

CHIT-CHAT CLUB

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Armies of the Night (and Day): Norman Mailer, Robert McNamara and the March on the Pentagon

Gentlemen, this evening I want to discuss the events surrounding -- and a famous literary account of -- the event called the March on the Pentagon, which took place on October 21, 1967, during my senior year of college. I began thinking about this paper over a year ago when Norman Mailer, one of the great American writers in the second half of the 20th Century -- and surely the most colorful -- died in November 2007. My interest in a literary topic increased with the death last January of John Updike, another great popular writer of the period.

I had originally intended to do a compare-and-contrast of two of their books covering the late 1960s, Mailer's *The Armies of the Night*^[1] and Updike's *Rabbit Redux*,^[2] with an emphasis on how the two authors had treated the Vietnam War. I began by reading Updike, but I have to admit I had trouble getting into *Rabbit Redux*. At its heart, it is a novel about infidelity and the breakup of a late 1960s suburban marriage, and the Vietnam War seems to figure in it only peripherally. So I turned my attention to Mailer, whose vivid, colorful prose made his book -- which was awarded both the Pulitzer Prize and the National Book Award -- hard to put down. With the death this past July of Robert McNamara, the Secretary of Defense with whom the Vietnam War will forever be identified, I decided to concentrate on Mailer's book and contrasting perspectives on the 1967 event that is at the center of it.

Some Background on Norman Mailer

Before we turn to *The Armies of the Night*, we should begin with a review of the career that by the late 1960s had made Mailer one of the most famous authors in America. Mailer was born in 1923, and went into the Army right after his graduation from Harvard in 1943. He earned immediate attention just after World War II, when *The Naked and the Dead* was published to widespread acclaim in 1948. It is still considered one of the best novels to come out of World War II, and its reputation was sufficient to warrant the publication of a 50th anniversary edition in 1998.

After *The Naked and the Dead*, Mailer's career became considerably choppier. His second novel was *Barbary Shore*, which was panned and is now largely forgotten, and the third was *The Deer Park*, which -- although a favorite of John F. Kennedy's -- offended a large part of the 1955 literary establishment with its graphic sexual content. Later there came the publication of *Advertisements for Myself*, which cemented Mailer's reputation as a supreme egoist and earned him a fair amount of ridicule.

In his memoir, *New York in the Fifties*,^[3] Dan Wakefield (an Indiana boy who was so excited by the city and Columbia University that he decided to stay in New York) gives the following description of Mailer as he was in the late 1950s, not long after he helped to found *The Village Voice*:

Mailer's fellow *Voice* columnist, Mary Nichols says, "I liked the controversy Mailer stirred up at the *Voice*. I kept running into him there, of course. At the annual Christmas party he would always get drunk and punch somebody out. It was inevitable, part of the holiday ritual."

Mailer was part of the Village in the fifties and part of the *Voice*, helping define them both, even though he resigned from writing his column, six months after it began, when his running disagreements with the editors came to a head over a typo: "nuisances" instead of "nuances." The column in which the typo appeared led to one of his most productive and fruitful subjects, hip versus square, and the later publication of his controversial essay "The White Negro" in *Dissent*. (*Wakefield*, pp. 142-43.)

As the 1950s came to a close, Mailer began to cement (and was clearly cultivating) the reputation for heavy drinking and belligerence for which he was well-known by the time I first heard of him. Wakefield gives us the following description of that persona:

I didn't know Mailer personally, though I used to see him at those *Village Voice* parties and talked to him a few times at big social events over the years. As long as I was speaking with him one-on-one, Mailer was a gracious, pleasant, fascinating conversationalist, but as soon as a group of people gathered to listen, his voice tended to rise, and his manner and opinions became more brash and pugnacious. [Seymour] Krim had a similar experience, finding that conversation with Mailer "immediately changed when we met in a group or anywhere in public where there were more than just the two of us; when that happened he assumed (and I didn't contest it) the central role . . . There was usually a turning point in my presence (around the third drink?) when the showboat cowboy in Mailer would start to ride high, bucking and broncking." (*Id.* at 146.)

Mailer's Account of the Events Leading Up to the March on the Pentagon

In *Armies of the Night*, Mailer begins at the beginning. He agreed to become involved with the March on the Pentagon about a month before the event, in September 1967, when he received a phone call from a casual friend and activist (and occasional novelist and poet) named Mitchell Goodman, who asked him to join an event before the March, when a group of prominent writers calling themselves "Resist" would go to the Justice Department to "support" students who were turning in their draft cards. Since he had been opposing the Vietnam War since 1965, Mailer agreed. Later, he was asked to speak along with Robert Lowell and Dwight Macdonald at a Washington theatre on the Thursday night before the Justice Department event, and he somewhat reluctantly accepted that invitation, too.

The meat of the book opens with a party at a local faculty member's home before the event at the theatre, where Mailer greets Lowell and Macdonald, neither of whom he has seen for some time. He likes and obviously envies Lowell, whose restrained, courtly and aristocratic New England manner seems to embody everything that Mailer, on many occasions,

would like to be. He is warier of Macdonald, whom he admires but who is also, Mailer suspects, giving his latest novel, *Why Are We in Vietnam?*, a bad review for *The New Yorker*. Nonetheless, they all make nice to each other, and then proceed to the theatre for the speeches intended to warm up the young audience for the weekend.

In a word, the event at the theatre is a disaster for Mailer, although he takes about 25 pages to describe it. He is fueled, not by food – of which he has had none for 10 hours – but by a FULL MUG of bourbon. Even though he has agreed to serve as M.C., this fuel causes him to wander off to find the men’s room (where he has a little mishap), and then to give what he calls his “dwarf alter ego” imitation of Lyndon Johnson. As a result, he is booed off the stage. No wonder Mailer refers to himself as the “Prince of Bourbon.”

Our club’s tradition of gentlemanly discourse precludes me from quoting the funniest and most salient passages about the events at the theatre, but for those of you who would like to follow up, you should look at pages 30-32, 37-38, and 47-51.

The same novelistic technique Mailer uses to describe the events at the theatre -- presenting in vivid, in-the-moment prose just what is going on in his head and in those of other participants at any particular time -- animates Mailer’s account of the rest of the weekend, as well. For example, after bad reports in the *Washington Post* on his behavior at the theatre, Mailer ruminates on how the trick in dealing with reporters is to give them salient, not brilliant, quotes – what a later generation would call sound bites. (*Armies* at 66.) Later, he quotes both Rev. William Sloan Coffin and Robert Lowell speaking eloquently at the Justice Department, where Lowell remarks that he’s been asked by a reporter whether he intends to turn in his draft card, although it should have been obvious that he’s too old to have one. (*Id.* at 73.)

The March Itself and Mailer’s Arrest

Saturday, October 21 – the day of the March itself – starts with Lowell, Macdonald and Mailer (who is somewhat hung over) having breakfast at the Hay-Adams Hotel, debating whether they should submit to arrest. They decide that doing so will give the whole event more meaning and dignity, and then Mailer continues:

And indeed how could one measure success or failure in a venture so odd and unprecedented as this? One did not march on the Pentagon and look to get arrested as a link in a master scheme to take over the bastions of the Republic step by step, no, that sort of sound-as-brickwork logic was left to the FBI. Rather, one marched on the Pentagon because . . . because . . . and here the reasons became so many and so curious and so vague, so political and so primitive, that there was no need, or perhaps no possibility to talk about it yet, one could only ruminate over the morning coffee. What possibly they shared now between them at the morning table of the Hay-Adams was the unspoken happy confidence that politics had again become mysterious, had begun to partake of Mystery; that gave life to a thought the gods were back in human affairs. A generation of American young had come along different from the five previous generations of the middle class. The new generation believed in technology more than any before it, but the

generation also believed in LSD, in witches, in tribal knowledge, in orgy, and revolution. It had no respect whatsoever for the unassailable logic of the next step: belief was reserved for the revelatory mystery of the happening where you did not know what was going to happen next; that was what was good about it. Their radicalism was in their hate for authority – the authority was the manifest evil of this generation. (*Id.* at 86.)

As he sets out for the day's events by hiking from the Washington Monument to the Lincoln Memorial, Mailer realizes that he has the feeling of going into battle, and that he hasn't felt this way for nearly a quarter of a century:

A thin high breath of pleasure, like a child's anticipation of the first rocket to be fired on the Fourth of July, hung over the sweet grass of the hill on Washington Monument. They were prancing past this hill, they were streaming to battle. Going to battle! He realized that he had not taken in precisely this thin high sensuous breath of pleasure in close to twenty-four years, not since the first time he had gone into combat, and found to his surprise that the walk toward the fire fight was one of the more agreeable – if stricken – moments of his life. Later, in the skirmish itself it was less agreeable – he had perspired so profusely he had hardly been able to see through his sweat – much later, months later, combat was disagreeable; it managed to consist of large doses of fatigue, the intestinal agitations of the tropics, endless promenades through the mud, and general apathy toward whether one lived or not. But the first breath had left a feather on his memory; it was in the wind now; he realized that an odd, yes a *zany* part of him had been expecting quietly and confidently for years, that before he was done, he would lead an army. (The lives of Leon Trotsky and Ernest Hemingway had done nothing to dispel this expectation.) No, the sweetness of war came back. Probably there were very few good wars (good wars being free of excessive exhaustion, raddled bowels, miserable food, and computerized methods) but if you were in as good shape for war as for football, there was very little which was better for the senses. (*Id.* at 90.)

Eventually, the crowd – with Mailer, Macdonald, Lowell and other mediagenic celebrities in the forefront – crosses the Arlington Memorial Bridge and arrives at the North Parking Lot, which is separated from the Pentagon by a large highway. The lot is curiously empty, since it's a Saturday and they are among the first to arrive. After reflecting on how he hopes to get arrested and released early, so he can get back to New York for a party, Mailer moves on to listen to the music, some of which is being presented by the Fugs, an ad hoc musical group including two of Mailer's radical friends, Ed Sanders and Tuli Kupferberg. Quite soon, Mailer realizes that their performance is part of a planned exorcism, which he describes as follows:

Now the Participant [*i.e.*, Mailer] recognized that this was the beginning of the exorcism of the Pentagon, yes the papers had made much of the permit requested by a hippie leader named Abbie Hoffman to encircle the Pentagon with twelve hundred men in order to form a ring of exorcism sufficiently powerful to raise the

Pentagon three hundred feet . In the air the Pentagon would then, went the presumption, turn orange and vibrate until all evil emissions had fled this levitation. At that point the war in Vietnam would end.

The General Services Administrator who ruled on the permit consented to let an attempt be made to raise the building ten feet, but he could not go so far as to allow the encirclement. Of course, exorcism without encirclement was like a culinary arthouse without a fire – no one could properly expect a meal. Nonetheless the exorcism would proceed, and the Fugs were to serve as a theatrical medium and would play their music on the rear bed of the truck they had driven in here at the end of the parking lot nearest to the Pentagon some hundreds of yards from the speaker’s stand where the rally was to take place. (*Id.* at 120.)

The exorcism then proceeds, with all manner of deities being invoked, including -- I’m not making this up -- “the Tyrone Power Pound Cake Society in the Sky.”

After a long wait, enough demonstrators arrive in the parking lot so they can all begin to advance on the Pentagon. As he approaches the building, Mailer (still at the forefront) sees that military police (MPs) are the rather light first ring, backed by another ring of MPs further back, and in back of them are U.S. Marshals. As he moves forward, one of the MPs finally arrests Mailer, who has been sensible and peaceful, but has stepped over into an area the government considers off-limits. A few pages later, Mailer speculates about why the MP (and the three policemen who arrested him on other occasions in his life) all seemed to quiver when they performed this duty:

Whether this was due to a sudden onrush – quote Freud from a letter to Fliess – of “unruly latent homosexuality,” or whether from a terror before God that they judged other men sufficiently to make arrest, or whether simply they were cowards, or if to the contrary they trembled from the effort it cost them to keep from assaulting the prisoner, whatever, Mailer could not quite decide – he had sometimes even wondered whether it was possible he offended some deeps in the police, no matter, as they laid hands on him. (*Id.* at 137.)

Eventually, Mailer is put on a bus, and over the next little while more and more prisoners also enter the bus. With one exception, all are polite, waiting for the next act of this rather carefully-scripted drama. But one of the prisoners is an American Nazi, and he is not polite. After he glares at Mailer, Mailer engages him in a staring contest, which the Nazi loses. He then shouts that Mailer is a “dirty Jew bastard,” and Mailer in turn calls him a “filthy Kraut pig,” while inwardly telling himself that this is not only unoriginal, but unfair because Germans appreciate his books now more than Americans do. The encounter continues as follows:

“I’m not a Kraut,” said the Nazi, “I’m a Norwegian.” And then as if the pride of his birth had tricked him into communication with an infidel, thus into sacrilege,

the Nazi added quickly, “Jew bastard red,” then cocked his fists. “Come here, you coward,” he said to Mailer, “I’ll kill you.”

“Throw the first punch, baby,” said Mailer, “You’ll get it all.”

They were both absolutely right. They had a perfect sense of the other. Mailer was certainly not brave enough to advance on the Nazi – it would be like springing an avalanche into himself. But he also knew that if the Nazi jumped him, one blond youth was very likely to get massacred. In retrospect, it would appear not uncomic – two philosophical monomaniacs with the same flaw – they could not help it, they were counterpunchers.” (*Id.* at 142-43.)

Shortly thereafter, this edifying exchange is broken up by a U.S. Marshal on the bus, who tells them to “shut up, or I’ll wreck both of you.” They comply.

Mailer’s Time in Jail and the Processing of His Case

Eventually the bus is full and the prisoners are taken to a post office, where the processing of their cases begins. Here Mailer’s prose turns from describing excitement to describing dullness, and how one of the most challenging aspects of being in any jail or prison, even for a short time, is to keep your mind stimulated and block out the repetitiousness of the experience. As the day drags on, it begins to dawn on Mailer that he will be lucky to make that party in New York, after all.

He is correct. In the evening, the remaining prisoners are informed they will be moved to a workhouse in Occoquan, Virginia, about twenty miles away. Since processing will continue there through the night, some of them may still be released before morning. Once they have boarded the bus to the workhouse, they encounter the documentary film-maker and his crew. Mailer makes a few pompous statements for the film-maker, then asks if he would like to hear the prisoners’ slogans. Mailer admits “he could not help it – the mountebank in him felt as if he were playing Winston Churchill. Ten minutes ago in the cell he had been mired in long slow thoughts of four wives – now he had a stage again and felt not unheroic.” (*Id.* at 173.) However, when the prisoners start to sing “We Shall Overcome,” the driver turns off the lights, the prisoners finish their singing, and the bus starts off for Occoquan.

After they arrive at there, the prisoners (including Mailer and Noam Chomsky) learn that the lawyers and the Commissioners serving as judges have all gone home for the evening, and that no more cases will be processed until morning. They settle in for the night, with Mailer insisting that he then has an “argument in his brain” about the pros and cons of the Vietnam War, which are set forth in the next ten pages. The arguments include the Domino Theory and the observation that there is a natural tension between the Vietnamese and the Chinese, since the latter occupied Vietnam for centuries. Overall, these and the other arguments seem very dated today.

In the morning at Occoquan, the issue becomes how Mailer should plead, and whether he will be released. Mailer initially wants to plead guilty, but is advised in strong terms that he

should plead *nolo contendere*. It turns out that lawyers from the American Civil Liberties Union are urging all the prisoners to plead *nolo*, which is part of a deal with the government pursuant to which, in return for a *nolo* plea, the prisoners will receive suspended five-day sentences. Mailer reluctantly acquiesces and pleads *nolo*.

It turns out, however, that the Commissioner before whom Mailer is appearing has a harsher sentence in mind for him, and he is sentenced to five days in jail. It takes a good deal of fancy legal footwork, which will entertain the lawyers and appears at pages 206-211, to get Mailer released on Sunday morning, on the ground that he is entitled to bail while he appeals, notice of which is given on a hand-written form!

The March on the Pentagon From Robert McNamara's Perspective

If Mailer's perspective on the March is a vivid example of the New Journalism at its best, Robert McNamara's perspective is both more Olympian and considerably more troubled. In his first reflection on the Vietnam War, *In Retrospect: The Tragedy and Lessons of Vietnam*, published in 1995,^[4] McNamara points that the March took place as public support for the Vietnam War was beginning to collapse, there was growing debate within the Johnson Administration about whether to suspend bombing and pursue negotiations with the North Vietnamese, and McNamara himself had lost confidence that the war could be won. Here in full is his account of the March on the Pentagon:

The next day, Saturday, October 21, 1967, angry antiwar demonstrators marched on the Pentagon, determined to shut it down.

We had learned of the march well in advance. On September 20, the president met with me and others to discuss how to deal with it. I told him we faced a difficult problem – difficult because the Pentagon has no natural defenses. A huge building – the world's largest when it was constructed during World War II – it is ringed by an asphalt road and acres of grass. You can walk up to it on all five sides.

We decided to surround the building with troops armed with rifles, standing shoulder-to-shoulder in the middle of the asphalt ring, and to station U.S. marshals between them and the protesters. We knew a single line of soldiers could not possibly prevent a mob of thousands from rushing the building – unless they fired their weapons, which we did not intend to permit. Therefore, Bus [*i.e.*, General Earle Wheeler, Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff] and I, with his troop commanders, agreed to station reinforcements in the Pentagon's center courtyard, a grassy area where employees like to sit in the sun during lunch. If pressure from the crowd forced a breach in the troop line, soldiers from inside the building would pour out to close it. So as not to aggravate tensions, we decided to drop those reinforcements into the courtyard using helicopters at night.

I told the president no rifle would be loaded without my permission, and I did not intend to give it. I added that Bus, Deputy Attorney General Warren Christopher,

and I would personally monitor the operation from my office and the Pentagon roof.

The day before the march, Undersecretary of the Army David E. McGiffert circulated a memo to all participating troops, marshals, and military police through the army chief of staff. It spelled out the guidelines of their mission:

In support of civil authority, we have the very delicate and difficult job of upholding both constitutional rights of free assembly and expression and protecting government operations and property. We cannot tolerate lawlessness; neither can we tolerate interference with the legitimate exercise of constitutional rights . . .

We must avoid either overreacting or under-reacting. We must behave with dignity and firmness. We must act in a way which holds to the absolute minimum the possibility of bloodshed and injury; which minimizes the need for arrest; which distinguishes to the extent feasible between those who are and are not breaking the law, and which uses minimum force consistent with the mission of protecting the employees (military and civilian), the operations, and the property of the Government.

As I reread Dave's words nearly three decades later, I still feel immense pride in the professional, responsible way the U.S. Army and the U.S. Marshal Service planned and executed an almost impossible task.

"There were two separate parts of the rally," *The Washington Post* reported.

The first was the gathering at the Reflecting Pool between the Washington Monument and the Lincoln Memorial. This one had the structure of taste and human respect. The crowd there had to be over 50,000. It was orderly and it was made up primarily of college students. The second gathering was the one in front of the Pentagon. This was smaller; 20,000 the Pentagon said. The front ranks of it, 3000 probably, was made up of troublemakers who put a deep gash in the antiwar movement."

The front ranks indeed included many troublemakers, who used every device to provoke the troops to violence. Young women rubbed their breasts against soldiers standing at attention with rifles at their sides and even unzipped their flies; the soldiers did not move. Protesters threw mud balls, picket signs, leaflets, sticks, and rocks at the troops; they stayed in place. A wave of demonstrators tried to break the line, but the troops fell back against the Pentagon's doors and the reinforcements from the courtyard flowed out to help hold the crowd. A few protesters managed to get into the building but were quickly ejected. Eventually, the crowd began to disperse. But thousands stayed into the night, building fires

on the grounds. The last demonstrators did not leave until the following afternoon.

The Post's report on the demonstration included this statement: "Although the potential for violence was high throughout the afternoon and into the night, not a shot was fired and no serious injuries were reported."

I watched the whole thing from the roof of the building and other vantage points. Years later a reporter asked if I had been scared. Of course I was scared: an uncontrolled mob is a frightening thing – luckily, in this case, frightening but ineffective. At the same time, I could not help but think that had the protesters been more disciplined – Ghandi-like – they could have achieved their objective of shutting us down. All they had to do was lie on the pavement around the building. We would have found it impossible to remove enough of them fast enough to keep the Pentagon open. (*In Retrospect*, pp. 303-305; footnotes omitted.)

There is an important post-script to this account. Only eleven days later, on November 1, 1967, McNamara sent President Johnson a lengthy memorandum (which had not been shown to Secretary Rusk, the Joint Chiefs, or National Security Advisor Walt Rostow) arguing that the current situation was untenable, and that the North Vietnamese would not change course unless they were convinced the United States was prepared to remain in Vietnam "for whatever period of time is necessary to assure the independent choice of the South Vietnamese people." (*Id.* at 308.) McNamara went on to recommend (1) stabilization of U.S. military operations in South Vietnam, with no increase in troop levels, (2) a halt to the bombing of North Vietnam before year's end so as to encourage negotiations, and (3) a review of U.S. operations in the South so as to transfer greater responsibility for them to the South Vietnamese. (*Id.* at 308-09.) The memo – which was heavily criticized by Justice Abe Fortas and Clark Clifford, who was to be the next Secretary of Defense – led to the final estrangement of McNamara from President Johnson, who nominated him to become President of the World Bank less than a month later, on November 30, 1967.

Some Concluding Thoughts

From the perspective of 42 years later, it is difficult to imagine an event like the March on the Pentagon happening today. While concern about a war they considered unjust motivated many of the protesters, the peacetime draft was at least an equally large concern. With the abolition of the draft in 1973 and its replacement with an all-volunteer, professional army, it is difficult to imagine a mass protest movement of the kind we saw in the United States from 1967 to 1971. At the same time, there is obviously a price to be paid for the stress that ill-considered combat operations impose on our troops, as suggested by the historically high rates of post-traumatic stress disorder and suicide that the Army is now experiencing.

Similarly, while some aspects of Mailer's book are dated, there is a still a freshness to its reportage that is very appealing. Bob McNamara's account of the March is not contemporaneous, but the high level of attention and concern for all participants that it shows the

March received at the highest levels of the American government should embarrass those who depicted Johnson and McNamara as nothing but blood-thirsty warmongers. Nonetheless, *In Retrospect* shows that the war in Vietnam lasted far longer than it should have, and teaches us that once combat operations are embarked upon, they can be very difficult to wind down. In a year that in some respects resembles 1965 – when President Johnson had to decide whether to escalate our military operations in Vietnam significantly, just as President Obama is now weighing whether to increase our troop presence in Afghanistan – that is a lesson worth remembering.

^[1] The full citation for the paperback edition is *The Armies of the Night: History as a Novel, The Novel as History* (New York: Plume (Penguin Group), 1994). The original hardcover edition was published in 1968 by the New American Library. Hereinafter, the book is referred to as *Armies of the Night* or *Armies*, and all citations are to the 1994 paperback edition. The pagination of that edition appears to be identical to the pagination in the original hardcover edition.

^[2] John Updike, *Rabbit Redux* (New York: Fawcett/Ballantine Books, 1996.) The original hardcover edition was published in 1971 by Alfred A. Knopf.

^[3] Dan Wakefield, *New York in the Fifties* (New York: Houghton Mifflin/Seymour Lawrence, 1992) (hereinafter, “*Wakefield*”).

^[4] Robert S. McNamara (with Brian VanDeMark), *In Retrospect: The Tragedy and Lessons of Vietnam* (New York: Times Books, 1995) (hereinafter, “*In Retrospect*”).