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New book revisits 'single most powerful antiwar act in US history'

John Dear | Jun. 5, 2012 On the Road to Peace

There have been hundreds of thousands of acts of nonviolent civil disobedience in U.S. history that have helped the cause of justice and peace. The Boston Tea Party, Thoreau's one night in jail, the suffragists who blocked the White House entrance, Rosa Parks' refusal to move to the back of the bus -- concerned people throughout our history have confronted injustice through civil disobedience as a way to change unjust laws. Indeed, one could argue that positive social change can only come "after good people break bad laws and accept the consequences." In recent years, thousands have been arrested for protesting the U.S. wars in Iraq and Afghanistan, the evil Keystone XL tar sands pipeline, mountaintop removal, and Wall Street corporate greed in the Occupy movement. Two weeks ago, thousands protested draconian laws in Montreal in the largest protest in Canadian history.

One of the most well-known acts of civil disobedience in U.S. history occurred in Catonsville, Md., on May 17, 1968, when nine people entered the local draft board office, took files into the parking lot, burned them with homemade napalm and awaited arrest. Their story made front-page news around the country, in part because two of the nine were well-known Catholic priests -- brothers Daniel and Philip Berrigan. Their subsequent trial and imprisonment energized the growing anti-war movement but also dramatically challenged the widespread notion that all Christians, especially Roman Catholics, supported U.S. war-making.

This month, 44 years after that dramatic public witness, Oxford University Press is publishing a mammoth historical account of that groundbreaking action. *The Catonsville Nine: A Story of Faith and Resistance in the Vietnam Era* [1] by Shawn Peters tells in detail the story of the nine activists, why they acted, what happened to them and the impact of their witness against the Vietnam War. Meticulously researched, it reads like a thriller with a compelling message about the power of ordinary people to make a difference in changing the world.

Peters explores "both the triumphs and the tragedies of the Catonsville nine ... by chronicling their lives both as individuals and as members of a group that engaged in a provocative and controversial iteration of social, religious and political protest -- one that still stands, for many Americans, as a signal act of civil disobedience." He writes:

> A full account of the lives of all of the Catonsville Nine represents more than simply a group biography of some quirky radical activists who briefly captured public attention and then faded back into obscurity. It demonstrates how, in perilous times, profound religious and political beliefs can intertwine and motivate sincere individuals to risk their personal freedom in order to resist state policies they deem both illegal and immoral. The story of the Nine further reveals how broadly such selfless acts of resistance can resonate with people who question the aggressive role taken by the American government on the world stage. Today, more than forty years after they stormed into the Catonsville draft office, the example of the Nine is still often invoked by both secular and religious opponents of militarism.

With thoughtful, careful insight, *The Catonsville Nine* walks us through the story, beginning with the meeting of Baltimore artist and activist Tom Lewis and the radical Josephite priest Philip Berrigan. Together with friends,

they organized regular demonstrations against the Vietnam War, only to see how little impact they made. So they upped the ante. With two other friends, they entered the Baltimore Customs House on Oct. 27, 1967, and poured blood on draft files. While awaiting trial and prison, Phil announced he wanted to act again before he went to prison in an even more dramatic way. Through a series of meetings in Washington, D.C., they recruited some friends: George Mische, nurse Mary Moylan, and missionaries in Guatemala, Tom* and Marjorie Melville, and John Hogan. A young Christian brother from St. Louis named David Darst had written to Phil in support of the Baltimore Four, so Phil invited him, as well.

Tom thought another Catholic priest should be part of the group so Phil would not be so easily dismissed. They invited Richard McSorley, the Jesuit professor at Georgetown University, who was interested but in the end decided against joining the group -- a decision he later regretted. So Phil drove to Cornell University to meet with his brother Dan, who served as a campus minister there and was freshly back from Vietnam. With Howard Zinn, Dan had journeyed to Hanoi to help retrieve three U.S. prisoners. While there, Hanoi was bombed by the United States, and they found themselves spending their nights in a dark air raid shelter.

Dan was shocked. You want to go back and do it again? He and Phil talked through the night. "Would the action we proposed offend the church? Of course it would," Phil later wrote about their conversation. "Might it alienate us from some of our fellow peace activists? Most definitely. Would it end the war? Certainly not. Was it consistent with the spirit of Christ, Martin Luther King and Mohandas Gandhi? We, the people who were planning the action, believed it was." Toward dawn, Dan agreed to join the action, and a date was set.

"I can't just be counseling other people to be heroic," Dan thought to himself. "I better do something myself."

It turned out that all nine members were Catholics, so their witness became a wakeup call to the church, as well. They picked the local Baltimore suburban draft board office because, among other things, it was located in the Knights of Columbus Hall.

Tom Lewis came upon the idea of defacing the records with homemade napalm, the flammable liquid Americans were dropping on the Vietnamese.

"We wished to demonstrate a better use for napalm than burning human beings to death," Marjorie Melville later wrote. "It is noble, patriotic, and worthy to use napalm to burn people, 'enemy people.' It is ignoble, unpatriotic, and unworthy to use napalm to burn 'our paper,' our property. Property is important; life is expendable."

"Our apologies, good friends, for the fracture of good order, the burning of paper instead of children, the angering of the orderlies in the front parlor of the charnel house," Dan Berrigan wrote in one of the group's statements. "We could not, so help us God, do otherwise. ... We say: killing is disorder, life and gentleness and community and unselfishness is the only order we recognize. For the sake of that order, we risk our liberty, our good name."

This powerful book gives the details of that fateful day, their jailing, the famous trial, their eventual imprisonment and how four of them went "underground." I was moved by the whole account and learned many details that brought the action and the actors to life. I was especially touched by the stories of David Darst and Mary Moylan. Young David taught inner-city high school kids and returned to teaching after the action. But he found himself alienated from his community and church. He fell into despair, and was planning to leave the Christian Brothers after his time in prison. But shortly before he would have gone to prison, he was killed in a terrible car crash and burned to death.

Dan Berrigan famously went underground for five months and was the subject of intense media scrutiny, but Mary Moylan went underground for 10 years and was all but forgotten. She eventually turned herself in, served

time in prison and cut ties with her friends. A strong feminist, she lamented the sexism she experienced from the men in the group. She died a few years ago.

It's important to act publicly for peace and justice, but it's equally important to reflect on our actions, pray over them, ponder our failings and learn from our mistakes so we can become more nonviolent, loving and peaceful. This book examines the bravery, courage and heroism of the nine in their strong public stand against evil U.S. war-making, but it also shows their weaknesses and mistakes, and in doing so, reveals their humanity. In doing so, it offers us the courage to undertake our own stand for peace today.

The Catonsville action was "arguably the single most powerful antiwar act in American history," Martin Sheen once said. But the nine didn't know it would stir such a reaction when they drove off to Catonsville that May morning. They didn't know that many other draft board raids would follow, or that many Christians would re-examine their support of war because of it. (At the time, *NCR* denounced their action in an editorial as "an offensive sort of prank, the bizarre product of minds linked in their fanaticism with the antics of the gun-running, ammunition-stocking Minutemen.") The war would kill millions of people, and the nine did what they nonviolently could to stop it.

Years later, White House transcripts revealed that President Richard Nixon wanted to drop nuclear weapons on Hanoi, and that Henry Kissinger talked him out of it, pointing to the millions of people who were already protesting the war. Perhaps, Dan once said to me, we helped prevent the use of nuclear weapons on Vietnam.

We never know the outcome of our actions for peace, but they must be taken anyway. As Dan writes, we do what's right because it's right and leave the outcome in God's hands. Today, the United States bombs people in Afghanistan, Pakistan and Yemen, maintains military bases around the world and threatens the entire planet with its nuclear arsenal. Last week, *The New York Times* reported that President Barack Obama personally supervises a "kill list" for extrajudicial assassinations through drone warfare. Like the Catonsville nine, we, too, need to reflect on this culture of war, risk our own nonviolent action and take a stand for peace.

Shawn Peters' superb account, *The Catonsville Nine*, will touch and inspire everyone who cares about peace. It lifts up nine people and their colleagues who gave all they could to end a horrendous war. Their Christian witness exemplifies the nonviolent resistance of Jesus who engaged in civil disobedience in the Jerusalem temple and was arrested, imprisoned and executed. May their story live on, and the witness for peace continue.

**An earlier version of this column misidentified Tom Melville.*

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John Dear will speak June 22 and 23 at the Wildgoose Festival [2] in North Carolina. His new book, *Lazarus, Come Forth!* [3], explores Jesus as the God of life calling humanity (in the symbol of the dead Lazarus) out of the tombs of the culture of war and death. To see John's 2012 speaking schedule, go to John Dear's website [4]. John's talk at last year's Sabeel conference in Bethlehem is featured in the new book *Challenging Empire* [5]. John is profiled with Dan Berrigan and Roy Bourgeois in a new book, *Divine Rebels* [6] by Deena Guzder (Lawrence Hill Books). This book and other recent books, including *Daniel Berrigan: Essential Writings* *[7]*; *Put Down Your Sword* *[8]* and *A Persistent Peace* *[9]*, are available from Amazon.com.

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[1] http://www.amazon.com/The-Catonsville-Nine-Resistance-

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[2] http://www.wildgoosefestival.org
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