



THE WRITING ON THE WALL

WHEN CLIMBING WENT MAINSTREAM,
EL CAP BECAME A GRANDSTAND FOR
POTENTIAL PROTESTS—AND ALL THE
CONTROVERSY THEY PROVOKE.

Story by **ASTRA LINCOLN**

An up-close view of the annual Firefall phenomenon, when February's setting sun lights up El Capitan's Horestail Fall for a few minutes each evening. / Photo: Nick Smith



On June 18, 2024, four climbers arrived atop El Cap Tower in the peak heat of the day. The climb had been surreally cheery, given what they were climbing for. “Is it bad that we’re having so much fun?” Miranda Oakley recalled thinking on the wall. They were on the *Nose*, after all. It was a route she knew well, a route she’d once believed was the very best in the world. In the preceding decade, she’d run lap after lap on it. In 2016, she became the first woman to ever solo the route in less than 24 hours, an accolade she claimed on a sweat-soaked, 100-degree August day. And so for the first few hours Oakley and the others were climbing, it felt like any other saccharine summer day—just a couple of friends scrambling up one of the most famous rock routes in the world.

On the top of the tower, the team began unpacking their haul bags, unspooling ropes, and clipping cams to their harnesses. They pulled a ten-pound banner, made from a technical, superlight sail cloth, out from one of the bags. Alix Morris, a Yosemite Search and Rescue veteran, looped rope through the eyelets at each corner. Then she and Oakley got to work stringing the banner up between anchors on either side of the ledge. Finally, they unfurled the 25-foot banner across the expanse of granite just above the top of Texas Flake. STOP THE GENOCIDE, it read, in the Palestinian flag’s red, black, and green.

As Morris and Oakley fiddled with the banner’s tensioning ropes, Henry Whittaker and Alexa Flower—two other members of the loosely organized advocacy group, Climbers for Palestine, who were in the ascent party that day—pulled out their cameras to take videos for Instagram and photos for *The San Francisco Chronicle*. In El Cap Meadow, 1,500 feet below, a crowd of their family and friends aimed their own cameras up at the spectacle. Only when seen through telephoto lenses or the optical glass of binoculars did the text on the banner become legible, but the onlookers were ready to zoom in to the top of the tower. One after another, they focused in on the postage stamp-sized white rectangle that was barely distinguishable from the granite’s gold and gray.

In the glitzy lights of competitive sporting events, protest is common. There have been public protests at nearly every Olympics dating back to the 19th century, plus protest actions at events including NFL games, college championship matches,

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and this year’s MLB Dodgers’ opener. But for all their regularity, sports protests—and their instigators—are typically controversial at the time that they occur. Take, for example, Muhammad Ali, the heavyweight boxing champion who in 1967 conscientiously objected to being drafted to the Vietnam War. The World Boxing Association meted out swift punishment, banning Ali from competition for three years and stripping him of his champion title. Yet, in the gentler light of retrospect, athletes that acted out are almost always lionized. Decades after dodging the draft, Ali “became something of a secular saint, a legend in soft focus,” Robert Lipsyte wrote in his *New York Times* obituary.

In the annals of climbing history, however, no champion political protesters come immediately to mind. This is, perhaps, because of the inherent absence of any grand stage—until recently, climbing has mostly happened on the margins, in tucked-away landscapes, garnering media attention only in insular publications that target audiences made up of other climbers. For all that climbers have prided themselves on their counterculturalism, their alleged punk-rock status has mostly meant that climbing took place largely out of view.

This secretive status has allowed for some secretive actions to occur. In apartheid South Africa in the 1970s, white mountain club members were discouraged from climbing with Black South Africans—but that didn’t stop some climbers from striking out to the cliff together anyway, climbing in integrated parties, sheltered from the consequences of being seen. “Society was sick,” the renowned Black South African climber Ed February said in a 2004 interview for *Outside* magazine, but “climbing is normal.” Here, the margins became a useful site to rehearse for the integrated society February and his partners hoped would one day come into view.

Still, for the most part, climbers haven’t

occupied themselves with changing the mainstream. In the sport’s history, you won’t find any Muhammad Alis. Any politically-minded athletes interested in speaking out were forced to fabricate their own kind of stage.

Ed Drummond and Colin Rowe climbed Nelson’s Column in Trafalgar Square, London, to raise awareness for the South African Anti-Apartheid Movement in 1979; they brought hammers, and pounded pitons into the granite structure’s cracks. Alain Robert put up a 2004 first ascent of the French oil company Total’s 614-foot-tall headquarter building to protest against the invasion of Iraq; then, in 2007, Mike Robertson free-soloed the Eiffel Tower wearing a “Free Burma” t-shirt. The stunt garnered him a front-page spread in the *Guardian*. It may not have ended the conflict, but it “brought it back into the news,” Robertson said in an interview with *Alpinist*.

Eventually, climbing broke into the news. In the 2010s, high-octane documentaries like *Dawn Wall* and *Free Solo* finally infused the sport with mass-market appeal. In 2018, the *Guardian* reported that climbing had officially become a global sensation. Suddenly, it felt like “anything that happened on El Cap was going to end up on CBS,” Morris told me. Now one didn’t have to scale a building; a banner-hang in Yosemite would do.

Once the STOP THE GENOCIDE banner was gently fluttering in the wind, once the photos were taken and the phone interviews were all complete, the activists relaxed. The climbing was over; the banner had been hung. The brief urgency of its installation—along with the preceding three months of tactical research in conference calls with Greenpeace volunteers, anonymous funders, and a web of other activists—was now in the rearview.



High above Yosemite Valley, Alix Morris (left) and Miranda Oakley (right) unfurl a banner reading “Stop the Genocide,” as they prepare to hang it above El Cap Tower, about halfway up the Nose on El Capitan. / Photo: Alexa Flower

“I had been nervous before,” Oakley told me. That spring, there had been a flurry of arrests on college campuses where students were running encampments and sit-ins, in light of which retaliation from the park service seemed plausible. “But once we were up there, it felt a lot safer. We were *way* up there. What was anyone going to do about it? No one was going to follow us up the *Nose* and start a fight.”

But an argument *had* ignited on the ground below. A Yosemite local with a reputation for hot-headedness had tipped off park rangers about the group’s plan to hang the banner.

Early on the morning of June 19, the climbers received their first warning that anything might have gone awry. One of the climbers’ contacts on the park staff had sent them a heads-up text: The park’s enforcement officers were talking about taking disciplinary actions against the four climbers. The climbers weren’t doing anything illegal, *per se*—Yosemite National Park regulations were clear that they couldn’t leave the banner unattended, or otherwise materially interrupt the experience of other climbers on the wall, neither of which they’d done—but now they were in a tough spot. Their friend was doing them a favor, presumably, by telling them about the back-room conversation and asking them to all come down. While it was Oakley, Morris, Whittaker, and Flower making the statement, it now felt like this third party might face consequences, too—

even if only in having to have a series of uncomfortable interactions in his role as accidental mediator between his bosses and his buds.

Oakley and the other climbers agreed to take down the banner. What they had planned as a 24-hour installation—the lion’s share of El Cap Meadow’s traffic whizzes through between 11 a.m. and 5 p.m., and they had wanted the action to be timed accordingly—lasted for one dark night, plus about as long as it takes to finish breakfast. They dilly-dallied removing their anchors and re-spooling their ropes, and eventually rigged up lines to rappel. When they arrived at the base of El Cap, no park personnel was there to give them a tase, a ticket, or even a talking-to.

The closest thing to repercussions that any of them faced was scrutiny on the internet. On Reddit and Instagram, hundreds of people accused the climbers of littering, of defacing the mountain, of recruiting for Hamas. The throughline of these messages was that they ought to keep politics out of climbing and out of America’s national parks. The comments seemed to assert that any American has the right to refuse to witness even the most oblique reminders of geopolitics; that park visitors are perhaps uniquely entitled to that experience, given that they are “opting outside” and thereby, it seems, opting out of the whirl of news notifications; and that, therefore, the climbers had a duty to honor these

rights—by *not* disrupting a tourist’s experience, by *not* hanging an almost-invisible banner that someone would have to go out of their way even to read.

Despite the Climbers for Palestine’s quick capitulation to self-censorship, their elaborately orchestrated photo-op generated the media buzz its organizers had hoped for. It made the rounds on social media and was picked up by international news. But for all of the media’s coverage of the banner hang, almost no one spoke of its referent: The Israeli military had been bombarding Gaza for eight months. Somewhere between 37,396 and 68,000 were already dead. *Climbers hang banner*, most media reported, instead of: Here’s a child gathering strips of flesh off a sidewalk. Or a premature child wrapped in tinfoil after the hospital was bombed. Or the decomposing body of a child, left in a hospital bed after a forced evacuation. Or a parent holding the decapitated head of their child in their cupped hands. The media spoke about people speaking about genocide; they were not spurred to speak about the genocide itself.

Oakley’s crew was speaking to a media that was muzzled, that had been bludgeoned into the passive voice. In 2024, an analysis run by *The Intercept* found that war coverage published by *The New York Times*, *Los Angeles Times*, and *Washington Post* disproportionately covered Israeli

deaths at a rate of 16 times the coverage per Palestinian death; they disproportionately used words like “slaughter” or “massacre” to describe Israeli deaths, whereas Palestinians were more often described as having simply “died.” Such coverage reveals that this is a war of voice as much as it is a war of violence.

The exception to this coverage exists in certain individuals’ social media feeds, where graphic war footage has become ubiquitous. “It can be difficult for those inundated by Gaza images on social media to remember that wide swaths of the US population have never seen them, and likely never will,” the editors at *n+1* wrote. “People have either sought out the video or cued the app’s algorithm to serve it up,” interrupting what would otherwise be mostly filtered beach-vacation photos and ads, a world free of consequence.

The Climbers for Palestine had similarly hoped their banner would interrupt the blissfully ignorant Yosemite tourist’s pretense of such a thing as a pristine national park experience—the idea that by visiting a park, one might step briefly outside the flow of history. This mission worked, and it didn’t: The banner was up, but none of the journalists that covered it wrote with any increased clarity or specificity about the genocide which the climbers hoped would end.

Despite their best efforts, the Climbers for Palestine didn’t find a way out of protest’s inevitable paradox: How can someone convey the seriousness of purpose with any action when humans are still being slaughtered? As with the hundreds of climber-protestors before them, the content of the Climbers for Palestine’s demonstration on El Cap in 2024 both exceeded and fell short of its ostensible message. The genocide had to be stopped! And their banner did nothing, at least in any obvious, immediate way, to stop it.

And how could it have? For anyone keeping score, it would seem as though the actions available to Americans were rapidly dwindling. Take, as an example, the American veteran Aaron Bushnell, who lit himself on fire on the steps of the U.S. Embassy in Israel in the same year the climbers hung their anti-genocide banner. “Compared to what people have been experiencing in Palestine at the hands of their colonizers—it’s not extreme at all,” Bushnell said during a livestream recorded in the moments before he died. “This is what our ruling class has decided will be

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normal,” he said. His self-immolation did nothing to slow Israel’s onslaught. Instead, in the months that followed, America’s attitude toward pro-Palestine speech turned Trumanesque. The after-image of the American-funded violence seems to have been redirected domestically: At the time of this writing, in the spring of 2025, it has become routine for the Trump administration to take radical actions—illegal deportations, or warrantless arrests—in retribution against such “radical” and “terrorist” acts as...co-authoring an op-ed in a college newspaper. If a way to thread the needle between subversive action and state suppression remains, it has become vanishingly narrow.

Alix Morris originally came up with the idea for the STOP THE GENOCIDE banner after seeing Sébastien Berthe hang a flag with the phrase, “War should be against climate change,” from his portaledge each night while projecting the *Dawn Wall* in 2022. In January 2025, when Berthe successfully free climbed the route, he took a photo from the summit with a banner that read, “El Cap climbers against fascism.”

But despite the clear impact that other, similar climbing protests had had on her, “I thought the [STOP THE GENOCIDE banner hang] action was performative, this kind of curated thing, for a really long time,” Morris told me in early 2025. For the rest of the involved climbers that I spoke to, whether they were emotionally or ideologically satisfied felt irrelevant: They had the chance to speak out against slaughter, and so they did. But it had taken Morris longer to feel that way.

Morris’ perspective shifted in February 2025, when a new wave of protests hit the national parks. For weeks on end this winter, disgruntled park employees hung inverted flags at parks across the country—beginning in Yosemite, on El Capitan. Nate Vince, the former park locksmith that led the effort, had intended to hang the flag on

a flagpole—until he remembered Climbers For Palestine’s banner. Thinking back to their example, “I realized El Cap was the biggest flag pole I had,” Vince said. He wanted to make a statement that would be clear from the Valley floor. From Climbers for Palestine, Vince had learned size does matter in fabric arts-based politicking. He ordered a flag that was 50 by 30 feet.

Vince’s inverted American flag went viral in a way the STOP THE GENOCIDE banner hadn’t. Fellow former park employees and their allies were fast to fly inverted flags on Pickle Rock in Arches, Utah; on Intersection Rock in Joshua Tree California; on Monkey Face in Smith Rock, Oregon; on Moonlight Buttress in Zion, Utah; and on Eagle Cliff in Rocky Mountain National Park, Colorado. A few weeks after Vince hung his jumbo flag in Yosemite, hundreds of thousands of people across the country marched during a “National Day of Action” to protest the funding cuts. In February—and, not unlikely, in part because of this flurry of demonstrations—1,000 terminated employees, including Vince, were hired back. (Of course, they were immediately placed on administrative leave. At the time of this writing, the future of their employment remained uncertain.)

The Protect Our Parks demonstrations were successful, in part, because the subject just felt so *personal*: people really, really love to play in these places. The threat feels immediate in a way that foreign war does not. And the Protect Our Parks demonstrations had a message that was, on its face, apolitical. Vince’s primary concern, he told me, was that he didn’t want to lose his career, his community, or his housing.

In the days immediately after the mass-firings were announced, people posted to social media en masse saying that this was the final straw—that the layoffs of park employees had finally turned them outwardly political. “I’m ashamed to say I’ve never been part of a



The banner hung by Climbers For Palestine, as seen from El Cap Meadow.
/ Photo: Dakota Snider

The most salient takeaway might be that powerlessness is an alibi. Hopelessness is an alibi. It's a way of offering yourself permission to give up on working toward your dreams.

protest,” read one post I saw. “But this has made politics personal.” That this issue galvanized so many makes me wonder whether people aren’t as reviled at the idea of parks being political as they purport themselves to be. Of course, every lover of public lands knows on some level that protected landscapes *are* political—the new presidential administration has made obvious how easily parks can be written, via policy, into or out of existence. Perhaps it’s alright for parks to be political—so long as it’s the specific vision of America as a passive place, little more than Ansel Adam’s “beauty of gold and green glitter,” that we’re protecting.

Unlike the terminated parks employees, Climbers for Palestine wanted to *disrupt*, rather than protect, the out-of-the-world experience of America’s superlative wilderness areas and the recreational opportunities that they present. They were up against one of rock climbing’s most alluring attributes: its addictiveness. Climbing, like any other obsession, creates the illusion that we might be free from the context of our lives. It instills the most

American type of freedom, which we have been led to believe is a kind of refusal of obligation, rather than an opportunity for inquiry. What if we instead understood freedom as a question: What are we going to *do* with it? How do you teach someone that what they have isn’t power and privilege, but rather burden and responsibility?

At the end of May, a third flag was hung by yet another group. With the help of Nate Vince, a coalition of seven LGBTQIA+ activists, including park biologist Shannon Joslin and the prominent drag queen known as Pattie Gonia, hung a trans pride flag above Heart Ledges on El Cap. They one-upped the inverted American flag: At 66 by 35 feet, the organizers believe it to be the largest flag ever flown on the cliff face.

Less than a week after the action, the park announced an update to the Superintendent’s Compendium. It prohibited anyone to hang any banner, sign, or flag larger than 15 square feet (3 by 5) without a permit, citing the Wilderness Act and gesturing vaguely toward risks to public safety. The update was signed on

May 21, but backdated to the 20th—the day the trans pride flag was hung, making it illegal retroactively.

Per a statement from the park—and in the first public statement pursuant to any of the three flags—it was an “inappropriate display.”

When I read about the Climbers for Palestine action for the first time in the summer of 2024, I couldn’t help but think about the vast space between *direct action*—which materially disrupts the flow of money, weapons, or power using means other than institutionalized political processes, as Greenpeace activists and tree sitters aspire to do—and *protest*—a word derived from the Latin words for public and witness. To make the noun into a verb—to turn *testis* (witness) into *testari* (assert)—implies that our witnessing means anything. I, too, have reposted the gory photos; I have signed the petitions; I have written a couple articles. I have tried to think strategically about my impact, about which of my communities I might influence the most. All of it feels meaningless, like I have accomplished nothing other than a reassertion of my own agency. Now, by some counts, as many as 335,500 Gazans could be dead.

What might a climber, who feels responsible to their community and therefore responsible for creating a less violent and punitive world, make of these feelings of futility and their fear of consequence? The most salient takeaway might be that powerlessness is an alibi. Hopelessness is an alibi. It’s a way of offering yourself permission to give up on working toward your dreams. Yes, strategy is useful. But it is useful, too, to occasionally extend ourselves grace while we experiment with what exactly our power can do.

I saw author Omar El Akkad this spring, while he was on tour for his new book, *One Day, Everyone Will Have Always Been Against This*. “Sometimes you have to remind the empire you have a backbone,” he said. “Sometimes you have to remind yourself.” 

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