

FORWARD

With Will The Kids Will Be

By LEONARD FEIN
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It was the kids that got to me. (The kids, and George Clooney's father.) I hadn't planned to write about Darfur this week, or even to mention it. But this is not about Darfur; it's about the kids.

I don't know the numbers, but they were plainly the vast majority of those who came to Washington on Sunday to join in the rally to stop the genocide in Darfur. Every time the C-Span camera panned the crowd, it was as if this rally was just for high school and college students. And maybe, just maybe, someone with power was watching, was listening, and the genocide will be stopped. (That was what Nick Clooney, George Clooney's dad, himself a journalist, eloquently said: I'm an old timer, and I have seen a lot. We didn't stop the Holocaust, and we didn't stop Cambodia and we didn't stop Rwanda. But this one we can stop. We really can.)

I know a little bit about such rallies. Rep. Tom Lantos, when it was his turn to speak at the Darfur rally, observed that there hadn't been any rallies during the time of the Holocaust. Lantos was wrong; there had been at least one rally.

It was at New York City's Madison Square Garden, on March 1, 1943 — and I know about it because I was there, along with 70,000 people, many of them gathered on the sidewalks and streets outside, listening to Rabbi Stephen S. Wise over loudspeakers. I was a kid, way younger than those on the Mall this past Sunday, but I remember it still. And I was at Madison Square Garden again, four years later, at a rally for a Jewish state, addressed by (among many, too many others) Rabbi Abba Hillel Silver and Chaim Weizmann, who was to become Israel's first president.

I missed some the big ones as an adult. But I remember when the Jews of Boston gathered on the Boston Common on June 5, 1967, to speak on Israel's behalf, not knowing that the very next day would see the onset of the Six Day War, still fearful to the point of near-panic that the Arab states would overwhelm Israel as they had promised. And I was very proudly there on the Mall in 1987 at the rally for Soviet Jewry — the largest rally ever convened by American Jews, with some 250,000 people in attendance.

Kids — young people — remember such events. Some are changed by them, become lifelong drum majors for justice. I've no doubt of that. But here, I want to call attention to the fact that these young people already have become drum majors for justice.

A rally, after all, is not just a bunch of speakers on one side and a larger or smaller audience on the other; a rally is its participants. A lighthouse without

ships is pointless; a rally without people, lots of people, is an embarrassment.

While I have no idea what of all the afternoon's rhetoric will remain in the memory of those who were there — I remember not a word that was spoken at the rallies I attended as a youngster — I know quite precisely what I will remember of the Darfur rally.

I will remember who was there, not up on the platform but on the grass below: The kids who, we're told, don't read newspapers; the kids who, we're told, are heirs to the sensibility of the "me" generation; the kids who, we're told, are busy at frat parties and raves, who see college as a vocational school and spend their free time instant messaging.

Not last Sunday. Not the many thousands of them who are alive, as alive as any of us old-timers, to the atrocity that is going on in Darfur. Joey Cheek, the Olympic gold medalist in speed skating and the final speaker at the Darfur rally, summed it up well: I am not a great man; I was born to the luxury that is America, and I have made a name for myself in an inconsequential sport. But those women in Darfur, they are my mother and my sisters, the men are my father and my brothers. We are here not to save Darfur, which is just a piece of dirt with lines drawn around it by map makers; we are here to save the people of Darfur, people who don't know, when they go to sleep at night, whether they will be alive in the morning.

No, this is not about Darfur, really not. It is about the hope and the encouragement we can derive from the fact that there is, indeed, a new generation, that we are not the last to care, the last to act, the last to shout out. These are the new watchmen and watchwomen of the night and of the day, those who labor for the coming of a day that is neither day nor night.

I sometimes tremble when I think of the state of the world my grandchildren will experience. War and environmental degradation, ethnic and religious conflict, terrorism, the whole litany of horror that is so familiar a threat, already too familiar a reality. But today, this week, the trembling is offset: Their parents, my children, the young people at the rally — they are not without power, they are not without will, they are not without resources, they are not silent and will not be.

Whatever happens in Darfur — may the genocide come speedily to an end, may the people of Darfur be restored to their homes and their lives — Darfur is not the final cause, and these young men and women will be there the next time and the one after that. I believe we can count on that, and on them.