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Apathy dies in the wake of Sept. 11

100,000-plus take ideologies to nation's capital

by Brian Klocke

WASHINGTON, D.C.-It was the first major demonstration in America since the Sept. 11 attacks, and it proved one point beyond doubt: Apathy is dead, and Americans are taking their causes to the street.



More than 100,000 demonstrators in Washington, D.C., and more than 38,000 in cities across the United States marched on April 20 to spread a cornucopia of interconnected messages of peace and global justice. A wide variety of civic-minded groups and individuals called for an end to war and terror and for support of health care, education and other basic needs of citizens at home.

Representatives of Boulder's grassroots peace, media, and political organizations-the Rocky Mountain Peace and Justice Center, Free Speech TV, Activist Media Project, and the Green Party, to name a few-were in attendance, as well as students and staff of the University of Colorado. The large number of protesters is significant in that it occurs during a time when most politicians and media commentators seem afraid to criticize U.S. policies for fear of being labeled anti-American or unpatriotic in what President Bush calls the "freest society in the world."

Many protesters demanded the closing of what has been described as "a terrorist training camp" in Fort Benning, Ga., the Western Hemisphere Institute for Security Cooperation, formerly known as School of the Americas. Others were focused on the negative impact of the structural adjustment policies of the International Monetary Fund (IMF) and the projects of the World Bank, both of which were holding their joint annual spring meetings. One of the biggest contingents, in what turned out to be the largest U.S. demonstration of the past several years, called for peace in the Middle East.

In one show of support for peace, Hasidic Jews joined Palestinians and

marched hand in hand.

"It actually brought tears to my eye when I saw them," said Diana Stough, a school teacher in the Boulder Valley School District. "They got right into the march with the Palestinians and held hands. That's what needs to happen. We need to cross racial, religious, economic boundaries, that's what we have to do. That's what I am hearing from people that are enlightened on the whole issue. What I am impressed with is that people are saying they don't hate Jews-they don't like Sharon too much-but they don't blame the Jewish people."

As Jews and Palestinian Muslims marched together, the crowd chanted "Jewish people yes, Zionism no," and, "Free, free Palestine."

"What the Hasidic marchers told me is that the Messiah can't come as long as Israel is acting this way," said Doc Rosen, a street medic from Denver who volunteers his services at demonstrations. "They said settlements have to be taken apart, the Palestinian state has to be established, and Jerusalem must be shared, and all people must have a home there. They're approaching this from a purely religious point of view."

Several Israeli peace groups in the march voiced support for the Palestinian cause. But some American Jews who were attending a separate event had a different perspective.

"I believe they are doing a terrible injustice-You shouldn't align yourself with the enemy that is killing your brothers," said Mark Aguilar, an Arvada resident who participated in the American Israeli Political Action Committee policy conference, also held this weekend in Washington.

Stough found hope in what she witnessed through the rallies and marches, teach-ins and workshops struggling to build a just peace.

"Once people get educated on one issue, they see the connections to all the other issues," Stough said. "First of all we need to educate. We need to be out in the streets. We need to sacrifice our comfort zone, because we live in a pretty comfortable place, so we have to be willing to sacrifice, and it's going to be hard work, and we're not going to get immediate results and speak to each other from heart to heart."

A peace message from the heart of Boulder-area activists-displayed on a 40-foot by 70-foot banner that once hung from a crane in Denver-re-appeared in Washington.

"Right next to the Washington Monument, is a sign that has come from Denver, Colo., that says 'Wage Peace Now!'" said Amy Goodman, master of ceremonies of the anti-war United We March rally and host of radio show "Democracy Now!" "It is a banner that was unfurled as one of the first protest actions as the U.S. dropped the

bombs on Afghanistan."

Other signs at the rally included "Not in my name," and "Peace is Patriotic." Several American flags also were flown.

Not all activists in Washington this weekend oppose the War on Terrorism nor believe that peace activists are patriots. A higher proportion of flags were found at the 50-person United We Stand rally sponsored by Free Republic. Their rally was located in the opposite corner of the Washington Monument from the anti-war United We March rally. Stand Waite, security coordinator for the conservative patriotic rally, explained the message:

"We are supporting our troops, and we're anti this bunch of nuts who are anti-American," Waite said.

While Free Republic got in a scuffle with peace marchers in Washington on Sept. 29, 2001, there seemed to be little conflict this weekend. D.C. Metropolitan Police Chief Charles Ramsey proclaimed the April 20 peace marches to be "one of the best-run, best-organized protests I've seen. We haven't had any problems."

The Free Republic rally loudspeakers broadcasted songs such as "God Bless America," "America the Beautiful" and Lee Greenwood's famous lyrics: "The flag still stands for freedom, and they can't take that away. I'm proud to be an American where at least I know I'm free."

Rally signs, with arrows pointing toward the Act Now to Stop War and End Racism (ANSWER) rally, read, "Traitors and Cowards Rally." Bright blue portable restrooms were adorned with signs that said "Patriots." One of the speakers expressed his view that, "America is divided into patriots and parasites."

"The people across the street are losers that don't have jobs and love Cuba so much that they should live there," he said.

The same man heard criticism of President Bush coming from the rally across the street. In response, he said: "I have nothing wrong with the President telling us what to think. Just tell me what the facts are so I know what's appropriate to think."

"Flag-waving doesn't cut it," says Steve Shafarman, founder of the Citizen Policies Institute. "It's very easy to post a flag on your SUV and go about your everyday life and drive to the mall to consume." Shafarman authored *We the People: Healing our Democracy and Saving Our World*, and dedicated the book to "all genuine patriots—those with the courage to question, commit, serve and sometimes sacrifice."

Andy, a Rhode Island demonstrator outside the IMF, emphasized that what is needed is not only protesting problems but good thinking and

grassroots action that creates positive solutions.

"Protest is one way of engaging the problems that are here but it doesn't create a solution," Andy said. "We have to work with the people here and the non-government organizations (NGOs). Everybody has to come together and find a better solution to what's going on."

Many former Boulder residents have left the comfort of Boulder to do just that. Kavitha Thakkar moved to Chicago and works for Peace Action, the largest activist peace network in the country. Peace Action works for policy changes in Congress, state capitals, city halls and the United Nations.

Mara Vanderslice moved to Washington, D.C., and is the Outreach Coordinator for Jubilee USA Network, part of an international movement that has worked successfully for debt relief for developing nations overburdened by enormous loan rescheduling and restructuring fees imposed by the IMF and World Bank. Uganda doubled its elementary school employment (40 percent to 90 percent) when it received the debt relief, and Tanzania got rid of educational user fees with the debt relief, resulting in 1.5 million students back in school in three months. Vanderslice says that debt relief for developing nations is "about freeing up resources for basic needs and returning sovereignty and self-determination in order to make decisions that impact the public health and safety of their own country."

Jim Starry, a former employee at the National Center for Atmospheric Research who runs his own environmental design firm in Arizona, traveled to Washington to promote public health and safety in the U.S. by giving a presentation inside the IMF/World Bank meetings on his ecologically friendly airport design, the Starport. The Starport has been written about in Time and Newsweek and several environmental magazines. Starry claims that "Denver International Airport doubled the air pollution, doubled the respiratory diseases in children under 3, and was four times over budget." In response to a recent report about improvement in air quality in Denver, Starry adds: "Anybody who thinks I am stupid enough that they can fly three times as many planes in the same manner in a different location and not triple the air pollution, while adding 36 million miles of driving to get to that location, are liars and lying about being liars."

George Ripley has chosen to start at the grassroots level. The former Boulder resident has moved to Washington in order to dedicated himself to re-envisioning the meaning of our flag, our country and of the ideals of citizenship.

"People I know, like me, are idealistically concerned about fairness and virtue and have voiced concern about liberals letting go of symbols like the flag and the bible. When we come to despise the symbol that is so widely perceived as the symbol of America, the flag,

it is time to make it something that we like rather than forsake it. If we are ashamed of the flag, then we should be doing something about it to be proud of it because it is our flag." Ripley has redesigned the U.S. flag by replacing the gold border with grassroots fringe and the cannonball and imperial eagle of the flagpole with a globe and a sheath of wheat, to symbolize the organic organizing principle of the grassroots of social justice. He will embark upon a 15,000-mile, 15-month bicycle trek around the perimeter of the United States, promoting his grassroots flag design and talking to average citizens about grassroots politics.

Ripley, like current Boulder resident Evan Ravitz, is also promoting a solution for direct democracy, known as the National Initiative for Democracy. If successful, this initiative, says Ripley, "will codify into constitutional law that the ultimate power is vested in the hands of the people and that the initiative process is guaranteed at local, state and national levels in every state." Currently, only 24 states in the Republic of the United States allow an initiative process. Initiatives, unlike political referenda, are placed on the ballot by the people, and not by the state.

"Respecting the values of America has to do with people having a voice, having a say over their existence-life, liberty and the pursuit of happiness," says Mary Gilbert, a Jewish Quaker, who recently spent three weeks at the United Nations with an accredited non-governmental organization.

Though the protests in D.C. were so diverse as to disperse focus, collectively they made one point loud and clear: Grassroots citizen action, the lifeblood of democracies, is pulsing through the heartland of America like never before.

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