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UNITED STATES

WAR AND IMPERIALISM



## Beating Nuclear Arms Into Plowshares

BY

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The US nuclear arsenal gobbles up massive resources for death that should be used for human life. For decades, Catholic activists have put their bodies on the line to insist we dismantle that arsenal.



A deactivated nuclear warhead at the Titan Missile Museum in Green Valley, Arizona. (Brendan Smialowski/AFP via Getty Images)

**M**ark Colville knew he would go to prison. When he and six others took wire cutters to the fence at the Naval Submarine Base Kings Bay in Georgia, home to a Trident nuclear submarine, the night of April 4, 2018, they weren't trying to evade the law. They intended to break it.

It was the fiftieth anniversary of Martin Luther King's assassination, and his 1967 speech on the "triple evils of racism, economic exploitation, and militarism" echoed in their heads. "Somehow these three evils are tied together," King had intoned.

For these activists, the bonds are clear: the US dedication to its nuclear arsenal impoverishes the nation as it makes utter annihilation possible. This is a crime far more destructive than any people are routinely put in prison for, the trespassers argue.

Colville kept a hand on his rosary, its old familiar prayers sliding through his mind as he walked across the dark base with his friend Patrick O'Neill. In Colville's backpack was a hammer inscribed with another MLK quote: "The ultimate logic of racism is genocide." Colville and O'Neill each spend most of their days working with homeless people, scaring up food donations and attending to people who've fallen out the bottom of capitalism, Colville in New Haven and O'Neil in North Carolina. They had come to beat swords into plowshares.

As she stepped into the base, Claire Grady tucked a photo into her jumper's front pocket. It was taken years earlier when she sat in a grieving circle of Iraqi women whose children had been killed by US bombs. Grady moves carefully, like a dancer or a ghost, and she moved lightly across the base now, carrying the Iraqi women with her.

Martha Hennessy put bottles of blood in her coat pockets and hiked with Grady to the base's administrative building. They carried

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Martha Hennessy put bottles of blood in her coat pockets and hiked with Grady to the base’s administrative building. They carried crime-scene tape to wrap around the building’s entrance and an indictment for war crimes they’d drafted against the United States.

At eighty-three, Liz McAlister is the elder of the group and a veteran of many such actions. She walked with Carmen Trotta, who exudes the tightly coiled energy of a boxer and (like Colville and O’Neill) runs a house of hospitality, and with Steve Kelly, a Jesuit priest who has spent a cumulative eleven years in prison for peace activism. Carrying Daniel Ellsberg’s 2017 book *The Doomsday Machine* and a Pope Francis proclamation against nuclear weapons, they made their way to the nuclear weapons storage bunker.

Like hundreds of nuclear weapons sites across the country and around the world, the fifteen-thousand-acre Kings Bay is a central feature of economic and psychic life in its area — in this case, Camden County, Georgia. “We’ve put the world on this hair-trigger alert where every city is fifteen minutes from annihilation — and yet we’re in this state of lethargy,” O’Neill said. “The entire economy of this town is predicated on the end of the world. They are doing the work of Armageddon.”



A clipped lock filed as evidence. (Courtesy of the defense team)



By midnight, O’Neill and Colville arrived at their destination: a monument in steel and concrete, models of the nuclear arms stored at the base. “It was an idol. We called it the missile shrine,” O’Neill explained. To them it was a false God — a rapacious one who has demanded seventy-five years of human sacrifice.



A hammer inscribed with the Martin Luther King Jr quote "The ultimate logic of racism is genocide," recovered from Mark Colville's backpack. (Courtesy of the defense team)

But their argument is deeper than objection to brutal or wanton spending priorities. To be forced to live under a regime prepared to unleash complete destruction at any moment, knowing that the government is willing to hijack the energy of the most basic bonds at the root of life — the energy in the atom — to destroy the world a hundredfold turns life into a death cult, O'Neill argues.

Eventually the three groups gathered at the missile monument. In a ritual rich with Christian symbolism, McAlister and Hennessy poured their blood on the monument. "Our nation is spilling a lot of blood. The killing our country does, it does in our name, and I strongly object," Hennessy said.

"Part of the problem," Colville explained later, "is that the blood spilled by our military isn't seen. When you see the blood, it offers a potential shift in perspective from this end of the weapon to the other end." Grady spray-painted "Love One Another" on the pavement. The group read the indictment aloud and unfurled the banner Kelly had been hefting in his backpack: "The Ultimate Logic of Trident: Omnicide." Then they sat down and waited for the military police to arrest them.

## The Catholic Worker Movement

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# The Catholic Worker Movement

**T**he Catholic Worker Movement, cofounded by Martha Hennessy's grandmother Dorothy Day, is an anarchist, pacifist movement born of an alchemy of 1930s Union

Square leftism and semimonastic Catholicism. The Catholic Worker and Plowshares networks intersect and interlace. Several of the Kings Bay dissidents live at Catholic Worker houses. They are confounding in their certitude and simplicity. And generally correct.

The first Plowshares action — named for the biblical admonition from Isaiah to beat swords into plowshares — was launched in 1980 when eight people (including McAlister's husband and her brother-in-law) broke into the General Electric nuclear missile facility at King of Prussia, Pennsylvania, beat hammers on nuclear warhead nose cones, and poured blood on nuclear blueprints. Since then, there have been more than one hundred similar actions across the United States and in New Zealand, Ireland, England, Australia, Germany, Holland, Scotland, and Sweden. They are direct inheritors of the hundreds of draft-board raids that so bedeviled the United States during the Vietnam War that J. Edgar Hoover established a specific unit to track Catholic activists.

Plowshares actions are anything but spontaneous, but it is hard to call them planned, exactly. Among a diffuse network of peace activists who regularly work together on everything from Palestine solidarity to decrying the war in Yemen to protesting torture and the permanence of Guantanamo, groups periodically form to consider a new antinuclear action. Plowshares groups meet for months, often years, getting to know each other better, working to establish trust, listening, thinking, and studying.



They see the actions as a kind of collective prayer. The Kings Bay crew coalesced after the 2016 funeral mass for Daniel Berrigan, the Jesuit priest who, with eight friends, famously napalmed draft files in Catonsville, Maryland, in 1968.

Plowshares and peace movement actions in general are often called, with not a little bit of condescension, symbolic. But they are not symbolic. These dissidents actually want to ban the bomb. They recognize that the US government is so far from contemplating such a thing that they need to take action themselves.

“In community organizing, it’s anathema to take on a challenge that you can’t win, but that’s too limited a view of change and history. If you don’t have that vision, where do we anchor our hope?” Colville asked, contrasting Plowshares with the neighborhood justice work on housing, hunger, and immigration he’s long been part of in New Haven. “One of the more important critiques to me about nuclearism is that it has killed the imagination. It has so harmed our human nature that we can’t imagine a way out of it.”

## The Cost of Nuclear Weapons

**I**n 1982, one million people gathered in New York’s Central Park to call for an end to nuclear weapons. Colville was arrested for the first time that day. It was the single largest demonstration in US history. By comparison, 470,000 marched in DC on January 21, 2017, and 300,000 at the People’s Climate March in New York City in 2014.



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Daniel Ellsberg’s *The Doomsday Machine* was also recovered among the interlopers’ belongings. (Courtesy of the defense team)



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The antinuclear activism of the 1980s receded as new outrages arose, but the bomb grew no less deadly — or expensive. Between 1940 and 2005, the United States spent \$6 trillion on nuclear weapons, according to Stephen Schwartz, author of *Atomic Audit: The Costs and Consequences of U.S. Nuclear Weapons Since 1940*, published by the Brookings Institution. The Congressional Budget Office projects the country will spend an additional \$634 billion on its nuclear arsenal in the next decade.



Schwartz said in an email in July that he roughly estimates that, all told since 1940, the United States has spent more than \$10 trillion on its nuclear weapons — their creation, management, and disposal. The Plowshares activists see that spending as pure and simple theft: public money that should have been used to care for people.

“Nuclearism is the epitome of capitalism,” Colville said as he prepared lunch for homeless neighbors in New Haven one June day. “The end game of capitalism is perpetual consumption and perpetual waste and perpetual victims,” he said. “That’s how nuclearism works. I draw a direct line from what we see at the common table [here]. What they are doing in Kings Bay is a massive



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Claire Grady spray-painted “Love One Another” on the pavement near the missile monument, where the activists gathered prior to their arrest. (Courtesy of the defense team)

theft from neighborhoods like this.”

The Kings Bay seven were arrested on April 4, 2018, and held in the Camden County jail. A few posted bail and went back to their lives to await trial, lugging ankle monitors with them to the soup-kitchen line, their weekly Union Square protests against US funding for Saudi Arabia’s bombs in Yemen, and to speak on college campuses. Colville served more than a year, then posted bail to attend his daughter’s wedding.

In 2019, the trial finally began. In October of that year, they were convicted, their arguments about the absurdity that disarming a nuclear weapon could be a crime but possessing one is not, their invocation of religious freedom, and their disputations on justice having convinced neither judge nor jury. Their sentencing was delayed by COVID. Finally, between June 2020 and April 2021, each was sentenced separately.

## A Mighty Battle

**W**ho can defeat the US war machine? So mighty a battle, it is barely ever mentioned in the litany of injustices that need to be unraveled. A young leftist today is more likely to know of campaigns to decolonize the local museum or English department than the quest — quixotic indeed — to end nuclear weapons. But some of those people in Central Park in 1982 and their global networks have never stopped working. Using the same methods as the Women’s International League for Peace and Freedom, founded during World War I with the goal of outlawing war, they’ve lobbied international bodies, catalogued the price of nuclear arsenals, pressed resolutions, and held



conferences.



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Activists splashed blood on the seal of the weapons facility. (Courtesy of the defense team)

In January, the United Nations adopted the Treaty on the Prohibition of Nuclear Weapons, which holds force of law in the countries that signed it. The United States isn't one of them.

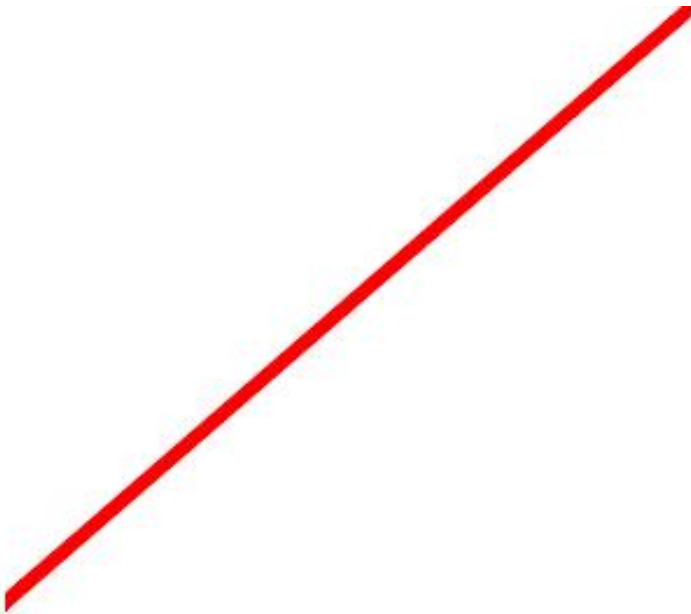
In January, the United Nations adopted the Treaty on the Prohibition of Nuclear Weapons, which holds force of law in the countries that signed it. The United States isn't one of them. Like so much else in the creation of a better possible world, the decade-long movement to advance this treaty was an effort led principally by the Global South. The antinuke movement in the United States is often dismissed as a "white movement," but its goals are the goals of nations of majority people of color. Eighty-two of the eighty-six signatories are nations in the Global South.

Colville was the last to be sentenced, getting twenty-one months — five more than he'd already served. By the time he completes this sentence, added to the time he's served for previous Plowshares actions, he'll have spent more than four years in prison. On a June morning before he reported to the Metropolitan Detention Center in Brooklyn, Colville was in the kitchen of the Amistad Catholic Worker house in New Haven, Connecticut, a house of hospitality that feeds hundreds each week via sit-down meals and a food pantry, helps run interference for a nearby homeless encampment, and serves as a place to be, a place of some gentleness. (The name invokes the 1839 Amistad rebellion of enslaved people who were imprisoned in New Haven until the Supreme Court ruled that they had been brought to the United States illegally and were free).

The kitchen at Amistad was stacked floor to ceiling with food donations: pasta sauce and muffins, oatmeal, cans of tuna, boxes of Parmalat, cookies, crates of eggs. On a shelf above the window in a plastic quart container were several hundred flat, white communion wafers. Colville worked trays of food into a massive oven donated from a local school as he talked.

"There is not an issue, no matter how small or local, that is not connected to our willingness to murder our children as the necessary cost of achieving security," he said. "To resist nuclearism is to touch the main wire of racism, violence, poverty in our society."





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