

Dueling Demonstrations

As Thousands March to Capitol to Protest Iraq Conflict, 189 Arrested; War Supporters Take on 'Vocal Minority'



BY MELINA MARA — THE WASHINGTON POST

Above, war protesters stage a "die-in" near the Capitol. At right, a counter-demonstration organized by Gathering of Eagles, a group of Vietnam veterans, and the D.C. chapter of the conservative group Free Republic.



BY MELINA MARA — THE WASHINGTON POST

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By MICHELLE BOORSTEIN, V. DION HAYNES and ALLISON KLEIN
Washington Post Staff Writers

A march by thousands of protesters demanding an end to the Iraq war turned chaotic yesterday afternoon near the Capitol, where hundreds sprawled on the ground in a symbolic "die-in." Police arrested 189 people, including 10 who organizers said were veterans of the war.

Capitol Police used chemical spray against a small number of the protesters and pushed back others who tried to jump a barrier in a self-described effort to be arrested. The "die-in," on a walkway in front of the Capitol, was generally peaceful, but scores of arrests came when protesters tried to climb over metal fences and a low stone wall.

Iraq war veteran Geoff Millard, 26, of Columbia Heights wore fatigues and clutched an American flag as he lay on the ground before he was arrested. "It's time for the peace movement to take the next step past protest and to resistance," said Millard, president of the D.C. chapter of Iraq Veterans Against the War.

It was an unruly end to a day that started in brilliant sunshine with two separate, largely upbeat rallies. One began about noon at Lafayette Square, across from the White House, and was organized by the antiwar ANSWER Coalition. The other, a few hours earlier on the Mall, was organized by Gathering of Eagles — a group of Vietnam veterans — and the D.C. chapter of the conservative group Free Republic. Their message: The Iraq war can be and is being won, and the troops need unqualified support.

"We just want a chance to show America we don't agree with the vocal minority," said Deborah King-Lile, 55, of St. Augustine, Fla.

The march opposing the war was led by about 50 veterans who served in Iraq, according to Iraq Veterans Against the War. Many wore fatigues as the crowd marched down Pennsylvania Avenue, where several blocks were lined with war supporters. At times, back-and-forth shouting grew confrontational and obscene.

March organizers said Iraq war veterans were more involved and visible at yesterday's protest than in any other similar demonstration since the conflict began. Activists said they are planning "a week of action" meant to push the antiwar movement to a more confrontational stage.

After being processed and released last night, one of those arrested said he had come by train from the Boston area. The protester, who identified himself as Walter Ducharme, 78, of Cambridge, Mass., said he had been arrested at an earlier demonstration and "figured I had to do it again."

Organizers of the antiwar event said tens of thousands turned out. A law enforcement official,

who declined to be identified because authorities no longer provide crowd counts, estimated the gathering at closer to 10,000; the march permit obtained in advance by ANSWER had projected that number.

Early in the day, Lafayette Square took on a festive atmosphere, with some war protesters wearing wigs and costumes and others drumming and playing music even as passionate speeches were given. Vietnam veterans chatted with Iraq war veterans young enough to be their children.

Signs and T-shirts displayed pointed antiwar messages, but a wide array of other causes was trumpeted, from health care and Palestinian rights to vegan advocacy. A man with a sign on his hat

Juan Torres Sr., 52, of Chicago held a large photo of his son, Juan Torres Jr., in Army uniform. Torres said his 25-year old son died while serving in the war in 2004. Military officials, he said, told him that his son committed suicide, but Torres said he doesn't believe it. "I continue to fight for justice," he said. "I don't want to see other families [lose a son] like mine."

Speakers included several Iraq war veterans, activist Ralph Nader and former U.S. attorney general Ramsey Clark, who talked about Iraqis who were refugees, hungry, or ill. "You can't believe a word the administration says," Clark said.

But administration supporters, well represented in the Gathering of Eagles and Free Republic counter-demonstrations, disagreed.

"I've seen how leftist politicians hate the military. It's disgusting. We're fighting a war not in Iraq but with them," said Lt. Col. Robert "Buzz" Patterson, a retired Air Force pilot.

War supporters staked out three blocks on Pennsylvania Avenue to await the war protesters. A large police presence and metal barricades separated the groups, but not their words.

"Comms out of D.C.!" came the chants from one corner of 10th Street NW. Across the street, two middle-aged men shouted obscenities into the face of a young man in full camouflage and a bandanna that concealed all but his eyes. The young man remained silent amid the screaming, holding a sign over his head that read "Support the troops, end the war."

A bus had been painted with antiwar slogans including "Impeach Bush-Cheney Now!!" A man at Pennsylvania Avenue and Sixth Street shouted "Drive your bus into the Potomac. You're all idiots. . . . Relieve us of your stupidity."

Like many yesterday, Deborah Johns, the mother of a sergeant who has served three tours in Iraq, raised the Vietnam War for comparison. "We're not going to let the domestic enemy here at home defeat us like they did then," she said. "No retreat, no surrender. Not now, not ever." A conversation began between war protester Ocek Eke, 38, of Elon, N.C., and Rich DeStefano, 64, of Philadelphia.

"We don't have to yell and scream at each other. Ultimately, we want the best for our country," Eke said.

"He makes good sense," DeStefano replied. "If we call each other names, we'll never have a dialogue," said Eke.

DeStefano: "Absolutely right."

Staff writers Nelson Hernandez, Jerry Markon, Mary Otto, Katherine Shaver and Clarence Williams and editorial assistants Jillian Jarrett, Aruna Jain and Timothy Wilson contributed to this report.



BY MELINA MARA — THE WASHINGTON POST

A protester struggles to get over a barrier and away from Capitol Police officers during yesterday's war protest. Police used chemical spray and arrested 189 people.



BY MELINA MARA — THE WASHINGTON POST

Andres Behrens of Miami prepares to jump a barrier as Capitol Police officers watch and wait.

that read "Cowboys opposed to war" stood next to a woman in a hijab holding the sign "Bush/Cheney Impeached: Don't settle for less."

Jeffrey Peskoff, 35, a former Army mechanic who served a year in Iraq, repeated what others have said about ANSWER: It tries to attach too many issues to the antiwar campaign. "But it's still productive," said Peskoff, who lives in Fort Carson, Colo. "It got people out, which is good. Even having the [war supporters] out, that's Americana in action."



BY KEVIN CLARK — THE WASHINGTON POST

John Gonder, left, with the counter-demonstration, talks with Gian Carlo Destefano, a war protester.