EXHUMING MAILER'S AMERICA

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NORMAN MAILER, WHO MARCHED UNABASHED and unafraid through the 1960's American counterculture and assailed our literary senses throughout his life, is probably cursing in his grave—and, oh, what colorfully foul words he knew how to use.

Given our achingly ambivalent generation of I-Pod-people, we could use more abrasive voices like his today.

Recently, Mailer's *The Armies of the Night* became the latest selection from my unread library. He followed Jack Kerouac's *On the Road*. Mailer's 1968 book had stood forlorn on my shelf for 20 years, since I left Humboldt State University with my journalism degree. I don't remember when or how I gained possession of the book; evidently someone, maybe me, thought it a good book for a journalist to read. It was and still is.

Armies is more than simply a refresher course on what quality "new" journalism is all about. Exhuming Mailer also triggered somber speculation that my America has atrophied since the 1960s, when thousands of people put their intellectual and corporal capital at risk to protest a failed military venture by a failed national leader, when the American middle class saw, understood, and rose up.

The Armies of the Night: History as a Novel/The Novel as History—is really two books in one: a personal history and a semi-journalistic account of the Oct. 20, 1967 public protest when demonstrators marched on the Pentagon to oppose the Vietnam War. The scene was later made cinematically famous in *Forrest Gump* (only a *Jeopardy* geek would probably know that fact).

The Armies of the Night won both a Pulitzer Prize for nonfiction and the National Book Award. There is no doubt that Mailer was a superb writer when he wanted to be. But I am confident that my random selection of *Armies* allowed me to see this fact unobstructed by the self-

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referential, salty language, and rough themes that dominate some of his other works.

Armies' first book, lion's share and literary meat, is "History as a Novel," a personal account of Mailer's involvement in the protest as part of a platoon of American social leaders and literati, including Noam Chomsky, Benjamin Spock, Robert Lowell, Paul Goodman, Marcus Raskin and Dwight McDonald. We see Mailer at pre-protest discussions, walking in mass protest, arrested and spending a night in jail. (He and his fellow notables decided, over drinks the night before, that they needed to get arrested so as to keep the mass media from labeling the protesters as just "hippies" and "student radicals.") Through Mailer's eyes, but told in a masterfully unsettling third person perspective viewing everything, including the character of Mailer, we are swept up by the ethos and bounce off the egos of the protesters. For the first time, for me, many of these historic counterculture figures are given flesh and blood, if not realism.

The second book, "The Novel as History," tells the same story but is more pleasingly concise for the researcher and the history aficionado; it is a short, believable report of the events before and after the protest. As Mailer wrote, it was "[t]he Novelist…passing his baton to the Historian" (243), an effort necessary because "[t]he mass media which surrounded the March on the Pentagon created a forest of inaccuracy which would blind the efforts of an historian" (243).

Reviews of *Armies*, at the time, ranged from the haughty to the simplistic. *The New Republic* said Mailer "rescued history from abstraction and aridity by approaching it with certain 'novelistic' instruments at the ready and in a certain large, general 'novelistic' spirit" (31). *Harper's Magazine*, meanwhile, said: "many of our most basic problems are illuminated while a cast of brilliant and wonderfully entertaining characters play out their roles in the action."[1] I found it strong as old black coffee; much of its flavor, but not its jolt, lost in the passage of time.

The two views of the same event create a whole that one rarely sees. Mailer's first book may be self-serving, egotistical, rambling—he offers incomplete rendering of events, going so far as to detail the content of speeches as what he *thought* speakers said instead of what they actually said. But Mailer's blurry view of reality is as pungent as the bourbon on his breath. In the second book, he details what should be called his *personally accepted* his-

tory of the march: what is known, or pieced together by a shining example of a "new" journalist in full voice.

But it would be a mistake to assume, as Mailer himself cautions at one point, that the first book is the less reliable history. In fact, understanding and accepting Mailer's admitted biases and lapses in the first book make his description of events more believable than his sanitized summary of media accounts in the second. Then, as today, routine American history is told—to a great extent—by the powerful people who control the government and the mass media; in *The Armies of the Night* it is told by a superb journalist whose words carry weight.

Mailer's relevance to the events at hand can be argued—depending on your trust of Mailer on Mailer, and Mailer's enemies on Mailer. But it is to his credit that he makes no claims to being anything more than a symbolic, sacrificial lamb—evidenced by the choice of photo used on the book jacket of Armies. Mailer is shown marching behind a front line which includes Raskin, Chomsky, Lowell, Sidney Lens and MacDonald; Mailer's head juts into the photo as if he is a bit actor trying to get a little face time. And in his writing, his human frailties slip through: while determined to get arrested—to get his fair share of abuse—Mailer frets that if he gets tear gassed it could damage his already weak eyes and impact his ability to write his "next great novel."

The truly pleasurable moments in *Armies* are the many passages where Mailer is able to give an intelligent man's biting and precise observation on the conflicted American society surrounding the 1960s anti-war protests:

> Anyone who passed through the educational system of America is in unconscious degree somewhere near half a patriot. (We may reduce the fraction when considering progressive schools.) The brain is washed deep, there are reflexes: white shirts, Star-Spangled Banner, saluting the flag. At home is corporation land's whip—the television set. Who would argue there are not idea-sets of brave soldiers, courageous cops, great strength and brutal patriotic skill in the land of authority? Obvious remarks, but it is precisely this huge and much convinced unconscious part of oneself which a demonstrator has to move against.…" (278)

It is sad to think that Mailer could well be talking about America today, that we have moved so little from the status quo of American society in the late 1960s to the 2000s. It is even more disheartening that the counterculture masses of that age have become the Ameriprise Financial retirement account customers of this age—that we allow the ultimate nonconformist, Dennis Hopper, to sell us investment advice instead of Harley-Davidson motorcycles.

Harper's review of *Armies* said Mailer's work "carries hints and reverberations that will make themselves felt in American life for many years."[1] But it appears that our moral and social conscience has devolved over the past forty years. For all our talking-head, double-speak of political and social polarity, the vast majority of America has become philosophically homogeneous and politically complacent.

In the 1960s, it was the great American middle class that made the difference in opposing the Vietnam War. It witnessed unwillingly conscripted young men dying in a questionable war and returning home in body bags; it watched masses rebelling in the streets with spiritual and intellectual notables leading the way. It looked for a reason why, and turned its opinion against a failed military venture by the failed political leader who championed it.

Today's American middle class has not only become less willing to take an unpopular stand themselves, we are less willing to understand—to even consider as valid—the cause driving others to take to the streets and get their fair share of abuse.

Part of the reason for this apathy is that this age's failed political leader, President George W. Bush and his cadre, learned from history. He has camouflaged reckless military adventurism, if not simple personal revenge, with the black-hooded fear mongering of international terrorism. He continues fighting a failed war by using various forms of a backdoor military draft and repeated abuse of our professional and citizen soldiers. He suppresses scrutiny and opposition through rampant illegal use of government powers.

Part of the apathy, however, is that we doubt the dedication, and the motives, of today's antiwar protesters. While there has been vocal and emotional opposition to the war in Iraq, there is an unwillingness of America's youth to abandon their Facebook pages and their "iPhone Faves" in favor of public protest. Even our dedicated modern protesters seem a pale horse in comparison to the protesters of the 1960s that Mailer sketches with such bold pen-strokes.

The protesters' efforts and convictions are not entirely at fault—they cannot be held responsible for the tepid reaction by an apathetic American public which believe the Al-Qaeda boogieman is worth the flag-draped body bags of our sons and daughters. But is there any doubt that today's protest leadership presents a face more akin to a MoveOn.org political campaign or an American Idol audition than to a morally driven action where important people were willing—eager, in fact—to risk physical and social abuse for a just cause.

In the late 1960s, when Mailer was writing, America's moral conscience was stirred by the protesters to the point that the sitting president, Lyndon Johnson, would not even put his record and his reputation into the voting booth against a tidal wave of public rejection driven by the crashing breakers of repeated anti-war protests.

In 2006, America's moral conscience could barely muster the strength to neuter George W. Bush by taking away his Republican legislative rubber stamp. After all, the evidence presented to us by a few voices in the darkness, voices not unlike Mailer's—telling us the crude, unpleasant truth—too many of us chose to listen to the co-opted voices of the financially motivated right, the politically correct left, and the self-preserving conservative and liberal media mass market.

In 2008—as we prepare to decide if the War in Iraq will, indeed, be America's 100 Years War—it would do well for America to take a look, again, at the reason we protested the Vietnam War, and the reason those protests—and those protesters—carried moral significance as much as signs and slogans. To read *The Armies of the Night* is, ultimately, to understand.

NOTE

1. This quotation appears as a blurb on the dust jacket of the first American edition of *The Armies of the Night* and was taken from Norman Mailer, "The Steps of the Pentagon." *Harper's Magazine* March, 1968: 47.

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