

Letter on the Washington Peace March

Eric Feaver graduated with honors from OU in June. He is presently attending the Johns Hopkins University's School for Advanced International Studies in Washington, D.C. working on a doctorate and specializing in Latin American studies. On Oct. 22 he and his wife participated in the massive demonstration in the national capital against the war in Vietnam, a weekend of protest that received wide and often conflicting coverage by the press. Feaver has written the following letter about his impressions of that weekend in October.

I have been thinking of writing about the "march" ever since that fateful day, but constant subjection to the crass, efficient, and deceitful Washington press has more or less numbed my spirit, and I was on the verge of thinking "what the hell." But since a resume of the situation has been requested, and having been somewhat stimulated by the type of half-true journalism which so characterizes the press in Oklahoma and in Washington, I now feel compelled to say something—even if it is entirely misconceived and downright falacious. Because, the truth is, I do not know what the "march" means nor why there were so many marchers and non-marchers participating in this futile, absurd expression of American decay. Suffice it to say that I saw the march from beginning to end; I saw the Pentagon mobbed; I saw soldiers show restraint; I saw the hippies exorcise the evil demons (the Rusk demon, the MacNamara demon, etc.) out of the Pentagon; I walked past a love-in (the first of its kind in the north Pentagon parking lot); I saw flower girls "attack" armed soldiers; I saw myself in the midst of an unreal esoteric debate between the SDS and the Radical New Left over the merits and non-merits of storming the inner complex of the Pentagon while the soldiers looked on in utter dismay, thankful that U.S. marshals and MPs were around to do the fighting.

Someone will undoubtedly write a book about the march, but even that would not be enough to tell all that went on, for in truth, there is a different story for every person who participated. But in this brief epistle, I shall start by referring to numbers. One newspaper said 15,000; another said 55,000; another said 250,000; and the official Pentagon count is somewhere between 30,000 and 35,000. There you have the varied accounts of how many people gathered together and marched. All are absurd in the sense that the account accepted is in direct relation to one's political and social view of the march. Drawing on my experience with football and fair crowds in Oklahoma and Dallas I am able to suggest two figures, both of which are probably wrong but far closer to the truth than the Pentagon version, which is an out and out lie. I maintain that 150,000 gathered around the reflecting pool between the Lincoln and Washington Monuments, and I maintain that 100,000 of those people and/or people who were not able to gather there (due to enforced bus delays, late shoppers in outlying regions, such as New York City) marched on the Pentagon.

I go on to maintain that only about 1,000 cared to venture onto the sacred Pentagon steps and sit and dare MPs to club them off those stairs. My wife and I were on those stairs before, during, and after the soldiers sealed them off and I am able to report that most of this "violent, unruly, crude, unpatriotic" mass were scared half to hell, had no bottles to throw, were inwardly most concerned with not getting clubbed by the opposition and were

earnestly engaged in a debate over what should be done next. My wife and I got off the Pentagon steps after the soldiers decided that sealing off the stairs was keeping more people on them than off them; therefore, they retreated and so did my scared little wife and my apprehensive self. The rest of the 99,000 milled around the Pentagon, the fence (constructed in one night), and the soldiers, wondering what in the world this was all about. Most of the 99,000 left at dark when the cold set in, having peacefully assembled and demonstrated.

Yes, there were hippies there, maybe thousands. How many I do not know, but according to the papers there were more flower people than anything else. Unfortunately the reporters failed to differentiate between hippies and the present "mod" fashions of the eastern college students. In truth the hippies were in a decided minority, and to accuse them of leading the rabble is too idiotic for words. The hippie slogan is "be your own man" or "drop out and leave society to its sick, stagnant self." Instead of leading the pack they were aimlessly wandering around it, tinkling little bells and whirling Halloween noise-makers and crying, "Out demons out, out demons out, in the name of all the gods that were, are, and shall be, out demons out." They were not violent. They stood out in the crowd as do red shirts in Owen Stadium.

The march had an aura of a Sunday picnic at the beginning; people were, on the whole, happy, smiling, talking loudly, running, and hastening to get in line. This has been interpreted in two ways: (1) the crowd was a bunch of teeny-boppers out for a good time with no real comprehension of what they were doing, and/or (2) the crowd was a bunch of radical New Lefters who tossed jests and jaunts at all the symbols of law and order in the District of Columbia. My opinion is that the crowd was generally happy and prepared for a peaceful, non-violent march on the Pentagon; the crowd knew full well what it was doing; and the crowd no more sassed "law and order" than do people when they refer to the police as "them coppers." And no paper deemed it necessary to note the surprising number of older folks, married couples with their children, and veterans who numbered well into the thousands. To call these people insincere is absurd.

After an extended peacetalk at the reflecting pool, the march proceeded peacefully in a long, slow, pleasant, guided meander over the Memorial Bridge where it instantly bogged down as a group of anti-marchers blocked a small bridge, on the other side of the river, over which the march had to pass to get to the Pentagon. The march leaders stopped the marchers (we were in the first line of marchers). We faced this tightly packed group of men who refused to let us pass—a direct violation of the march permit—but the police did not move an inch to remove the anti-marchers. And yes, they carried signs, but they did not all read "Support our boys in Vietnam." They also read "Go to hell you filthy, red-loving jewish fascists" and

“Down with the Jewish Red Clergy” and “Bomb the hell out of the Marchers” and “Obliterate anti-war protest.” They were only thirty and were eventually swept aside as the march leaders, incautiously, I think, proceeded to lead the marchers, now tightly packed themselves, stretching all the way back across the Potomac to the Washington Monument, through the anti-marchers.

The next confrontation was the fence. Eight feet high, topped with barbed wire—another violation of the march permit—which instead of deterring the marchers forced them into even tighter clumps of people growing increasingly irritated by these human and physical obstacles which were guaranteed not to be there.

The third confrontation was really not a confrontation at all; it was mass intimidation. It had begun at the reflecting pool when all the marchers were listening to the speeches of an assortment of gifted and not so gifted anti-war personages. It came in the form of air power, and it grew worse and worse as the marchers came closer to the Pentagon. It was an assortment of helicopters flying at tree-top height, swooping down over the heads of the protestors, circling about, and returning to swoop down over the heads of the protestors, circling about, and returning to swoop even closer. The din was terrific and military personnel leaned out of these whirling little machines to take their dastardly pictures. As the march approached the Pentagon parking lot and the mall, the helicopters were so thick that they began to get in each other's way. The time inevitably came when one of them got in the path of one of those low flying jets that take off from nearby National Airport, and it did all sorts of mid-air contortions to avoid a disastrous collision.

The fourth confrontation—now that the crowd had been forced into closed and close quarters and had been infuriated by anti-protestors, fences, and helicopters—was with the U.S. marshals. These efficient chaps spared no words and adeptly wielded their oversize night sticks (akin to baseball bats with lead in the end) as a few stupid or unaware people stumbled or were pushed or dared to step over a totally imaginary line. Whack! And that stopped that; those who were going to step over lines were few and far between and most of them were eventually isolated on the Pentagon steps.

The fifth confrontation was when the soldiers, generally younger than I, were ordered to seal off the Pentagon stairs. According to the papers they showed “massive restraint,” which is partially true, but no one attacked the soldiers. I was only inches from the front line and could see that even with beer cans (given the intent to use them) we would be no match for them no matter how many of us were there. They had rifles and they were loaded or looked loaded, with full clips attached to the rifle chambers. They had bayonets, and in the distance around to one side, the tell-tale smoke and smell of tear gas, which the Pentagon claims was not used, but was, began to drift into the air. The rifles were not pointed into the air but pointed right at our hearts or thereabouts and would have done an effective job of extermination, if utilized. According to the papers the crowd jeered and

threw beer cans. And according to me, and I was there, the crowd gasped and recovered and threw flowers eradicated from the Pentagon mall. And soon it was a great comedy. The crowd was cowed except for the flowers, and the soldiers looked patently ridiculous with flowers on their arms, rifles, and helmets. The crowd nervously laughed; the soldiers, embarrassed, withdrew.

The last confrontation, which I did not witness, took place late that night and the next day on those now famous Pentagon stairs—but rest assured that our property in the Pentagon was never in danger. A small number of confused, leaderless people are no match for club swinging MPs, marshals, and the Bastille-like Pentagon, which is a veritable fortress. But the march ended long before this confrontation. This last confrontation and the march are not the same thing.

There was some bad stuff on the side of the marchers. There were communists there, fellow travelers, Marxists, and revolutionaries of all shades of pink and red. Yes, there were allusions to Che Guevara which were ridiculous and harmful and stupid and misplaced. And the march was, to be nice, poorly planned, disjointed; at times the march leaders displayed an amazing irrelevance to the popular tone of the manifestation.

Further, some people got out of hand and joined the powers-that-be in violating the march permit. Some by design, some because they got scared, some because the improper handling of the march by the District and Federal officials and the march leaders so taunted them that they could not cope with their own selves and became unnatural in their actions. But, again, they were a decided minority—maybe a thousand. 650 were arrested, so it could be less than 1,000. They were not representative of the vast majority of marchers.

Lastly, the march flopped. Because of the irresponsible action of an aggressive few, it backfired. It backfired as did the riots in Atlanta and Detroit and Cleveland. America cannot accept violence, real or imagined. It didn't in Shay's Rebellion, and it cannot now. But the real tragedy is not that the march failed to solidify American opinion against the war (How could it have succeeded under the conditions described herein?) but that I saw, and will swear under oath that I saw, America act in a most totalitarian way before the march—the building of the fence, the strange cancellation of special buses from New York City and other points, not to mention the hoard of soldiers posted everywhere; during the march—the helicopters, the anti-march protestors who were not restrained, the fence; and after the march—the scum slinging of the President, the suppression of the truth by the newspapers, and the flagrant lying of the Pentagon, regarding both the numbers and the intent of the marchers.

I was there; you can take my word for it or the newspapers or someone else's word. In reality a lot that I have said herein can be discarded as so much angry emotionalism but at least I warn you to look for my shortcomings. The truth has been suppressed and something very wrong with our society has been exposed. This scares me as much as the Vietnam war, and in the last analysis, left uncorrected, it will wreak more havoc in our country than that irrational struggle in Southeast Asia.

Eric