

Berrigan Trial-- Government vs. Peace Movement

By John Cotter

HARRISBURG (Pa.) — (AP) — Antiwar priest Philip Berrigan and seven men and women go on trial here Jan. 10 for conspiring against the United States. Many view it as a showdown between the government and the peace movement but, so far, this city seems unimpressed.

Berrigan and his codefendants — two priests, a nun, a former priest, a former nun, a Pakistani scholar and a young draft resister — have become the Harrisburg 8.

Given the background and celebrity of the defendants and the charges involved, the trial will attract worldwide attention. Already it has brought a small band of young activist foes of the war to this reserved capital of Pennsylvania.

But in the city itself, the hub of a mainly rural 11-county area which provided the grand jury that indicated the defendants and will provide a jury to try them, there have been only ripples of interest.

With the rest of the world, residents of Harrisburg got word of the city's role in the case last Jan. 12 when the Justice Department announced that a secret grand jury meeting here had indicated Berrigan and five others. The charges were plotting to blow up heating tunnels of federal buildings in Washington and to kidnap presidential adviser Henry Kissinger to force a bombing halt in Southeast Asia.

Four months later, the grand jury returned a second, superseding indictment. It added two defendants and made broader charges involving destruction of draft records. With it, the government no longer had to prove its sensational bomb-kidnap

accusations to win convictions.

The trial will take place in a heavily guarded courtroom on the ninth floor of a multi-million-dollar marble, steel and glass building built three years ago to house the federal government. Ten of the courtroom's 85 spectator seats will be open daily for those among the city's 67,500 residents who care to watch.

At first glance, Harrisburg may be the perfect site for a trial with such political overtones.

Outwardly, it is a sleepy little town. Its residents are conservative, government-oriented, Republican. Harrisburg has been untouched by the antiwar activism of the defendants.

But underneath, change is brewing.

"Harrisburg is a city catching up with things that have been happening through the 1960s . . . it is groping with problems long ignored," said Bob Mendelsohn, 30 year old executive director of the City Human Relations Commission.

For years, despite a rapidly growing black population, Harrisburg government was almost the exclusive property of whites. But the situation was changed somewhat by four days of mild rioting in 1969 and by the efforts of a small group of young black and white antipoverty workers.

The city, now 37 percent black, has a black school board president, a black councilman. City schools are in the second year of a desegregation plan that calls for widespread busing of the district's 12,000 pupils, 59 percent of them black.

Opposition to the busing plan was not substantial, though there were grumblings.

"The people here are diffi-

cult to arouse and even when they're aroused . . . they're not very aroused," mused Jack Lynch, a 40 year old former Democratic candidate for mayor who holds the No. 2 post in the state auditor general's office.

To Lynch, the young people of the Harrisburg Defense Committee who are here to try to get the people interested in the trial and their cause of peace face a difficult task.

"Even if there is interest," he said, "you have to beat people over the head to get a response. It stems, I think from a general lifestyle traceable to the Germans and Swedes who first settled here. The people are conservative and stable in just about everything they do. Stability and security are goals."

The youths also face other odds.

The state is the biggest industry here, employing some 20,000 persons from the city and surrounding suburbs and small towns which boost the metropolitan population to 400,000. And there are few who are not somehow affected by state pay and pension checks.

Hundreds of other residents go to work daily for a Navy supply depot in nearby Mechanicsburg and an Army base in New Cumberland, where helicopters damaged in Vietnam are repaired and sent back to war.

It is strong on the military.

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The state Veterans of Foreign Wars and the American Legion are headquartered here. Bars abound with talk of the good old Army days; faded stickers proclaiming "America, Love It or Leave It" can still be spotted on cars. Until the number of draftees began decreasing with the winding down of the Vietnam ground war, civic leaders hosted bon voyage parties for recruits of the late 1960s.

"Harrisburg is fully out of the peace movement," said Paul Beers, a historian and columnist for the Harrisburg Evening News.

"There is a strong peace base here," he added, "Quakers, Mennonites, others with strong antiwar convictions. But it is quiet and unassertive. The people are socially conservative and protest is bad manners."

There were attempts to introduce the movement to the city and a peace center was opened during the moratoriums of 1968 and 1969. But the campaign failed to generate much interest.

Since February, members of the Harrisburg Defense Committee have been trying anew. They are not connected with the defense but with a national organization established to help raise money

like.

"We're not here to defend the Harrisburg 8 but to make a gift to the community, to bring about an awareness," said Fred Solowey, a 1970 graduate of Cornell University who is the coordinator of the local committee.

Solowey and the three other committee staff members have been working long days, lining up speaking engagements for the three defendants who have come to town early, soliciting help from clergy and lay groups, trying to stir up interest among students at a two-year community college which opened in the mid-1960s and trying to get shoppers and workers to talk about peace and government repression and social justice.

There also is planning for demonstrations once the trial opens: an Easter pilgrimage to the city from points across the nation, an amateur production of Daniel Berrigan's play, "The Trial of the Catonsville Nine."

Their successes have been small — there is now a core of about 50 who can be counted on. But the workers seem undaunted.

The defendants, members of a mostly middle class Catholic left, have drawn their principal support here from the religious.

Several months after the

first indictment, 34 of the diocese's 172 active priests signed a statement of solidarity with the defendants. Later 10 more priests signed. Most of them were from the immediate area and their average age was 35 to 40. Among them was a monsignor.

Some defense supporters and defense lawyers claim the government handpicked Harrisburg as the trial site, but the Justice Department denies it.

Spokesmen maintain the alleged plot was hatched and key acts of the conspiracy

occurred in the Middle District of Pennsylvania while Philip Berrigan was a federal prisoner at Lewisburg, an hour's drive away.

There is scattered talk about the possibility of outsiders turning the trial into a street event. But law enforcement officials play this down and a random survey of stores in the immediate vicinity of the courthouse uncovered little concern among owners.

"This is a capital city and there are many demonstrations," said Mayor Harold Swenson. "Teachers seeking more pay, welfare rights groups. They come and go all the time. Downtown you tell somebody about a demonstration and he'll say, 'So what else is new?'"

"The people who support the Harrisburg 8 aren't going to give us a hard time," he continued. "I know them."



SHOWING SUPPORT FOR THE HARRISBURG 8
Jerry Eller and Tom Davidson with a defense T-shirt

—AP Photo