

## Erik Assadourian: Tea Parties for the Climate?



**O**n March 2nd, I and about 2,500 other people showed up at the Spirit of Justice Park, just south of the U.S. Capitol in Washington, D.C., in order to march around the coal- and gas-fired Capitol Power Plant and blockade the entrances. The police were out in force, and we were risking arrest for trespassing, unlawful assembly, and disorderly conduct.

It was a bitterly cold and snowy day, so raising a crowd of 2,500 felt like a success. As a group, we drew attention to this polluting power plant just blocks away from the Capitol. A few brave journalists defied the elements to report the events, and organizers worked to expand the ranks of the climate movement. And just days before the protest (after months of protest organizing), Congressional leaders agreed to phase out coal at the plant.

Now it's late April and I'm less confident with the results—particularly when I compare them with the “Tea Party” protests that occurred across the United States around April 15th (taxes-due day). Over 300,000 people in 346 cities gathered, garbed in tea bags, to hold Boston Tea Party reenactments in order to protest tax proposals.



Some of those chilled 2,500 marchers with the U.S. Capitol in the background.

These demonstrations opposed a future of increased government services and more tax responsibilities for the rich. Our power plant rally fought a future of increased temperatures and more extreme weather events. Unlike the climate change protest, the “tea parties” received vast media attention across the political spectrum.

I'd also wager that they helped mobilize the conservative base against the Democratic agenda in both the White House and the Congress. Many have criticized the movement as an “Astroturf” (fake grassroots) operation, but regardless of its roots over 300,000 people seem to believe that freedom means lower taxes, fewer services, less social safety net. When that type of momentum can be generated, what is the right strategy for smaller groups of less well-funded climate change activists to take?

My answer: the level of commitment must be dramatically escalated. At the power plant, I was saddened to observe that not once did any of the organizers or celebrities present say that political action is not enough, that our lives must be our message—that we must use as little energy or resources in our own lives as possible and model how satisfying this simpler life can be.

We also must select our political resistance activities carefully. The Capitol Climate Action started at 1 p.m. and officially ended at 6 p.m. Knowing this, the police decided not to arrest a single person, allowing us to disperse on our own (and not creating any martyrs). But suppose protesters had blockaded the power plant for several days or blocked off the major roads into Washington? The police, media, and politicians would certainly not be able to ignore *that*.

Unaddressed, climate change is going to disrupt the lives of billions. Yet few of us are really changing in the ways necessary to curb emissions. While blocking traffic might not be the right means, neither is a series of ineffectual symbolic protests—not when other groups can mobilize the media and supporters so much more effectively. We'll have to reassess our strategy if we seriously want to prevent global warming and not just feel good that we didn't stay silent as humanity cooked the climate.