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No Heroism in Miami Protests ~~SEP 1~~ 1972

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Cowardly Demonstrators

By Bob Greene

MIAMI BEACH — (CST)— First, they were cowards, which is a characteristic that you will find in the majority of punks and bullies.

Second, they were not anti-war demonstrators, as they were commonly called by the media.

They knew nothing of the war beyond the dumbest cliches, and they demonstrated their moral superiority in such ways as surrounding the auto of a 60-year-old woman, letting the air out of her tires, jumping on the car hood until the woman was in tears, and then pushing her around when she tried to get away.

They are gone now, the brave young protesters, but anyone who was in the streets of Miami Beach that last night of the Republican convention will not forget it.

Early in the evening things looked quiet around the Convention Hall, and it looked as if the night could be okay. I went to a place called Tony's Italian restaurant with Joe McGinniss, who wrote "The Selling of the President, 1968." We had a pizza and drank some beer, and agreed that maybe, just maybe, the night would be calm.

We walked out of the restaurant, and we saw it begin. At Collins Avenue and 22nd Street, a Miami Route D bus slowed down. It was not a delegate charter; just a scheduled bus taking local people home from work. There were a few delegates aboard, but most of the riders were Miamians.

The street gangs, or "non-delegates" as they have been called in the papers, saw the bus and went after it. They ripped at the gas tank, and Collins Avenue became wet with gasoline. They tried to set the bus afire. They blocked the doors so no one could get off. They tried to rock the bus so it, and the local peo-

ple inside, would topple on its side. They lay in the streets because they knew that the bus driver would not risk driving on and injuring any of them.

Inside the bus, some of the riders, mostly the elderly ones, were beginning to panic. They saw the gas pouring out of the tank, saw the crowd closing in, saw the kid starting to set a rag on fire, saw the doors to the bus being blocked. Some of them were screaming, their hands held to their faces.

"You kill people!" the street gangs shouted at the bus full of locals. "You kill Vietnamese people!"

The police had not yet arrived. They had been staying their distance in accordance with Chief Rocky Pomerence's "keep it cool" policy. It was a horrifying sight. Even the kids who saw what was taking place had no power to make their companions stop it.

"This is crazy," McGinniss said. "Nixon couldn't have hired people to make him look any better."

By the time it was happening all over, at every corner on the way to the

Convention Hall. We roamed the streets, seeing any dignity the anti-war movement ever had dying right before our eyes.

Abbie Hoffman had left town in the morning; he should have stayed, for this was his children's graduation day, and he should have been with us to watch.

Mrs. Joseph Male, the wife of a Miami Beach lawyer, was driving home to be with her young son when the street gangs got to her.

"Cars don't bleed," they screamed as they threw rocks at Mrs. Malek, and flattened her car's tires, and rocked her auto. Again, no police, at least not yet.

When the police did come, the young martyrs ran like hell. It was like that all evening. They would pick on the women and the oldest of the men, and then when their bullying was about to be stopped by the cops they would run away.

Say what you want about the Chicago Democratic Convention in 1968, but at least then it was kids against cops. In 1968, at least the kids believed in something, and you never saw anything that you could

call cowardice.

Maybe it's finally time to realize that long hair and jeans and easy anti-war slogans do not necessarily make a person in the right; or a hero.

The cops were the heroes in Miami Beach; they were patient beyond belief.

When the gas and the mace came, as they inevitably had to, the street gangs acted as if they had been betrayed in some way. McGinniss came coughing up to me by a fence outside the hall. "It's getting more and more unbelievable," he said. "When the gas started, I heard a kid tell his friend, 'It's OK, you should have seen the last scene in 'The Strawberry Statement.'"

So the conventions are done now, and the kids are gone. At least one man, a worker at the Convention Hall, is in a Miami hospital because he suffered a heart attack after the gangs surrounded him on the street and would not let him loose.

It is hard to know whose side they were really on; they made Richard Nixon and the Republicans look like America's supreme moralists, and they brought added hate to the McGovern campaign, at a time when George McGovern does not need any more enemies.

But maybe the gangs in the streets weren't on anyone's side.

Cowards and punks never were much on ideology.