



Written by [Alex Newman](#) on March 31, 2011

Anti-War Nun, Priests, Grandmas Sentenced to Prison

A federal judge sentenced a group of five anti-nuclear weapons protesters — two elderly priests, an 84-year-old nun, a retired teacher, and a 61-year-old social worker — to prison after they admitted to breaking into a U.S. naval base to hang banners and pray.

Known as the “Bangor 5,” the peace activists were [arrested](#) on All Souls night in November 2009 for cutting through several fences surrounding the Kitsap-Bangor military base in Washington state to protest against the U.S. government’s offensive nuclear arsenal. Once inside, they sprinkled blood, unfurled banners reading “Disarm Now Plowshares, Trident: Illegal + Immoral” and prayed for hours until being detained.



The five were [convicted](#) by a federal jury late last year of conspiracy, trespassing, and destruction of government property. And earlier this week, U.S. District Judge Benjamin Settle sentenced the activists to a year of supervised release following prison terms of between two and 15 months — far less than the possible 10 years they could have faced.

The judge actually [praised](#) as “extraordinary” the protesters' humanitarian efforts and activism. “It’ll be a great day when [the nuclear weapons] exist no more,” the judge [said](#). “It’s not easy to sit in judgment of people who have lived such sacrificial lives.”

However, due to the illegality of the protests and the dangers involved, Settle [said](#) he had to send a “clear message” that only lawful activism should be used to seek change. He also emphasized that the protesters could have been killed and that their methods [represented](#) “a form of anarchy.”

Prosecutors, who [said](#) the “selfish” demonstrators had “crossed a line,” were seeking prison sentences of up to three years followed by three years of probation. “These defendants must be held accountable under the law,” [charged](#) Assistant U.S. Attorney Arlen Storm.

But hundreds of protesters who gathered at the courthouse before sentencing evidently did not agree. They carried signs with messages such as “Blessed are the Peacemakers” and “War is not Christ’s way,” according to [news reports](#). Some cried after the sentences were announced. According to the Catholic News Service, supporters [left](#) the court singing the traditional Latin canon *Dona Nobis Pacem*, or Grant Us Peace.

As noted by the judge, the convicted protesters showed no signs of remorse. And in their statements, the activists made that abundantly clear. They said, among other things, that the U.S. government was in fact violating the law by maintaining a vast arsenal of “illegal” nuclear weapons on the base and on submarines.

“I’m so glad for the action we took,” [said](#) 82-year-old Jesuit priest Bill Bichsel. “I think the only law that



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we tried to carry in our own hands is God's law."

The other priest, 61-year-old Stephen Kelly, [echoed](#) those remarks: "We went to the base to uphold a higher law," he said. "I think it's really worth it. I have the solace of my conscience, as I think this is just one little step against nuclear weapons and someday we'll be free, and maybe not in my lifetime, but I have hope."

In fact, all of the defendants maintained that they were not guilty owing to the alleged illegality and lethality of the nuclear weapons they were protesting against. But the judge [prohibited](#) the use of that defense during trial.

"We accept personal responsibility for bringing attention to the policies of our government, and for the responsibility of protesting nuclear weapons," [wrote](#) 84-year-old Sacred Heart Sister Anne Montgomery in court documents cited by the Associated Press, noting that the group had considered the possibility that they could have been shot.

But she was firm in her convictions. "We know that the manufacture and deployment of Trident II missiles, weapons of mass destruction, is immoral and criminal under International law and, therefore, under United States law," she wrote, referring to a treaty that purports to ban "first strike" nuclear weapons.

An attorney who helped prepare a defense for the activists, all of whom represented themselves in court, [harshly criticized](#) the trial in an article for *Counter Punch* after sentencing. The fact that the defendants were extremely limited in what defenses they were allowed to use, for example, made convincing a "baffled" jury of their innocence quite tough.

High-profile supporters of the activists [include](#) former U.S. Attorney General Ramsey Clark and retired Catholic Bishop Thomas Gumbleton of Detroit. Other backers, while not necessarily supportive of the means, praised the protests and the attention showered on the cause.

"I wish these peace protesters had used other means of pointing attention to the obscene and bloated US military budget, and how the military/industrial and security/industrial sector of the Government's economy has drained it almost to a point of no return," [wrote](#) anti-war talk-radio host Michael Rivero. "I would truly love to believe that legal means can always bring about positive change; however, 'belief' and the hard reality about the direction in which this country is going, is a chasm too wide to cross these days."

Some critics of the activists [left harsh comments](#) scattered across the web posted below news stories about the sentencing. However, no prominent figures were quoted denouncing the protesters in major media reports.

The convicted activists have a week left to file an appeal. All were taken into custody on Monday, March 28, after some said they might not show up to serve their time if they were set free until a later date.



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