

PM: Oops, Did We Forget about the U.S. Nuclear Weapons? A Warning from Modern Day Prophets

By Polly Mann

The U.S. population wasn't always so complacent about nuclear weapons. There have been mass mobilizations against nuclear weapons in decades past. Today, far fewer people are involved in antinuclear activity or even very aware of the danger posed by nuclear war.

However, an action conducted by three individuals garnered some national attention and shook things up a bit a few years ago. They were briefly in the news again when, on September 15, 2015, Sister Megan Rice, an 85-year-old Catholic nun who belongs to the order of the Society of the Holy Child of Jesus, and Michael Walli of Washington, D.C., together with Greg Boertje-Obed of Duluth, Minnesota—both men Catholic Workers—were resentenced for damaging a storage bunker at the Y-12 Nuclear Weapons Complex in Oak Ridge, Tennessee, in 2012.



*Michael Walli, Sr. Megan Rice, and Greg Boerje-Obed
Photo: Transform Now Plowshares*

The complex contains the world's largest repository of highly enriched uranium—enough to make 10,000 nuclear warheads.

The three activists with the antinuclear group, Transform Now Plowshares, had originally been sentenced to three to five years in federal prison. They refused to accept a plea bargain and insisted on a trial by jury. A federal grand jury found them guilty on two felony accounts: sabotage ("The intent to injure, interfere with, or obstruct the national defense of the United States"— a vague definition that can be used to punish dissent); and depredation of government property (depredation is

characterized as the act of plundering, robbing, pillaging, or laying waste government property). All three defendants were handcuffed, shackled, led from the courtroom, and sent to serve time in prison. Fellow Plowshares activists said that “they received a harsh and unjust sentence, in part, we think, for embarrassing authorities about the lax security.”

John LaForge of the Wisconsin-based Nukewatch commented about excluding evidence in the defense at the trials of antinuclear activists who commit actions intended to reveal the danger of nuclear weapons. Violations of morality and international law are omitted: “Judges and prosecutors have, in fact, placed nuclear weapons and war planning beyond the reach of the law—unlike assault rifles, poison gas, or other contraband—as if H-bombs were sacrosanct, unquestionable, and too precious to be addressed by mere mortals.”

Last May, the Transform Now Plowshares activists had already served two years in prison when the 6th U.S. District Circuit Court of Appeals threw out the sabotage charge and released them. The September resentencing resulted in counting time served for the lesser offense of depredation, or damaging of government property—the three had already served more time than guidelines recommended for that. The resentencing also prohibited them from entering the grounds of any nuclear facility and, as in the original sentencing, demanded that they pay approximately \$53,000 in restitution for damages to the Y-12 property.

The action of the Transform Now Plowshares revealed how three senior citizens carrying only bibles, roses, a wire snipper (to cut fencing), hammers, and spray-paint could so easily breach a facility described as “the ‘Fort Knox’ of highly-enriched uranium.” The fact that one of these people was a nun in her eighties drew particular attention.

The New York Times referred to the break-in as “the biggest security breach in the history of the nation’s atomic complex.” The New Yorker magazine of March 9, 2015, carried a 15-page article by Eric Schlosser, “Break-In at Y-12.” It reported that the Y-12 National Security Complex cost half a billion dollars in taxpayer money (according to Nukewatch New Mexico, the U.S. nuclear weapons complex, composed of eight key facilities, exceeds \$8 billion annually to maintain). The article described in detail the antinuclear action: Security at the Oak Ridge structure is provided by 500 officers, five armored vehicles, Carling guns, video cameras, motion detectors, four perimeter fences, and rows of concrete blocks. On July 28, 2012, the three activists, dedicated to nonviolence, overcame these obstacles and violated the security of the complex.

To gain access to the facility, they walked through woods and security fences into the brightly lit nuclear area. Once there, the intruders spray-painted onto the building in large black letters such phrases as “WOE TO THE EMPIRE OF BLOOD,” “WORK FOR PEACE NOT WAR,” and “THE FRUIT OF JUSTICE IS PEACE.” The activists hammered on the wall of the building. They placed bibles and roses on the

ground and sang religious songs. A patrol car approached at about 4:30 in the morning as they were singing “This Little Light of Mine, I’m Gonna Let It Shine.” The security officer who discovered them recognized that they were not terrorists but protesters, and they were handcuffed and brought to jail and charged.



The Y-12 National Security Complex, whose website describes itself as “the ‘Fort Knox’ of uranium”, was compromised by an 82-year-old nun.

Image: DoD

Congressional hearings were called in regard to the break-in. Investigations of the Oak Ridge Y-12 National Security Facility proved that security was extremely faulty at the site. Security cameras did not work and communication between the two companies who provided security was poor. However, the intent of the Transform Now Plowshares activists was not to reveal how poorly the site’s stockpile was protected. Their intent was to interfere with the potential for nuclear war that is threatening humanity.

These three are modern-day prophets. The late Rabbi Abraham Heschel would have agreed. He is quoted as having said: “The major activity of the prophet was interference. To interfere with the way things are going; whether in terms of militarism among nations, sexism in churches... The prophet criticizes and places himself/herself in opposition and therefore in a position of interfering with what is happening.”

As Sister Megan Rice told the Knoxville News Sentinel when she was released from federal prison:

This secrecy has predominated this industry. This is why the whole country and the whole world has not stopped it, it’s gone on for seventy years. We have the power, and the love, and the strength and the courage to end it and transform the whole project... We will together respond and keep our planet sacred, alive, whole and

healthy by transforming this into sustainable alternatives—which exist. To create better jobs! A cleaner environment! And a future for the seventh generation.

In the meantime, the U.S. is calling for an upgrade in nuclear weapons.

Isn't it time to heed the warnings these three prophets have issued to us and demand an end to all nuclear weapons again? As Sister Megan Rice said in a Democracy Now TV and radio interview on May 19, "It isn't just Congress. It's not just the President. Every one of us is equally responsible to end the escalation."

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