

Miami crowd control would do tyrant proud

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Published November 30, 2003

Miami police Chief John Timoney must be mighty proud of the social order he maintained during the Free Trade Area of the Americas summit a couple of weeks ago in Miami - sort of the way Saddam Hussein was proud of quieting dissension in his country.

Timoney has a well-deserved reputation for using paramilitary tactics to turn any city where large protests are planned into a place where the Constitution has taken a holiday. During the FTAA meeting on Nov. 20, Timoney dispatched 2,500 police officers in full riot gear against a crowd estimated at 8,000 people, mostly union members and retirees.

The result was a show of force that would have made a Latin American dictator blush. Slavish public officials such as Miami Mayor Manny Diaz touted Timoney's handiwork as "a model for homeland defense," and the Miami Police Department has responded to complaints by saying that officers demonstrated "a tremendous amount of restraint."

But this is hardly the way eyewitnesses described it. The scene was a "massive police state," according to the president of the United Steelworkers of America, who has demanded a congressional investigation. Congress gave Miami \$8.5-million for security during the FTAA meetings - funds slipped inside the \$87-billion measure for Iraq. The steelworkers called it money for "homeland repression."

The National Lawyers Guild, a liberal legal organization, said the day was punctuated by "indiscriminate, excessive force against hundreds of nonviolent protesters with weapons including pepper spray, tear gas, and concussion grenades and rubber bullets."

Observers said the provocation for officers to shoot rubber bullets and paint balls filled with pepper spray at the predominantly peaceable crowd was often one person lobbing an orange in the direction of police or lighting a trash can on fire.

Nikki Hartman, a 28-year-old Pinellas County resident, was shot three times with rubber bullets - once, she said, when a police officer fired point-blank at her behind after she stooped to pick up a bandanna she'd dropped. The officer had kicked it her way before shooting her. She was later shot in the back while retreating from police lines. Her friend Robert Davis was shot seven times while trying to help Hartman to her feet.

In addition to such shootings, police abandoned any legitimate basis for searching and arresting people. Miles Swanson, 25, a legal observer for the lawyers guild, was punched numerous times while being taken in by officers for pointing out undercover police dressed up as protesters. Eight of 60 guild observers were arrested that day; they wore distinctive green hats and were apparently targeted. When Swanson was grabbed off the street by three Broward County sheriff's deputies - two of whom were in ski masks - he said they told him "this is what you get when you f-- with us." Then, Swanson said, the deputies drove him around while looking for another legal observer to arrest. He ultimately pleaded no contest to one charge of obstructing justice so he could return to law school in Washington, D.C.

Celeste Fraser Delgado, a 36-year-old reporter for the Miami New Times, was interviewing protesters when she was arrested. According to an Associated Press report of her ordeal, she overheard police arguing about what to charge her with. The two misdemeanors - failure to obey a legal command and resisting arrest without violence - were dropped the next day.

The police seemed especially sensitive to having their actions photographed or taped. Sean Lidberg, who was stringing for a Minnesota paper, said his group of friends was aggressively detained and searched by police because one of them had picked up and put down a coconut found on the ground.

"We're from Minnesota and never saw coconuts growing wild," said the 20-year-old Lidberg. When he tried to take video of the police searching through his backpack, Lidberg said, "they shoved the camera down and wouldn't let me document anything said or done." Police proceeded to take most of what he had in his backpack, which included two gas masks. He doesn't expect to see his stuff again.

When contacted for comment, the Miami police first asked for case numbers. When those were provided, the public information officer said he didn't have time to comment on the incidents and hung up when his name was requested.

Ever since the melee at the 1999 World Trade Organization meeting in Seattle, where demonstrators blocked streets and vandalized stores, conference planners and public officials have adopted a no-holds-barred approach to potential large-scale protests. And Timoney is their man. Militant protesters, "punks" as he calls them, are anathema to Timoney. Shutting them down with Pinkerton prowess is his specialty. Rights, schmights.

Anyone who cares about civil liberties might remember Timoney as the police commissioner of Philadelphia during the 2000 Republican convention - an event marked by police making pre-emptive arrests on baseless charges and smashing heads. This led to lucrative private consulting offers for Timoney and then, this year, to the top-cop spot in Miami.

His antiprotester philosophy is a fitting sign of the times and intersects nicely with the new FBI protocols established by Attorney General John Ashcroft. Ashcroft recently junked FBI guidelines that prevented agents from monitoring groups without evidence of criminal wrongdoing, saying it was vital for antiterrorism operations. But in a J. Edgar Hoover redux, it turns out that this flexibility is being used to spy on and collect intelligence on antiwar protesters.

When men like Timoney and Ashcroft are on the A-list of the nation's law enforcers, free speech doesn't stand a chance. It is open season on dissent. A vignette reported by the Miami Herald says it all: During the FTAA action, Timoney came upon a protester who was pinned against a car being arrested; without knowing anything about the circumstances, he pointed a finger at the demonstrator's face and said, "You're bad. F-- you!" People exercising their First Amendment rights are now considered the enemy.