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Protests will run gamut at GOP gathering in NYC

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By Martha T. Moore, USA TODAY

NEW YORK — Delegates to the Republican convention next month will see Broadway musicals their first night in town, but the best show may not be on stage.



An anti-Bush group pokes fun at the Bush administration's policies that benefit the wealthy.

Todd Plitt, USA TODAY

Organizers of several anti-Bush groups estimate that as many as 250,000 people are planning to protest during the four-day convention, which will play host to 5,000 delegates and 15,000 members of the media.

The protests will range from an anti-war march Aug. 29, the day before the convention opens, to street performances by groups such as the Billionaires for Bush, whose several dozen members dress up as rich people and skewer Republican economic policy.

Many of the same groups also plan to demonstrate in Boston at the Democratic convention at the end of July. But their target is the Bush administration. And the president is being renominated on Sept. 2 in New York, where Democrats outnumber Republicans 5-1.

"We need to go to New York because the major decision-makers around the country are all going to be (at the convention) in Madison Square Garden. And we want them to feel the impact of how people around the country feel," says Benjamin Chavis Muhammad, chairman of the



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Hip Hop Summit Action Network. The activist group was founded by music mogul Russell Simmons to change mandatory sentencing laws for drug crimes.

For David McCarthy, 34, a Web site producer, the Republicans' choice of New York spurred him to join the Billionaire's group. The convention ends nine days before the third anniversary of the Sept. 11 terrorist attacks.

"Bush took advantage of a national tragedy and used it for political gain," he says. "As soon as I heard the convention would be here, I knew I had to protest."

The Republican National Committee did not return a phone call seeking comment.

Groups with permits to demonstrate include Planned Parenthood, People for the American Way, Code Pink: Women for Peace, the Middle East Peace Coalition and the New York City Central Labor Council.

The Republican convention isn't the only focus for protests. The Billionaires for Bush, for instance, plan a "limo tour" of battleground states. But the national convention, which combines the incumbent president and the media capital of the country, provides a ready-made spotlight.

"I think everybody is a little excited and nervous," says Gabriel Willow, 26, an artist and member of another theatrical protest group, Greene Dragon, which uses a Revolutionary War motif. Willow's hope for the convention: "There will be such a demonstration that there will be no question that (the Bush) administration is no longer wanted."

Compared to protests at previous political conventions, "there's nothing dramatically new here. It's just that it's going to be on a much larger scale," says Alex Vitale, a Brooklyn College sociology professor who studies police tactics toward demonstrations.

Mixed into the protests will be a prayer vigil by the Christian Defense Coalition and a demonstration by New York police and firefighters to demand higher wages.

Police and firefighters "would rather be inside supporting our president," says Al O'Leary, spokesman for the police union.

But there will also be several small groups riding bikes, ringing bells, playing ukuleles and, in a protest against American overconsumption, vomiting.

Many demonstrations are being organized through Web sites, such as rncnotwelcome.org and counterconvention.org, through a daily stream of e-mails and weekly meetings in New York.

"The masses are kind of faceless," says Willow, whose group Greene Dragon declared independence from "Corporate Monarch George II" on July 4.

"It's strangely easy to dismiss 250,000 people," she says. "That's why it's important to have a different approach."



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About 30 people gathered recently in a downtown apartment to plan their strategy as Billionaires for Bush. Members dress in fake jewels, gowns, tuxedos and top hats and adopt names such as Meg A. Bucks and Tex Shelter.

"It's tough to talk about economic equality and have it be interesting," says Alice Meaker, 35, director of field operations for Billionaires for Bush. "This is a good way to reach voters, by using humor."

The largest demonstration planned will be the anti-war protest by United for Peace and Justice. The route is still being negotiated by the group and police. Protesters want to rally in part of Central Park, but the city parks department says a huge crowd would damage the lawn.

"It's not about lawn care, it's about politics," says William Dobbs, spokesman for United for Peace and Justice. "Mayor Bloomberg has rolled out a red carpet for the Republicans, and we don't have anything."

Police say they are far more concerned about a possible terrorist attack during the convention than disruption from massive demonstrations. A protest area will be at one corner of the restricted zone around Madison Square Garden. In the crowd of demonstrators will be "legal observers," lawyers watching for clashes with police.

The New York Civil Liberties Union is running classes for people who plan to protest. The classes deal with what types of protests are legal and what to do if arrested.

"Certainly it presents a challenge," says Donna Lieberman, executive director of the civil liberties group.

"It's not just any old occasion for demonstration," she says. "It's the Republican convention. The president will be in town. The challenge for the police department will be to respect all the rights involved."

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