

HERB CAEN



The Last Peace March

"WHAT DO we want?" . . . "PEACE!"
 . . . "When?" . . . "NOW!" . . . "What do we
 want?" . . . "P E A C E!" . . . "When?" . . .
 "NOW!" . . .

Over and over, the familiar catechism, ringing out over the shuffle of thousands of marching feet on a clear and beautiful morning in San Francisco. On Saturday, there we all were again, for the third time — or was it the fourth? — demonstrating easily and glibly for the cause, enjoying the thrill of solidarity, feeling even a little silly at joining in the schoolboy chanting of simple words.

By nature, Americans aren't demonstrative; only a war as long and miserable as this one could have drawn so many shy people out of their protective shells — and even then it took years. In 1965, only a few hundred were willing to lay it on the line (to be photographed, filed in a memory bank, sometimes busted). By 1967, there were tens of thousands; in '69, hundreds of thousands, and now maybe half a million, here and in Washington.

Still, in a country of 200 million, only a drop in the bucket. The President gives no signal (was he occupied again by a game on TV?). His Administration ignores it. If you can believe Dr. Gallup and his ten-foot polls, a majority of Americans are now against the war, but it's still a minority that marches.

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ONE MORE time, trying to get the message through, trying to reclaim the American dream here in the loveliest of American cities. But all those red flags flapping in the morning breeze — do they mean the revolution is really here or are they merely young defiance? All those Viet Cong banners. "I don't know why," says a somber young woman who has walked in every march, "but I hate to see those. I know the VC are fighting for their country, but we're fighting to save ours." Her American flag bore the peace symbol instead of stars, but red flags dominated the last peace march.

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THE CADRES formed downtown, gathering momentum and people as they swept into Geary Boulevard, the well-worn route through the heart of the Richmond, past the houses of the silent majority, toward the Russian Orthodox church with its onion domes shining in the sun. Tac Squad-ers in their coveralls, hundreds of photographers, not all of them from Army Intelligence.

At Arguello, a Dixieland band pumping a little life into already sagging arches. At the crest of each rise, marchers pausing to look back at the packed street and ask the question that was to be asked 10,000 times that day: "How many?" Everybody had a guess but there never was an accurate count. Whatever it was, it wasn't enough, for the war goes on.

From upstairs windows, oldsters staring down at the marchers with expressionless eyes. With us or against us? Here and there, bartenders standing on the sidewalk, glowering. No doubt where they stand. But the kids — ah, the kids. Leaning out the windows, peeking furtively from behind curtains, they flashed the peace sign. At 26th Ave., a drunk with a glass in his hand shouted "Commies!" over and over as he staggered, lurched and finally fell.

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HOW MOTLEY this throng. "It's great to see so many of us old-timers out today," beamed an old-timer, but it was still a march for the young, as it should be. The uniform was tattered Levis and Army castoffs. At least one example of Radical Chic: a woman in Gucci shoes, carrying a Gucci shoulder bag, and around her neck a locket containing a baby picture of — Lenin! At 27th Ave., Roger Kent, wearing his Navy blouse with its row of World War II battle ribbons. Poet Allen Ginsberg, who has lost weight and looks fit, tootling away on a plastic horn. Lawrence Ferlinghetti. But mainly kids, kids, kids, some of whom hadn't been born when the Indochina war began and who now wave red flags in front of bulls on the streets of San Francisco . . . A memorable friendly sign outside a little house on 27th Ave.: "Please Use Our Bathroom."

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THE THOUSANDS filed into Golden Gate Park, past a row of legless and one-legged Vietnam veterans watching impassively from wheelchairs. On the grass of the polo field, the great crowd settled down for a huge picnic. Out came the salami, the cheese, the jugs of wine. "What are all these **PEASANTS** doing on my **POLO** field?" lisped a young man with hand on hip, camping it up. A skinny short-haired guy walked through the mob, carrying a sign reading "Tell It To Hanoi!" Everybody admired his guts. In marched the Gay Liberation Front, to smiles and laughter. Their big Viet Cong banner was colored a delicious delirious lavender.

The speeches began, the well-meaning cliches distorted and lost in the brisk Pacific wind. One sensed the absence of a villain like Lyndon Baines Johnson. Nixon is merely an object of derision; it was "Hey, hey, LBJ!" that used to fire up the crowd. At the edge of the Park, the militant Chicanos, in their brown berets and battle jackets, were forming up to disrupt the speeches for keeps. A raggle-taggle army. "They oughta get drafted," scoffed a Vietnam vet, "so's they'd learn how to march at least."

The last peace march, ending in frustration and bitterness. If there is a next one, it will surely be violent. That was the message of last Saturday and it had better be heeded.