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AUGUST 30 [MONDAY]

Still We Rise March

By Benjamin Ryan

8/30, Madison Square Garden, 2:30PM

As the Republican Convention began its first day in Madison Square Garden, there was no end to the list of gripes that tens of thousands of peaceful protesters chanted as they made their way from Union Square to the Garden between approximately noon and 2:30 pm.



An umbrella group calling itself Still We Rise sponsored the march, which they dubbed at the "poor people's march and rally for justice." SWR is a coalition of about 38 organizations that advocate for those in society who are the most in need of social services: AIDS service organizations, homeless groups, minority and immigrant groups, etc.

The march brought out thousands of what could be generally categorized as 21st century hippies: mostly young people, scraggly, multiethnic, often with multiple piercings and/or dreadlocks, the occasional Mohawk, women with no deodorant and unshaved arm pits, sexually ambiguous men, and so on.

"Buck Fush," many t-shirts and buttons proclaimed, carrying on the swelling tradition of making euphemistic plays on the president and vice president's names in order to express contempt toward the Republicans. Not surprisingly, Whoopi Goldberg was nowhere to be found.

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During the march, which traveled west on 15th Street and then up 8th Avenue, the marchers made clear they would like the following things: increased funding for AIDS, domestically and abroad; access to generic AIDS medications in Africa; the release of Mumia; federal funding for needle exchange programs; housing for the homeless; social services for the poor; a higher minimum wage; and an end to the Rockefeller era drug laws.

In other words, these are the guys nobody knows what to do with. The Republicans think they are ultra Leftist whack jobs who want to tax the living daylights out of the rich and give all the money to people who should just go out and get a job. And Democrats fear they'll make a scene and prove to Gary Bauer, et al, that the Left isn't the party for nice, happy families.

Not so! Many of the protesters, who were themselves probably hippies left over from that other generation that dealt with that other ongoing quagmire-ridden war, brought their kids along. Nine year-old John Bingham, who held an inflatable doll of George W. Bush dressed in a military outfit with an extended Pinocchio nose, was happy to brave the sweltering heat of the afternoon, but said his mother hadn't quite informed him about the purpose of today's march.

"We went to the march yesterday, and that was against Bush. But I don't know about today," said Mr. Bingham.

Which is excellent insight, because numerous demonstrators expressed vitriol toward all ends of the political spectrum. Maverick activist Jennifer Flynn, one of the event's organizers and the co-founder of the New York City AIDS Housing Network, said, "We're not complaining specifically about the Bush administration. The top three things that we're complaining about is the record rate of homeless people, the rising rates of HIV, and an incredibly high number of Americans living in poverty. And whoever's in power is ultimately responsible."



But there were still others who had all their eggs in the Kerry basket. Stephanie Selisaar, a 21 year-old rising senior at the University of Michigan, carried a sign stating that "If Bush Wins I'm Moving to Europe." Having spent six months in Florence, Italy, she said the city would make an excellent retreat from the havoc she fears a second Bush term would yield.

"The best way to start a conversation with the Italians, [is] saying something horrible about Bush," she said.

Participants toward the center of the several blocks of people marched to the beat of drums provided by an anarchist group called the Cakalak Heat Drum Core. Most of the group was dressed in pink, though a few just had pink hair. Some of them waved anarchist insignia flags and danced while others drummed away on upside down buckets.

Upon arrival at the rally, which took place at 8th Avenue and 30th Street, the protesters were greeted by a scattering of dancing Hare Krishnas as well as a

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songs they sang to "wage war against injustice."

During the rally, Charles King, president of Housing Works, which advocates on behalf of homeless New Yorkers with AIDS, dedicated the march to his late partner, Keith Cylar, who recently died of AIDS.

"Our leaders offer little more than pictures of compassion," Mr. King said as he lambasted the Bush administration for everything from the war on Iraq to funding for HIV/AIDS.

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