

The History of Protest in Fort Wayne

**January 29, 2021
Fort Wayne Quest Club**

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While I was in the “getting used to it” part of the Quest paper process, I learned that the program committee thought I was a good choice for this topic. First of all, thank you for the vote of confidence. Second of all, oh, my goodness!

This topic has been a challenge to wrestle into a finished form. It keeps happening, and I continue to find excellent sources of commentary that I want to add.

Protest — and the kinds of activism that successful protest spins off — seems to be everywhere today, now that I am sensitized to it. An Atlantic article last June reported that one in five Americans said they’d participated in a recent protest. The aftershocks of those protests are still happening as committees meet, funds are raised and disbursed and people urge the people they know to keep going and do more for the cause.

In this dynamic situation, I see three ways that the research says protests make a difference:

1. Protests create activists for life, among protesters and also among bystanders
2. Protests can move the Overton Window, the view of what’s seen as acceptable and reasonable in the public sphere. For example, that June Atlantic article argues “Reforming the police as the minimal, conservative position is a striking shift in the Overton window in just a few years” and an achievement of the Black Lives Matter protest movement.
3. Urban authorities respond differently, and more accommodatingly, to protest than their rural or national counterparts. They understand, however consciously, that making at least a small accommodation to protesters’ demands preserves urban order better than complete rejection of them. I think this could relate to the Overton window phenomenon.

These points are just some of the available and growing research and commentary — backed up by my personal experience on my social media accounts. There is so much great information to assess and incorporate. I urge you to consult my bibliography if you are intrigued.

But here’s the kind truth about a Quest Paper deadline — it forces you to draw a line in the sand and reason and report from there. I will share just one personal story with you because my experience back then inevitably colors all my understanding of protests ever since.

A protest is one of my most vivid memories from my teen years. I clearly remember sitting on our couch next to my mother watching the Democratic National Convention in 1968 (we always watched the conventions together). I can still hear the chant, “The whole world’s watching, the whole world’s watching ...” and feel the frozen horror of seeing people who might as well have been me (because I, too, thought the U.S. should not be in Vietnam, and I was just about their age) being teargassed, beaten and dragged off to jail by the Chicago police. For a good little girl from Muncie, witnessing that scene could well have been my crucial incentive not to attend the protests the next fall and spring in Bloomington once I was on campus. I snuck into Ballantine Hall for class instead.

All of this is worth saying mostly because it helps me make my point that I see protest as a fraught process: Potentially dangerous, likely unsuccessful, happening on a public stage that the

protesters do not control and that can reward them with sympathetic attention, punish them with negative publicity (or worse) and/or simply ignore or misrepresent them.

But protest has to be fraught. Otherwise it's just a political rally and has no hope of achieving anything outside of the options already safely within the realm of the possible. Without protesters, Abraham Lincoln might not have just abolished slavery (which was not his original plan): Remember the abolitionists? Without suffragettes, women might not yet have the vote. Protest movements preceded the nuclear arms control agreements (which were not necessarily the goal of the movements) and the founding of the Environmental Protection Agency (which was a goal but not the biggest).

I just characterized quite a few different things as protest, and that highlights the need for a definition. I've always thought of protest as doing something that the people in charge don't really want you to do to call attention to something that you want to change or protect because you think the pressure of the public attention might tip the balance and make what you want happen. Some of the academic literature seems happy to call it "politics by other means" and move on, which is way too vague for my thinking. Because the protest we are interested in today is more than a momentary thing, more than a season of discontent, we will use the definition I found in David S. Meyer's "The Politics of Protest: Social Movements in America." He defines these social movements, the embodiment of protest, as "collective and sustained efforts that challenge existing or potential laws, policies, norms, or authorities making use of extra institutional as well as institutional political tactics." (p112)

By definition, he adds, most people don't protest. They watch. But the response of the bystanders, especially in today's instantly-on-the Internet age, is often the most important factor in determining the outcome of a protest action. The most important people to watch in any fight, he notes, are the ones in the crowd. "They may stay out of the fight, and the stronger fighter will prevail. Or they may intervene, and other outcomes become possible." And it is the losers in any conflict who have an interest in expanding its scope and bringing in new actors. That's what social movements do, he reminds us. "When social movements are successful, authorities and bystanders think not only about the political efforts of activists but also about their demands and gripes." (pp14-15)

And that's what leads to change.

As a nation, as a culture, America has always faced and responded to protest. I found a moving and fascinating overview of the historic cavalcade of our progressive protests in a book edited by Michael G. Long called "We the Resistance: Documenting a History of Nonviolent Protest in the United States." Long has pulled together a collection of 162 voices originating from protests by Colonial residents of Pennsylvania refusing to discriminate against Quakers through every movement that has shaped and reshaped our culture to the present day: Abolition, women's rights, Native American rights, labor rights, the environment, the peace movement, LBGTQ rights, immigration justice, animal liberation, Occupy Wall Street, Black Lives Matter, and more.

The essential fact is: There has been a lot of protest, a lot to protest, too. The American Way is particularly open to protest as a tool once people find themselves in a certain part of the political waters, perhaps it is even welcoming to protest.

David Meyer argues that the Founding Fathers, particularly James Madison, purposefully created this protest-friendly character of our political waters as a way of keeping whatever "interests" are stronger at any given time from overwhelming other parts of the body politic. Meyer describes our system as institutionalizing dissent with the government structure of checks

and balances created by the Constitution and then making plenty of protection for extra-institutional speech (and protest) with the Bill of Rights. According to Meyer's analysis, both the Constitution and the Bill of Rights are designed to be robust and to increase the ability of the American political system, the nation, to slowly but more or less surely respond to the challenges it faces with the least likelihood of people either giving up and dropping out or of taking up arms against it.

I guess I can say: So far, so good, Mr. Madison. Though we have experienced glimpses down into the abyss, which I, for one, would prefer to avoid.

Turning to today's question: As a nation we have a rich history of protest, but what about here in Fort Wayne? I do not believe any of the 162 voices in the "We the Resistance" book are from here, or even Indiana. Does our much-commented-upon Midwestern niceness, like my learned caution, tamp down our willingness to use protest as a political tool?

Not at all. My research, which I will characterize as thorough though not complete or exhaustive, yielded 155 entries either of or about protests ranging from early 1800s abolition and temperance actions to the most recent demonstrations at Courthouse Green and calls for the resignation of U.S. Rep. Jim Banks in front of the federal Courthouse. I combed in detail through our most recent and authoritative local history, edited by Questor John Beatty, and searched the Journal Gazette online archive with additional help from access to The News-Sentinel's old archive of its photo negative collection (that sadly is not a complete collection of all the years of the paper's photography).

A lot has happened here. I will state my belief that everything that has been protested about anywhere in this nation has been protested about here, too, even though I may not have a dated example of it in my list.

My database has the most entries in the labor protest category, probably because the newspapers reported on business news. The News-Sentinel's photo logs yielded 7 entries about strikes in 1950, 7 in 1951 and 6 in 1953. That's a lot. GE was the site of strikes four different times from 1950 through 1952. Civil rights, which has morphed along the way from the classic civil rights marches and sit-ins at lunch counters here through school desegregation to protests against police brutality and Black Lives Matter demonstrations, is the next big clearly-defined category. The way the newspaper reported the protests and therefore I recorded them does not count out separately the 10-plus days straight of Black Lives Matter protests downtown this summer, which would have made it an even larger category.

By comparison, the antiwar movement barely registers in my database, once again because of how the newspapers in this case did not cover it during the times I was able to see records for. Nevertheless, the history book tells us the antiwar movement has been active here as a "small countercultural movement" since the 1960s, most recently getting coverage for a protest downtown a year ago this month against the Trump administration's military actions in the Mideast. Fort Wayne does have a persistent community of peace advocates (who have been largely ignored for decades). And one day does live in a lot of people's memories: Palm Sunday, April 14, 1971, a defining moment for many then-young people. A police crackdown used tear gas and clubs to drive more than a thousand young people, congregating peacefully (if perhaps smoking pot) out of Foster Park after complaints were received. It seems in 1971, simply to be young among many other youth was more than could be tolerated by what I always used to call The Establishment. The book characterizes this as an antiwar experience for the youth, without specifying what antiwar activities were going on that day.

Another long-term protest movement here is the pro-life/pro-choice contest that was brought to a boil in 1978 when an abortion clinic opened on Webster Street downtown. I judge the weekly confrontations of pro-life and pro-choice advocates with the women who were trying to enter the clinic not to be protest. A lot of what happened in the next ring out and has happened as that arena of conflict has waned is protest, though, with large annual Right to Life marches and frequent competing demonstrations with both sides present with their signs and adherents.

My database has listings of people engaging in protest actions in regards to: public education (in the early 1800s as well as at last year's Indiana General Assembly), the Civil War draft, political rivalries (then and now, though no actual brickbats now), specific government actions, anti-pornography, against the city's anti-smoking ordinance, Gay Pride and LGBTQ rights, animal rights, immigration policy and immigrant rights, gun control (mostly pro but some con, too), annexations, the Purdue Fort Wayne restructuring, health care, threatened historic buildings, against proposed real estate developments (especially gas stations), utility costs and patient rights. We've even had at least one protest against Gov. Holcomb's use of executive orders to control the COVID-19 pandemic. I realize I do not have sources to list our local Occupy Wall Street protests, though I am sure there were Occupiers in Freimann Square.

Let's study a series of snapshots from different times (which overlap in some ways) because that's what my research was able to focus on.

What I am considering our early era of protest did not necessarily involve gathering in public spaces, holding signs and chanting slogans. The focus was on speaking your anti-establishment truth and refusing to quiet down, and this social agitation was a way that women made their mark even though they were legally denied the vote and the right to own property if married and were excluded from meaningful employment. The men who held the same views generally had a professional position (minister, newspaper owner/editor, attorney or politician) from which to make their views heard. Our county history book cites examples of women's actions pro-abolition, pro-temperance, pro-women's rights and pro-public education during this time. A lot of work in this early era went into bringing speakers to town, organizing public debates, writing letters to the editor and keeping a lively civic conversation going.

Our early temperance activists, though, were particularly likely to use what we would recognize today as protest tactics.

In 1854, they organized a torch-lit parade up Barr Street past the homes of notable civic leaders, where participants shouted "groans" of approval. They also dug a large grave and buried a cask of whiskey.

Junia Aveline, widow of hotel-owner Francis Aveline, began a campaign of temperance speeches in the spring of 1874 that included speeches on the courthouse steps and across Allen County devoted to awakening her friends and neighbors to the painful consequences of alcohol abuse. By January 1875, as an early Woman's Christian Temperance Union leader here, she and the state president presented a petition signed by 10,000 temperance women to a joint session of the Indiana State Legislature. The response: They were informed the elected officials were there to represent their constituents, not their consciences, and their constituents opposed temperance. There's a similar story from when women delivered a large petition for women's rights to the legislature in 1859. They were ridiculed and their petition ignored.

The women kept organizing, adding suffrage to their goals. This is how protest becomes a social movement, and the suffragettes, locally but especially nationally, became expert at using protest tactics. Today's women's rights movement routinely organizes huge protest marches nationally with good-sized local supporting marches here and in many, many other cities.

The Civil War is its own era of protest in Fort Wayne. This information is from our history book. The city leaders closed ranks and declared their support for the Union early on, which they maintained, but the populace was not as united. Once it became obvious that the first regiments who marched off to war in uniforms sewed by the ladies of Fort Wayne were not going to quickly return home victorious and maybe not return home at all, the people of Fort Wayne had to come to terms with the draft President Lincoln instituted. By 1863, tension was notable in the city. In 1863, local Republicans celebrated winning a seat in Congress with a torch-light parade but were pelted with brickbats, stones, clubs and verbal abuse along the way. Susan Mann McCulloch is quoted in the book: "Mrs. Colerick, as usual, ran out and hoorah'd for Jeff Davis. I think it quite time she was sent to where her sympathies are." Another Union rally the same year sparked a riot. By 1864, more than 900 protesters staged a rally at the Courthouse square, threatening the county commissioners that if they did not start paying a larger bounty to men who enlisted, they would be taken out and hanged.

The war also triggered the city's first labor strike when the Pittsburgh, Fort Wayne, and Chicago Railroad, reacting to the shortage of U.S. currency, tried to pay its employees in company vouchers. The employees, who had the year before formed Local No. 12 of the Union and Brotherhood of the Footboard, called the city's first major labor strike.

The post-Civil War era, when Fort Wayne grew into a full-on manufacturing powerhouse supported by excellent railroad connections, is when labor protests — strikes — become the prevalent type of protest. These are the most vivid protests, the most fraught, the protests where people really were risking the most because they were risking, and many times losing, their livelihoods. Of course, to work in a factory or on the railroad then was also risky because there were no safety protections and pay generally was as bad as the working conditions. These strikes, these protests and the union organizing that underpinned them, helped change that.

1877 was a difficult year. The railroad union, reorganized as the Brotherhood of Locomotive Engineers, staged a major strike that won support from conductors, yardmen and firemen from multiple railroads. It shut down the city and caused the intervention of federal troops, though the strike had been settled through extensive negotiations by the time the troops actually arrived in town. To the credit of the Fort Wayne strikers and company leaders, no rioting or bloodshed occurred here, as it had elsewhere along the railway line.

In 1884, a strike shut down the Fort Wayne Electric Railway Corporation streetcar lines when motormen and conductors demanded a raise from 13.5 to 15 cents an hour. Scabs brought in by the company were pelted with bad eggs. Strikers tipped over a car at Transfer Corner. Three thousand citizens attended a mass rally at Courthouse Square. Arbitration after two weeks ended the strike with the company giving in to the strikers' demand.

Between 1900 and 1930, Fort Wayne had more than 40 labor unions representing mostly skilled workers. Construction trades and railroad workers were well represented, but also barbers, butchers, cigar makers, clothing clerks, musicians, letter carriers, ice wagon drivers, horse shoers, stonecutters, textile workers and waist factory workers. Our history book reports that strikes and lockouts were common.

Here's how one of them went:

In December 1920, female workers at Wayne Knitting Mills took the bold step, the history book says, of joining a company-wide strike to protest the elimination of pay bonuses and profit-sharing plans. A total of 800 people walked out. The strike continued all winter and into spring. In April, factory owner Theodore Thieme ended the strike by firing 16 of the strike leaders.

Two significant things happened as the 20th century wore on. They happened nationwide, the civil rights movement, followed by a sort of standardization of protest, and they happened here, too.

I don't have any data to make a tidy connection from our abolitionists and Susan Mann McCulloch complaining about Mrs. Colerick's Confederate sympathies to the very real and effective Civil Rights movement that emerged here after World War II and then full-fledged in the 1960s. The world changed a lot during those years — for everyone, though for black Americans it may well have felt like everything changed and nothing changed.

After World War II, our history book recounts, African-American veterans, denied service at the Meyer's Drug Store lunch counter downtown at Main and Calhoun streets, staged a sit-in, after which two stools were reserved for African-American patrons. Years later, in the 1970s, a line of black demonstrators gathered outside the G.C. Murphy store downtown to protest its refusal to hire African-Americans or to serve them at its lunch counter.

In June 1963, while Martin Luther King Jr. spoke to about 3,000 people inside Scottish Rite Auditorium, five white segregationists carried signs outside. Five years later, the history book recounts, the city had "limited rioting" after his assassination.

In 1965, nearly 1,500 people, black and white, marched peacefully through downtown Fort Wayne for a memorial service for the Rev. James J. Reeb, a white Unitarian minister from Boston, who was fatally beaten as he marched in Selma, Alabama. A year later in July, more than 600 demonstrators (more than a quarter of whom were white, the history book reports) staged a series of rallies outside City Hall pressuring the Zeis administration to recruit African-Americans to the police and fire departments and to appoint one to the school board and the redevelopment board — during a 100-plus-degree heat wave.

In 1969, the Fort Wayne Ministerial Alliance led a group of 100 marchers to a Fort Wayne school board meeting seeking a plan for desegregation. Getting none, it called for a boycott of four elementary schools, triggering the Freedom School movement. It lasted only 10 days, but it was instrumental in moving the school corporation toward desegregation.

These protest actions opened seats at downtown lunch counters and forced the desegregation of the city elementary schools, but they also did more.

They probably changed us, to be precise, white people in Allen County, long-term. I cite research done by Shom Mazumder and reported in the Washington Post in 2017 looking at white people in counties that had non-violent civil rights protests 50 years ago. We are one of those counties.

"Take, for example, two counties that had identical average incomes, demographics and voting behavior before the civil rights movement," he wrote. "Whites today from the counties that did have protests show less racial prejudice toward blacks than their counterparts from counties that did not — but were otherwise similar.

"Whites from the counties that did have protests, decades ago, are more likely today to identify as Democrats — the party associated with racial liberalism — compared with those from counties that had no such protests.

"What's more, they're less likely to believe for instance, that African Americans don't work hard enough, and more likely to believe that historical discrimination against African American still matters today. And they're also likely to support affirmative action policies than whites from the non-protest counties."

Mazumder wraps up his article citing the three factors that determine a protest's success, arguing that consistently succeeding with at least one of these factors can make the difference.

First is organization, a continuing organization that allows the activists to continue pushing for the movement's goals after the protest event. He cites the Tea Party as particularly effectively organized in this way.

Second is messaging, with the key criteria being a message that resonates for more than just the core supporters. Remember the importance of the bystanders? The message power of cellphone video of police brutality has been widely cited as powerfully resonant and a key reason the Black Lives Matter movement is achieving status as our nation's second Civil Rights movement in the judgment of many commentators.

Third is nonviolence. Research finds that, worldwide, nonviolent movements tend to be about twice as effective as violent ones.

The civil rights movement was so successful that its protests have become the model that most later protests have followed in this country, especially. The antiwar movement varied from the original civil rights leaders' highly organized tactics by embracing a much more leaderless concept of protest, for example in the Mayday protest of 1971 in Washington, D.C., where obstructive tactics, announced in advance, triggered official response that resulted in 7,000 of the 25,000 demonstrators being arrested.

Similar self-organizing protests, made even easier by smartphones and social media, carry on the largely leaderless style of protest today, which leads to situations like the one here this summer. The city administration was willing to talk to protest leaders about police reforms, but the leaders it chose to talk to were not necessarily the leaders who represented all the protesters. Different groups of protest leaders squabbled in public about who represented whom.

But overall, our protest model has become safer because both protesters and police have expectations and processes they expect (or are required) to follow, which increases safety for both.

This standardization may be part of why protest seems so familiar today, so ubiquitous. It is safer to protest in many ways at least, than it used to be. And we all know that protest can make a difference, even if the process is incremental and take a long time.

It's only logical to consider, given all this, what meaning, what importance, protest has going forward.

I'll cite two examples, one local and one national, of how otherwise standardized protests went off the tracks just in the past year. First, this summer's Black Lives Matter protests in downtown Fort Wayne. During the first nights, rioting protesters did a lot of property damage and a young man lost an eye during a police tear gas attack. Second, just this month, Jan. 6, a rally supporting Donald Trump turned into a murderous riot breaking into our Capitol while Congress was in session.

Protest is still fraught, and the stakes are always high. It behooves us to take people's willingness to protest seriously.

What the presence of protest in our community and our culture should do — and I mean protest from any part of the socio-economic-political spectrum — is cause all of us to stop and think.

- Not about whether the protesters damaged any property or impeded the conduct of any public or private business. We have social structures in place to deal with that, and we have plenty of opportunity to hold them accountable.
- Not about how the protesters look or dressed or how they spoke or wrote their message. I, for a relatively petty example, must resist my knee-jerk reaction to dismiss or discount the voices of people who don't spell or use apostrophes correctly.

- Not even about how many of them there were. It's not a popularity contest and there are a lot of factors that affect who can and will show up to protest even something very important to them.

We need to stop and think about what it is about our socio-economic-political system that made this protest the thing that these human beings, these probably otherwise perfectly ordinary people, decided they wanted and needed to do today. Be mindful that it may well be something that we are not routinely aware of in our own lives. Once we have stopped and thought about that, then we can decide what our response to the protest should be.

Here's a foundational concept I use. It's proved to be a significantly valuable and useful tool ever since I was first able to articulate it for myself years and years ago.

People do things for their own good reasons.

- Not my good reasons.
- Not necessarily even reasons I would recognize as good, but reasons they understand to represent a good, i.e. constructive, purpose.

I make a mistake when I dismiss people's actions as mistaken, wrong or, worse, evil. Though I do believe evil acts are committed by people and it's then worth considering whether they are evil themselves. But except for that small sliver of exceptional events, people, overall, do things for their own good reasons. And I can function more effectively when I make the effort to identify them.

I have learned that I need to make this effort with the background understanding of my own limitations. We all are crippled intellectually and emotionally by the limitations of the cultural assumptions we grew up with, ideas so deep and so much a part of the very definitions of things to us that we are no more routinely aware of them than a fish is aware it lives in water. But those ideas — about how people should act, about who is Us and who is Them, about what makes people deserving — are powerful. They color all our thoughts and all our feelings. They affect our judgment, and we become wiser and more compassionate with every attempt to surface, recognize and do everything we can to insure they are not triggering toxic thoughts or behavior on our parts.

Stopping and thinking also opens our minds and hearts to simply learn from other people's stories and lived experiences.

This personal growth, this learning, is at the deepest level, what makes protest work. It's how individuals and cultures mature and grow. In America, we use the tools of democracy, one of which is protest, to enact much of our culture's progress.

As I stand in front of you today, we are at the beginning of a year that has managed already to be even more tragic with disease and dark with conflict than the extremely difficult year before it. Yet I cling to my faith that as a people we are smart enough and caring enough to not only survive all this but also to continue the work of unearthing and addressing these things about our system that make protest inevitable and to make things better.

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