

Three Anti-War Protests

Central Park to the UN (March 1967)

The war protesters gathered in Sheep's Meadow by the thousands on a beautiful afternoon -- sunny and warm. In the vast crowd, there were Sgt. Pepper costumes, tie-dyed, face-painted hippies, college straights dressed in Ivy League styles, the long-haired and the long-long-haired, blacks, whites, reds, and browns. There were signs and banners, tambourines, flutes, guitars, saxophones, bongos, banjos, Native American drums, and a lone trumpet. Clouds of pot and hash smoke drifted across the green lawn. Hucksters were pushing nickel bags, meth, mescaline, psilocybin, acid, ludes, black beauties, reddiees - - an entire pharmacopeia was on sale. My brother Mike, Johnny Buckley and I sat under a tree near the Mall drinking it all in.

For the occasion, I was decked out in a maroon suit with yellow pinstripes in a 1930s gangster cut and a bright yellow tie contrasted with a dark purple shirt. The outfit was completed with a maroon snap brim fedora and white and brown wing tip shoes, all of which came from the Kips Bay Boys Club Thrift Shop. I toted a mandolin case containing a toy machine gun and was carrying a handwritten sign that said "End US Gangsterism in Vietnam."

We joined the motley protest as it paraded out of Central Park, passing by the monuments to the Latin American liberators and then onto the Avenue of the Americas in no particular order. We had heard that Martin Luther King was in the front of the marchers, but we couldn't see him. The crowds on the Avenue were a pretty good size and grew larger as we approached Bryant Park at 42nd Street, where we turned east, heading for the UN. Occasionally a ripple of applause would flow through the bystanders as I strolled by and I felt proud of my get-up and the provocative message on my sign. We reached First Avenue, marched past the Secretariat Building and assembled in front of the wall engraved with a passage from Isaiah: "They will beat their swords into plowshares and their spears into pruning hooks. Nation will not take up sword against nation, nor will they train for war anymore."

From a podium erected on the steps below the engraving, a number of speakers addressed the crowd, saying nothing that added much to Isaiah. After the speeches, the chanting ("Hey, hey, LBJ, How many kids did you kill today?" and singing ("We shall not be moved"), the protest broke up peacefully. Johnny, Mike and I headed up to Brandy's, a bar on 84th Street between Second and Third Avenues. Bobby Mangan, who had served in the Marines in Vietnam, was the bartender at Brandy's and when he saw my outfit, sign, and machinegun, he cracked up and bought us a round of drinks.

The mandolin case and toy gun immediately were given a place of honor on top of the mahogany back-bar. They remained there, perched above the mirror and tiers of whisky bottles, for years.

The March on the Pentagon (October 1967)

It was Friday night. My brother Mike and I and Larry Strubing were drinking in Joe's, a joint on Second Avenue between 54th and 55th, talking about the antiwar March on the Pentagon that was going to take place the next day. Larry had recently returned from a year-long tour in Vietnam and was now out of the Army. Just then, Jim Moorehead walked in and when we told him what we had been discussing, he announce in his juiced-up Dean Moriarity way that his wheels were parked right outside and we were welcome to drive down to Washington with him. That got an enthusiastic reception, but when we started thinking seriously about making the trip, we quickly realized we had no idea how long the expedition down to DC would take or what we'd need for gas and food. Aside from the few dollars on the bar, we had no money and, even if the whole trip took only 24 hours, we didn't have enough cash.

My brother Mike pulled me aside and said we should borrow the money from our father, who was against the war and might be agreeable to financing our participation in the march. I thought it was a good idea and Jim said he'd drive us out to Sunnyside to get the money. When we got to 39th Place and 43rd Avenue, Jim parked the car at the corner and Mike and I walked the ½ block to our house. Jim was going out with my sister Bitsy and my father didn't like "that bum", so Jim waited in the car. Our parents were sitting in the living room when we walked in and they thought our going to the demonstration was OK, so long as we were careful and didn't get into trouble. We didn't mention who was driving us down and our dad gave us forty bucks to cover expenses.

We were back in the City in no time and after buying beer in a deli on 53rd Street, we all jumped in the car and Jim headed for the Lincoln Tunnel. On the New Jersey Turnpike, Jim broke out some weed and we passed several joints around, everyone getting pretty toasted. The radio was on playing "Groovin" by the Rascals and we all buzzed out on the grass. Sometime later, I have no idea how long, but it was still dark, I snapped awake and noticed that the beams from our headlights were swaying slowly back and forth across the highway. I yelled "Jim", his eyes popped open and he got the car under control. No one slept from then on.

We arrived in Washington just after dawn and, following the directions from an anti-war leaflet, drove to George Washington University, where we were able to park. The dorms were open to marchers and we got an hour or so of fitful sleep in a dorm corridor before things started to gear up. Parade marshals in armbands were soon forming the

people from the dorms into a lumpy line-of-march in the tree-lined streets of the campus. They herded us out to the Mall, which was only a short distance away, where we joined a vast crowd that was in the process of being molded into a huge parade. There was a great deal of milling about while the marshals tried to organize things and we took the opportunity to check out the freaks and geeks, the anti-war signs, the hare-krishnas, the “what if they gave a war and nobody came” t-shirts, the “We shall overcome”, the imitation Yippies, the Che Guevaras, the Clergy men and women, and the Yellow Submarine.

Eventually, the parade began to move and in a short time we arrived at the Lincoln Memorial where a huge mass of people had already assembled and someone was addressing the crowd. We were beyond the far end of the reflecting pool and could hear very little. Speaker after speaker harangued the assemblage, but except for the audience immediately in front of the podium near the steps of the Memorial there was little reaction. Around us, a lot of the protesters just sprawled out on the ground, absorbing the late October sunshine, smoking dope, making love, going to sleep. After what seemed like a long, boring time, the parade marshals again began the slow process of herding the mass of demonstrators into a marching column and eventually we started to move.

We crossed the Memorial Bridge over the Potomac and suddenly from the height of the bridge we could make out the Pentagon way off in the distance sitting in a kind of glen. The lead segment of the march came into view as it approached the gargantuan parking lot that surrounds the building. By the time we arrived, the Pentagon was completely encircled by Federal Marshals, the 82nd Airborne Division, and the antiwar protesters. The Federal Marshals wore business suits, white shirts and ties and dark armbands “US Marshall” stenciled on them. They looked just like the guys who were sent in by the Kennedys to restore order at Ol’ Miss. The paratroopers were in combat gear with their rifles in their hands. Separating the protesters from the troops and marshals was a cordon of white rope. The demonstrators milled around, swapped rumors, sang songs and chanted slogans. I didn’t see anyone directly challenge the Marshals or the Military. Every now and then Norman Mailer, Dwight McDonald or some other celebrity protester would walk by, turning heads and getting a spattering of applause.

The day dragged on and rounding one corner of the huge building, we caught the very end of the Yippies’ well-advertised exorcism of the Pentagon. A little later, some pretty girls with long flowing hair approached the soldiers and placed daisies in the barrels of their M-14s. In the late afternoon, people began to leave the demonstration and we decided to walk back to the University. By the time we reached the car, it was growing dark and we were tired. The drive back to New York was quiet. The Pentagon hadn’t levitated and the war went on. A little over a year later, I was wearing the uniform of the 82nd Airborne in a place called Hoc Mon.

Busted: Whitehall Street to Times Square (December 1967)

Mike and I got off the subway at the Battery and followed a steady stream of protesters out of Battery Park down the short block to New York City's central draft office at 39 Whitehall Street. It was about nine o'clock in the morning and a large crowd had already assemble in front of the grotesque stone and red brick building that housed the draft office, an office that was in the process of being made famous by Arlo Guthrie's recently released *Alice's Restaurant*. Mike and I were standing in the rear of the demonstration across the street from the building. Although there was some chanting, "Hell no, we won't go", singing, "We shall not be moved", and the size of the crowd continued to grow, not much else was going on.

Then the policemen at the front of the crowd began pushing the people back from the draft office's entrance. Soon the crowd was shoving back and the cops started clubbing people. At the same time, a troop of five mounted policemen began moving up Whitehall Street from South Ferry. The crowd seemed to tense and then everyone scattered. Mike and I sprinted to Pearl Street and headed uptown with demonstrators running in front of us and behind us. We were approaching the corner of Broad Street when we came up behind a heavysset plainclothes detective who was running after a group of sign-carrying protestors and breathing heavily. Mike gave me a sly look out of the corner of his eye and stuck out his foot barely tapping the heel of the cop's right shoe as it moved backward. The detective went down like a ton of bricks. Mike and I scooted past him and ran as fast we could. At Wall Street we cut over to Broadway and tried to lose ourselves in a sizeable block of protesters who were heading up to City Hall Park where the demonstration was supposed to reassemble.

When we got to City Hall, a good many protestors were already milling around the park. The police were out in force and a phalanx of club-wielding motorcycle cops lined City Hall steps. Using bullhorns, the demonstration's organizers were trying to form the throng into columns so we could march up Broadway to the big Armed Forces recruiting station located in the middle of Times Square. Although the weather was chilly, Mike and I had taken off our jackets and tied them around our waists so we wouldn't be too easy to spot if the fat detective came looking for us. After a half an hour or so of waiting around in City Hall Park, several thousand demonstrators started up Broadway to Times Square. En route, we disrupted a lot of traffic, which resulted in almost continuous horn honking and fist waving by aggravated motorists. The sentiments of the pedestrian onlookers appeared to be evenly split: some waved and applauded, while others shouted insults and curses. When we passed a construction site near 30th Street, the hardhats greeted us with a chorus of abuse -- "faggots, dirty hippies, cowards" - - and a lot of other colorful names. Some of the marchers shouted back, but I kept my mouth shut, thankful that the construction workers didn't throw anything but words down on us.

Arriving at Times Square, I was surprised to see that a large number of protesters were already there. Joined by the group coming up from downtown, the mass of people gathered around the Recruiting Station overflowed into the street and began to obstruct traffic on both Broadway and Seventh Avenue. The leaders of the demonstration, who appeared to have been talking with the police commander on the traffic island in the middle of Times Square, announced that we were going to march across 42nd Street to the UN Plaza. There was some grumbling, but soon the crowd was trickling onto 42nd Street where the police had cleared traffic from the eastbound lane. We marched to First Avenue singing and chanting, with Mike and me keeping a constant lookout for the detective he had tripped. When we arrived at the UN Plaza, we saw it was filled with police vehicles and Department of Correction buses. The tail end of the march had barely turned the corner onto First Avenue when the police began to arrest the demonstrators.

Seeing the first arrest, Mike and I quickly headed for the far side of First Avenue. Dodging around the back of a bus, we almost collided with two cops. They immediately grabbed us, placed us under arrest, and pushed us through the back door of a Correction Department bus. The police filled bus after bus with demonstrators and soon we were on our way downtown in a caravan headed by two police cars with their sirens wailing. We pulled up to an old police station just south of Delancey Street and were herded into cells in the back of the station house. A large number of protesters had been arrested, so the cells were very crowded. Mike and I never intended to get arrested; we looked at each other in disbelief and shook our heads. Nearly everyone we talked to seemed surprised and unhappy with the turn of events. There was no chanting or singing in the cells -- everybody was subdued, discussing in low tones our situation and what was likely to happen next. Mike and I were praying that the detective who had taken a tumble wasn't going to show up and examine the prisoners.

Less than an hour later, the cops came through the back room and, without any explanation, opened the cell doors one by one and warned us to get the hell out of the station house and out of the neighborhood. Once on the outside, Mike and I hoofed it as fast as we could to the subway station on Delancey Street and Essex and took the first uptown train that arrived. After boarding the subway, we looked at each other and for the first time that day we laughed.

On the ride back home to Sunnyside, we talked about the protest and the war. We had both lost our student deferments: Mike had dropped out of college and I had become draft eligible when deferments for graduate students were eliminated. We were now classified 1-A and likely to be drafted in less than a year, maybe much less than a year. Neither of us had a moral objection to the war. We certainly weren't conscientious objectors. In fact, we thought most of the really earnest protesters were ridiculous. In

our minds, the war was stupid because a lot of guys were getting killed and we weren't winning. Being sent into that kind of war didn't appeal to us on any level.

After I had been reclassified 1-A, I had a recurring dream. I saw myself in the movie *Attack*, in the role played by Jack Palance, pinned down in the doorway of a stucco house in Belgium, with the tread of a German tank about to roll over me. Just before my arm is crushed by the tank I would wake up. The dream was vivid and terrifying. I was afraid of the war and didn't want to go and Mike and I thought the demonstrations just might make the president wind down and end the conflict. So we figured taking part in the protests, aside from providing some laughs, could lessen our chances of being drafted. Our motive was purely self-preservation.

During this time, the war and the antiwar movement were the constant topics of discussion and I sometimes grandly declared to my friends that I would risk going to jail rather than serve. I envisioned myself candidly telling the court I was acting on the principle that I shouldn't be forced to risk my life in a war I didn't believe in. No highfalutin principle - - simple self-interest. Yet deep down I knew that it was all rhetoric - - I wasn't going to jail and I wasn't going to Canada. And I wasn't going to claim to be a conscientious objector, or get a psychiatrist to say military service would destroy my mental health, or pretend that I was a homosexual. With all the obvious ways out eliminated, I knew I was eventually going to be drafted and I would go, hoping that I got an assignment that didn't involve being shot at.

After we returned home, we learned on the evening news that the police commander in Times Square had assured the protest leaders that if we marched peacefully to the UN Plaza no one would be arrested. The conversation was caught on tape by a local TV station and when they showed it to the brass at police headquarters, the word went out to free the prisoners. Mike and I hadn't been booked or fingerprinted; our names hadn't even been taken, so there was no record of us being involved at all. We were relieved to have dodged that metaphorical bullet, but we also knew that the war, with real bullets, was getting closer and closer to us.