

No More Presidents

A Narrative from the 2005 Inauguration

CrimethInc.

January 17, 2017

An earlier version of this narrative appeared in the first issue of *Rolling Thunder: An Anarchist Journal of Dangerous Living*. It has become more poignant with the passing of time: what if anarchists and others had somehow succeeded in making the invasion and occupation of Iraq impossible? Perhaps the Islamic State would not have come to power, and the Syrian uprising could have turned out differently. What if anarchists had been more successful in opposing Obama, so Trump could not have presented himself as the only alternative? What horrors loom ahead in this next administration—and what would it take to forestall them?

January 20, 2005, Washington, DC. The second inauguration of George W. Bush.

The riot police were already pouring out of their vehicles and suiting up when we arrived at the reconvergence point. Our first march had hit a wall of armored police before we could reach the checkpoints surrounding the inaugural parade route, and we'd spent the following hour lost in the multitudes outside those checkpoints, trying to figure out where our friends were and how to attain critical mass again. We passed the riot police and crossed the street into the throng assembling at the point we had agreed the previous night.

Many people were gathering here, but there was no clear indication as to what to do next. As far as any of us knew, now that the initial march was over, no one had a backup plan. At a discussion the night before, when I'd broached the question of what we would do if the march failed to break through the checkpoint, one maniac had coldly responded, "What's with all this talk about backup plans and exit strategies? People are fucking dying in Iraq."

"So what are you saying, that we should just go until we all get arrested?"

"Well, yeah."

Things hadn't played out that way in the streets: we hadn't gotten through, and we hadn't been arrested. Now we needed to come up with a new strategy—and quick, before the motorcade passed.

The prospects of this weren't looking good. People were milling around indecisively, conferring in small groups; there was a feeling of dejection in the air. To one side, some activists were bickering about the decisions made during the earlier march. Others—from the looks of it, not

the most experienced protesters present—had actually sat down in a circle to hold a formal collective discussion, which didn't seem to be turning up any answers either. This, while riot police were massing across the street! Perhaps they wouldn't arrest us all right here, but the longer we dallied, the more difficult it would be to get past them.

I went from one cluster of friends to the next—in each one, ideas were being tossed around, but none seemed to be sticking. In my pessimistic frame of mind, it struck me as a microcosm of protest politics in general: every clique has a pet plan they'd like to see put into action, but none is willing to do more than talk about how great their plan is.

There was no sense in joining the marketplace of ideas. I returned to the friend I trusted most, the one with whom I'd shared so many experiences at other demonstrations. "Listen, nothing's going to happen unless somebody decides something and goes for it. I trust you to make the call for both of us. Just pick a plan, and count me in."

One of his friends had an idea—apparently, she'd seen a flatbed truck parked near the checkpoints loaded with wooden pallets we might be able to seize, with which to try to break through the police lines. This seemed hard to believe, but stranger things have happened.

So we had an idea. But how were we going to set it in motion? My friends went around to a few other knots of people, making the proposal. Everything just seemed to turn to mush: "Yeah, we could do that... or maybe we could..."

Regrouping quickly, we decided—insanely, impetuously—that we would just go, the ten of us, and try it, since we had to do something. Ten was a quixotic number with which to storm flatbed trucks and charge police checkpoints, but at this point it seemed like a quixotic attempt could only be an improvement on what would happen otherwise.

We stepped out onto the street opposite the now thoroughly prepared riot police and set off in the direction of the trucks. To our surprise, a dozen more people trailed after us—curious what was happening, perhaps, or just responding instinctively to movement.

Another of my friends seized the chance. "Come on! This way! Join us!" he shouted, waving his arms. I put my riot whistle between my teeth and blew a series of blasts in a marching rhythm.

In a matter of seconds, the whole crowd poured off the corner and into the street behind us.

Now something was happening, and the initiative was ours. Behind, the riot police reoriented themselves, as if submerged in molasses, and prepared to follow. We were already well down the street, moving swiftly, once again appreciative of each other's presence and sure of our collective strength.

It struck me that there was a lesson of sorts in what had just transpired, but before I could explore this thought further, we were swarming over the trucks, unloading the pallets.

Could we really do this? In the full light of day, here we were, commandeering a full truckload of defensive materials in the most occupied zone of the capital city of the most powerful nation on earth. Why hadn't we done this during the larger march earlier in the day? If we had been equipped then, we certainly could have gotten to the checkpoints, and history might have played out differently. We had passed construction sites, garbage heaps, and plenty of other opportunities to gather what we needed. Did we really want a revolution, or just a protest march?

It remained to be seen if we would be able to get to a checkpoint this time, either. There were police behind us, presumably on the streets to either side of us, and in much greater numbers ahead. I kept close to my companions. We were moving swiftly, almost running.

No squad cars or baton-wielding officers blocked our path. Perhaps as we had reentered the area they had not at first identified us as the anarchist menace against which they had mobilized

police from all around the eastern half of the country. We arrived at the street running parallel to the parade route, a scant block from the checkpoints. We could see one of the checkpoints ahead of us, a fence of towering black metal grate with lines of hulking armored police behind it.

Now the police behind us were catching up, and we sighted a larger force in armored vehicles approaching up the street on our left. If we went straight for the checkpoint ahead, we would be surrounded. Instinctively, the crowd veered to the right, increasing speed; some threw down their pallets in the intersection as a makeshift barricade to slow our enemies' pursuit.

A couple blocks more and we arrived at another checkpoint, having somehow eluded our escort. Here, before the fence, we suddenly paused as the gravity of what we were doing hit us. A thick cordon of police waited ahead for us, behind the metal fortifications. There were only a few dozen of us, really, and we were scarcely equipped with hooded sweatshirts and bandannas, let alone the tools it would take to get this fence down while protecting ourselves from the troops behind it. We were a shoddy bunch in a time that called for far fiercer forces.

At this moment, when, in our hesitation, it seemed like we all might go no further, I heard a familiar voice behind me:

"Ten! Nine! Eight!"

It was the maniac from the meeting the night before. He was wearing a motorcycle helmet, shouting at the top of his lungs with a cool certainty. Until now, his impetuosity had been a liability—but here, he was the only one with enough morale to imagine we would actually follow through with what we had come to do.

"Seven! Six!"

This was obviously insane behavior. A few unarmed, skinny lunatics could no more break through this fortification than a bundle of flowers could flip a tank.

"Five!"

Our arms were linked tightly, binding us into lines. My friends and I were in the third line of perhaps seven. Over the heads of the taller people in front of me, I could just make out the front line of police, readying industrial pepper spray dispensers.

"Four!"

There was nothing else for it. If we didn't do something now, it would just be embarrassing. By the final numbers, we were all screaming:

"Three! Two! *One!*"

I exchanged a glance with my bosom companion, at my side to the right. In an instant, it conveyed, "This is absurd. But fuck it, here we go."

"Yes. Here we go," his eyes responded.

An instant later, we were surging towards the checkpoint—and then, before those of us behind the front line could see the object of our charge, everything went black and our lungs seized up. The crowd heaved forward and broke against the line of police officers showering us with pepper spray, then fell back choking in disarray. The fence shook, rattled, and was still.

I staggered back about fifty yards with the friends on either side of me, all of us blind and unable to breathe. There we paused and helped each other to regain use of our eyes and throats. A cynical television cameraman hurried up to capture this poignant moment; I chased him off. We cleared out of the area before the police could secure it. Maybe they were under orders not to arrest us en masse unless we did something really dangerous.

I later heard that after our charge, they shut down all the checkpoints around the parade route. I'm not sure whether to believe it was because of our meager effort. I also heard that the truck

we unloaded was stocked with grappling hooks, too, with which we could more easily have assaulted the fence had we taken them along with the palettes. *Grappling hooks?* What were *grappling hooks* doing there?

But again, stranger things have happened.

Why didn't we arrive prepared for the work we came to do that day? We could have given our opponents a run for their proverbial money, had we been ready—we simply would have needed protective gear and the conviction that we were really going to go for it. It came out in conversation afterwards that a couple of the friends who had been at my side when we charged the checkpoint—some of the most courageous and capable among them, in fact—actually had goggles and vinegar-soaked rags in their backpacks. Somehow they had forgotten to put these on when it came time to charge the fence.

Why do we sabotage ourselves like this? By and large, our own hesitations seem to pose a much greater threat to our efforts than the assembled might of the police state. It's as if, even when we are staking our lives and freedom, we find it hard to believe it is really happening. We know well enough in our heads that if we are going to do anything to interrupt all the injustices in progress, we must do so here and now—but it's another thing entirely to behave with our bodies as if this is the case. When we don our masks and raise our black flags, we seem to enter a tentative, imaginary world in which we don't take responsibility for believing the things we're doing are actually possible.

Clearly, as my story shows, it is possible for a few maniacs to seize defensive materials, charge police lines, and change the course of history a little bit—all this, without even getting arrested. It only remains for us to do these things with the sense that the stakes of the struggle are our lives, that we can actually win—to take the goggles out of our bags and put them on before the pepper spray comes out, literally and figuratively. People have done this before—in Quebec City, in Genoa, even in Washington, DC. It's not too much to ask of ourselves.

Next time, we'll show up with both backup plans *and* motorcycle helmets, ready to leave the world we're familiar with behind once and for all. We won't hesitate or falter. We'll know just how lucky we are to get a chance to live and act outside the cages prepared for us, and we won't count on getting another one.

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