



Photos by Frank Johnston—The Washington Post

A banner carried by one of the Vietnam war protesters looms in stark contrast the famed Washington Monument.

Poster

It Was the Best, Biggest and Last

A Commentary

By Nicholas von Hoffman

It was the best, it was the biggest, it was the last of the antiwar demonstrations. If it cannot convince the men who make war and peace they can't safely go on with the conflict, then no amount of marching, praying or singing will change their minds.

The young people will turn to other tactics because they've come in supplication and politeness; they've walked like

pilgrims, holdin gandles in the windy night, and, standing, one by one, in front of the White House, begged for their lives; they've massed and swarmed and listened in army-sized formations to their ministers and their musicians imprecate peace and life.

There is nothing more they can do to win the minds and hearts of the men who run the American government. Either these men understand the shame and reproach of having tens of thousands of people implore them for life and clemency on the streets, or the youth will turn to other ways of stopping the killing.

Woodstock and Chicago

These enormous scenes of communion and contact will continue. Woodstock was as much responsible for this weekend in Washington as Chicago was. They love the coming together, the touching and sharing of food and bodies, they love the improvising of crash pads and meals and transportation; they love getting high on each other and they dig the feeling that they are part of something very large, that they're doing something very important.

They relish these things but if they can't end the war by providing these warm and affecting experiences for themselves and others, they will use other methods and the methods will work, for this past week has shown that they are stronger than the government.

They've demonstrated they have the motive power, enthusiasm and unity the White House has beseeched the country to manifest. On Tuesday the government asked for a great outpouring and it got empty streets. The people couldn't even be bothered to turn on their headlights. Sure, we support the President but would you mind stepping to one side while we make this putt? We will support the President on the golf courses and in front of TV sets, put on the line for him while we drive to work.

Letter to Senators

Imagine it. The government is reduced to having this letter sent out to the members of the United States Senate:

"How about a big cheer for the great U.S.A.?"

"A committee has been formed to salute a week of national unity and I am proud to serve as their national chairman. There are millions of Americans, of all ages, who make up the silent majority and we are urging them to participate in activities from coast to coast to display unity in America.

"I certainly hope you will accept my invitation to serve as a co-chairman. Please wire your confirmation to me at Hollywood, California, so that we may unite in this program together.

"Warmest regards,

"Bob 'FOR A WEEK OF NATIONAL UNITY' Hope."

This demonstration, the one here in Washington, is the outpouring and support that the White House wanted for itself, but the other side got it. They got it because their people believe in peace and almost nobody's left who believe in this war enough to make a sacrifice for it. The antiwar people achieved unity for the same reasons.

Indescribable Diversity

The demonstration included people of indescribable diversity. The Crazies, the Mad Dogs, the Weathermen and the weatherwomen, Unitarian-Universalist reverends, Trotskyites, Krishna Consciousness mantra-chanters, timid, troubled liberals from sincere liberal arts campuses, worried draftables with no discernible politics, rock lovers, fighters and lovers, careerists and drifters, fraternity boys and commune dwellers.

Without Martha Raye or Bob Hope on the Road to Nowhere they made a unity. They swapped and bartered, fought and intrigued with each other until they could unite on a common course of action. They believed in what they were doing while the government must rely on a mindless, patriotic conditioned reflex, but the bell has been rung and the dog's mouth has watered so often that the trick doesn't work any more.

If after today the war doesn't end immediately these same thousands and their even more numerous supporters will commence the campaign to end it. We will see a tapering off of demonstrations designed to convince public officials to change their minds. Instead the movement will shift its vectors toward direct action.

They will go after the military directly, not to confront it,

but to liberate it. The people who marched in Washington don't hate soldiers. But for the grace of a draft board or a student exemption they would be soldiers. Many of them are in ROTC.

Demonstration at Six

The recent demonstration at Ft. Dix, N.J., is a fore-sign of what is to come. Five to seven thousand people marched on the army camp there, not to attack the soldiers but to win them over.

Anyone who's ever talked to a soldier about how he feels when there is a peace demonstration at the gates of his camp dare not discount the possibilities that this new direction will work. The average soldier is a draftee who would never have volunteered. He is the same age as most of the protesters and he comes out of the same youth culture.

What kind of inroads have already been made is impossible to say, but there are signs and underground whisperings that suggest it's more than you might think. The idea sounds impossible but five years ago a peace movement of the present size was unthinkable. The day may come when the privates turn to their commanders and, handing them their rifles, say, "General, if it's so good, you fight it. We'll sit it out."