

# Tennessee Radicals Resist the Permanent Nuclear War Machine at Oak Ridge

MaxZine Weinstein

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A few months ago, George W. Bush proclaimed that 2002 would be a “war year.” Indeed, the so-called “War Against Terrorism” promises war without end. Still, the President has not hesitated in making superficial gestures towards “peace.” The latest of these is the recent nuclear arms reduction treaty signed with Russian President Vladimir Putin. The treaty will not dismantle a single weapon, simply move some into storage.

“Instead of liquidating the nuclear legacy President Bush is, at best, only rearranging it,” explains Kevin Martin, executive director of Peace Action. “His treaty doesn’t require any weapons to be destroyed, merely set aside in storage where they will be vulnerable to theft or rogue use. Past performance and the Bush administration’s penchant for unilateralism indicates that the majority of the weapons eliminations promised under the treaty will never come to pass.”

Perhaps some North Americans have been lulled by the myth that there is no longer a nuclear threat. In fact, the danger has grown as the government talks more and more about developing and using a new generation of nuclear weapons to accomplish foreign policy objectives. Under the Bush administration, the nukes industry is getting new contracts and programs.

Among the revelations fueling the war machine is the disclosure that Bush considers plausible the use of nuclear first-strikes against whomever he designates a “rogue nation.” Of course, most readers of this publication realize that the United States is itself the world’s most dangerous “rogue state.” Bush bullies, “We’ve got all options on the table, because we want to make it very clear to nations that you will not threaten the United States or use weapons of mass destruction against us or our allies.”

Even the response of mainstream critics has been appropriately suspicious. “They’re trying desperately to find new uses for nuclear weapons, when their uses should be limited to deterrence,” adds John Isaacs of the Council for a Livable World. “This is very, very dangerous talk...Dr. Strangelove is clearly still alive in the Pentagon,” emphasizes Paul Richter in the *Los Angeles Times*.

Since the Cold War officially ended, the anti-nuclear movement appeared to have vanished. Many radical anti-nuke activists—such as Starhawk, David Solnit, and Katya Komisaruk—who stoked the sometimes tepid peace movement with creativity and risk in the 1980s, have turned their organizing efforts to the global justice movement, bringing with them the dramatically democratic affinity group structures that have been so effective at mass mobilizations against the corporate elite. We need that kind of bold, risky energy in the anti-nuclear movement once again.

Here in the South, we’ve participated in biannual pilgrimages to Oak Ridge, Tennessee to the Y-12 nuclear weapons plant. The bombs used on Hiroshima and Nagasaki were built here, just as the next generation of “mini-nukes” will be assembled in our back yard. The Oak Ridge Environmental Peace Alliance (OREPA) organizes weekly vigils and larger protests. Rallies, speakers, music, civil disobedience and literature tables are the fare of the day. On

one hand, we feel like we have been doing this same dance for years. But on the other, it is not the same dance—the content and character of the protests is changing.

Our local A-bomb plant fits neatly into the Bush plans. Y-12 is the last full scale nuclear weapons production facility in the United States. The Department of Energy has unveiled plans for a new “National Security Complex” in Oak Ridge. A brand new 4 billion dollar bomb plant would enable them to do 10 times as much weapons work as current levels and to go into production of new nuclear weapons. The forces pushing to expand this work are formidable: corporate profiteers have lobbied and bought politicians with millions of dollars of investments to continue these projects.

The OREPA protests have a standard script. We gather on a Sunday at a city park next door to a museum documenting the great role of the atom (this is what Oak Ridge built its fortune on, starting as a World War II secret city to construct the first atomic bomb). We march through the streets by malls and fast food joints and the American flags that predominate exterior decorations these days. We arrive at the gates of Y-12 on the outskirts of the city. We are treated to (or bored by, depending upon your point of view) music, speeches, theater, and free food from Food Not Bombs. A group of people “cross the line” in acts of civil disobedience. Some years there have been 200 to 300 protesters. At the recent April actions, those numbers doubled.

In some ways this sounds like a rehashed plot from the 1980s and ‘90s. However, we are encouraged by the energy, the more complete critique, the understanding of corporate globalization, and the ‘connection to other social issues that are present at these events. Queer activists are happy to notice that homophobia (itself a driving force in militarism) is no longer a big part of the peace movement, as it was just 10 years ago. There is much less of “single issue” mentality. These shifts bode well for creating a long-term community of resistance.

Protests to stop the extended war against everything are growing. What remains to be seen is whether or not a long-term, effective strategy can develop to stop the nuclear madness. We must move beyond the amount of energy that gets put into the “let’s see how many people we can get arrested at a protest” game. While massive civil disobedience actions may help build a movement, they are not enough.

In the late 1980s, anarchists in the anti-nuke movement encouraged creativity and new tactics just as we’ve done in the streets to oppose organizations like the World Bank, the IMF, the WTO, and so on. Clearly, it’s time to renew a more vigorous opposition to America’s own “weapons of mass destruction” and ingest the beleaguered anti-nuke movement with the energy of the global justice movement.

## **Hiroshima Day Actions for Peace**

In Oak Ridge, Tennessee  
August 3 and 4, 2002  
for information, contact OREPA  
PO Box 5743, Oak Ridge, TN 37831  
865-483-8202  
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