

How 'Mad' was Norman?

Or Where Was Norman Normal?

Norman Bates

1983

FE NOTE: The following article arrived in the mail just as our last issue was going to the printer. Since that time, the government has closed the case on the shooting of Norman Mayer on Dec. 8, 1982 and his name has disappeared from the media. But his actions, and his message, continue to deserve attention. The postscript was submitted later, after two films on nuclearism were aired on national television.

"I would rather be mad with truth than sane with lies."

—Bertrand Russell

"The madman is not the man who has lost his reason. The madman is the man who has lost everything except his reason."

—G. K. Chesterton

Another national spectacle has ended. The murder of Norman Mayer by James Watt's National Park Police (the rapists of Smokey the Bear) and the Washington D.C. Police (the protectors of the KKK) closed a bizarre media event.

In the rush to judgment following Mayer's death, the media enacted its customary role in legitimating thought by rendering a verdict on the "insanity" of Norman Mayer's actions. If one brackets out the insipid platitudes about violence begetting violence (Norman Mayer, it should be pointed out, was unarmed and without any destructive materials apparently), one is still left with the pronouncement about Mayer's "madness." But how "mad" was Norman?

"Madness," contends the French philosopher and social critic Michel Foucault, "deals not so much with truth and the world, as with man and whatever truth about himself he is able to perceive." Our perception of madness, thus, is a reflection of what we think we see when we look at ourselves. However, this self-reflection is distorted not only by our own alienated praxis, but also by cultural institutions like the media. To a great extent the media performs a function not unlike what the asylum entails. According to Foucault, the asylum is a repository of "surveillance and judgment" that reinforces the lines of authority in society.

The tragedy of Norman Mayer's death is intimately bound up with the logic of his protest and the "rationality" of media politics. Norman Mayer sought what most "red-blooded" Americans seek—authenticating oneself through the media. This form of cultural narcissism infects the overwhelming majority of people in this society. Mayer's purpose in "taking" the Washington Monument was to use an icon (or in reductionist psychological terms, a phallic symbol) to grab the attention of the media (and, thus, grabbing the nation by the balls?). In turn, he thought he could use the media to broadcast his cause. Sharing this fetish of the media with a whole spectrum of political types, Norman Mayer thought that he could capture the mind of America. Unfortunately, the hermeneutic terrain

of media politics rests outside the power of those who have any serious alternative message to deliver. The banality of Mayer's protest, like his death, is the ultimate consequence to media politics.

On the other hand, Norman Mayer's message about nuclear madness and the "genocidalists" (his own term and one that indicates a penetrating mind) contained more than a kernel of rational thought. The very fact that Norman Mayer was encouraging people to read Jonathan Schell's *The Fate of the Earth* suggests a person who not only understood the full horror of nuclear politics, but also comprehended the need to do serious reflection on all the consequences of anti-nuclear politics (something that many proponents of a nuclear freeze haven't apparently grasped).

The psychological element in Mayer's approach to the anti-nuclear cause concerns the obsessive nature of Mayer's campaign. However, instead of trying to psychologize the links between his methods and his character structure, thus overdetermining the personal aspect, I want to focus on the social situation confronting those who also share Norman Mayer's "hang-up" about nuclear madness. I believe that the obsessive character and paranoia embedded in Mayer's message was a healthy and sane longing for survival. Mayer's lack of connection, however, to an ongoing community effectively sealed his social isolation and self-destruction. Moreover, Mayer's political sensibilities, i.e., media politics and the playing out of the narcissistic mania of being number one (as in his organization, "No. 1 Priority") hampered his ability to break through the lines of authority that ensnared the focal points of his protests, i.e., the White House and the Washington Monument. Without any meaningful social connections and bereft of a sense of the macro and micro-physics of power, Norman Mayer went off the deep-end.

Yet, if we consider the moment of combative action, misguided as it was, in Mayer's take-over of the Washington Monument, we have only our own passivity and spectatorship to bemoan. Lulled into the belief (engendered by the media and by some advocates of the nuclear freeze) that the MX missile vote was the dawn of a new beginning, many opponents of nuclear madness failed to recognize that the rest of the nuclear paraphernalia sailed through Congress on the very day Norman Mayer mounted his last ditch effort at generating a national dialogue.

On the other hand, how can one expect to develop a dialogue with those who accept any argument about the "rationality" of nuclear politics whether in its so-called winnable mode (the Reaganites) or its "defensive" mode (Kennedy et al)? A national dialogue on the basis of this "rationality" is a contradiction in terms. In fact, the communicative disorders embedded in America's political and cultural institutions can only lead to more crazy discussions about deterrence, appropriate weaponry, etc. The only way to create a critical discourse on the issue of nuclear madness is through combative politics and the development of communities of resistance. Norman Mayer was sane enough to know that talk is not only cheap, it's without substance unless there is a combative politics, that is, bringing the issue to an action context. Mayer's combative politics, however, were rootless and misdirected, something all too normal in what passes for the action context in the United States.

The rooting of a combative politics on the nuclear question, as well as other matters, calls for more than a rejection of politics-as-usual. We need to develop communities of resistance to the whole structure of the nuclear society. We need to turn upside down what is considered normal in our political culture—interest group and media politics—and, even, in everyday life—politeness and calmness about survival issues. Adjusting to the insanity of the power structure only increases the rage that all of us feel. Establishing our own directions, in conjunction with local, national, and international movements, requires fully understanding what constitutes being mad and normal and where reason resides in contemporary civilization. The unfortunate problem that plagues us all is that reason itself, as Foucault reminds us, is suspect. And, yet, our discontent with civilization must move beyond a primal whimper before we go out with a bang. Since, as I said once before, "We all go a little mad sometimes," let our madness seek new paths to sanity and survival before it's too late.

Yours for the future,

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Fifth Estate #312, Spring 1983

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