

Republican National Convention Notes
September 2008

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2010 Elections Update

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The St. Paul mayor and police chief, and Ramsey County sheriff describe a street war between police and violent outsiders during the week of the Republican National Convention. I have no doubt that they believe this to be true, but just like with weapons of mass destruction, the beliefs and repeated statements by government leaders do not make it so.

As a National Lawyers Guild legal observer and photographer, working long shifts on Monday and Thursday, and attending two raids over the prior weekend, I saw a completely different scene. I observed thousands of peaceful protesters and a few acts of peaceful civil disobedience. I saw no violence on the part of protesters, and saw evidence of just a handful of acts of property destruction.

On the other hand, I witnessed countless acts of police violence against peaceful protesters, and arrests of bystanders, observers and reporters. I carried no weapons and no signs, did not engage in any protests, and followed all police orders. All I had was a camera and bag with lens. Still, I was threatened with arrest several times.

Monday

September 1, 2008

It is too bad that news coverage of the peaceful march on Monday is being obscured by coverage of violent acts by a small number of people not connected with the march. While I was disappointed in the violence, I am even more disappointed in the law enforcement response.

I saw the police, looking like Star Wars Imperial Storm Troupers, perhaps 100 strong, with automatic weapons, tear gas and pepper spray, move in on around 30 young men and women who were marching on Kellogg without a permit. While patience might have allowed the group to do its thing and move on, the response was to gas, spray and arrest. I was unscathed, other than some spray and gas blown around by the wind, and some glass scratches from lying down to take some pics.

I saw a young thin man who peacefully stood in the way of the police, pinned to the ground by several larger officers for at least 10 minutes, even though he showed no signs of resisting, and

when they picked him up, he was scratched and bruised, drooling, and incoherent. He waited 20 minutes for a medical team.

The Prior Weekend

Even worse, I observed two raids over the weekend that were complete overkill. While police may have had some grounds for some of its actions over the weekend, these two did not. One was on Iglehart on Saturday, where the handcuff detention of search of a house full of independent journalists led to no criminal activity.

Then early Monday morning, my neighbors called at 2:00 am to say police were outside their house, where they were hosting some young marchers from Iowa. The family and their guests are pacifists. The guests arrived that evening, and other neighbors called the police when they saw someone under the car with a package. The family and guests were in the house at the time, so it was not one of them. The person ran away when the neighbors came out of their house.

The police came out and saw a gas mask in the back seat, as the Iowa guests had heard that the police would have tear gas and pepper spray at the marches. The police called in the bomb squad, leading them to block off the street and briefly evacuate some houses. After searching the car and breaking the window and finding no criminal evidence, the police impounded the man's grandfather's car because of the broken window. The person under the car and the package were not found. The parents, who are not conspiracy theorists, wonder if the person was with the police, perhaps trying to attach the global positioning satellite device to the car.

Thursday
September 4, 2008

I volunteered again in the afternoon, first interviewing people released from jail on their treatment. One man was the first to be arrested on Monday, John Doe #1. Part of his incarceration was in solitary, but he was in good spirits. Another man showed me taser marks on his abdomen from his arrest on Tuesday. He still was disoriented, so his girl friend helped with the interview.

I then was called to accompany 10 people going to a meeting with the mayor's staff over concerns about police actions during the week and the march permit for the evening. They all went through mental detectors, and had no weapons. While there, about 20 riot sheriffs came and waited in the hallway.

At 5:00, the police blocked the previously permitted march route down Cedar Avenue with riot police and dump trucks, and ordered spectators and photographers like myself off of the bridge or face arrest. I have heard conflicting accounts on whether the permit expired at 5:00, or whether it was revoked.

I then learned that the marchers would try John Ireland Blvd, so I went there to find that route blocked by the police (meaning mixture of police, sheriffs, state Bureau of Criminal

Apprehension, national guard, and feds) as well. I took some nice pics of the police blockade of the marchers with the capital building in the background. Fitting.

I left the standoff to pick up my daughter Rosie from the Jewish Community Center (JCC) after school teen center, and dropped her with my neighbors, whose guest's car was impounded over the weekend. I know, I should not leave Rosie with such enemies of the state.

I returned to the standoff, which went on for sometime. I took some pics of the Ramsey County sheriff joking with his friends. Then the march moved to the nearby Sears parking lot, with the police in chase by foot, car, bike, and horse. The police began shooting compression bombs and gas, which broke up most of the crowd. The police selected some marchers to chase down and arrest, one of which I photographed when he was pinned to the ground. They then cornered remaining marchers on the Marian Street bridge, and brought in busses to take them to jail.

Several times police would tell us bystanders and photographers to move from one vantage point to another, and threaten arrest if we did not move fast enough. It often was hard to tell where to go to avoid arrest. I did not get arrested, and the gas fumes did not reach me this time, but there were several close calls. There were hundreds of officers involved, and the whole confrontation went on for 6 hours.

Thoughts.

This was quite a week. I think the city and police could have avoided most of the confrontations by being more liberal in granting march permits, and picking battles over control more rationally. Downtown St. Paul streets are quiet in the evenings on normal days, and also during the RNC because many of the locals were avoiding the area because of how the convention divided the downtown. Allowing more marches to go through would not have obstructed anything.

The overwhelming majority of marchers stayed completely within the law. A smaller number of marchers did not, but still engaged in nothing more than peaceful civil disobedience by not following all of the rules set by the city and directives of the police. They had much in common with the lunch counter sit-ins and civil rights marchers in the 1960s segregated South.

City and police officials have stood behind police actions as a response to outside violent agitators, unfortunately reminiscent of the claims of Bull Connor and the white Southern power structure in the 60s. Just as back then, the tiny violent minority was a justification for violent police actions against the peaceful majority. All of the detentions and arrests I witnessed were peaceful marchers, bystanders, legal observers, medics, and the press.

Not all of the police acted without restraint. While several of the riot police threatened me with arrest if I did not follow their directions fast enough, some of the regular police officers respected our rights. When the riot police ordered marchers to disperse and some did not leave fast enough, I observed bicycle police chasing a marcher who was trying to leave the area. I gave chase to photograph the arrest and came across a police officer and asked if I could follow, and he said yes.

While those who committed crimes of violence should expect arrest and prosecution, those who did not should not. I have been in Downtown St. Paul on St. Patrick's Day, and I have witnessed more illegal activity than I witnessed during the RNC marches. Regretfully, the police viewed almost everyone as a suspect. They saw shadows everywhere, and connected dots which had nothing to do with each other.

I have heard officials say that detaining and arresting bystanders, observers and reporters was justified because it was hard to tell who were the "trouble makers" and who were not. It is sad to think that in the country which tells the world that freedom and freedom to assemble and speak are some of the most important rights, people have to prove their innocence to avoid arrest when exercising these rights.

There is a good chance that police or sheriffs from around Minnesota and other states were part of this, as well as state and federal officers. I am sure that any comments to relevant government officials about conduct of law enforcement would be useful.

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651-793-7000
<http://www.bca.state.mn.us/bca.asp>

For those of you in cities and counties outside of St. Paul and Minneapolis, go to
<http://www.state.mn.us/cgi-bin/portal/mn/jsp/content.do?subchannel=-536879913&id=-8494&agency=NorthStar>

For those in St. Paul, you can contact:

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Police Complaints

Police-Civilian Internal Affairs

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Sheriff Bob Fletcher

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Hennepin County Board of Commissioners
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