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May Day '71: When Bob Parry Went to Jail in the Biggest Mass Arrest in U.S. History

In 1971, Bob Parry, the late founder and editor of Consortium News, traveled to Washington to take part in an anti-Vietnam War protest. Here published for the first time in 47 years is Bob's account of that day.

By Robert Parry, Stephen Orlov, and Nat Parry
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A note from Nat Parry:

In the spring of 1971, with war raging in Vietnam, the U.S. peace movement hoped to shut down the federal government in an audacious mass civil disobedience action. Under the slogan "If the government won't stop the war, then the people will stop the government," tens of thousands of protesters set out to block major intersections and bridges to bring Washington, DC, to a halt.

A young Robert Parry, then a student at Colby College, drove down from Maine to participate in the demonstrations and ended up arrested along with thousands of other protesters who were swept up in the largest mass arrest in U.S. history. He later wrote about the protests and their significance in the Colby Echo, where he was Editor-in-Chief.

Marking the anniversary of these events, we republish Parry's article for the first time in 47 years, with an introduction from his classmate Stephen Orlov, who attended the demonstration with him.

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By Stephen Orlov

It was with a heavy heart that I read Nat Parry's moving tribute to his father, Robert, on his sudden passing.

Bob was my closest friend at Maine's Colby College during the turbulent Vietnam War years, when Bob was Editor-in-Chief of our student newspaper, the *Colby Echo*. He rarely talked with family and friends about his time at Colby, given the enormity of the important issues of the day he addressed tirelessly during his distinguished career. So Nat asked me to share a few anecdotes about Bob during his student days, when he began honing his muckraking journalistic skills and demonstrating to our campus community his inspiring strength of character in speaking truth to power.

I worked with Bob at the *Echo*, writing anti-war articles as an Associate Editor and Student Government President. We helped lead with a handful of activists the Colby strike against the Vietnam War in May of 1970, following Nixon's invasion of Cambodia and the National Guard's killing of protesting students at Kent State. Bob played a key role in our successful

lobbying campaign that convinced the Colby Faculty to pass a resolution supporting our student strike.

We replaced classes with a counter-cultural-curriculum of daily workshops led by students and professors on the mass movements that were engulfing America in a tidal wave of social protest—anti-war and nuclear disarmament, civil rights and black power, feminism and gay rights, the American Indian Movement and United Farm Workers Boycott, anti-poverty and pro-environment.

Bob and I drafted a telegram on behalf of student government heads of 16 college and university campuses in Maine to Senators Edmund Muskie and Margaret Chase Smith, which forced them to fly to Colby within days for an all-state anti-war rally that would "give the students of Maine the opportunity to confront you."

We devoured the non-violent civil disobedience writings of King, Thoreau and Gandhi, discussing for hours how to best apply their theory and practice to our plans for being arrested together at anti-war demonstrations in Washington DC that spring. And a year later at the May Day demonstrations in 1971, the friendly elderly stranger arrested next to us turned out to be Dr. Benjamin Spock, who had penned the classic baby-care "bible," we both would later rely on as parents.

Image below is Robert Parry in 1971

At a speech to Alumni donors during the strike, Colby President Robert Strider attacked Bob's editorial stewardship of the *Echo*, decrying "the uncontrollable barbarism, with its obscenities, libel and innuendo, of the college press." The following semester, Strider moved to end the College's near century-old sponsorship of the *Echo* because of Bob's editorial choices.

Strider wrote to Bob officially demanding the removal of the Colby name from the *Echo* and he convinced the Chairperson of the Board of Trustees to propose at a Board meeting we attended a resolution to disassociate the College from its student newspaper. Strider had highlighted swear words and an *Echo* photo of students frolicking "au natural" as just cause, but we countered that the heart of the matter was Bob's anti-war editorial position. Bob refused to remove the Colby name from the *Echo* and he delivered an unflinching defense of freedom of the press, convincing the Trustees to reject the censorship resolution of their Board Chair and College President.

On a personal note, Bob lamented a painful rift with his father, William, who was the publisher of the *Framingham News*, nearby Boston. He told me how his dad had always preached to him the need to consider multiple points of view for every story, a principle Bob embraced throughout his career, and yet William dogmatically dismissed off-hand Bob's anti-war position as being anti-American, and he ardently supported the war effort in his paper. Perhaps that personal experience later helped Bob emotionally confront the surreptitious maneuvers by government and media power brokers to blacklist him within the Washington press corps for his courageous reporting.

Bob and I remained in close touch during our first few years after graduation. We traveled together to Miami in 1972 for anti-war demonstrations at the Republican National Convention, sleeping in a pop-up tent in the protester's camp at Flamingo Park, where we bathed in the Park swimming pool. We drove there from Mass. to Florida in a car Bob had recently bought. He was rather proud of the fact that he had tuned it up himself after studying an auto-maintenance manual.

After I moved to Montreal and he to Virginia, regrettably we rarely saw each other, occasionally catching up on work and family life from a distance. I can still remember decades ago, Bob describing passionately his visionary plans to begin publishing an online investigative journal in the tradition of his hero, I.F. Stone. I was thrilled to learn that Bob was honored in 2015 with Harvard's Nieman Foundation I.F. Stone Prize for Journalism, and later with the Martha Gellhorn Award. Ironically, when the Colby Trustees refused forty-five years earlier to back the Board resolution disassociating the College from the *Echo*, they appointed Trustee Dwight Sargent, the curator of Harvard's Nieman Foundation of Journalism at the time, to head a study committee, which never censored Bob or the *Echo*.

Throughout his life's journey, Robert Parry cast the shadow of a giant, and on his path he left a signature footprint marked by strength and integrity. Bob's passing is a personal loss of a friend I've admired my entire adult life, a loss of far greater magnitude for his loving family. His legacy shall endure, inspiring investigative journalists the world over.

"May Day"

By Robert Parry

(Originally published in the *Colby Echo* student newspaper in May 1971)

There was the air of a mighty athletic contest about it. A super bowl played out in the streets of the nation's capital. And the news media always alert for any incident that will appeal to America's sports-minded viewing public played the athletics of the situation to the hilt. To the media, it was the kids coming off several big seasons of demonstrations against the seasoned veterans of the Washington police force. The demonstrators with their potent offense trying to throw the city into chaos; the cops, led by their elite Civil Disturbance Unit and backed up by thousands of Marines, Army, and National Guard, putting up a great defense to maintain social order.

It was to be the biggest story of the week, perhaps of 1971, and the participants' temerarious victory predictions and scoffs at the strength of the opposition reminded some viewers of Joe Namath psyching the Baltimore Colts out of the '69 Super Bowl. The

demonstrators had stated, “If the government won’t stop the war, then the people will stop the government.” And President Nixon had countered with assurances that he would not be intimidated. Chief of the D.C. police, Jerry Wilson, who would guide his team on the field, went on saying that the demonstration would be only a minor “nuisance.”

So the lines were drawn and the kids readied themselves for game time Monday morning. But the police started things early with a foray into the demonstrators’ home base at dawn Sunday. At that time, 41,000 people were camping at West Potomac Park. The police dispersed them hoping that many would go home, but most remained in Washington and others, like the nine members of the Colby contingent, had been staying elsewhere.

But with the thrust into the park, the police had taken the play away from the offense-minded demonstrators. The kids charged foul, but their cries went unheeded. Rules for the week’s struggle were fuzzy at best, and with their early move, the police gave warning that many of the fair-play guidelines were out the window for as long as threats of disruption continued. The lack of rules reflected an even greater confusion which would plague observers and commenters throughout the week – how could anyone tell who won.

Nine of us from Colby – Steve Orlov, Dick Kaynor, Bob Knight, Lyndon Summers, Ken Eisen, Joel Simon, Andy Koss, Peter Vose and me – had come to Washington to commit civil disobedience. Most of us expected to be arrested; some were prepared to be clubbed. We had come because we opposed the war and wanted to demonstrate through the power of non-violent civil disobedience that our commitment to the war’s end went beyond placards and petitions to congressmen.

We had come expecting to engage in Gandhian civil disobedience (passive non-violence); we learned, however, on meeting up with our regional group Sunday afternoon that the tactic now being favored was “mobile non-violence.” Apparently because of fears that the numbers of demonstrators had been significantly reduced by the park clearing and because of a greater concern for the ends (who would win the “Stop the City” Bowl Game) rather than the means, regional leaders favoring “mobile” tactics had prevailed over others wanting more passive disobedience. Gandhi was to be mixed with Abbie Hoffman and the result would be a kind of touch football in the streets.

The kids were up early Monday but, as the slogan goes, the police department never sleeps. The cops and the troops were out in force and they had already had the four bridges from Virginia to D.C. neatly in their pockets. Ken and I drove our cars into the city before six. Our job was to use the cars for blocking and slowing down traffic. Steve and Peter stayed with us in case of trouble and the others disembarked on the D.C. side of the Theodore Roosevelt Bridge. From the beginning it was clear that things were not going our way.

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Steve and I drove around participating in and occasionally starting traffic jams. Scenes from Godard films met us at nearly every corner. Police charging and swinging into clumps of demonstrators, police cars chasing kids across parks, the grey smoke of tear gas rising everywhere, troops in their full, khaki battle gear lining the city's bridges. The government had responded to the threats of a shut-down with force and throughout the morning they had the kids running from their attacks and reeling from the tear gas. Traffic was snarled (some places for hours) but as the government pointed out, the workers got through.

When the Colby contingent returned to Ken's house in Arlington, we evaluated what had happened and discovered that Jody and Lyndon had been arrested. Everyone at the Eisen's was disappointed with how the demonstration had developed. We had come to be arrested and instead spent the whole day avoiding arrest. All of us agreed, no more of the same.

That evening, however, Bob, Steve and I talked with Hosea Williams, a leader of the SCLC, and he told us that his organization would lead a march to the Justice Department Tuesday afternoon which would end in a mass sit-down and, almost certainly, arrests. Six of us decided to go; four of us (Ken, Steve, Dick and I) got arrested. (Bob and Peter had taken a lunch break during the speeches and when they returned from their "Justice Department" sandwiches, they found four rows of police blocking off access to the several thousand demonstrators.)

The demonstrations at Justice were what we had been hoping for. When the police arrived, the two or three thousand protesters sat down and pulled out handkerchiefs to use in case of tear gas. The police moved toward us in rows, a tear gas canister was set off accidentally. The people didn't panic, they didn't run, they stayed together. The police began the arrests. At first, there were some incidents of violence, police clubbing and macing demonstrators, but when the cops realized that there would be no resistance, the arrests came orderly and peaceful.

The arrested demonstrators were taken in buses to areas of detention. The four of us from Colby and about 800 other people were placed in the U.S. District Court cell block. We were held in a cell (50'x20') with 100 other protesters and later in a cell (15'x15') containing 66

people.

The over-crowding, the oppressive heat, and the bologna sandwiches served with rancid mayonnaise made life in the cells difficult. But it also served as a crucible test for the principles of communal living. When food was provided for us, we asked to be allowed to pass the food back to the back of the cell in an orderly way. The people sitting against the back wall ate first. We overcame the difficulties of too many people by communicating with each other and arranging shifts for sleeping (while some slept, others stood or sat uncomfortably). In short, we survived by learning to live with and care for each other.

At 10:30 Wednesday morning, I was taken in a bus to court. Ken, Steve, and Dick had to remain in an even smaller cell (8'x12') with 33 people until five that evening. Dick, Ken, and I were fortunate to be arraigned before Judge Halleck, the judge most sympathetic to our cause in the city. Halleck was accepting pleas of nolo contendere (no contest) and giving sentences of two days or $20 (the two days considered already served). Steve and Jody were released on bond and the charges against Lyndon were dropped.

People have asked us since we've returned to Colby what was accomplished in Washington. The media, knowing that nobody likes a tie game, had ruled that the police had won. And indeed there are strong arguments to support that conclusion: the city was kept open, the government did function, and the war still continues. The police statistics were also impressive: virtually all government employees made it to work and almost 14,000 demonstrators had been arrested. And the people who watched on their sets at home saw the police always on the offensive and the demonstrators on the run.

But one thing that the media seemed to forget was that the shutting down of Washington was only one of May Day's aims. The demonstrators were designed to project an image of Washington, D.C., to the world as the scene of social chaos brought on by the country's involvement in Indochina and the problems of racism and poverty at home. By forcing the government to line its streets with thousands of soldiers the demonstrations created an image not easily washed away.

But more importantly, May Day was the first large-scale application of non-violent civil disobedience by white Americans. The arrest tallies which are pointed to with such pride by Chief Wilson stand perhaps as a greater monument to the determination and will to sacrifice of the protesters. As we were being taken away from the Justice Department in a bus, the cry of the people with us was not of defeat but of victory. As we passed people on the streets kids leaned out the windows shouting "We won, we won."

But the greater measure of victory of defeat had to lie in the effect the actions had on those not participating. The initial reaction from television commentators and politicians indicated that the demonstrations were not well received, but other adults who were more immediately involved with the May Day occurrences felt differently. For instance, a reporter for the*Washington Star* who was arrested at Justice and served time in our cell block wrote on Thursday, "I … was radicalized, but not just in the political sense. When I was separated from the group in the cell block, I told them I didn't know whether to flash a V sign for peace or a fist for power. 'Give them both,' said a friend. I did."

The spirit, he wrote, comparable to that of the "Britons in their bomb shelter during World War II or civil rights workers in the south" – was the feeling of men and women with a vision of a new society that is coming. Everyone I've talked to who experienced that feeling left

Washington knowing that they had found 14,000 brothers and sisters by being in jail. The whole question of victory or defeat became submerged under all of us win or all of us lose.

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Stephen Orlov is an award-winning playwright, who recently co-edited with Melbourne-based Palestinian playwright and poet, Samah Sabawi, Double Exposure: Plays of the Jewish and Palestinian Diasporas, the first English-language anthology worldwide in any genre of drama, prose, or poetry by Jewish and Palestinian writers.

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