

The Trump Effect: Protesting the Result

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Donald Trump, even without raising a single pen, or signing a single legal document, has already had a profound effect on activism in the United States. Much of this has taken form among the student body of various schools, a brushfire reaction of fury that has seen empty classrooms and vacated schools. Walkouts have taken place over two days. Instructors have followed.

Two days after the result, San Francisco witnessed gatherings of young protesters, most below voting age, marshalling themselves at the Civic Centre and effectively shutting down Market Street. Local journalists repaired to the scene in hurried enthusiasm, and helicopters were dispatched to film the gathering crowd. Would Trump's America flare up, notably in parts of the country where his support was minimal?

The San Francisco Unified School District explained that it had not given the seal of approval to the protest, though it was hard to flaw the actions of students emboldened by their constitutional protections. "We recognize our students' right to free speech and understand their need to use it. The walkout this morning was not authorized by SFUSD staff."

Curiously enough, news anchors were careful about how best to cover these actions. On realising they were being filmed, various members of the crowd proceeded to chant obscenities with gusto. Unmistakably colourful gestures were also flashed in front of the camera, causing consternation among the local news anchors. Even in Trump's emotionally liberated America, civility had to be shown. Yet again, the establishment was telling people how best to behave.

A few sensible voices found time to give news crews what they wanted. An African American girl loomed into view, eager to express her opinions about the events of the last few days. "I feel that Donald Trump is a horrible man." She insisted, not that we did not notice, that she was "a woman of colour." She was also gay and troubled.

The night before, the violent aspect of the anti-Trump response came to the fore. Some 7,000 protestors found voice on Oakland's streets. Molotov cocktails, fireworks and other projectiles were directed at police. Over time, the fractious gathering dispersed into smaller groups, setting fires and inflicting acts of vandalism upon businesses. Three Oakland police officers were also injured, and three Pleasanton patrol cars damaged.

According to the official statement from Oakland police, "Throughout the evening, the large group splintered into smaller groups that began vandalizing numerous businesses in the downtown area." Oakland's Mayor, Libby Schaaf, was beside herself with frustration the next day, urging calm and the need for peaceful protest. Hooliganism would not be tolerated.

Behind the protest agenda here is the monumental difficulty of acceptance. Blue collar whiteness doesn't wash well in these noisy circles. Aggrieved, the message of "Not my president" has been chanted across city centres – in as many as twenty-five across the country. Trump effigies have been burned.

This language of protest signals the cutting divisions through the country: be wary of what is white, and working class if you find yourself in metropolitan centres, or in areas of a technology boom. If you are an immigrant, be even more fearful.

"Trump and Pence make so sense," went the Wednesday message among anti-Trump protestors as they marched from Union Square to Washington Square Park in Manhattan. Outside Trump Tower, Lady Gaga joined some 5,000 others. Such instances of pop agitation do little to measure the levels of inclusion. Across the aisles, the country remains divided, and intolerance is being met by intolerance.

In truth, Trump has given little to his detractors to work with. Slogans have been aplenty, and the "vision thing" about making America great again has been more mantra than substance. He has been indifferent to blueprints and policy outlines, making any genuine critique of him beyond personal characteristics and tendencies near impossible. Only the emotions count.

What has mattered is the feared contingency and hypothetical. Trump's nascent tenure might, argued protestor Nick Powers to CNN in New York, encourage more robust stop-and-frisk policies in the name of law and order. Sexist opinions would also be normalised. Society would somehow become more brutal. The ease, in other words, of seeing Trump as the instigator of violent exception, rather than a beneficiary of a rotten malaise, becomes a rule.

The protestors might have to wait that bit longer, notably for Trump's cabinet appointments and those to the Supreme Court, before burning down the front store with urgent enthusiasm. It is hard to imagine that the president elect will be restrained on various fronts, be it Obamacare, social policy or the regulating of finance and capital. Nor should it be assumed that his relations with the Republicans will be warm and functional in Trumpland.

Trump took on the dynasts, including those within the Republican movement. He generated such hostility from the paladins and doyens that even Clinton thought she might have a chance garnering their support. How wrong they all were, as they continue to be. Deafness tends to be a fatal drawback in politics.

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