

Cultural Daily

Independent Voices, New Perspectives

The Day I (Almost) Stormed the Capitol

Lynda Smith Hoggan · Wednesday, January 27th, 2021

It was April 24, 1971. My roommate and I left our college campus in western Pennsylvania to drive to Washington DC for “Out Now,” the largest-ever anti-Vietnam War protest march.



The first day, Friday just getting there, is a blur now. Us in our long hair, bell-bottoms and repurposed Army jackets. The friend with a car (since we didn't have one). Hours of driving the 300 miles of unfamiliar highway. But I know the mood was one of excitement. We were standing up for something we believed in (“PEACE!”) We also expected to find something else most 20-year-olds long for (“PARTY!”) And cigarettes were only 50 cents in the nation's capital, so we planned to “stock up!” (This meant at most a carton apiece, since our cash flow was hardly flowing.) I'm sure we drove around the city, looking for where to land our vehicle (difficult to do with an influx of half a million people). I don't remember even a single meal, so we probably ate snacks from convenience stores. Most likely we grabbed a few hours' sleep scrunched up in the car.

When the sun came up Saturday morning, though, we were on the move—on foot. It wasn't hard to figure out where to go, considering the salmon-like flow down Pennsylvania Avenue. Black and white, young and old. Some in wheelchairs and others wearing a clerical collar. Parents with children riding on their shoulders. All kinds of people were against what the U.S. was doing in Vietnam.

Our crowd grew ever larger as we moved toward the Capitol. We chanted things like, “Hell no, we won't go!” a reference to the draft, and the more general, “Power to the people! Right on!” Until

finally we were a sea of protesters, shoulder to shoulder, waves churning at the bottom of the hallowed steps. Still shouting our chants, we called for President Nixon to come out and face us. (He didn't.)

Suddenly a few rogue voices began to rise above the noise of the crowd. "Storm the Capitol!" here. "C'mon, let's take it!" there. There was a moment when I felt the crowd begin to surge, the bodies behind me pressing to go forward. That was the fulcrum when the huge but peaceful protest could have tipped and become a mob, and I would have been swept up in it.

It ended as quickly as it started. Not because of a police presence (I don't remember one). It was because the organizers of the event—clearly well trained, very present and LOUD—shut it down. "NO! This is a peaceful protest!" and "STOP RIGHT HERE! We are not going there!" They pushed back firmly until the rogue voices gave up and the crowd stopped surging and returned to a mellow flow. It was impressive. We were there for peace. We didn't want anyone to get hurt (like that little girl hanging around her dad's neck). We didn't want to go to jail (if we could barely afford cigarettes, how could we afford bail?) Our parents didn't even know we were there—did we want them to see us bleeding on the evening news?

Instead, we listened to impassioned speeches from people like John Kerry. A Vietnam vet who returned with a strong conviction against the war, and later entered politics and served as U.S. Secretary of State. The mood was passionate, but also peaceful and positive, until finally we were ushered by the organizers to turn and disperse. And then we did party.

I just wish those organizers had been the ones in charge at the Capitol on January 6, 2021. Not for the Trump mob that invaded our government with the intent to create chaos, do violence, and overturn the U.S. government. But to fill the void left by lack of law enforcement and turn those thugs away.

Maybe it wouldn't have worked. As far as I know, our organizers were committed to non-violence. But would they have responded with force if our crowd had turned into an unlawful mob? And could they have responded with strength to this year's insurgents, hell bent on breaching and bragging afterward, but also carrying zip ties and guns, and because of whom lives were lost?

Some would say that the movement I was a party to was no better—that there were radical factions (there were), violent events (yes), and lives lost (sadly). But I do see one contrast. The majority of that movement was largely people like me who love our country; who were deeply saddened to see the ways in which our government did not live up to our constitutional imperatives of equality and agency; and who wanted our legislators to do better. The domestic terror attack this month was perpetrated by people who love 'our country' only if it follows their white supremacist and/or evangelical agendas and allows their oligarch to rule.

Yeah, big difference indeed.

(Featured image from Wikimedia)

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