

I smell social justice....and funnel cake?

James Roberts | Nov. 22, 2008

This morning began with the same enthusiasm last night ended with. The crowd gathered early in the hall of the Convention Center to hear Pamela Bowman deliver the annual update regarding the legislative effort to shut down the School of the Americas. Her news was, from those I talked to who have been attending the event regularly for years, more optimistic than ever.

She noted that last year, legislation put before the U.S. House of Representatives fell just 7 votes shy of passing. Turnover in the recent elections has left her, and others, hoping this is the year efforts to shut down the School receives the legislative support it needs. A hopeful morning for those looking to bring about change.

As the morning session ended, and groups left the hall and headed to the site of today's rally at the gates of Ft. Benning, the paradox of this weekend's events showed in stark relief. Walking out of the convention hall, I wandered towards my car. I'd love to say it was journalistic curiosity, or an innate sense for dramatic irony that drew me down the street - but in all honesty, it was the smell of barbecue. (I was raised in Kansas City, it's a predisposition).

Turning the corner only a block from where thousands have gathered over the last two days to speak truth to justice and promote peace and non-violence, Columbus hosted it's annual "God Bless Ft. Benning Day". It was, in every way, a carnival. Rows of motorcycles adorned with American flags lined the side streets, there was a tank on display, for children to crawl into and fiddle with buttons and knobs. On the main strip, filling nearly four city blocks, were taco stands, stages with dancers performing, and moon-walks for children to play on. There was music and karaoke, even a temporary wrestling ring was erected where amateur grapplers executed back flips from what seemed like poorly manufactured turnbuckles.

My weakness for dry-rub marinade left me helpless. I stopped, ordered some ribs and made my way along the main corridor of Columbus. If there were any remaining troops on the base, they clearly didn't know about this event. Some played pop-a-shot with their kids, others simply strolled with someone on their arm. Most seemed content to simply sit and watch.

It seemed all too fitting that the event, which was held a few miles farther from the SOA convention last time I was here, now coincided directly with the SOA's events. I asked a few of the guys in uniform enjoying mocha flavored energy drinks, "Does everyone on the base know about the protest?". "Of course, we're aware and it's part of our routine every year." They asked to remain anonymous, and weren't eager to talk much more about it with me.

I should mention, I have several friends in the military. Some of my fondest memories in college were pouring beers at the Local V.F.W. Post in Lawrence, Kansas. At the same time, I've never hidden my participation in, or admiration for, the SOA Watch's work. But no one I've known who was a member of the military shied from a conversation about it. In fact there's a large delegation of protesters every year from the organization, Veteran's for Peace.

It's anecdotal, I know, but maybe there's a lesson to take from that. All the talk of change, the new found sense of hope - and perhaps movement on the legislative front, will open up a new era in the dialogue between activists and members of the military? If the goal of the SOA is to address, and reform American foreign policy, we should hope that part of the process will involve making room at the table for those who have been a part of it. Most of the faces at the fair were young. Most of the enlisted friends I have are as well. That's promise in my mind. I think I have as much to learn from them as they do from me. I'd hate to think we would never invite each other to the other's party.

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