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Student Protesters, Fighting Image of Apathy, Call for a Cohesive Movement

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Student Activists Call for Peace, a Cohesive Movement at U.S. Colleges

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Sunday, January 28, 2007; A08

As the bulk of war protesters chanted "this is what democracy looks like" on the Mall yesterday, a few hundred gathered separately on the south edge of the Mall.

Members of the College Democrats of America mingled with the more radical Students for a Democratic Society and the Communist Youth Movement. Many held signs proclaiming themselves "another future leader against the war." Some danced. Some clapped. Others passed around a joint. Disparate in their affiliations, they were united in their chants: "College, not combat."

Since the war began nearly four years ago, many Vietnam-era antiwar activists have publicly lamented what they see as apathy among today's college students. They wonder whether the absence of a draft and a culture of pop music and reality television have distracted young people from civic responsibilities.

But among the hundreds of students on the Mall yesterday, dozens of whom drove all night to get to Washington for the protest, the prevailing sentiment was that their generation had been unfairly maligned and that the antiwar movement is growing stronger every day.

"I do think we're misrepresented as being lazy, ignorant and unaware of current events," said Sarah Searle, 19, a sophomore at the University of Virginia. "There's no huge movement going on like during Vietnam, but that doesn't mean we're apathetic."

The students at yesterday's protest noted that their efforts have not had the iconic touchstones of the late 1960s and early 1970s, when shootings at Kent State and the

student takeover at Columbia University stirred U.S. consciousness. Still, there are signs, they said, of a building resistance to the war in Iraq and other U.S. foreign policy initiatives.

"Whenever you have inequality dragging on the way it is now, that's always resulted at some point in a rise in mass resistance," said David Judd, a Columbia junior who celebrated his 21st birthday yesterday by traveling with 150 classmates to Washington for the protest. "Obviously, that's not going to happen tomorrow, but there's good reason to believe that at some point it will, and the work that we do beforehand in preparing for that and getting people involved in activism is important."

Many students mentioned the case of Ehren Watada -- the U.S. Army lieutenant facing a court martial for refusing to deploy to Iraq -- as an important step in building a cohesive antiwar movement. Watada's father spoke from the main stage at the protest while student speakers at a side rally organized by the Campus Antiwar Network hailed the young man as a hero and said the war will not end until other soldiers make the same decision.

Mark Rudd, the 1960s radical who gained notoriety as the leader of the Columbia protests and as a member of the revolutionary group the Weathermen, said he has noticed increased antiwar activity among college students over the past year, which he attributed in part to Watada's public refusal to deploy in June. Students for a Democratic Society, the largest student activist group during Vietnam, has reemerged, holding its first convention since 1969 last year and gaining a presence on a growing number of college campuses.

"There's been a 35-year break where there hasn't been a mass movement, so students haven't had a natural model for how to do it," Rudd said, laying some of the blame on the Weathermen for breaking apart the larger student movement in the push to be more radical. "I hope they'll learn from our shameful history and learn how not to screw things up like we did."

Students agreed that ending the war will require building a coalition across political lines. University of Maryland senior Alan Wright, 21, said political moderates have been alienated from the antiwar movement by radicals.

"We might all be against the war, but there's no consensus about what we should do now," Wright said. "If we can all come together, we will be able to have more of an impact."

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