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oral sessions with C. Hamard

# Shutting a freeway in traffic-clogged L.A. gets attention. But is it effective activism?

#  Los Angeles Times, by Rachel Uranga, Nathan Solis \_ December 2023

A son on the way to the airport to say goodbye to his dying father watched time slip by. A mom comforted her hungry infant. Frustration generally boiled over earlier this week as protesters calling for a cease-fire in Gaza halted traffic for hours along a downtown Los Angeles freeway during morning rush hour. A month earlier in the Bay Area, a protest demanding the same thing shut down the Bay Bridge for hours — and delayed needed transplant organs.

Freeways and bridges are the lifelines of America’s big cities. And protesters of everything from climate change to police brutality have known for years there is no better way to get people’s attention than to interrupt those corridors of daily life, even if they elicit as much anger as they do sympathy.

Freeways are touchstones to the story of modern Los Angeles: The division of historic neighborhoods, the O.J. Simpson chase down the 405. Carmageddon.The traffic jams in movies from “LaLa Land” to “Falling Down.”It played into demonstrators’ decision to walk onto the 101 Freeway in 2020 to protest the murder of George Floyd.

Experts say targeting major transportation routes can be both incredibly powerful and extremely risky. “You are guaranteed that millions of people are going to hear about your protests, because everybody listens to the traffic report,” said Michael Beer, director of Nonviolence International. “But you have to think: Are you stopping the ambulance from getting to a hospital and somebody’s gonna die?” he said. But, he said, it has happened in protests around the world.

“We understand that engaging in a disruption like this has material consequences for people’s commute and their daily life, “ said Adam Hirsch, an organizer. “But at this point, we really have no choice but to take this kind of disruptive action. We have to kind of shove a wedge into the public consciousness in order to demonstrate the fact that this is an immense, immense moral crisis, not just for Jewish Americans, but for every single American because our tax dollars are funding this war. We have received an overwhelming amount of positive feedback and we hope that inspires others to take up acts of nonviolent protest so that we can achieve a lasting ceasefire,” he said.

I met a man who was on his way to catch an international flight to go say goodbye to his dying father,” LaVallee said. He said he supports the right to protest, “but I feel like blocking traffic during rush hour in Los Angeles is 99.9% always unnecessary.”

Effective protests create a narrative about the issue, one that resonates with the protest, and he’s not sure that people are making the right links in their mind. Still, he understands the pure frustration: “There’s a huge crisis in Gaza,” he said, “and it’s slipping off the front page.”

The tactic is largely geared toward media. “Journalists typically don’t cover protesters that behave themselves, so the point of this tactic is to make sure you get that attention,” said Jay Ulfelder, research project manager at Harvard’s Nonviolent Action Lab. (513 words)