

American Totalitarianism in Norman Mailer's *The Armies of the Night*

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Mailer's prescient fear of totalitarianism in America does not fully take shape until twenty years later in *The Armies of the Night*, the partially autobiographical novel/history of the march on the Pentagon. Recounting the semiautobiographical experience, Mailer takes great pains to present himself as a boorish drunk at times and as a political prophet at other times. Describing himself as the event's "anti-star" in the opening page of the book, Mailer is hung-over contemplating participation in the historic march. Mailer wrote *The Armies of the Night* in close third person about the events leading up to and including the march on the pentagon. In the story, Mailer attends a party where he despises the majority of attendees, drunkenly commandeers a rally, describes the event of the march itself, and finally details his subsequent arrest and release from prison. *The Armies of the Night* extends this critique to the government's handling of the Vietnam War. Mailer eventually declares that the solution for totalitarianism in American institutions is to engender increased civic education and participation in national policies.

Mailer cut a swath of destruction through the mores of professional journalism with bursts of vibrant profanity, pop culture references, and what some would see as an unprofessional proximity to his subject. Still, until the anticipated publishing of *Armies*, Mailer's attempts to convince his readers of governmental wrongs had gone unheeded. For Mailer, the goal of writing about the march was to help break the complacency of middle of the road Americans and alert them to the increasingly authoritarian nature of their government. *Armies'* style communicated that message more successfully than any previous book had been able because Mailer's style matched his content. His innovative use and confusion of perspective dared critics to look more closely at

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what constituted objective journalistic truth. By questioning the validity of old journalism as a reliable vehicle for objectivity, Mailer established conceptions of meaning-making in a way that had been previously untried. In this way, Mailer could all at once disregard the casual acceptance of authority in government and the literary norms that went along with it. In *The Armies of the Night*, Mailer toys with perspective, interweaving text from Time and other official print sources in order to complicate an objective or 'historical' viewpoint of events. *Armies of the Night* is Mailer's statement against any authoritarian voice either from a critic or elsewhere that he can write whatever and however he likes. Similarly, it is his invitation to readers to mimic his individualistic expression and further tear down the ability of establishment print media to cast objective the telling of an event. Like his political classification of himself as a Marxian anarchist or left conservative, sometimes Mailer would label himself a contradiction just so he could set his own definition for what it meant.

Thematically *The Armies of the Night* condemns American policy makers of totalitarian power mongering through its criticism of the botched handling of the Vietnam War. The self named protagonist/author "Mailer" is concerned that the vast majority of Americans are uninformed and indifferent to the government's abuses of their nation's power overseas. He sees the Vietnam In an obscene dreamscape, *Armies* compares the working class, small town resident with an orange-haired grandma at a Los Vegas slot machine. The grandma is so obsessed with getting a lucky strike at the machine that she ignores a man trying to tell her about war crimes perpetuated by American involvement overseas. Eventually, the grandma is forced to confront an actual Vietnamese burn victim wheeled in on a gurney and only regards the child enough to say the burned little girl should tell her nurse to change her stinking sheets Mailer similarly sees this grandma's small town complacent attitude towards brutality in the faces of the riot cops. In this special instance, the battle against totalitarianism takes the form of a battle for individual expression and social responsibility. This battle is for Mailer a contest of the right of expression against the brutality of the war. Where Mailer sees the unthinking middle of America as secretly desiring the brutality of innocents

in Vietnam (both the local citizenry and the American soldiers), he wants to counter this type of expression with rational, political dissent. *The Armies of the Night* is then an example of moral individuals confronting centers of power both as a physical protest and literary dissent.

In the totalitarian society *Armies* warns us America is becoming, those that dissent must balance courage with the brutality their brave acts may engender. Opposition to this type of top down power expression necessarily requires an ever increasing investment of risk and commitment. Those remaining protesters feared not just the immediate brutal acts they would suffer, but each additional act to come. Mailer's way of avoiding this downward spiral of commitment is, in effect, to never begin the process. Mailer sidesteps the major physical commitment of his body and action by offering instead the text of *Armies* and his name for reproof. Mailer himself rejoins: "One's own literary work was the only answer to the war in Vietnam," (Radford 72). The "answer" to Vietnam should not be more violence, either as aggressor or victim. Traditionally, physically aggressive mobs and violent acts are eventually easier to contain by increased violence by the state. On the other hand, political dissent through the written word has been much harder to repress. Mailer's story could be crafted exactly the way he saw it in *Armies*. That is why Mailer decides to use his friends and influence to negotiate a quicker release from prison because his battle is literary. Although Mailer imagines "his life as a battle against totalitarianism," this fight, unlike his many physical ones, is a literary battle (Radford 58). Instead of seeing his continued presence in jail as a way of furthering his protest, his shrewd lawyer friend helps release him before many other less connected prisoners. The way Mailer sees it, continuing as a prisoner would require: "an endless ladder of moral challenges. Each time you climbed a step ... another higher, more dangerous, more disadvantageous step would present itself ... Sooner or later you would have to descend." (195)

Observing a Leninist radical named Walter Teague organize a free school for the dissemination of his ideas, Mailer uses the text of *Armies* to teach a less violent, more palatable path to political change. Instead of taking totalitarianism head-on, Mailer's literary engagement strives to change belief of his audience and then their actions, not vice

versa. The strength of Mailer's form of dissent is that ideas, unlike violent action, are easier to transmit and endure longer. The text of *Armies* has had more impact on the thinking and eventually, the actions of more people than even the march itself. Unlike the protest, the text has the ability to reach across time with as much fervor and intensity as it had in 1968 as a renewable affect evidenced by the continued scholarly discussion concerning it. Because *Armies* describes an actual event using novelists' tools like metaphor, imagery, and dialogue, the potential for readers to remember the event the way Mailer describes it is greater than the dry "objectivity" of traditional print sources. Instead of passing over the event as a small hiccup in history, Mailer describes the march as possibly as important as the Civil War that in a few decades, "the event may loom in our history large as the ghosts of the Union dead." (88) Mailer rewrites the history of the event in the way he wishes claiming that his account, although subjective, has as much validity as the other more supported accounts of the march. Mailer saw that he could do more for the cause against the war by his literary gifts than by getting killed or beaten in a protest. Although his literary contribution to the march required his physical presence, Mailer's battle with totalitarianism was ultimately waged more through his writing than any moment in a physical rite of passage.

Merrill cites: "Mailer's eloquent monologue before the judge as proof of his transformation from an experience begun in apathy but concluded in mild exultation." (120). Of course, Mailer is committed to the cause of ending the war in Vietnam. However, Mailer's physical battling seems limited to the boxing ring and ex-wives. Mailer then suggests that if the war does not end in the next year then protests will and must continue because: "we are burning the body and blood of Christ in Vietnam. Yes, we are burning him there, and as we do, we destroy the foundation of this Republic, which is its love and trust in Christ." (214) Choosing Christ as his operating symbol, Mailer wisely equates sacramental symbol with that of the innocents sacrificed in Vietnam suggesting that those who continue the war are destroying Christianity and with it, the very foundation of the republic. With this imagery, Mailer constructs a potent literary device in which those who are indifferent or

for the war, crucify Christ anew. Although a Jew, Mailer is able to momentarily assume the religion of his wife in order to appeal to the vast "center of America" audience (Armies 188). He switches the focus of the war from that of democracy versus godless communism to godly behavior versus ungodly behavior. Mailer asserts that the democracy his audience believes in should be protecting not only those within its borders, but also the soldiers and people of Vietnam. Like Christ, Mailer offers himself as a sacrifice so that every person would see they had the ability to express their political views as he does. While Mailer is no doubt committed to the cause of fighting involvement in Vietnam, he is not the type of radical that blows up buildings or starts a riot. Mailer instead shifts attention to the discussion he is hoping will be the answer to the conflict. This form of textual, nonviolent dissent had the potential to change his audience's minds better than immediate physical violence against the government. Mailer's alternative answer is to increase his audience's understanding of their government's significant actions overseas like in his breakdown of the argument of communism in Asia (Armies 181-89). Knowing that traditional print sources would question him later about his comments, Mailer used his critics' usual path for skewering him to inspire others to oppose the war directly through peaceful protests both physical and written. Mailer hoped that his recasting of the march as a significant expression of public discontent with the stalemate in Vietnam would loosen the largely immobile conservative support of the war.

The Armies of the Night is a critique of the government's hypocrisy. In *Naked*, Hearn fumbles to explain the righteousness in fighting fascism in the Pacific theatre. He opines: (Over here, as far as I'm concerned, it's an imperialist tossup. Either we louse up Asia or Japan does. Later in *Armies*, a Hearn-like Mailer finishes this thought with regard to a different war; the only real difficulty might be then to decide who would do more harm to Asia, Capitalism or Communism." (187) Mailer suggests that interceding on behalf of Asian countries leads to "harm." Wars either on behalf of or against countries on the other side of the globe lead to a type of hypocrisy where protection becomes destruction, and freedom becomes oppression. Instead, Mailer suggests a type of isolationism that would allow other countries the ability to

practice what form of government they wish and if it was successful, Americans “would be forced to applaud” (Armies 187). But more likely, the inadequacy of totalitarian forms of government would eventually topple any regime.

In the end, Mailer decides the best way to fight against the war in Vietnam is to recast the conflict from a matter of democracy versus communism to good versus evil. The whole of *Armies* reconstructs the origin of America much like Mailer does himself in his courtroom speech. He recalls the national origin narrative as being built upon Christian precepts, and therefore, as “God was present in every man not only as compassion but as power...so the country belonged to the...will of the people” (Armies 288). The Christian middle the target audience of Mailer’s argument should then see Christianity and liberal democracy as irreversibly linked by the pursuit of the common good. The Christian moderates would be able to see whatever is done unto the least of these the Vietnamese people, is done unto Christ. The “liars” in control of the government will not relent on their own so it, according to Mailer, is up to the previously insane “middle of America” to end tyranny by a democratic process (Armies 188). In this way, Mailer furthers his project of personal expression. As the “will of the people” expands to include more individuals than just the few in power, personal expression becomes more important. In turn, Mailer’s position as champion of expression increases in validity and value as well.

Mailer’s final metaphor of America as a leprous giantess about to give birth focuses the urgency of his warning of domestic totalitarianism. Mailer presents two very unequal options for the giantess’ child. Representing the future of the American political system, the child will either be “the most fearsome totalitarianism the world has ever known” or “a new world brave and tender, artful and wild” (Armies 288). *Armies of the night* hopes to “deliver” the child free of disease and usher in a new period of free expression and democratic rule through a reclamation of what Mailer sees as the ineffable qualities of democracy -civic involvement and personal expression Mailer’s path to this utopist society enables civic involvement and personal expression because he invites others to do as he has done with *Armies* to observe the world around and

question old journalism's portrayal of the truth. If more people observe, think, and write or share their opinions, power that would otherwise be pooled into small groups of people is kept in check by the mass of civic-minded citizens. Mailer's unrelenting fear of adopting American totalitarian forms of government derives from what appeared as a global victory over totalitarianism abroad.

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