

Inside a Bush Protest

The Washington Post
03/ 9/2007

SAO PAULO, Brazil -- The first real action of **President Bush's** visit here took place before Air Force One even landed last night. Thousands of mostly left-leaning demonstrators beating drums, shouting slogans and waving signs **protested in the center of town**. Some of the protesters threw objects at the helmeted riot police carrying transparent shields. Some of the police responded with tear gas and truncheons.

A few of us managed to escape the White House bubble long enough to get to the Avenue Paulista and found an emotional crowd that clearly doesn't care much for the president. Signs and stickers made him out to be another **Adolf Hitler** and carried the slogan, "**Fora Bush.**" It being a four-letter word starting with "F," we thought we could figure out what it means. But actually it means "get out."

When we arrived, most of the violence seemed over, but it was an unsettled scene that appeared as if it could explode again at any moment. As we walked up, hundreds of protesters suddenly turned away from their speakers and began running right at us, as if fleeing from police. Smart people who have experienced riots say it is sometimes best to simply stand still and not try to run yourself because you may just get trampled or beaten. If you stand still, you become like a light pole and the surging crowd will swarm around you. Or so the theory goes.

Fortunately in this case, they swarmed around us. We never did figure out what they were running from -- possibly just a false alarm, a noise that spooked them, or maybe someone threw something at the police and everyone expected a tough response. Hard to say. The protest appeared mostly peaceful when we were there.

We ventured further into the crowd and talked with some people. They were an eclectic mix of folks mainly from the political left -- anti-war, anti-capitalism, anti-globalization activists, some waving hammer-and-sickle flags, others holding up signs about global warming, others from agrarian groups or the United Socialist Workers Party. What they had in common was a strong antipathy for Bush and Brazilian President **Luiz Inacio Lula da Silva**.

We didn't speak Portuguese and few of them spoke English, but the message was clear enough. "No Bush, no war," **Damao Vicente**, 30, told us in the only English he knew.

As we talked with a clutch of university students, suddenly one of their friends came up and urgently told them they had to leave. They grabbed at their stray compatriots and ran away as fast as they could. Again, we weren't sure why. But we did then spot a line of helmeted police that hadn't been there a few minutes before.

The president rarely sees such scenes except perhaps on television. He arrived in Sao Paulo after dark a few hours later and headed by well-guarded motorcade to the Hilton Hotel, where he is staying. The only sign of protest he saw during the hour-long drive in from the airport was a single Brazilian standing along the road who raised his middle finger in a gesture that translates the world over.