

Peaceful protest:

When CNN took a commercial break from the war in the Gulf, I glanced over at T. on the other side of the sofa. Her nostrils were flaring.

“What’s wrong?” I asked sliding closer.

"I've decided one thing," said my wife. "I'll *never* ever become a Canadian citizen." She shook her head and blew out a long breath. "I thought when I came here that I was coming to a peaceful country. But now –" she shook her head, "now I can see that Canadians are just puppets – puppets of the Americans."

"Well, Canada is a member of the United Nations. And part of NATO. Our military was obligated to go along with this."

"Obligated to kill Arabs? She cried. "That’s bullshit!"

"Let’s just hope it’s over quickly," I said, "And that the Israelis don’t jump into it."

"All the blood will be on the hands of George Bush," she flared. "I just wish someone would stop that bastard with a bullet. He is evil!" A little roughly, she pulled my arm off her neck.

"Come on, now," I chuckled, "I'm not George Bush."

"It’s just so unfair. Americans don’t know what it’s like to be bombed." Sobbing, she dropped her head on my shoulder.



I was already in bed when T. finally came upstairs. Apart from the break for supper and getting the girls ready for bed, she’d watched CNN almost continually through the day.

I waited with fingers on the lamp switch while she undressed. Before lying down, she blurted: "I think I'm having a nervous breakdown." She rolled to the far side.

"T.," I said turning towards her, "I know you're upset by the news – but come on –what’s the point in worrying about what far beyond your control?"

Uncomforted, her back shuttered in a paroxysm of sobs.



Exhausted and woozy from the unshakable chest cold, I phoned to ask T. to pick me up after work at the back of the college annex. I held my tongue when she arrived 30 minutes late. With the girls strapped in the rear seat, we drove back to Burnaby listening to the CBC radio blaring with live coverage of Operation Desert Storm. We were twisting up Forest Grove Drive around 4:00 PM when a breaking report trumpeted that pre-dawn Bagdad was alit with the explosions of cruise missiles. Finally, T. broke her silence:

"Why, why, why does Bush have to bomb children in their beds just because they're Iraqis?" She thumped the wheel, "Does Bush think that Iraqis are not human?"

"Careful, T.—careful!" I croaked, "Just watch the road— just concentrate on your driving."

"It is Bush who is the monster, not Saddam Hussein!"

For an instant, it occurred that *Baba M.*, her own father (burly with a thick moustache) much more closely resembled Saddam than he did Bush...

"Please don't let the television drive you crazy," I said.

I can't stand it." She sobbed.

"Look," I touched her arm. "There is something we can do that might make you feel better. There's a march against the war downtown on Saturday. We can go. You will see that you're not alone. OK?"

She nodded, wad of tissue to her nose. Whatever consolation that proposal may have afforded, it seemed that the thought of every striking tomahawk missile 15,000 km distant, still heaved her breast...



Saturday was cold but sunny. With the girls in parkas and mittens, we drove downtown in late morning. From the parkade on Hastings St., we walked up Granville to Georgia Street where a crowd was gathering near the art gallery steps. Cardboard signs bobbed and twirled as the anti-war protestors began moving west towards Howe Street.

With T. holding little TE in arms and me with 5-year-old MT on shoulders, we stepped off the curb and squeezed into the human flood. Past police motorcycles and barricades halting traffic,

we were swept along around the pre-determined march route. Finally, though a gauntlet of TV cameras we were back on the northwest corner of the art gallery plaza.

For another 20 minutes with the girls on shoulders, T. and I squinted up towards the top of the steps where a green banner (*'End the arms race'*) was hung between the columns. With the echoes and the chatter, it was difficult to make out the exhortations from the microphone. Reps from Greenpeace, and the ILO led anti-war chants. One activist, playing his guitar over the screechy loudspeaker tried to urge the crowd into *'solidarity forever'* but with the march over, people were drifting away.

With MT slumping on my shoulders, I looked over at little TE jostling in her mom's arms. She was still awake and looking bewildered.

"Are you getting cold, honey?" I squeezed her mittened hand.

"I think so," said T. "But they were both *very* good girls— very patient. They never cried the whole time."

For the first time in a week— my wife was smiling.

1991, January

Of inspirational futility:



Flashing on the images of the 1991 march for peace at the start of Operation Desert Storm—I stepped into a far larger crowd marching down Georgia St. to protest the impending Gulf War redux... Beside me was 11-year-old MH who was not yet born when his sisters, mom and I attended that first rally.

Hand lettered cardboard signs (*'Stop the Gulf War'*) jostled amid large banners that held up by pairs of protesters (*'No Blood for Oil'*) Quite as expected, there were mixed messages: *'Protect North Korea's right to nuclear defence'*, urged a Trotskyite banner. *'Asses of Evil'*, proclaimed a poster showing the face of the Pope between that of Bush and Blair. There was also the predictable plethora of fringe groups revelling in their rare opportunity to hand out leaflets.

Still, unlike the few blocks walked in the cold sunlight of that futile demonstration in 1991, today it was a much larger event and a longer circuit... For some 20 minutes, we jostled down Robson St. before circling back to the art gallery plaza. Unlike 12 years ago, this rally seemed better planned. There was a makeshift stage on the steps with a podium with a microphone backed by a bank of amplifiers.

"You said we'd have to stay only 10 more minutes, dad." nudged MH. "Com'on, let's go—the smells are bothering my nose!" Indeed, we were enveloped by the sweetish scent of weed.

"Just a few more minutes, honey." I urged, hand on his shoulders. "Let's just hear a bit of the music. Be patient."

Tuning up was a 'Rock Against Racism' band. "Hello, Vancouver, we are the peace capital of Canada," said the singer, striking jangling chords. "We are 20,000!"

"How many did he say were here?" asked an old woman on my right. "Did he say 20,000?"

"That's what I heard," I said, a lump in my throat thickening.

So for another 15 minutes, we stood absorbing the throbbing bass along with the spirit of solidarity. Even if the number was doubly inflated, the turnout was inspiring...

Still, how do these rallies even remotely impact processes already set in motion? It is irrelevant to Bush that little Canada chooses for once not to take scalps along with big brother. Bush has

his ‘international’ cover from the old dowager of empire, thanks to slimy Toby Blair. Already the imperial forces are poised to strike. The war machine is loaded and locked for firing. The trigger pull is no more stoppable than ejaculation a few seconds before orgasm...

Still, for those last few moments before slipping away from the rally, I tingled in the certainty that however futile—showing up with MH today had *some* meaningful purpose...

2003, January
