

Rivers of Blood, Rivers of Life -- San Francisco: November 18 2002

By Starhawk

On Monday, November 18, at 7 AM, the Bay Area Anti-War Coalition held a rally in downtown San Francisco, me grumbling all the while about the good old days when we could just hold hands and sing "Give Peace a Chance" and not be carting around drums, lockboxes, duct tape and the entire contents of a modern art gallery at the crack of dawn, not to mention mounting what was virtually a small para-military (but nonviolent) operation. combined with a theatrical production on the street, just to register our opposition to the war. Nonetheless, we arrived at our destination with a van full of hand painted signs, including acrylic portraits of entire Iraqi families, hand-painted scenes of devastation in Palestine, landscaped depicting the other world that is possible, enlarged photos of Iraqi women and children, two large banners that said 'No War in Iraq' four giant bird puppets, one Living River consisting of large panels of various shades of blue gauze supported by light poles, with mylar fish suspended from them, and a bucket full of fake blood made of cornstarch and red food coloring to make a River of Blood. We met up with our fellow protestors who had among them numerous drums, and a brass marching band.

We held a short rally, which mostly consisted of Marisa singing a haunting, wailing song into a bullhorn, and then marched off, in the opposite direction of our target, while several affinity groups got into position and blocked the entrances to the building that houses Chevron. Some of them linked arms and others inserted their arms into lockboxes: arge plastic tubes with a metal rod inside tow which they could lock their wrists, so the police would have to cut the tubes off, (and hopefully not the wrists!) thereby prolonging the blockade.

We didn't have huge numbers, and the rallyers were split between the front doors and the back. The brass band played first at one entrance, then the other. Carwill, one of the organizers, had written a ritual, for which people holding the enlarged photos of Iraqis stood together in a circle, holding the pictures up, while he read a moving liturgy about unblinding ourselves to the reality of the human beings we were looking at and whose lives are threatened by the war. The overall theme of the action was Rivers of Blood transformed to Rivers of Life. I quickly made up a chant:

Open your eyes, open your eyes,
No rivers of blood,
We want rivers of life

Not, perhaps, the most brilliant, poetic chant ever, but sung to Standard Pagan Chant

Tune Number One, it worked fine. At some point, Mary Bull, a local organizer of the Boycott the Gap campaign, picked up the bucket of fake blood and dribbled it across the entry point to the Chevron plaza, creating the River of Blood. Unfortunately, she was right in front of the police who grabbed her and arrested her, rather roughly.

We circled around for a long time, chanting, and then handing the microphone over to various people to speak or chant or express themselves however they liked. Police and workers tracked fake blood over the pavement every time they crossed the line, leaving bloody footprints. Meanwhile, behind us we could see our friends getting arrested. It took the police quite a while to get the lockboxes off, but they eventually took everyone away. A security guard came out and dumped a bag of sand over the blood, which struck me as extremely symbolic given that in the first Gulf war US troops bulldozed sand over thousands of bodies of Iraqi troops to hide the corpses. Some of the troops were buried alive.

Then the rest of the rally joined us from the back of the building, and the brass band and banners and drums led the way down Market Street, our main central avenue. We were just a block away from the building that houses Dianne Feinstein's office. She is our Senator who voted for the war in Iraq in spite of major opposition from her constituents. She is also a big supporter of the Sharon government in Israel.

The Palestinian justice affinity group had run ahead, and by the time the rally reached the building, they had succeeded in getting inside the lobby and were blockading the elevators. We rallied in front of the building, chanting "Hey, hey, Feinstein, We want justice in Palestine!" and classics like, "Hey hey, ho ho, your oil war has got to go!"

One young man in the action had worn a business suit, and he'd gotten into the lobby and was trying to get an appointment to go up and see Feinstein—or her aide, and getting a lot of respectful help from the security guards who didn't realize he was a protestor until one of the cops recognized him from the Chevron building, got mad, grabbed his tie and tried to choke him. They soon had him down on the ground with five cops kneeling on him and handcuffing him, while we watched through the glass walls shouting, "Shame! Shame!"

Finally they took everyone away, and we closed with a spiral dance. Then some of us went down to the jail to wait for people to be released. Everyone except Mary Bull was released quickly, but Mary was charged with two felonies: vandalism and intent to commit a crime, and held on \$21,000 bail. We spent a good part of the afternoon trying to get her released, unsuccessfully, and soon the District Attorney's office was inundated with calls urging him to drop the charges. Mary was held overnight naked in a room padded with rubber, because they claimed she was a psychiatric risk. A group of people spent the day at the courthouse, trying to raise bail money and trying to contact lawyers. Finally late Tuesday evening she was released without bail, on her personal promise to appear for court. We will continue pressuring the DA to drop the charges, and are considering a class action suit about the bad treatment in jail.

All in all, we considered the action a great success. In spite of small numbers, we succeeded in disrupting a major oil company and linking the war to oil and larger economic issues, and disrupting Feinstein's office, holding her accountable for her lack

of responsiveness to the people she supposedly represents. And we gave many new people their first experience with nonviolent civil disobedience, and built trust and connections among our coalition here in the Bay Area.

-- *Starhawk*

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