

The 1997 Anti-Klan Rally

And Lessons for Today

In this article I recount the organizing of a protest that had many parallels with today's environment in which we are organizing protests on the G-20 under difficult circumstances. I believe that there is much to learn from what happened in 1997. Your feedback is welcome.

Background: The Movement for Justice for Jonny Gammage and the Klan

In 1997, the movement for Justice for Jonny Gammage had been advocating for two years – through protests marches, the media, and a conference – justice for Jonny Gammage, an African American motorist who was brutally beaten and killed by several Pittsburgh area police officers in 1995. This multiracial movement, consisting of campus activists and radical community activists, worked with civil rights groups such as the NAACP and the Gammage family in denouncing the racism of his murder and calling for the prosecution of the police officers responsible for his death.

In response to this, the KKK announced that they would hold their next national rally at the City County building in downtown Pittsburgh on Grant St., and that they would keep coming back for rallies until the police stopped being “persecuted”. (The Klan has historically been allied with the police so this move wasn’t too surprising, as shocking as it initially sounded). The Klan obtained a permit from the City of Pittsburgh for this purpose.

A coalition of liberal-to-moderate groups including the Coalition to Counter Hate Groups and the PA Human Relations Commission came together to respond to this unfortunate event. When a hate group comes to a town (and they’ve come to many PA towns), the Coalition to Counter Hate Groups and their allies often urge people to stay away from that group’s rally but instead to hold an alternate gathering in a different area. Their reasoning is that they don’t want to draw attention and give power to the Klan. They also have concern with potential violence that could occur. They called for a rally several blocks away, at Market Square.

Many in the movement for Justice for Jonny Gammage felt strongly that it was important to challenge the Klan more directly, on Grant St. (although across the street from them in order to avoid any physical confrontation), in a nonviolent, legal rally. Based on the experience that they had in holding numerous peaceful marches in Pittsburgh for justice for Jonny Gammage, other victims of police brutality and for political prisoner Mumia Abu-Jamal, this movement had gained the skills, confidence, and political imperative to hold such a rally. We also felt that the logic of retreating to Market Square didn’t make sense: what if the Klan next decided to hold a rally in Market Square, should we continue retreating to more and more distant places until the only safe place is in our homes? By then our homes wouldn’t feel too safe.

The Liberal-Radical Split

This divergence in tactics represented a relatively rare split in the usually united front between liberals and more radical activists in Pittsburgh. It was felt by many that it would be OK to hold two separate rallies, and that it would be best if neither group denounced the other in public.

However, several of the leaders of the group organizing the Market Square rally, driven by their ideology of keeping people away from hate groups, publicly urged people NOT to attend the Grant St. rally. They repeatedly warned that it would be violent, and one of their representatives was quoted in the Post Gazette as saying that it would be “bloody”. The Grant St. coalition members agreed not to denounce the Market Square rally and asked the organizers of the Market Square rally not to denounce the Grant St. rally. But the violence baiting continued.

The Violence Baiting Spreads to the City Power Structure

Unfortunately, the violence baiting wasn't limited to activists. The city government and media took advantage of the liberal-radical disagreement to deepen the violence baiting.

- The police warned about how violent the protest could be. They stated that their intelligence indicated that out-of-town militant radical activists were planning to come and violently oppose the Klan. In a meeting between organizers from the Grant St. coalition and the police, two of them were shown videos depicting violent clashes between anti-Klan protestors and the Klan. After that meeting, those organizers were sufficiently scared that they doubted our ability to successfully organize a rally on Grant St. After a day of talking with them and reassuring them that we could, they regained their confidence.
- City Council unanimously passed a resolution urging people not to go to Grant St. because they thought that it would be too dangerous.
- The Mayor (Tom Murphy) also publicly called on people not to go to Grant St.
- The press thrived on the sensationalism of the implied violence and repeatedly parroted the fear and hype of violence on Grant St.

The Effects of the Violence Baiting

The effect of the violence baiting and fear stories was that the tension in the city surrounding the anti-Klan protests was raising and I believe that it ironically increased the chance that something could go wrong.

The violence baiting and denunciations were not just a rhetorical exercise but in our analysis were largely responsible for the city refusing to give us a permit to hold a rally on Grant St. as we had requested. This was the only time that we could remember where we were outright refused a permit to hold a rally. Imagine the irony of this moment: the Klan was able to easily obtain a permit, but we weren't because we were considered too dangerous.

In addition, we were spied on by the police. At one of our organizing meetings in Oakland, two men attended who stated that they were with a community group. Later when we met with the police to coordinate on logistics, we were introduced to those two men as undercover detectives.

A consensus had emerged in the liberal power structure that our rally should be shut down, and the city government was acting on it. We realized that we would need to launch a counter-effort – political, in the media, and in court if necessary – to regain our right to protest.

The Counter-Offensive

Our counter-offensive consisted of getting onto talk shows and holding press conferences to explain our side of the story: that we have held numerous nonviolent protests in the past and that we are able to make the one on Grant St. nonviolent as well. We explained how we would recruit and train peace marshals and would coordinate logistically with the police. We also explained that we have the constitutional right to nonviolently protest even if some disagreed with our tactics or politics.

While our public campaign helped some previously skeptical people to understand our position, it wasn't enough to convince the city to give us a permit. So, with the help of the ACLU, we took the city to federal court – the hearing was held the evening before the rally – to sue for the right to protest on Grant St.

The Result

With just hours to go before the rally, we won our case: the federal judge ruled that the city must give us the right to protest the Klan on Grant St.

Although this was a victory for our right to free speech, we still had to contend with a massive chain link cage erected by the police surrounding the entire block where we were planning to protest. This cage only had two door-sized entry/exit points which can be very dangerous and, ironically, can lead to violence in the case that people panic due to any problems in the confined space.

We urged people not to enter the cage but instead to stay outside of it with us as we assembled in the spaces to the left and right of the cage. While some went in, many stayed outside.

We also had to contend with massive amounts of intimidating police in full riot gear and horses, ready to release their tear gas on command.

Despite the violence baiting, tension and provocative police horses and riot gear, the protest went well. There was only a minor scuffle involving a few neo-Nazi skinheads who crossed over to the anti-Klan crowd and were soon escorted out by the police. Between two and three thousand people attended and the pictures in the newspaper showed several signs from both rallies denouncing the Klan.

The street going from the Market Square rally to the Grant St. rally was also closed for pedestrian traffic, and many people walked between the two rallies. I felt that this open channel between the two rallies was a very powerful symbol of the reconciliation that was starting to take place between the two coalitions.

And the Klan hasn't returned since.

Lessons for Today

We showed people that we can organize rallies – even under difficult circumstances – and not be violent or lose control. And that we should have confidence in ourselves and young, radical activists working in a multi-racial coalition.

The lessons that I drew from this type of incident for today include,

- The importance of a united front between a variety of groups and agreements like the Pittsburgh Principles in order to reduce violence baiting, because the police and government often take advantage of it and amplify it.
- That the politics and psychological atmosphere leading up to a protest have a large influence on the ability to organize a protest, and on the legal outcomes of getting permits for those purposes.
- That it's important to have confidence in ourselves and in our allies to organize disciplined, nonviolent actions.