



Middle-Class, Suburban White Guy for Peace

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Several members of the newly-formed Grand Rapids Peace Team drove to Washington, D.C. the weekend of April 20 to visit Senators' offices, to rally, and to march for peace. This is one of our stories.

After several weeks of anticipation and wondering if I really wanted to get myself as deeply involved in this sort of thing, I set off with three friends for Washington, D.C. The purpose of this trip was to participate in a series of events that expressed opposition to U.S. government policies regarding war, aid to foreign governments and a neglect of more peaceful, constructive alternatives when it comes to addressing cultural and political problems both here and around the world. To better understand why I went and what happened there, let me just say a few things about myself.

An "Average American"

As the title of this article implies, I'm an "average American" citizen. I come from a working-class background, with both union members and entrepreneurs among my relatives. My grandfather fought in WWII, most of my extended family members are sympathetic to conservative, Republican views, and for the most part, our lives are situated at a convenient distance from most of the more intractable social problems prevalent in our society. All in all, I live in a fairly comfortable nest compared with many in our nation, and it would be relatively easy for me to just stick to my own business and let someone else deal with all the issues that seems to stir up so much trouble.

Except that I just can't. Life doesn't seem to allow me that option. After 25 years or more of trying to figure out what I wanted to do with my life, I wound up working in a social service organization that helps

abused and neglected teenagers deal with the challenges of their lives. This experience, along with my on-going involvement with the Christian church and the spiritual issues at the heart of our faith, has led me to take on more personal responsibility for getting involved with the bigger ethical questions of our times, even if they seem so large and overwhelming that I often wonder if anything I do can make a difference.

So here I was, early on a Thursday morning, climbing into a Toyota Prius (the gas/electric hybrid car owned by Corinne Carey, a long-time activist who goes by the email name of AUNTY_NUKE), heading off to Washington, D.C. The night before, she, Mark Mattison, Ilene VanBruggin and I had our pictures taken for a piece to be published in *The Grand Rapids Press*, our local paper. It was a public announcement of sorts, informing the community that the "Grand Rapids Peace Team" was on its way to our nation's capitol to march against war. I appreciated the opportunity to get our message out, but I was also aware that my picture was just as likely to come to the attention of people who knew me and had no idea that I held such radical political convictions. Now the die had been cast, and I was on the verge of being publicly identified as (gasp) a liberal!

No matter, that. I saw the wheels of my destiny turning and was at peace with whatever fallout might ensue from my appearance in the local press. I'd written letters to the editor already, anyway, supporting peace protestors and the progressive cause. This was just another step along the way.

On the way to D.C., we had plenty of time to talk, to get to know each other even better than we had in the time that we'd been meeting as a Peace Team. A lot of the talk was just about stuff going on in our world and concerns that we had as individuals, but we also spent time setting up an agenda for our time in Washington. For Thursday, the main task was getting

Grand Rapids Peace Team, an affiliate of Michigan Peace Team in Lansing, Michigan, is associated with the Institute for Global Education in Grand Rapids, Michigan. Editor: Mark M. Mattison.

to Washington and finding the place we would stay, a homeless shelter called the “Community for Creative Non-Violence.” It was founded some years ago by a famous activist named Mitch Snyder who apparently first conceived of “the homeless” as a constituency meriting political and social attention. Interestingly, the community was housed in a building that was once used as the offices of the Department of Defense!

Friday’s Senatorial Meetings

Friday’s task was to attend meetings with Michigan’s senators, Carl Levin and Debbie Stabenow. We would join others from our state to share our concerns on key issues: with Levin, it was to talk about closing the Western Hemisphere Institute for Security and Cooperation (WHISC) which used to be known as the School of the Americas (SOA). Located at Fort Benning, Georgia, the SOA has been long regarded as a spawning ground for military and paramilitary operations that result in violent human rights abuses in Central American countries. Annual demonstrations have been held for several years to press the U.S. to close this school as part of our desire to reframe our nation’s role in addressing Central and South American issues.

With Senator Stabenow, we took a different approach. Given her legislative history of voting to oppose the SOA, we shifted our efforts to inform her of problems we perceive in our nation’s policies regarding Colombia, particularly our nearly unqualified support for the Pastrana government’s military campaign against the revolutionary FARC movement. We understand that in this on-going civil war, many human rights abuses and atrocities have been committed against peasants and unarmed civilians. But we are concerned that the effort to “wage war” on drugs and terrorism is in many ways a smoke-screen designed to justify support for policies that will oppress indigenous peoples and give increased control over natural resources to multinational corporations.

Saturday’s Rally

I knew that the police and security presence would be significant, and that elements of those gathered may have been intent on provoking a crisis. But despite these mildly ominous portents, I felt confident that we would have a peaceful, successful day, though

I was still very uncertain about just how many people might show up to join the demonstrations.

Our group made its way down Constitution Avenue, to the Sylvan Theater located just to the south of the Washington Monument. Along the way we saw a group of bike-riding police officers, pedaling in formation, directed by a captain barking out commands. It was the first tangible appearance of the men and women in blue, and as it turned out, this was about as imposing a presence as the law would manifest that day. We also saw others who looked to be headed to the same events as us, even a familiar face or two.

When we made it to the grounds, we were privileged to witness a colorful, vibrant gathering of people from all over the country and the world, representing such an array of groups, interests, causes.



Photo by Ed Hedemann, courtesy War Resisters League, New York, NY

Peace activists, environmental groups, alternative political parties. Revolutionaries, punks, hippies. Clergy, gays, propagandists. Street performers, militants, anti-capitalists. People drawn to Washington, because their faith, their principles, their hopes compelled them to speak out. People of all different skin colors, lifestyles and ages. People who traveled in large contingents, and some who came in

small groups, or maybe even alone. So much passion, so much concern, so much anguish over all the violence, suffering and oppression going on in our world, too frequently justified as “necessary, our only practical option.” It was an amazing display.

Among the many people whose garments, banners and signs indicated their message and cause, I felt rather blank as I considered that I really hadn’t done anything to make clear my reason for being there or my stance on any issues. In the back of my mind, I had this idea that I would buy a shirt of some sort in D.C., maybe even something commemorating the day’s events. Once I got there, it dawned on me how silly that was, how in keeping with a consumerist mentality that I could trace back to the days when I went to arena rock concerts and bought a souvenir T-shirt as a memento of a real cool time.

So there I stood in a plain, smoky red shirt, blue shorts, white Nike’s - hardly an imposing figure that would cause the masters of global empire to tremble in their wingtips. What could I do to “declare” myself? I bought a pin for \$1 that said “Peace is Patriotic,” a sufficiently bland and positive statement

that wouldn't stir up too much resentment. It was a start. Then I found a bright red sticker that said "STOP THE WAR! NO POLICE STATE! REFUSE AND RESIST.ORG" and stuck it on my sleeve. Getting better. I needed a message. It came to me, so I found a marker and wrote on my shirt, as I was wearing it, "MIDDLE-CLASS SUBURBAN WHITE GUY FOR PEACE." It's exactly what I wanted to say, because it's what I am.

The shirt earned me a few laughs from my friends, which I always enjoy, but more meaningfully, it produced many smiles, some positive comments, and even some high-fives and handshakes from strangers in the crowd. I recognized then and now that in some ways, it's really important that "my demographic" be involved and represented in the anti-war effort, because for the most part, the politicians think they have guys like me pretty well tied in and linked to the system.

But I want to stop the futile process of justifying our faults and failures, of seeing life as a relentlessly competitive and unforgiving arena, where it's up to each person to grab what he or she can or risk losing everything. I want to stand opposed to the practices of hoarding wealth to such an extent that poverty and suffering are practically guaranteed in so many societies. In short, I want to do what I can to promote peace, justice, freedom, cooperation, respect and understanding among all peoples. I can no longer go along with an ethic or a strategy that says enemies must be killed if they can't be conquered in some other way. And so, I'm a middle-class suburban white guy for peace.

The March

After several hours of hanging out by the Washington Monument, talking with each other and checking out the various representatives of humanity who came out that day, it was finally time to start the walk to the Capitol. We were all pretty eager and happy to be on underway. We set out across the lawn and within several minutes found ourselves merging with the rather vocal and emotional pro-Palestinian groups that had been meeting in the Ellipse in front of the White House.

As the group started moving, it became clear that the Palestinian contingent was going to be the most vociferous of the assembled mass. It made sense,

given that "their issue" was the hottest one at the moment – in the past week, Ariel Sharon had mounted a brutal invasion of the West Bank, and their frustrations had mounted to a fever-pitch. Though I myself see a lot of misguided leadership and failure on both sides of this agonizing conflict, I was ready to voice my support of the Palestinian people. They've been hard pressed for decades and are worthy of our support and respect, as much as I differ with many of the tactics that some of them have used in opposing the Israeli policies regarding settlers and the free movement of their citizens.

It's hard to go into a lot of detail in describing the march. Mostly what I recall are scattered impressions, just taking in all the color, spectacle and sounds of the event. Lots of drumming and chanting, an emotional

exuberance that came from being with so many people who felt empowered to make a statement without the need for apology or reservation. It was idealistic, sure, and probably not all that practical if we were expecting our sentiments to become policy. We know all too well that the people calling the shots in geopolitical matters are pretty focused on their own agenda and won't let a motley

assemblage of radicals and activists sway them from their tasks, but it didn't really matter all that much to me at the time. And I'm prepared to live with the frustration that comes from seeing people who ought to know better make one stupid decision after another. I was happy enough to simply enjoy the fact that a lot of us are willing to withhold our approval and make our opposition clear.

We got to Pennsylvania Avenue and the march continued to unfold itself before the eyes of cops lining the road and bystanders along the sidewalks. A light rain began to fall, but not to such an extent that it became distracting or uncomfortable. Helicopters swooped down above us, going right down the street but in the opposite direction as we were. It seemed for a while that the chopper coverage was designed to be non-stop – as soon as one disappeared from view overhead, another could be seen up in front of us. After a few had made their pass, the crowd began cheering and flashing peace signs with their fingers each time a new one flew over.

Along the way, we saw a large, monumental statue on one of the street corners was occupied by Palestinian children, sitting on the shoulders of a man

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wrestling a horse, joyously waving their red, white, green and black flags. I imagined what such a sight, in downtown Washington D.C., might signify to Palestinians still living back in the occupied territories. I envisioned seeds of hope being nourished by the image of children celebrating their culture and heritage in such troubled times.

Making a Difference

And from there, the march proceeded on its way, down Pennsylvania until we once again crossed back onto Constitution Avenue, past the National Gallery of Art, and wound up on the Mall. A stage had been set up for some speakers, but the sound system wasn't adequate to reach all the people, so it was just a portion, probably less than a third, who heard what was spoken from the platform. Once the march had reached the mall, a lot of folks were content to mill around, lay on the grass, lead their own chants and mini-demonstrations and generally do their own thing.

Perhaps there were some who would have liked to see a tighter focus to the day's conclusion, but it seemed good enough for most of us. The prevailing sentiment was one of peace amid the diversity of causes and groups represented. The lasting impression

made upon me was that the time for clarifying our underlying themes and goals would soon be upon us, but for now, we, the many people who had in our own ways endured a season of silence and isolation, had finally found each other, and now, having made that connection, we didn't want to let it go.

We see that there is much at stake, and that we want to have a role in shaping our response, and charting the course of where we go from here. We are tired of people in positions of privilege using our voices and resources to justify the conduct of war and the further exploitation of our neighbors. We are ready to resist, and put our collective energies into something that better reflects our values and aspirations, and our desire to live at peace in our world and throughout our lives.

Our message is strong, our cause is just and we are ready to take on the responsibilities of leading our violent and greedy society in a better way, a way that makes for a more just and sustainable future. I am just one of a new coalition, one that many may not recognize or take all that seriously. But after this weekend, my purpose and dedication are clear – I am a middle-class suburban white guy for peace, and I plan on making a difference. •

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