

25 Years at the White House Gates



Longest Continuous Vigil Anywhere?

By Ellen Thomas

Since June 3, 1981, nine years to the day before tanks rolled into Tiananmen Square to put a halt to the pro-democracy movement, signs calling for "Wisdom and Honesty," justice and nuclear disarmament have stood every day and night in front of the White House.

According to National Park Service figures, the signs have been seen by over three million people per year.

To those who maintain perhaps the longest continuous vigil in human history, the signs represent the ancient right -- Thomas Jefferson may have termed it "the duty" -- of people in a democracy to nonviolently voice opinions on issues of broad public concern, even if it means they must go to prison for their beliefs.



On June 3, 1981 a pilgrim named Wm. ("Doubting") Thomas sat down on the White House sidewalk with a cardboard sign -- "Wanted, Wisdom and Honesty" -- to talk about truth, justice, freedom, peace, and the threat of nuclear war.

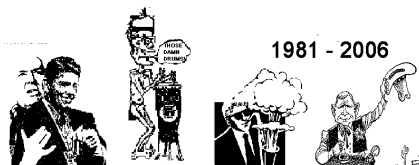
Concepcion Picciotto also came to Lafayette Park and began working with Thomas in 1981.



To the public, those who maintain the vigil outside the White House arouse a spectrum of perceptions.

The 1991 and 1994 Berlitz Travel Guide for Washington, DC pictured the vigil over the caption, "It's the right of

every American to set up a stand and make a point in Lafayette Park."



Four presidents have, with varying degrees of patience, reduced and endured the vigilers' presence.

Those who share the materialistic values symbolized by the White House sometimes view the vigil as "visual blight."

The Washington Times and Washington Post have called the vigilers



"weirdos" and "lunatics" and the signs "eyesores," "gibberish" and "junk."

On the other extreme, there are those who, valuing life, view the policies of the White House as slightly "mad," and believe that the vigil reflects sanity.

Some journalists have been more than tolerant, likening the vigilers to saints and prophets, and even beautiful!

Actually the vigilers are just trying to practice what they preach. They still have hope for humanity. They believe someday, if they hold on long enough, people might wake up to their own responsibilities and begin, at last, to act compassionately, wisely, honestly. For this, and for the children, they endure harsh weather, the whims of police, and abusive behavior by hostile bystanders. For they know they're not alone.



So, the vigil continues... working for peace, hoping for humanity.

It Hasn't Been Easy

During the early 1980's, hostile Park Police and Secret Service officers tried to drive Thomas and Concepcion away.

At first they were arrested and charged with "loitering" or "disturbing the peace."

But few judges would convict them, and no judge would imprison them, knowing the history of the First Amendment.

Thanks to the 1976 *Stacey Abney* decision by the U.S. Court of Appeals, sleep as part of a round-the-clock vigil was still considered, in and of itself, "expressive conduct protected by the First Amendment."

So there was a meeting between President Reagan and Department of Interior lawyer Richard Robbins, and shortly thereafter regulations began appearing in the Code of Federal Regulations, to:

(1) define "camping" as "using the park for living accommodation purposes, regardless of the activity in which one might otherwise be engaged," thus negating the First Amendment and the *Abney* decision;



(2) move the vigilers from the White House sidewalk to Lafayette Park;

(3) reduce the number of signs that an individual might have to two, and the size to 4' x 4' x 1/4", no higher than six feet off the ground, and requiring that someone always be within three feet of the signs; and



(4) reduce the amount of "property" a person might have other than the signs to 3 cubic feet, a real hardship in cold and wet weather.



These regulations allowed police to harass, intimidate, and arrest all demonstrators who came to

Lafayette Park, and have been used extensively to chase most people away.

But patience, perseverance, creativity, Thomas's pro se lawsuits against police

misconduct, and sympathetic friends have kept Thomas and Concepcion north of the White House, touching the minds and hearts of many.

Other People Come and Go

Many people have joined Thomas and Concepcion in vigiling for varying lengths of time. I was one of them, from 1984 to 2002.

Of the many extraordinary people and events the vigilers have encountered over the years, here are but a few.



Norman Mayer



In 1982, Norman Mayer brought signs and



literature to the White House sidewalk with the message that abolishing nuclear



weapons must be everyone's number one priority.

Norman found Thomas fasting, and talked him into eating by saying "As long as you keep

your vigil, the truth can't be ignored."

On December 8, 1982, Norman Mayer staged a very scary demonstration at the Washington Monument, demanding that the news media devote "90% of its time" to the subject of nuclear weapons or he would blow up the monument with his van (which he claimed had 1,000 lbs of explosives, but in fact contained nothing but a battery-powered TV set). When he drove away after several hours of intense media scrutiny, sharpshooters killed him, for which they received medals.

Thomas erected a 12' x 18' reproduction of Norman's flier in Lafayette Park.



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Mitch Snyder and CCNV

In 1981 and 1984, the Community for Creative Nonviolence (CCNV), led by Mitch Snyder, pitched tents in Lafayette Park as a statement about homelessness.

In 1981 homeless people actually slept in the tents for a while. But in 1984, the Supreme Court ruled that the Park Service had a right to keep people from sleeping in tents.

Although Concepcion and Thomas had nothing resembling a tent, they were arrested under the "camping" regulation.

During the '80's, Mitch Snyder's fasts for the homeless attracted a great deal of media attention. As a result, the Reagan administration provided a multi-million-dollar homeless shelter and medical clinic at 2nd and D NW, and in 1984 voters passed an initiative (#17) guaranteeing homeless people a right to shelter.

Mitch and everyone's friend, B Wardlaw, went on a cross-country campaign in 1986 which culminated in "Hands Across America."

In June, 1990, however, the city won a referendum rescinding Initiative 17. Mitch began a very debilitating open-ended fast, but this time the media weren't interested in his fast or the plight of the homeless, and neither, apparently, were the voters.

Mitch dropped in on old friends to reminisce. He spent an unusually long half hour with Thomas at the signs.

The first week of July, exhausted, despairing, his vision and health failing, Mitch killed himself. With Mitch's death, CCNV became simply a shelter, and the star-studded vigils and marches for homeless people ceased.

Dr. Charles Hyder



From September 23, 1986 to May 1, 1987, Dr. Charles Hyder, a

310-pound astro-geo-physicist from New Mexico, came to the park to fast for global nuclear disarmament, losing 180 pounds in the process. He attracted a lot of people.



Hyder brought with him his scientific analysis of the dangers of burying nuclear waste in salt caverns (salt will melt under extreme heat, and rise to the surface). He also warned that Chernobyl cancers would be killing people in increasing numbers in decades to come.

At first local newspapers refused to report about Hyder's fast, some claiming, when called, that they weren't going to be blackmailed into writing a story every time someone stopped eating, but by spring 1987, so many international stories had been written, even the Washington Post published an article.

To the best of our knowledge, Dr. Hyder is the only protester to ever have a sack full of mail hand-delivered to Lafayette Park by a White House staffer, addressed by Japanese school children to "Dr. Hyder, c/o The White House."

Hyder was visited by Nobel Prize winners, educators, and members of Congress,



and was sent to Geneva by Carl Sagan to take his proposal to the U.N. talks on disarmament.

He received a letter from Gorbachev asking him to end his fast, and a float was built in his honor for the May Day parade in Moscow. A pass in the Urals mountains was named after him.

Dr. Hyder quit fasting and returned to New Mexico in early May, 1987.



Unfortunately he regained all the weight he had lost and more, and his heart failed. He died in 2004.

During Hyder's fast the vigilers wrote and began circulating a petition

to the legislators of the U.S. and then-USSR calling for a commitment to abolish all nuclear weapons and use the money instead for human needs.

They circulated this petition for years after Hyder was gone.



Dr. Ted Taylor, who was designer of the biggest and smallest nuclear bombs before he quit working for the government and spent all his time trying to eliminate nuclear weapons, came to meet Dr. Hyder, and remained a good friend of the vigil, and lobbied successfully on behalf of Proposition One. (See next page.)



The Ragtag Band

During Dr. Hyder's fast, some young musicians arrived separately, each staying to build signs and feed people, write and teach songs, and perform daily as the Ragtag Band.



Hyder, Mojo, Sunrise, Scott, Song, Robin

So effective was the scene in the park in those days that police enforcement was stepped up.



Prison (1988)

Early in 1987, police issued "camping" tickets right and left. In 1988, Sunrise and Mojo went to prison for two months, and Thomas

and I for three months, charged with "camping." Concepcion kept the vigil going while we were gone.



When we immediately returned to the park upon our release, the police backed off for a while. The Ragtag Band drifted away by 1992. Sunrise now lives in France, Mojo in Texas, and Song in the Philippines.

Peace Park

In 1985, we began calling Lafayette Square "Peace Park." A sign on the corner read "Welcome to Peace Park,"



and back when there was still traffic on Pennsylvania Avenue, we could hear the Trolley Tour drivers point out our signs to tourists as "Peace Park."

During our time in jail, the City Paper and Washington Post both published articles and letters to the editor referring to "Peace Park."

So the National Park Service announced they were going to remove the beloved sculpture, "The Awakening," from Hains Point, and build a "Peace Park." It's not hard to believe they hoped this would distract the public from the vigil.

The National Park Service never did build their "Peace Park," and "The Awakening" has been returned to Hains Point after a cleaning. Many people still call Lafayette Square "Peace Park." We hope it sticks.

Atlantic Life Community



For decades, a very special community of faith-based activists has been coming to the White



House regularly to speak out about the insanity of war.

Twice a year they hold a retreat in DC, hosted by Jonah House of Baltimore and Dorothy Day Catholic Workers of DC, and young people come from around the country to



learn about faith-based nonviolent witnessing for peace and the poor.

The Dorothy Day Catholic Workers also feed homeless people every Thursday night, formerly in Lafayette Park, but the police have chased most homeless people away from the White House area.



Many members of this community have chosen to spend years in

prison for performing "Plowshares" actions, symbolically beating swords into plowshares, for example, by pouring their own blood and hammering on missile silos and submarines, and prayerfully waiting to be arrested.



In 1990, when it became obvious that Bush 41 was going to go to war against Iraq, members of the Atlantic Life Community began a vigil on the White House sidewalk every Friday at noon, which has continued now for sixteen years, against sanctions and bombings during the Clinton years, against war during the two Bush administrations. They also hold a vigil early every Monday morning at the Pentagon.



The Ground War At Home (1991)



One of our most memorable shared experiences with the Washington Peace Center was during the first Gulf War, when Lisa Fithian and others very effectively reached out to the community to join the drummers in Lafayette Park.

The 40 days and nights of continuous drumming had a profound effect.



After President George H.W. Bush told a group of supporters, "those damned drums are keeping me awake all night," the police began enforcing an absurd "60 decibels" rule (background noise was 80 decibels), snatching drums and signs and arresting people, sometimes brutally. Bush later retracted his statement as "hyperbole," but the damage was done.

A video we produced after the war, "The Ground War At Home," played on public access television all over the country during the spring of 1991, showing police misconduct and utter disregard for the First Amendment.

While anti-war protesters were harassed and arrested for even putting a sign or drum down, or drumming at more than 60 decibels, halfway down the block a few pro-war advocates were encouraged by police when they stuck signs in the fence, blew whistles, and encouraged motorists to honk.



One of the drummers, Diana Nomad, was arrested and convicted for chanting "Na myo ho reng e kyo" and tapping a prayer drum, but the Court of Appeals overturned the conviction, ruling that drumming outside the White House is a form of speech protected by the First Amendment.

Diana died a few years ago of brain cancer, a great loss. The rest of us, however, can now drum with impunity, in hopes that the President will hear. Please remember the Nomad case if the police try to silence your drums.



Proposition One



By 1990, the thousands of signatures we had collected on our petition proved that the idea of global nuclear disarmament was popular all over the world, even in the U.S. We lobbied Congress with petitions in hand, to no avail.

Joe Vigorito, who had just come from Arizona's "Impeach Gov. Meachem" campaign, advised us to bring the idea to the voters of DC, in hopes that this might impress the politicians. So we launched a voter initiative campaign and in September, 1993, brought the petition to the voters as "Proposition One", or D.C. Initiative 37- the "Nuclear Disarmament and Economic Conversion Act."

A hard-working crew of unpaid young people registered to vote and hit the streets, collecting thousands of signatures at shopping centers, churches, bus stops, grocery stores,



and (with assistance from well-known activists) we got the idea on the ballot, and won the election.

As a result, since 1994 a bill has been introduced seven times by DC's delegate Eleanor Holmes Norton into the U.S. House of Representatives as "The Nuclear Disarmament and Economic Conversion Act" (HR-1348 this session - see next page for text.)

Proposition One has also traveled overseas. In 1990, Bob Dorrough and Lynn Fredrikssen went to Moscow and Kazakhstan and carried a Russian petition with them.



People stood in line to sign the petition wherever they went.



Bob had been a part of the vigil off and on since 1983. He was arrested in 1986 when the large signs were removed under the sign-size regulation and was arrested several times for drumming during the Gulf War. Bob now lives in Japan, teaching English.

In 1994, I was invited to go to Japan to talk about the vigil and Proposition One. The Japanese people are perhaps the most grateful of all foreign travelers who stop at the signs. Concepcion has had photographs from Hiroshima and Nagasaki bombings on her signs for more than 20 years.



Hiroshima/Nagasaki Peace Committee



Each year since 1981, during the first week of August, the Hiroshima-Nagasaki Peace Committee of the National Capitol Gray Panthers, founded by Louise Franklin-Ramirez, sponsors a series of events commemorating the bombings in Japan, and hosting survivors of the bombings (known as "Hibakusha"). To find out about this year's events, contact John Steinbach - 703-369-7427 <johnsteinbach@starpower.net>

Pennsylvania Ave Closure

In some ways, life has been easier for the vigilers under Presidents Clinton and Bush 43. No new regulations have been written, and the police are somewhat more civilized - that is, when they aren't closing the park for bogus "bomb" scares and limousines.

But during the Clinton years, Pennsylvania Avenue was closed to traffic for the first time ever.

So Thomas took his sign, "Wanted, Wisdom & Honesty," to the middle of Pennsylvania Avenue. It wasn't long before he was arrested.

It was instructive to observe how this closure came about.

First, there was a news article announcing that the Secret Service hoped to put a tunnel under Pennsylvania Avenue by 2000.

Then in 1994 there were a series of very highly publicized oddball events.



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Somebody flew a small plane into a tree on the south lawn, and died.

A pedestrian in a trench coat pulled out an automatic weapon and shot between the floors of the front of the White House.

Then a desperate homeless man, who had been kicked and scorned by a Park Police officer for a week, staggered after his tormentor from the park to the White House sidewalk with a knife taped to his paralyzed hand, and was killed by another Park Police officer who wheeled up in a cruiser, leapt out, crouched, and fired.



Somebody went over the fence. People go over the fence several times a year, usually, and the Secret Service has NO problem dealing with them. This time it was big news.

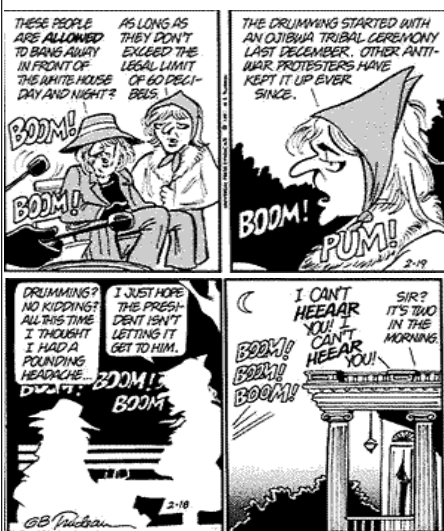
A few weeks later, Pennsylvania Avenue was closed to traffic, perhaps forever.

Rollerbladers were thrilled with the quiet new Avenue, but the vigilers were disappointed, for this seriously reduced the numbers of people who get a chance to read the signs.

Since 9/11, even the rollerbladers are usually elsewhere. Pennsylvania Avenue has been taken over by the police forces, and the rest of us are only tolerated.

IMMORTALIZED IN DOONESBURY

Garry Trudeau has showed a strong interest in Lafayette park since 1984, and paid particular attention in 1991:



To contact the vigilers:

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P.O. Box 27217,
Washington DC 20038
Phone: 202-682-4282

Email:

Thomas <prop1@prop1.org>
Ellen Thomas
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Concepcion Picciotto
<concepcionpicciotto@yahoo.com>

To learn
much more:
<http://prop1.org>

Lafayette Park Belongs to the Dissenters



Letter to Editor,
published December 22, 1984
Washington Post "Free For All"

Elizabeth Rowe (Close to Home, Dec. 9, 1984) lamented that "Lafayette Square ... is no longer a place to delight the eye and invite the passerby" and that the park should be "restored to its traditional use as a 'public pleasuring place.'" She suggested establishing "the city's new Hyde Park on the Ellipse."

In a letter Dec. 15, Thomas W. D. Wright praised Elizabeth Rowe's inspiration and opined that "some [demonstrators] are aware they are defiling beauty."

It seems grossly unfair to credit Elizabeth Rowe with this "inspiration." In January 1983, the secretary of the Interior, James Watt, had the same notion. Fortunately (or unfortunately, depending upon one's perception of "beauty"), he ran up against the First Amendment.

As early as July 1981 a tourist suggested that I move my signs ("trash" he called them) from in front of the White House to the Ellipse. I replied that if I moved, it would only be a matter of time before someone else's aesthetic sensibilities would be offended and would suggest I move to Greenbelt, Md. or Yosemite National Park, or the top of Mt. McKinley. And I pointed out that freedom of speech is something of a moot point if there is no one to hear what you are saying.

Perhaps Elizabeth Rowe has her traditions crossed, or maybe I just don't understand what she means by "a public pleasuring place." But one thing is certain--no place on the planet is a more traditional place for public discourse than Lafayette Park. And, traditionally, intolerant segments of the ponderous majority have sought to stifle minority dissent in front of the presidential palace.

Until recently those who considered the free expression of ideas less significant to the interests of democracy than the preservation of the status quo have been thwarted in their attempts to prohibit criticism in the area where it is most likely to reflect on the chief administrator.

As recently as 1965, a bill was before Congress (it was voted down by the Senate) which was aimed at banning demonstrations within 1,000 feet of the White House. Now we have entered a new era where bureaucrats write regulations that restrict freedom of religion, speech, the press and the right of the people to peaceably assemble and petition the government for redress of grievance.

In "Birth of a Street Person" (Style, Dec. 14), a story about my wife, [Ellen] Thomas, and me, the U.S. attorney, Royce Lambeth, was quoted as asking, "Why can't (the demonstrators in front of the White House) conform?" Perhaps the answer lies in the question: "Why couldn't Shadrach, Meshach and Abednego kneel down and worship the king's idol?"

I have two additional solutions for folks who don't like to listen to folks they don't like to look at:

- 1) Build a chain-link fence around the District, call it "King's Dominion," and prohibit protesting within the fence.
- 2) Move to the Soviet Union and leave Lafayette Park to those who value individual freedom and human life above "perfect" Polaroid snapshots and the "sanctity" of national icons.

William Thomas

[Note: substitute "Iraq" for "Soviet Union" and it still makes sense. et]

Other Friends...



... all these
and SO
many more ...
Thank you!

HR-1348

"The Nuclear Disarmament and Economic Conversion Act"

The United States Government shall--

(1) disable and dismantle all its nuclear weapons and refrain from replacing them at any time with any weapons of mass destruction;

(2) redirect resources that are currently being used for nuclear weapons programs to use--

(A) in converting all nuclear weapons industry employees, processes, plants, and programs smoothly to constructive, ecologically beneficial peacetime activities during the 3 years following the effective date of this Act, and

(B) in addressing human and infrastruc-

ture needs such as housing, health care, education, agriculture, and environmental restoration, including alternative fuel sources;

(3) undertake vigorous good faith efforts to eliminate war, armed conflict, and all military operations; and

(4) actively promote policies to induce all other countries to join in these commitments for world peace and security.

This Act shall take effect when the President certifies to the Congress that all foreign countries possessing nuclear weapons have established legal requirements comparable to those set forth [herein] and those requirements have taken effect.