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Protests loom as Republicans prepare to meet

Expecting convention to inspire violence, police blanket Manhattan

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By **MICHELLE MITTELSTADT / The Dallas Morning News**

NEW YORK – Hundreds of thousands of protesters will take to the streets of New York next week, ringing bells at Ground Zero, parading coffins past the Republicans' convention hall and engaging in civil disobedience in noisy protest of President Bush and the war in Iraq.

The demonstrators, coming from across the United States, will be met by a display of local, state and federal law enforcement unprecedented for a national political convention.

The potential for confrontation – and even violence – looms over this convention in a manner not seen since 1968, when the Democratic gathering in Chicago was marred by violent clashes between police and protesters.

"That's what I am afraid of," New Yorker Karyn Tabat said Thursday over a salad in a Manhattan pizzeria. "I hear what's going on. I hear the defiance of New Yorkers."

Some 10,000 New York police officers, supplemented by federal and regional law enforcement officials and an arsenal of high-tech tools, will blanket Manhattan's streets, waterways and airspace in the days surrounding the convention.

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Their mission: Protect a city that remains a top al-Qaeda target and maintain order on streets that will be lively with Bush opponents, peace and anti-globalization activists, anarchists, environmentalists and advocates for the poor.

"With a big, experienced police force, we can do it," said Police Commissioner Raymond Kelly, who is deploying nearly a third of his 36,500-strong force for convention security. "We're ready."

Police made their first convention-related arrests Thursday, taking into custody four people – including a Dallas man – who rappelled from the Plaza Hotel's windows to display a huge anti-Bush banner, and arresting nearly a dozen AIDS activists who stripped naked and blocked traffic outside Madison Square Garden.

City officials have signaled that police will deal forcefully with protesters who break the law. "If you disrupt traffic, if you behave in ways that are against the law, the NYPD will enforce the law, period," Mayor Michael Bloomberg said.

The massive police presence already is visible – a testament to the city's heightened terrorism alert – with officers swarming Penn Station, the bustling train station below Madison Square Garden, the convention site.

A week of dissent

Some of the major demonstrations planned to protest the Republican convention next week:

TODAY

- Mothers and Others Opposing Bush will march across the Brooklyn Bridge.

SATURDAY

- Planned Parenthood March for Women's Lives will cross the Brooklyn Bridge.
- Ringout.org participants will gather at Ground Zero to ring 2,749 bells to commemorate the World Trade Center deaths.

SUNDAY

- 250,000 demonstrators are expected for an anti-war march organized by United for Peace and Justice.
- Chaos on Broadway: Protesters plan to accost Republican delegates attending Broadway shows.

MONDAY

- March by the Hip Hop Summit Action Network and organizations that assist the low-income
- Demonstration outside the United Nations by the Poor People's Economic Human Rights Campaign

TUESDAY

- Daylong civil disobedience and "direct action" planned by anarchist groups against corporate and government sites

WEDNESDAY

- 5,000 marchers holding pink slips will form a symbolic unemployment line from Wall Street to Madison Square Garden.

The security headaches, street closures and possibility of violence are too much for many New Yorkers, who have chosen to go on vacation or leave the city during convention week.

Peace promised

Major protests are planned each day, beginning Sunday on the eve of the convention and continuing through the finale, Mr. Bush's acceptance speech on Thursday. A massive anti-war march past Madison Square Garden on Sunday is expected to draw 250,000 people.

Organizers of key protests insist that the marches will be peaceful. Several of the groups have been negotiating with city officials for months, battling unsuccessfully for access to Central Park.

"Right now, the one thing we do know is there are tens of thousands of demonstrators who are going to be coming to protest Bush's policies and are very sure that they are going to be practicing their First Amendment rights," said Bill Hackwell, a spokesman for International ANSWER, an anti-war group that hasn't been able to work out an acceptable route with police for its planned Saturday march. "And we don't know what the city is going to do."

- Central Labor Council Labor Day rally near Madison Square Garden

- 50,000 protesters expected for a women's rights rally at Central Park

THURSDAY

- As yet unscheduled protests outside Madison Square Garden and elsewhere in Manhattan as President Bush accepts his party's nomination

UNCONVENTIONAL PROTESTS

It won't be just the usual chants and sit-ins at next week's GOP convention. Here's a sampling of some of the more creative protests planned:

- A coalition of women known as the Axis of Eve will hold a "panty performance protest," during which the women will flash their undergarments to "expose and depose" President Bush.

- Billionaires for Bush, a tongue-in-cheek group whose members go by colorful monikers such as Skip S. Tate-Tax and Pam Perd, will hold a billionaire croquet party and the Million Billionaire March.

- During the major anti-war march Sunday, protesters hope to line up 1,000 coffins in tribute to the troops who have died in Iraq.

- The Rude Mechanical Orchestra will perform at anti-GOP events.

- A performance artist will stage the Vomitorium, a re-enactment of a Roman gorging in protest of imperialism and consumerism.

- The Pink Bloc Bike Brigade, composed of

protests but doesn't have enough evidence to move against any group or individual, the bureau's counterterrorism chief, Gary Bald, told reporters recently.

Police, who have prepped for the convention over the past 18 months, say they have infiltrated some of the protest groups and are prepared for any tactics that may be used. The FBI has acknowledged interviewing some activists headed to New York but strenuously denies infringing on any civil liberties.

transsexuals, will participate in an anti-Bush bike ride.

- An anti-Bush wet T-shirt contest and water-gun fight will be held at Central Park.

SOURCE: Dallas Morning News research

Two spins on protests

Republicans are laying the groundwork to blame the Democratic Party if the protests become violent. Republican Party chairman Ed Gillespie, in a *New York Times* interview this week, called the line between protesters and the Democratic Party "fairly blurry."

"I think the Democrats are going to have to be careful about not letting the protesters get out of hand," Mr. Gillespie said.

His comments angered Democratic Party chairman Terry McAuliffe, who said it was "slander" to imply coordination with the protesters. He urged demonstrators to keep things civil, saying Democrats benefit if Republicans get their message out. "We want to let people hear what their message is," he said. "They will see what the Republicans truly are."

Some protest organizers say the police are talking up the potential for violence in a bid to suppress demonstrator turnout – a charge the department denies.

"We do believe in confronting the powers that be, we do believe in confronting the state, but we are not out there to hurt anybody," said Eric Laursen, a self-described anarchist and member of a coalition planning acts of civil disobedience Tuesday.

He scoffed at a March police memo cautioning that anarchists might throw acid in officers' faces, hurl nail-studded potatoes and attempt to trip police up with wire. However, he said that the anarchists may break some laws with planned acts of civil disobedience such as sit-ins and blocking access to buildings.

Some fret that the Police Department, under court order not to repeat some of the strong-arm tactics it used during a February 2003 anti-war march, may be overly aggressive.

"The track record of the Police Department is very worrisome," said Bill Dobbs of United for Peace and Justice, the coalition organizing Sunday's anti-war march. "We are going to hope that they handle this reasonably."

Alex Vitale, a Brooklyn College sociology professor who studies police tactics toward demonstrations, also questioned whether police officials will change their strategy.

"Unfortunately, I think there's a chance we are going to see arrests and the use of force even against people engaged in only the most minor law violations," said Mr. Vitale, who will track convention-related arrests.

Making mischief

While none of the groups are voicing a plan for confrontation, that doesn't mean there will be a lack of mischief-making.

Some groups are plotting ways to torment the delegates: confronting them outside Broadway shows on Sunday, urging Broadway casts to call in sick that day, and disrupting convention events by infiltrating them as volunteers.

Then, there is the street theater: Billionaires for Bush lampooning Republicans with a Million Billionaire March in top hats, thousands of people lining Wall Street holding pink slips to symbolize the millions of jobless, and a "Bushville" tent city set up by advocates for the poor.

Adding to the tumult, police and firefighters, who have been working for more than two years without a contract, are threatening illegal strikes or other job actions.

The scene expected in New York, an overwhelmingly Democratic city, is far different than in Boston, where only a few thousand demonstrators marched at the Democratic convention.

E-mail mmittelstadt@dallasnews.com

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