

Dan Berrigan's Life of Protesting American Wars Is Resurrected by His Death

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When I left the tumultuous Boston-Cambridge area in 1972, after years of having a front-row seat on anti-war and civil rights protests, rallies and a failed "revolution", I returned home to New Jersey. Many others – both 'out-of-staters' and Bostonians – left the metro area also. Some returned to home states and others reckoned since America was on the verge of economic and moral collapse they better find safe haven in states like Vermont, New Hampshire and Maine.

I noted at the time that friends who were "reformers" moved to Vermont; friends who were "rebels" moved to New Hampshire; and friends who were Whole Earth Catalog "back to the earth" people moved to Maine.

In little over four decades, Ben & Jerry Vermonters produced Bernie Sanders; arch-conservative "rebels without a cause" produced libertarians in New Hampshire; and Mainers produced "famously moderate" national political figures until this decade, when Maine's public image in America was shattered and repudiated by an off-center, off-color Gov. Paul LePage.

Maine's Gov. Paul LePage fondly remembers neoliberal Milton Friedman of the Chicago School of "third-world plunderers" as I soberly remember Father Daniel Berrigan, who died April 30.

Dan lived long enough to see a moral compatriot and fellow Jesuit adopt the name Francis and assume the helm of a tradition-bound church that once sought to silence priests and laity who protested war and the economic system that profited from it.

Video from "RIP Father Daniel Berrigan: Remembering the Life and Legacy of the Antiwar Priest & Poet", Democracy Now! May 2, 2016.

Remonstrated by right-wing media pundits as Marxist and blasphemous, Pope Francis' Laudato Si!, a thoroughly secular basil text for reinstating world peace, saving the environment and restoring social and economic equality, raised the bar of moral consciousness and built upon the tradition of Catholic anti-war and social activists like Dan and Phil Berrigan, Thomas Merton and Dorothy Day.

As America dropped eight million tons of bombs over Vietnam between 1965 and 1973 – three times the amount used in WWII, pouring napalm and agent orange from B-52's on

villagers and peasants – Dan, brother Phil and seven others took 378 draft files from the draft board in Catonsville, Maryland. In the parking lot of the draft board office, they set the draft records on fire using homemade napalm, to protest the Vietnam War. They became known as the Catonsville Nine.

Slideshow from “Napalm Bombing in Vietnam – All of the impacts and uses of napalm”, Tim Potter, Prezi.

The number of casualties from the Vietnam War – military and civilian – are estimated to be between over one-million to almost four-million. The Vietnam Red Cross recorded over 4.8 million deaths and 400,000 children born with birth defects due to exposure to Agent Orange manufactured by DOW Chemical.

The Berrigans opposed war and nuclear weapons. They never killed anyone or burned the flesh of babies, peasants, villagers or civilians; yet The Catonsville Nine were convicted on federal charges accusing them of destroying U.S. property and interfering with the Selective Service Act of 1967. All were sentenced on Nov. 9, 1968, to prison terms ranging from two to 3½ years.

In 1980, the Berrigan brothers and six others began the Plowshares Movement when they broke into the General Electric nuclear missile facility in King of Prussia, Pennsylvania, hammered nuclear warhead nose cones and poured blood onto documents and files. “They shall beat their swords into plowshares,” Berrigan said, quoting Isaiah 2, “so we did it.”

When asked in 2009 by “America,” a national Catholic magazine, whether he had any regrets, Dan Berrigan replied: “I could have done sooner the things I did, like Catonsville.”

Today, people like him are made invisible and irrelevant by politicians and media precisely at a time when America’s wars, once isolated to Southeast Asia in the 1960’s and 70’s, have mushroomed into “endless wars” vanquishing country after country in the middle-east. Moreover, the threat of far greater wars loom from unprecedented U.S.-NATO military armament and force build-ups across Europe and Asian Pacific nations in preparation for conflicts with Russia and China – wars that most estimate will invoke nuclear exchanges inciting WWII, and wars whose rationales have been thoroughly left un-debated in Congress, the mass-media and, by and large, a majority of Americans.



Unless you are a committed anti-war libertarian or a supporter of Jill Stein of the Green Party, you probably support arguments in favor of American military engagements; for no Republican or Democratic presidential candidate speaks for peaceful resolutions, only for fiercer fire-power, boots on the ground, modernization of nuclear weaponry, “carpet bombing” and NATO “cost sharing formulas”. Tax rebels don’t protest trillions spent on war, only on welfare programs and social safety-nets.

Berrigan called this nation’s endless wars “American military imperialism” and they continue unabated today with greater velocity and funding.

The show of anti-war sentiment during the George W. Bush administration evaporated after Barack Obama won the presidency in 2008. The cry of “My Country Right or Wrong”

sounded by conservatives in the 1960's in defense of America's engagement in Vietnam became a hushed and muted "My Obama Right or Wrong" credo of too many forty years later, intently ignoring Mr. Obama's persecution of journalists, expansion of wars, merciless drone warfare, aggressive postures against Russia and China, and seamless spying on all Americans by the NSA.

In an interview with the Nation magazine on the 40th anniversary of the Catonsville demonstration, Berrigan lamented that the activism of the 1960s and early 1970s evaporated with the passage of time. His explanation serves to explain the present absence of anti-war activism in America.

"The short fuse of the American left is typical of the highs and lows of American emotional life," he said. "It is very rare to sustain a movement in recognizable form without a spiritual base."

Yesterday it was the Communists and today it is the "terrorists". Yesterday it was napalm and agent orange and today it is drones, depleted uranium, laser beams, "full spectrum dominance" and regime change of non-compliant sovereigns who dare counter American diktats and neoliberal economic formulas. The "spiritual base" seems unchanged from yesterday to today: WAR!

Dan Berrigan died one day after hundreds of demonstrators stormed the California GOP convention at the Hyatt Regency in Burlingame on April 29 to protest Donald Trump, his racism, calls to deport immigrants, Islamophobia, near-fascistic demagoguery and overall vulgarity unbecoming of a leader of the so-called "free world" and trustee of the nuclear codes.

"The 'protesters' in California were thugs and criminals," tweeted Donald Trump in response. "Many are professionals. They should be dealt with strongly by law enforcement!" said the Strongman.



Few have drawn the conclusion that our wars in the world have come home to roost; that our penchant for overthrowing democracy in other nations (in the name of democracy) might be being conducted here; that the moral decay that has infiltrated the nation's blood stream permitting endless and illegal overseas wars has now metastasized into degenerative domestic politics, an ubiquitous gun culture, crimes against minorities, calls for deportations, police violence and the rise of an anti-democratic demagogue and Strongman, Donald Trump.

The ascent of tyrants and dictators come to mind in light of Mr. Trump's incendiary rhetoric, threats to use volunteer armies of supporters against protesters as well as against the entire political establishment should he not get his way; but so do methods used in "regime change" operations come to mind.

While the diversions of sex, drugs and rock n' roll might actually have demoralized youth in the 1960's and early 70's enough to wither their passions against war, racism and economic inequity, today's youth are diverted by the burden of student debt, present and future fears about their economic security, and a widespread voluntary preoccupation with digital technologies that can be dulling forces that atomize individuals, immobilizing and neutralizing social and political activism within the real analog world.

Until the “silent majority” in America turn from advocating war wherever and with whomever it deems an enemy and comes to redeem America’s birthright of bringing light and peace to our world, only irrational militarism overflowing with madness posing as wisdom will prevail.

An object lesson from Dan Berrigan is that protests are necessary acts of personal conscience that serve the present but reverberate into the future. But it is “very rare to sustain a movement in recognizable form without a spiritual base.”

* * *

Because he died, I now remember all that was buried. In death, he resurrected the Light, the spiritual base.

Says the Talmud:

No monument need be built

for the righteous -

for Dan Berrigan.

For his words and deeds

that live after him

serve as his monument.

Video from “‘A Moral Giant’: A Democracy Now! Special on the Life & Legacy of Father Daniel Berrigan”, Democracy Now!, May 3, 2016.

“If you were to identify Catholic prophets in the 20th century, he’d be right there with Dorothy Day and Thomas Merton.” — Chester Gillis, Georgetown University.

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Notes:

[1] [“Jesuit priest and peace activist the Rev. Daniel Berrigan dies at 94”. Associated Press via LA Times. April 30, 2016.](#)

<http://www.latimes.com/nation/nationnow/la-na-daniel-berrigan-obit-20160430-story.html>

[2] [Laudato Si!. Pope Francis. The Vatican. May 5, 2015.](#)

http://w2.vatican.va/content/francesco/en/encyclicals/documents/papa-francesco_20150524_encyclic_a-laudato-si.html

[3] [The Vietnam War. Napalm & Agent Orange.](#)

<http://vietnamawbb.weebly.com/napalm-agent-orange.html>

- [4] [Statistical Information about Fatal Casualties of the Vietnam War. National Archives.](http://www.archives.gov/research/military/vietnam-war/casualty-statistics.html)
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- [6] [“Napalm Bombing in Vietnam – all the impacts and uses of napalm”. Tim Potter. Prezi. \(Slides\)](https://prezi.com/qvx91toi6lwp/napalm-bombing-in-vietnam)
<https://prezi.com/qvx91toi6lwp/napalm-bombing-in-vietnam>
- [7] [“RIP Father Daniel Berrigan: Remembering the Life and Legacy of the Antiwar Priest & Poet”. Democracy Now! May 2, 2016.](http://www.democracynow.org/2016/5/2/rip_father_daniel_berrigan_remembering_the)
http://www.democracynow.org/2016/5/2/rip_father_daniel_berrigan_remembering_the
- [8] [“Daniel Berrigan: Forty Years After Catonsville”. Chris Hedges. The Nation. May 20, 2008.](http://www.thenation.com/article/daniel-berrigan-forty-years-after-catonsville)
<http://www.thenation.com/article/daniel-berrigan-forty-years-after-catonsville>
- [9] [“‘A Moral Giant’: A Democracy Now! Special on the Life & Legacy of Father Daniel Berrigan”. Democracy Now! May 3, 2016.](http://www.democracynow.org/2016/5/3/a_democracy_now_special_on_the)
http://www.democracynow.org/2016/5/3/a_democracy_now_special_on_the
- [9] [“Protesters and Police Face Off Outside Trump Speech in California”. NBC News. April 29, 2016.](http://www.nbcnews.com/politics/2016-election/protesters-police-clash-outside-trump-rally-california-n564991)
<http://www.nbcnews.com/politics/2016-election/protesters-police-clash-outside-trump-rally-california-n564991>
- [10] [Donald J. Trump tweet: “The protesters...”. April 30, 2016. Twitter.](https://twitter.com/realdonaldtrump/status/726403534380478464)
<https://twitter.com/realdonaldtrump/status/726403534380478464>

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