

Tens of thousands protest Bush inauguration in Washington

A reporting team
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Tens of thousands of people took to the streets of Washington Thursday to protest the inauguration of George W. Bush for a second term as US president. Many lined the route of the inaugural parade, booing and jeering as Bush's limousine made its way down Pennsylvania Avenue. "Not our president," some chanted.

Others clashed with police during an otherwise peaceful march through the streets of the US capital. Cops used pepper spray and tear gas against some of the demonstrators, and there were a number of arrests.

The mass media gave short shrift to the protests. Instead, they chose to focus on the pomp and circumstance of the inauguration ceremony, which served to mask the criminality of the US administration.

The inauguration took place in a police state atmosphere. A 100-block area surrounding the inaugural parade route was blocked off to normal traffic. Businesses and offices shut down for the day and school was cancelled in the city because of the intense security.

An army of security forces was deployed for the occasion. In addition to the massive police presence that exists within the US capital, some 7,000 troops were mobilized and at least 3,000 cops were brought in from surrounding counties, as well as from cities as far distant as Miami. Police were positioned every several feet on both sides of the parade route, while helicopters flew overhead. Snipers were visible on area rooftops.

Media reports made much of the unprecedented deployment of police power, with some commentators making no bones of the fact that the clampdown was aimed first and foremost against protesters seeking to express their opposition to the Bush administration.

In addition to the police presence, the Bush administration's inaugural committee took extraordinary steps to limit access to the route, not only for protesters, but for the general public as well. Most of Pennsylvania Avenue was occupied by bleachers reserved for Bush campaign donors, whose money bought them a seat. While ostensibly a public event, this year access to the inauguration was determined to an unprecedented degree on the basis of wealth and political connections.

The day of the inauguration, the *Washington Post* reported that it had asked the Secret Service where a member of the general public who did not hold a ticket could stand to watch the parade. "I do not have an answer to that question," a spokesman for the agency said. The *Post* went on to quote an FBI spokesman who said:

"There are no places on the parade route that are not already assigned or ticketed seating."

Nothing could more clearly express the social and political polarization that dominates American society. Bush supporters, sporting cowboy hats and fur coats, strutted through the streets, while residents of the predominantly African-American city fumed over the police restrictions and the enormous burden that the inauguration—the most expensive in the country's history—has placed upon Washington's underfunded municipal government.

In the course of Bush's speech, several demonstrators from the Code Pink group who managed to get near the platform raised a banner reading "Bring the Troops Home" and began to chant. Police rushed in to tear the banner down and drag them away. Members of the predominantly Republican crowd cheered the police action, chanting "USA, USA."

Because of the intense security, thousands of people were forced to stand for hours in the cold before getting anywhere near the inaugural parade route. At the entrances reserved for the general public, half or more of those on line had come to oppose Bush's inauguration. Many carried homemade signs. "US Military Families are Grieving While You Celebrate," said one. Others read: "51 Percent is Not a Mandate," "This Emperor Has No Clothes," "Ohio=Ukraine," and "Second-Rate Citizen."

While waiting outside the metal security fences manned by National Guardsmen in combat fatigues, the crowd broke into chants of "Let us in," "No more years" and "Peace, now."

Among those standing on the long line leading into the security tent on 4th Street was Abdullah, an Egyptian immigrant who works for a company that operates a food concession in one of the office buildings located inside the frozen zone.

"I have been here for an hour waiting for them to let people in," he said. "I'm just trying to go to work, but they make it impossible. I knew there would be problems, but this is ridiculous. If I can get through, then I will work; if not, I'll just go home."

When the crowd was finally allowed to move, people were subjected to frisks and marched through metal detectors just to approach the street where the inaugural parade passed.

Many of those who came to protest were high school and university students. Entire families also came, including some with children serving in Iraq. Several returned soldiers as well as parents of soldiers killed in the Iraq war and occupation joined the demonstrations.

Tara Labar, a high school senior from Nazareth, Pennsylvania,

came to protest the inauguration with a group of students from the Lehigh Performing Arts Charter School. “I hate Bush and I hate the war,” she explained, when asked why she made the trip to Washington. “It is so bad that more than 50 million Americans could vote for him. I think that the country is so split right now.”

Asked what she expected from a second term of the Bush administration, Tara said, “I am terrified and I am worried about my own future. I want to be a teacher, but with ‘No Child Left Behind,’ you don’t know what will be left of public education in four years’ time.”

Doug Spooner, 17, a high school senior from Winchester, Virginia, said, “In Iraq, Afghanistan and in the United States itself, people are dying because of what this administration is doing, and that is not right. Unfortunately, people don’t see that corporate America and big business are running the show.

“I also don’t like how this administration is using fear and a crusade mentality. We have never been a nation that took a position in war based on religious ideology. This is something new and it is not good; we are not a Christian nation. He is promoting an ideology based on hatred and fear of anything that is different.”

Kristin Boczar, 17, also a student from Winchester, said, “I feel strongly about democracy, and this president is affecting us and our future. I am against the war in Iraq. My brother is a soldier and he is against the war. He didn’t want Bush as his boss. He went into the army as a last resort. We are not rich, and could not afford private school.

“When my brother came home from basic training, he told us that they instructed them that if an eight-year-old girl comes running up to their humvee, even if she was just begging for food, that they had to kill her, either shoot her or run her over. We are killing so many civilians over there, and that is not right. Bush says that we are doing good, but we are not.

“There are military recruiters at our school every day. Not just the army, but the marines, air force, national guard, all of them. They set up tables in the cafeteria and try and get kids to sign up. They will promise you anything. They told me, that since I was a girl, I would not be sent to the front lines, but I don’t believe them.

“It is wrong that you can get a free education if you join the military, but not if you just want to go to school. We are fighting a war that is wrong and based on lies.”

Their friend Sarah Anderson, also a high school senior, said, “I don’t support our president. I am upset with the way he is running the government. I feel he shouldn’t have started the war. I think his stand on abortion is wrong. There are no jobs and things are getting worse. He is definitely not for the working class.”

Wes Frierl from New Hampshire came to the inauguration carrying a sign reading “Another Vietnam Veteran for Peace.” He said, “I wanted to show that there is opposition to this administration’s policies, not only internationally, but domestically as well. What they are intending to do spells disaster for people in this country and abroad.

“I am a Vietnam vet. I went to war based upon a lie. The USS Maddox attack was a fabrication. What happened with Iraq is not all that different. It seems that each generation is forced to go through this. Now I have been hearing that they want to attack Iran. They say it would be a bombing campaign, but that doesn’t

make it any more correct.”

Sylvia Kareema Gant came with a group from Chicago. “I came because the war that he started is wrong,” she said. “I would tell my son and my grandson not to go into the service. And I think that I speak for a lot of people who have seen families lose husbands, fathers and children for nothing.

“What they have done with the military has made it into something that it was never supposed to be. It used to be that young people would go into the military to get money for their education and, if it was necessary, they were ready to serve. But this was not necessary. This terrible president has killed our young men for nothing. And they are spending billions of dollars on this war, when they don’t have money for jobs, for education or for social services in this country.

“They want us just to give up and accept it. So they put on all of this unnecessary security to scare us. Then they spend \$40 million on their parties to show how great they are. That money could have been used to help people. They should come to Chicago and see how many families are struggling just to live.”

The overwhelming police presence was in evidence when cops discovered a homeless man with a dog sleeping in a construction site just inside the security zone surrounding the parade route. Secret Service agents, US Marshals, city and federal police all responded. As the man sat curled up in a fetal position, they called in agitated reports to their individual commands about the detection of a “suspicious” individual near the president’s parade route. Multiple police cars and vans responded before the man and his dog were hauled away.

Even among Bush’s Republican supporters, the stringent security arrangements provoked some grumbling. The Republican faithful were given color-coded tickets to the inauguration. Gold tickets—for obvious reasons—were the most prestigious, while green were apparently the most common.

Green ticket holders were massed at an entry point, unable to get through the security checkpoint until well after Bush had been sworn in and had given his speech. Mounted police were called in to control the crowd. Some of the green ticket-holders marched to a separate entrance reserved for those with higher-class tickets and demanded to be let in. When one man loudly insisted on talking with a supervisor, he was met by a police sergeant toting a submachine gun and turned back.



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