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Demonstration in Washington

In what must rank as one of the more poignant and eloquent protests against this nation's continued involvement in the war in Indochina, wounded and decorated veterans last week hurled their battle ribbons and medals at symbols of government in Washington representing the authority which sent them into battle. The massive numbers of antiwar demonstrators who gathered both in San Francisco and the nation's capital over the weekend underscored the rising tide of disenchantment that sweeps now coast to coast, across much of American society.

Antiwar sentiment grows in force. In addition to the veterans, those who participated in the recent demonstrations were both the young and the not-so-young, labor, management, middle America. They deserve credit for their visible testimony and for their generally excellent deportment. The cherished right of assembly enshrined in the Constitution is the right of peaceful assembly. It was not seriously abused.

To remove President Nixon from Washington doubtless is the goal of many of those taking their sentiments to the streets. To have succeeded, as they did for the duration of the weekend, may lead some of them to assert a victory of sorts. The President left Washington first for Virginia Beach and then for Camp David. He was physically beyond ear-shot. He could not see the "Out Now" placards.

Very probably, however, this was a Presidential counter-demonstration, a calculated way of his saying to the hundreds of thousands gathering to petition him that he did not care to hear their message. Whether intentionally or not, he was indicating by his absence a certain contempt for the reasonable expression of public opinion, in somewhat the same manner as he did once before by watching a sports contest on television rather than witnessing an antiwar rally just outside his windows and meeting with its leaders.

It is the responsibility of leadership in countries where the people are sovereign to listen to dissident voices. This is an especially grave responsibility when the people are so visibly divided on so great an issue as war and peace.

The success of President Nixon's appeal to the American people to trust him, to believe in his plan for Vietnamization of the conflict and the ultimate withdrawal of American troops, depends at least in part on a reciprocal willingness to listen to the opposition and to respect the sincere and orderly expression of opposition views. Trust is fragile. The President missed an opportunity over the weekend to strengthen it.