

The Wake Magazine

Bitter Tea [1]

Archived Story [2] | September 19th, 2008

Photos by Matt Miranda and Scottie Tuska

D-day. Convention week. September 1st-4th. Republican Christmas. Call it what you will, the atmosphere in St. Paul that week was truly bizarre. Amongst the commotion surrounding the MSNBC Free Speech Stage® a Tucson cop buys himself a hocked McCain-Palin T-shirt. A man in a suit claims to be McCain's second choice for VP. A group of antiwar feminists decry the nomination of Sarah Palin and a group of radical Christians chant passages from the Letters to Corinthians. If we're all doomed to hell, then what was that place?



[3]

Why cuffs?

When I asked why I was being arrested, the police told me I shouldn't have been in St. Paul.

We were at the foot of the capitol when a man with a loudspeaker told everyone to stay together and continue protesting. He yelled something along the lines of, "Everyone, follow us! We have a plan, but we can't tell you what it is!" Curiosity piqued, we followed along with the rest of the group.

I made a point to not partake in the chanting and I kept my distance from the bulk of

the group. We marched in a large circle around several blocks without any problems. It was only when we were finishing our loop and were approaching the capitol that things turned ugly. Suddenly and without warning, the air was filled with green smoke. The group's momentum flipped. Some panicked and ran; others yelled "Peaceful protestors!" and "Walk! Don't Run!" The crowd funneled between nearby businesses and scattered.

I found myself walking alongside a Sears when I had my first run-in with an officer or, more specifically, with his horse. While we walked and discussed our thoughts, two mounted police approached us from the right. They were shouting at us angrily to leave. I turned to get out of the way of the horse but wasn't fast enough. I was knocked to the ground, and felt my legs getting stepped on by heavy horse hooves. I managed to pick myself up, only to be met with a slap to the back of the head by the police officer who kindly told me to "Get the fuck out of here."

Anger took hold. When did it become illegal to walk through a Sears parking lot? I wasn't protesting and I wasn't violent. For all he knew, I was heading to my car to go home.



[4]

Peace team

By this point, smoke billowed through the air and the pop of concussion grenades echoed through the streets. Completely surrounded by police and things that were exploding, I threw up my arms and shouted, "Where the hell do you want us to go!?" Many of the police looked bewildered themselves. Eventually, the entire group was pushed onto a bridge, groups of protesters herded by cops with showers of mace as their reward.

America is built upon a foundation of civil disobedience. Since the first acts of rebellion that sparked the Revolutionary War, America has relied on the voices of its people to initiate

progress. From civil rights to women's suffrage, our freedoms exist due to the actions of those brave enough to fight for change. The boycotts and terrorism used to oppose British oppression were what inspired the framers of the constitution to document our civil liberties; to include within the constitution a Bill of Rights: the freedom of speech, assembly, press, religion, and petition.

Without an active and vocal populace, America stands helpless against the very government it was designed to confront. Without the freedom to fight, Americans become voiceless masses; flocks subdued into complacency and subjected to the whims of those in power.



[5]

Apocalypse now

Over the course of the Week-long Republican National Convention, staff members of The Wake experienced first hand the activities of both police and protestors on the streets of St. Paul. On Thursday, September 4th, 2008, nearly 400 people were arrested during an impromptu protest. Among them were two members of The Wake's editorial staff along with a coterie of others, including journalists, teenagers and senior citizens. On the first day, protestors involved in the "March on the RNC and Stop the War" clashed with police on, resulting in 284 arrests. With police units from Ramsey County to Arlington, Texas called into St. Paul, the number of cops on the streets was striking, as were their actions. Throughout the duration of the RNC, acts of vandalism and disruption by protestors resulted in police use of riot gear, rubber bullets, tear gas, and wooden batons.

Even in the weeks preceding the RNC, local police collaborated with the FBI in an anticipatory stifling of activism. They entered houses and offices of advocacy groups such as Food Not Bombs and the anarchist group the RNC Welcoming Committee. The Pioneer Press reports that authorities said they were searching

for “items that could be used for direct action techniques, ranging from computers, Xboxes, Xbox games, Molotov cocktails and matchstick heads,” as well as empty bottles, flammable liquids, rags and other materials. If you read over that list without prejudice, it’s pretty obvious that these are common household items and hardly justification for the Iraq-styled searches – hands zip-tied, heads to the ground – that took place. One man whose house was searched claimed that police had taken their household’s grey water, (a measure taken by environmentalists to conserve water) labeled it urine and fabricated a conspiracy to douse police with urine and feces. In case you’re wondering, the fecal matter was excavated from their septic tank. You know, that big tank where waste is stored. Underground.

Things only got worse once the convention started. Along with the astronomically high number arrests came numerous examples of police brutality and complete disregard for protesters’ legal and human rights.

And suddenly, in the middle of this lukewarm protest, all hell broke loose. As soon as the first flash bangs went off, most of the media scattered. Many protesters lost their composure, panicked and ran into one another. “Hold hands, stay together,” commanded the leaders of the protest over loudspeaker. “Walk, don’t run.”



[6]

Cops under the white sky

Flashbangs rattled across the concrete and exploded several feet to my left – then to my right. Gas seeped from the explosions. The stagnant air echoed with screams. Faceless equestrian police armed with chemicals and rubber bullets chased protesters. The air filled with pepper spray – a curious combination of smell and sensation. Protesters were raising their hands about their heads, crying and yelling “we’re peaceful, we love you, don’t hurt us!” Some were subsequently beaten or

trampled. National Guard members stood apart and above the commotion, watching with lips tight and weapons raised.

A few minutes passed before the protesters and bystanders realized what was going on. The police had surrounded what remained of the crowd in a Sears parking lot and forcefully herded us onto a bridge over Interstate 94, where we were commanded to sit on the concrete and place our hands on our heads. Floodlights illuminated the silhouettes of police barricading both sides of the bridge while armed soldiers and police officers patrolled the seated arrestees. A loudspeaker announced that we were arrested for unlawful assembly and that “resistance will be met with force.”

Of the over 300 people sitting on the bridge around me, most were in their late teens and early twenties, with some old hippies thrown into the mix for good measure. To my right was a group of outspoken transient punks who had hitchhiked to St. Paul for the convention and had been squatting for several days. To my left was a serious kid from a local high school. Several people had no interest in the convention or the protest whatsoever and had been caught up in the commotion by freak accident.

In the commotion surrounding the RNC, 818 arrests were made. 19 of those were felonies, with two more potential felonies under investigation. In total, 30 “official” journalists were arrested, with many more reporting via blogs and kitchen-sink publications. Five citizens were arrested under the suspicion of “conspiracy to riot in furtherance of terrorism” – a new Patriot Act-endorsed charge that can net your peace-loving ass seven and a half years in jail. If acting as a roadblock can be construed as terrorism, it has become a very loose term indeed. Or perhaps police were referring to a previously unheard of terrorist device called the urine water balloon which, when tossed at police, could leave them bathed in stench and shame. Dangerous stuff.



[7]

Take aim

The tale of police vs. protestors is not a new one. Interaction between the two factions during the Democratic National Convention in 1968 was the topic of novels and conversation across the country. This convention was no different when it came to action. A sea of clashes and uprisings, it was a veritable journalistic wonderland of headlining opportunities. Protests ranged from a march on the capitol lead by Rage Against the Machine to daily throngs of religious fanatics toting enormous signs, who probably just hopped the 16 straight from the U of M campus to Rice Park. The amount of people who had something to say was not surprising, but comforting. The overdramatic police action was just as predictable.

It was really weird: we're standing on the green in front of the capitol when a group of bike cops cuts through the center of the field without warning. Everyone starts gathering around and yelling in an attempt to, I don't know, dissuade them. They had no reason to be there; we had a permit. As they reach the center of the green, they just fell on these two kids lying on the grass. No shit, lying on the grass. They arrested them and formed a perimeter around them, using their bikes to hold off the ring of protesters that had suddenly formed. Everyone was watching and saw that the kids had done nothing. We started chanting "Let them go" and the police responded by bashing us with their bikes. After they went through, the riot police, swat team and mounted cops came through like a parade, cutting through the crowd. The Mounties just stood there for, say, fifteen minutes staring us down. They said that the kids had damaged police property.

Later, when they started rounding up and arresting people in the street, the cops lined up on the edges of the sidewalk and pointed their guns at us. They even tried to shoot a guy for climbing a tree. They would have done it if not for this older woman who stepped in and acted as a human shield. This was after they told us to get on the sidewalk if we wanted to avoid arrest. They didn't say anything about climbing trees.

Police are a perplexing species. Like all humans, they range from good, to bad, to ugly. Unfortunately, unlike all humans, they have guns, mace, and the ability to throw you in a cage. This means that while the nice ones are fine, the bad ones are downright awful.

Norm Coleman said, "Our goal was to have a safe and successful convention, and clearly we have done that." Maybe the politicians slept soundly all week,

but all the other taxpayers with something to say didn't.

Sure, the police had a tough job. Facing 16-hour days and promises of trillions of satanic anarchists with poop launching machines and urine grenades, they were expecting the worst. Unfortunately, a few were looking forward to the worst.



[8]

A protestor

Simply put, the police response to protesters and citizens during the convention was unthinkably hostile. A simple Youtube search will yield all the evidence you need: a single man tackled by five cops for refusing a search, a woman maced in the face – twice – for offering a flower, crowds beaten back with bikes and batons, not to mention the clouds of tear gas and grenades. More and more reports of detainee mistreatment continue to pour in while legal tensions continue to mount.

Here's what supposedly happened. Protestors had a permit to assemble until 5:00 pm. I arrived on the scene a few hours after that, and people were still protesting. Apparently there was a police announcement that was supposed to halt the protestors, but nobody listened to it. I was completely unaware of this. Because a group of people went marching down the street chanting things a few hours after 5:00, police decided to start throwing as many grenades as they could in all directions and arrested everyone within a five block radius of the capitol, macing plenty of people along the way. Personally, I thought it was a bit much.

It's hard to look at the evidence and not feel like we were under martial law, with Police officers given complete freedom to use whatever violent crowd-control measure that should shoot across their combat-addled minds. We have to ask: What's the justification? The protesters were peaceful. Police were not attacked. One window was smashed. The mainstream media seemed to dwell on

“the few that ruined it for the many,” but was that really the case? Or was one act of violence perpetrated by John Doe – against a window, mind you – trumped up and used as justification to violently attack and mistreat protesters who were trying to make the only statement they could against a government, political party, establishment, etc. that has disenfranchised and belittled them for years? Is it a police state if you are silenced and detained on an everyday basis? Is it a police state if martial law is enacted without being declared? Maybe all the things we say about our enemies are also applicable to us.

If you want proof, simply look to the lack of media reaction. When a group of 200 people including 19 journalists, two of whom were AP reporters, were trapped and arrested on a bridge during the final night of the convention, it was a situation warranting media attention. As was the near arrest of “Democracy Now!” host Amy Goodman, who simply asked to see a commander about the detainment of the program’s two producers. Instead, a video of her being handcuffed and lead to a van by police is one of the most viewed clips on YouTube. Stories of journalists whose press credentials were ignored are numerous, as are accounts of physical abuse and abuse of rights by police. It seems that these sordid tales of media suppression deserve a larger stage than the website that made Tay Zonday and The Whitest Kids You Know famous.



[9]

The press

Instead, that larger stage was reserved for coverage of Bristol Palin’s baby and President Bush’s praise of John McCain. Mainstream media concentrated on what was occurring inside the Excel, ignoring many in favor of a few. Unfortunately, what is filmed inside of the convention center is an elaborately planned performance. Each speech, audience member, and backdrop conveys a strategic party message. What the party cannot control occurs on the streets outside. As John McCain gave his acceptance speech

encouraging Americans to “fight for the ideals and character of a free people,” freedoms of speech and press were being challenged on the streets of St. Paul. Most people just never heard about it.

We view government-influenced media as characteristic of developing republics, such as China or Russia. It is time to realize that we are receiving a skewed account of events in the United States. When the American media turned its eyes toward the Republican National Convention, it apparently developed glaucoma. Even worse, the little coverage given to the protests focused on demonizing Anarchists without actually explaining their beliefs or motivations. In that respect, they’ve managed to become our own homegrown “Terrorists:” radicals who are deliberately misrepresented and misunderstood. Believe it or not, Anarchism is an actual political paradigm based on philosophical and political writings. It is a paradigm that stresses communal living and community action. It is not the fifteen-year-old punk kid you used to hang out with carving an “A” into his arm between art classes. It is not a blind hatred of all organization and rational thought. It is not a plague threatening to turn your children into bomb-throwing mercenaries.

The hatred and ignorance that has been shown towards anarchists by the mainstream media is, unfortunately, only one of the many problems with their coverage of the convention. Take, for example, the fact that hundreds of peaceful protestors and journalists were arrested, detained, maced, shot with rubber bullets in the name of national security and the amount of complaints lodged by the press is almost equal to the amount of complaints that the Saint Paul Police have received – none at all. The detention of many press members may have prevented them from telling their side, but when do they stand up for their own rights and the civil liberties of the citizens of this country? Rubber bullets have replaced fire hoses, but nothing has changed since the days of the Kent State Massacre.

On the final day of the convention, when old man McCain stepped up to reiterate the dangers Islamic Extremism (Could we win a War on Extremism, etc.) and the genius of offshore drilling, a completely peaceful protest was devolving into chaos. Just like every day that week, the clock ticked past the magic hour and the police went apeshit. One protestor tried to hand them a flower from atop stilts, while another pleaded with each one. It seemed that their pleas of “We love you” couldn’t get past the gas masks. Then again there

were, like, totally, like five kids who started swearing at the cops.

Within half an hour, we were seated in neat rows with our hands on our heads. Hours passed. The morale of the arrestees was high. We sang songs and swapped stories while the police stood around.

Eventually boredom and discomfort set in. Many of us needed to use the bathroom, including myself. I begged the officers to take me to the bathroom. I was forced to pee in a water bottle in front of 400 people and national news cameras. Girls weren't so lucky. I met one who wet herself after begging the police for a bathroom.

I was impressed by the restraint of my fellow detainees. For a group of criminals, some not even legal adults, there seemed to be a level maturity that wasn't shown by many of the police officers. One officer, whose nametag read B. Donahue, blatantly mocked the arrestees, saying things like "You're all just a bunch of babies. You went right where we told you to go," and "If you really believed in what you were protesting, you would have stood through the smoke and fought back." This same officer threatened me: "If you don't shut your mouth, you won't like what happens," which was his response to me asking the person I was sitting with where he had come from.

Despite the forceful confrontations by police, it's safe to say that nobody on the bridge had reacted violently. People were maced and arrested without reason or warning. If there is a way to piss a lot of people off at once, they certainly seemed to have found it.

That little scene is a microcosm of the four days that rocked St. Paul, an invitation to every wack, nut job and overzealous cop to show up for what, for one week, was the greatest shown on earth. It was like our own Tiananmen Square except that we're supposed to have rights. If we had any sense, we would have just stayed home and worked on our grey water systems. Of course, now even that's probable cause for a raid and arrest.

The story in photos

1. <http://www.wakemag.org/voices/bitter-tea/>
2. <http://www.wakemag.org/author/archivedstory/>
3. http://farm4.static.flickr.com/3001/2866445548_3481a08424.jpg
4. http://farm4.static.flickr.com/3001/2865615319_42de2f988a.jpg
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