

Norman Mayer and the Missile X

Who is Sane? Who is Mad?

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1983

Norman Mayer tried to stop the Missile X and failed. On the morning of December 8 the 66-year-old Miami man drove his van up to the Washington Monument, threatening to blow up the structure with 1,000 pounds of dynamite. Not interested in taking human lives, he insisted that nine people inside be evacuated. Perhaps he could have toppled that ugly stone spire resembling a hooded Ku Klux Klansman, or even broken a few windows in the White House. (In fact, a White House luncheon attended by President Reagan was moved to a room facing away from the monument grounds.) But no bombs were exploded and no White House windows broken.

A friend described him as “obsessed” by the possibility of nuclear war. “He’s been reading everything printed since the 1920s,” he said. “The more research he did, the more convinced he was of man’s inability to resolve the conflicts.” A sign on the truck said, “No. 1 Priority: Ban Nuclear Weapons,” while Mayer demanded a national “dialogue on nuclear war,” adding, “As an act of sanity, ban nuclear weapons or have a nice doomsday.” He picked the Washington Monument because, in his words, “It’s one of the sacred icons and it’s accessible.”

Ten hours later he was killed by murderous SWAT snipers who pulled his truck away from the monument. There were no explosives. Unlike the officially sanctioned terrorists of the governments of the world, he could not back up his threats with force. “He died for a bluff,” said one reporter.

Calling all politicians “genocidalists,” he decided to take his message to the news media, hoping they would relay it sympathetically. Obviously enough, it became a field day for cynical newspaper reporters and television commentators. Steve Komarow, a particularly smug and stupid AP reporter chosen to mediate with Mayer, wrote later, “As I stood near the white van, there was no way for me to know whether this man posed a real threat of massive destruction,” blind to the irony of his words in the situation. The television media presented it all as a problem of “terrorism,” portraying Mayer as a maladjusted fanatic turned lunatic turned terrorist. No one mentioned the contrast between one little man with a dummy bomb threatening all the Big Men with their thousands of Big Bombs, threatening to blow up a worthless obelisk itself resembling a missile in order to gain the attention of all the millions threatened by the genuine missiles of the State.

The “well-adjusted” responded either with indifference or by howling from their perches while rattling their chains. A young and up-and-coming necktie from some arms control organization officiously denounced the older man. Instead of even decrying the act while drawing a lesson from its tenor of desperation not felt by Norman Mayer alone—that “radical futurelessness” described by psychologist Robert Jay Lifton and felt by ten-year-olds who don’t want to grow up and have children of their own because they are afraid they’ll be killed in a nuclear war, among others—the spokesman chose to speak of Mayer as a “fringe” type, the kind of fanatic which reasonable, practical people would exclude from their association. No Norman Mayers for this twerp—he has a future in the arms control business, that wing of the arms machine which provides the necessary criticism to rationalize its maintenance—to keep the Missile X in operation.

Missile X—and Planet X

The MX refers specifically to the “missile experimental,” or “Peacekeeper,” as Reagan and his minions have dubbed it in their Wild West (or perhaps apocalyptic) fashion. But the MX is only a part, and an expendable part at that, of something greater. Nevertheless, there is something space-age and enigmatic about that title, making it a fearsome metaphor for an entire weapons system, which is itself only an integral part of that very organization of society, that Planet X, which makes it all possible. It is that system of domination which results in the production of that particular weapon, the MX, but which also creates countless other manifestations of its power, some not even weapons in the strict sense, though they do as much damage to the human body and spirit. The Planet X is the vast, unitary machine, made up of the thousands of weapons, innumerable computerized plans for destruction and for human domination, the massive bureaucracies, the tremendous expenditure and centralization of energy, the megatech projects which crush the landscape, all the interminable chains of command. It is an ant heap growing out of control. E.P. Thompson has labeled this system “exterminism,” while Lewis Mumford has described it as a megamachine. The “Peacekeeper” and other such military demons, as well as the human servants who bring them to life, are only the obelisk at the crown of an enormous pyramid, a pyramid built upside-down and teetering under its own weight. So Mayer’s choice of icons was rather appropriate, certainly as good as any other.

All the seemingly unrelated parts of the machine act in a chaotic unison, each contributing directly or indirectly, each layer aware of its own immediate acts but of no others, all the strata coalescing into a gigantic organism beyond the reach of the parts, an unknown X factor which even the analysts cannot begin to surmise—that hairline trigger, that gamble for war, the world we won’t live to see when these monsters have devoured it, the ever more terrifying discoveries emerging daily from the sorcery going on in the tiers standing alongside the sleek, riveted, voracious hull of Missile X. It is the sum of all the parts working away at the edifice of death—the daily death and the Final Death.

Life Among the “Well-adjusted”

Somehow the mass men of today have learned to live with this dread. That is what it means, among other things, to be “well-adjusted.” (It is an appropriate term: one adjusts a dial on electronic equipment or a lever on machinery.) But Norman Mayer saw through the illusion and was haunted by it until he broke, going beyond the norms and shattering the taboos to attack a symbol—an icon for an icon—and was killed in reprisal for this act of rebellion by normal men, following orders somewhere down the chain of command, like the men who will launch the missiles when they are so instructed by some supervisor or machine.

Meanwhile, normal people like ourselves went about their daily routines.

As soon as Reagan announced the MX missile in November as “the right missile at the right time,” as if by signal, the pseudo-opposition of anti-MX lobbyists and Freeze Campaign organizers, political realists all, went into action. How neatly it fits: while the liberals shoot at “empty silos,” the other manifestations of the beast—the first strike Cruise missiles, the Trident submarines, the conventional weapons buildup, the Rapid Deployment Forces, the interventionist schemes, the registration for military conscription, the society-wide psychological preparation for war—all go on unabated. The MX opponents, siding with Congressional hawks and even members of the Joint Chiefs of Staff, argue the “inadequacy” of the MX as a “deterrent,” calling in many cases for a conventional arms buildup or other forms of nuclear weapons, such as air-launched Cruise missiles, as an alternative.

And so the paradigm of the Planet X works in another important way. The megamachine functions as it does because all its parts only see it from their fragmented, partial perspective. A social opacity renders it invisible so that no relationships can be established between its isolated, everyday acts, its diverse sectors, and its result. The lobbyists, in similar fashion, are hypnotized by an icon, an image of the totality, a single weapon, the MX missile, while accepting the necessity of the very weapons system and the underlying social organization which give birth to it and which continue to engender other, even more horrible monstrosities. They are practical people, so they acknowledge that the system must remain intact (“at least for now,” and now is all that matters), and cannot see the relationship between the decoy missile, that trick with mirrors, and the entirety of the system, which it both sym-

bolizes and conceals. And so opposition to nuclearism, potentially opposition to those underlying social relations which make it a reality, gets lost in the labyrinthine halls of the electoral illusion while the hydra-headed machine creaks onward towards conflagration.

War Has Already Broken Out

Hence, in a manner of speaking, their war is already in progress, not only in the peripheries where the massacres go on unceasingly, but in the very minds and spirits of the drones here in the midst of the pyramid. World War III, the Final Death, has already broken out in the culture. A mass indifference has taken hold. As long ago as 1958, C. Wright Mills signaled this indifference as “moral somnambulism,” “the mute acceptance—or even unawareness—of moral atrocity.” Norman Mayer tried to shake people from their passivity and moral torpor with a dramatic act, but he ended up as carrion for the media, another show. Afterwards, the culture went on blowing up abstract worlds and alien enemies on video screens in mock rehearsals for the final conflict to come.

“In the expanded world of mechanically vivified communication,” wrote Mills, “the individual becomes the spectator of everything but the human witness of nothing...In official man there is no more human shock; in his unofficial follower there is little sense of moral issue...The atrocities of our time are done by men as ‘functions’ of a social machinery—men possessed by an abstracted view that hides from them the human beings who are their victims and, as well, their own humanity. They are inhuman acts because they are impersonal. They are not sadistic but merely businesslike; they are not aggressive but merely efficient; they are not emotional at all but technically clean-cut.”

Incarnating this indifference among the “well-adjusted” we find the clean-cut administrators and technicians of the so-called “defense community,” and even what one of them has called the “targeting community.” No Norman Mayers here to be sure. Just scientists, academics, and bureaucrats preparing the final holocaust (and all the variations on the theme) day in and day out from their comfortable offices in the Hudson Institute, the Pentagon, and General Dynamics. One should imagine them playing tennis, picking the “right school” for their children, and infighting in bureaucratic meetings to protect or expand their turf or to get another photocopier in their office—in short, all the little things which constitute the life of privileged bureaucrats everywhere.

These are the experts who are making the incremental decisions. Neither voting referendums nor street marches touch them in their quiet laboratories and offices. Whether confronted by six lonely souls bearing pathetic placards in Red Square or a million in Central Park, they go about their business. Whether the MX is defeated or squeaks through, they map their targets and improve their rockets.

Shift From MAD to NUTS

In the years since World War II, the analysts and experts have shifted in their theory of “deterrence” (since nobody admits to wanting a nuclear war, not even the sorcerers in the war rooms), from the model of Mutually Assured Destruction (MAD) to Nuclear Use Theory Strategy (NUTS). Within the context of the pyramid, these men are eminently sane and the Norman Mayers are the kooks and fanatics.

Those who argue, such as those experts who formerly made the decisions and who now find themselves outside the inner circles, that the MX, a first-strike weapon, should be killed and the strategy of deterrence under the model of Mutually Assured Destruction be maintained, don’t recognize that “deterrence” has gone the way of technology. War strategy has tailed after technological innovation, rendering MAD obsolete. The increased speed and accuracy of the missiles, and the increasingly blurred line between battlefield weapons and “ultimate” weapons, and not the changing mood of politicians, have eroded the original perspective of deterrence. When President Carter signed Presidential Directive 59 in July 1980, which called for the development of accurate first strike weaponry which could hit Soviet missiles in their silos, as well as calling for planning of so-called limited nuclear war based on the concept of “flexible response,” he was only making official what technology had been doing on its own within the bowels of the megamachine. (See “Yes We Have No Mañanas,” FE #303, October 20, 1980.)

Reagan and Weinberger call this process “modernization,” and that is in a sense exactly what it is. They are going to replace old weapons with newer, updated versions, whether or not they get their MX decoy in the bargain. Technology has its own laws—all must conform. Fear that the other side will attain first strike capability spurs each empire on, and both sides are without a doubt actively pursuing a first strike capability, worried that the other will achieve it first, though the Soviets appear to be way behind in the race. And since it will be the weaker partner which tends to set off the conflagration in an attempt to avoid being attacked without a chance to retaliate, Weinberger’s nightmare of Soviet attack will become a self-fulfilling prophecy in which the “deterrent” prompts the attack.

Planning, Planning, Planning

And so they go on planning, planning, planning the inevitable between cocktail parties, graduations and vacations. At work, they map out new targets, or discover a new component for lift-off rockets or a more efficient fuel. One bureaucrat, itching for a promotion, writes in the official budget for fiscal 1983, “U.S. defense policies ensure our preparedness to respond to, and, if necessary, successfully fight either conventional or nuclear war.” Another, (Eugene Rostow, Director of the U.S. Arms Control and Disarmament Agency, to be exact), quips, “We are in a pre-war and not a post-war world.” Another (Colin S. Gray of the Hudson Institute), hoping to make a name for himself in the “defense community” and hence to enter the inner circles, writes in an article titled “Victory Is Possible” in the Summer 1980 *Foreign Policy*, “If American nuclear power is to support U.S. foreign objectives, the United States must possess the ability to wage nuclear war rationally.” These are the normals.

So perhaps Norman Mayer was not so crazy, since contrary to the (mathematically demonstrable) concept of the probability of inevitable accidental nuclear war, with the deliberate planning and the modernization of the equipment, it will be an accident and a fluke if there is no nuclear war.

In a sensitive article, “The Bureaucratization of Homocide” (in the E.P. Thompson/Dan Smith collection *Protest and Survive*), Henry T. Nash, a former intelligence analyst for the Air Force Air Targets Division, describes the daily routines of the planners succinctly, asking “What was it about Air Targets that made me insensitive to its homicidal implications? I and my colleagues, with whom I shared a large office, drank coffee, and ate lunch, never experienced guilt or self-criticism. Our office behavior was no different from that of men and women who might work for a bank or insurance company. What enabled us calmly to plan to incinerate vast numbers of unknown human beings without any sense of moral revulsion?”

But something else lies beneath Nash’s questions. And that is that the inevitability of nuclear holocaust consists not only in people’s willingness to continue working as war targeters, but in their capacity to continue in the banks and insurance companies as well. The fact is that if people are incapable of or unwilling to collectively overthrow the everyday conditions of domination, to stop not only the decoys but the entirety of the empires and the megastates which produce them, then they can be sure that they are destined to die in a nuclear war.

Norman Mayer was a desperate man. He decided to target an icon of imperial power, of the state, a physical structure resembling a missile. But he could not do it alone—and perhaps, given the present momentum of events, or their inertia, his particular scheme was a hopeless and quixotic one. But a world free of the nuclear terror and all the terrors which flow from the megamachine, cannot be won without such a sense of urgency, passion and despair, without demolishing the icons of domination, without disrupting the rhythm made up of the everyday reproduction of the machine at its base, without dismantling the massified technological pyramid which incarnates absolute power and its absolute weapons.

The Grim Chase toward the Void

Lewis Mumford, comparing this quickening velocity toward the void with Captain Ahab’s maniacal pursuit of Moby Dick, wrote in *The Myth of the Machine*,

“Outwardly mankind is still committed to the grim chase Melville described, lured by the adventure, the prospect of oil and whalebone, the promptings of pride, and above all by a love-rejecting pursuit of power. But it

has also begun consciously to face the prospect of total annihilation, which may be brought about by the captains who now have control of the ship. Against that senseless fate every act of rebellion, every exhibition of group defiance, every assertion of the will-to-live, every display of autonomy and self-direction, at however primitive a level, diminishes the headway of the doom-threatened ship and delays the fatal moment when the White Whale will shatter its planks and drown the crew.”

Let this be an epitaph for Norman Mayer. The pervasive sense of radical futurelessness which drove him to the brink and beyond is an accurate sense of the state of the world. This civilization has no future. And only by winning back our present, by stopping this voracious Planet X in its tracks and regaining our own Planet Earth, can we assure any future for ourselves.

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<https://www.fiftheestate.org/archive/311-winter-1983/norman-mayer-and-the-missile-x>
Fifth Estate #311, Winter, 1983

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