

A Discussion of the Recent Action at the US Air Force Band Performance at Evergreen

Last Thursday, February 3, twenty-five people staged an action at the US Air Force Band appearance at The Evergreen State College. Since then a number of criticisms have been leveled at the organizers, the major ones being: 1) why the fuss, it's just a band performance, 2) you antagonized a lot of people, 3) you shouldn't have been so confrontational, and 4) you gave the school a bad name.

First, what was the issue? Many of us were very upset when we learned that the USAF Band was coming to Evergreen to perform. We didn't view it as just any old band, but instead recognized it as an integral part of the military's attempt to wage an effective public relations campaign both at home and abroad.

According to Senator Bill Proxmire, the Pentagon spends over \$47 million each year on displays and exhibitions of military hardware, as well as "cultural events" such as Thursday's concert. The Office of Information for the Armed Forces alone spends \$12 million yearly to operate 350 radio and TV stations throughout the world, in addition to producing 50 films, 400,000 posters, 8.5 million copies of 70-odd publications; and providing articles and photos for some 1,500 newspapers run by the military.

This massive propaganda effort is intended to obscure and mystify the actual role of the US military. This is particularly important because of the growing unhappiness of the American people over the size and expense of the armed forces and the nature of its actions throughout the world. The campaign is designed to instill in Americans a sense of awe, wonder, and pride at the technological capabilities of "their" military. Even worse, it brings them to the point of overlooking completely the primary purpose and function of the US military, which is the protection of US corporate interests overseas.

For the Vietnamese people, however, there was little mystification. The Air Force was clearly not an air show at a state fair or even an evening of classical music. Instead it was the onslaught of destructive firepower beyond the comprehension of most of us reading this column. We chose to protest this "cultural event" because we recognize that the Air Force Band is an inseparable part of the general program of the US military.

How were we going to bring this issue into the public arena for debate and discussion? We explored two major options: 1) total disruption of the event and refusal to allow it to happen, and 2) an educational effort during or before the event which would allow it to continue. We realized that by exercising either of these options we face the danger of antagonizing our audience.

We were all opposed to "unnecessary" antagonism, yet realized that a certain amount of antagonism will accompany any political activity, particularly when that activity is confrontational in nature. It is through confrontation that people are forced to face issues and clarify their respective positions on them. Though this thought is contrary to the values that many of us were brought up with, it is accurate nevertheless.

In order to avoid unnecessary antagonism, we decided to drop the disruptive approach for the educational/confrontational strategy. This meant we would do a forceful presentation of our position that neither the band nor the audience could possibly ignore, yet would still allow the band to play. We recognize that there was still bound to be negative reaction to this strategy, but felt that to do less would be to fall into the trap set by those whose fears of being confrontational lead them to a position of essential non-action. Having formulated our strategy, the third question, that of tactics, fell into place fairly easily, with the eventual plan resembling an unscheduled multi-media presentation.

To conclude, we want to offer a brief critique of Thursday's action.

We think we did upset a number of people, particularly those who felt their freedom to listen to the band had been infringed upon. We don't feel, however, that this could have been substantially avoided without negating the purpose of our action -- i.e. confronting people with the broader purpose of the Air Force Band. As to the question of freedom, Americans often tend to view freedom as the right to refuse to get "involved," which is in actuality simply the refusal to acknowledge one's unavoidable involvement in the world around them, the refusal to acknowledge one's responsibilities to society.

We think we may have contributed to some people's negative attitudes about Evergreen, just as we may have contributed to other people's positive impressions, though probably not as many. The question seems to be the extent to which one compromises one's political and social beliefs in order to protect an institution of the state, which in this case happens to have a number of progressive features. There is no doubt that on-campus criticism of recent Board of Trustees' decisions has played into the hands of Evergreen's chronic critics on Capitol Hill and around the state; but is the alternative to take no action at all, or restrain one's actions to the point of ineffectiveness? We think not. Neither then should our concern for evergreens image cause us to fail to take equally controversial actions on issues of national and international importance.

We think that on the whole, however, the action had many positive results. It got people talking about the military, about the role of military bands and other ideological devices, about the issue of confrontational politics, clarifying and grasping arguments, and shifting positions as new understanding took root.

This has particularly been the case within the group of organizers, where much political growth occurred during the planning, action, and critiquing process. We developed a greater understanding of the need for political action, action that confronts people at fundamental levels. We realize that such action is difficult to pull off, and will bring down on one's head much criticism. We recognize above all that to fail to actively challenge the forces of oppression and exploitation around us, particularly their more subtle forms, is to lend our tacit support to the status quo.

We look forward to meeting in the near future with others who share our concerns, for the Band is scheduled to return to Evergreen on April 12th.

Note: This is an edited version of a statement written for the CPJ (Cooper Point Journal) Forum column that failed to make the February 10 issue. This version will be submitted for next week's issue, along with the signatures of folks who participated in the action and support this statement. The following 20 people signed the original, far wordier, version: Roxann Daily, Marita Haberland, Regon Unsoeld, Tom Nogler, Alan Mador, Peter Quigley, Paul Hathaway, Krag Unsoeld, Mike Zeiss, Margaret Forsythe, Doug Migden, Tess Martinez, Kate Albrecht, Ken Yale, Daniel Mayer, Rich Stocker, Lyle Tribbett, Sarah Bean, Tim Murphy, and Lanny Aronoff.