

Cops Raid Shadow Conventions

Written by Don Hazen, Alternet
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Claiming they had an intelligence tip about a bomb threat, Los Angeles County sheriff's deputies on August 14 temporarily closed down Patriotic Hall, the home of the Independent Media Center and the Shadow Conventions, located five blocks from the Democratic Convention. (See the July 12 River Cities' Reader for coverage of the Shadow Conventions.)

The deputies detained three activists for several hours, shut down all power to a TV satellite truck in the parking lot, and tore apart a "suspicious" van, only to later admit they had the wrong vehicle. As a result, Free Speech TV's live national telecast, *Crashing the Party* – which would have been broadcast in 60 cities across the country during Bill Clinton's speech – was knocked off the air. At the same time, hundreds of Shadow Convention participants were pushed out into the street.

Compounding matters, The Los Angeles Police Department reportedly got another "tip" that there was rioting going on outside Patriotic Hall and sent a massive police force roaring to the South Figueroa Street location. Trucks with shotgun-toting cops, hundreds of riot-gear police, and five large buses all pulled up, ready to make massive arrests. What they discovered was Gore Vidal and Christopher Hitchens speaking to a crowd of 200 people in the streets outside the hall, forced there by the sheriff's deputies inside. When asked how the LAPD could think there was rioting going on with the county deputies on the scene, the department's deputy chief commented that "communication between the departments isn't very good."

Brian Drolett, in charge of satellite operations for Free Speech TV, said, "By what right can they come in and shut down a national TV show on this flimsy pretense? By what right can they turn L.A. into a police state and discourage people from talking about the issues of import to Americans? I can only think that this was a planned effort to block our satellite transmission."

Rachel Cadman, a radio journalist working at the Independent Media Center, had been standing near her van in the Patriotic Hall parking lot late that afternoon when four sheriff's deputies aggressively approached and took her, her sister, and a friend into custody. According to the deputies, the LAPD bomb squad was then called – but they didn't respond immediately because they wanted more information. Nevertheless, without the bomb squad present, the van was pulled apart, and all its contents thrown out into the parking lot and left there. (The bomb

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squad would arrive later and search the truck a second time, without finding any bomb-related materials.)

After being forced out on to the sidewalk, the Shadow Convention participants shared a loudspeaker from the mobile truck of Anteye.com, a video-oriented web site covering the Shadow Convention. Arianna Huffington and her cohorts attempted to keep the show going. The situation brought out the gallows humor of Vidal and Hitchens, two of the more droll commentators on the American left. Vidal said he “felt like he was in Chicago in '68 and was filling in the time until the bomb went off.” Hitchens offered, “If we had a general election, we’d have to decide which generals to choose.” While Hitchens was joking, hundreds of riot-gearred cops were lining the streets and marching toward the Anteye truck and the people listening in the street.

Ultimately the entire situation at Patriotic Hall seemed an exercise in elaborate harassment by the various L.A. police forces, aimed at disrupting peaceful activities. It seemed at almost every turn, the LAPD had adopted the Colin Powell approach to democracy – shows of massive force to intimidate the expression of free speech.