

Washington's Finest

The long weekend isn't over at this writing, but no matter, we have seen enough to be clear in our minds about the performance of the district police force. Top to bottom, it has been, well, "simply fantastic" is the way one qualified authority put it, and he was a leader of the Mobe. We would say simply that Washington's finest has done us all proud, and never mind what may yet happen because it isn't over yet; it is entirely possible that as the soft core of the demonstration dissolves and heads home, enough of the hard shell will remain behind, looking for trouble, trying to provoke the head-knocking confrontation which has so far been denied them by the stoic discipline and wise tactics of Chief Wilson and his men.

That may yet happen, but it won't change the verdict because as early as Saturday morning the police were bone-weary and sorely tried and by the end of yesterday's big march a lot of them had as much or more than a man can be expected to take. Off duty at 3 a.m. and on again at 6 a.m., it was that sort of drill; squad cars on the run, split-second reactions, endless standing on hard pavement in stiff, cold wind or milling around in an atmosphere of edgy tension not knowing just when to stand fast, when to push back, at what precise movement to throw the gas canister that would break up a menacing crowd cluster before it grew too large to deal with except by using night-sticks, hand to hand.

The first test came on Friday night at Dupont

Circle, with the Crazies and the Mad Dogs and the Weatherman, the cutting edge, headed bloodily for the South Vietnamese Embassy, and it was the difference between using clubs, two-handedly, to push or one-handedly to slash, Chicago-style. The contingent at Florida Avenue passed that test, with the sort of toughness that is harder than the other kind because it means holding back and getting pushed around some. It is measured not in the casualties among the kids, but in the casualties among the cops; a dozen policemen were treated for minor injuries and four more were injured seriously.

Still the policy of firm restraint held up, by and large. Careful warnings were given before the gas was thrown; along the parade route, it was "please" and "thank you" as the policemen moved the crowds along. By the end of the day yesterday, the police were beginning to gripe — but about the things that good troops gripe about. Not about the long-haired militant kids, the enemy who called them pigs and fascists, but about the working conditions and about an inadvertent, off-the-cuff comment by Chief Wilson to the effect that maybe some of his men had gone to the use of gas too soon. This is normal, and no knocks against either the police or the chief or the city officials who share the responsibility—as well as the credit—for the carefully thought-out, brilliantly executed policy of firmness and restraint and close cooperation with the Mobe's own unofficial police force. It may not be over, but it is not too early to say Well Done.