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Party Crashers

■ When The GOP Nominates Bush, There Will Be Flies In The Anointment

June 27, 2004

By JOHN JURGENSEN, Courant Staff Writer

Bedford Avenue is a low-slung strip of trendy commerce where the idle hip loiter and mingle in shoebox bars, boutiques and galleries.

A few blocks beyond Bedford's gentrified heart in Brooklyn, Jonny America steps out of a bodega with a six-pack of Samuel Adams. Beer named for an American patriot is apt refreshment for an evening of plotting a "revel-ution."

In a basement apartment around the corner, Jonny joins about a dozen people gathered on couches under a low ceiling covered with plastic turf. Lights from a spinning disco ball strafe the assembled members of Greene Dragon, a loose collective of more than 30 artists, activists and curious joiners that takes its name from the tavern where Paul Revere and his cronies hatched their plans.

Over the next two hours they discuss logos ("It's got to look good as a T-shirt and a tattoo"), slogans ("Maximus revelus!"), costuming ("Imagine if Ben Franklin got down with Bootsy Collins") and finances (negligible).

These are the small, tedious steps they're taking on a determined path to roil the Republican National Convention at summer's end - and have fun as they do it.

Jonny, a slim, sleepy-eyed, first-time organizer, explains his historical inspiration this way: "The country was founded on a bunch of radicals getting together and having a good time. We're about having a good time through the political process."

With an itinerary of theatrics that includes a July 4 declaration of independence from "corporate monarch George II" and a ride along Lexington Avenue during the convention to warn New Yorkers that "the Republicans are coming," Greene Dragon is just one of the many groups forming strategies to get noticed amid an expected crush of anti-Republican action.

But what will these sweaty, high-summer days of dissent look like?

Expect to see sudden floods of bicyclists and a phalanx of bell ringers around ground zero. Expect marchers en masse and attempts to confront Republican delegates directly as they tour the city. Expect a campaign of "electronic civil disobedience" against conservative

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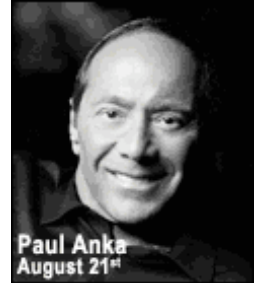


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computer networks. And expect a circus of outrage, including a piece of street theater featuring choreographed vomiting.

Depending on whom you talk to, the 2004 Republican convention could look like Seattle in 1999. Or Chicago in 1968.

But many hope that their efforts will create a new high-watermark on the messy history of mass protest.

"I would like to see August [in New York] turn into a political ground zero," says Jason Flores-Williams, a political writer for High Times magazine. "I want to see waves of direct actions. Streets being blockaded. Almost constant attempts to [engage] Madison Square Garden. I'd like to see 2,000 to 3,000 arrests a day. The jails overflowing. Where the story becomes the nightmare around the convention."

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To try to steal the spotlight from the Republicans, a leftist array has been forming since last summer with organizational meetings in New York. But outside of the usual suspects - the inveterate protesters - the convention is likely to draw a diverse throng, temporarily united by their beefs with the Bush administration. For example, groups as seemingly opposed as the Hip-Hop Summit Action Network and the city's police and fire unions have filed for marching permits.

But what bearing could marches, no matter how grand, have on the scene inside the Garden? Or on observers around the world?

With the U.S. on the brink of invading Iraq in February 2003, tens of thousands of demonstrators rallied near the United Nations in New York - a crowd matched in London, Rome and Paris and other world capitals. The outcry was reported around the globe. But the war, of course, proceeded.

So, although most people who oppose the Republican convention agree on the need for sheer numbers in the streets, they also understand the limits of the traditional street protest. Although many of the youngest and most spirited activists plan to join the wide river of marchers that will converge the day before the convention begins, they also look forward to shooting the rapids of dissent with acts of civil disobedience and disruption.

"People are really frustrated with the options that are available, with coming to the protest and holding their signs. They want to do more and be more confrontational," says Jamie Moran, 30, who helps run RNC Not Welcome, an activist collective that encourages "decentralized actions" meant to rattle the four-day convention.

"It's really hard to say what's going to happen because we don't know," Moran says, "but I want to make Bush go home with his tail between his legs."

Whether that goal is met might well depend on those defying traditional tactics.

Consider this: The anti-war coalition United for Peace and Justice applied more than a year ago for permits for the



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largest gathering expected (they anticipate about 250,000 for an Aug. 29 demonstration). The group plans a march up Eighth Avenue, past Madison Square Garden, to Central Park for a rally.

So far, the organization has not gotten a permit. And neither have at least a dozen other groups that have applied for permission to march or gather.

"We're totally disgusted," says William K. Dobbs, the spokesman for United for Peace and Justice. "Permits are the means by which the state and city can work to stop or suffocate a protest or stop it from blossoming."

Like Moran, John Flanigan expects some of the best results from the most disruptive behavior. The 28-year-old is a veteran of the 1999 anti-globalization clashes in Seattle, an experience he calls "extremely empowering." Recently he has conducted workshops in New York, training activists in such topics as how to create effective human blockades and how to make calm decisions when confronted by police.

Top New York police have said that terrorists concern them more than mobs of angry Americans armed with the First Amendment. But that doesn't mean the police are going to make it easy for them. An NYPD spokesman would not describe security specifics, but the press has reported that about 10,000 officers could be assigned to the convention, in addition to the Secret Service and FBI.

Confronted with a perimeter designed to protect the president, direct action planners are seeking ways to confront Republican delegates elsewhere in the city. For example, anti-convention websites offer lists of where delegates are lodging and the Broadway shows they plan to attend.

"If people can't actually get to the site and they feel like they're banging their heads against the wall, then they can look outside of that," Flanigan says. "I know a lot of people are targeting the hotels where the delegates are staying or targeting the people who are funding the RNC."

•

A hint of the coming spectacle emerges during the biweekly NoRNC Clearinghouse, a forum to encourage communication among the groups crafting plans.

In May, perhaps 200 people, including Jonny America (not his real name), attend a meeting at St. Mark's Church in the East Village.

Reporters must identify themselves. Cameras are forbidden. Cops are assumed to be undercover.

Inside a semicircle of folding chairs, a man holds up signs written on paper towels that tell people at the microphone that they have 2 minutes, 1 minute, 30 seconds left to speak.

As dozens wait in line to pitch their missions and causes - from soliciting political street art, to offering emergency legal aid, to "demilitarizing" the police - a calendar on an easel fills up with events that start more than a week before the convention.

Among them: The Critical Mass ride that will jam the

streets with bicyclists; the "Bushville" tent city of homeless families and their advocates; bell ringers who want to encircle ground zero; the arrival of marchers who started walking from the convention in Boston weeks earlier; a poor people's procession; and the provocatively labeled "day of mass creative resistance" on Aug. 31.

Perusing this schedule as the meeting nears the three-hour mark, a jaded observer might be excused for asking, what's the point? It's not as if any of this will prevent Bush's nomination.

It's the question that haunts any protest struggle. But part of the answer lies in the approximately 15,000 members of the international press that convention organizers are expecting in the city.

"If they got one image that really captured the message, that would be a great thing," says Wendy Tremayne, explaining why, of all the media available, she plans to invite photographers only from The Associated Press and Reuters to the event she's coordinating. With attention from those two wire services, images from her happening in downtown Manhattan could ricochet around the world.

And if her vision materializes, those images could be unsettling.

Tremayne is creating a vomitorium. An urban legend held over from ancient Rome, vomitoriums are said to be the alcoves where the gluttonous upper class threw up to make room for more feasting. The historical veracity of the vomitorium is questionable, but for Tremayne the metaphor is more important.

"I love the visceral stuff," says the 36-year-old yoga instructor who lives in the Williamsburg section of Brooklyn. "In truth, I think [the project] is more about capitalism and where it took us."

To decry what she sees as America's "over-consumption to the point of sickness," Tremayne is recruiting a cast of faux-Romans to gorge on platters of food and then, before an audience gathered at a city park, make themselves vomit. She's already acquired the pig troughs and asked a biochemist to prepare a pamphlet titled, "So, You've Decided to Puke."

"If you want to take ipecac, go ahead. If you want to use a finger, go ahead. You just have to throw up," Tremayne says of her guidelines.

A former publicist, she knows how to amplify statement with spectacle. Maybe that's why she eschews the formula of march/slogan/sign to avoid alienating - or maybe worse, boring - potential allies.

It's an impulse that also defines the raucous political theater of Greene Dragon and Billionaires for Bush, one of the most talked-about groups poking at the administration.

Cloaked in the uniforms of the elite - power suits, ball gowns, tiaras - the Billionaires crash Republican events with champagne flutes in their hands, fake bills falling out of their pockets and slogans such as, "Four more wars!" and "Corporations are people too!" In August, they'll welcome Republicans to New York with a "Million Billionaires March."

In its original form, the Billionaires began in 2000. Now, anchored by an executive team of about six people, including New York-based founder Phil T. Rich (otherwise known as Andrew Boyd), the Billionaires have multiplied. Thanks to a witty concept, generous media attention, and a downloadable do-it-yourself manual, there are about 50 chapters across the country and four overseas.

As the spokeswoman who goes by Pam Perd puts it, "Who wouldn't want to be a Billionaire?"

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Billionaires for Bush are the rock stars of the protest scene, role models for activist who want to break out of the pack.

"Their level of organization is pretty sophisticated. They're not just this misguided missile," says Tremayne, noting the Billionaires' emphasis on inclusion. "If you want to latch onto something, this is continuous, it's social, it's creative. For a lot of people who are sick of the desk-job grinder it's a way to jump out and become an artist."

In their countercultural popularity and guerrilla theater tactics, the Billionaires and their ilk could be heirs of '60s icons like the Yippies. The brainchild of such radicals as Abbie Hoffman and Jerry Rubin, the Yippies nominated a swine called "Pigassus" for president at the 1968 Democratic convention in Chicago. Still, that convention is remembered more for its street violence, as police gassed and beat demonstrators (and even some journalists and bystanders).

Jonny America might be walking in Yippie footsteps, but he is no hippie.

When New York magazine picked him to be on its cover in May for a story on local protesters, the 29-year-old who often hears about his resemblance to actor Jason Priestley agreed to drape his bare torso in an American flag. But he balked when the photographer asked him to flash a peace sign for the camera. Too cliché.

Instead, his activism is younger, born out of a uniquely late-century phenomenon: Burning Man.

Started in San Francisco almost 20 years ago, this annual gathering now attracts about 25,000 people to the Black Rock Desert of Nevada. On a dried lake bed 120 miles north of Reno each summer they create a pulsing, self-sufficient community dedicated to "radical self-expression." Performances, art installations and thematic encampments create the civic life of the temporary city, building to a peak just before Labor Day when a giant effigy is set ablaze.

It was during his own Burning Man initiation in 2003 that Jonny had an epiphany about how he'd express himself politically in the future. Inspiration hit at a roller disco in the desert as parachutists floated out of the sky.

"At this moment, I realized I'd been living in limits. That's when I realized, I'm done [with conventional] protesting. I'm done marching. What is that? It's walking in line. It's following a certain path you're told to walk," Jonny says. "Greene Dragon is totally Burner-inspired."

After the meeting in Brooklyn adjourns, Jonny, who is

"flying by the seat of my pants" without a day job until the November election, wanders out to the kitchen. He sits on a stool near two of his collaborators, Phil Anderson and Elana Levin, as they parse their party-based approach to activism.

"If politics isn't sexy, why do it?" asks Levin, who wears spearmint-colored knee socks with her black Converse high tops.

A former Howard Dean worker, Levin is the full-time New York organizer for the Committee to ReDefeat the President, a group that gets people together in restaurants and bars to call unregistered voters in swing states on their cellphones, trying to persuade them to vote Democrat.

She's not the only one so politically engrossed. Anderson is trying to get Republican delegates to participate in a documentary film and Jonny has moonlighted as a Billionaire for Bush.

Such political multitasking says they're sincere, even if they take to the streets in gaudy sequined vests and tri-cornered hats. Or if there's a dose of bacchanalia in their rallies, such as a recent pub crawl in costume through the "colonial" Williamsburg section of Brooklyn to gather new recruits.

"When it comes right down to it most of us are dead serious," Levin says. "The status quo is absolutely intolerable. This is our way of criticizing it and setting fire to it."

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