

The Battle We Won

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Some rather inspiring events unfolded on campus in April. You might, even, have been forgiven for mistaking the events here for having happened at Berkeley. April 21 2006 will go down in history as a great day for Stanford.

You see, the campus was supposed to have a rather illustrious visitor that day. No, not just a ho-hum right wing academic, we have plenty of those already, especially in our resident arch-regressive-capitalist think tank the Hoover Institute. No, not a foreign dignitary. No, not just any government official. Much worse than that. Not even Schwarzenegger. Not even Rice, or Powell, or Cheney. It was the man himself, the lead war criminal, the biggest single threat to world peace, the most dangerous man in the world, yes, George W Bush.

George W Bush was coming to campus.

Except he didn't. Because *we stopped him!* Even though this place is Rich Kids University Inc, even though most students are highly respectable law-abiding liberals, even though they have a crushing workload and are too dignified and too apathetic and too cool to be doing anything political. And even though we only found out about the visit a day or two beforehand. At virtually infinitesimal notice, there was a large protest, and thanks to a combination of police incompetence, police brutality, student commitment, and some militancy, a very successful one.

It did involve getting baton charged, and I am none too happy to have been baton charged. Especially since I was just standing on the side of the road at the time, not breaking any laws, not doing anything provocative, just standing there, not blocking the road, on the side of the road. I was mostly thinking about symplectic geometry at the time. Well, usually there are adverse consequences to thinking too much about mathematics, but getting marched on by riot police is a new one, a rather interesting punishment. It's OK, I wasn't hurt, and nor was anyone else, much. Even though there were batons, and there was tear gas present. In fact the police disgraced themselves with their behaviour — although, to those who are familiar with police behaviour beyond the standard breast-beating ideology and mythology that the police are there to protect you, this will come as little surprise. The depths to which they lowered themselves, however, one may find somewhat breathtaking.

I wrote up a fairly long account of the day, it's something between eyewitness journalism and a detailed report, which is on my website at

http://math.stanford.edu/~mathews/articles/battle_of_stanford.pdf .

It is 13 pages long. But I will mention briefly one of the tactics used, because it is instructive, even while omitting many many details. For all the details you should read my article. I had never seen this tactic before.

People were standing on the road. Entirely legally, there was nothing stopping them from standing there, no barriers, no instructions, no signs, and in fact the police had halted all traffic down this road several hours earlier. I was standing on the side of the road, but others were standing on the road itself. Again, nobody was doing anything provocative. There were a few chants going. The irrepressible Stanford Marching Band were there — as of course they had to be at any event on campus! — playing behind the lines. Some people were dancing. Those present were mostly students, though there were also some prospective students and their parents — turned out it was actually admit weekend, when next year's freshman class comes to visit. There were also a few people from the local community around, including everybody's favourite octogenarian rabble-rousers, The Raging Grannies. It was something of a festival atmosphere, as it always is. There was some street theatre and some funny costumes, very positive, non-violent, assertive but not aggressive stuff.

Some time beforehand, a column of riot police had marched out in front of the crowd, which we regarded as rather funny because it was so ridiculous that grim green-uniformed paramilitaries should confront us while we stood there and sang. So they got laughs, and then they got more laughs when they drew their batons; but when they marched on us it was more a collective gasp, with a few screams and some panicked fleeing of the scene. In any case, as they marched some people did not happily accept being physically forced from a position where they were standing legally. So, according to the old adage, (and, derivatively, the Radiohead song) they stood up, by sitting down. As everyone knows, police with batons can push you back if you are standing, but not if you are sitting. They can still beat you up or drag you off, but it is messier. So a battle line was drawn. Warnings and threats came via megaphone. It was something of a standoff, although the music kept playing and the chants continued.

Hence the police decided to deploy the aforementioned tactic. It was not violent. It did not involve any police violence. In fact, it did not involve the police at all. It involved the fire brigade.

A fire engine drove up to the protest - from behind the protestors, on our side, not the police side. It didn't run anybody over, however; it stopped at the crowd. Some people got up to get out of its way; some people didn't; some people didn't know what was going on. But now, you see, the people sitting in front of the fire engine with its lights flashing were "obstructing justice", and so were immediately arrested. They were carried off. The police violently dragged away a small girl who must have been no more than 18 years old; it looked utterly revolting. Three people were arrested.

The firemen jumped out of the truck, enraged. They got out to argue with the remaining protestors: there's a medical emergency at the Hoover tower, we

have to get through, what do you think you're doing? These honest, hardworking protectors of public safety, responding to a medical emergency, were being thwarted by a depraved group of political zealots intent on their goals regardless of the consequences for the health of others. These proud, strong, brave, virtuous, good firefighters — how they denounced our moral calibre!

Once the sitting protestors were taken away, and the street was clear, the firemen got back in their truck and drove off.

In reverse.

They did not proceed to the Hoover tower; they did not proceed to any medical emergency; they went back down the road, where they came from. Clearly, there had been no medical emergency, it was a total fabrication, a tactic to clear the street, an excuse to arrest those otherwise breaking no law. The fire department — an apparently innocent branch of the emergency authorities, supposedly limited to doing the important work of putting out fires and directly protecting the physical safety of residents — had been used as a political tool. Some of us may have our doubts about the police, but we do not doubt firefighters: what they do is noble, brave, untainted. The police had used that assumed honesty and credibility — acted out enthusiastically by the firefighters themselves, who had proved talent worthy of an Oscar — as an unscrupulous tactic to achieve a strategic and quasi-military aim in a non-violent, legal, peaceful civil protest.

In any case, the quasi-military aim was not achieved: although the road was clear for a minute or two, people soon surged back onto the road in defiance. The police had lost all credibility. Nobody could claim that they were just “doing their job”. The road remained blocked, and although at this point a chunky guy with a chunky gun — a tear gas grenade launcher — stepped up to the scene, the police were not quite insane to order him to fire it. Bush did not attempt to drive through. We won.

I have since been informed that the fire truck tactic has been used before, and that our treatment was rather lenient compared to similar situations elsewhere in California. It makes sense, of course, that the police should be a little more circumspect while the rich kids are around.

I will leave it up to you to draw your own conclusions on the matter, but, as I mentioned, for the full details I refer you to my article.