The Right to Peaceful Assembly

Manoj Vasa

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The people have a voice. Individually one may not seem to speak loud enough to reach their objectives, but with an assembly they will be able to convey a lasting message. The freedom of speech and the right to peaceful assembly is a powerful amendment of our constitution. The voice of the society and the public can be heard when spoken by the masses. This amendment gives us the privilege to express an opinion when we feel and know something is not right. However, some people’s form of expression to fix a problem reaches such extremes that their voice becomes quiet and their actions keep becoming louder while their purpose fades. An example of this is the Ferguson riots that have taken place in Ferguson, Missouri. On the other hand, movements like occupy Wall Street show a prime example of what peaceful assembly actually entails.

Officer Darren Williams shot Michael Brown which lead to his death. On the trial held on November 24 the grand jury has decided not to Prosecute Officer Williams for his actions. This decision has led to an outrage by the community. The protests began with a peaceful demonstration that eventually lead to looting of stores, fires that burned down businesses, and inflicted injuries on numerous innocent bystanders. More specifically, the damage inflicted was known to have accumulated to a total cost of approximately four million dollars. This is a ridiculous amount of damage that has not even helped the cause that these people were fighting for. As it seems, these acts of aggression only worsened the reputation of the people in Ferguson, Missouri. Their aggression to alleviate stereotypical judgement only resulted in worse stereotypical judgement. There was no peaceful assembly, there was no petition, but only rage. It infuriates me how others who didn’t even participate in the movement decided to take part in the riots instead. I wasn’t completely aware of all the happenings of these riots till I checked online to assess all the damage. It appalled me to see the how many business were burned down and the condition that the malls were left in after all the looting. The rioters on the street were also violent as they charged head on to fight the police that are trying to prevent further destruction. I began to question if this movement had any more purpose than for the masses to purge their anger enough to forget what they were even angry about to begin with.

The Occupy Wall Street Movement, on the other hand, was a fight against the social and economic inequality of all people nationwide. This was a movement for the 99% that fought against the corruption and the influence of big corporations in politics. The Occupy Wall Street movement began in Zuccotti Park which was in Wall Street. These people didn’t wreak havoc or raise terror. However, this peaceful assembly did achieve one of its purposes. That one purpose is to make the voice of these oppressed people heard. The voice that spoke for the 99% and against the 1% that possessed all the wealth and power that creates this inequality. People marched the streets and held posters as they screamed of their opinions and the cause of the movement on the top of their lungs. What made them so powerful were their numbers and their slogans that they wave above their heads. Some of these slogans included sayings such as “We march for hope not hate”, “A better world is possible”, “We don’t need to feed corporate greed”, and “The 99% will not be silent”.

The words that these protesters displayed conveyed a message in a peaceful way as opposed to the riot example that the Ferguson incident indicated. These people had the right to assemble peacefully ad that is what they did. There were no wars or blood in the streets and no violence to call for police intervention. This was an example of the first amendment’s freedom speech and right to a peaceful assembly used right. I was moved by the enthusiasm in some of the protestors that marched the streets. This to me seemed to be a better use of the right to peaceful assembly.

These two blatantly unique expressions of people really changed my views on the world. I was lead to believe that people didn’t have a voice. I believed that there was no chance to fight back against unjust legislation such as unfair taxes. Well, I was wrong. I was delighted to be wrong on this certain occasion. In fact, I visited an event set up by the students of my campus that discussed and allowed suggestions from the audience of their complaints of the campus. This was the week right before spring break. I walked into the center grass area where everyone conversed of their disputes. There were people who spoke of the horrible wifi connection on campus and other who spoke of the ineffective designated smoking areas. The assembly consisted of about 20 people. There weren’t many people, but we each knew our voice was heard. I came to understand that peaceful assemblies are an excellent way for a collective voice to be heard even if that voice makes no change. It wasn’t imminent change that was necessary, but simply for a voice to be heard.

From this information I’ve become aware of, I’ve begun looking for regulations of peaceful assemblies. The legal documentation for the first amendment stated that no assembly will be protected if signs of riots are present. The text went on to explain that the right to peaceful assembly only allows people to assemble with a permit. This requirement may allow for more peaceful assemblies. The majority of the group seems harmless and march for a common purpose, but there seems to be a distinct few that always take advantage of the situation. Thus, I believe any peaceful assembly should have regulations where enforcement is involved to restrict these deviants. Often times, it seems that once one person diverges from the crowd, others follow pursuit and the peaceful assembly isn’t so peaceful anymore. Nonetheless, regulation is necessary to protect the majority of the crowd expressing their opinions in a march or a stagnant location. Although the document says no regulation is necessary, I argue that some regulation is necessary to keep an assembly peaceful and avoid the damage that could be caused by the few violent protesters in the crowd.

I interviewed a close friend of mine’s uncle, James, who is a crowd control specialist on the matter of legal enforcement in peaceful assemblies. I became interested in the aspect of what enforcement authorities were limited to do as they regulate or intervene in a peaceful assembly. One thing he has mentioned was that the police were only allowed to use force if given the authority to. So, they start their regulation and intervention through peaceful means first. Another thing he has said was the first course of action to take with a wild crowd was to try and negotiate before engaging with force. I was curious as to how often the police actually attempted to negotiate with the crowd before everything got out of control. Often times, the police weren’t able to negotiate because at that point it was already too late to diffuse a situation without force. I’ve seen some protest that had violent protestors while others were mixed with normal civilians who were pepper-sprayed by police.

The right to peaceful assembly is a powerful amendment of our constitution. It truly appeals to the power of the voice of the people. Each individual voice combines for the cause that the people march and yell for. Assemblies show that the people do have power. The people do have a voice. However, these protests are only effective when the demonstrations are performed by a larger population. The voice of the people is powerful and can be heard.

Resources

1. Right to Peaceful Assembly: United States

Written by: Andrew M. Winston

Pages read: 18-19

Published: October 2014

1. What Happened in Ferguson

Written by: Larry Buchanan

Pages read: 1 – 5

Published: September 2015

1. What Happened in Ferguson

Written by: Larry Buchanan

Pages read: 6 – 9

Published: September 2015

1. The Triumph of Occupy Wall Street

Written by: Michael Levitin

Pages read: 1 – 8

Published: June 10, 2015

1. Interviewed Emily Morin

Time: 10:45 AM

Place: In Classroom

Date: 3/7/2013

1. Interviewed Eli Abrams

Time: 12:30 PM

Place: In Library on Campus

Date: 3/7/2013

1. Interviewed James Reyer

Time: 4:00 PM – 4:45 PM

Place: My house

Date: 2/21/2013