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In Democracy's Wake - The Anti-War Protest in Washington DC

By William Rivers Pitt

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October 26, 2002, will be noted in history as a day when 250,000 Americans streamed into the nation's capitol to protest a war that has not truly begun. This is a remarkable thing; the Vietnam war had been underway for years before any massed public opposition of the size seen in Washington this week was mustered. On Saturday, Americans marched against a Presidential wish for war, rather than against an actual war. The crowd was so large it snarled traffic in the city for miles in all directions, so much so that protesters were still struggling to arrive as the event came to a conclusion.

This was a protest mirrored across the country and the world; tens of thousands turned out for a simultaneous rally in San Francisco, as well as several other American cities. Europe experienced yet another outpouring of anti-war sentiment in its streets. October 26th was a day of global action, with global consequence, that may prove to spare us from a global catastrophe.

Not far from where the speakers' podium had been erected in Washington's Constitution Park stood the Vietnam War Memorial. The obsidian darkness, etched with too many names, is polished to a high and mirrored shine. As you gaze at those names, as you consider the cost of ill-founded and poorly-waged war, you stare your own reflected image in the eye. Those who marched in Washington on Saturday, October 26th, paid obeisance to those names, and made a promise to the face they saw in that stone. Not in my name, they swore. Not this time. Not on my watch.

The purpose of this protest, organized by a group called International ANSWER (Act Now to Stop War and End Racism), was to let it be known in the halls of the Pentagon and White House that the people of America do not in any way support George W. Bush's plans for war in Iraq. This goal was accomplished. The crowd was comprised almost completely of extraordinarily ordinary Americans - mothers, grandmothers, workers, teachers, students, church groups - the very constitution of which spoke louder than any microphone ever could. The crowd could have stood in silence for the entire rally and achieved its purpose, for it was made of men and women, many of whom have



never protested anything before, who walked in massive numbers out of the simple heart and soul of the nation to say, simply, 'No.'

In the end, though, the gathering became a bull-throated repudiation of virtually everything the Bush administration has done to date, and everything it stands for. This crowd of very regular people came loaded for bear, as if they had been waiting in white-knuckled anticipation for almost three years for an opportunity to give voice to their overwhelming disgust. Signs denouncing Bush, Cheney, Rumsfeld and Perle were all around; this is the first administration in recent memory whose smaller members have earned such public scorn. There were signs catcalling the sordid relationships between the administration and Enron, Halliburton, Arthur Andersen and the collapse of what had been a sound economic platform. Sign after sign after sign, however, was directed towards Bush himself. 250,000 Americans wanted him to know that, finally, his honeymoon was over.

A somber emotional tremor coursed below the surface of this gathering. On every building, and in a ring around the Washington Monument, American flags flew at half-mast. Black bands could be seen on many arms in the gathering, and thousands of signs bearing the name and image of Senator Paul Wellstone could be seen in all directions. Wellstone had been killed in a plane crash the day before, when many of the rally's participants were still on the road to the capitol. The only time, during the entire day, when the massed crowd fell completely silent came when Rev. Jesse Jackson called the assembled to prayer.

"Brothers and sisters," began Rev. Jackson as he took to the podium before the crowd, "a moment of silence. Let us join hands for Paul and Shiela Wellstone, and their daughter, who perished yesterday. His seat may be filled. His principles and commitment and integrity and passion and purpose will not be so easily filled. Let us rededicate ourselves to the cause of peace and justice that Paul always fought for. We thank God for his memory, for his purpose, and for that which he left in us. Amen."

The silence rolled out across the city. The roar that followed shook the very ground.

Speaker after speaker - from Rev. Jackson to actor/activist Susan Sarandon to a variety of war veterans - came to the microphone to denounce Bush's plans for war, the restrictions of rights under the PATRIOT Act, the dissolution of economic security, and to speak of the fundamental idea that the program this administration has put forth is caustically dangerous to the nation and the world. Over it all drifted the spirit of Paul Wellstone, who was credited by some for the clearing clouds and bright sunshine on a day that had promised rain.

One truth was there for the taking after the crowd had created a mile-long chanting snake of shoulder-to-shoulder Americans that wrapped itself several times around the White House. This nation is not comprised of citizens who view the world through Bush administration eyes. The man himself was in Mexico as

those 250,000 people engirded his borrowed home, but the message was delivered. The weight of those people, in that one spot and on that one day, tilted the axis of the earth just ever so slightly. The sun still shines the same, and the seasons have not changed, but the winds blow differently now. Those who would have us feed ourselves into the maw of war cannot but notice the difference.

This was Democracy's wake, a massive funeral for a fallen hero and a path carved towards a future dominated more fulsomely by the will of people willing to take to the streets. If 250,000 came out for a war yet to begin, the administration must shudder at the masses to come should they follow through with their foolish plans. Mr. Wellstone was well served, and well pleased, by this incredible turn of events.

William Rivers Pitt is a teacher from Boston, MA. He is the author of two books - "War On Iraq" (with Scott Ritter) available now from Context Books, and "The Greatest Sedition is Silence," available in April 2003 from Pluto Press.



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