

THE MARCH ON THE PENTAGON

CLARK AKATIFF

ABSTRACT. The Pentagon March of October 1967 had a significant spatial component. Four barriers separated five levels of commitment and action. Overcoming the barrier of geographical distance was largely a function of psychological distance; those most alienated were willing to travel farthest. The participants showed clear evidence of spatial differentiation as a function of commitment at each successive level of confrontation. **KEY WORDS:** *Activism, Confrontation, Militancy, Pentagon march, Psychological distance, Political commitment, Yippies.*

THE weekend of October 19–21, 1967, marked a major turning point in the development of militant antigovernment protest in the United States. This was the weekend when some 400,000 people converged on Washington, D.C. in an attempt to “Confront the Warmakers.” In the long run, I am convinced, this will be seen as the time when the protest movement in the United States took the step from liberalism to radicalism. The full story of the assault on the Pentagon can never be fully known, for it was a kaleidoscopic event which developed a dynamic of its own that swept participants along on a cloud of excitement, fear, hostility, and exaltation.¹ I am no exception; my observations are personal, and reflect my participation as well as my academic training. My presence at the Pentagon was both to protest the war and to observe the development of the protest movement itself. This dual purpose flickered in my mind—one being dominant now, and the other then, and if this paper appears subjective and perhaps contentious, it is because these purposes remain intertwined in my mind. I am convinced that geography must become more intimately in-

Accepted for publication 7 July 1973.

Mr. Akatiff is associated with the Salk Institute, 168 Tennyson Avenue, Palo Alto, CA 94301.

¹ The most widely acclaimed account of the Pentagon confrontation is Norman Mailer, *The Steps of the Pentagon* (New York: Harpers, 1968). A shorter, but useful, version appears in Garry Will, *The Second Civil War* (New York: New American Library, 1968), pp. 63–70. Newspaper coverage in the *Washington Post* (October 19–22) was extensive and generally accurate, though perhaps reflecting an establishment bias; biased in the other direction were the *National Guardian* (New York), and the *Washington Free Press*.

involved in the movements for social change afoot in this nation and the world. I also believe that geographic analysis of distribution, dispersal, flows, and environmental perception provide powerful analytic tools for the general understanding of these movements.

GEOGRAPHICAL ANALYSIS OF PEAK EXPERIENCE

The confrontation at the Pentagon represented the clash of two armies. One army represented established order—powerful, disciplined, marshalled by conscription, and representing the status quo in the United States and the World. In opposition was an army of rabble—unarmed, undisciplined, marshalled by the mushrooming clouds of alienation, cultural disintegration, and protestation—representing an emergent revolutionary force in the United States and the World. The battlefield was the very citadel of established order—Washington, D.C., and the Pentagon, and the confrontation brought the war in Vietnam home in a very concrete and dramatic manner.

Battles are peak experiences. They represent a distillation of the environmental forces (both social and natural) that lead to them, and they provide an essential reality by which the observer of social phenomena might judge the causes of such phenomena. An analogy might be made to the clash of two football teams; the game itself is the peak experience. We can know much about the factors leading to the game—the varying capabilities of the teams, their training and spirit, but it is the reality of the game itself that “proves” or “disproves” our perception of these factors. “Armchair quarterbacking” is essentially an after-the-fact analysis of a peak experience; after the essential

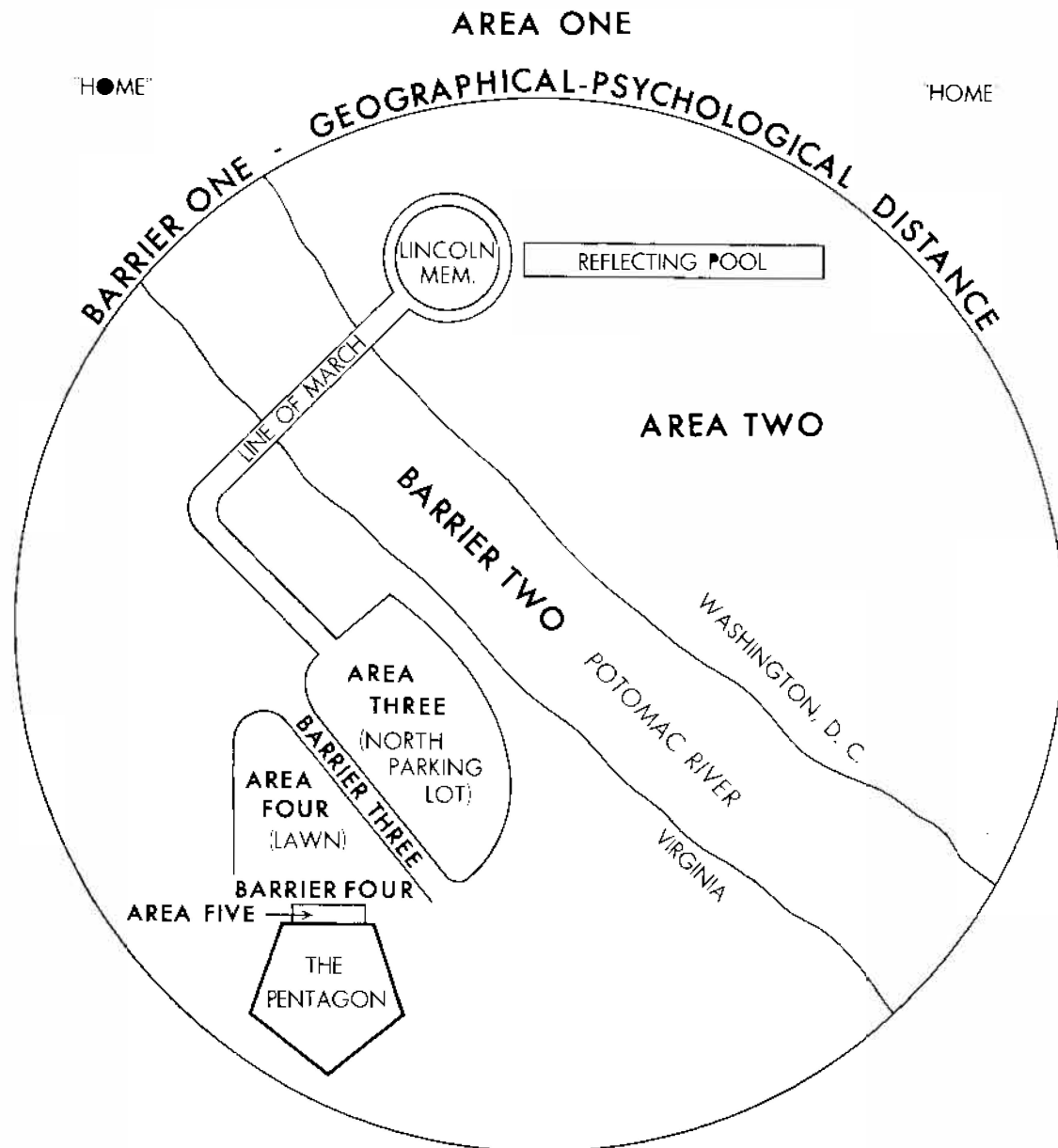


Fig. 1. Diagrammatic sketch of Pentagon confrontational areas and barriers.

reality has transpired reevaluations of strengths and weaknesses must be made.²

In the Pentagon Demonstration the actual unfolding of the battle—in some cases in a quite literal manner—displayed the social and geographical forces that had been gestating up

to this moment of confrontation. The actual location of the participants, the lines of confrontation, and the successive plateaus of involvement present graphic evidence of the real situation that had developed—a situation which outran the anticipations of most observers. In order to systematize this understanding I have divided the confrontation into five clearly defined levels of action and commitment, each of which has a different geographical context (Fig. 1). Area One is home—wherever the

² The analytic use of the peak experience concept has been widely publicized by the psychologist, Abraham H. Maslow, *Toward a Psychology of Being* (Princeton, N.J.: Van Nostrand, 1962), chapter 7.

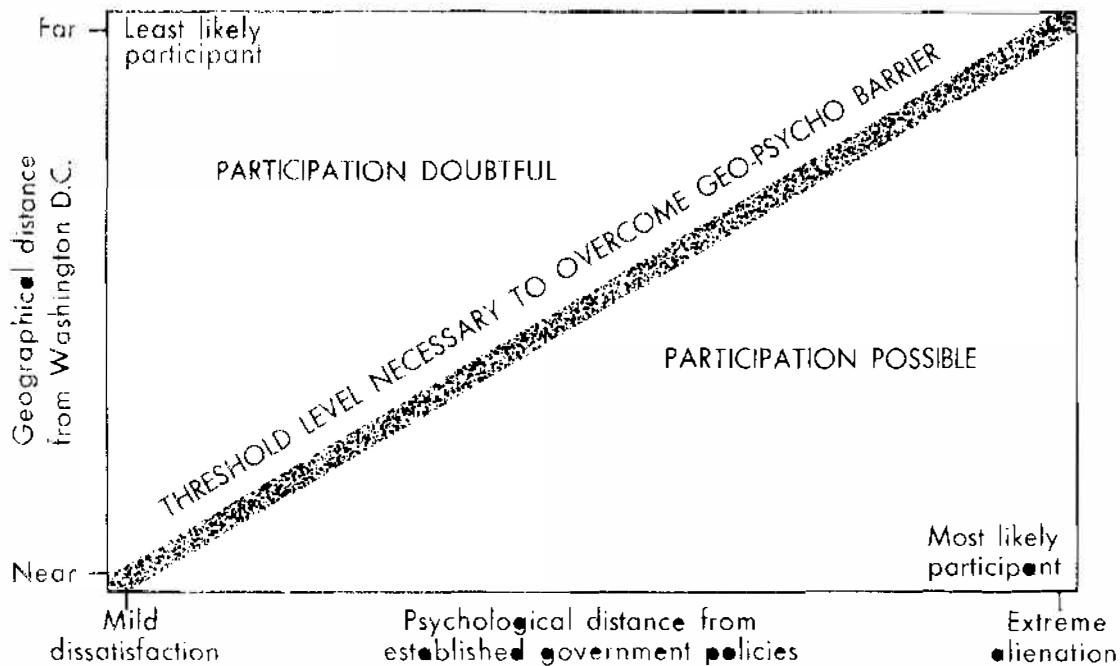


Fig. 2

participants live and carry on their day-to-day activities. Area Two is Washington, D.C., the Lincoln Memorial in particular. This area was the initial focus of the demonstration and represented the meeting grounds for the largest and most diverse group of protesters. Area Three is the North Parking Lot of the Pentagon. Located across the Potomac and near the Pentagon, movement to this area signified a greater commitment to the protest. Area Four is the lawn facing the mall entrance to the Pentagon and Area Five is the steps and mall of the Pentagon itself. Movement by a demonstrator from one area to the next higher one represented an increasing commitment to the protest, and it is through analysis of the collective behavior of the demonstrators at each level that judgments of the actual nature of the demonstration are made.

It is possible to view these different areas of involvement as plateaus; each plateau represented a different level of commitment and each was farther from home in both a geographic and a psychological sense. The success of the demonstration was measured by the numbers of people who reached the successively higher plateaus and thereby overcame the geographical and psychological barriers to participation. Movement from one plateau to another

involved the conscious surmounting of a barrier and the plateaus in a sense were defined by their barriers.³

The first barrier was the distance between one's home and Washington. This was the most obviously geographical of the barriers, especially for those who lived far from Washington, yet it was even more fundamentally psychological, for one had to overcome the psychological restraints upon participation in anti-governmental protests before one could begin the actual journey. In general the psychological distance was roughly a function of geographic distance. Those who lived close to the site of the demonstration (Area Two) had to travel only a relatively slight psychological distance, but farther from Area Two the psychological distance increased. One might have expected demonstrators who had to spend more than one day in actual travel to manifest greater psychological alienation from normal behavior (Fig. 2).

The fundamental determinant of the success of the Pentagon protest was the large numbers

³ A systematic consideration of barriers appeared in Robert S. Yuill, *A Simulation Study of Barrier Effects in Spatial Diffusion Problems*, Discussion Paper No. 5 (Ann Arbor: Michigan Inter-University Community of Mathematical Geographers, 1965).

of people who successfully overcame the psychological barrier to participation and, often at the last minute, began the trip to Washington. This unusual outpouring appears to have been conditioned by a number of events both formally related and unrelated to the demonstration. Prior to the weekend of confrontation, anti-war and anti-draft activities had been encouraged by the mobilization leaders. The Pentagon confrontation itself was seen as a culmination of a week of activities focused on local issues. At least two of these local events were very successful in capturing the attention of the mass media. Primary was a week-long series of confrontations in the streets of Oakland, California. The San Francisco Bay Area had long been a leading edge of the protest movement in the United States, and the demonstrators who clashed with police and successfully stopped operation of the induction center set a keynote for the week's activities.⁴ Second was the protest against Armed Forces recruitment at the University of Wisconsin, which also reached riotous (and therefore attention-getting) levels. Smaller protests occurred in many American academic communities, and these attention-focusing events seemed to lead to a surprising outpouring of participants, many moved by opposition to the war, but others simply interested in becoming witnesses to what promised to be an exciting show. Compounding these events was the assassination of Ché Gueverra, who had become a romantic model of the revolutionary activist for a generation of student radicals; his death seemed to demand an escalation of commitment. Finally, the weather throughout the East and Midwest was permissive; it did not impede traffic, but it was not so "good" that the participant might be tempted to vacation.

My experience in deciding to go to Washington seems to have been typical. Prior to Thursday, October 18, I had no intention of going to the demonstration. That afternoon, almost unconsciously reflecting the forces listed above, I felt compelled at least to try to travel to Washington to fulfill perceived political and academic obligations. Since there were substantial psychological barriers to participation

⁴ The most extensive coverage of these events appeared in the *San Francisco Chronicle* (for the week in consideration). "Underground" press accounts appear in the *Movement* (San Francisco) and *Berkeley Barb*.

(concern with propriety, family discouragement), I decided to go only if a ride could be procured easily. To seek this ride I went Friday evening to the point at which departures from East Lansing were to be made. After a short while I met three students who were there for the same reasons—they would go if it "happened." One had a car, I had a credit card, and these factors immediately made the psychological distance between East Lansing and Washington disappear. We were on our way, and the twelve-hour drive to Washington contributed to our resolve, for having overcome the inertia of East Lansing we were immediately enmeshed in the excitement of the demonstration.

The night of October 19–20 must have been unique in traffic patterns upon the freeways converging on Washington. Once in the car and moving, one had the illusion of the entire nation on the move toward the Capital. This was an illusion, of course, but a very exciting one, and one which contributed to a heightened anticipation. Visual survey and questioning of service station attendants and others along the route provided the estimate that approximately seventy-five percent of the traffic on the Ohio-Pennsylvania turnpike that evening was related to the demonstration. The Howard Johnsons along the turnpikes became transformed into temporary meeting places for the mobilizing army, and for once the typical traveller became a distinct minority. Radio newscasts began to take on an ominous tone by reporting the massing of government troops to meet the demonstrators. This initial involvement with a mass movement along the highways forced a sense of moment and significance which was translated into a distinct militancy in Washington.

Once in Washington some indication of the geographical distribution of the mobilization could be gathered by the identifying banners, school sweaters, and labeled points of congregation. (Students massed by geographical location.) It appeared that the stronghold of protest was the large metropolitan centers of the East, especially New York and Boston. Bostonian representation appeared especially heavy, outweighing what might have been anticipated by population and distance alone. By contrast, representation from Philadelphia and Baltimore seemed light despite their proximity. The Midwest contributed heavily, perhaps one-third to one-half of the active par-

ticipants. Especially well represented were Michigan, Ohio, Illinois, Wisconsin, and Iowa, though there was representation from all other states in the Midwest. Though distinctly a minority, representation from the South was fairly strong, with prominent delegations from North Carolina, Florida, and Kentucky. A very strong delegation came from Austin, Texas, a two-day drive. Perhaps 500 to 1000 travelled from the West Coast, particularly California.

As this army of protestors converged on Washington one could sense the mounting tension and excitement. The gathering point was the reflecting pond between the Washington and Lincoln memorials. The beautiful clarity of the weather and mythopoeic power of the surroundings contributed to a mounting sense of purposeful anticipation. It appears that the organizers were not really prepared, either in an organizational or intellectual sense, for the militancy of the mobilized army.

The leadership of the mobilization was an amalgamation of old line liberal protest leaders such as Doctor Spock, celebrities such as Norman Mailer, and radical activists such as Jerry Rubin. In all probability, the leadership was not unified on any purposes beyond the mobilization to Area Two. Beyond this area it was unclear how the confrontation was to develop. Governmental reluctance to assist the mobilization leaders contributed to this uncertainty, for it was unclear if a permit to march to the Pentagon would be issued until late in the week. (Even during the morning of the 20th there seemed to be doubt on this question.) Permit or not, however, it was clear that some people would attempt to enter the Pentagon and risk arrest, but just how many was unclear. In all likelihood the leadership was divided, some wishing to maintain control over the army and have the confrontation largely symbolic—e.g., the arrest of a few celebrities without involving the mass of demonstrators, but others sought just the opposite. In reality these differences came to little, for the willingness of a large fraction of the crowd to do battle outran the abilities of the leadership to control, and therein lay actual movement from liberalism to radicalism.

As the central gathering point, the Lincoln Memorial area attracted the most diverse group of participants. (The exact size of the demonstration is difficult to know since there were great discrepancies in crowd size estimates.

Generally the crowd size estimates reflected observer's bias; those who disapproved saw few, those who approved saw many. I have used the figure of 400,000, which is supposedly the Washington police estimate released some weeks after the demonstration.) The crowd included a wide variety of individuals, from those who were radically opposed to the war and the government to those who wished merely to make their voices heard in a peaceful and nonradical manner. Large numbers of people (especially young people) were more-or-less riding the crest of a wave of excitement, without worrying greatly about a well thought-out political position. The vast majority of the crowd was young—college and high school students—but with a respectable number of middle aged participants, some of whom were more concerned with watching their children than protesting the war. The crowd was overwhelmingly white, though some participants were black. Around the edges of the crowd were vendors of various ideologies, a few hecklers and counter-demonstrators—none of whom seemed to attract much attention.

The actual movement across the Arlington Memorial bridge to the Pentagon some one-and-a-half miles away was delayed approximately two hours. The exact reason for the delay was unclear, but seemed related to late arrival of several dozen buses from New York City, uncertainty of plans, and the long-windedness of speakers. The crowd had been growing in size and intensity from dawn, and by noon had reached a level that seemed to demand movement. Actual movement, however, did not come until about 2 p.m., and by this time the participants had become decidedly restless and anxious. The delay had a two-way effect on the protest, heightening the mood and determination of certain participants, but leading to a drop-off by those who grew tired and doubted the abilities of the organizers to control the situation.

As the march began a wave of excitement swept through the crowd, transforming it from a passive to an active body. The second step toward confrontation had been taken, and fundamental division began to appear. As movement began each participant (consciously or unconsciously) reached a moment of truth. In a formal sense the line of march was very disorderly. One's position was determined—to a considerable degree—by one's desire. The

leaders of the mobilization had established a formal vanguard composed of celebrities and protest leaders, but this vanguard was overwhelmed by noncelebrities who rushed to the front. Jockeying for position resulted in the emergence of a spontaneous vanguard of those most desirous of being involved at the front of the march, and a rearguard of those more reluctantly involved who chose to remain in Washington or at the tail (Fig. 3). Broadly speaking, this division reflected emotional or political commitment to the confrontation. The crossing of the second barrier had divided the participant into active and passive parts—formal leadership disintegrated, and the dynamic of the crowd became the motor of the army. At this point the protest movement crossed its Rubicon.

The march was channeled along streets, with the marchers keeping a brisk pace. When the line of march reached the North Parking Lot (Fig. 1), still several hundred yards from the Pentagon, the then leaderless army fanned out

into an amorphous crowd, rather like a stream debouching upon an alluvial fan. This dispersion of the march, in Area Three, led to a temporary disorientation. The Pentagon stood in the near distance, but no one knew what to do. The crowd again divided into a vanguard and rearguard. The rearguard massed around the entrance to the parking lot, listened to more speeches, and avoided confrontation. The vanguard—self selected—massed at the opposite end of the lot, near the Pentagon and nearest confrontation.

The Third Barrier Between Areas Three and Four lay the most formidable of the barriers to movement, and the first actual military presence. Between the parking lot and the Pentagon lay a four-lane highway (which had been closed for the day), and formidable lines of troops and marshalls. At this point the demonstration paused—it was as if, having run all the way to the Pentagon, now everyone waited for something to happen, and for a while it looked as if nothing would. Then the first assault was made.

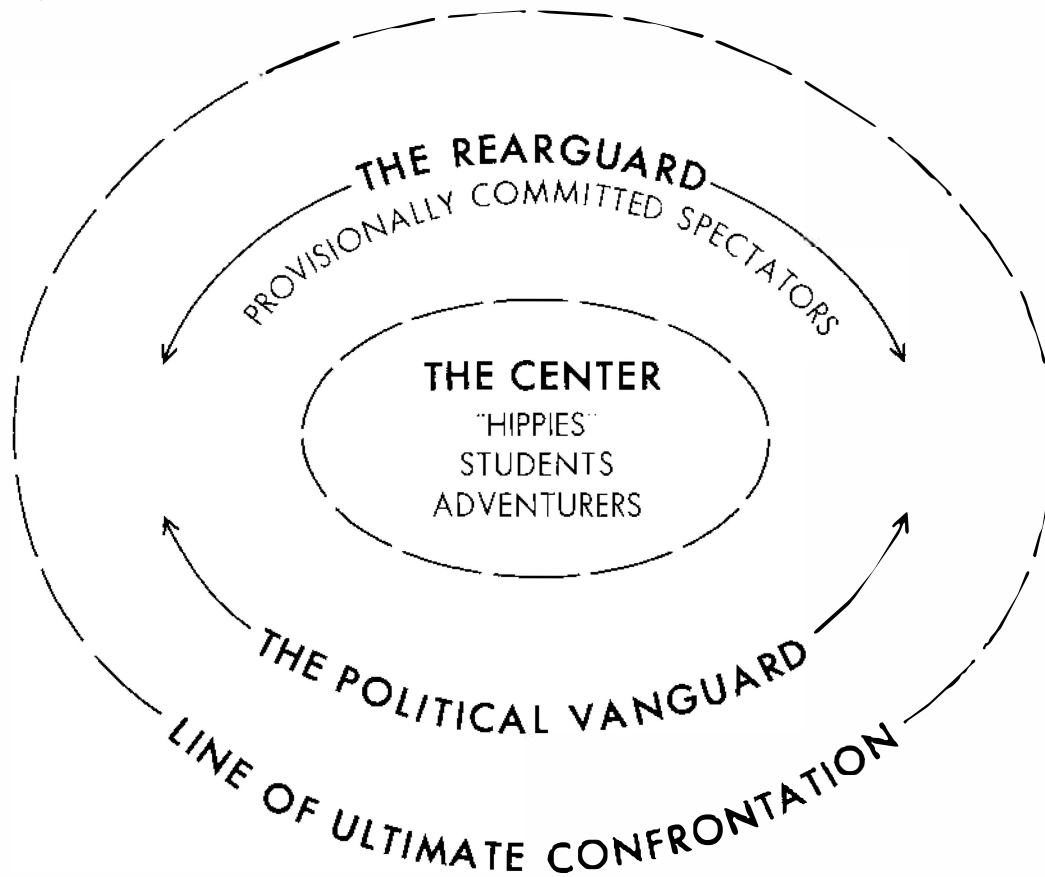


FIG. 3

I think it not insignificant that this first actual confrontation was the work of several score students under a SDS banner.⁵ Equally significant is the fact that the attempt was grossly misdirected, for rather than choosing a critical spot to attack, this band ended up in a fruitless battle which if won would have led them along a culvert away from the Pentagon. Misdirected or not, this initial breakaway seemed exactly what was needed to galvanize the vanguard; other breaks were made, and soon hundreds of people were streaming toward the Pentagon. These breakthroughs appeared to set off a great burst of energy—finally the confrontation had been made, and for those in the vanguard a sense of victory replaced the aimlessness of a few moments past.

In front of the Pentagon there is an extensive lawn, and following the breakthroughs and the retreat of military defense lines to the Pentagon itself many protestors congregated on that lawn (Area Four), including many who had resisted involvement in the initial breakthrough. At this point, the Pentagon itself remained untouched. A final barrier remained—the monumental steps and the wall which enclosed the mall entrance to the building. Again, faced by a barrier, the crowd bifurcated. The vanguard was defined by those who rushed up the steps and succeeded in pushing the lines of defending troops to the top of the stairs. The rearguard remained below, in Area Four, but added to the general level of conflict by chanting and shouting. At this point the lines of confrontation became effectively stalemated. Along this line of stalemate a pitched, though largely nonviolent, battle raged for two to three hours. At any time a further breakthrough might have occurred, but the demonstrators lacked leadership, and the confrontation settled down to stalemate.

Stalemate is perhaps the wrong word, because some of the most important developments of the weekend transpired during the thirty hours before the confrontation ended with the arrest of 250 hard core demonstrators. By the time the lines of confrontation had become fixed the constituted leadership of the mobilization had disintegrated—many had been ar-

⁵ There appears to be some disagreement on this point. Both Mailer's and Will's versions differ from mine to some degree; further research is needed to establish the historical fact. Regardless, the geographics of the action remain clear: it took an initial breakthrough to activate the crowd.

rested, and others remained in the rear attending to problems of bail, supply, and information. In their place arose a spontaneous leadership. The confrontation line became one across which communication flowed. The demonstrators attempted to reduce the effectiveness of the troops, first by yelling, threats, and other tactics designed to intimidate them. When this tactic proved useless, the form of communication became more measured. Loudspeakers were used to address the troops about the purpose for the demonstration, and the reasons they should be against the war. In general the idea seems to have been to break the discipline of the troops by showing them that they had more in common with the demonstrators than with their own officers. In this form of battle the leaders were those who were effective—those willing and able to speak or otherwise demonstrate. This form of confrontation (psychological warfare?) proved quite successful, for discipline among large elements of the troops broke down by late Saturday evening, and fraternization occurred across the lines of confrontation. This was especially true of those soldiers on the flanks who had not been under the greatest stress.

By Sunday evening the demonstrators had been reduced to those on the steps and nearby on the lawn. The vanguard had taken to sitting on the mall before the Pentagon; the form of this mass of sitters was roughly elliptical (Fig. 3). On the leading edge, which faced the troops, were massed political activists, not exclusively, but dominantly. These people—predominantly students—represented a particular sort of leadership that urged the most militant action and viewed themselves as the rightful leaders. On the trailing edge were older people, children, and spectators. It was the favored location of those who were not really committed to ultimate arrest, or who wanted to be able to choose at the last minute.

The center of the crowd was a heterogeneous group of students, hippies, and disaffiliates. Most were firmly committed to confrontation leading to arrest, but not necessarily for well thought out, political reasons. It was in this area—the center—that the true spirit of the demonstration appeared to lodge. Here emerged the only real presence of constituted leadership in the personage of Jerry Rubin. As the night wore on and arrest became imminent, the leading edge became tense and insisted on disci-

pline. The trailing edge disintegrated. The center carried the day, leading songs (not only protest songs, but also rock and roll, "heresy," in the cars of some of the politically oriented protestors), smoking marijuana, and generally making a celebration of the evening.

It was directly as a result of this experience that the Yippies were born.⁶ For those who

⁶The Yippies (Youth International Party) were first conceived by the editor and contributors to the *Realist* (New York). The origin of the idea and its

remained at the Pentagon until the finish, it became apparent that the protest movement had at last developed a winning radical tactic—demonstration designed to capture media attention, energize the protestors, and leave established authorities no choice but to ignore the demonstration and invite escalation, or to overreact and thus win sympathy for the demonstrators.

connection to the Pentagon demonstrations is documented in a series of articles in the *Realist* (1967–1968).