

Greetings from Lockdown City

By Michael Blanding

michaelblanding.com | July 27, 2004

“**W**elcome to the DNC Free Speech Camp – line up!” yelled the drill sergeant, a black, military-style cap pulled down to his sunglasses. Following his orders, a dozen or so “prisoners” put black hoods over their heads and had their hands bound behind their backs, then knelt with their heads touching the ground. Other men and women walked around with gags over their mouths. “We are gathered here today in solemn and silent protest at the incarceration of pro-democracy demonstrators in the barbwire cage known as the DNC Free Speech zone,” yelled the drill sergeant. “What does it mean when Boston, a city built on the history of revolutionary dissent, builds a barbaric confine for people who want to express their democratic rights?”

This bit of street theater kicked off the protests at the first official day of the Democratic National Convention, a day focused ironically on protesting for the right to protest. The scene around these activists this morning could hardly be more confining. The so-called free-speech zone set up by police occupies a narrow stretch of pavement underneath elevated train tracks, which are in some places so low that police have painted girders with orange “Caution – Watch Your Head.” The area is further covered overhead by netting, in some places supplemented by coils of barbed wire and surrounded by a 12-foot high chain link fence draped with an translucent black mesh. The overall effect is more reminiscent of the camps set up for interment of Japanese prisoners in World War II, or the prison for enemy combatants at Camp X-Ray. What’s worse, say protesters, police did not reveal the full extent of their plans for the area until a week before the convention, leaving little time for a legal challenge.

“It’s really a penitentiary pit, not a free speech area,” says Naomi Archer of the group Save Our Civil Liberties, after taking off her gag. “People in this protest pen feel claustrophobic, constrained, and criminalized, and that’s not acceptable in US 2004.”

The free-speech zone is part of the overall sense of lockdown on the streets of Boston for the convention, which feels more like Bogota or Tel Aviv than the so-called Cradle of Liberty.

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Some 5,000 policemen stand sentry on almost literally every corner downtown – city officers in their regular uniforms, state police flexing their muscles in full riot gear, and national guardsmen patrolling the streets in camouflage. The constant din of helicopters drones over the city, broken only by the intermittent sound of police sirens, causing even some delegates to complain about feeling like they are in a police state.

Ironically, the first day of the convention had already been set aside to protest civil liberties; but little did activists know they would be protesting their own repression. A march on police brutality and the PATRIOT act drew several hundred anarchist youths to march to the FleetCenter where the convention is being held, and where security is tightest. Dozens of police in riot gear, armed with submachine guns, looked on from behind the security fence as the march approached the center. Once there, however, the march refused to enter the “protest pen” as protesters call it. Sitting down in the middle of the street, they ignored calls by police to disperse, playing spin the bottle and duck-duck-goose in the middle of the road. Eventually, the march broke up without arrests.

“We have no intention of giving up every right we have in this country to enter that area,” says Elly Guillette of the Bl(a)ck Tea Society, a self-described “anti-authoritarian” group that participated in the march. “We believe that the existence of the free-speech area is itself an affront to the First Amendment.”

In addition, police are conducting searches of passengers entering subway stations and of pedestrians nearby the FleetCenter. Police have also reportedly engaged in preemptive searches and aggressive questioning of activists. On July 19, protesters say, the FBI visited the home of an activist and questioned individuals sitting on the porch about DNC protests. After being refused entry into the home, police lingered on the property for 10 minutes. The incident follows similar reports of questioning activists about this summer’s conventions in New York, Colorado, Missouri, and Kansas.

Activists from Seeds for Peace who arrived in town on colorful bus from Maine say that police raided the bus on Saturday, detaining them and searching it for four and a half hours. According to their report, officers from the Boston police, state police, secret service, and FBI arrived with fire trucks and a bomb squad van and searched the bus with a bomb-sniffing dog, eventually confiscating five propane tanks. (A police spokesperson would not comment on the incident, except to say that officer had “probable cause” to conduct the search.)

“You might as well start searching people’s garages for propane tanks for their barbecues,” says Jeff Feuer of the National Lawyers Guild, who is representing the activists. “Of course security is a concern. But at some point you have to draw a line and say we’re not going to accept these encroachments on our civil liberties and our right to privacy.” It’s exactly these

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kinds of encroachments that panelists decried at a forum to discuss civil liberties sponsored by the Kucinich campaign on Monday afternoon. Panelists included actors Mimi Kennedy and James Cromwell, and Rainbow/PUSH director Jesse Jackson. “We need to repeal the PATRIOT Act, we need to restore our civil liberties, and... rally around the principle of democracy,” thundered Jackson from the pulpit, as the crowd of several hundred stamped their feet in approval.

After the forum, Kucinich addressed the issue of security in Boston in an interview. “I’ve never liked this national security structure at these large political gatherings,” he said, noting that he was one of the politicians locked down in a hotel at the WTO meeting in Seattle. “There’s been a slow and steady shift to attempt to deny people the right to assemble. We’re in Boston, home of the liberty tree – does that ring a bell, to mix metaphors?” Though Kucinich says he’ll speak out against the repression inside the hall, other Democrats have been silent on the issue of free speech at their convention, even as they tout a “Stronger America” on the convention floor. The Democratic National Convention Committee did not respond to a call for comment.

Boston Police defend the security as a necessary precaution in an age of terrorism. “Part of what came out of the 9/11 commission is that law enforcement knew the risks but didn’t take the opportunity to deal with them,” says police spokeswoman Mary Jo Harris. “We have to walk the line between preparing for foreseeable risks and going too far. We’re walking that line.”

Harris insists that activists knew the security that would be put in place well before the convention. However, in an interview with AlterNet less than two weeks before the convention, police spokesman Kevin Foley did not mention the netting or barbed wire, and specifically said that the fences would be uncovered for the sake of visibility. Told of this, Harris does concede that the mesh hung on the fence was a new addition added at the request of the Secret Service, who warned that activists in the past have shot bleach and urine at police with supersoakers. (Protesters deny this as urban legend. “The effort to fill a supersoaker with urine is so far beyond comprehension,” says the Bl(a)ck Tea Society’s Emma Lang. “These ideas are preposterous.”)

Surprised to hear of Harris’ statements, Nancy Murray of the Massachusetts ACLU says that they learned only ten days before the convention that the protest pen would be moved underneath the elevated tracks from a relatively more open area next door. The group was also informed that only 1,000 people would be allowed in the area – downgraded from 4,000 – and that the stage would be made smaller and put behind a small building in the zone where it looks out on the mesh-covered fence, instead of protesters. “My assumption is that this is something the Secret Service requested at the last minute,” says Murray. “If

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not, and [police] were not negotiating in good faith, I feel that we were basically hoodwinked.”

The Bl(a)ck Tea Society and other protest groups filed suit a week before the convention, arguing that the make-up of the free speech zone was a violation of the first amendment. After touring the area, U.S. District Judge Douglas Woodlock decried the zone as a “an affront to free expression” and said that the characterization of the area being “like a concentration camp... was an understatement.” Citing terrorist concerns, however, he eventually ruled against the protesters. (An appeals court upheld the decision on Monday.)

In a separate case, the ANSWER coalition and other groups won the right to march in front of the FleetCenter in their anti-war march on Sunday after first being denied a permit by the city. That march, consisting of a spirited crowd of about 2,000 drum-beating activists, also went off without major incident, though one activist of South Asian descent was arrested and later released by police. A police spokesperson told activists that he was arrested for looking around “a little too curiously,” while activists contend that the case was one of racial profiling.

While other groups have followed the Bl(a)ck Tea Society’s lead in boycotting the free-speech area, some have decided to use the area to dramatize the very issues they are protesting. As delegates filed into the hall on Monday night to hear a lineup of speakers including Bill Clinton, peace activists staged a protest of the occupation of Palestine with a die-in of protesters draped with Palestinian flags. Around the zone were hung signs reading “Protest Prison” and “People in a Cage, Just Like Palestine,” and several speakers drew an even more explicit comparison. “It is tragic that after all of these years of democracy... we are in a cage,” said Margaret Prescod of Global Women’s Strike. “It should be an insult to everyone across the street. They should be demanding that this cage be torn down, just as the wall in Palestine should be torn down.”

Filing past the protest zone on the other side of the fence, delegates got a view of a dark fence with shadows of people on the other side, the electronic sound of the public address system ringing off the steel rafters above. More than anything, the scene reinforced the notion that protesters are dangerous and in need of restraint. Not surprisingly, few delegates stopped to listen to their message, though some smiled and waved sympathetically. Of the few who actually stood to listen was delegate and Democratic donor Caroline Cunningham. “I think it’s antithetical to free speech,” she said. “Ostensibly we’re fighting this war to protect freedom for other people, but freedom of speech is one our most basic freedoms.”

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In Boston, that's no longer a freedom that can be taken for granted. Said another conventioneer standing at the fence: "If they are trying to tell us stuff, I have no idea what they are saying."

Michael Blanding is an associate editor at Boston Magazine, where he writes about politics, culture, and urban affairs. He has also written for publications including The Nation, Salon, AlterNet, The Boston Globe, The Boston Phoenix, and Condé Nast Traveler.