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Elvis Says: Remember Seattle!

The King and the kids strike a blow at the heart of globalization. A vivid dispatch from the future.

BY JOHN H. RICHARDSON

On Tuesday, November 30, the World Trade Organization's meeting in Seattle was stopped by the unexpected arrival of thousands of protesters. The next day, the hammer came down.

At a corner, the guy with the green hat jumps up on an electrical utility box and makes a speech, using an orange highway cone as a megaphone. "It does my heart so good to see so many of my brothers and sisters here in the street!" he says.

"Fuck you!" someone says, as a joke. People laugh.

"Who's that guy?" somebody asks.

"He's the guy with the green hat," somebody answers.

Then the crowd notices he's also wearing a Nike jacket and starts booing him. He strips off his jacket and throws it in a tree and everyone cheers, and just as the guy with the Lenin beard takes his place and starts to preach--"What we need is the power of labor"--the crowd loses patience.

"No more talking! Let's march!"

AT THE DOCKS, a thousand people converge. Standing in a cold drizzle, they sing protest songs. Power to the people, power to the

people. A union leader gets up and tells them they're beautiful. "We're making history in Seattle, brothers and sisters! We came to Seattle as steelworkers and environmentalists and advocates for our separate causes, but we're leaving Seattle committed to the cause of social justice!"

Then the brawny union man introduces a skinny kid in glasses, says his name is David Taylor and he's one of the leaders of something called DAN, which has been right in the middle of everything this week. A big cheer goes up as the kid takes the mike. "Well, I'd like to say that all of us from Direct Action Network that are still out of jail came down today to support you guys and show them what coalitions are. We can shut down the WTO!"

Amid cheers and whoops and hollers, Taylor promises to keep protesting.

JUST OFF THE DOCKS, Coast Guard boats with armed police drift by. As the speeches continue, Taylor tells me he's studying political economy at Evergreen State College in Olympia and has been working to get ready for this week sixteen hours a day since August, when a group called Art and Revolution came to his campus and taught the students how to make big street puppets. That grew into DAN, a coalition of about eighteen groups from up and down the West Coast. For months now, they've been doing "nonviolent jail solidarity trainings" and "direct-action street-theater training."

"Currently, what's really bothering us is that they're not allowing the people who have been arrested to speak to lawyers," he says. "There are four busloads full of people sitting outside the jail. But our lawyers do not have accurate information because they have denied people their phone calls."

Taylor is an intelligent, well-spoken kid. He's charged up like everyone, but professional, getting the message out. He says that the anarchists we've heard so much about on TV were really just twenty kids, and they were far from the main action--the police didn't even do anything about them and instead were gassing the crowds. And today things are even worse. "We've had cell phones and all of our radio communication confiscated this morning, along with our puppets and signs. They stopped our van."

"How did they know it was your van?"

"It was filled with puppets."

He's twenty-two. His parents have been watching on TV, and yesterday in the middle of the tear gas, he talked to them on his cell phone. "I got some of my best recon information from them!" he says, laughing.

THE DIRECT ACTION NETWORK hall is a big old warehouse up near the city university, a raw space with a cement floor. Stacked in a corner are pipes with chains welded to them for use in human blockades, and human-sized cardboard turtle shells. In another corner are various huge puppets--a giant head, a globe, a pyramid like the one on the dollar bill. Near the other wall is a line of tables with hot food.

A hundred scraggly kids with aggressively alternative hair sit on the floor, having a meeting about tomorrow's events. First up is a man in a red clown nose. "The Red Nose Group proposes that we start by meeting in the parks--there's a really strong tradition in Seattle that parks are a place for public speech."

When he's finished, a facilitator shouts, "Stack!" This means that the next person in the "stack" of speakers should quickly take his turn.

"The Puppet Group has a proposal. We thought of having a march using what puppets we have left with everybody together so that it will be really clear to the media when they beat us down."

"Stack!"

"We have an offer of help from the National Guard," another man says. People laugh, but he continues. "I have a card here from the administrative officer for the National Guard public relations. He says he's available for us to use, on our side--he wants to make sure that we have our First Amendment rights."

The laughter mixes with applause.

"Stack!"

"I'm from the Reddi-wip Cluster. Just to say that the Reddi-wips support the idea of starting the march at 11:00 so that people would join us on their lunch hour."

The proposals continue for almost an hour. As they speak, a facilitator named Stephanie explains how it works--it's not democracy or even consensus but an affinity-group structure that dates back to the Spanish Civil War. After all the proposals are in, an affinity group can join with other groups in a large action, or not. She herself is a member of the Small-Town Sleazy Cowboys and the Lady Puppet Rodeo Association. "It's very empowering," she says. "Everyone's voice is recognized. There is no leader or hierarchy."

One of the more established affinity groups is an outfit called the Elvis Underground: The Church! It's been around for ten years and has about two thousand members who believe that "Elvis is the perfect example of nonviolence, a bottomless well of benevolence and love." They do weddings and protests and hand out flyers advertising their eleven commandments, which include "Don't Be Cruel" and "Love Me Tender" and "Return to Sender."

Specifically, in this action, they've hung mistletoe, set up a stereo system, distributed condoms (with a sticker that says, the king is coming) and clean socks, and run "rumor control." But mostly, they man two large pots of boiling tea, which, like their belief in Elvis, they don't push on anyone. "A popular saying in the church is, 'Although it's for everybody, it's not everybody's cup of tea.' "

"Did the King drink tea? I wasn't aware of that."

"Still does. Better tea than ever, too."

It's hard to tell whether he's being ironic. He says he's a deacon in the church ("My real name? Well, you can call me Deacon Rivers") and that when he heard about the protests six months ago, he immediately decided to come. "We feel that all suffering is caused by alienation from Elvis and separation from universal rhythm and harmony. So, you know, from a moral and spiritual point of view, I really didn't have any choice."

Has he ever imitated Elvis, I ask.

He hesitates. "Well, I think we all imitate Elvis in every way, you know? And I think that some of us are prepared to admit it, and some of us aren't."

UP ON BROADWAY, a few blocks from Seattle University, the police line up across the street, standing elbow to elbow in their black

Robocop gear--face shields and gas masks and body armor, metallic sci-fi voice of authority crackling through a megaphone: Disperse! Disperse! Fifty feet away, people stand on the sidewalks and street corners watching. One guy laughs to his friends and says, "Let's face it. We're here to see the riot."

In a fancy restaurant, a waiter waves a white napkin to get rid of some lingering tear gas. The cops came through a half hour ago, chasing a group of protesters.

A cameraman from a German television station films the police from a quiet corner. When a policeman tells him to move, he obediently crosses to the far corner and keeps filming. He's using a big broadcast camera, and it's obvious he's a professional, but suddenly a national guardsman darts forward with a can of pepper spray and squirts him--from no more than two feet away--right in the eyes. As he doubles over and howls in pain, the guardsman sees me standing there with my mouth open and lunges forward again. I feel the cool splash and then the burn--damn, it burns!

Immediately someone emerges from the shadows with a bottle of water and flushes out the German guy's eyes. As he tilts his head back and the water pours down his pain-twisted face, another cameraman comes up and tapes the scene.

A young man marches down the street toward the line of cops, shouting in a ragged howl, "I live here! I live here!" At the top of his lungs he tells them that he was just reading a bedtime story to his four-year-old daughter and then the bombs starting going off and the tear gas drifted in the window and they scared his daughter goddammit, and suddenly five guardsmen rush forward with five cans of pepper spray and just hose him down.

And suddenly everything explodes. Percussion bombs go Boom! Boom! Boom! and tear-gas canisters pinwheel overhead and hit the street, trailing ribbons of acrid smoke. It fills my throat with barbed wire and stings my eyes shut, and I can't even see enough to escape. Some sweet and decent person comes up and washes out my eyes--my brother!--and we run to the next street. Another line of cops! And they're starting to move! Run! There's a moment of panic, and everyone starts to scatter. A percussion bomb hits my leg and goes off with a huge boom! a foot away. Someone says, "They're shooting! Run!"

I stop long enough to see a policeman sneak up behind some stragglers and club them behind the knees. They crumple to the pavement.

Rubber bullets ping off the cars.

A CROWD STARTS TO GATHER at Broadway and Pike, just below the college. Someone passing by me says, "To be totally underground, you have to avoid places where there are groups like this." But the crowds are exciting and people keep pouring in. Pretty soon the street is full and the intersection blocked. Drummers arrive and start pounding out a steady beat. People start chanting, "Whose streets? Our streets!" A guy asks a girl if she wants to meet up later. A big nineteen-year-old homeless kid named Tim tells his story of urban warfare: "A fuckin' cop grabbed me by the lapel 'n' said, 'Get the hell offa Broadway.'" He's grinning.

Then the crowd starts moving up Pike toward the line of police, and the siege of Pike Street begins. Kids ease up toward the cops, taunting them. We pass a Foot Zone store and Tim checks the sizes. "If they had 13's, I'd break their window and get 'em." Near the cop line, a group produces a flag and starts trying to light it on fire. "Burn the flag! Burn the fuckin' flag!" But other people stop them--one guy says the flag is a symbol of our constitutional rights, dammit.

Then suddenly a middle-aged man in a suit walks right into the middle of the street and starts talking to the kids. "People are starting to see what you guys have been putting up with all day," he says. "And so now the important thing is to cool things out and show that we are peaceful."

"Who are you?" someone demands.

"My name's Brian," he says.

"Whaddya do?" shouts someone. "Are you an undercover cop?"

"No, I'm with King County. I'm on the county council. I'm a politician, okay? My name's Brian Derdowski. But I've been fightin' the WTO, and the important thing is to keep the pressure on the WTO. So if we can just clear the street and--"

"I'm not going!"

a guy says.

"Okay," Brian says. "But the public is starting to be aware. There's going to be serious examination of what's happening in the streets of Seattle."

"Right," says the suspicious man. "And there's to be serious examination if you are there with us."

"I am here."

"Things will change so much if you stand with us."

"I'm doing the best I can, brother."

By now Derdowski has a crowd of about fifty kids around him, and it's touching how grateful they are to see him there. They seem almost eager for adult leadership, for solidarity with a guy in a suit. They're shaking his hand and telling him their stories. The suspicious man turns to the crowd and says, "I'm not sure if he's actually believing what he's saying, but he's saying some good stuff."

And suddenly the cops start to move again. Boom! go the percussion bombs. Boom! Boom! Boom! Tear-gas canisters fly and wooden bullets thunk against walls and cars. Someone shouts, "Councilman Derdowski, what is that about?" Derdowski says he's going to go talk to the cops and begs the kids to get on the sidewalks, but as he approaches the police line, the cops unleash more tear gas and more percussion bombs. Someone smashes the window at the Foot Zone and people yell, No! and wrestle the vandal to the ground. I can't see if it's Tim, but judging from those big, flailing feet, it looks like it might be. Quickly a line of kids forms in front of the window to prevent looting, and they stand there for the next hour, until someone arrives to board up the store.

BACK UP AT THE DAN CENTER, fifty or sixty kids hang out, relaxing from the long day. People talk about this being the beginning of something. They're planning more protests, workshops, a summer caravan to train more activists, expanding their database. Someone announces that the police have agreed to let DAN lawyers into the jail. A cheer goes up.

Over by the Elvis Underground's card table, an angelic eight-year-old girl named Megan is serving tea. After she tells me about getting

teargassed, I ask her how long she's been working for Elvis.

"About, oh--forever."

I point to Deacon Rivers. "Is that your dad?"

"No," she says, pointing to a man with long hair and a droopy mustache. "That hairy fellow over there is my dad."

She's amazingly self-possessed, a still point in the chaos. "That hairy fellow?"

"Yes."

"And Deacon Rivers?"

"He's my friend."

"And Elvis?"

"He's the King."