

Silent protesters harassed, ejected from US Senate hearings

Barry Grey in Washington DC
13 January 2007

Incidents at two Senate hearings on Bush's Iraq war plan provide a telling commentary on the state of American democracy.

On Thursday, during the Senate Foreign Relations Committee hearing on Bush's plan to escalate the war in Iraq, this reporter was sitting across the aisle from a young man who was determined to register his opposition to the war by silently holding up a small sign bearing an antiwar slogan.

This elementary and non-confrontational expression of political thought prompted repeated warnings from armed police stationed in the conference hall. Two of them surrounded the silent, seated man several times to demand that he put away his sign. Each time he lowered the sign for a time, and then raised it again after a few minutes.

This affront to authority had to be stopped at all costs, and finally the police grabbed the man and dragged him out of the hall. "No more war! No more lies!" he shouted as he was being hustled out of the supposed temple of American democracy.

The incident was mentioned only as a footnote in a few of the voluminous press reports on the hearing that appeared Friday, and misrepresented so as to place the onus on the victim. He was removed, it was said, after he began shouting antiwar slogans.

On Friday, two women from the Code Pink antiwar group were sitting quietly behind me at the Senate Armed Services Committee hearing on the war. They were wearing pink tops bearing antiwar emblems. Suddenly two armed police surrounded one of them and demanded that she hand over her shoulder bag so they could search it.

Neither she nor her companion had said or done anything to provoke such a violation of her privacy rights, a clear breach of the Fourth Amendment ban on

warrantless searches and seizures. Nor was there any chance that she was hiding a weapon or explosive device, since all those who enter federal government buildings in the nation's capital have to put their bags through a screening device and walk through a police-manned metal detector.

Evidently the police were looking for something else of great danger—an antiwar sign. They came up empty-handed and the woman was allowed to remain.



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