

Peace trumps war in Washington rallies

The streets of Washington D.C. were alive with democracy last weekend as hundreds of thousands of peace activists converged on the capitol to call for an immediate end to the occupation of Iraq. The crowd's diversity spoke even louder than its massive numbers, with veterans and active duty service personnel marching side-by-side with seasoned peace activists. They were joined by union delegations, church congregations, military families, communists, Democrats, frat boys, transsexuals, feminists, firefighters, pro-choicers, anti-abortionists, anarchists, teachers, puppeteers, retirees, celebrities, displaced New Orleaners and a *mélange* of others – in short, all of us.

They came from across the United States to shout, pray, raise banners, hold signs, sing and scream. They came to experience democracy. They came to be heard, because people were drowning in silence for far too long.

They came from all walks of life. This is important, because for the past ten years or so we've seen all too many intimidating photos of American police officers decked out in military garb, with gas masks, batons and helmets, facing off against citizens exercising their constitutional rights to peaceful protest. We've seen an aura of criminalization surround dissent, with authorities treating protest as a behavioral aberration instead of as a time honored tradition. We've seen authorities deem protests as "incidents" to be

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managed and contained, instead of festivals to be joined. When demonstrations started requiring medics, and demonstrators started needing gas masks, most folks just opted to stay home. This model of officially encouraged apathy worked for generations in police states around the world, and it began to work here as well.

Then came the summer of Cindy Sheehan, and 'Main Street Moms' started taking to the streets. Middle-aged Americans who skipped the Vietnam era protests were demonstrating for the first time in their lives. Students were coming out for their first ever rallies. Cops started telling protestors about their own kids, stuck fighting Bush's war in Iraq. Americans joined thousands of small vigils around the nation – returning to their office water coolers to talk about them. Eventually even the media began to cover the peace movement – not as a freak show but as a barometer of an emerging political shift – though the main shift was in the media itself. Suddenly, like a flashback, protest was cool again. The storm had passed. The wannabe dictator can huff and puff – but he's just a punk and he ain't gonna blow the will of the people down.

This all said and done, first-time demonstrators still experience a familiar syndrome – and Saturday's event didn't prove any different. The march is empowering. They've never been in the company of so many caring like-minded people. They've filled the streets, engulfed the capitol district, tasted power – and no doubt, changed the world. Then they head home, all pumped up, ready to see the next day's headlines proclaiming the end of evil. Revolution is at hand. But there are no headlines. It's not a major story. And usually, according to most press reports, most of them weren't there.

Protestors shouldn't get hung up on media reports. We don't need corporations to verify our experiences. Demonstrations alone seldom lead to quantum policy shifts. Folks who expect to change the world will no doubt be disappointed. What mass demonstrations do, however, is empower demonstrators who now know that they're not alone. Their views and emotions aren't aberrations – they're part of a powerful mass movement. And it makes sense. Ultimately, demonstrations are for the demonstrators.

Numbers, however, are still important. And they're always a point of contention. Mainstream media reports cite between 100,000 and 300,000 people attending Saturday's march. The Washington Police issued two numbers. First, they said organizers seem to have met their goal of attracting 100,000 people. Hence, this minimal figure quickly spread through the media. Later on, another Washington Police official, estimated the crowd at 150,000 people while organizers and some media outlets estimated 300,000. I found it impossible to estimate the crowd size since they were spread all over Capitol Hill, with the march occupying its entire parade route, with people returning to the Washington Monument as others still waited to begin marching, bottlenecked up for

hours across the street at the Ellipse. Tens of thousands of others seemed to skip the rally at the Ellipse and simply entered the march from points along the route.

Back in Dumbfuckland

There was an amusing sideshow in the form of a failed counterdemonstration endorsed by groups such as The American Legion and the corporate sponsored and oxymoronically named Accuracy in Media. Organizers of the "Support the Troops and Their Mission Weekend" modeled their event on the mass demonstration prototype employed by peace activists, with three days of small actions and a mass rally to be held a day after the main anti-war event. Not to be outdone on the bore-the-crowd front, they lined up 29 speakers, including two pro-war Republican Representatives to Congress, the former national Commander of the American Legion, and convicted Watergate burglar G. Gordon Liddy. Organizers told the media that they expected upwards of 20,000 "patriots" to attend.

When Sunday rolled around, the pro-warriors (not to be confused with "warriors," as in the people who actually fight and die in wars) showed up with placards both celebrating "democracy" in Iraq and Afghanistan, and demanding that anti-war protestors in America be jailed. They set up their stage, lined up their speakers, and waited in vain for their followers. The Guardian and the Associated Press report that 100 people showed up. This, presumably, included the 29 scheduled speakers. CNN estimated the crowd as "hundreds." Japan Today, in their coverage, estimated 200 people. Fox News provided the most generous count, reporting that 400 people showed up – far short of the 20,000 that organizers expected. The big question, of course, is why are 100-400 pro-war activists getting international coverage when the same number of anti-war demonstrators usually can't even get decent local coverage in their own hometown communities? CNN eventually chose to fabricate an ersatz "balance" rather than report reality. On their CNN Student News, both demonstrations scored equal coverage, with a teaser explaining, "Listen to two different stories from two different demonstrations concerning one war."

The pro-war rally, with its grand soundstage, international press corps and full line-up of speakers, seemed to be missing one thing – a constituency. The media was all set to paint a picture of dueling rallies negating one another – but one rally, no matter how you framed it, was missing. In its absence, it provided a powerful juxtaposition point to starkly frame America's emerging anti-war sentiment.

It also paved the way for some odd comic relief, as I surfed over to the blog set up by Support the Troops and Their Mission Weekend organizers, to see how they would explain away the thousand-to-one plurality of pinkos over patriots. They didn't let me down.

There were a few recurring themes at work on their blog. While not explaining where

their missing supporters were, they did shed light on just how far one must depart from the realm of rational logic in order to back the Bush administration. First, there was the "All it means is that more of us [our] supporters have jobs than the leftist commie pukes do" argument, rephrased into various forms of prose. And there was the "millions watching at home" argument – since C-Span broadcast the entire pro-war lawn fete live, folks could actually protest at home watching TV, drinking Coors and eating Dominos Pizza. That's where they were – watching C-Span.

The jobless peaceniks, on the other hand, had no choice but to turn out, because, well, you see, it was their job. This was the most common theory on the blog, summed up by this representative post: "Another thing, as it was pointed out today, and at other times on Fox especially, the Dems have professional protestors that make their living going from protest to protest." Get it? "Organizers" ("communists," to be specific) paid 150,000 – 300,000 people to show up. We professionals weren't alone: "Many that were there were either paid protesters or young college kids who have no responsibilities." It seems the commies rented luxury busses, they go on to explain, and paid the feckless students a few rubles to get on them.

Then there's the logistic issue: "These rallies seem to be held on the east coast. There are more colleges/universities/leftists in the blue states." Hmmm. They got us there. We purposely hold demonstrations in the nation's capitol instead of in Dumbfuckland in order to make it easy for all those east coast smarty-pants book reading types to show up. Only, I don't know where Dumbfuckland, this Bush-loving yahoo-laden neo-con utopia, is anymore. I do know that tens of thousands of the anti-war demonstrators held banners or signs indicating that they hailed from Dixie and other supposed Bush strongholds.

Maybe Dumbfuckland is just a state of mind – a place to retreat to when reality spurs on attacks of cognitive dissonance. In any event – it's Bush's last bastion of support – a place where folks can just turn off their brains so that everything can once again make sense. Perhaps the first real wars of the 21st Century are shaping up to be cosmic battles pitting logic and reality against empty jingoistic slogans.