

Democracy in action: A dispatch from the front line



BARB GUY

After attending a memorial service in Tucson last week, I elected to stay and enjoy the city and the magnificent, flowering desert.

On Monday morning I was surprised to hear that President Bush was arriving in a few hours, visiting Tucson for "A Conversation on Strengthening Social Security," one of 60 such stops nationwide. Fifteen hundred tickets were given out to Republican faithful in the same manner used for Bush's campaign appearances, i.e., no opposing views allowed.

On a whim, my husband and I decided to head to the Tucson Convention Center where Bush would speak in order to check out Tucson's loyal opposition.

We found a few hundred people outside the center, each one an ingredient in the crazy soup that makes up such gatherings. There

were wonks, Greens, Democrats, union members, seniors, Catholics, Quakers, college students and middle-schoolers on spring break, punk rockers, Latinos, and lawyers from Tucson's three nearby courthouses.

We even bumped into our good old friend Bruce, who now lives in Tucson. It felt so normal to see him at a rally, his smile and his purple sweater adding flavor to the soup.

The only thing everyone had in common was being there to petition our government for redress of our grievances. It's a cherished part of what makes America America, so important that it's in the Constitution, right there in the First Amendment along with freedom of (and from) religion, freedom of speech, freedom of assembly and freedom of the press. I'm sure of my facts - I was recently quizzed on this.

Social Security and war were two main protester themes.

Tucson's vast senior citizen population was well-represented among the crowd (although many more of them were admirers waiting inside) and while some were preoccupied with matters of foreign policy, most demonstrated concerns about Social Security.

White-haired ladies and gentlemen sat in lawn chairs, walked spryly or with canes, and held signs: "Fix Social Security Now," "Bush = Social Insecurity," "Social Security Scam." We smiled as a grandma slowly went past pushing a bright red walker. On the front was a sign "Hands off my Social Security!"

The anti-war folks were as varied as the multitude of colors found blooming in the desert nearby. Some took a positive approach with their placards and buttons: "Patriots for Peace," "Support the Troops - Bring Them Home Safe!" Others were more emphatic: "Bush Lies," "No War on Iraq," "War is a Disgrace to Christ and Country."

My favorites were the ones with a flash of wit: "Fight the rich, not their wars," "Draft the Bush Twins," "WMD? The only thing to fear is GWB" and "Who Would Jesus Bomb?"

Women from CodePink, a national group favoring peace over war, were there and I decided to stand with them. Some women had signs saying, "Give George a pink slip."

I smiled, picturing women's rights pioneer Alice Paul back from heaven, meeting my new friends. She would surely be pleased.

The Salt Lake Tribune

I helped to hold CodePink's giant fuchsia banner for a few minutes and happened to be one of the women holding it when, heralded by an ear-splitting siren chorus and a score of motorcycle police, President Bush arrived. There were two presidential limousines, and then several official SUVs and police cars brought up the rear.

The motorcade moved toward us, but turned into the center's grounds via the next entry over, about 300 feet before where we were gathered. As the long string of motorcycle officers turned parallel to us, several people booed, because the motorcade had, in effect, pulled the old switcheroo. I thought the booing seemed a little nasty, especially since the police were not the object of anyone's scorn.

I don't approve of booing the president, either, and that's who the protesters were actually mad at. But Bush generates those boos in two ways. First, with policies that certain of us (say, half the country) find reprehensible and, second, by creating an atmosphere that our nation's founders would be horrified to see.

When they planned for earnest citizens petitioning the government, I'm sure they envisioned the president engaged in respectful dialogue, not sealed off from everyone who disagrees with him, proudly crowing that he doesn't even read the newspaper. Reagan may have been the Teflon president, but

Bush is surely the isolation-tank president.

One man started the time-honored peace rally call-and-response chant, "What does democracy look like? This is what democracy looks like."

The boo-inducing irony is that in the era of George W. Bush, anyone who petitions the government is locked out of the discussion. Sadly, at the moment, *this* is what our democracy looks like.

Barb Guy is a frequent contributor to these pages. © Salt Lake Tribune.