

City Of Dissent

by Gail Robinson
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Protest march down Fifth Avenue, 1917.



Brian Knowlton joined tens of thousands of other New Yorkers on the East Side of Manhattan on February 25 to protest the U.S. preparation for war in Iraq. And like many others that day, he was arrested -- in his case for not moving when a police officer asked him to.

Rather than simply being given a ticket, Knowlton was held at One Police Plaza and questioned -- not just for his name and address but about his political affiliations and who had accompanied him to the rally. "The detective asked, 'So do you come to these things often?' - something like that," Knowlton recalled.

Confronted with evidence of such interrogations, the police department admitted last week that they had asked similar questions of many people arrested at protests beginning in mid February

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and had compiled the answers on special "demonstration debriefing forms." Under fire from [civil liberties groups](#), who called the practice "chilling" and "intimidating," Commissioner Raymond Kelly said the department would end the practice.

The police department also has backtracked from its [denial](#) of a permit to march for the February 15th mass anti-war demonstration, granting such a permit to a later demonstration. But at the same time the department has not backed down from reviving a practice that was banned almost 20 years ago, the surveillance of political activity. And the federal government, which has already cracked down on the rights of non-citizens, is considering measures that would allow the government to take citizenship away from Americans who support groups the government considers terrorist.

New York, long a center of protest, has in the last several months been what one [reporter](#) called "the spiritual center of the anti-war movement." In a city edgy with fears of terrorism, New Yorkers marched, rallied, staged "die ins" and practiced civil disobedience. As activists mounted the first mass protests in New York since the terrorist attacks of September 11, they confronted heightened security concerns head on.

"A national conversation is starting about what kind of country we want to live in and what balance we will tolerate between public safety and private freedom," Matthew Brzezinski wrote in the New York Times magazine. Depending on whether there are further terrorists attacks, he continued, "we may come to think nothing of American citizens who act suspiciously being held without bail or denied legal representation for indeterminate periods or tried in courts where proceedings are under seal."

A HISTORY OF PROTEST, AND SUPPRESSION

The history of dissent in New York goes back a long way -- as have the efforts to suppress that dissent.

One reason for New York's prominent role is because it has long served as the center of U.S. publishing, and the many writers and editors of dissenting publications added to the range of voices heard in the city. New York also has always had the highest concentration of immigrants,

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who bring their varied viewpoints and, often, an antipathy toward authority learned in the old country. Jewish immigration in the late 19th and early 20th century, for example, spurred the development of an American socialism that was particularly strong in New York. [Italian immigrants](#) also played a major role in the early days of the labor movement in New York, demanding rights for workers.

"The matrix of ideas is richer here, and in part it's richer because it reflects debate and discussion overseas as well as at home," says Joshua Brown, director of the [American Social History Project](#) at the Graduate Center of the City University of New York, who says that for much of its history New York has been "the exception to the rule" of the American mainstream.

But just as dissent has flourished here, so have efforts to suppress it, particularly when Americans feel threatened. "In time of war or national emergency, we respond too harshly in our restriction of civil liberties, and then, later, when it is too late, we regret our behavior," Geoffrey R. Stone, a professor of law at the University of Chicago has [written](#) .

During the Civil War, Abraham Lincoln several times suspended the writ of habeas corpus which requires that a court show why someone is being charged. The nationwide crackdown had a disproportionate effect in New York where many people, particularly Irish immigrants, opposed the war. By the early 1860s, [writes](#) Kevin Baker, as many as 10 percent of New York City men were arrested, most for dodging the draft or otherwise resisting the war effort.

During World War I, President Woodrow Wilson warned that disloyalty "must be crushed out of existence." Opposition to the war was particularly strong in New York, where settlement house workers, groups championing women's rights, and many immigrants had been against U.S. involvement in the conflict. Some 2,000 people were arrested for opposing the war — including, for example, Mollie Steiner, a Russian Jewish immigrant who had handed out anti-war leaflets in the city.

The suppression continued with the Red Scare of 1919 and 1920, when New York State's Lusk Committee tracked down and arrested communists, focusing on immigrants in New York City.

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In the 1960's, with much of the country caught up in protest movements, New York did not stand out as much as it has in more politically sleepy times. But dissent thrived here as well, spreading beyond the anti-war movement to such protest movements as the demand for community [control](#) of local schools, and the gay rights [movement](#), which got its start in Greenwich Village in 1969 when police raided a gay bar and patrons fought back. Campus protest, which began in Berkeley, moved east most famously in 1968, when students at Columbia University occupied some of the school's buildings to [demand](#) that Columbia not build a gym in Morningside Park, a protest to which the administration responded by calling in the police.

While much of the rest of the nation seemed to settle down for a while, protests continued in New York, from the giant 1982 [demonstration](#) in Central Park calling for a freeze on nuclear weapons to the acts of civil disobedience in front of police [headquarters](#), after the killing of unarmed [Amadou Diallo](#) by undercover New York City police in February, 1999, to the local [protests](#) against the U.S. Navy's shelling of the Puerto Rican island of Vieques.

Protest march on 17th Street, 2003.

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