

Then & Now

Homecoming, 1965

Parade and protest on a Friday afternoon

On a warm, sunny autumn afternoon, a gala university homecoming parade slowly made its way along streets lined with cheerful spectators, following a twisty two-mile course through downtown. Stretching almost half a mile, the merry procession featured two dozen student-built floats, ten marching bands, an astronaut, the mayor, the president of the university, fire engines, clowns, antique cars, and a bevy of go-go girls, Playboy bunnies, and beauty queens.

By the time the parade drew to a close, however, the mood had turned from festive to foul. Spectators were booing, hissing, and shouting insults. A few began to launch projectiles at the float in the rear. Paper, sticks, raw eggs, and Coke bottles flew through the air, striking the float and its riders. Then a group of about fifty young men mobbed the float, tearing and ripping until nothing was left but the wire frame.

The float eventually managed to break away from its attackers and limped off, chased by a group of jeering boys.

Although it may sound like a scene from *Animal House*, this was a documented real-life event.

And it happened in Ann Arbor.

The date was Friday, October 15, 1965, and the focus of all the ill feeling was a simple, no-frills affair. Spare to the point of ugliness, the float depicted an American soldier guarding a group of Vietnamese peasant women in a barbed-wire enclosure—a “strategic hamlet,” as the U.S. government called it. Signs on the side read, “This is homecoming for Vietnamese displaced by American bombing.”

Organized, large-scale protest of U.S. military intervention in Southeast Asia had begun in the spring of 1965, following the start of a massive American bombing campaign against North Vietnam. That summer, radical activist Jerry Rubin and others in Berkeley, California, called for October 15 and 16 to be the International Days of Protest against the war. In Ann Arbor, a coalition of student groups, university faculty, and local activists planned a series of dramatic events designed to draw attention to the war. Ultimately they would generate more drama than they desired.

In 1965, the Vietnam war could not yet be called unpopular. The few who publicly protested it were generally considered to be traitors, cowards, or both. Across the country, many demonstrations that weekend were met by sizeable contingents of counter-protesters, who heckled, insulted, and even assaulted the antiwar groups.

In Ann Arbor, the weekend’s central event was the country’s first act of mass



In October 1965, the lone antiwar float in the U-M homecoming parade (above) was attacked and destroyed by pro-war protesters. By 1969, half the floats in the parade would have a peace or antiwar theme. In 1971 (below), the homecoming game included a halftime antiwar demonstration, with veterans releasing black balloons to commemorate the war dead.

civil disobedience directed at the Vietnam War. On Friday evening a mixed group of thirty-eight young people, including six women and a few junior university faculty, staged a sit-in at the draft board office at the corner of Liberty and Main. The demonstrators sat on the floor, talking and singing songs, until the office closed, after which they were arrested for trespassing. They made no attempt to resist arrest, and most remained immobile and had to be carried out by police. Among those arrested were an editor of the *Michigan Daily* and Bill Ayers, who later helped found the revolutionary Weather Underground.

The nonviolent scene inside the draft board office contrasted sharply with the tense situation on the street below. A crowd of about five hundred had gathered, some in support of the demonstrators, others in angry opposition. Insults were traded, and a few scuffles broke out. Fifty law officers were called in to keep order, nightsticks drawn, as the arrestees were carried down the stairs to a waiting police van.

Similarly heated face-offs between protesters and counter-protesters took place throughout the weekend. In addition to the destruction of the float, a protester holding an antiwar sign along the parade route was attacked by three bullies who beat him bloody. Police were slow to break up the one-sided battle and did nothing to prevent the attack on the float. When asked to intervene, one officer reportedly refused, saying that he had served three years in the Marines.

“The student body can now say that it has about two hundred students who are willing and most pleased to attack violently anyone (women included) who is opposed to the U.S. policy in Vietnam,” a witness to the assault on the float wrote in a letter to the *Michigan Daily*. “Ann Arbor now knows that it has a police force which will

stand by while people are being attacked and refuse to protect them. I am now very much afraid to be a student here. So would anyone who saw the faces of those patriots who so valiantly attacked the float. There was pure murder on those faces.”

As a whole, the International Days of Protest have often been judged a failure. Polls found a significant increase in the number of Americans expressing support for the war after the demonstrations.

In Ann Arbor, however, the protests seem to have had the opposite effect. A month later, local veterans’ organizations held a Veterans Day march downtown to show support for U.S. policy in Vietnam. Despite a huge publicity blitz in the patently pro-war *Ann Arbor News*, the parade was sparsely attended.

As the war in Vietnam wore on, opposition to it grew, and school spirit and peace activism began to seem

three decades, the festivities were sporadically revived, with varying degrees of success. An eleven-year lull was broken in 2007, when a serious effort was made to restore homecoming to its former glory, with a parade, carnival, and other activities. In 2008, however, the parade was dropped. This year, as the Observer went to press in mid-September, the Michigan Student Assembly had few plans to celebrate homecoming.

In 1965, a Dylanesque “hard rain” fell on the inaugural U-M homecoming parade. But Ann Arbor, like most of the country, is much quieter today than it was forty-four years ago. When the parade and pageantry make their inevitable return to campus, event organizers will probably enjoy clearer skies.

—Alan Glenn

Alan Glenn is making a documentary film on Ann Arbor in the 1960s. See www.modernmajorfilms.com.



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