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THE REPUBLICANS: THE CONVENTION IN NEW YORK -- THE POLICE; Tools of Crowd Control: Scooters and Mesh Netting

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With no permit but an agreement with police commanders to keep sidewalks clear and not block traffic, antiwar marchers on Tuesday afternoon stepped off the curb near ground zero for a march to Madison Square Garden.

But in less than 10 minutes, hundreds of the protesters were corralled behind orange mesh netting, folding their arms behind their backs to be handcuffed and crying out to police officers, "Why are we being arrested?" "What are the charges?"

The arrests of roughly 200 people engaged in a peaceful rally emerged as a flashpoint yesterday, with civil libertarians complaining that the efforts to keep streets and sidewalks clear and not allow demonstrations near the Garden without a permit have come at the cost of First Amendment rights.

The police, on the other hand, argued that they have bent over backward to accommodate peaceful protesters even when they lack permits, and are forced to act when certain rules are broken.

From the use of motorized scooters instead of horses, to orange netting to halt and confine people for arrest, to a show of force deploying scores of officers on any whiff of trouble, the police have largely succeeded in keeping demonstrations away from the Garden and, with a few exceptions, mostly violence free.

But the tactics are giving protesters and ordinary New Yorkers alike an up-close, sometimes frustrating experience in the latest tools and tactics of crowd control.

About 20 minutes before the march, Ed Hedeman, an organizer with the War Resisters League, stood negotiating with a half-dozen white-shirted police commanders.

Though the demonstration had been publicized for days, the police asked about the route and the group's plans. Mr. Hedeman could be heard giving assurances that the group sought "no trouble" and was willing to alter its course.

But Mr. Hedeman also made it clear they would not abandon their objective to end the march by symbolically "dying" in the street to commemorate war dead.

"They wanted us to end by marching into a protest pen at Eighth Avenue and 31st Street," Mr. Hedeman said later in an interview, moments before the march began. "I told them we are not marching into any pens."

He said the commanders assured him the march could proceed -- east on Fulton Street and up Broadway to the Garden -- as long as participants walked two abreast, in order to keep sidewalks clear, and did not block traffic at intersections.

From the moment the march began at 4:01 p.m., when a couple hundred demonstrators crossed the street on the green light, it was clear that the police would enforce the rules. A man tapping on a drum was told by an officer to stop because "sound devices are not allowed."

Two minutes later, halfway up the block, the procession halted, shortly after the lead marchers unfurled a banner with the group's name and antiwar slogans. The group was not blocking the sidewalk. But some had clearly strayed from the rules by walking three-by-three or more, and a few in the back had stepped into the street and scurried across Church Street as the light changed.

Confusion erupted. As some officers yelled for the marchers to keep moving, others began yelling that they were not complying with the rules, causing the lead marchers to stop as if to discuss the problem with commanders. A group of helmeted police officers assembled in front. "Get moving now," an officer yelled; "We can't, you guys are blocking us," several protesters in front replied.

Minutes later, a commander ordered officers to "form a line," and officers on bicycles quickly lined the curb. Moments later a commander announced, "that's it, you're all under arrest. everybody from here" -- motioning to the front marchers -- "to the intersection."

A commander called for prisoner buses and officers pulled a roll of orange netting from a police van. While officers guarded the front and back of the line, they slowly unfurled the mesh along the line of demonstrators while other officers clutching white plastic hand cuffs moved in.

Police Commissioner Raymond W. Kelly said the fact that organizers planned to "die in" -- illegally blocking the street -- was a factor in stopping the march after a few people apparently stepped out of line.

"I think it was part of the decision on the part of the commanders, but the fact is that they were breaking the law," he said. "You can't arrest people for what they intend to do."

Most of the marchers have been charged with disorderly conduct, or if they offered resistance, like refusing to stand up, obstructing governmental administration.