

# A Marine at a Peace Rally

By  
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It was Friday, April 4<sup>th</sup>, 2003 and the United States Military was making an impressive display of might and compassion as they moved into Iraq. I had the day off. I was planning on visiting my daughter in Salem who was in the hospital for minor surgery... then the phone rang.

“Yo?”

“Mr. Kesey? Boy, am I glad I got a hold of you. Did you see the protesters burn the American flag on the news yesterday? What did you think about that?”

I recognized the voice of the Nancy Dorr that had organized several “Support Our Troop Rally’s” one of which I attended and spoke at in Vancouver, Washington. She had asked me to speak as a result of a letter to the Editor of the Oregonian that I had written about supporting our troops and also because of a novel that I had written about Vietnam.

“Well, yeah. I saw it.”

“Did it upset you?”

“Yeah, I guess you could say that.”

“Well, we...”

And she told me that they were going to have a “Support Our Troops Rally” at Pioneer Square in Portland at five that afternoon. She wanted me to be there as the main speaker.

“Me?” I asked.

“Yes. Just say what you said the last time. You know about how it was when you came back from Vietnam. What do you think? Can you come? Please?”

I told her that it was short notice, but that I’d think about it and call her back. So I thought about it. It was fun last time. I liked all the hurrah stuff, the flag waving, the singing and the cheers. Made a person feel proud to be an American. I thought that maybe afterwards I could sell a couple of my books. It was for a good cause. So I called her back and told her that I’d be there.

“Good. We are going to burn the peace flag. You know just too...”

A warning light went off. After all I’m a youth counselor and don’t I always say, “Two wrongs don’t make a right.” And don’t I say, “Just because someone else does something stupid doesn’t mean you have to.”

However I thought that I could do my little two-minute speal and depart. I didn’t want to get involved with the flag-burning thing. I didn’t express my concerns to her. I told her that I’d see her about 4:30.

I drove to Salem; saw my daughter and the whole fam damly was there. I told them what I was doing. They were impressed. I left out the part about burning the peace flag.

“Dad’s speaking out in support of our troops. Go, Dad! WhooRaa!”

I found a parking spot only three blocks from Pioneer Square. Boy was I lucky. In my briefcase were a couple of copies of my book “What Am I Doing Here?” an American and Marine Corps flag.

It was about 4:30 when I walked into the square. Nancy greeted me with a big hug, introduced me to a Vietnam Vet who was helping her set up. Then she ran off on a mission to find something.

I went into Starbuck’s and bought a Mocha and wrote a brief outline of what I wanted to say. I wanted to keep it short and sweet.

I walked outside Starbuck’s and leaned up against a concrete wall. It had rained off and on all day. Dark threatening clouds hung overhead in a threatening manner. I watched the people begin to straggle into the Square. I noticed Police. Lots of Police. Police on bicycles, horses, on foot and in cars. Lots of Police.

I said to myself, “Kesey? What’s wrong with this picture?”

I’m drinking my coffee and waiting for the hordes of flag waving patriots to arrive, instead I’m seeing “the others.”

*What are they doing here? I thought this was a Support Our Troops Rally? This is not looking good.*

*I could leave. Right now. Just get up and walk right outahere. But she’s depending on me. I can’t get up and leave. Chicken!*

*But I didn’t sign up for this. This could get ugly.*

I rationalized that they're for peace. How bad could it get?  
I walked over to one of the policemen and asked, "You're here to protect me, right?"  
"We're here, Sir."

It was getting closer to five o'clock and the circle was getting tighter around the few people holding American flags and Support Our Troops signs. There was a three-piece combo playing jazz. It gave the gathering a festive touch. There was a complete array of anti-war signage. A Channel 12 truck pulled up to the curb and began unloading and setting up their gear. The crowd had swelled to maybe two hundred and I'm still looking for the Calvary to arrive.

A man walked over to where I was sitting and said, "Semper Fi, man."  
"Semper Fi," I answered. He knew I was a Marine because I was wearing my Marine utility cover. "This doesn't look too good for us," I added.

"Screw 'em," he answered.

I walked over to the area where the Vietnam Vet was playing his French harp and singing "America the Beautiful" ...alone. The crowd noise was starting to pick up some. I stood to the rear. He read a poem. I couldn't hear too well even though there was a microphone and speakers. Then he started singing "God Bless America." The jazz combo kept playing and they weren't playing "God Bless America." I started to walk over to ask them to stop or at least play along with the song when I realized that they were playing loudly...on purpose. I took my hat off and joined the Vietnam Vet in song. I looked around to see who else was singing. I was not encouraged. I remember at the time how surreal it seemed. I can't ever think of a time or a place that I'm aware of that when "God Bless America" was being sung that everyone didn't stand and join in.

It's not too late, I thought to myself. I looked around and realized that it was too late to back out now.

Nancy was waving frantically for my attention. She was in the front with her tripod and cam recorder. The TV cameramen were moving in closer for better shots. Two ladies dressed in pink carrying a pink banner kept moving in front of Nancy, trying to block her from recording. She was trying to shove them out of the way. But it was hard for me to tell if she was waving for me or waving off the Pink Ladies.

I soon realized that it was my turn. The Vietnam Vet turned to me and handed me the mic with a look that said, "Thank God, there's someone else here as dumb as I am."

As the baton changed hands the crowd erupted into another octave. And I can't explain what it erupted into other than a deafening noise. I'm assuming that they were calling me names but I could not hear the words. I could tell by the tone and tenor that they weren't yelling, "Have a nice day." Their blended faces were young, old, bearded and clean-shaven. They wore an array of clothing from suits to sweats. But their eyes were wild and they pumped their clenched fists in the air. I heard drums, whistles and cymbals. I was totally taken by surprise. And I hadn't even said anything yet. I should have yelled as loud as I could, "**I hate War!**" That would have blown their minds. Sent them into a confused murmur. I could have said that and meant it, for the Warrior is the last person who wants to send it's "Nation's Best" into harms way unless it is absolutely necessary.

The shock that I had felt from the noise and ferocity of the crowd was slowly being replaced with an anger that was building inside of me. I turned and looked at the crowd to my rear. I changed the mic from my right hand to my left and walked toward an unsuspecting young man. As I approached I focused on his mouth surrounded by a black beard. I couldn't tell what he was screaming but I could tell it wasn't nice. I think I scared him with the look I had on my face because when I got close enough to do some damage, he closed his mouth. I heard a voice over my right shoulder. "Don't do it." I turned my head slightly not taking my eyes off the young man's mouth. It was the policeman. I nodded, turned and walked back to the podium.

A man in a green and gold University of Oregon sweatshirt walked up to the front and raised his arms and shouted, "**Give the man a chance to be heard!**" He was shouted down. Then he came to me and said, "Go ahead, Mr. Kesey and speak. We can hear you."

"With all this noise?" I asked.

"Go ahead," he repeated.

I took a deep breath and shouted into the mic, "**I'm proud to be an American!**" This brought howls like a wolf caught in a vice trap. This was quite a change from when I said this in Vancouver's Support Our Troops Rally. I was received in cheers, clapping and a standing ovation.

I waited a few seconds. I actually thought that once I started they might quiet down some. But that didn't happen. Then I bellowed, "**I love my country!**" This brought the crowd into screaming frenzy.

My anger was building. I looked at the encircling crowd. Then I gave them the double whammy. **“I respect my President and I respect the law.”** This brought cries of pain. Their eyes rolled into their heads and foam formed at the corners of their mouths. I was beginning to shake with a simmering rage. A little gray haired man ran up to the podium, eyes wild, screaming something, slobber ran down his chin like a rabid dog.

Then I said, **“You should be proud to live in the land of the free!”** It was becoming apparent that if I continued to shout these vile statements my personal well-being could be in jeopardy. I had had enough. After all I just came to show and express my support for our troops. Now I just wanted to get out of Pioneer Square and out of Portland. I wanted to go back home to the comfort of Tillamook County.

I glared at them. Then I gathered the strength for one last verbal fling. **“I’m ashamed of you and you should be ashamed of yourselves for the way you are acting!”** It was like pounding in the last nail into the vampire’s coffin. They didn’t take kindly to being chastised. After all I was a warmonger.

I sat the mic on the podium, turned and walked away. A fellow Marine grabbed me and gave me a hug and said, “I proud of you, man. Don’t pay any attention to them. They’re nothing.”

I picked up my gear and was walking through the screaming crowd when a stringy gray haired lady ran up to me and yelled something into my face. I had held my anger in check up until now, but I couldn’t help myself. It just popped out.

“F\_ \_ \_ you, bitch.”

She looked at me in surprise, like how could you say such a lurid thing. It didn’t matter what she had called me.

I walked briskly down the streets of Portland to my rig. My fists were clinched and I was fuming. How could what I said send these people, that had professed that they were for peace, into such a frenzy? How could I, even at the age of 63, be so naïve to think that their motives are to do good things? How could any one believe that their agenda is for world peace? I didn’t see peace in their hearts. I didn’t see love in their screaming faces. I didn’t hear compassion in their voices. What I did see and hear was hate and anger.

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It’s been a little over a month now and in reflection all I feel is sorry for them. How sad their lives must be to be living in a county they do not love.

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