

Protesting Protestors

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(*Note, Oct. 10, 2024: I hate to admit it, but this blog is long overdue. I have enormous sympathy for the people suffering in the now year-old Israeli conflicts, but up 'til now I simply didn't want to talk about those calamities at all. I've felt, and still feel, that every iota of energy focussed on their horrors is energy removed from the defence of Ukraine, which is, regrettably but I think understandably and all-too-humanly, rather closer to my heart. My last name tells the story, I suspect. That said, as newly escalated death and destruction in the Middle East re-energizes American student protests these past few weeks, I'm reminded of how those protests and protestors commanded my attention earlier this year, enough that I wrote the following blog but never posted it. Might as well send it now....)

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I have a serious question for anyone and everyone: Why all the derision toward pro-Palestine protestors? In recent news stories, I've seen them belittled as "Gluten-Free Warriors" and "Banana-allergy revolutionaries"; heard their mutual aid and self-protective efforts mocked as "playing dress-up"; and read vitriolic screeds intended to disconnect them from the lineage of those lionized 1960's anti-war protestors. Why?

One criticism that pops up repeatedly is that, unlike the Vietnam-era protestors who faced conscription at a time when 100,000 of their countrymen had already been killed or wounded, today's angry students have "no skin in the game". I agree: since no Americans are being drafted to fight in Gaza today, there IS a clear difference. However, I'd say that difference only strengthens an argument that today's conscientious objectors are perhaps even more genuine and valiant than those who, 50 years ago, railed against a war they personally did not want to die in. Surely the threat of conscription makes one's purportedly principled objection to war a bit suspect, no? After all, it's hard not to presume the motives of someone protesting against something that puts them directly in harm's way, right? But, if there's NO chance you'll ever be forced to fight, then the willingness to risk one's own neck and oppose your government's actions can hardly be dismissed as self-serving. Which brings us back to the often shockingly nasty attacks on America's young ideologues in 2024.

The obvious fact is, today's protesting students could easily ignore everything that's going on

in a war half a world away and just enjoy their graduation season with impunity, but instead they've camped outside to protest, risking the ire and retaliation of their schools, their communities, and in no small measure, of the armed thugs — both with badges and without — who frequently descend upon them with raucous violence. If that doesn't display sincere and selfless commitment to a cause, then what would? Meanwhile, comfortable armchair critics like Judith Miller sit on the sidelines and bash the activists, lobbing ad-hominems and other rhetorical smoke bombs from their cozy suburban home offices. For example, Ms Miller, the smug septuagenarian sniper, recently demanded to know, "If you (protestors are) so proud of what you're doing, then why do you cover your faces?" It was an ironic attack/inquiry, dripping with hypocrisy, because while the protestors commonly wear improvised masks and goggles to protect them from chemical assaults by cops and counter-protestors, those counter-protestors themselves — Ms Miller's type of folks, I assume — were gleefully donning matching, menacing white halloween masks, not for physical protection but for intimidation and to preserve their anonymity during their crime spree. Sure, protestors occupied some space, chanted, distributed flyers, and generally disrupted university operations, but they weren't physically assaulting people (and yes, there were exceptions, but as a rule they weren't violent). The counter-protestors, by contrast, showed up in coordinated intimidation uniforms for the sole purpose of attacking people who posed no threat to them. They came with an explicit agenda of personal violence, hence the protestors' need for masks and barricades and makeshift medical tents, knowing they'd be wounded by the inevitable aggressions of counter-protestors and cops. Cops, of course, rarely skip an opportunity to do violence where they can get away with it, so there was never any doubt they'd soon arrive to the party... and within 24 hours of an attack on the pro-Palestine camp at UCLA, the LAPD descended with their surplus war paraphernalia discarded by their mercenary military cousins, laying waste to encampments and making plenty of punitive arrests. Of course, they didn't arrest any of the costumed counter-protestors, who by then had finished beating up their victims and gone home. Instead, cops arrested the injured and disoriented protestors themselves. You know, "serving and protecting", as cops do. So that, judge Judy, is why they wear masks.

Meanwhile, as all this is going on, Judith Miller and her fellow witless warriors joined Joe Biden in his asinine comments like: "vandalism, trespassing, breaking windows, shutting down campuses, forcing cancellation of classes and graduations... none of this is peaceful protest." Right. Because in America, as in any fundamentally authoritarian state (as they all are, by definition), the only kind of protest that is really tolerated is the kind that can be easily ignored.