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Inattention to accuracy about 'Catonsville Nine' distorts history

George Mische | May. 17, 2013
Viewpoint

Nearly 45 years ago, a close friend who was a prominent national civil rights leader said we should write our own movement's history. Because if we don't, somebody who was not part of it will come along with preconceived notions and their own agenda -- and get it wrong. He was so right. With this memory in mind, in honor of the 45th anniversary of the "The Catonsville Nine" draft file burning, I have decided to write something that more accurately reflects that event than how others have portrayed it in the past.

On May 17, 1968, nine ordinary people, who happened to be Catholics, entered the U.S. draft board office in Catonsville, Md. Together, the nine of us -- Dan Berrigan, Phil Berrigan, David Darst, John Hogan, Tom Lewis, Margie Melville, Tom Melville, Mary Moylan and I -- removed 378 1-A draft files and burned them in the parking lot with homemade napalm. As the files burned, we explained to the media who we were and what motivated our action.

While the files burned, we prayed for peace and waited for the police. We were arrested and taken to the local police station. After being questioned, we were taken to Baltimore County jail, where we refused bail and fasted for eight days before agreeing to be released.

You have to understand what was happening in this country and in Vietnam at this time: The Tet Offensive was making 1968 the bloodiest year of the decade-long war; President Lyndon Johnson had committed more troops in Vietnam, taking the total U.S. soldiers there to nearly 550,000, and 24,000 young men were being inducted monthly to fill the quota. At home, the country was divided in a bitter presidential campaign that had already forced Johnson from seeking re-election. Martin Luther King Jr. had been assassinated the month before and Robert Kennedy would be killed the following month. The times were chaotic, conflicted and confused.

While this was unfolding, and while opposition to Johnson's policies was rising, Johnson famously stated, "I don't care if those hippies carry signs from Maine to California. I will decide what the war policy will be. I am not going to be the first American president to lose a war."

The media dubbed us the "Catonsville Nine." Four of us are still alive today -- Dan, Margie, Tom and me. The other five members of our group have passed on to the great realm of peace and justice that they pursued all their lives.

After being charged with four felonies by the U.S. government and indicted by the state of Maryland, we were put on trial in federal court. The courtroom was packed every day. Press came from around the world, and hundreds of people from around the country came to show their support.

After a powerful week inside and outside the courtroom, we were found guilty and received prison sentences ranging from 24 to 42 months. When the U.S. Supreme Court refused to hear our appeal, Mary, Dan and I carried out our resistance further by not turning ourselves in as ordered. The remaining six decided to surrender

and begin serving their sentences. We all were supportive of one another's decisions.

I was captured a month later in Chicago. Dan was found even later in Block Island, R.I. The FBI never found Mary -- until she turned herself in 10 years later. One of her lifelong goals was to show that women should be on an equal footing as men. I was delighted to see her success in outlasting Dan, myself and the FBI.

Admittedly, I always thought we should have been known as the Catonsville 10 because my wife, Helene, was a part of this venture from the very beginning. Dan, a Jesuit priest, had married us in 1967, and she helped open a peace action house in Washington, D.C., soon to be joined by Moylan, Hogan and the Melvilles. This house was where the planning meeting to act at Catonsville was held. It was also out of that meeting that four attendees -- Art Melville, Tony Mullaney, Jim Harney and Bob Cunnane -- decided to take the next two major actions, the Milwaukee 14 draft board action and the D.C. Nine Dow Chemical Company action. While I was inside Lewisburg Federal Prison serving a three-year sentence, Helene lived outside the prison's walls caring for our two young children, Danielle and Philip.

Since 1968 there have been numerous books and articles written about our action. Two movies have been made and the play "The Trial of the Catonsville Nine" has been performed countless times around the world. The overindulgence of concentrating on our specific action has created an enormous myth about who we were as people and exaggerated the importance of our role in the growth and evolution of the anti-Vietnam War Catholic peace movement, which became known as the "Catholic left."

The members of the Catonsville Nine brought diverse life experiences to our group. Three were priests, two were brothers, one was a nun, and three were laypeople. We were Army veterans. We worked abroad in places like Latin America and Africa. We served the poor and minorities in this country. We were teachers. Each of us took seriously the calls from Pope John XXIII and President John F. Kennedy to work for peace and justice. Despite what people may think, we were ordinary people who wanted to prove that even small numbers of people could make a difference. Our being Catholic was important because at that time, only five of more than 400 U.S. bishops were speaking out against the war. Cardinal Francis Spellman of New York, the most powerful bishop in the U.S., personally celebrated Christmas Mass with the troops each year in Vietnam. He blessed B-52 bombers that were used to drop napalm on the Vietnamese. As Catholics, we needed to show that we didn't agree with the hierarchy of the church.

But more importantly, the seeming infatuation with our event robbed the rightful place in history for the hundreds of people who, by the government's 1992 admission, raided nearly 300 draft boards across the country between 1968 and 1972. Major actions occurred in Camden, N.J.; Milwaukee; Indianapolis; Buffalo, N.Y.; Rochester, N.Y.; Boston; Philadelphia; and Washington, D.C. The Chicago 15 destroyed more than 50,000 draft records in a predominantly minority neighborhood on the city's South Side. In New York City an all-women group raided 15 draft boards and spent the night shredding draft files. The next day they scattered the paper shreds in Rockefeller Plaza in front of hundreds of people over the lunch hour, and distributed a statement taking responsibility for the action.

After seeing how the early books distorted and misunderstood that era, I refrained from doing any book interviews after 1975 and passed on participating in the making of the second Catonsville movie. Through the years, I found Garry Wills, Murray Polner and Jim O'Grady to be credible authors on the subject of the "Catholic left" era.

A book that has really infuriated me is Shawn Francis Peters' The Catonsville Nine: A Story of Faith and Resistance in the Vietnam Era, which Jesuit Fr. John Dear, an NCR columnist, reviewed in 2012. He raved about the accuracy of Peters' book. Dear cites Peters quoting the actor Martin Sheen as saying the Catonsville

Nine action was "arguably the single most powerful antiwar act in American history," which was embarrassing for me to read.

In February 2009, Peters asked to interview me for the book he was writing about the Catonsville Nine. I declined his request, explaining my reasons for avoiding interviews. He stated he understood my concerns but would like to sit down and explain his approach to the book if I ever passed through Madison, Wis. A couple months later I was in Madison to celebrate the 100-year anniversary of The Progressive magazine, and I let Peters know. We met for about 30 minutes over coffee, during which he tried again to include me in his book plans. I was put off by his approach to try to draw a wedge between Dan and me during this conversation, and I made a point to stay clear of his book plans. Sixteen months later, Peters contacted me again to inform me he was coming to Minneapolis on business, had a couple of morning hours open and would like to meet to further explain his book plans. While talking over a cup of coffee, he pulled out a tape recorder. I again explained I wasn't willing to participate in any taped interview, which Peters later admitted to a mutual Maryland friend.

Last year in July, Jim Mengel, a member of the Baltimore Four, gave me a copy of Peters' book as a birthday gift. He told me that some of the things that Peters wrote about him never happened. A number of people who read Peters' book thought I had cooperated with him based on claims he made in the preface and acknowledgement sections. This prompted me to read his book. I took 12 legal-sized pages of notes where he completely misconstrued or misinterpreted the historical facts concerning the Catonsville action, the trial, the post-trial developments, prison life, etc.

But most concerning to me is his portrayal of Mary Moylan and David Darst. I talked with Mary often, and she never once talked about regretting her participation in the Catonsville action, nor has anyone else. She was not anti-male, and she did not die as a sad, broken-down alcoholic. David was not suicidal by any stretch of the imagination, as Peters implies. David was disappointed with his Christian Brothers' lack of commitment to the peace question and wondered how he would handle prison life. Everyone facing prison time wonders about that! David and I spent a great deal of time together between the Catonsville action and his untimely death in a car accident. Mary and I attended his funeral in St. Louis.

While I was less than enthusiastic about Peters' and many other authors' representations of the Catonsville Nine and "Catholic left," I recently viewed a new documentary that made a better impression. Joe Tropea and Skizz Cyzyk's movie "Hit & Stay" is one of the most accurate depictions of what truly happened during this movement. His movie will be shown at the Maryland Film Festival between May 8 and 12.

Joe wrote to me in 2007, asking to interview me for a movie and article he was working on about the Catonsville Nine. I never responded to his letter. When he learned that Tom Melville and I were on a seven-week cross-country speaking tour during the fall of 2007, he booked us to speak at the University of Maryland, Baltimore County, where he was working on his masters' degree. He asked if he could tape our lectures, which Tom and I agreed to. We were in Baltimore for several days and during that time Joe and I had a lot of time to talk and his sincerity impressed me. I explained that I felt enough had been done about the Catonsville Nine. But not nearly enough had been done about the other actions -- that was the important part of history that had not been told. From there, he approached his project with an open mind, and was committed to being accurate and respecting the true Catholic left. I was so supportive, I contacted nearly everyone I knew and asked them to make a donation to help fund Joe and Skizz's project. For this movie, they interviewed more than 80 people, including Ramsey Clark, Bill Ayers, Noam Chomsky and Howard Zinn. It also includes amazing historical footage, including Walter Cronkite reporting on the CBS Evening News that there were 271 draft board raids between 1968-71.

Today's Catholic hierarchy seems as morally bankrupt as it was 45 years ago. Its leadership's preoccupation

with abortion and gay marriage, its complacency with the immorality of our foreign policy and its inability to challenge hearts hardened to the plight of the poor disappoint me today as much as they did so long ago. I have hope that Pope Francis will have the courage and wherewithal to make the dramatic changes in church leadership that are so direly necessary.

[George Mische now lives in the Minneapolis area. His daughter, Cecilia Mische, assisted with this article.]

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