

Resistance Is the Supreme Act of Faith

By Chris Hedges

Becket: *It is not for me to win you round. I have only to say no to you.*

King: *But you must be logical, Becket!*

Becket: *No. That isn't necessary, my liege. We must only do—absurdly—what we have been given to do—fight to the end.*

—From the play "Becket," by Jean Anouilh

January 02, 2019 "[Information Clearing House](#)" - The struggle against the monstrous radical evil that dominates our lives—an evil that is swiftly despoiling the earth and driving the human species toward extinction, stripping us of our most basic civil liberties and freedoms, waging endless war and solidifying the obscene wealth of an oligarchic elite at our expense—will be fought only with the belief that resistance, however futile, insignificant and even self-defeating it may appear, can set in motion moral and spiritual forces that radiate outward to inspire others, including those who come after us. It is, in essence, an act of faith. Nothing less than this faith will sustain us. We resist not because we will succeed, but because it is right. Resistance is the supreme act of faith.

During the Vietnam War, on the afternoon of May 17, 1968, nine Catholics, including two brothers, the radical priests Phil and Dan Berrigan, entered the draft board in Catonsville, Md., and seized Selective Service records. They carted them outside to the parking lot in metal trash cans and set them on fire with homemade napalm—the recipe was from the Special Forces Handbook of the U.S. Army. The men and women, many of whom were or had been members of Catholic religious orders, stood and prayed around the bonfire until they were arrested. They were protesting not only the war but, as Dan Berrigan wrote, "every major presumption underlying American life." They acted, and eventually went to prison, Berrigan went on, "to set in motion spiritual rhythms whose outward influences are, in the nature of things, simply immeasurable."

The group's statement read:

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
We could not so help us God do otherwise
For we are sick at heart
Our hearts give us no rest for thinking of the Land of Burning
Children. ...
We say: Killing is disorder
life and gentleness and community and unselfishness
is the only order we recognize. ...
How long must the world's resources
be raped in the service of legalized murder?
When at what point will you say no to this war?
We have chosen to say
with the gift of our liberty
if necessary our lives:
the violence stops here
the death stops here
the suppression of the truth stops here
this war stops here. ...

The Catonsville protest sparked a wave of break-ins at draft boards in which files were burned, mutilated, stolen or destroyed. The Selective Service, in the first eight months of 1970 alone, recorded 271 "antidraft occurrences" at draft boards across the country.

The nature, power and cost of civil disobedience, along with the understanding that confronting evil is the highest form of spirituality, is the subject of the play "The Trial of the Catonsville Nine," written by Dan Berrigan. [Transport Group](#) will present a production of the play at the Abrons Arts Center in New York City from Jan. 16 to Feb. 23. It will be performed with three actors, one of whom is my wife, [Eunice Wong](#). Our daughter was baptized by [Dan Berrigan](#) (1921-2016).

The men and women who became known as the Catonsville Nine pleaded guilty to the charges leveled against them—theft and destruction of property of the U.S. government and "disrupting the official activities" of the Selective Service. The Catonsville Nine used the court to indict the now-omnipotent war machine, which as Berrigan wrote "has come to include the court process that serves it." The courts, the presidency and the Congress, he noted, have calcified and turned to stone. "The 'separation of powers' is proving a fiction; ball and joint, the functions of power are fusing, like the bones of an aged body," he wrote.

"For you cannot set up a court in the Kingdom of the Blind, to condemn those who see; a court presided over by those who would pluck out the eyes of

men and call it rehabilitation," Berrigan continued.

The defendants in the Catonsville Nine trial declined to question or challenge any potential jurors during the selection process. Later they would use their testimony not to attempt to prove their innocence—they freely admitted they were guilty of the prosecution's narrow charges—but to put the nation on trial. They argued that to abide by a higher law they must confront the law. Breaking the law was a function of conscience.

"The law, as presently revered and taught and enforced, is becoming an enticement to lawlessness," Dan Berrigan wrote in his book of essays, "No Bars to Manhood." "Lawyers and laws and courts and penal systems are nearly immobile before a shaken society, which is making civil disobedience a civil (I dare say a religious) duty. The law is aligning itself more and more with forms of power whose existence is placed more and more in question. ... So if they would obey the law, [people] are being forced, in the present crucial instance, either to disobey God or to disobey the law of humanity."

"The courts, up to the U.S. Supreme Court itself, are unwilling, especially in wartime, to consider seriously the moral and legal questions of war itself," Berrigan wrote. "So we felt that civilized [people] must seek to use the courtroom in order to achieve some public audibility about who we were and what we were about. The issues raised by the war—issues of constitutionality and morality of the war, of free speech and freedom of protest—might thereby be separated from our personal or corporate fates."

The law, Berrigan saw, is used to strengthen "a corporate system bent in the direction of more and more American hegemony abroad, more and more firmly imbedded poverty and racism at home." This capitalist machine, he said, had to be "taken apart, built over again." The Nine understood that it was "spiritually absurd and suicidal to be pretending to help the poor at home while we bombed the poor abroad." Mass incarceration and widespread poverty were the inevitable results of endless war and unchecked militarism. If this militarism was not curbed—and it has not been curbed—the Nine predicted it would exacerbate racism among dispossessed whites, expand lethal, militarized police forces and transform the Congress, the judiciary, the presidency and the press into handmaidens of the corporate state. The trajectory, Dan Berrigan wrote, would lead to "an interlocking dance of death, a celebration of horror."

The Catonsville Nine were indifferent to their fate. "We were obliged in fact to attain some kind of personal liberation before acting at all," Berrigan wrote, "a certain spiritual detachment from the fact of prison." They did not expect miracles. They were not deceived by the roller coaster of emotional highs and lows that characterize a consumer culture. Patience, as the Vietnamese in Hanoi told Dan Berrigan, "is a revolutionary virtue." It was the truth that was

on trial. The point of civil disobedience, Berrigan said, is not that people will agree or even follow. It is that such actions foster among the wider population "a deepened consciousness."

"Still," Berrigan wrote in his autobiography, "this or that court, no matter what its crimes against justice, its stacked cards, its vindictive blindness, would never succeed in closing the dossier on conscience. And this was exactly our hope. Time would work in its imperceptible way, mysterious, invisible; other lives would be touched as the stories of the courageous and nonviolent were heard, often by word of mouth only. Time taking its own sweet time, so to speak, the motion and motive of a larger soul."

The Berrigans, who identified as religious radicals, had little use for liberals. Liberals, they said, addressed only small, moral fragments and used their pet causes, in most cases, not to bring about systemic change, but for self-adulation. Liberals often saw wars or social injustices as isolated evils whose end would restore harmony.

"But the consciousness of the radical man is integrated," Dan Berrigan wrote in "No Bars to Manhood." "He knows that everything leads to everything else. So while he works for the end of the war, for the end of poverty, or for the end of American racism, he knows that every war is symptomatic of every other war. Vietnam to Laos and on to Thailand, and across the world to Guatemala, and across all wars to his own heart."

"Our act was aimed, as our statement tried to make clear, at every major presumption underlying American life today," he wrote. "Our act was in the strictest sense a conspiracy; that is to say, we had agreed together to attack the working assumptions of American life. Our act was a denial that American institutions were presently functioning in a way that good men [and women] could approve or sanction. We were denying that the law, medicine, education, and systems of social welfare (and, above all, the military-paramilitary styles and objectives that rule and overrule and control these others) were serving the people, were including the needy, or might be expected to change in accord with changing needs, that these could enlist or embody the sources of good men [and women]—imagination, moral suppleness, pragmatism, or compassion."

[Phil Berrigan](#) (1923-2002), a highly decorated infantry officer who fought in Europe in World War II, was the driving force behind the Catonsville Nine. He had already broken into a draft board office in the Baltimore Customs House in October 1967 with three other protesters—they would become known as the Baltimore Four—and poured blood over draft files. The event was well publicized. He and the artist [Thomas P. Lewis](#), one of the Baltimore Four, were awaiting sentencing for their Baltimore action when they participated in the act at Catonsville. Phil Berrigan and Lewis knew that their participation in

Catonsville meant their sentences for the Baltimore protest would be harsher. But they understood that resistance cannot be reactive. It must be proactive. Phil Berrigan convinced his brother Dan to join the protest at Catonsville at a time when Dan believed that his work was "standing by the students [protesters] in their travail; nothing more." "In comparison with him," Dan wrote of Phil, "I was a coddled egg indeed." But Dan Berrigan knew that "if I delayed too long, I would never find the courage to say no" to the war.

It was clear, Dan Berrigan wrote, that the government "would allow men like myself to do what we were doing almost indefinitely; to sign statements, to picket, to support resisters in court. Even if they did pick us up, it was the government who were choosing the victim and the time and place of prosecution. The initiative was entirely in their hands. But in the plan under discussion, the situation was entirely reversed. A few men [and women] were declaring that the initiative of actions and passion belonged to the peaceable and the resisting."

The Berrigans excoriated the church hierarchy for sacralizing the nation, the government, capitalism, the military and the war. They argued that the fusion of secular and religious authority would kill the church as a religious institution. The archbishop of New York at the time, Cardinal Francis J. Spellman, in one example, sprinkled holy water on B-52 bombers and blessed the warplanes before their missions in Vietnam. He described the conflict as a "war for civilization" and "Christ's war against the Vietcong and the people of North Vietnam."

Phil Berrigan, the first priest to go to jail for protesting the war, celebrated Mass for his fellow prisoners. The services were, for the first time, well attended. The cardinal of Baltimore, in response, stripped Phil Berrigan of his priestly functions. The Masses celebrated later by an assigned outsider were boycotted by the prisoners. "There seemed to be some connection, too subtle for those in power to grasp, quite lucid to the imprisoned, between the Eucharist and a priest who was a fellow prisoner," Dan Berrigan wrote.

"In sum, in a time of crisis, the Church had waited on the culture," Dan Berrigan wrote in "No Bars to Manhood." "When the war-making society had completed its case against a nonviolent, protesting priest, the Church moved against him too, sacred overkill added to secular. Indeed, Christ made common cause with Caesar; religion preached a new crusade, a dubious and savage war. The Church all but disappeared into the legions." Those of faith, Berrigan wrote, should be content to "live and die 'outside the walls'; they are men [and women] without a country and a church. They can flee the nation or languish in jail; the curse of the inquisitor will penetrate the jails to strike them there."

It has been 50 years since Catonsville. And yet, often unheard and

unheralded, the steadfast drumbeat of nonviolent religious protest against the war machine continues. Elizabeth McAlister, of [Jonah House](#) in Baltimore and the widow of Phil Berrigan, along with the Jesuit priest Steve Kelly and [Catholic Worker Movement](#) members Carmen Trotta, Clare Grady, Martha Hennessy (the granddaughter of Catholic Worker Movement co-founder [Dorothy Day](#)), Mark Colville and Patrick O'Neill, will be put on trial next spring for [trespassing](#) onto the Kings Bay Naval Submarine Base in St. Marys, Ga., to protest our nuclear weapons arsenal.

The activists entered the base on April 4, 2018, the 50th anniversary of the assassination of Dr. Martin Luther King Jr., who thundered against the "triple evils of militarism, racism and materialism." They carried hammers and baby bottles of their own blood to defile the nuclear weapons storage bunkers. The Kings Bay naval facility is the largest nuclear submarine base in the world. Four of the group were released on bond and are forced to wear ankle monitors. Kelly, Colville and [McAlister](#), who turned 79 in jail last month, remain incarcerated in the Glynn County Detention Center.

Dan Berrigan reflected on the burning of the Catonsville draft records in "To Dwell in Peace: An Autobiography":

The act was pitiful, a tiny flare amid the consuming fires of war. But Catonsville was like a firebreak, a small fire lit, to contain and conquer a greater. ...

For the remainder of our lives, the fires would burn and burn, in hearts and minds, in draft boards, in prisons and courts. A new fire, new as a Pentecost, flared up in eyes deadened and hopeless. ...

"Nothing can be done!" How often we had heard that gasp: the last of the human, of soul, of freedom. Indeed, something could be done; and was. And would be.

We had removed an abomination from the Earth. It was as though, across the land, a series of signal fires had been lighted. The first was no larger than a gleam of an eye. But hill to hill, slowly at first, then like a wildfire, leaping interstices and valleys, the fires flared. ...

In the following years, some seventy draft boards were entered across the land. Their contents variously shredded, sacked, hidden out of sight, burned, scattered to the winds. In one case, the files were mailed back to their owners, with a note urging that the inductee refuse to serve.

That morning! We stood in the breach of birth. We could know

nothing. Would something follow, would our act speak to others, awaken their resolve? We knew only the bare bones of consequence. ...

The act was done. We sat in custody in the back room of the Catonsville Post Office, weak with relief, grinning like virtuous gargoyles. Three or four FBI honchos entered portentously. Their leader, a jut-jawed paradigm, surveyed us from the doorway. His eagle eye lit on Philip. He roared out: "Him again! Good God, I'm changing my religion!"

I could think of no greater tribute to my brother.

Chris Hedges, spent nearly two decades as a foreign correspondent in Central America, the Middle East, Africa and the Balkans. He has reported from more than 50 countries and has worked for The Christian Science Monitor, National Public Radio, The Dallas Morning News and The New York Times, for which he was a foreign correspondent for 15 years.

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