They couldn't see the home of their President: glaring floodlights aimed at the sidewalk made it impossible to see anything of the building behind them or even to look toward it for more than a few seconds.

But if Nixon ever peered out of his windows, he must have seen them. A long file of strange forms wrapped in blankets and anything else they could find to guard them against the cold, moving slowly past with flickering candles, dangling round their necks signs naming one of the American soldiers killed in Vietnam, or one of the Vietnamese villages destroyed by those American soldiers.

A strange equation there—one American soldier to a whole village of Vietnamese—perhaps a touch of racism. The whole thing didn't seem to take you very far, tell you where to go from here, how to fight against this abomination. But still somehow it was impressive.

Macabre, deathly and medieval, making you think of a society in decay, plague-stricken or destroyed by famine or war.

And it made you think too about the kids who were moving past on feet that must have been numb with cold. Kids, many of whom didn't really know where the war had come from or what to do about it other than offer up their sense of sorrow. It seemed strange that they could really think their frail candles would effect the power that rested comfortably behind its blinding floodlights. And you had to wonder where they had been during the last

few years when that same power had been busy slaughtering close to a million people in Vietnam who had tried to move against it and take their land into their own hands.

But they kept on coming, quietly determined in their innocence.

The mass march started down Pennsylvania Avenue at 10:30 Saturday morning. It had started an hour and a half before schedule and was over almost before it began. By noon, when the official Mobilization speeches began on the grounds of the Washington Monument, that vast area was already filled nearly to capacity.

How many people were there? Observers who had watched a quarter of a million people gather in Washington for 1963's massive civil rights demonstration said that 1969's anti-war crowd was clearly larger; the New York Times accepted police estimates that there were only 300,000 of us in Washington on Saturday; when Dr. Spock announced from the speakers platform that there were 1.5 million, that seemed a little high. The Mobe later set the figure at 800,000. That seemed right.

But for the people there, the old numbers game did not seem very relevant. Looking over the solid mass that spread out from the Washington Monument, you had the feeling, like the girl in an oversized army jacket who carried her handwritten sign, that "We are the majority."

In San Francisco over 300,000 persons marched against the war and attended a rally in Golden Gate Park.

It was a cold, clear day. Forecasts of snow or rain (a government plot?) never even threatened to materialize, but a freezing wind kept hundreds of different flags and banners flapping throughout the afternoon.

There were Stars and Stripes with huge peace symbols drawn in the center; there were stars and black bars and stripes and hearts; and in front of the speaker's platform, a huge NLF banner rippled in the wind all day long.

A husky old guy with a graying beard was spotted carrying a large red IWW flag with a "sabot" at the top of the pole.

Around the Washington Monument itself, the government had neglected to raise the U.S. flags, so people hoisted their own: bright red; black and red; the NLF's yellow star on a blue and red field; the green, black and red of black liberation; and many others.

The mood was festive and people did not feel much like listening to speeches. They sat huddled together on the grass, sipping coffee, eating, talking of many different things. Joints were not much in evidence, but the sweet familiar fragrance drifted past from time to time. People didn't seem particularly attentive as ex-Assistant Secretary of Commerce Howard Samuels intoned that "the first business of business is peace in Vietnam." He tried to convince his young audience that if the government would only operate on the "proven principles of American business management," it would get out of Vietnam immediately.

People weren't too interested in Senator Charles Goodell (R-N.Y.) either: "The war in Vietnam is not in the American interests." They were puzzled by or else plain indifferent to Goodell's pride at having introduced a bill in the Senate that would require all U.S. troops to be out of Vietnam by January 1, 1971.

Dave Dellinger, one of the eight defendants in the Chicago Conspiracy trial, pointed out to the crowd that another year of delayed withdrawal would mean the deaths of 15,000 Americans and many times that number of Vietnamese.

He also asserted that no peace plan could be really "honorable" unless it included the recognition of the only legitimate government that now exists in South Vietnam the Provisional Revolutionary Government supported by the NLF.

The speakers covered a wide political spectrum, from businessmen like Samuels to movement people like Carol Brightman of Leviathan Magazine, Phil Hutchings, former head of SNCC, and a GI who warned Nixon that, "If you don't bring the troops home, they're going to come home by themselves."

Other speakers included Mrs. Coretta Scott King, Sen. George McGovern (D-S.D.), Carol Lipman, National Secretary of the Student Mobilization committee, and Harold Gibbons, International Vice-president of the Teamsters.

But the crowd remained sluggish before the flow of words, half tolerating, half enduring the arguments, accolades and indignation of the speakers. There were only a few moments of real spirit. When Dick Gregory said that "Agnew was the kind of person who would make a crank call to the Russians on the hot line," there was a massive roar of approval.

But only Richie Havens and some of the other professional entertainers could really bring everybody alive; they had people singing and dancing and being together in a way that reminded a lot of people of that other occasion in

recent history when hundreds of thousands of young people caught a sense of their own power. As people danced around in a huge circle, one kid said: "The people who planned this are the same people who did Woodstock."

That wasn't true, of course, but the reason he probably felt that way was because a lot of the people in Washington had undoubtedly been in Woodstock. They were young people, sincere, intelligent, in search of that elusive community and power over their own lives so insidiously denied to them in capitalist America.

The Justice Department march called originally by the Yippies and the Conspiracy, and announced by Dave Dellinger from the speakers' platform, swept up thousands of others as it burst away from the rally around 4 o'clock and surged along Constitution Avenue behind a phalanx of Viet Cong flags and towering effigies of Agnew, Attorney General Mitchell, and Judge Julius (Magoo) Hoffman.

By the time the march had circled the Justice Department once, bombarding it with angry chants of "Free Bobby Seale" and "Ho, Ho, Ho Chi Minh, the NLF is gonna win!" it numbered at least 15,000, and several thousand others stood by, curious to see what would come of it.

What they saw was a mass of angry people trying to voice their rage against a building constructed like a fortress. The south side of the Justice Department, where the people rallied, was guarded only by six cops, unlike the other three sides which were lined with helmeted police.

One of the six was the DC Chief Pig, disguised as an ordinary patrolman. The cops had a plan.

Quickly a crowd of people clustered around the doorway, draping Viet Cong flags from the ornate lamp fixtures and perching themselves on the window ledges. When another group moved to the main flagpole, hauled down the American flag and hoisted a Viet Cong flag in its place, the police took serious offense. Six of them rushed in and returned things to normal. The crowd drew back and gave the cops a rousing boo.

Shortly afterward, the inevitable first rock crashed through one of the ground-floor windows of the Justice Department. Others followed.

The people around the massive steel door started pounding on it rhythmically, chanting "Free Bobby Seale!" and seconds later the first tear gas canisters -exploded near them, splitting the crowd and driving nearly half of it back from the Justice Department and onto the Mall across the street. A cordon of police made the split permanent.

Then as it grew darker and colder and people's frustration mounted, the crowd grew bolder. Again the American flag was dragged down from in front of the window where Mitchell sat watching, but this time it was quickly torn to pieces and the Viet Cong flag that replaced it flew undisturbed.

The crowd cheered wildly, and the cops stood firmly in position knowing that the mood had changed and that it might not be safe to try to move in and rescue Old Glory again. More windows were shattered.

And then it was really dark. And eerie. The police slowly pushed their way forward and other lines of cops appeared across the street and blocked one of the side streets. The chants now competed with a steady humming noise coming from the truck that fills the machines police use to spray gas.

Lights glistened off the line of helmets worn by the police, and a searchlight mounted on the roof of the Internal Revenue building scanned the crowd as they began to prepare for the imminent gas attack.

A middle-aged man and his wife stood on the curb and watched. When people approached and urged that they get wet cloths to cover their mouths and noses the man blustered, "We're just watching. We didn't come here to get gassed."

Minutes later the gas hit. Not just a few canisters but dozens. As people began to move stubbornly back, the police kept firing more and more gas into their midst. Gas grenades were exploding all over, around people's heads and shoulders and at their feet.

Quickly the air turned a murky brown, then a solid gray. People were gasping, moaning, stumbling, falling, and still more canisters poured in, lobbed in front of the line of retreat along which the tightly packed crowd could only inch its way slowly, so long as it refused to panic and abandon those overcome by the gas to trampling or arrest.

People who had tried to cling to friends lost them in the gas, the pain and the desperation, and still the cops kept firing in gas.

When at last they broke out into clear air, many of the marchers collapsed, others staggered off, their anger overwhelmed by weakness, and still others regrouped either to make window-breaking forays into the business district or to try to hold their ground at nearby street corners. Either way they soon met more cops and more gas.

None of them had the satisfaction of knowing that the broken windows at the Justice Department had been enough to fill its air-conditioning system with gas, and send people coughing from Attorney General Mitchell's office. Mitchell himself got a good dose of CS.

After the demonstrators were cleared away from the Justice Department, the corner of 12th Street and Constitution Avenue became a no-man's land. The mass of cops there were soon joined by fresh forces, bussed-in by D.C. Transit.

Each unit had a sharpshooter, armed with a rifle. But the rifles were never Used. Every few minutes, another carton of tear gas canisters would be tossed to the ground

Each cop would grab a small can from it, rip the container open, put the tear gas grenade in his grenade launcher, pull the trigger, and watch the people in the Mall, a block and a half away, scurry from the gas.

Most of these people hadn't participated in the Justice Department demonstration: they'd been observing from the sidelines, and were drawn into the battle gradually as the struggle intensified.

The cops were staggeringly well-equipped, and too far away to be hit by rocks, so the kids' weapons could only be ironic bravado and taunts. Several gas grenades were tossed back towards the gas-masked cops in symbolic defiance.

One kid strolled up to a water fountain as the latest gas barrage lifted, raised a hand in a comic pantomime of "Stop!", took a long drink as two gas grenades skittered precisely towards him, and walked back through the fumes at a deliberate pace.

The cops gassed their way down the deserted Constitution Avenue, lobbing gas along the Mall and forcing kids up towards the Washington Monument. It was a weird slow-motion process; the high ground gave a vantage point to watch the cops forming a new pattern of phalanxes and lines.

As the Mobe busses pulled out of Washington, D.C., National Guardsmen with MP helmets, gas masks and heavy rifles had cordoned off the area within a block on all sides of the White House. Earlier, a force of about 700 had marched towards the White House, and as they were dispersed, clouds of tear gas wafted over the White House lawn.

National Guardsmen augmented the D.C. cops in guarding the shopping area of the city from roving bands, some of whom were looking for the chartered busses they'd lost in the confusion, others seeking an opportunity to toss a brick through a window. The plate-glass windows of Garfinkel's, American Express, a men's clothing store and a bank were among the targets demolished.

After 11 p.m., cops gassed a bunch of Weathermen who had regrouped in Dupont Circle, the base of the previous evening's abortive forays against the South Vietnamese embassy. A second night Dupont Circle was cleared.

It was a strange sight—the nation's capital under military guard—but it was not a unique one. The ghetto rebellion a year and a half ago brought more troops and more gas. The occupation this time was light enough to emphasize that the government wasn't worried about losing the city.

It was a city that was designed not to be lost—its wide diagonal avenues were planned with the quick movement of **

The people stayed at their bonfires as long as the gas permitted. Thousands in the northwest corner of the Mall—people who had stayed at the Mobe rally to hear the cast of "Hair" when the Justice Department marchers headed out—could be heard a thousand yards away, shouting at the cops, "One, two, three, four, we don't want your fucking war."

The Medical Committee for Human Rights headquarters, in a trailer on the Monument grounds, was treating the casualties of the eerie evening.

One 16-year-old girl from rural Maryland was complaining that her mother would never let her out to concerts any more when she saw her gas-burned face. She's stopped in a bathroom before leaving to get her bus, but the cops had scored a near direct hit with a gas grenade. A boy muttered, "It's the old Gas the kids game again."

Most of them didn't have a heavy political analysis of what happened to them, but it was for many their first demonstration and their first gassing, and they had an intense new sense of who the enemy is and which side they're on.

In the far reaches of the Mall, groups of people were waylaying cop cars, and cops were swooping down on Mobe marchers wandering around in confusion, searching for friends and busses. One group of kids waiting to be packed into a paddy wagon was shaken by the clubbing of a buddy who had tried to escape.

The troops and the mobs of Paris during the French Revolution were very much in mind. But the kids and their brothers in Guardsmen garb were a symbol of the real contradictions between the President's peace-of-mind and the demands of the anti-war movement—the cries which pierced the sound of shattering Justice Department windows, and the moans of a swaying crowd giving the V-sign around the Monument.

No one knows now what the exact circumstances of the resolution of that contradiction will be. Chances are that when it comes, though, it will come as a result of the success of Provisional Revolutionary Government mortars and politics, that it will come when the ruling class split over whether "Vietnam is good business" deepens, and that it will be accompanied by both the proliferation of the "peace community" with its moratorium buttons and marches, and the chants of the radicals: "Ho, Ho, Ho Chi Minh, the NLF is gonna win!"

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