

ONLINE SEPTEMBER 13, 2011**American Autumn**Protest Groups Bring the Arab Spring to the United States *Nathan Schneider*

On a Sunday afternoon in August, a dozen or more people gathered in a circle of chairs around a cozy living room in suburban Baltimore. One of the youngest was celebrating his 38th birthday. A few others were listening and occasionally speaking up on Skype, through computers on laps and tables. The adjacent dining room had a potluck spread, with local cheeses, homegrown tomatoes, turkey wraps, cupcakes, and chocolate-chip cookies. In the kitchen was a pot of strong coffee.

The meeting began with a recital of hours-old, revolutionary lyrics (“O say do those hand-painted / Banners yet wave”) sung to the tune of “The Star-Spangled Banner,” with gusto that recalled its origins as a drinking song. Soon working groups were reporting back on their progress since the last meeting. One woman rushed through her presentation of Gene Sharp’s nonviolent insurrectionary theory because she had to take her son to a piano lesson.



Budget protests in Madison, Wisconsin (February 19, 2011) / Richard Hurd / [Flickr\(cc\)](#)

The night before, about a hundred people had come to New York’s Tompkins Square Park for what they called the “NYC General Assembly.” This crowd was younger, artsier, more anarchistic, and had agreed on fewer basic points than the group that met in Baltimore, but what they lacked in consensus they made up for in urgency. Their objective was just about a month away: to occupy the area around Wall Street starting on September 17. The Baltimore potluck—whose participants are organizing an **occupation of Washington, D.C.’s Freedom Plaza** starting on October 6, the 10th anniversary of the war in Afghanistan—at least had a few more weeks to prepare.

Despite their subcultural differences and the almost total lack of coordination between them, both undertakings are part of a common effort to bring the spirit of 2011 to the United States. With uprisings having spread from Tunisia to Egypt, across the Arab world, and then in various forms to China, Greece, Spain, Israel, and England, 2011 may join 1789, 1848, and 1968 as a year synonymous with people-power—and no small amount of chaos. Though their aims are more limited, the September 17 and October 6 groups have adopted what seems to be this year’s signature tactic: the sustained occupation of symbolic public spaces. They’re planning to build their movements by holding public assemblies that will last for days, weeks, or even months. Their respective agendas, though not final until they hit the streets, involve curbing corporate influence on politics and society, protecting the environment, and finally ending the costly wars abroad.

Just days after the protests in Tahrir Square and throughout Egypt led to Hosni Mubarak’s fall, students and workers began camping out in the capitol building in Madison, Wisconsin. But since their success in restraining Governor Scott Walker’s union-busting steamroller proved limited, the United States has quieted down again, lulled into the faux-politics exalted by the news cycle, with Iowa straw polls and candidates posturing for funders, each trying to outdo the others’ disdain for the very institutions they aspire to lead.

The plotters of the American Autumn want to bring politics out of the two-party circus and into the streets. “This is a people’s action, by the people for the people,” said Tarak Kauff during the Baltimore meeting. A soldier in the early 1960s, he’s now a member of Veterans for Peace. “We are creating a nonviolent people’s army,” he added. Even Al Gore—not especially a hero of theirs—recently called for such an awakening.

The goal is to create a space for people to come into their own, explained Margaret Flowers, a pediatrician and a mother of three teenagers, who became radicalized during the recent fight for single-payer health care. Soon after, she was among those who first conceived of the plan for October 6. She and the other organizers realize that the moment they succeed—if they do, by some definition of the word—is the moment they’ll have to let go.

“I just think of how I raised my children,” Flowers said.

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