

Rally to Restore Sanity The Moderate Left Marches on Washington

STORY AND PHOTOS BY **ANDREW FISH**

Two hundred thousand or so gather on the Washington Mall in support of sanity, civility, moderation, and/or fear. As “The Daily Show” and “The Colbert Report” are respective news and pundit-show send-ups that have become as important as the programs they parody, so their lighthearted rally on October 30th turns out to be a powerful moment in our cultural and political history. With such unlikely clarion calls as respecting others with differing opinions and taking it down a notch, The Rally to Restore Sanity and/or Fear — initially billed as two competing events, Jon Stewart’s Rally to Restore Sanity and Stephen Colbert’s March to Keep Fear Alive — is a meeting place for fans with a shared passion for staying calm and designing witty protest signs. “Listen to Mom: Play Nice,” “I Want My Country Back, or a Pony, One of the Two,” “Hooray Fear,” “America Isn’t Perfect and I’m OK With That,” “Kiss Me, I Buy Distressed Debt,” “Pizza! I Want Pizza!” The vibe is peaceful, easygoing, and full of smiles, though one can’t call it non-partisan. A fair share of the signs decry Sarah Palin, the Tea Party movement, Fox News, and the talking points of the right. We spot “Sanity Not Hannity,” “Glenn Beck Wasn’t Breast-Fed, Maybe That’s the Problem,” and a resolute figure in a Ronald Reagan mask holding up, “Have Your Republican Spayed or Neutered.” Yet whether it’s about ideals of civility amid disagreement or fingering specific culprits, this is an enormously friendly group of people.

The show itself is a tongue-in-cheek face-off between Stewart’s desire for tolerance and Colbert’s over-the-top fear-mongering, and features the likes of Father Guido Sarducci

(a.k.a. Don Novello), Sam Waterston, and Kareem Abdul-Jabbar, as well as musical guests including the Roots, Ozzy Osbourne, Yusuf Islam (formerly Cat Stevens), Wilco’s Jeff Tweedy, and Sheryl Crow. What will likely be most remembered, however, is Stewart’s “Moment of Sincerity,” in which he proclaims to the crowd, “But we live now in hard times, not end times. And we can have animus and not be enemies.” He goes on to assert that the news media’s sensationalizing of the conservative-liberal conflict is an impediment to creating this kind of understanding. “If we amplify everything, we hear nothing,” he declares.

Stewart’s ideas of courteous coexistence and quelling animosity are echoed by the attendees we talk to, who have come out to give voice to the substantial section of society that’s liberal-minded but doesn’t normally go to rallies. Let’s start at the beginning...

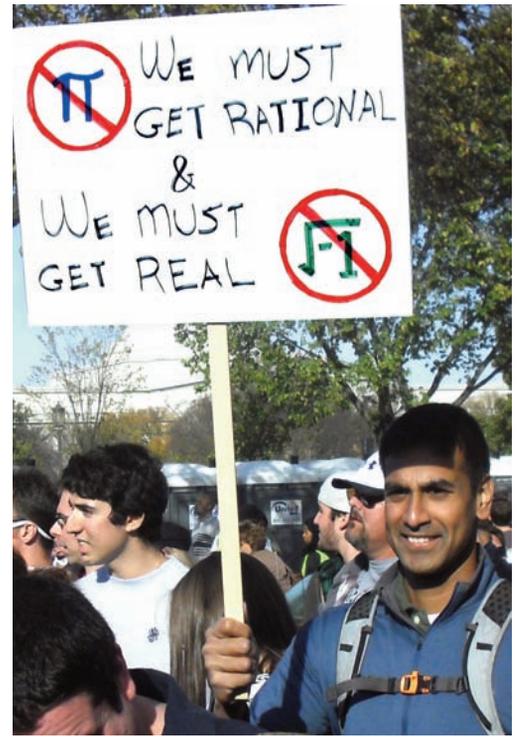
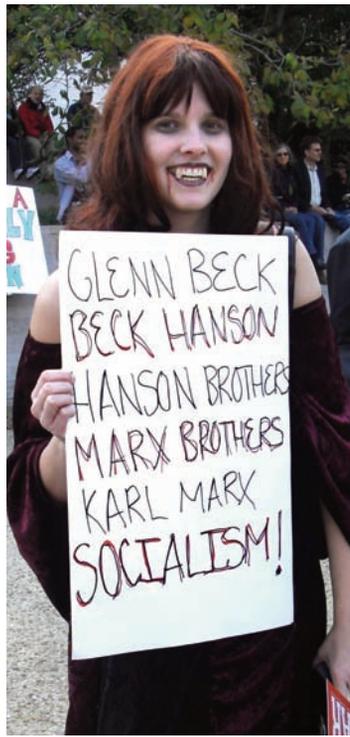
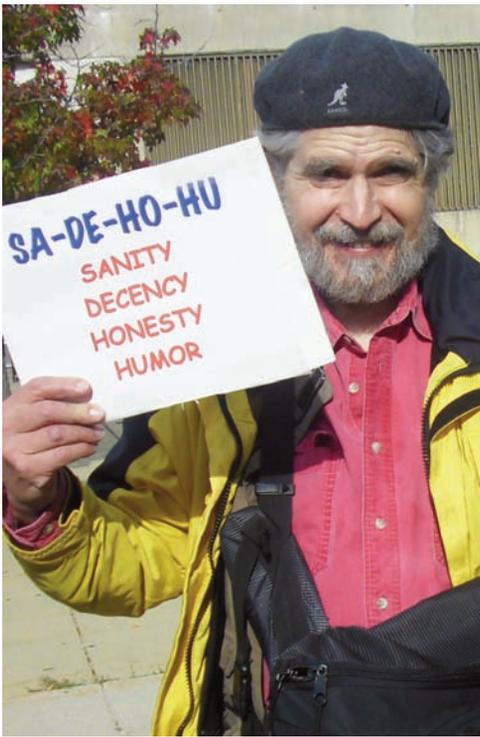
The line for the Washington Metro at Maryland’s New Carrollton Station extends easily half a mile, and we chat with folks as the queue moves slowly toward the tracks. “Giving the silent majority the opportunity to get heard a little bit,” answers Kallie, when asked what she thinks the rally is all about. And who is the silent majority? “Moderates,” she explains. “The people that, like they said on ‘The Daily Show’ already, have better things to do with their life than be extremist, that have to go to school and work and make a living.” Alex adds, “We can’t host all these rallies like the Tea Party hosts all over the place. I think it’s really good that we’re actually getting to speak up a little bit more.” Tom from Bowie, Maryland is fond of keeping it low key, but his anti-Dick Cheney t-shirt makes it clear which side he’s on. “I think we need some modera-

tion in the political discourse,” he nods, then grins. “Respect the other side but, you know, take ‘em down. Whatever it takes.”

It’s a jam-packed train ride, during which strangers get acquainted, sharing opinions and stories. We arrive at the L’Enfant Plaza station and along with teems of affably enthusiastic ralliers, we trek toward the vast field beside the Capitol. The turnout is huge and the first person we turn to says it quite eloquently: “A lot of us out here today are right in the middle. There really shouldn’t even be a middle. It should just be all of us together.”

Matt from Ohio has come to Washington with a series of signs, the foremost of which invites people over to “Put a Star on Real America.” He has another that reads, “Who Does Your Thinking for You? A Free Country Starts with a Free Mind,” amid which appear the logos for the Democratic and Republican parties, Glenn Beck, Fox News, and even “The Daily Show.” “The way the two-party system works is one party completely alienates the other party until they absolutely don’t represent any of us,” he explains. “I think there are valid ideas all across the spectrum, but I think it’s more about chewing people out than it is thinking about valid ideas ... I’ve heard opinions on both sides and I love some on both of them and I hate some on both sides also. It’s all about finding, in my opinion, the middle ground. I think the one thing the extremists hate more than the opposite side are the people in the middle.”

Jack from Charlottesville, Virginia, holds a sign that reads, “I’m on Your Side Whether You Like It or Not.” The other side says, “I Could Be Wrong.” “A lot of the problem today,” he suggests, “is that a lot of people seem to be



convinced that they're right, and people that are convinced that they're right are a lot more likely to do unpleasant things to one another about it — like step on their heads or put them in jail or set them on fire. I just want to encourage people to admit the fact that none of us is really sure we're right. We're doing the best we can." When asked whether the moderates or the extremes are in the majority, he replies, "Tautologically, there can't be a majority that's extreme, but I think that the nature of the media, as they have multiplied, is that they have made the extreme voices much, much more audible, and because we have a two-party system, the people on the extreme are the votes that are deciding a lot of stuff. So I think that most people, by and large, are fairly moderate but their voice isn't heard because they aren't screaming about it."

Brenda from Virginia carries a sign with the following: "Reasonable People Don't Incite Fear or Fear Insight." "I guess from an educator's point of view — I just retired after 31 years of teaching — I don't believe that that's how our democracy works," she offers. "Certainly the inciting of fear has been the really big one lately. I just think that people are fearing thinking for themselves and that's not what we're about. To blindly follow somebody else's ideas without questioning, that's not what makes a good populace. That's why I taught middle-schoolers that very thing. It is an important thing to be teaching kids. I think that they need to learn how to realize that they can have different opinions without being ugly to each other."

Mary from Atlanta, Georgia, holds aloft, "Please Stop Trying to Take Back 'Your' Country. It's MINE Too, How 'Bout We Share?" She declares: "You hear the people out there saying, 'It's time to take our country back.' Well, it's not just their country. It's our country, too, and most of us really like it. We like things like Social Security; we like things like

Medicare. The idea that they're taking back from the progressives and making progressive [into] demons, a lot of us like what progressives have done. A lot of us want to go forward; we don't want our country to go backwards. They want to go back to this ideal that they think happened years ago, and it just was never really like that ... I think taxes are important. I understand that they don't want to pay a lot of taxes, but the fact is you've got to work together in this country. Taxes are an investment in our country. [You can't have] lower, lower and lower taxes because then you have no services. You don't have roads and schools and a defense department, and you don't have a safety net for people. I'm hoping that people could be a little bit more rational, and discuss things, and learn to share our country and share our points of view."

James came out from Wyoming, suspecting that he may be the lone representative of his state. The laid-back, long-haired website manager opines, "Moderation is the way to go. There's no place in this world for extremism; it's too divisive ... There are definitely good ideas on the left and the right. I come from a state where a political agenda that works well in Los Angeles wouldn't work well in Wyoming. People in Wyoming are far too independent. They're mostly farmers; they're mostly ranchers. I have a tendency to agree with them that they would like big government out of their business. On the other hand, I think that big government has every obligation to support the underprivileged people in a big city like Los Angeles. So it has to be a balance between the two. There's no one page."

The enormous happening has attracted all ages, which particularly strikes one participant we talk with. "I was really excited to see Cat Stevens and my son loved Ozzie," he smiles. "What amazes me is the ages of people who are interested. My mother-in-law is 74 and her

boyfriend loves Colbert, and has no idea he's a liberal. And she loves Stewart. They really wanted to come!"

The signs, opinions, and ideals that have taken over the grassy expanse on this gorgeous fall day all come together upon our visit with Laura and Collin, who brought their young kids to experience this colossal gathering of normally quiet voices.

Venice: What brought you here today?

Laura: We just wanted to be part of the sanity. The politics and the pain is just too much and we wanted to be part of trying to bring some sanity back to Washington.

Collin: If you want to see government change, you can be a part of it. You can bring your signs out and protest, and everybody will respect you for your own wishes. It doesn't matter if you're right or left; if you want to see change, come out and do it yourself. There's no reason to sit at home and watch it on TV. You can be part of it in person.

Is there more moderation in the country than we see on television?

Collin: Absolutely. On TV, all you see is the far left and the far right. There is no room for a moderate person. I'm conservative on some things and liberal on others. You don't see that.

Laura: That's not what sells. Moderation doesn't sell news stories. The wars are what sell news stories. The über-conservatives and the über-liberals, that's what sells news stories. The basic American that is moderate, you don't see that, and it's really sad.

Is that what this rally is about?

Laura: Absolutely. It's about the everyman, the moderates coming out and saying, "We don't want the far right and the far left speaking for us." We have a voice. We want to be heard. ▼