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# Vandals for Peace

*A group of idealistic Catholics protested the Vietnam War in 1968 by burning files seized from a draft board in suburban Baltimore.*

By [ROBERT K. LANDERS](#)

I was a 22-year-old Army draftee in June 1966, just weeks from being sent as a combat engineer to a war that political scientist Hans Morgenthau and other critics had persuaded me was ill-advised and probably unwinnable. I did not go so far as to consider the war in Vietnam "immoral, illegal and unjust," as three draftees at Fort Hood, Texas, that very month proclaimed that they did; they likened U.S. involvement in Vietnam to Nazi aggression in Europe and defiantly declared that they would not go. But America was hardly Nazi Germany. Home on leave, I pondered my situation—and went off to the war.

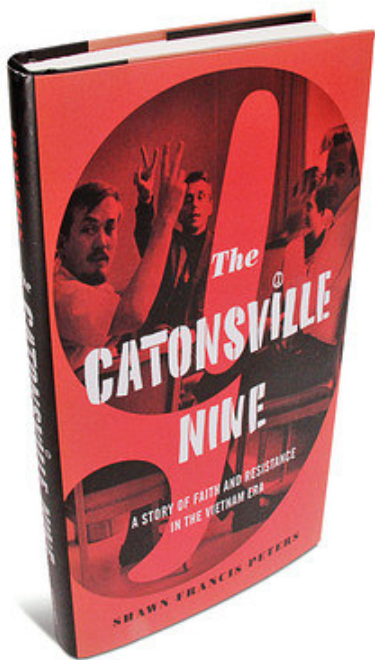
Two years later, opposition to the war had grown, and at the October 1968 trial of the "Catonsville Nine," there were many references to the heroic resistance to the Third Reich. In the dock were nine idealistic Catholics, clerical and lay, who that May had seized and "napalmed" more than 370 draft files at a Selective Service board in Catonsville, Md., a Baltimore suburb. As Shawn Francis Peters makes clear in his sympathetic but evenhanded history of the affair, the act was one of desperation by seven men and two women who were frustrated that all the talk, marches and protests against the war (and perceived U.S. militarism elsewhere) had had virtually no effect on American policy.

For two of the Nine—the Rev. Phil Berrigan, a World War II combat veteran and Roman Catholic priest (who would leave the priesthood in 1973), and Tom Lewis, an artist who had served in the Army National Guard of Maryland—the Catonsville action had not been their first draft-board raid. In October 1967, they and two other men had poured a mixture of their own blood and animal blood on draft files at Baltimore's main Selective Service office. Despite their professed commitment to nonviolence, they had initially considered blowing up the building (after determining to their satisfaction that it would be unoccupied); horrified by that idea, a lawyer they consulted suggested defacing the files with blood instead.

A month after the Baltimore raid, Sen. Eugene McCarthy announced that he would enter Democratic primaries in 1968 to challenge President Lyndon Johnson and his Vietnam policy. McCarthy hoped, he said, that his candidacy would alleviate a growing "sense of political helplessness" that was leading people "to take extralegal if not illegal actions to manifest protest." His stunning show of strength in the New Hampshire primary four months later prompted Sen. Robert Kennedy to precipitately enter the contest as an antiwar candidate and led to Johnson's dropping out. But the Catonsville Nine disregarded the more effective McCarthy alternative to the illegal draft-board raids (and Mr. Peters fails even to mention McCarthy). The reason they did is readily apparent: "Simply," Berrigan told the judge at the trial of the Nine, "we have lost confidence in the institutions of this country"—including, he added, ones of especial concern to the defendants: their own church and others.

After the trial, sentencing and appeals were over, and the Nine (their actual number reduced to eight by the death of David Darst, a Christian Brother, in an auto accident) were ordered to report to federal prison in 1970, only four of them did so. The other four, including Berrigan and his older brother, Dan Berrigan, also a priest, decided not to adhere to civil disobedience's traditional requirement of accepting the legal consequences of one's illegal action and chose instead to continue their "resistance" by going "underground."

The younger Berrigan was quickly apprehended, but Dan Berrigan, while intermittently surfacing in public, eluded capture for four months, to the FBI's embarrassment. The other two fugitives were much less in the media spotlight. George Mische had worked for




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### The Catonsville Nine

By Shawn Francis Peters  
(Oxford, 390 pages, \$34.95)

author doesn't explore. Mr. Peters, who was a toddler at the time of the Catonsville raid, thinks the Nine "might have contributed to bringing the war to an end." Dan Berrigan is sure of it: The Nine were "an ingredient in the antiwar pot. All of us made it politically impossible to continue the war."

As it happens, I had an opportunity in 1987 to speak with Eugene McCarthy, whose 1968 effort was far more influential than the Nine's. He was more modest than Dan Berrigan—and more realistic—about his own impact. The course of the war, McCarthy said, was "not very much" affected by his challenge. Even so, he still thought it was "the right thing to do." Could the same now be truthfully said about the Catonsville Nine's desperate little caper? I think not.

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economic development in Latin America but had grown disillusioned by U.S. policy there and now envisioned future "actions" that would dramatically destroy the property of institutions such as the Bank of America; he was captured after a month. Mary Moylan, a nurse, was on the lam for nine years, during which she became increasingly radical, associating with members of the violence-prone Weather Underground Organization; eventually, she turned herself in.

When the Catonsville Nine were news, the Berrigan brothers got most of the ink. Mr. Peters gives due attention to the other seven, as well as to the other dramatis personae—the Selective Service clerks, the attorneys and the judges—and their points of view. Some Catholics, such as the Rev. Robert Drinan, a Boston College law professor who would be elected to Congress in 1970, applauded the Nine's "prophetic witness" for peace. But more than two-thirds of American Catholics (according to a 1971 Gallup poll) disapproved of such draft raids. Novelist Walker Percy, a prominent Catholic, likened the Catonsville attack to actions of the Ku Klux Klan. The prominent pacifist Thomas Merton, a Trappist monk who was a mentor to the Berrigans, had serious qualms about the raid. It "bordered on violence," Merton said, "and was violent to the extent that it meant pushing some good ladies"—the draft clerks—"around and destroying some government property."

The Catonsville raid, which inspired similar actions, became a rallying point for the antiwar movement, even though it may have been a net minus for it in terms of public opinion—a possibility the

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