

Code Orange for Bush and Blair

MAKE no mistake about it – history books will cite February 15th, 2003 as a milestone in the global struggle for justice and democracy. The simultaneous coming together of eight to eleven and a half million anti-war protesters in 660 communities spanning every continent (including Antarctica) is historically unprecedented. It marks a powerful opening salvo for a new globally interconnected political reality – one for whom international borders are little more than old world geographic demarcations.

February 15th was about the triumph of hope over despair, of activism over cynicism, and of a renewed belief that we can change the course of history. And it is this new movement that will be George W. Bush's ultimate legacy. The threat that his criminal administration posed to the world's people and environment gave birth to a new generation of activists and to a new global movement – all of us, everywhere, undeterred as we follow the dream of democracy and seek out the manna of hope.

Approximately two million people marched in Rome against a war in Iraq. Up to five million marched in 55 cities across Spain, with 1.3 million marching in Barcelona (a city whose metro population is only 30% larger than that of Buffalo) and 660,000 people in Madrid. Between one and one and a half million people marched in London in what was the largest political rally in that city's long tormented history. In Melbourne, 150,000-200,000 people marched in the largest anti-war rally in Australia's history (that is, until the following Sunday when 250,000 people marched in Sydney). A half million people marched in Berlin. Over 100,000 people rallied in Paris. Another 100,000 marched in

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Jakarta, Indonesia. Los Angeles saw between 50,000 and 75,000 marchers while San Francisco hosted approximately 150,000. Toronto saw at least 15,000 demonstrators (some estimates are substantially higher), with another 25,000 marching in Montreal. In Bosnia, war-weary Muslims and Croats marched together. People marched in Sweden, Switzerland, Tel Aviv, Tokyo, Norway, Syria, South Africa, Scotland, Austria, Bangladesh, Denmark, Belgium, Holland and the Philippines, to name a few places

Nowhere was this spirit more evident last weekend than in New York City, where a half million people came together in defiance of a Billionaire Republican mayor who declared their march illegal, and a federal government whose bogus terror warning all but shut down tourism in that city. Undeterred by Bush administration warnings of a biological or chemical attack, possibly "targeting New York City's hotels and transportation infrastructure," they came by bus, train, plane, subway and bike.

New York's mayor, Michael Bloomberg, for his part, declared the march verboten, citing a seemingly unconstitutional post 9-11 ban on marches. The legal battle between march organizers and the mayor played out for weeks leading up to the demonstration, never being resolved. A columnist writing for the conservative weekly New York Sun praised Bloomberg, writing, "The longer the delay in granting the protestors a permit, the less time the organizers have to get their turnout organized, and the smaller the crowd is likely to be." With only days to go before the march, demonstration organizers gave up on getting a march permit and instead focused on a stationary rally, which the city granted a permit for on First Avenue at 49th Street.

Mayor turns marchers into criminals

Other groups, ranging from labor unions such as the UAW and AFSCME, to political groups such as The Greens and Republicans for Peace, to religious groups and artists, organized 67 feeder marches, all converging on the First Avenue rally site. Mayor Bloomberg refused to grant march permits to any of the feeder marches, in effect turning the marchers, representing an extremely diverse cross-section of the American people, into criminals.

When the morning of the 15th rolled around, 6,000 police officers attempted to confine the permit-less feeder marches to the city's often narrow sidewalks, only to be overwhelmed as the marches swelled into hundreds of thousands of people, chaotically spilling over into traffic as police officers belted out contradicting orders. The rules changed from block to block and minute to minute, with officers intermittingly ordering people off of the street and onto the sidewalk, and vice versa, peppering their orders with threats of arrest.

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On First Avenue, police used interlocking metal barriers, to pen demonstrators into block long cages as they arrived, in order to prevent them from marching any further as a larger group. The unhappily penned crowd quickly swelled from the stage at 49th Street, north to 80th street. As the rally site filled up, police blocked access to First Avenue, detouring would-be protestors onto what eventually became a 30 block march up to 80th Street – in effect ordering protestors to march after denying them a permit to do so. When First Avenue filled up, police blocked all eastward pedestrian traffic on Second Avenue for a 50-block stretch, penning the gridlocked would-be ralliers into hastily assembled pens on Second Ave. When Second Avenue filled, they erected barricades at Third Avenue, and eventually at some places, on Lexington Avenue (one block west of 3rd Ave.), transforming the entire Upper East Side of Manhattan into one big urban rally.

Police block access to rally

Bands of police officers continued to block access to the rally from points all over Manhattan, with marchers being “penned” as far away as 21st Street and 6th Avenue to the South, while others were blocked by wooden police barriers at 92nd Street and 2nd Avenue to the North, with other police actions taking place as far west as 8th Avenue (Midtown Manhattan is one big grid of Avenues running north and south, and streets running east and west). WBAI, a local radio station, broadcast the rally live, allowing protestors to hear the speeches wherever they were gridlocked. At about this time, police officers started estimating the crowd at one million people. Some newspapers would later make the ridiculous assertion that 100,000 people attended. The city cut subway service on the Lexington Avenue line. Barricades were everywhere. It became impossible to move – with most folks never making it to First Avenue. There seems to be a consensus supporting a crowd estimate of 500,000 people protesting on the various streets and avenues.

New post 9-11 laws also banned protest signs with wooden sticks, giving police the onerous task of having to strip sticks from signs, flags from flagpoles, banners from support poles, and so on. In true Orwellian fashion, city rule makers claim the law is designed to protect protestors. Also ostensibly in the interest of protecting protestors, they banned portable toilets and food and drink vendors, thus adding new elements of physical pain to the otherwise frigid February protest experience.

Still, people persevered, and so did the peaceful nature of the day, as speakers admonished the crowd to resist provocation and not allow police officers to incite violence. At one point, two police horses rode into the crowd, injuring five demonstrators,

yet the crowd remained peaceful, though The New York Times, without providing any specifics, reported the incident with a strange twist, simply writing that the crowd injured two horses.

Middle aged resistance

Most of the resistance came from the least likely quarters – middle aged and elderly New Yorkers, who, almost wherever I turned around, were dressing down cops for their behavior. One of the more memorable newly minted civil libertarians was a Jewish woman, clearly a New York native, in her 60s. She was standing near me in a crowd on the sidewalk in front of a Starbucks in the First Avenue rally zone, watching speeches on a giant 50 foot Jumbotron when police officers decided to clear the sidewalk (organizers installed giant tractor-trailer truck mounted folding TVs every five blocks so protestors could see surreal images of the stage while they listened to speeches on boom boxes).

"You gotta get off the sidewalk," one officer shouted to us. "What do you mean I gotta get off the sidewalk?" she asked. "You gotta get into the pen," he answered. "I'm not going into no pen," she responded indignantly. "Look lady, ya gotta get off the sidewalk – it's closed," he bellowed. "Whaddya mean the sidewalk is closed? Who ever heard of such a thing? A closed sidewalk?" she asked to no one in particular. "Look lady, if ya don't move I gotta arrest you."

"Arrest me? What ya gonna arrest me for, I'm just standing here?"

"I'm gonna arrest ya for trespassing."

"Trespassing? What trespassing? This is a sidewalk for god's sake. How can I trespass on a sidewalk?" she asked, before, in utter frustration, telling the officer, "I've had it! I ain't moving. So go ahead and arrest me if that's what you gotta do."

"Look lady – what are you busting my balls for," he asked, "If you don't want to move, don't move, but don't bust my balls about it." And he left. His sergeant promised us, as a departing gesture, that we'd soon get trampled with horses. Then she left. The frustrated women and her friends remained, last I heard, mumbling, "Sidewalk. Now you gotta have a permit to walk on the sidewalk..."

This little bit of street theatre seems to sum up the frustration and anger that New Yorkers are feeling these days. Anger at the murderous bastards who attacked the city on September 11th. Anger at the politicians who from afar, seek to capitalize on their pain. Anger at the police state that New York has become. Anger at the perpetual "code orange" that goes hand in hand with empire. Anger at being forced to the front lines of a war they never wanted, initiated by a foreign policy they never supported. Anger at the prospect of bio and nuclear terrorism, and at the suggestion that they stock up on duct

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tape. Anger at seeing their country destroyed and pillaged by crooks New Yorkers voted against in droves. Anger at the loss – the terrible loss of the simpler lives they had once known.

That's what this demonstration was all about. A woman on the street telling a cop she wouldn't be penned like a cow awaiting slaughter. A city telling a government they won't be cannon fodder for a war they don't want or support. A nation telling the world that this unelected government isn't operating in our name. And a world of people telling each other that we are one.

Oh yeah, I almost forgot. Late on Saturday the U.S. and British governments put their impending war on hold – at least for a few days – "to give diplomacy one more chance."

The next anti-war rally will be in Washington on March 8th, International Women's Day. ●