

# Resistance                      Dispatches: Foreign and Domestic



Every American soldier takes an oath to support and defend the Constitution against all enemies. Since I left the service, I wondered who those enemies truly were. Once, I thought they were those disciples of God in the mountains of Afghanistan. When we went to war, the newsreaders told us that the Taliban buried women up to their necks and crushed their skulls with stone. It was a war on American ideals, because it was a war on women. They locked them away like prisoners, forced them into marriage, scarred their faces with acid. Though I cannot say what this had to do with airplanes pitched into our monuments of commerce and battle, I went to war to fight in the name of women whom I never saw. The closest I ever came was when we killed the men and heard the mothers, sisters, and wives wailing behind the *qalat* walls. The saccharine thrill of

combat turned to lye in my mouth. Only after years of contemplation can I ask myself if I was just another man waging war on women, simply on another front.

When we elected the 45<sup>th</sup> President, I felt as if the war had followed me home. It seemed like everyone was looking for an enemy. For those who won the election, the enemy occupied the space of the foreign—the sexually aberrant, culturally diverse, economically anathematic to the so-called American Dream. My enemy, on the other hand, was domestic—that man elected President and the bigots he enabled with hate speech.

I welcomed a fight. It was a respite from my self-imposed exile from the people around me. Sharing the beauty, pain, and trials of my time in Afghanistan was like speaking an alien tongue. Gone was the collective purpose that I took for granted in the Army, but now the threat of that man in the high castle galvanized people into action. I also must admit that there was comfort in the tumult and panic—the pain of others seemed to lessen my own—helplessness and isolation were now part of the emotional vernacular. So when the call went out to march on the Capitol, I volunteered. Many of the protesters drew from a well of deep moral wounds, structural oppression, or strength to march. If I am honest, in that moment I approached the Women's March as a soldier, and this was simply another battle to fight.



Ksenia V. CPT, USAF (sep.)

I traveled with my friend Ksenia, a former Air Force Captain. We planned to march with Common Defense, an organization of progressive veterans opposed to the new president. On the drive south, she told me that many of the people with whom she

served opposed her politics. Many of them cut ties with her when she made public her intention to march. I watched the nude trees outside my window, passing too fast to distinguish branches. So many of my former comrades and fellow veterans also spoke against the protestors. I found people I love on the other side of this new conflict. Would I have to count them among my enemies as well?

*Give war a chance*, one of them wrote on Facebook.

*OPEN YOUR small minds, you whining losers, wipe away your tears, and open your malicious hearts, AND JOIN IN GIVING GOVERNMENT BACK TO THE PEOPLE!* wrote another.

At the time, I did not realize that I would have to carry their reputation with me—that others would see me as the same as these angry veterans. I buried my phone in my pocket for the rest of the ride. At rest stops, I watched the nursing mothers in pink hats and elder matriarchs with their signs in windows. These were the people my one-time comrades railed against? I cried in front of my soldiers, fought beside them, triumphed because of them. Would they see my decision to march as a betrayal?



Abuse of power comes as no surprise

I muffled my doubts. When we arrived, I reunited with old friends. We smoked and drank too much, dancing the way the young do because they do not yet understand they will die. To celebrate with people I loved felt novel, like learning how to whistle, and for the first time in years I thought I might name something happiness. Voices too loud from liquor, hands fluttering, and wide eyed, we looked forward to a march, organized by women of color, Muslims, and queer women. It appeared that the organizers had made good on their claims to place intersectionality at the fore.

In the morning, I pinned my medals to my jacket, took up my sign. *VETS VS HATE*, it read. Demonstrators inundated the subway platforms. Trains passed, one after another, bringing more people. The station choked with bodies, it was almost impossible to move. Cheers coursed through the crowd, amplified by the arched concrete enclosure and I worried if the huddled voices might rattle the station walls apart and

bury us alive. There were so many people underground, it was difficult to breathe. Above-ground carried the same sense of unease, the overflowing streets patrolled by national guardsman and police, yet as people gathered, even they were hemmed in and immobilized. I grew up in Alexandria just across the river, and I never saw the streets so full. The place I planned to meet Ksenia and the other veteran protesters was too crowded when I arrived. I looked for her, but I couldn't move more than a few feet, wriggling through the assemblage. I thought, if we all wanted to, we could take control of the city.

Demonstrators wore the near-ubiquitous cat-eared pink hats, held their signs—their political convictions aloft for the world to see. I too performed my identity, but as a veteran of the War in Afghanistan. Some of the demonstrators looked at me the way I once had looked at Afghans—*friend or foe?* There were many men there—fleece-clad fathers pushing strollers, boyfriends and husbands clinging to lovers or spouses, waving rainbow flags, but I was the only one who trespassed into the territory of threatening. Being a veteran may have evoked images of violent American Legionnaires at rallies during the election. *Man, soldier, medals*—symbols of masculinity, patriarchy.

*Yes, I'm a veteran, I told them, yes I'm here in solidarity.* I could not choose between removing my hat and my medals, or shouting at the top of my lungs *I'm one of you.* I told myself that it was important to show that those that served were not props for hate. I told myself that this day was never about me. Yet there was something else. Most of the faces around me were white. There was a group of Muslim students, a smattering of people of color, but each of us—all of us, were surrounded. I made calculations—was I using the right speech pattern? Was my posture sufficiently unthreatening? Did my expression say *I don't want any trouble?* I've been told that I'm too self-conscious, that I should *just relax*, but anyone who said that

never had to live a life of color. I remember one childhood summer in Philadelphia, fleeing from a white teenager brandishing a baseball bat. In Louisiana, I lived on a block where I let all my white neighbors know that I owned guns because they spoke as if blacks still belonged under the lash. They only spoke to my white wife, as if I wasn't there to hear them—that I served on active duty seemed to make no difference to them.

Yet I was still a man among hundreds of thousands of women. They came to the Capitol because of a misogynist and bigot. Where the sense of urgency brought my friends and me together, at the march, my anxieties might have played off those of the other protesters, creating distance. White or not, that we all feared for our bodies should have been enough. We were all there together, after all.

The rally started—a mixture of cheers, punctuated by bouts of silence from a crowd that appeared uncertain of what to do next. Demonstrators shouted their adoration for celebrity speakers like Gloria Steinem, Michael Moore, and Ashley Judd. Though situated among vital voices from marginalized groups, the biggest voices were white ones. An hour passed, then another. More speakers, musical interludes. Those in attendance looked at their watches, waiting. I looked up at the signs, held aloft like pikes. *It's not Feminism if it's not Intersectional*, one read. I did not know whether this was lip service or a rallying call.

By the third hour, many of those assembled chanted, *Let us march, let us march*. I too was tired, my back ached from tensing against the shifting crowd. National Guard and paramedics ferried the ill through the throng, parting it for ambulances that crept forward like giant flashing snails. In the shuffle, I found Ksenia. We had been so close the whole time, but could not see one another because of the mob around us. *Let us march*. The words nearly drowned out the speakers.

Tamika Mallory, one of the national co-chairs took the podium.

“To those of you who have for the first time felt the pain that my people have felt since they were born here with chains shackled on our legs—today I say to you, welcome to my world,” she said.

Moved though I was, those words did not seem to sit well with many around me.

They began again, *let us march*. I too wanted to move, but the urgency of the narratives told on the stage held me there. Yet another hour passed. Though I am young, years of carrying half my body-weight in body armor and ammunition had ravaged my joints, which started to ache. I cannot imagine the pain of the elderly among us. Impatient voices became angry. Louder they said, *let us march*. Many did not carry the chant, yet it only took everyone else’s silence for a few to reenact the silencing of people of color, Muslims, and the LGBTQ community. What had they done to earn such ill treatment? It was imperative to stay and listen, yet I am ashamed that I wanted to leave and take to the streets. The anxious current infecting the thousands around me took a hold of me too. The women telling their stories asked of us a mere four hours of our time. The marginalized wait all their lives to be heard, and so many never live to have the chance.





ution will not be televised

Some booed as the organizers announced each subsequent performer and speaker. They booed before Alicia Keyes arrived on stage, but they cheered when they heard her name. When Janelle Monae performed with the mothers of Eric Garner, Mohamed Bah, and Dontre Hamilton, everyone knew better than to chant or jeer, but it did not stop them from complaining, as if they were waiting too long for a cup of coffee rather than paying tribute to the women on stage. No one booed or chanted when Amy Schumer and Madonna took the stage. Some even yelled for people to lower their signs so they could see the performance. Madonna said she thought about blowing up the White House, but only a white person had the luxury of saying that without repercussion. I thought of what Tamika Mallory said.

“This is not a concert.”

Ksenia and I broke away to find our group. As everyone set off on the slow walk around the Mall, we left the rally like the recently concussed. I could not reconcile the words I heard on stage with the behavior of the throng. As we made our way to the rendezvous we passed through the crowds. I tried to chant, to rouse the crowd, but few followed my lead. A few demonstrators plugged their ears. Ksenia mused that she was not yet ready to be out as a veteran. Despite everything she suffered, everything she achieved, she felt she could not show the rest of the world who she was. I thought of the entitlement I had to wear my medals. To be a male veteran is acceptable. To be a woman veteran is transgressive. I wondered if blending in was a matter of survival for her, like my own habit of dialect hopping.

Ascending the low hill at the Washington Monument, I saw the immensity of the movement below us. The great swathes of humanity streaming through the Capitol's marble canyons resembled the masses fleeing strife across Africa and Asia for the unwelcoming shores of the West. Who would dare oppose such a force? Then, if the right wing vilified the biggest humanitarian crisis since World War Two, of course they would also vilify us. The light retreated from the day. Ksenia and I stood there, watched. An immigrant from the Soviet Union. A son of Vietnamese refugees. Vestiges of the last long struggle watching the embers of the next.

We found our group, after everything ended. We spent the night celebrating, commiserating, mourning. The fatigue of the day softened with the comfort of old friends and new comrades. The veterans of Common Defense spoke in practical terms—lessons learned, future collaborations, the long road ahead. Among that small group, I saw the vision for the march that felt so elusive during the rally. Women leading a movement, men in solidarity. People of the First Nations, people of color, Muslims, queer folks, alongside whites—united.

“Veterans issues are women’s issues,” one of the organizers

said to me. "When we talk about [Military Sexual Trauma], when we talk about the repeal of [Don't Ask Don't Tell], when we talk about women in combat, these are women's issues. These are veterans issues."

When I heard this, I felt so short sighted. I understood then, that whatever this movement becomes, we are no longer siloed into labels like *Anti-War*, *Racial Justice*, or even *White Feminism*. The old guard of activism must give way to this generation, a large interconnected spectrum all concerned with justice. We parted ways, and for the first time all day I felt hopeful that we would overcome.

I crossed the city to meet my college friends again. The drive took us across the city. Demonstrators continued marching in ragged informal lines. Trashcans brimmed with discarded signs. I met my friends at Comet, an establishment made famous by a fantastic scandal that began with wild speculation and ended with a deluded man armed with a weapon bent on violence. When I first heard of the so-called Pizza Gate scandal, I could not fathom why so many subscribed to such a spurious narrative. That folly felt little more than a fever dream that night. Protest signs leaned against every wall. Among the patrons, staff, my friends, I felt the relief of taking the first small steps down a long difficult path. Eyes ringed by fatigue from the march, everyone in our party welcomed sleep.

As we departed, the flashing lights of police cars and the garish banners of the Westboro Baptist church greeted us—*HOMO SEX IS SIN, Got AIDS Yet?* The police scrambled to get between the zealots and the Women's Marchers. Men yelled, by bullhorn, over the bullhorns. I thought to defy my old habits of resorting to anger. In Afghanistan, anger sustained me, protected me even. A policeman between us, I spoke to one of the men on the picket line. I asked to talk, to tell me why he was doing it on his terms. I told him that we were not so different, both Americans. I served for him to have freedom of speech, I said.

He called me crazy. Someone filmed the exchange, draping us in harsh white light. Another man screamed over my shoulder.

“That guy didn’t ever do shit for his country. He never had to give anything up.” He pointed at the evangelist, “Fuck you buddy.”

“Why am I crazy?” I said.

The man behind me pointed to a black church member.

“There’s some real self-hate going on there.”

The man behind me was white.



Westboro protesters at Comet Pizza

The evangelist ignored the commotion, gaze fixed on me. I remembered—these people protested soldiers’ funerals. Dead soldiers. These wild-eyed men with their long beards activated an old familiar heat in my chest. I moved through the crowd. Music played, and my friends dancing. Beat and rhythm carried

through the revelers like the sway of wind through water. Protest signs held aloft like boughs overhead. Rainbow flags like falling leaves. The man with the bullhorn singled people out, women he deemed un-weddable, men he called sexual deviants. They flipped him off, or cursed at him, but they kept their smiles, bodies still moving.

When it came my turn, the bullhorn man jabbed a finger at me.

“You, I know your kind. You’re doomed to hell. Hell waits for you.”

“I’ve been to hell,” I told him. “We had a name for people like you in Afghanistan—*munafiqeen*.” The false pious.

“Hell,” he went on, “hell for your kind.” I wanted to reach past the policemen, tear the beard from his face. After everything I gave, this is what I defended?

“You motherfucking Taliban.” I screamed back.

A woman chided me.

My anger broke. Present, but not blinding. Cooler now. Around me, that moment of rage did nothing to dampen the mood. Two women kissed. Children cavorted atop patio tables. This was what I hoped to return to after my war ended, yet in that moment I watched as if I never came home.

I drew back into the crowd, tried to unfold the seams of that brief glimpse back into my past. Against what did I swear to defend? Once, it was enemies from without, students of God hiding in the mountains. Yet, the Taliban never sought to destroy America. I learned over there that even the worst of them believed that they were simply defending against invaders. No, America’s real foes were always at home. The bigots, kleptocrats, and the new President among them. We must disabuse ourselves of biases, entitlement, alienation. The road ahead needs cooperation, joy, and compassion. If I am to

be ready for the future, I must defend against enemies domestic—at home in my cities and fields. Home in my heart of hearts.

**Photo Credit: Drew Pham**