

Inauguration Special

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January 2001

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Many are calling 2000 the "year of the protest," after people took to the streets from Seattle to Belgrade and beyond to demand fundamental change. Now, in the United States at least, the year 2001 promises to begin with an outright insurrection.

The upcoming demonstrations against the inauguration of GOP coup leader George W. Bush will bring together an unprecedented mix of movements-on-the-rise, heralding yet another surge in activism in this already volatile time.

Public outrage over the Republican theft of America's presidential election and the systematic denial of African-American voting rights has sparked a vast array of organizing efforts by everyone from revolutionary anarchists opposing "the entire state system" to Democratic voters questioning the fairness of American democracy for the first time. Most significantly, Bush's coronation is sparking a revival of grassroots organizing by the black civil rights movement.

The players in the unfolding inauguration drama are so numerous and varied, and the pace of preparations so harried, that it hasn't been easy to get a handle on what will go down on January 20. Here, then, is a guide to the scenario and cast of characters for the inauguration protests.

SCENARIO

Many of the details concerning the actual Inauguration, like the exact parade route, have yet to be announced, but the basic outline of the day is set. The swearing-in ceremony will take place on the west side of the U.S. Capitol building beginning at 11:30 AM. Bush is scheduled to take the oath of office at noon. The ceremony will be followed by the traditional inaugural parade, which begins at 2:00 PM.

For more information on official preparations, see the official web site. Other good resources are www.presidential-inaugural.com and the Armed Forces Inaugural Committee's "frequently asked questions" page. If you've got many hundreds of dollars to spare, you can buy a scalped ticket to one or more inaugural events, from the swearing-in ceremony to various inaugural balls; one source for these is www.inauguralevents.com.

There are four different announced meeting points and times for anti-inaugural protests.

1) At 10:00 AM, people will meet at Dupont Circle for the Voter March rally and protest, which will culminate in a march to the Supreme Court. The organizers of this event, which has a moderate tone and good-government agenda, have received a permit from the D.C. police.

2) Also at 10:00 AM, folks of a more radical disposition will meet at Pennsylvania Avenue and 14th Street, responding to calls put out by the socialist International Action Center and the anarchist Revolutionary Anti-Authoritarian Block. The anarchists will meet beneath a "Class War" banner. Presumably this march will also go to the Supreme Court, though there's been no public announcement of the route.

3) At noon, the Reverend Al Sharpton, with the support of other African-American leaders, has called for people to meet at Stanton Park, at 4th and Maryland. From there, there will be a march to the Supreme Court for a "Shadow Inauguration," in which Sharpton will administer a "Citizen's Oath" pledging action to safeguard voting rights.

4) The National Organization for Women will hold a rally from 11:30 AM to 2:30 PM, with a focus on reproductive rights, at the Navy Memorial on Pennsylvania Avenue between 8th and 9th.

These, however, are not the only protest plans. There is no large-scale civil disobedience in the works, but many direct-action-oriented activists organized into small groups hope to jeer and/or disrupt inaugural events including the 2:00 parade.

The Partnership for Civil Justice is strongly urging protesters to form into groups of no more than 25 people. The group's guide to the inauguration protests – essential reading for anyone who will be out on the streets – explains:

”Demonstrations in groups of 25 people or less may be held without a permit on Pennsylvania Avenue or other federal land subject to the jurisdiction of the National Park Service. See, 36 C.F.R. Section(s) 7.96(g)(2)(i). Based on this provision, the U.S. Circuit Court for the District of Columbia has ruled that it is unlawful for the U.S. Government to fine or arrest Inaugural protesters in groups of 25 or less on the asserted grounds that such protesters are demonstrating without a permit.”

As it happens, this regulation dovetails perfectly with the way that direct action protests are organized these days.

The groups behind the rallies and marches, the anarchists excepted, favor an old-style mass mobilization model. In this type of protest, people attend as bodies in a crowd, individuals in a mass. Sometimes they form contingents based on shared identity or membership in an organization (like “gays against Bush” or “schoolteachers for democracy” or “National Organization for Women”). Everyone follows the direction of the protest leadership, whether that's a prominent individual like Reverend Sharpton, or a behind-the-scenes group of organizers, like the folks from VoterMarch who are making their event happen.

Direct-action radicals – like the people who shut down the WTO meetings in Seattle – organize themselves quite differently. They often view themselves as “anti-mass”, and generally take part in large actions as members of “affinity groups,” small assemblages of like-minded folks who act and make decisions collectively.

There is much less coordination among direct actionists for the inauguration than there was in Seattle or during the April 2000 protests against the World Bank and International Monetary Fund in D.C. The Justice Action Movement (JAM), is arranging nonviolence trainings, legal support, and other key matters to the extent it can, given the severe time constraints.

So the bottom line is, affinity groups are pretty much going to have to figure out for themselves what to do. Most will focus on finding creative, in-your-face ways of expressing their dissent, from street theater to colorful signs and banners (check the protest guide for details about what size these must be according to federal regulations).

There are no plans for large-scale civil disobedience, at least as far as I know. There's some talk of people doing sit-ins in the path of the inaugural parade, but it's not clear whether that will even be physically possible, given the massive police presence that's expected.

Then too, the parade route will also be lined with Republicans, including many of the budding right-wing street activists who staged their own in-your-face protests against the Florida recount. In fact, January 20 will also witness a scary “Patriot's March on D.C.: Celebrating Constitutional Victory,” which begins in front of the Supreme Court at 9:00 AM. One organizer told *The Washington Times*, “I think we will present a real contrast from a bunch of kids all dressed in black who dislike America, what the country stands for, and are waving big puppets.”

The D.C. police have been making menacing pronouncements about their preparations. If the recent past is a guide, there will be a huge law enforcement presence, and the real possibility of police violence against protesters. Be aware that you run some risk of arrest if you attend any

of these protests, except perhaps the permitted Voter March. There's also a chance that you will encounter pepper spray or other chemical weapons; prepare yourself by reading an excellent guide on the subject from the current *Earth First! Journal*.

CAST OF CHARACTERS

1. Black Civil Rights Activists

The centerpiece of the Bush campaign's theft of the 2000 election was an organized effort to deny voting rights to blacks throughout Florida – and no aspect of the inauguration protests is more important than the African-American mobilizations that are taking place. Civil rights leaders are terming the election a "wake-up call" and pledging renewed grassroots activism by African Americans.

Ron Daniels, a respected scholar and activist who is executive director of the Center for Constitutional Rights (CCR), was among the first to issue a call to protest the inauguration, in two of his syndicated columns: 1, 2.

At a January 2 press conference (1,2) organized by Daniels and the CCR, the Reverend Al Sharpton announced his plans for a Shadow Inauguration.

Reverend Sharpton has still not completely lived down his role in the 1987 Tawana Brawley affair, in which he vociferously backed a young African-American woman who claimed she had been the victim of a hideous racial assault, which a grand jury later declared to be a hoax. But even many of Sharpton's former detractors have expressed admiration for his organizing in the wake of the 1999 killing of unarmed immigrant Amadou Diallo in New York City, including a sustained multiracial campaign of civil disobedience that led to more than 1000 arrests.

The Kensington Welfare Rights Union, a Philadelphia-based multiracial movement of the poor, which has an impressive track record of successful direct action, recently announced that it will be mobilizing for January 20. The International Action Center's march has been endorsed by a number of prominent African-American groups including the National Coalition of Blacks for Reparations in America. Other people of color efforts for the inauguration include a Puerto Rican contingent organized by activists who have been fighting the U.S. Navy bombing of Vieques. The New Black Panther Party has called for a "Day of Outrage" but has released no details as of this writing.

However, the most famous civil rights activist in America, the Reverend Jesse Jackson, leader of the Rainbow PUSH Coalition, won't be at the inauguration protests in D.C. on January 20. Instead, he will participate in a march on January 20 in Tallahassee, the capital of Florida.

Jackson's distance from the main action is not only geographical. On the night that the U.S. Supreme Court handed victory to Bush, Jackson declared he would "take to the streets . . . delegitimize Bush, discredit him, do whatever. But never accept him."

The next day, however, Jackson made a sudden turnabout and telephoned Bush. "I called him to congratulate him as our next president and say it's time to engage in meaningful dialogue so we can start the process of uniting and healing our nation," Jackson said to *The New York Post*. "I told him that he would have my support."

According to an article in the *Village Voice* by Peter Noel, Jackson's flip-flop came at the behest of the big-money moguls who have been financing Jackson's Wall Street Project, an effort to increase investment in minority-owned businesses. Noel quotes a "financial insider" who claims,

"These contributors told Reverend Jackson, 'You better hold this down because we won't back you anymore if you are adverse to the new administration in Washington.'"

To the general public, Jesse Jackson is progressive activism embodied, but those familiar with his grassroots track record aren't shocked by this turn of events: Jackson has a long history of placing his personal access to power over the issues he claims to champion. Many will never forgive him for undercutting the Rainbow Coalition back in 1988, when it held the promise of becoming a vibrant, multiracial, multi-issue grassroots movement with an agenda broader than Jackson's electoral aspirations. Jackson pushed through a set of by-law changes that greatly expanded his authority over the coalition and nipped independent organizing efforts in the bud.

2. Angry Democrats and Independents

The election of 2000 is inspiring all kinds of first-time protesters to take to the streets. Several websites reflect the extent of spontaneous grassroots activism that is taking place: www.votermarch.org www.countercoup.org www.trustthepeople.com www.democracymarch.org

Also check out an account by Zack Exley, creator of the CounterCoup site, of how Internet organizing against the stolen election took off:

To get a sense of the mood of this wild-card group of protesters, check out the Voter March listserv – but subscribe and read it on the web, unless you want your inbox deluged.

3. Direct Action Radicals

The Justice Action Movement is bringing together many of the forces that fought the WTO in Seattle and have been actively organizing ever since, including at the Republican and Democratic Party Conventions last summer. These include various groups affiliated with the Direct Action Network.

For many of these folks, including me, the pre-election debate was between voting for Ralph Nader or not voting at all. Most of us have little or no faith in the American electoral system to begin with, given its domination by big money and corporate interests, and see the choice between Republicans and Democrats as one between two wings of the same business party. The problem with the presidential vote, in this view, goes far deeper than inaccurate counting or even African-American disenfranchisement, to a system based on corporate power and white supremacy.

So there's a certain amount of irony in our presence at the inauguration protests – we'd have been inclined to protest even if Gore had won. There have been a few flame wars on the inauguration listservs between direct action types and more politically conventional folks, sparked either by condescension from the former or efforts by the latter to disassociate themselves from the rabble rousers.

4. The Black Bloc

The inauguration protests are also drawing a fair number of revolutionary anarchists, who are completely opposed to electoral politics and think the government should be abolished. One group, the Barricada Collective, has issued a call for a Black Bloc on January 20.

Black Blocs became world famous after the one at the Seattle WTO protests engaged in organized property destruction, but they are often more about group solidarity than the use of any

particular tactic. For example, the Black Bloc at the April 2000 D.C. protests against the IMF and World Bank pledged to uphold the larger direct action campaign's nonviolence code. Instead of smashing windows, they acted to draw police attention away from locked-down protesters and to reinforce weak points in the direct-action blockade.

The inauguration Black Bloc has officially disassociated itself from the Justice Action Movement because JAM held a pre-action meeting with police. If anyone is planning to engage in property destruction, they haven't been stupid enough to announce those intentions publicly, so it's hard to say what the Black Bloc will do on J20. Dressing in Black Bloc costume will make you a police magnet; at past protests, the cops have either beaten or preemptively arrested anyone who "looks like an anarchist." The word is that many will respond by dressing like mainstream protesters, and there's also talk of using Blues Brothers-style get-ups (white dress shirts plus black suit jackets, pants, and neckties).

5. International Action Center

The International Action Center is doing a vast amount of organizing work for the J20 protests, emphasizing the issues of black disenfranchisement and criminal injustice. The group has long experience with big national mobilizations; for this one, it's created a network of regional "organizing centers" that are both spreading the word and handling key logistical details like chartering buses.

The IAC was founded after the Persian Gulf War of 1991 by former U.S. Attorney General Ramsey Clark. It's a front group for the Workers World Party, a four-decade-old socialist organization with some super-creepy politics. Workers World applauded the Soviet invasion of Czechoslovakia in 1968, supported the murderous regime of Romania dictator Nicolae Ceausescu, and caused a major and ridiculous split in the antiwar movement during the Gulf War by refusing to criticize the Iraqi regime of Saddam Hussein.

Many activists I know – some of them anti-authoritarian to the core – cut the IAC a fair amount of slack, because the group boasts many skilled organizers and mobilizes a lot of people. I've been impressed with the size of their contingents at police brutality marches in New York and the protests outside the Republican Convention in Philadelphia. They do a great job organizing logistics like chartering buses – visit their site if you need transportation. But at the risk of being called a red-baiter, I've got to say that the IAC gives me the whim-whams.

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Issue #14 of Free Radical

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