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SOA drew activists of all stripes

by Patrick O'Neill

COLUMBUS, GA

They came from throughout the country advocating everything from Canceling Third World debt, to closing the Guantanamo Bay prison, to stopping the death penalty. Some hawked T-Shirts and buttons. Religious orders recruited, but most simply vied for the attention of passers-by so they could tell all who would listen about their particular campaign.

The 19th annual SOA Watch weekend of events in this southwest Georgia military town looked a lot like the gatherings of years past. The number of protesters was down for the first time in recent years, perhaps because of a poor economy, or a post-election energy slump, but the enthusiasm was high as activists showed excitement that a new administration and more Democrats in Congress could mean 2009 will be the year Congress votes to close the Western Hemisphere Institute for Security Cooperation (formerly the School of the Americas), the US Army school that trains Latin American soldiers, many of whom have been implicated in human rights violations and killings in their native countries.

"Now that 35 of our (Congressional) opponents have lost their seats, we're quite confident that we have a shot of finally closing this thing down, and also with more access to the White House, as soon as Obama and his family get that new dog, we're going to be knocking on the door for a meeting," said SOA Watch representative Eric LeCompte, as the last of this year's protesters made their way down Benning Rd., away from the main stage Sunday afternoon.

Activist brothers, Steve and John Dear, had tables along Benning Rd. Fr. John Dear, SJ, was selling and signing copies of his newest book, *A Persistent Peace: One Man's Struggle for a Nonviolent World*, while his younger brother, Steve, who is executive director of People of Faith Against the Death Penalty, was selling T-shirts and getting signatures on an anti-death penalty petition.

On Sunday, just six people, the lowest number since the annual protest began in 1990, crossed the line?

by entering onto Ft. Benning in an act of civil disobedience. In past years, the federal trespass charge has netted 90-day to six-month prison sentences. The six were released on \$500 to \$1,000 cash bonds Sunday, and were given a Jan. 26, 2009 court date.

At the Ft. Benning fence line, the throngs who marched in Sunday's traditional mock funeral procession to remember Latin American martyrs, left powerful images of their cause -- photos, messages and white crosses bearing the names of what seemed like countless victims.

Of note was a military uniform hung neatly on the fence with name plate and medals in place, a handprinted note pinned to the breast.

?To whom it may concern. I wore this jacket with honor for 20 years, but I am returning it for I have learned that it does not represent duty, honor, country. The military's main objective is to expand and protect capitalism. In other words it is used to=2 0protect the elite. Sincerely, Donna D. Stevens
PS: I am a patriot too.?

As always, the police presence at the protest seemed overdone for a nonviolent gathering that has always been solemn or joyful, but never violent.

According to the local Columbus paper, *The Ledger-Enquirer*, the police presence included Columbus police, Georgia State Patrol, Muscogee County Prison officials, Muscogee County Sheriff's Office, Muscogee County Marshal's Office and Fort Benning Military Police.

?We don't ask the police to be here, and from my perspective they shouldn't be here,? LeCompte said. ?There's no reason for the police to be here. We've never in our 19-year history had one incident of violence. Actually the only problems we've ever had in terms of provocateurs has been from the police, not from us. I would prefer that they weren't here. We don't need them.?

20 Those arrested at the protest were: Diane Pinchot-Osu of Cleveland, Ohio; Fr. Luis Barrios of North Bergen, NJ ; Louis Wolf of Washington, DC; Theresa Cusimano of Denver, CO; Al Simmons of Richmond, VA and Kristen Holm of Chicago, IL.

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