

The Brawl in St. Paul

A Breakdown of the 2008 RNC

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When asking the question of whether [party ___] was successful in the 2008 RNC protests, it's worth noting that protests are not outright confrontations and cannot be judged by the same standards. Because protesters, no matter how militant, are still on some level inherently self-restrained. The cops fire concussion grenades; we spray silly string. Thus in a conventional sense, protests are always, inevitably, lost battles. What makes protests _useful to protesters are the strategic changes they can effect in the process of losing.

Most people forget but Seattle was actually a failure. We got extremely lucky and succeeded somewhat in one tactical goal (impeding delegates), but made no ground whatsoever in the larger struggle. Despite the hiccup, the machinations of the WTO continued exactly as before. While the narrative of N30 inspiring global resistance to the WTO (culminating in its modern irrelevancy) is an oft repeated tale, the reality is that our colorful protests made not a drop of difference. It was the Bush Administration that gutted the WTO; consciously shifting the focus of power from Global Capital to Empire. From hegemonic corporatism to westphalian realism. And it was a Brazilian Neoliberal named Lula whose national self-interest exploited the situation to stall the Doha rounds.

Driving away from Seattle this was quite apparent. For all of our spectacle, we hadn't actually gotten anywhere. But as the weeks passed a curious thing happened: we began to commemorate our stand. We began to feel nostalgic for the sense of confrontation. We made a stand and lost, but in the sheer act of making a stand we discovered a useful offset. It invigorated us and built our numbers.

For a variety of reasons the 2008 RNC was an explicit attempt to recreate the highs of Seattle, and for better or worse it's partly through this lens that most actors and observers will try to measure it. Unlike Seattle, however, the formal goal of impeding delegates was always tacked on just for show. As many people said during the lead-up, while it would be nice to see the cameras pan an empty stadium on the 6 o' clock news, it was also seriously unlikely. If the Republican National Convention itself was nothing more than a media spectacle, the RNC Mobilization was a many-times compounded spectacle, often of self-manipulation. Thus, even more so than Seattle, there's no easy metric by which to analyze St. Paul.

Players and Goals

There were many forces active on the streets of St. Paul, each with very different goals. Before analyzing how they played out, it's worth examining their motivation and intent.

Local City Administration: The municipal authorities wanted money, investment and prestige from the Republicans. But without the government losing legitimacy with the resident liberal population. Since incumbent politicians would suffer mightily from such fallout, they pushed hard to avoid outrages like protest pens.

Local Police: While local law enforcement also saw the benefit of appearing open and permissive of free speech, more than anything else they were concerned with even the slightest impression of "losing control." Crime prevention was entirely secondary to maintaining the state's image of absolute authority throughout the convention. Thus significant resources in Major Crimes were redirected from mafia and gang concerns to befriending hippies, while, for example, during the convention Sex Crimes alone was cut to just one person and not allowed to file any reports over 24 hours old.

Feds: While Federal participation was extensive — from the usual Joint Terrorism Task Force stuff to extensive loans and oversight — their specific intent is harder to ascertain. Obviously, like all the other statist parties, Homeland Security ultimately wanted to protect state power. And we can only presume that their strategy was more informed and nuanced than either local administration or law enforcement. But all that says very little to how this repression fit specifically into their longer campaign against the Anarchist movement.

Maoists: Having spent decades systematically infiltrating the alternative infrastructure and liberal activist projects of the twin cities, the local Maoist cadres saw the RNC as an unparalleled opportunity to further consolidate their control of the liberal activist spectrum in high-profile positions. While always clandestinely hostile to anarchist organizing attempts, they saw far more value in solidifying positions of power among the liberals than in undermining the anarchists who were doing all the heavy lifting organizational work for them.

(A) Home-Team: When the 2008 RNC host town was announced chance had already coalesced in St. Paul what many observers in the Anarchist milieu have since termed an “activist dream team.” Folks with a ton of experience and drive — but relatively little baggage. Notably however, few of these individuals were particularly sympathetic to the summit hopping and mass mobilizations of yesteryear. But, since a mega-protest spectacle seemed inevitably thrust upon them, they decided to chin up and make it the best possible. This Home-Team was particularly concerned with righting the mistakes of Miami ('03) where activists failed to have either substantive local logistical support or a strong framework to plug into and New York ('04) where anarchist organizing efforts were appropriated and eclipsed by liberals, contributing to a total lack of militancy on the ground. And, of course, they were concerned with both the energy that such mobilizations sucked from local and/or long-term projects and the devastation it left on the host community.

While the Home-Team was skeptical of many aspects of Seattle, and in no way saw it as a sustainable long-term model, they still turned explicitly to its successes. Which, in their minds, the slumping Anarchist milieu desperately needed. Collectively they shared three broad goals:

1. *Raise Anarchism's profile and spread the word.* Seattle was a watershed moment because it inspired thousands of protesters to pick up a book on Anarchism. Not so much the ALF-CIO folks in the stadium, to whom we were hooligans, but rather the students doing lock downs in the streets. Those people, through DAN and face-to-face contact, found personal incentive to investigate anarchism on their own and became a wave of popular reference for Anarchism within activist circles. It was hoped that by taking a leading role in the RNC preparations anarchists would similarly inspire the various liberals and generic “movement” leftists in — or coming to — St. Paul.

2. *Shake the milieu's malaise and regain self-confidence.* Nothing rattles the bones and builds electric buzz like facing off with the cops. The sense of urgency, high-stakes, solidarity and collective strength that mass confrontations bring has a charged effect — no matter how profoundly brutal the police repression is — that percolates outward from those who experienced it back to their communities. Nothing gets our priorities in line like a face full of pepper spray from faceless fratboy riot cops and a stranger with a Crass patch pouring malox in your eyes, telling you it'll be alright and helping you to your feet. Miami was a disaster because we fell apart in the face of police repression and in New York we compounded the problem by not doing anything. They pushed us and we lost our nerve — which, whether or not you think mass mobilizations are

sustainable, was a bad thing. It was the hope of many that an organized successful confrontation in St. Paul would help us regrow it.

3. *Build capacity.* However useless our effort in Seattle might have been on the global stage, in the lead up, planning and execution we built vast networks of friendships and refined skills both tactical (building lockboxes), infrastructural (indymedia was formed), and organizational (learning how to lead folks and come to decisions collectively). Looking at our efforts in Katrina and looking as well to the Jena 7 mobilization, it seemed to many that retaining the capacity to respond nationally to local events was an important if not critical strength. Given the exponential growth (and, alas, relatively constant burnout) of the regional Anarchist activist scene, by 2008 those who still retained the full experiences and skills of the DAN mobilizations were in a distinct minority. To counteract this slide St. Paul offered a useful, but strategically non-critical, training run. (Plus, for those *deeds-over-words* type activists not drawn by geeky bookfairs and conferences, there'd been few enough excuses for family reunions.)

All these were, on the whole, central issues to the Home-Team and were mirrored by many other Anarchists around the country. But they were not the only force within the Anarchist mobilization around the RNC.

(A) Visitors: To many focused on organizational projects, St. Paul was a no-risk opportunity to prop their flags on the barricades and suck up greater momentum and legitimacy through osmosis (SDS wanted cameras, A3 wanted intra-movement respect, IWW wanted relevance with the younger crowd... etc). But it was also an opportunity, for those radicalized since the end of summit-hopping, to claim for themselves the experiences so romanticized by CrimethInc and co. Balanced in the middle of these tendencies was Unconventional Action, a slapdash facade of the RNC's mandatory national level action network that for a long time was really just two groups in New York and North Carolina. It's no insult, just a fact, that UA was no DAN and much of its base was young and largely inexperienced with this scale of undertaking. This tendency's goal was largely just to be enlivened by the protests. As one fresh-faced out of town organizer said, "to finally get a piece of the Seattle pie."

So here's what happened. Nobody showed. Not the cops, not the liberals, not the anarchists. Everyone's numbers were way, way lower than they wanted and expected. This was painful for them, but critical for us.

Small town police departments didn't want to be tied up in lawsuits over police brutality. Law enforcement only managed to scrape together a threadbare 3,500 officers by going out of state.

Gustav and local chilling effects from the police raids kept the Liberals at home, but the biggest effects came from Obama and the Maoists. On the eve of presumed electoral victory liberals felt little compulsion to protest the assumed losers. Similarly, because unlike ANSWER or World Can't Wait the Coalition had a limited shelf life, there was little incentive for the local Maoists to invest serious time or energy into making the protests a national-level success. Thus the liberals ended up floating naught but an embarrassing 10,000 out of the 70,000 everyone expected.

While Law Enforcement's low numbers might have otherwise made some level of tactical victory possible, without liberal jelly to fill out the downtown the blockades were doomed from the start.

The Saint Paul Ballot Box

Home team was always in a sticky spot. Having been dealt a project they otherwise would not think of getting involved in, they were faced with the challenge of rallying support from their likewise skeptical peers. Without a good number of experienced, committed blockaders on the ground even a brief tactical victory would be impossible.

Make no mistake, the resources clearly existed within the Anarchist milieu. Traveling the country and interacting with veteran activists it was quite apparent that, had we wanted to, we could have easily shut down 10 St. Pauls.

It's just, as it turned out, we didn't want to.

Anarchist presence at the RNC was maybe 800 people, tops. And while that could have been enough to shut down the main on-ramps and impede delegate buses for up to an hour had those 800 been ultra-skilled blockaders, they weren't. To give some measure of the inexperience on the ground: *not a single fucking tripod went up.*

Let's take a moment and dwell on that.

Setting aside Sector 5 (Home-Team's native sector, which was systematically dismantled by an informant), there were next to no hard blockades attempted. People parked a van and chained themselves to it. Others used lockboxes across a road in the middle of nowhere, without locking the ends to anything. Most of the "hard blockades" were overturned plastic newspaper boxes. A couple overturned garbage bins. Folks skirmished with the police in a high-risk attempt to place caution tape across an intersection (one officer ripped it down in a single stroke). That's not to undercut or malign the spirit of those involved in these actions; supplementing more intense efforts, these might even have been useful distractions. But there were no chain drops, no bike walls, no drum wall, no serious physical barricades whatsoever. Not a even a single tripod went up.

The fact is plain: the anarchist milieu largely decided to sit this one out.

This should have been obvious in the lead up, but wasn't. Home Team was hardly alone in their initial distaste for Mass Mobilizations. Support for the RNC effort was widespread, but paper thin. Although voiced from time to time, personal distaste and disinterest in resurrecting the Summit Hopping formula was largely cloaked behind generic support for a diversity of tactics and an abstract interest in seeing the community boost its morale. Aside from a few usual suspects, open conflict and debate on tactics was seen as a impediment to be avoided. Thus those who disagreed with the effectiveness of mass protest (compared to more sustainable local projects and ever-popular basic needs organizing) largely kept their mouths shut out of respect for those organizing... and consequently doomed the entire tactical operation.

Right or wrong, the only way to gauge the movement's priorities was in action.

St. Paul saw a lot of of younger bodies hit the street. Enthusiastic at the idea of plugging into a major demo, they largely had no idea that they *were* the full extent of the demo until about noon on Monday. And then they were crushed.

Rabid Dogs

Before addressing the role Law Enforcement played it's worth first appreciating just how committed the Feds were in concealing their hand. As early as a year before the RNC, FBI agents

initiated a quiet campaign of stings and corruption investigations against local police. The inevitable results of these operations gave the Feds substantial leverage over the Ramsey County Sheriff's Department. With local Law Enforcement ready to take the fall, they could instigate pretty much any level of harassment against the Anarchists without fear of substantive public backlash.

But there were trade offs. While the Sheriff made an attractive attack dog, he was not exactly nuanced. In their eagerness to beat hippie ass, Local Law Enforcement adopted a degree of autonomy in their efforts that, on a strategic level, they were simply unqualified for. And once started there was little the Feds could do to reign them in without revealing their hand. While a few of the raids were overseen by inconspicuous FBI and ATF agents, others quickly stemmed from the malformed initiative of local police who thought they were helping out. Thus as early as Saturday we had seen attacks on honey pot targets like uninvolved spaces and anarchist journalists, and by Thursday there were reporters shot in the face, lawyers brutalized and camera-friendly kids tortured in the Ramsey County Jail.

At core, local law enforcement wanted to maintain the impression of unchallenged authority at all costs. While they were always sensitive to the longer game – working hard in the lead-up to try and win over the liberals – the Feds stirred up feelings and gave them pretense to turn it into 'all out war.'

Police forces, as a whole, are blunt armies, slow to raise and harder still to control with any degree of nuance. In provoking the rank-and-file with tales of "barbarians at the gates" the Feds gambled on a stronger, more militant and more skilled anarchist presence. One whose impressiveness would steal the public narrative and take pressure off the cops. Like Home-Team, they had no way of predicting the milieu's decision to stay at home. And Local Law Enforcement—being barely sentient thugs—were simply incapable of re-evaluating the strategic context for themselves. Since the Feds had no way to quickly convey this change, the cops went ahead and more or less followed their initial marching orders to a T, beating hapless kids to a pulp in front of horrified onlookers and generally revealing themselves to be the fratboy fascists they are. This was easily our biggest victory.

Tactically we arrived on the streets with next to no strength whatsoever. Had it not been for the extremity of the police reaction, St. Paul might well have been a complete wash for the Anarchists.

Where any other police force might have wiped our feeble barricades off the streets without much fanfare, local Law Enforcement had been worked into such a lather that every interaction between protesters and police was a propaganda coup for us. Shocked and outraged liberals will be shouting *They Arrested Amy Goodman!!!* for years to come. By upping the ante beyond the conventionally established boundaries of protest, police repression managed to blunt the strategic damage of an inevitable tactical failure.

Cloaking Effects

While Hurricane Gustav stacked more chips against us on a tactical level—reducing the number of delegates required on the first day—its primary effect was in the national media. In conjunction with the nomination of Sarah Palin, Gustav helped keep the RNC protests almost entirely out of the national news.

For organizations like SDS looking to build a public presence this was unfortunate. But for the movement as a whole, the cloaking effect was arguably quite a boon.

Mass Mobilizations work to our advantage when it comes to outreach on a personal level, but media misrepresentation has always been an impossible hurdle for Anarchists. We're quite literally the most misrepresented and systematically slandered group in history. (Stop. Try and think of anyone else so thoroughly and consistently maligned. Seriously. Must be doing something right.) Otherwise intelligent, cogent, respectable journalists turn into deliberately lying hacks the moment anarchism comes up. This is always quite shocking to fresh-faced anarchists who just presumed that our ridiculous public image could be fixed by simply correcting the lies. *'All anarchism needs is a good media effort!'* What they fail to take into account was just who exactly invented and spread those lies. Journalists may be committed to the truth in usual circumstances, but then politicians tuck their children in at night too. For such statist, the fleeting decency of their everyday lives is entirely built on a premise so brutal and monstrous it would tear their minds asunder were they ever to look at it directly. Is it any wonder that even the smartest of journalists will consistently revert to sensationalism and blind apologism for tyranny when confronted by the spectre of anarchism? It was *journalists*, not politicians, who popularized the vulgar and deliberate mis-perception of "anarchy" as equivalent to violent chaos.

On those rare instances when we engage in street battles with the cops it's like dangling dripping bacon in front of a dog. No matter how much integrity they have you can't very well expect them to portray us as anything more than sub-human criminals. While "throwing urine and feces" was a deliciously audacious debasement, the fact that the media lapped up the lies of the cops (even adding their own in a few circumstances) was not particularly surprising. No matter how cautious or adroit our efforts with the media at these sorts of mass mobilizations, good coverage is an outright impossibility.

That leaves *no* coverage.

Which, magically, we got.

Beyond the blessings of a crowded news day, and aside from a few mandatory *"police beat me senseless and shot my camera, but it was clearly justified because some bad, chimpanzee-esque protesters upset the poor things"*, every time the media started to turn their attention to the streets of St. Paul, they were quickly vanquished:

"Are those extremist democrats—like the self-proclaimed "anarchists" of the RNC Welcoming Committee—planning to protest the RNC despite Hurricane Gustav deliberately contributing to the partisan divide?"...

... "Just as anarchist medics and volunteers were the first to provide aid to survivors of Hurricane Katrina, so too are anarchist organizations like FNB and Common Grounds digging in as we speak to help those in the Gulf abandoned by both parties of our tyrannical, profiteering government. While the state's thugs may have kidnapped those showing us some Minnesota hospitality, we remain undaunted in our solidarity with those survivors of Katrina who were attacked by riot cops last night."

"Why did some bad protesters—so evil they called themselves "anarchists"—choose to murder several innocent windows along a cheerful Macy's storefront?"

... “I was beaten and tortured, that’s right, outright fucking tortured, in the Ramsey County Jail. She was raped. Fuck you.”

Eventually deprived of everything nasty they could think to say, the media by and large opted to say nothing at all.

Respecting a Diversity of Kick-Yo-Ass

All the strategic gains mentioned so far have been at best small variations in degree compared to previous summits and mass mobilizations. But the sharpest accomplishment we had was largely a tactical one, albeit not as sexy or immediate as physical blockades. What marked St. Paul as truly unique and worthy of historical note was the level of explicit coalition building between anarchists and liberals.

While Home Team comprised many different individuals, factions and groups, a significant percentage of its organizing effort was spent preempting the usual Liberal backstabbing. Individuals spent long hours negotiating demands, looking past hierarchical procedures and sitting through endless meetings. At the same time Home Team built up a solid organizing presence early on and thus approached the Liberals from a position of unassailable strength and independence. For a good many months the Anarchists were the only game in town.

Local Law Enforcement, in turn, worked tirelessly, in conjunction with Local City Administration, to win over the Liberals and force a standard good-protester / bad protester narrative. They failed utterly.

Home Team countered by humanizing themselves and anarchism on a personal level and then educating their liberal friends on the historic role of police. Left-liberal organizations built around class and race struggles helped validate these concerns. And the anarchists, in turn, were unafraid to play off Liberal qualms: *‘Treating the police as allies is a big fuck you to poor people of color.’* *‘Allowing the police to sow division over mere tactical differences helps silence all of our voices.’* The process was long and slow, and aggravating, but before the end NPR-listening grannies had become fierce, articulate proponents of a Diversity of Tactics.

Of course some of this success was due to the fact that the local Maoist puppetmasters, being evil commies, were not exactly zealots of nonviolence. But the Maoists didn’t control every Liberal organization. Indeed our greatest and most heartfelt support came from organizations they didn’t even have a presence in.

After the Saturday Raids, few among Home Team had the opportunity to fully impress the importance of the St. Paul Principles upon their own ranks. Thus the situation on the streets was more complex. Many black-blockers laid their bodies on the line, famously defending children and disabled folks attacked by the cops, while on the other hand a few fled into one of the liberal marches after militantly confronting the cops—a clear violation of the St. Paul Principles. (The Liberal rank-n-file were not exactly perfect either.)

Nevertheless the coalition held together perfectly. Not only did the cops fail to split ranks, the Liberals went out of their way again and again to stand by us before the media—much to the shock and chagrin of Law Enforcement.

The media ran with the story anyway—even reporting ahead of time on conflicts between “good” and “bad” protesters that hadn’t happened, they simply presumed *would* happen. This

much was inevitable. But without the standard nonviolent “good protester” spokesperson angrily denouncing the violent “bad protesters,” their stories have been noticeably weakened.

Tactical Summary

Like all protests, on a tactical level we lost. The actual conflict itself was by nature momentary, fleeting, and largely irrelevant outside its strategic effects. Nevertheless, an overview is easy:

- They used superior numbers and infiltration to systematically break and dismantle our street presence.
- We managed our coalitions and friendships incredibly well, holding protester ranks together better than ever before.

Strategic Summary

Exactly what the lasting effects of St. Paul will be is hard to measure. Victory and defeat, on a strategic level, is always muddled. But we can at least consider a partial checklist of gains and losses:

- They further dehumanized us before rabid fratboy statist around the world.
- They built experience and know-how infiltrating our ranks.
- They made us appear weak.
- We got a couple thousand folks (on the ground and at home) a lot friendlier towards anarchism and more likely to investigate our thoughts on their own.
- We returned marginal attention in the broader public to the growing intensity of state power — rather than, say, hope-a-rific promises of public health care.
- We got a ton of face-time between folks within our own ranks who would otherwise never interact, further developing our internal conversations on tactics and theory.
- We built sympathy and solidarity with anti-authoritarians outside America and helped re-enthuse them.

The real contest, however, was always over our self-perception. We got our asses kicked. They abducted us in unmarked vans, invaded our homes, stole our stuff, tortured us in jail, and, of course, pepper-sprayed, tear-gased, maced, bear-sprayed, tasered, billy-clubbed, trampled, rubber-bulleted, flash-banged, and concussion-grenaded the crap out of us on the streets.

They did all this, despite the costs incurred, just to break our nerve.

They might succeed.

A Moment of Clarity

It doesn't matter that we were never going to win on the streets. And it doesn't matter that we made particularly tasty lemonade from the lemons dealt us.

Most of those who participated left St. Paul with the immediate pain of a battle lost. We've returned home to half-heartedly raise bail and promote stories on Digg about how batshit insane the cops were. That's not winning, that's whining. And people can tell. We can tell. The *go-team!* mantra of "*Spectacle Crashed!*" that survivors were repeating on Tuesday and Wednesday was never going to last. Because it's false. It's hollow. It's a patronizing self-deception and, sure as rain, it will eventually give way to malaise.

Protests are inherently artificial situations. Spectacles of negotiation and appeals to power. No matter how harsh the repression, no matter how feisty the riot, on both sides they're ultimately confrontations for the sake of appearance.

For all the outreach and capacity building we accomplished in this mobilization we ended up looking weak at a moment when we desperately wanted to look strong.

That we kept up "a good nine hours" of street-level confrontations on the first is meaningless. The gut-wrenching horror and exhilaration of street-fighting may have given some newcomers a visceral impression of the magnitude of our struggle. But it's a false sense of scale. Make no mistake, this war that we live is so much larger than pepper spray and black bandannas. Despite the repression we faced the gloves never truly came off.

What we should take away from St. Paul is not a blind mythology, but a fuller appreciation of our strengths.

On the streets and in the lead up, all our successes stemmed from our agility and adaptability. In every contest of outright momentum we lost. Against the State, we simply can't win such. We don't have the strength and, even if we did, it's not our way. We are not a cohesive, undifferentiated mob and there was never going to come a day in which we simply poured over their barricades and on to victory.

Thankfully, many among us appear to be awakening to this.

Attack Attack Attack

While St. Paul resoundingly demonstrated the movement's growing disinterest in mass mobilizations and conventional protest, the alternative is not retreat.

It's not enough to build, to just go home and work on our own communities. Despite the appeal, we cannot afford to simply take shelter behind the feel good, generic movement-ism of projects like free schools, free software and neighborhood gardens.

That's not to say that such things aren't incredibly important. But more important is that we don't lose our nerve.

Because regardless of whether or not they're doing so, *anyone* can work to build a new world, to help folks secure basic needs for themselves. We represent an ethical realization that power is an absolutely destructive and alienating psychosis. Without that assertion made explicit, those gardens are doomed. Because 1. ultimately The State will never let us get away with such things—even now it is working to devalue and undercut them, and 2. without a clear clarion call to hold

ourselves accountable we'll slide back into the same half-measures and compromises that have destroyed every movement in history.

To prevent that we have to keep flying the black flag high.

We cannot afford to lick our wounds. Timidity will not save our tradition. There is no teeter-totter of history. Fascism today will not inevitably give way to permissive liberalism tomorrow. If we've been lucky in the past it was sheer doggedness that pulled us through.

They attacked us, brazenly, openly, arrogantly. They made it clear that they know where their priorities lie. If we had somehow "won" on the streets and, say, turned St. Paul into a giant free state, they would have nuked it.

The only response is to go on the offensive. The only surefire way to retain our nerve is to strike back. Not to negotiate, wheedle or throw ourselves another get-well riot. But to focus on efficiency on an individual level, and to hell with appearances. To hell with the spectacle of our collective momentum. To hit them back again and again with everything we each have. They break our bones? We need to shove the splinters in their fucking eyesockets.

We need to get serious.

"[A]bove all, summits constitute a form of experimentation to see what level of oppression people are willing to put up with."

–Notes on Summits & Counter Summits

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