

THE CAPITOL STEPS

A 1971 Vietnam War protest at the Capitol and events of Jan. 6 could not be more different

By **JOHN GFROERER**
For the Monitor

It was a completely peaceful demonstration on the steps of the Capitol in Washington.

I had unexpectedly come upon it while making a delivery to the National Council of Churches across the street. Getting back into my car I noticed that something was going on. At that time the area on the east side of the Capitol building was a large parking lot, so before heading back to the office I decided to pull in and see what was happening. The moment has never been forgotten.

The steps on the House side of the Capitol building were full, top to bottom, with demonstrators against the war in Vietnam, peacefully sitting in silent protest.

At the top of the steps were several members of Congress, including Ron Dellums of California and Bella Abzug of New York, speaking to the assembled. At the bottom, a platoon of police was starting to methodically arrest everyone sitting on the steps. Members of Congress were pleading with the police to stop, saying the demonstrators were their guests. But the police were not swayed and continued with their mission.

It was the final culminating event after two weeks of continuous demonstrations in Washington against the war in the spring of 1971. It began with Vietnam Vets, including future Secretary of State John Kerry, throwing their medals back at the Congress. A few days after that, half a million people marched on the Capitol to rally against the war. That was followed by over a week of different actions leading to civil disobedience.

Every day there were arrests of people making their statement against the war. It was, and still is, the largest



Veterans protesting the war in Vietnam throw medals and other articles on the steps of the Capitol on April 23, 1971, in Washington.

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SEE STEPS C3

A Vietnam War protest on the steps of the Capitol played out differently

STEPS FROM C1

mass arrests for civil disobedience in American History.

Washington was tense. On Monday of that week I awoke to see a busload of police in riot gear next to the park outside my window. I stopped walking to work, for fear I would be arrested just being on the street. D.C. jails were full beyond capacity and D.C. Stadium was being used as a temporary place to hold those arrested.

This action on the Capitol steps was the conclusion of it all. I had participated in a march to the Justice Department the day before, but left before those arrests began. I had been arrested at a demonstration myself the week before. Now I was back at work and had forgotten this last event was even happening until it caught my eye.

And, quite by happenstance, there I was witnessing what still to this day troubles me. The demonstrators, peaceful in their presence, being arrested for simply sitting on the steps of the Capitol, while congressmen advocated for the arrests to stop – yet powerless to impact what was

playing out before them.

I watched for several minutes trying to digest what I was seeing. Disgust mixed with hope.

The contradictions that can exist with being an American: living in a free society but yet knowing there were limits to that freedom. This was the reality being played out before me, contradictions that present no resolution. Basic tensions that allow us all to coexist under one dome of freedom, with our own closely clung-to ideas of what that freedom should look like – different as those ideas may be.

Troubling as it was, there was a calmness that encircled the moment. The members of Congress, while clearly upset, were not calling the police names or demonizing them for doing their job. Those sitting on the steps about to be arrested did not resist or carry weapons to attack. And the police did not use excessive force in carrying out their work.

There seemed to be a mutual respect among all involved, an understanding that this is what I must do, and this is what you must do. This



Vietnam veterans opposed to the war assemble on the steps of the Capitol in Washington on April 19, 1971, to protest the U.S. action in Indochina.

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is our role at this moment in our democracy.

I gave brief consideration to going over and joining those on the steps, but on the other hand I was not quite ready to go back to jail so soon. And people back at the office where I worked would be wondering what had happened to me. So, I chose to just witness for a few minutes before heading back to my car and to work.

The next morning on the front page of the *Washington Post* was a picture of my good

friend Arlene being arrested at the Capitol. I had no idea she was even there. A day or two later she woke me with an early morning call to say she had just been released from D.C. Stadium. But by that time, life in Washington had for the most part returned to normal.

I was walking to work again without fear, the many out-of-town demonstrators had left, and the war in Vietnam was set to continue for a couple more years.

As you might expect, the

events of Jan. 6 on those very same steps have me doing some reflecting. There are some similarities. But mostly there are obvious and important differences.

There is no place more appropriate to bring our grievances about how things are going than the Capitol building in Washington, D.C. You can't escape the symbolism or history of that building. To stand beneath it can be humbling as it beckons to hear us, and to enfold us into that history.

The word that keeps throwing itself in front of me when considering the differences between this demonstration and that demonstration is "courage." I think of my friend Arlene and the courage it took for her to make a statement against an unjust war and know the consequences she would face.

Watching the arresting policemen get closer and closer, unsure of where she would be taken and for how long, she remained firm and did not run, accepting that her temporary incarceration was minimal compared to continuing that war.

It does not require courage

to pick up a stick, or flagpole, or fire extinguisher, and join a mob breaking windows and doors and chasing people with your anger. Just like it doesn't take courage to pick up a gun and threaten people with a fleeting sense of superiority.

America calls us to have courage. But it does not call us to shout down or beat down or break down those with whom we disagree. It calls for courage, to make change and deeper courage to accept when that change isn't going to happen as we want.

Most importantly, America calls for us to have the courage to respect the institutions which govern our liberty. We should recognize that we use the same steps in our quests, and sharing those steps unites us in ways deeper than one misguided president can disrupt.

Courage, respect, acceptance are how we move ahead together. Though worried, I have faith we will find the path.

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