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Militants & Moderates

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Two images from the Washington, D.C. counter-inauguration protests capture, for me, the promise of this moment in time.

The first is the TV footage of George W. Bush's motorcade accelerating, with Secret Service agents jogging to keep up, as it approached the largest concentration of protesters along Pennsylvania Avenue. No matter how much the corporate media underestimated our numbers or marginalized our message, the inaugural demonstrations achieved a major goal: They marred Bush's coronation and unnerved those who made it happen. The commander-in-thief sped past the angry crowd at Freedom Plaza out of fear, no small thing for a protest to accomplish.

The second image was nowhere to be found on television or in corporate news accounts; you had to be there or read about it on Indymedia. Right about the time when Bush was taking the oath of office, the police had boxed in hundreds of protesters on 14th Street between K and L Streets – most, though not all, members of the anarchist Black Bloc. Some people managed to push their way out, but mass arrests were looking likely.

Then, as if in a dream, thousands of demonstrators from the reform-oriented Voter March and the National Organization for Women came down 14th Street, smack into the police line.

Initially, the police surrounded some of them as well, but they were angrier and feistier than the cops anticipated. Ultimately the police bowed to the force of numbers and backed off, letting the trapped protesters go free. There's a street-action technique used by some radicals called "unarrest," where folks acting in concert literally snatch their comrades from the arms of the police. In this powerful and unlikely inauguration drama, the most moderate participants in the day's demonstrations ended up mass-unarresting the most militant.

These incidents point to larger truths about the historic upsurge of pro-democracy and anti-capitalist protest taking place in the United States and around the globe. Those in power are truly alarmed by these movements' rising strength – but the key challenge now is for radicals and reformers to find ways to work together.

What better sign of the jittery state of the global ruling class than the recent decision to hold this year's World Trade Organization meeting in the Persian Gulf emirate of Qatar, an absolute monarchy where protests are illegal? (Even the U.S. State Department notes, with bland understatement, that "restrictions on the freedoms of speech, press, assembly, association, [and] religion" are "problems.") No other country was willing to host the WTO, because protesters have successfully made it a global pariah: The security risks for the sponsoring nation are too great, the publicity too bad, the expense too high.

Time and again over the fourteen months since the WTO was shut down in Seattle, the authorities have taken extreme measures to prevent or limit protest, only to see demonstrators prevail through a mix of stubbornness, fearlessness, and anger.

It happened in Prague last September, during the meetings of the International Monetary Fund and World Bank. There, despite heavy fortifications, demonstrators not only besieged the conference center but actually managed to break into it, leading officials to suspend the talks a day early.

This went on for a while, through chants of "USA!" and that "Hey hey, goodbye" song. But SUDS must have spoiled the conservatives' fun, because before long, they slunk away.

Throughout inauguration day, there were many occasions like this, where demonstrators outnumbered Republicans and made them noticeably uncomfortable. It was all quite satisfying, until you remembered that, while we made Bush & Co. nervous, they got state power. It's going to be a long and difficult four years.

It happened this past weekend at the World Economic Forum in Davos, Switzerland, where demonstrators defied a total ban on protests and faced off against police armed with tear gas, rubber bullets, and water cannons.

And it happened at the Bush inauguration, where – in another almost totally unreported episode – the Black Bloc, using a cart pilfered from a construction site, flattened one of the government's vaunted security checkpoints, allowing hundreds of protesters to breeze through. Meanwhile, a few blocks away in Freedom Plaza, other demonstrators matter-of-factly took over bleachers that had been reserved for GOP-friendly ticket holders.

The angriest people at the inauguration protests, though, were the moderates, not the militants. The experience of seeing the Bush family and its cronies disenfranchise black voters and steal the presidency most infuriated people who have some degree of faith in electoral politics, not the jaded cynics who are quick to say that "voting doesn't change anything," or, more anarchistically, "no matter who you vote for, government wins."

A substantial number of these Democrats and independents were demonstrating for the first time – but odds are quite good it won't be their last. The checkpoint system and aggressive policing opened many eyes and clearly radicalized some participants. One woman from the Voter March posted a powerful account of coming up against the police line at 14th and L and briefly being trapped inside.

"I was so scared I didn't know what to do. I was looking at the various police, trying to find a face that might be approachable – there were none!" she wrote. But then a man next to her convinced a cop to let a few people out, and she quickly slipped through the hole in the line. "This has shaken me like nothing else," she explained.

"I'm a middle class, getting to be middle-aged female American – first time ever demonstrating – there to participate with

my legal, constitutionally guaranteed right to free speech (so I thought until that day). In the face of a threat to this right, what did I do – I walked away. I'm so sorry and so ashamed. I'll NEVER walk away again."

There is extraordinary political promise in the broad-based outrage at the theft of this election, anger that is not going away despite the corporate media's rush to make nicey-nice and treat the Bush regime as a legitimate presidency. The utter spinelessness of the Democratic Party – from its decision not to mobilize large-scale protests in Florida to demand a full vote count to its acquiescence in Bush's far-right cabinet choices – further ensures that at least some of this anger will fuel sweeping critiques of the sorry state of American democracy.

The great irony of the 14th Street showdown is that just the night before, some members of the Black Bloc had been dismissing as wimpy reformists the very folks who ended up saving them from mass arrest on J20. In a dark basement well away from other activist gathering spots, about a hundred anarchists held a surreptitious meeting to coordinate their inaugural activities. The discussion turned to a common critique of previous blocs, the sense that the fuck-shit-up crowd tends to use other protesters for cover, including protesters that passionately disagree with their tactics – meaning, for example, that folks committed to nonviolent action get exposed to greater police violence as a result of Black Bloc opportunism. Some folks agreed that was a mistake and a problem; others brushed off the criticism, saying it was perfectly legitimate to "hide among a bunch of reformists."

When the Black Bloc got surrounded on 14th Street, probably the last place they thought they'd get help from was such a bunch. (Exclaimed one Bloc'er, "I never thought I'd be happy to see people with Gore-Lieberman signs!") It would be going too far to say the Black Bloc was humbled by the experience, but in the wake of J20, you could clearly discern a new respect for these unexpected allies.

"This is a big thank you to whoever came to support the Revolutionary Anti-Authoritarian Bloc," wrote one anarchist on Indymedia. "After being trapped at one point by cops and having to push our way out, only to have people trapped again, I'm glad there was some soli-fucking-darity. That's what it's all about. We will stand by you when you need us, and I'm glad to see it's vice versa."

Some folks from Reclaim the Streets in New York came to the inaugural protests dressed in tinpot-military-regime attire. Sporting gold epaulettes and mirrored aviator glasses, they dubbed themselves Students for an Undemocratic Society.

"We are the children of the political, military, and business elites of America," read their manifesto. "We have worked for years to undermine democracy worldwide, and seek to celebrate the fact that – with the installation of Cheney and Bush – even the pretense of American democracy has at last been cast aside. We march in support of the property-owning, white heterosexual male who rules by violence."

SUDS started the day early at the U.S. Supreme Court, where GOP boosters had been promising to stage a fierce "Patriots' March." Only about fifty patriots bothered to show up, however. SUDS, wearing their silly costumes and carrying signs that said "OBEY," outnumbered them by a factor of two-to-one.

The right-wingers launched into a chant: "Get a job! Get a job!"

SUDS joined in: "Get a job! Get a job!"

The right-wingers tried something new: "Welcome President Bush! Welcome President Bush!"

SUDS echoed them: "Welcome President Bush! Welcome President Bush!"

The patriots tried again, this time with a mouthful of a chant: "Meanspirited, condescending, arrogant liberals!"

SUDS, of course, was quick to mimic.