

“A NOBLE PURSUIT”:
THE ARMIES OF THE NIGHT
AS OUTSIDE AGITATOR

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ON A WEEKEND IN OCTOBER OF 1967, tens of thousands of demonstrators amassed in Washington DC to protest the war in Vietnam. Intending *The Armies of the Night: History as a Novel, The Novel as History* (1968) to record and commemorate this eventful weekend, Norman Mailer enlarged the march on the Pentagon's meaning, working as a novelist to make it more than a four-day set of tremors in the nation's capital. Some consider the march a watershed moment, “the first in a chain of events that led to Lyndon Johnson's decision . . . to deescalate in Vietnam” (Small 70). Mailer's nonfiction novel carefully examines this defining event of American history. Through Mailer's dual role as a demonstrator and narrator, readers are provided a rich witness to the many obstacles that were set before marchers in the form of a biased media and government officials opposed to the peace movement, including the military and police whose physical abuse is featured in the novel.

Armies is also concerned with a sweeping view of American culture *vis-à-vis* the march, for this is a “literary project . . . radically committed to a rendering of the American reality” (Scott 18), and *Armies* becomes Mailer's attempt to expand upon the march's implications for the national character. When *Armies* was published, the country was divided over the war in Vietnam; according to a 1967 Gallup poll, when asked whether “the U.S. made a mistake sending troops to Vietnam” forty-six percent said yes while almost an equal amount, forty-four percent, answered no (Gallup 2087). Mailer addresses the division over the war and also the disparaging of anti-war

protestors in the mainstream press which created a gulf between mainstream America and the anti-war movement: "from late 1967 into 1968 when Mailer wrote this book, open season on the 'hippie' had been tacitly declared" (MacFarlane 131). Mailer works to familiarize the populace with these voices of dissent and to humanize them. The cultural clashes Mailer depicts epitomize the volatility of the U.S. at that moment, the rips in the social fabric that were becoming obvious during the escalation of the Vietnam War.

I will also consider how this novel might have acted as a catalyst for activism for some contemporary readers and how it worked to coalesce support for the anti-war movement, addressing those Americans who were either unsympathetic towards or even appalled by the anti-war protesters and challenging readers to see the efficacy and patriotism of the marchers' cause. It is difficult to gauge the novel's effectiveness on this front, but I will consider media coverage and popular reaction to the marchers and to the book itself. It is in the novelistic form that Mailer shares this moment in history, and he has said that the reading of novels "is a noble pursuit, that ideally it profoundly changes the ways in which people perceive their experience" ("Prisoner" 133). Mailer understood the great possibility of his novel to effect change and the opportunity he had to shape readers' understanding of what it meant to protest the war in Vietnam.

The political divide was so great in America in the late 1960s that Mailer may have felt obliged to explain one faction to another, to use as a didactic tool; he was teaching about a counterculture, from which many Americans were insulated. Scott MacFarlane measures the social turmoil of the times "at a level unseen since the Civil War. The book reading public was clamoring for insight into what was happening on the streets of America" (MacFarlane 133). *Armies* was a new window into the anti-war movement. The mainstream media kept Americans in the dark about the anti-war movement. Readers were witness to Mailer's own perspective of the counterculture which was not always exhortative: "It was the children in whom Mailer had some hope, a gloomy hope. These mad middle-class children with their lobotomies from sin, their nihilistic embezzlement of all middle-class moral funds, their innocence, their lust for apocalypse, their unbelievable indifference to waste" (*Armies* 44). Mailer does not form saints out of the anti-war camp, and one could not accuse Mailer of being an outright defender of the counterculture. But through his intimate sketches of the activists and his own experience as a fellow marcher, we do see images of greatness, of self-sacrifice and

patriotism. Most important, Mailer, as narrator/protagonist, gives Americans outside the march a sense of what it was to be a demonstrator.

One of Mailer's main tasks as an author is to acquaint his readers with the character of the marchers themselves, so a primary concern of *Armies* is media bias as it affected the American public's sentiments about the acts of resistance happening all around them. But the mainstream press was hawkish: before the Tet Offensive in January of 1968, "not a single major newspaper or television network call[ed] for the end to the war" (Streitmatter, *Voices* 197). In fact, the mainstream media plainly opposed the anti-war effort "in the heady days early in the war when American correspondents doubled as government handmaidens, they openly condemned anti-war protesters as traitors" (Streitmatter, *Mightier* 201). This was the atmosphere in which Mailer attempted to tell a moving tale of the anti-war movement.

Mailer renounces conventional journalism; he doesn't trust the media to analyze the anti-war movement fairly. Media studies of the time show that "throughout [the] various stages of escalating involvement, mainstream American journalists supported the effort, serving as exuberant cheerleaders for the military" (Streitmatter, *Voices* 184). Mailer frequently points out the unfair coverage that the press gave to the actions of the demonstrators and how "[e]mphasis was put on every rock thrown, and a count was made of the windows broken. (There were, however, only a few.) But there was no specific mention of The Wedge [a brutal crowd control technique, which resulted in beating of the marchers]. Indeed, stories [of police brutality] quickly disappeared" (*Armies* 313–14). This becomes evident as Mailer distinguishes the reporting of mainstream press from that of the alternative press. The alternative press (such as the *Catholic Worker*, *I.F. Stone's Weekly*, *National Guardian*, and *Ramparts*) was critical of the war going back in some cases to the 1950s when troops were first deployed to Vietnam (Streitmatter, *Voices* 184).

One of the most damning charges in the book is the brutality perpetrated against the marchers, who were for the most part peacefully protesting; some protestors were "clubbed until they were broken and bloody" (Zaroulis and Sullivan 138). The abuse was amplified by the fact that it often went unreported. For the reports of police violence, Mailer relies upon outside sources because he had been arrested early in the demonstration before most of the violence occurred. Yet he gains credibility when integrating outside witnesses and reportage into a book that was mostly reported from his standpoint,

and these external sources may have lent more authority to the charge that protesters were abused. For any journalist there was difficulty in covering something as large as the march on the Pentagon “because of the extensive terrain in question and the rapid movements of the protestors and soldiers” (Small 72). Acting as a novelist-journalist, Mailer collects varied media accounts of the march and weaves them into the narrative; here he features one Leftist perspective of the march, identifying the witness as “Harvey Mayes of the English Department at Hunter”:

One soldier spilled the water from his canteen on the ground in order to add to the discomfort of the female demonstrator at his feet. She cursed him—understandably, I think—and shifted her body. She lost her balance and her shoulder hit the rifle at the soldier’s side. He raised the rifle, and with its butt, came down hard on the girl’s leg. The girl tried to move back but was not fast enough to avoid the billy-club of a soldier in the second row of the troops. At least four times that soldier hit her with all his force. (*Armies* 303)

Mailer was obliged to portray the graphic scenes from the march which were missing in many media reports. Perhaps the stories of abuse were reported on more by the Left media because the Left journalists were among the protestors, down in the tussle, while mainstream reporters observed from a safe distance, avoiding a potential encounter with violent police.

Mailer also gave accounts of “the [mainstream] press [who were], in the aftermath, antagonistic to the March” and so included passages of an article from the *New York Times* which stated that “[i]t is difficult to report publicly the ugly and vulgar provocation of many of the militants. They spat on some of the soldiers in the front line at the Pentagon and goaded them with the most vicious personal slander. . . . [M]any officials here are surprised that there was not much more violence” (*Armies* 313). Notice that the *Times* does not mention any specific violence of the MPs. Numerous commentators condemned *not* the beatings meted out to the demonstrators, but the protest itself; David Brinkley called it a “coarse, vulgar episode” (Wells 202–3). However, Maurice Isserman, one marcher, remembers the marchers for the most part as peaceful, remaining “pretty true to Gandhian principles” (B15).

In looking beyond Mailer’s collection of media accounts of the march, it

is clear that he wasn't exaggerating the bias against anti-war activists. The *New York Times* reported that Robert McNamara felt his soldiers showed "restraint . . . under provocation" (Reston 1), and in one article the protesters were referred to as "scum of the universe" (Roberts 45); another report called the demonstration "mass paranoia . . . elic[ing] a great deal of foolishness" (Baker 45). What the press wrote about the protestors was not always so disparaging, but rarely was the message of the marchers given much time, and this sort of mainstream coverage was the only information readily available to the general public about the anti-war movement. Some of the first reports of the march on and the siege of the Pentagon were missing reports of police violence because the reporters went home late Saturday night before the police began employing more militant tactics. But on Monday in another story of the march the *New York Times* still ignored "the bloody military sweep of early Sunday morning;" the *Washington Post's* Monday coverage was similar in that it "continued to emphasize the violence of the protestors, not the defenders of the Pentagon" (Small 76, 78). *Time* came out with its story a few days after the march on October 27 in which they marginalized the protestors as "left-wing radicals, hippies, acid heads, and people with painted faces in bizarre costumes" while at the same time "applaud[ing] the government for its restraint" (Small 79–80).

Mailer is unwilling to let the picture that the mainstream press drew of demonstrators become the only permanent record, and "he scolded the press for their lies, and their misrepresentation, for their guilt in creating a psychology over the last twenty years in the average American which made wars like Vietnam possible" (*Armies* 93). Mailer understands that the press is pivotal in a nation's critique of its culture and policies, and he takes the press to task for their failure to cultivate an informed public. Eventually, Mailer's *Armies* would stand with media accounts as a record of the event. Before *Armies* was published as a book in 1968, it appeared in periodicals (almost the entire issues of *Harper's* and *Commentary* were given to this story). So Mailer responded to the mass media's "forest of inaccuracy" first in popular periodicals and then in book form. According to Dick Fontaine, a British filmmaker who was filming a documentary of Mailer over the weekend of the march, "Norman remembered, with frightening accuracy, minutes and minutes, pages and pages, of the dialogues he was having with the others, let alone, of course, the brilliant descriptions of time, place and mood. . . . His memory and interpretations of . . . [these events] are truly breathtaking."

This speaks well of Mailer's journalistic sensibilities and his hope to avoid a forest of inaccuracies himself. To this end, it is important to recall that *Armies* won a Polk Award for excellence in journalism.

One of the achievements of *Armies* is that in it Mailer is able to designate the marchers as patriots, a far cry from the criticism that labeled them "draft dodgers," "communists," and "rabble rousers." In contrast, Mailer describes draft resisters as moral and courageous: "by handing in draft cards, these young men were committing their future either to prison, emigration, frustration, or at best, years where everything must be unknown, and that spoke of a readiness to take moral leaps . . . [and a] faith in one's ability to react with grace" (*Armies* 88). Mailer recasts draft dodgers as draft resisters, those willing to risk their lives for peace rather than war. Furthermore, Mailer aligns the march itself with America's long tradition of ostensibly just and triumphant empire-building conflict. He describes the March on the Pentagon as a rite of passage and connects this to a collection of American moments that could be understood as similar rites of passage, for "each generation of Americans had forged their own rite, in the forest of the Alleghenies and the Adirondacks, at Valley Forge, at New Orleans in 1812, with Rogers and Clark or at Sutter's Mill, at Gettysburg, the Alamo, the Klondike, the Argonne, Normandy, Pusan" (*Armies* 308). Such a comparison implies that without undergoing such crises the U.S. would not have become a sovereign republic, and so the March on the Pentagon is figured as another historic challenge for the country. This lofty rhetoric is meant to stir a reader's patriotic sympathies, and Mailer is determined that his audience will see the marchers not as subversives but as patriots within the traditions of American democracy.

Mailer understood that "to affect consciousness is thus to shape power" and that his words were shaping people's perception of the anti-war movement. Even if his readers were persuaded to believe in a peaceful resolution to the Vietnam War, what would these readers do with this new consciousness, a consciousness which was "itself a central ingredient in power" (Miller 394)? It is difficult to measure how readers enact their power, but we can watch how Mailer enacts his own. He undertakes his own civil disobedience, getting arrested in hopes of gaining publicity and offering credence to the cause of the march, and he understands that his symbolic action must be captured by the press to multiply its effect. When writing the story of *Armies*, Mailer tracks his own movement from critic to supporter to war protester to

prisoner of conscience, and we see that he “feels the claims of imagination as urgently as the claims of action” (Behar 262), and so he must both examine and act.

Armies represents, for Mailer, a test of his moral strength, an examination of whether Mailer could stand behind his highest moral principles. The story of *Armies* offers a way for Mailer to put his philosophy into action and to answer the question, Are you willing to put your life on the line? David Wyatt calls Mailer “a man so obsessed by courage,” which is a persistent theme in Mailer’s famous essay “The White Negro” (1957) (318). In many ways *Armies* is tied to all of Mailer’s preceding writing. The most obvious connection is to *Why Are We in Vietnam?* (1967), but the themes and challenges of *Armies* are also indebted to *Cannibals and Christians* (1966) and *The Presidential Papers* (1963). These books variously tested the warrior in Mailer. Even his first book, *The Naked and the Dead* (1948), plays a role in the conception of *Armies*. Mary Dearborn claims that *Armies* is a recapitulation of his first novel bringing up questions of “confrontation with and the reaction to authority” (244). In *Armies*, Mailer’s critique of structures of power and his own civil disobedience stands in clear defiance of authoritarian establishments, the same authoritarian establishments which thwarted characters in his previous texts. Mailer’s working out of his own demons in this journey from author to activist was also meant to engage the hearts and minds of his readers in the important business of opening their eyes to the truth about the war in Vietnam. But it is not just a story about Mailer or the many Mailer characters; Mailer serves as an entry to the predicament of the war in Vietnam and a people’s various ways to protest it.

Mailer admits early in the story his growing belief that his own writing about the Vietnam War is not enough, that “no project had seemed to cost him enough,” for his writing was one thing, but action was another. And by simply writing about the Vietnam War “he had been suffering more and more in the past few years from the private conviction that he was getting a little soft, a hint curdled” (*Armies* 70–1). This may have served as a barb at his audience of readers, among whom surely numbered many armchair revolutionaries. To keep from getting soft and to resist being contented with a writer’s perspective, he had to move into action himself. He had to actually take part in the demonstrations, to be physically, not just ideologically in opposition to the war, but we are not meant to concentrate solely on Mailer’s own struggle. Rather, from his own story of activism he may bring about in

his readers a new understanding that through the act of reading one becomes aware, but not yet *involved* in a cause. Readers might appreciate that having their consciousness raised was not the same as protesting the war in their own communities, not at all the same as stepping out into the streets to form a human protest. One had to move from words to action, from page to protest.

Mailer asks serious questions of his readers, as Alfred Kazin points out, describing him as the first “leading American peacenik and resister addressing urgent questions to his ‘army’—Are we good enough? How can we overcome the ‘mediocrity of the middle-class middle-aged masses of the Left?’ The general shoddiness of American standards just now? The tendency of authorities to lie?” (BR 1). Mailer artfully places such questions within the framework of a narrative, addressed not only to fellow peaceniks but also to a popular readership. It was important that this novel travel beyond the Left community, and it did. Indeed, *Armies* “reestablished Mailer with a wide audience” (Whalen-Bridge 217) and won both the Pulitzer Prize for General Nonfiction and the National Book Award. And it was gaining a popular audience (a readership made up of more than those on the Left) for this topic that was a challenge for Mailer: “walking the parapet between the intellectual and the popular, and Mailer with his dream of making ‘a revolution in the consciousness of our time’ is too ambitious to settle for a minority ‘art’ audience” (Radford 230). Mailer was ambitious enough to take on the challenge of telling a story that those within the anti-war movement would rally around and those outside would give a fair hearing.

The novel, first in serial and then in book form, was meant to prod readers to action. In fact, it is specifically the expansiveness of the novel genre that Mailer finds useful toward a moral end. Mailer understood the great potential of the genre. In one interview he contends that “art is to intensify, even, if necessary, to exacerbate, the moral consciousness of people. In particular, I think the novel is at its best the most moral of the art forms because it’s the most immediate, the most overbearing . . . It is the most inescapable” (Mailer, *Advertisements* 384). Did Mailer’s readers find his story inescapable, and if so, were they catalyzed to protest the war themselves? The answer cannot easily be quantified. We can, however, study the way in which Norman Mailer tried to activate readers. Critics picked up on this hunger of Mailer’s to make change, his “extra-literary hunger for things to change and change now, in palpable ways rather than in the imaginary, alternative

ways in which most artist-novelists deal” (Gilman 27). This book is not only a testimony of civil disobedience but also a story which aims to engender civil disobedience in the reader.

Wherever readers stood on the political continuum, *Armies* invites readers to justify events in the book with their real lives; it allows for “[r]eading history over the edge of text,” which is a combination of “close reading and analysis that allow us to get ‘inside’ the narrative, while at the same time we understand that the narrators and subjects of nonfiction . . . live ‘outside’ the narrative as well” (Lehman 3). This makes for an intense reading experience, especially if the novelist like Mailer uses his skills to capture an already fascinating or contentious event. One other factor that might have turned contemporary readers into implicated readers was the timeliness of the book’s release: the march was more than mere history it was a recent event when the book was published just seven months after the event—and the controversy over Vietnam still raged on.

In a nonfiction novel such as *Armies*, the story can take on very real manifestations, which could lead to political action on the part of readers. A reader could take measure of his or her own (in)action regarding the war and choose to act out against the war. Such action is difficult to trace, but in the case of *Armies*, Rubin claims the novel “became the Bible of the movement” (Manso 461); Dearborn suggests that “young leftists found it an astute analysis and were impressed by the passion Mailer brought to the work” (246). However, Michael Albert and Noam Chomsky, both major figures in the anti-war movement, didn’t feel that it made much of an impact within the movement. Albert recalls “honestly, I doubt if anyone I knew or virtually anyone in the movement read it, even I didn’t. My guess would be it had [a] very very modest impact . . . and virtually none inside the movement per se.” While it is unclear whether it affected those within the movement, it is also difficult to tell how it affected readers just becoming acquainted with the peace movement. Dearborn indicates that those outside the movement were touched by the novel: “across the political spectrum, readers who watched the student movement with varying degrees of approval or censure were made to understand that what was going on in the streets . . . was a real phenomenon that had to be taken extremely seriously” (246). Furthermore, the Pulitzer and National Book Award, which were because of the novel, are a sort of establishment seals of approval—proof that it had reached middle America. Contemporary reviewers were generous with their praise. The

London Magazine named him “the best living writer of English prose” (Bergonzi 100). Others saw *Armies* as a monumental book, “a literary act whose significance is certain to grow” (Gilman 27). One way the book could live on was through the reactions of its readers.

Not only was *Armies* about politics, but the novel stood as a statement of the relationship between literature and politics. To ignore politics, for the novelist, is an error. Mailer must speak politically, for “the separation of the literary and political horizons is a mute acceptance of the structures through which power is exercised” (Schueller 127). Whether his novel convinced one single person to join the anti-war cause or not, it was a necessary testimony. Simply by representing the happenings of the anti-war movement in narrative form, Mailer made a new current in American politics. Perhaps Mailer understood the inescapability of politics, for as an activist author he could not “dissociate himself from the social contexts through which he speaks” (Schueller 125). His story would be null without its complex entanglement with real political struggle.

A contemporary review of *Armies* in *The Nation* called it “a permanent contribution to our literature—a unique testimony to literary responsiveness and responsibility” (Trachtenberg 702); certainly, Mailer was responding to important political phenomena that had not received sustained literary attention. His writing about the rifts within the tumultuous New Left, the division between Americans for and against the war, and the response of government and the press to the anti-war movement did delineate important political issues that needed to be aired. Mailer did not shy away from critique of the government or the media or of himself in order to tell the story of those in the anti-war movement.

Mailer’s novel represents a catalyst for social change through its introduction of an anti-war subculture to a popular audience. Mailer speaks candidly about his intentions: “I was trying to bring a consciousness to America about the war in Vietnam. . . . I think the effect of the book was to make resistance to the war in Vietnam a little more human to people who were still supporting the war. So, yes, I think the book did have a political effect. Maybe it tended to strengthen the side opposed to the war in Vietnam” (“Existential” 220). Jason Epstein recalls *Armies* as a book “meant to rally or produce a political reaction” (Manso 470); a strong argument can be made for the fact that Mailer meant to catalyze his readers. He attested to the disorganization and dissension within the anti-war camp, but more vigorously

showed the misrepresentation, defamation, and even the physical denigration of the activists. His argument for peace in Vietnam gained stature because he was a bona fide activist for the cause, facing arrest to further the significance of his protest. He was there, present at the march, and authenticated his action by telling the story of the march. *The Armies of the Night* exists as a testament to the anti-war movement and to the efficacy of civil disobedience.

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