



N.Y. wants calm, but demonstrators prefer some chaos

Convention stirs protest plans

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NEW YORK -- If Mayor Michael Bloomberg and police officials have their way, protests at next week's Republican National Convention will be predictable and orderly, posing little inconvenience to delegates as they are feted at events around the city.

But not everyone is planning to be so cooperative. A number of groups already have announced they are planning acts of civil disobedience designed to make the GOP's stay as uncomfortable as possible.

One group is planning to tell the "naked truth" about the Bush administration by appearing in public without clothes. Another plans to harass delegates at Broadway shows and other events. Still another is staging an illegal march and "die in" near Madison Square Garden.

The FBI says it has intelligence that anarchist groups are planning acts of violence similar to what occurred in 1999 at the World Trade Organization conference in Seattle, where windows were shattered and more than 400 people were arrested.

But even if nothing so dire occurs, it is clear that some groups are offended by the city's effort to stage-manage the protests and are bent on departing from the script.

"It's to make sure we are not ignored," said Eric Laursen of the A31 Action Coalition, which is planning acts of civil disobedience on Aug. 31, the second day of the convention. "It's very easy for the authorities to arrange permitted marches and rallies in such a way that they can be ignored. Protesters are given routes to march on that are surrounded by police."

Another group, the War Resisters League, will stage an unauthorized march from Ground Zero to Madison Square Garden at 3 p.m. next Tuesday, said Frida Berrigan, a member of the group's board and daughter of noted peace activist Philip Berrigan. She said the event, which is to draw attention to military and civilian deaths in Iraq and Afghanistan, will culminate in a "die in" in which participants will lie down in an intersection.

"We feel the Republicans are using New Yorkers' grief over 9/11 in a cynical way to make the president look tough on terrorism," Berrigan said. "We are marching for all the other Ground Zeros that have been made possible by the administration's policies."

Throughout the convention, which is to run from Monday through Thursday at Madison Square Garden, the city is to maintain a penned-in protest zone stretching south on Eighth Avenue from 31st Street. It also has granted permits for protests elsewhere.

But some of the zest for civil disobedience has been stoked by the city's refusal to allow groups to protest in Central Park. United for Peace and Justice, a national peace coalition planning a massive protest for Sunday, has filed a lawsuit in an effort to gain access to the park.

The coalition has said it is only interested in a permitted demonstration and will not engage in civil disobedience. And the groups that are planning civil disobedience, including the War Resisters League and the A31 Action Coalition, have said their demonstrations would be non-violent.

But both the FBI and the city police are keeping tabs on individuals and groups known to have engaged in violent protest, though neither agency has been able to cite specific threats against the convention.

The potential for violence has provoked a debate among opponents of the Bush administration over whether even aggressive street theater would be a wise strategy for Bush's detractors.

Todd Gitlin, an author and Columbia University journalism professor who was a founder of Students for a Democratic Society, a Vietnam-era protest coalition, said violence at the 1968 Democratic Convention in Chicago helped strengthen Richard Nixon's "hold over the law-and-order vote." He said ugly scenes at the GOP convention next week could, fairly or not, be associated with the Democrats

"The theatrics of rage can easily play into Bush's hands," Gitlin wrote in the current issue of *The Nation*.

But Tom Hayden, another important figure in the 1960s protests, wrote in an op-ed piece in *Newsday* last week that aggressive protests could underscore how much Bush has divided the country.

"A confrontation in New York," Hayden wrote, "could be a sign that four more years of this president's policies will destabilize our country as needlessly as his Iraq adventure and trillion-dollar tax cuts for the wealthy."

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