

Levitating the Pentagon: Exorcism as Politics, Politics as Exorcism

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ABSTRACT

On 21 October 1967 Allen Ginsberg, Abbie Hoffman, and Ed Sanders of the band The Fugs, and others, organized an “exorcism” of the Pentagon in which several thousand demonstrators participated. Most historians have regarded this event as “a put on” or at best as “performance art.” This article takes seriously the nominal status of the ritual as a “sacred” or “magical” event. It argues that the organizers were utilizing innovative strategies of social action to alter the terms of debate regarding the Vietnam War.

Inasmuch as these strategies drew on “secret” insights into the nature of social reality, they were seen as “magical” and in continuity with pre-modern esoteric traditions. Finally, it is argued that the new left turned to such tactics out of a deep frustration with traditional forms of democratic political engagement.

Keywords

Pentagon, new left, magic, 1960s, protest, Ginsberg

On 21 October, 1967 Allen Ginsberg, Abbie Hoffman, and Ed Sanders of the band The Fugs, and others organized an “exorcism” of the Pentagon. According to Hoffman, twelve hundred protesters would surround the building and perform a ritual, causing it to levitate three hundred feet in the air. The Pentagon would then turn orange and spin, expelling its demons and ending the Vietnam War (Hoffman 2005, 3). Journalist Norman Mailer, who witnessed the ritual, wrote that, “The March on the Pentagon was an ambiguous event whose essential value or absurdity may not be established for ten or twenty years, or indeed ever” (Mailer 1971, 53).

But forty years later this event has not received the analysis it deserves. Most historiography of the Pentagon Exorcism suffers from two erroneous assumptions: first that it was *only* an act of political theatre, and not

a sincere exorcism; and second that it was an isolated incident that could only have occurred in 1967. Neither of these assumptions appears to be true. While apologists have explained the exorcism as an act of symbolic protest or a clever bit of propaganda, the design of the ritual drew heavily from the esoteric milieu of the 1960s, and sincere magical practitioners collaborated alongside pranksters and activists. Furthermore, since 1967 this strange combination of politics and esotericism has become part of the repertoire of various leftist social movements. A prominent example is the 1999 World Trade Organization meeting in Portland, Oregon. Anarchists smashed the windows of storefronts, explaining that each broken windowpane was a corporate "spell" they had broken (Gay 1999).¹ Meanwhile, the anarchist witch Starhawk conducted a "WTO spell." Using classic sympathetic magic, the public ritual featured an ice sculpture, the melting of which corresponded to the dissolution of the WTO's power (Starhawk 1999).

It is also telling that these two assumptions about the Pentagon Exorcism correspond to two variations of the secularization thesis as described by Jose Casanova: the privatization-of-religion thesis and the decline of religion thesis (Casanova 1994, 25–39). In the first version of this narrative, it is assumed that sacred ritual cannot be relevant to the public sphere, so the appearance of such a ritual must *ipso facto* be "a prank" or theatre. In the second narrative it is assumed that belief in magic is on the decline, and that a mass exorcism must be a "last gasp" of supernaturalism prior to complete secularization.²

However, as the secularization narrative has increasingly come under attack,³ it is time to reassess what happened at the Pentagon in 1967. This event was implicitly a religious one in Edward Bailey's three senses of commitment, intensive concerns with extensive effects, and most signif-

1. In an Internet post, anarchists identified as "the Black Bloc" claimed responsibility for property damage done during the protests. They stated, "The number of broken windows pales in comparison to the number of broken spells—spells cast by a corporate hegemony to lull us into forgetfulness of all the violence committed in the blame of private property rights and of all the potential of a society without them. Broken windows can be boarded up (with yet more waste of our forests) and eventually replaced, but the shattering of assumptions will hopefully persist for some time to come."
2. For the "last gasp" argument regarding religious innovation, see Bryan Wilson's article "The Return of the Sacred" in the *Journal for the Scientific Study of Religion* (Wilson 1979).
3. See, for instance, Casanova 1994, 11; Stark 1999; Swatos and Christiano 2000, 2.

icantly, integrating foci (Bailey 1997, 8–9). In fact, the exorcism was a strange mixture of political protest, satirical theater, and collective ritual. It was nominally a “magical” ritual, and it calls for a reassessment of how “magic”—as distinct from religion or art—might be defined in the modern era: using exorcism to end the Vietnam War is a very different goal from the more quotidian magical rituals classically studied by Frazer, Mauss, and Malinowski. The “new left” of the 1960s drew on esoteric traditions to manipulate the symbolic order rather than the natural world. Ginsberg, Hoffman, and company employed innovative strategies (the manipulation of language, street theater, and collective ritual) that were designed to bypass the political arena by moving directly to the level of collective representations. Their exorcism sought to “profane” a building that they felt many Americans regarded as sacred. The collective chaos they unleashed was an attempt to create symbolic space for a reassessment of the government and the Vietnam War. The “new left” described these tactics as a form of “magic” and apparently saw them as continuous with the esoteric traditions of pre-modern cultures. In this sense, the Pentagon Exorcism was “magic” for the late twentieth century.

Finally, the exorcism raises intriguing questions about the relationship between esotericism and agency. Edward Tiryakian has suggested that the survival of esoteric culture in the modern world represents a lack of confidence in established models of reality (Tiryakian 1972, 510). There is evidence that the exorcists turned to the occult not out of a naïve Aquarian optimism, but rather a deep cynicism about traditional Enlightenment ideals of democratic representation.⁴

What really happened on 21 October 1967

The event that Sanders calls, “The Great Exorcism and Levitation of the Pentagon” was only a small part of a much larger protest known as “Stop the Draft Week,” during which some eleven hundred men burned their draft cards and protestors famously stuck flowers into the barrels of M-16s (Gosse 2005, 93). The march is frequently cited as the moment when the

4. “Occultism,” as opposed to the broader category of esotericism or magic, is often characterized as a response to the Enlightenment. Nicholas Goodrick-Clarke writes that behind the various systems and pseudo-sciences that have been branded as “occult,” “there lay a strong desire to reconcile the findings of modern natural science with a religious view that could restore man to a position of centrality and dignity in the universe” (Goodrick-Clarke 1992, 29). The new left seemed to be experimenting with a similar reconciliation of rational political discourse and a religious view in which individuals could participate directly.

peace movement turned from “the politics of protest” to “the politics of confrontation” (Bodroghkozy 2001, 139). On that day of the exorcism there were as many as 100,000 protesters in Washington. However, intelligence agencies as well as aerial photography from a Navy Skywarrior reconnaissance plane indicate that only about thirty-five thousand actually marched on the Pentagon. At the same time, nearly twenty-four hundred soldiers had been brought in to defend the Pentagon, and thirteen tear-gas launchers had been installed on the roof (Vogel 2008, 367–374). By the end of the day, 647 demonstrators had been arrested, and forty-seven hospitalized (Stone 2004, 430).

Many individuals have been credited with the idea for the exorcism. It seems that there was no single mastermind behind this event. Rather, it arose organically, drawing on the input of numerous people. Bill Ellis has suggested that there may have originally been two rival visions of the ritual—one an exorcism and one a levitation—and that they eventually merged (Ellis 2000, 175). What is certain is that the idea came together at a “Human Be-In” held on 14 January, 1967 in San Francisco’s Golden Gate Park. The Be-In brought together numerous figures from the new left such as the Beat poets Allen Ginsberg and Gary Snyder, the painter Michael Bowen, and Allen Cohen, the editor of the underground paper *The Oracle*. Also present was anti-war activist Jerry Rubin, who had been asked to give a speech (Sloman et al. 2004, 22).

David Dellinger, of the National Mobilization Committee to End the War in Vietnam (also known as “the Mobe”), had recruited Jerry Rubin to lead a march on Washington. Rubin, not yet thirty, had already accomplished such subversive feats as traveling illegally to Cuba and interviewing Che Guevara. He had also aided Abbie Hoffman in visiting the New York Stock Exchange to throw dollar bills at stockbrokers and set money on fire. Dellinger hoped that by recruiting Rubin, an alliance could be formed between committed “old left” activists, and the hippies (Stone, 2004, 448). It was Rubin’s idea to target the Pentagon, rather than Congress, commenting, “The Pentagon would be seen as the enemy, whereas Congress is kind of neutral. It would be the wrong message to march on Congress” (Sloman et al. 2004, 28).

Someone suggested to Rubin that the march on the Pentagon should take the form of a levitation and/or an exorcism. Rubin himself recalled that the idea had been Hoffman’s. Allen Ginsberg attributed the idea to Gary Snyder, who wrote his vitriolic poem, “A Curse on the Men in Washington, Pentagon” in the summer of 1967 (Sloman et al. 2004, 28).

Historian W.J. Rorabaugh attributes the idea for a levitation to Charlie Brown Artman, Berkeley's "original hippie," while under the influence of LSD (Rorabaugh 1989, 135). Allen Cohen has also claimed credit for the idea, along with his friend Michael Bowen. In this version of events, the inspiration was Cohen's reading of *The City in History* by Lewis Mumford. Mumford describes the Pentagon as a sort of architectural throwback to "Bronze Age fantasies of absolute power." He links the construction of the Pentagon in 1943 to a similar regression towards a government characterized by secrecy and "priestcraft." He concludes that humanity may not develop further until the building is demolished (Mumford 1997, 432). Cohen read this passage to Rubin. According to Cohen, "I suggested that we direct our energies toward the Pentagon, to exorcising it in a magic ceremony. [He] liked that idea because he was into the theatre of politics, we were into the magic of living, and so the two ideas merged" (Taylor 1987, 240). This account is interesting, because it suggests that from its very inception, the exorcism was a polyvalent event: theater for some, the mobilization of literal esoteric forces for others.

To organize such an event, Rubin immediately sought the aid of his friend Hoffman, who is largely credited with the playful, innovative style of the protest (Stone 2004, 449). Hoffman proceeded to engage in a series of very public magical preparations to cultivate media attention. Hoffman later reflected on this work: "Media is free. Use it. Don't pay for it. Don't buy ads. Make news" (Hoffman 2005, 44). The first of these preparations was to measure the Pentagon in order to calculate how many people would be needed to surround it. The artist Martin Carey assisted in this task and would later design a poster for the exorcism (Isitt 2009, 139). Hoffman found that one side of the Pentagon was approximately two hundred and forty people wide, and concluded that twelve hundred people would be needed to surround all five sides. During this exercise, he was arrested by national guardsmen and informed that it was illegal to measure the Pentagon. Hoffman used the opportunity to tell Pentagon personnel that he would soon surround the building with an army of hippies and levitate it (Hoffman 2005, 43). Informing them of this was likely the entire point of the exercise.

Before being escorted off the premises, Hoffman made a formal request for a permit to levitate the Pentagon. Surprisingly, this was granted. Activist Sal Gianetta commented on this discussion, "It was unbelievable. That meeting was like two and a half hours or so and probably twenty per cent of that meeting was devoted to this serious talk about levitating the Pen-

tagon. And this is our military, right?" (Sloman et al. 2004, 30). The General Services Administrator consented to an attempt at levitation on two conditions: first, the Pentagon could be raised only three feet, so as not to damage the foundations. Second, participants would be allowed to gather in front of the building but not to surround it. Hoffman found the offer acceptable: he and the administrator shook on it (Sloman et al. 2004, 30).

Back in New York, Hoffman followed this up with a press conference. In a more explicit threat that first appeared in the *East Village Other*, he declared:

We will dye the Potomac red, burn the cherry trees...sorcerers, swamis, witches, voodoo, warlocks, medicine men and speed freaks will hurl their magic at the faded brown walls. Rock bands will bomb out with "Joshua fit the Battle of Jericho." We will dance and sing and chant the mighty OM. We will fuck on the grass and beat ourselves against the doors. Everyone will scream "VOTE FOR ME." We shall raise the flag of nothingness over the Pentagon and a mighty cheer of liberation will echo through the land.

(Hoffman 2005, 39)

The reference to the Battle of Jericho is perhaps telling. Hoffman shrewdly implies that there is a precedent in Judaeo-Christian tradition for demolishing fortifications using only collective ritual.

He also worked with the New York Diggers, an activist and street theatre group, to scavenge "witch costumes" from rummage sales and second hand stores. Two vanloads of costumes were prepared for the trip to Washington (Jezer 1992, 116). Activists held a benefit concert in the Village Theatre to raise funds for the effort on 13 October. The concert took the form of a ritual and doubled as another occult preparation. The Associated Press covered the event and several newspapers ran headlines like "Hippie Magic Readied to Destroy Pentagon" (Miller 1967, 7). Ed Sanders of The Fugs presided over this ritual, in which a photo of the Pentagon was burned. The ashes were then gathered into a bottle, which would be buried in Washington and then cast on the Pentagon itself. (In Frazer's terms, this was both sympathetic and contagious magic.) According to newspaper accounts, the ritual lasted over an hour and was attended by some two hundred people. Performers wore green paint in order to offset red, the colour of Mars, god of war (Miller 1967, 7). A Native American shaman consecrated the ceremony by throwing down cornmeal (Sloman et al. 2004, 30). According to some accounts, the ritual also involved smoke bombs (Jezer 1992, 116). As the performance climaxed, participants joined hands around a table-sized plywood model of the Pentagon and chanted

"Up, demon! Up, demon!" as the model was pulled by piano wires toward the ceiling.

Ed Sanders took responsibility for designing the main ritual in Washington. According to Sanders, the rite was originally to be modeled on the "Catholic or Episcopalian" rite of exorcism (Taylor 1987, 241). Sanders recalls contacting his friend the occultist Harry Smith, who was a regular at his New York Bookstore, The Peace Eye. According to Sanders:

So I went to Harry and asked him what happened in an exorcism and he gave me some advice. So he filled me in on what his view was. He told me about consecrating the four directions, surrounding it, circling it, using elements of earth, air, fire and water, alchemical symbols to purify the place, to invoke certain deities, and so on. So I sing-songed a whole retinue of deities past and present, imaginary and real, to summon the strength to exorcise this place. It was part real, part symbolic, part wolf ticket, part spiritual, part secular, part wishful thinking and part anger. And it had humor. You gotta have the universal humor. And since I knew Indo-European languages, I learned this Hittite exorcism ritual. I actually put together a decent exorcism. (Sloman 2004, 30)

Sander's "decent exorcism" was made into a mimeographed sheet with the liturgical structure for the ritual. A Greek magical formula appears at the top of the text. This is actually part of a spell for conjuring a supernatural servant taken from the Preisendanz magical papyri (Betz 2007, 6). At the bottom of the page is transliterated Hittite, presumably an exorcism. The actual ritual consists of ten steps, including such ritual acts as praying for the bad karma of American soldiers, consecrating the four directions, encircling the Pentagon in cornmeal⁵, and the use of a "sacred Grope relic." These preparations are followed by the actual "ceremony of exorcism" with ritual steps corresponding to the four elements, "the rising of the Pentagon," and something called "the EXORGASM." The service concludes with a peace mantra.

Needless to say, Sanders' ritual is highly eclectic. Bill Ellis notes that the rite uses the "standard format" of Wiccan ceremony. Specifically, he cites features that he associates with the ritual praxis of Wiccan pioneer Gerald Gardner. The phrase "rising of the Pentagon" is suggestive of "raising a cone of power." The sexual features of the ritual (i.e. the Grope relic, the Exorgasm) are also reminiscent of Gardnerian sexual magic (Ellis 2000,

5. Gary Lachman suggests that this feature of the ritual was proposed by the Native American shaman and activist Rolling Thunder, who suggested that, "among his people the surest way to contain evil emanations is to encircle them" (Lachman 2003, 356).

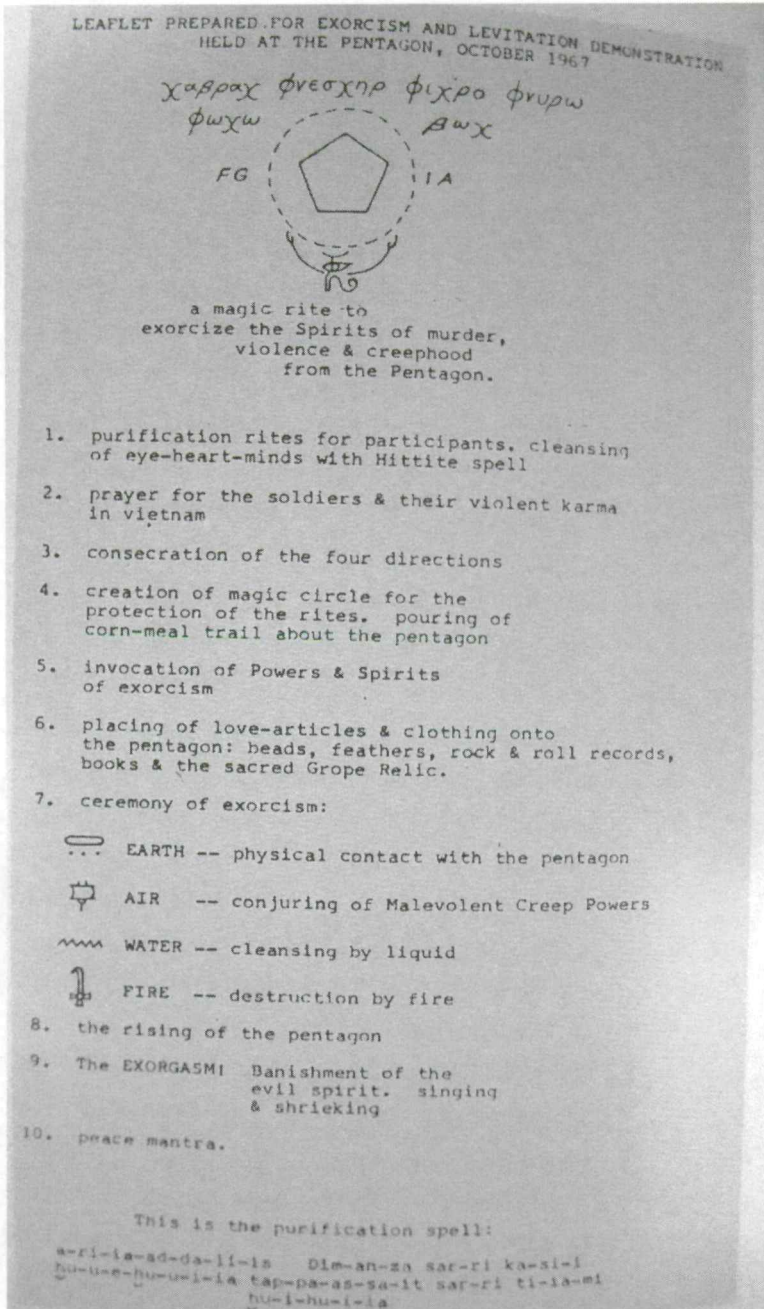


Figure 1 Mimeographed pamphlet describing the exorcism ritual designed by Ed Sanders.

175). (Of course, transgressive sexuality also permeates the entire *oeuvre* of Ed Sanders and The Fugs.) Any Pagan elements in the rite were most likely introduced by Harry Smith.

The actual ritual was nowhere near as elaborate or as organized as this pamphlet might suggest. Sanders described various plans for the rite that never saw fruition, such as finding a Native American to circle the Pentagon with a trail of cornmeal and acquiring a live cow to symbolize Hathor, the Egyptian sky-deity, patroness of arts and schools (Taylor 1987, 241–242). Journalist Paul Krassner was scheduled to speak at a literary conference at the University of Iowa. Abbie Hoffman tapped him to purchase organic Iowa cornmeal—enough to encircle the Pentagon. Krassner recalls, “I was supposed to be a rationalist, but it was hard to say no to Abbie.” Sadly, the morning before the exorcism, Krassner, along with Bob Fass, and a woman identified only as “Mountain Girl,” decided to “test” the cornmeal by encircling the Washington Monument and were detained by law enforcement. After explaining that they were conducting a religious ritual, the activists were released. Their cornmeal, however, was confiscated (Sloman *et al.* 2004, 30–32). As for the goddess Hathor, plans had been made with Harry Smith to bring in a cow from Virginia, painted with occult symbols. The cow was stopped by police. Finally, numerous daisies had been purchased with the intention of chartering a small plane that would be used to rain flowers onto the Pentagon. Activists were stopped at the airport by the FBI, but allowed to keep the daisies. These were taken to the march where some of them found their way into the barrels of M-16s (Sloman *et al.* 2004, 32). Ironically, this unintended chain of events led to the famous photograph of peace activists placing flowers into gun barrels. This was arguably the greatest propaganda victory of the march. Daniel Ellsberg, the military analyst who leaked the Pentagon Papers to *The New York Times*, commented that, “Once the kid put his flower in the barrel of the kid looking just like himself but tense and nervous, the authority of the Pentagon psychologically was dissolved” (Sloman *et al.* 2004, 38).

The actual ritual lasted approximately fifteen minutes and focused around The Fugs, who performed from a flat bed truck equipped with a gas powered generator. (Proceeds from a recent concert in Washington had been used to rent the truck (Taylor 1987, 257).) In front of a canvas backdrop painted with a Day-Glo image of the “Eye of Providence,” handfuls of colored cornmeal were sprinkled to the four directions (Sloman *et al.* 2004, 33). A mimeographed text was circulated through the crowd containing a spell that invoked deities, saints, and supernatural beings from numerous

cultures and religions. The spell read, in part:

21 October, 1967, Washington, D.C., U.S.A., Planet Earth

We Freeman, of all colors of the spectrum, in the name of God, Ra Jehovah, Anubis, Osiris, Tlaloc, Quetzalcoatl, Thoth, Ptah, Allah, Krishna... We are demanding that the pentacle of power once again be used to serve the interests of GOD manifest in the world as man. We are embarking on a motion which is millennial in scope. Let this day, 21 October, 1967, mark the beginning of suprapolitics.

By act of reading this paper you are engaged in the Holy Ritual of Exorcism. To further participate focus your thought on the casting out of evil through the grace of GOD which is all (ours). A billion stars in a billion galaxies of space and time is the form of your power, and limitless is your name. (Mailer 1971, 120–121)

Philip Metres points out that the leaflet alternately invokes the grammar of political petitions (“we are demanding”), legal and political language (“embarking on a motion”), and religious rite (“GOD manifest in the world as man”) (Metres 2007, 109). The crowd responded with refrains of “Out Demons! Out!” and “Burn the money!” Others spontaneously began to chant the Maha Mantra, made popular by the International Society for Krishna Consciousness, founded the previous year by A.C. Bhaktivedanta Swami Prabhupada. Mailer recalls that the ritual ended with a sustained chant of “Om” (Mailer 1971, 122).

Interesting as The Fugs were, equally interesting was what was happening *under* the truck. Here Kenneth Anger, an occultist and follower of the magician Aleister Crowley, was conducting his own ritual to end the war, which was both more secretive and more sinister. Allen Ginsberg commented, “While Ed was trying to un-hex the Pentagon, Kenneth Anger was underneath his wagon trying to hex him” (Sloman et al. 2004, 33).

Magic as “suprapolitics”

Historians have struggled to define the nature of this protest. Many seem to have viewed it as apolitical or a joke. Jonah Raskin describes it as “a colossal put on” (Raskin 1996, 120). Christopher Lasch described the theater of Hoffman and the Yippies as, “The degeneration of politics into spectacle” (Lasch 1991, 81). More cogent are arguments that take seriously Sanders’ claim that this is the beginning of “suprapolitics.” Julie Stephens argues that whatever else the protest might have also been, it was fully political (Stephens 1998, 37). Several scholars have noted how the event used theater to express opposition to the war, while simultaneously disrupting the cultural norms that legitimized the war. T.V. Reed writes

that, "The march was an attempt to establish democratic control over the course of America's political life through a collective reinterpretation of the meaning of the building said to embody the nation's 'defense'" (Reed 1992, 91).

Few scholars have suggested that the exorcism may have been a sincere example of sacred ritual as well as a clever semiotic maneuver. Bill Ellis (2000, 175–177) and Gary Lasch (2003, 355–257) describe the exorcism in the context of an occult revival and a burgeoning Pagan movement underway during the 1960s. Camille Paglia also notes the influence of the occult on the new left and describes the event as "a strange mix of revolutionary politics with ecstatic nature-worship and sex-charged self-transformation" (Paglia 2003, 58). Amanda Porterfield describes the exorcism as an expression of "free floating sacramentalism" (Porterfield 2001, 110). The fact that so little historical analysis has considered the nominally "sacred" status of the ritual appears to be a function of the secularization narrative.

Similarly, most historians view the event as a monovalent and cohesive undertaking, which it was not. The event was in fact a confluence of three different traditions of "exorcism." First, there was the poetry of figures like Gary Snyder and Allen Ginsberg, who had begun to combine political invective with Buddhist esotericism. Beat poets were attempting to effect political change through the manipulation of language, and their poetry described this endeavor in terms of "spels," curses, and exorcism. At the same time, Abbie Hoffman and the Diggers were describing their political street theater as "exorcism." This term seems to have found its way into Hoffman's political philosophy through the work of French playwright Atonin Artaud. Finally, the exorcism was aided by figures that may be called "occultists" in the most traditional and literal sense, the most prominent of these being Kenneth Anger. All three of these approaches were "suprapolitical," in that they sought to effect change by bypassing the traditional channels of political representation. However, all three were also esoteric—in Tiryakian's sense, of having "secret knowledge of the reality of things" (Tiryakian 1972, 499).⁶ Ginsberg, Hoffman, and Anger each felt they had found "a secret" to end the war that they described, either literally or figuratively, as magic.

6. Gary Lasch has also described the politics of the new left during the 1960s as esoteric. He writes, "In *Revolution for the Hell of it* (1968), Hoffman wrote, 'Reality is a subjective experience. It exists in my head. I am the Revolution,' a magical insight if there ever was one" (Lasch 2003, 357).

Allen Ginsberg and the Beats

In the summer of 1967, Gary Snyder wrote his poem, "Curse on the Men in Washington, Pentagon." It is a vitriolic indictment of "the white man" as the enemy of both Vietnamese civilians and Native Americans. It ends with the lines, "This magic I work, this loving I give / that my children may flourish / And yours won't live" (Snyder 1971). When it was written, Snyder's poem was considered too inflammatory even for underground publications such as the San Francisco *Oracle*. However, it was eventually distributed as a mimeographed broadside by the Diggers (Sullivan 1997, 76–77).

The body of the poem is preceded by the Buddhist mantra, "*om a ka ca ta ta pa ya sa svaha*." Appropriately, this is the Tibetan mantra "for causing cities to tremble" (Snellgrove 1971, 50).⁷ Its appearance here is reminiscent of Hoffman's reference to the Battle of Jericho. At the bottom of the page is the phrase "*hi'alawa'vita'ki'ai*," which Snyder claimed to be the chorus of a Cheyenne ghost dance song, meaning "We shall live again" (Sullivan 1997, 79). This poem likely inspired the format for Ed Sander's exorcism ritual, which also sandwiched English between foreign and esoteric phrases.

When asked about the use of mantra in this poem, Snyder responded, "Yes, that's a little bit of an example of imprecatory magic....What I'm more interested in now is formulating some mantric possibilities within the English language, within the English phrasings" (Snyder and McLean 1980, 46). Snyder drew on Buddhist mantra again in his poem, "Spel Against Demons" (1970). In this poem he writes that, "Gnowledge is the secret of Transformation!" The spelling "Gnowledge" is a reference to the Greek word *gnosis*, suggesting esoteric knowledge. The poem ends with the mantra, "NAMAH SAMANTAH VAJRANAM CHANDA MAHAROSHANA / SPHATAYA HUM TRAKA HAM MAM." This is followed by a drawing of a vajra, a ritual tool symbolizing irresistible force (Snyder 1974, 16–17). This is a Sanskrit mantra commonly used in Shingon Buddhism, an esoteric school of Buddhism from Japan. It means, "Homage to the all-pervading Vajras! O Violent One of great wrath! Destroy! Hum trat ham mam" (Shingon Buddhist service book 1975, 25). "Spel Against Demons" is typical of the genre, in that it equates political change with esoteric knowledge and incorporates esoteric tradition.

Allen Ginsberg was also interested in Buddhism and by 1967 his study of mantras had led him to conclude that reality is constructed through lan-

7. This mantra appears in Snellgrove's translation of the Tibetan Hevajra Tantra, published in 1959 and again in 1964. Snyder most likely found the mantra from Snellgrove's translation.

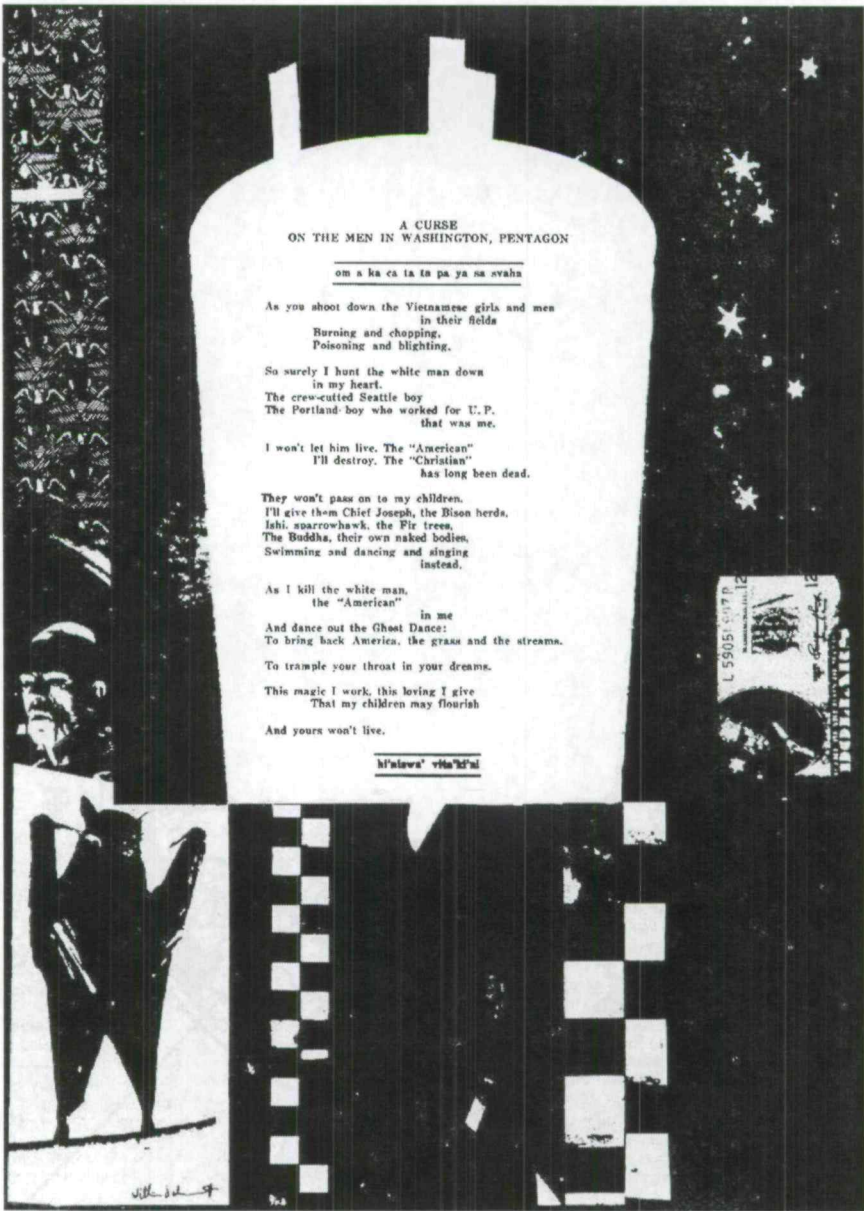


Figure 2 Mimeographed pamphlet of the poem "A Curse on the Men in Washington, Pentagon" written by Gary Snyder and distributed by the *San Francisco Diggers*.

guage. In 1965, Ginsberg successfully disarmed a conflict between hippies and Hell's Angels by leading a chant of the Prajnaparamita Sutra. (The Hell's Angels began chanting too: Houen 2003, 355). In 1966, he wrote in his poem "Wichita Vortex Sutra" that, "the war is language." Accordingly, he believed that ritual utterances could be a powerful tool for social change. In what Alex Houen called Ginsberg's theory of "potentialism," language and imagination offered the possibility for a new reality, apart from the one created by mass media. By contrast, Ginsberg described the language of Lyndon Johnson and the State Department as "black mantras," that were creating a false reality (Houen 2003, 360).

Ginsberg made full use of the ritual utterance in "Wichita Vortex Sutra," where he declared:

I call on all Powers of imagination
make Mantra of American language now
I here declare the end of the War! (Ginsberg 1987, 407).

Much like the chant performed by The Fugs, on which it was certainly an influence, this poem invokes a litany of gods and supernatural beings—both Asian and Western—to aid the poet in declaring an end to the war. This use of the ritual utterance simultaneously offers a new imagined reality and challenges the legitimacy of the United States government to declare a war. In September, 1967 Ginsberg wrote "Pentagon Exorcism," which may have been intended as a more positive version of Snyder's "Curse on the Men in Washington, Pentagon." Like Snyder's poem, it incorporates Tibetan mantras against rakshas (demons), and calls the Pentagon to apocatostasis—the reconciliation of good and evil (Ginsberg 1987, 483). As for the ritual held in Washington, Ginsberg commented, "I think we demystified the authority of the Pentagon, and in that sense we *did* levitate it." He points out that four months later, a Gallup poll showed that 52% of Americans were opposed to the war (Taylor 1987, 251).⁸ This suggests that, for Ginsberg, creating a shift in public opinion was a form of magic.

Interestingly, the Beat tradition of combining political invective with esotericism continued after the Pentagon Exorcism. In 1968, Ginsberg, along with The Fugs, performed another "exorcism" at the grave of Joseph McCarthy in Appleton, Wisconsin. The short ceremony involved leaving various benevolent objects on the senator's grave—flowers, a candy bar, a stuffed animal, etc. Sanders had planned a similar tactic at the Pentagon

8. Ginsberg conveniently fails to mention that the Tet Offensive occurred shortly before this poll.

but had not been able to implement it (Sanders, 2010).

The esoteric style of Snyder and Ginsberg was also perpetuated by fellow Beat poet and activist Anne Waldman. Her poem, "Spel Against Specious Ones" also contains ritual utterances reminiscent of magical ritual: "that they get no more votes / that they exude an aura of sickness & scent of doom / that their credit runs out." The penultimate line of the poem appears to reference mantra, "Om Banish Ho Hum!—Gone Gone Out of Gentle Pathways!" (Waldman 1996, 61).

Abbie Hoffman and the Diggers

While Ginsberg and the Beats tried to create new realities with mantras and language, Hoffman sought to unmake media-constructed reality using street theater and spectacle. With *The Diggers*, Hoffman famously staged such antics as running a pig for president and announcing to police that the hippies had invented a weapon called LACE—an aerosol aphrodisiac that would compel police and soldiers to copulate with each other. The goal of these spectacles was to attract media attention and thereby reach the American public.

While Hoffman rarely spoke plainly of his political philosophy, he has described his work as part of a tradition combining anti-war politics and subversive art that goes back to the Dada movement during World War I (Sloman et al. 2004, 24). He was especially inspired by the work of French playwright and philosopher Antonin Artaud. Artaud, who influenced absurdist such as Samuel Beckett and Eugene Ionesco, believed that theater should be as real and compelling for the audience as possible. He argued that this could be done most effectively without a written script or a stage. For Hoffman, Artaud provided the "intellectual framework" for a series of experiments in street theater as protest (Raskin 1996, 119).

Interestingly, Artaud may have been another route by which the new left encountered the language of magic and exorcism. In *The Theatre and Its Double* (1938), Artaud praises the power of Balinese theater to affect the audience and describes it as having "something of the ceremonial quality of a religious rite."⁹ He writes "The thoughts it aims at, the spiritual states it seeks to create, the mystic solutions it proposes are aroused and attained without delay or circumlocution. All of which seems to be an exorcism to make our demons flow" (Artaud 1958, 60). Two months before the march on Washington, Hoffman and Jerry Rubin pulled a stunt at the New York

9. Indeed, Balinese theater is the primary case study of Clifford Geertz's essay, "Religion as a Cultural System" (Geertz 1989, 87–125).

stock exchange in which they first threw money onto the traders and then set bills on fire. They described this stunt—which involved mocking an important cultural symbol (currency)—as “an exorcism” (Hoffman 2005, 33).

While preparing for the Pentagon exorcism, Hoffman wrote: “The magic is beginning to work, but the media must be convinced” (Hoffman 2005, 44). Like Ginsberg, Hoffman described his form of political art as magic because he felt it had the power to destroy one reality and replace it with another. He commented on the exorcism, “Never for a moment did I believe guerrilla theater or ‘monkey warfare,’ as I had come to call it, could alone stop the war in Vietnam. But it did extend the possibilities of involving the senses and penetrating the symbolic world of fantasy” (Hoffman 1980, 126).

While Ginsburg and the Beats sought to alter reality through language, Hoffman used absurdity to disrupt the taken-for-granted status of the symbolic order. His approach has been compared with Mikhail Bakhtin’s notion of “carnival” wherein “laughter frees human consciousness, thought, and imagination for new potentialities” (France 1999, 13). Or, in Hoffman’s own words, “Confusion is mightier than the sword!” (Hoffman 2005, 26). He specifically targeted institutions endowed with a kind of civic sacralty (the Pentagon, the New York Stock Exchange), and sought to profane them, dissolving their status as sacred.¹⁰ As activist Sal Gianetta recalled:

It started out initially that no way in the world was there gonna be any kind of activity anywhere around the Pentagon, which was the fucking Basilica of Peter of the United States, there was no fucking way. Somebody made that statement and right away Abbie says, ‘Well fuck you, we’ll levitate the fucking thing high enough you won’t be able to get in the fucking stairs. Then what are you gonna do with your fucking Pentagon?’

(Sloman et al. 2004, 30).

Similarly, Daniel Ellsberg commented that, “Removing deference from any of these institutions is very, very important, and this is of course the kind of thing that Abbie understood very instinctively (Sloman et al. 2004, 30).¹¹

10. In the *East Village Other*, Hoffman threatened that, “Girls will run naked and piss on the Pentagon walls” (Hoffman 2005, 39). This would seem to be a ritual act of profaning. Unlike much of Hoffman’s threat, urination on the Pentagon did actually occur (Stone 2004, 430).

11. Defense Secretary Robert McNamara took the opposite view of Hoffman’s leadership. He remarked, “I absolutely guarantee you I could have shut down

Finally, Hoffman seemed to recognize that this process of redefining the world through collective chaos was, in a sense, a magical or religious function. He commented that, "riots are holy" (Hoffman 2005, 27). Hoffman's approach to propaganda is not unlike Emile Durkheim's theory that new collective representations arise from the chaos of "collective effervescence." Interestingly, Durkheim argues that magical symbol systems and the efficacy ascribed to them are actually derived from the experience of collective ritual (Durkheim 1995, 366).

Kenneth Anger and the occultists

Finally, from its very inception, there were some who viewed levitating the Pentagon as a magical undertaking in the most literal sense. Activist Ponderosa Pine reports that the levitation was proposed by Michael Bowen after consulting with Mexican shamans. Pine stated, "We didn't expect the building to actually leave terra firma, but this fellow arrived with ideas on how to make it happen and I began to see there was an interesting difference between East Coast and West Coast" (Taylor 1987, 240–241). Similarly, Keith Lampe commented on Bowen's hope for levitation, "What a charming moment: all of us 'radicals' there suddenly become 'moderates' because Michael really expected to levitate it whereas the rest of us were into it merely as a witty media-project" (Sloman et al. 2004, 30).

There was conflict when magician and filmmaker Kenneth Anger offered to help. Anger promised a degree of occult authenticity. However, his elitist philosophy put him at odds with other organizers. Anger described the other protesters as "idiots" and suggested that any serious magic would have to be conducted by him personally. He claims that he successfully infiltrated the Pentagon and left magical talismans in 93 men's rooms. This, Anger explained, was a magical attack on Mars, the god of war and ruling deity of America (Sloman et al. 2004, 33–34).

Sanders recalls that after his performance he went under the truck where he saw:

This guy from *Newsweek* trying to hold a microphone close to Anger. It looked like Anger was burning a pentagon with a Tarot card or a picture of the devil or something in the middle of it. In other words the thing we were doing above him, he viewed that as the exoteric thing and he was doing the esoteric, serious, zero-bullshit exorcism. So I went along with that.

(Sloman et al. 2004, 34).¹²

the whole goddamn place" (Vogel 2008, 388).

12. Another account appears in Ed Sanders' book *The Family*, where he writes,

In Weberian terms, there is an interesting contrast, between The Fugs on top of the truck acting as priests and Anger beneath it acting as a magician. These two roles in mediating between humans and the supernatural form the first theoretical dichotomy in Max Weber's model of religion. The two functions differ in both their goals and their means. The priestly function is part of a systematic and organized "cult," but the magician serves to remedy only *ad hoc* problems. While the priests use ritual to solicit the help of the sacred, the magician attempts to "force" magical forces through coercion (Parsons 1993, xl). Sanders and Hoffman saw their ritual as part of a long-term symbolic battle for hearts and minds. Conversely, Anger saw the war in Vietnam as an isolated problem, which could be remedied by forcing the compliance of the deity Mars. What is interesting is that both approaches were using ritual in order to treat abstract social forces (the military apparatus, the media, and public opinion) as supernatural or sacred powers. In doing so, they inadvertently recreated a dichotomy that Weber attributes to the earliest ritual interactions between humanity and the supernatural. This is another angle through which the Pentagon Exorcism can be studied as a religious system.

Conclusions

Edward Bailey's three non-exclusive criteria of implicit religion include commitment, integrating foci, and intensive concern with extensive effects (Bailey 1997a, 8–9). As a case study of implicit religion, those present at the Pentagon Exorcism clearly showed no shortage of "commitment," braving arrests, beatings, and tear gas. They were also intensely concerned with extensive effects—primarily the end of the Vietnam War and the creation of a more just society. But the most relevant criterion of implicit religion in this case is the second: integrating foci. What most distinguishes the "magical" tactics of the new left from the purely political approach of the old left is that figures like Ginsberg, Hoffman, and Anger integrated political commitments with non-political nodes of meaning. In each of the three styles of exorcism examined here, anti-war activism is integrated with another (more explicitly) religious concern, of personal significance to the organizers: Buddhist mantra, transgressive ritual, and occultism, respectively. The goal of this integration is clearly not to profane religious traditions (i.e. a "put on"), but to sacralize protest.

"Anger, bare from the waist up, revealing what appeared to be a tattoo of Lucifer on his chest, burned a picture of the devil within a consecrated pentagram, shouting oaths and hissing as he flashed a magic ring at inquiring reporters thrusting microphones at him hunched down the gravel" (Sanders 1993, 24–25).

Furthermore, this magical mode of protest—which Mailer (1994, 124) dubbed “revolutionary alchemy”—has continued to the present day. In fact, activist Bob Fass claims that the Pentagon Exorcism was an influence on the 2004 protests of the Republican National Committee (Sloman et al. 2004, 61). There is substantial literature about how the religious right sees social engagement as a kind of supernatural warfare,¹³ but this perspective has a corollary among the spiritually eclectic left. The new left’s combination of protest with ritual and esotericism is alive and well and takes many forms.

Kathy Ferguson has written on the concept of “cosmic feminism.” Like Ginsberg, cosmic feminism seeks to circumvent language, seeing it as patriarchal. In doing so, it enters a liminal space between sacred ritual and political protest. Ferguson describes Starhawk as a cosmic feminist witch, who “brings her magic rituals to direct actions at the Lawrence Livermore weapons labs, Vadenberg Air Force Base, the Diablo Canyon nuclear plant, and other sites of patriarchal mega-power” (Ferguson 1993, 104). Ferguson traces the origin of this tradition to the women activists present at the Pentagon Exorcism.

Similarly, Protestant theologian Walter Wink has located the Pentagon in the Christian tradition of demonology and exorcism. He writes:

The Powers are simultaneously an outer, visible structure and an inner, spiritual reality. Perhaps we are not accustomed to thinking of the Pentagon, the Chrysler Corporation, or the Mafia as having a spirituality, but they do ... What people in the world of the Bible experienced as and called “principalities and powers” was in fact the actual spiritual at the center of the political, economic, and cultural institutions of their day.” (Wink 1998, 24)

Another example is anarchist poet Hakim Bey. His essay, “Media Hex: The Occult Assault on Institutions,” walks the same line Ginsberg and Hoffman did between literal and figurative “magical assaults” on media constructed reality (Bey 2003, 334–340). Finally, transgressive pop star Lady Gaga has repeatedly described her stage show as “an exorcism” (Hapsis 2009). She may have originally used the term in a sense similar to that of Artaud. However, in the wake of Gaga’s celebrity, numerous conspiracy theorists have emerged claiming that Gaga has links to Freemasonry, the Illuminati, or other esoteric conspiracies. Various examples of “occult imagery” have been cited and interpreted in her music videos and concerts (Biles 2010). Rather than denying these charges, Gaga seems to have capitalized on this infamy, using her heightened celebrity to lobby against the

13. See, for instance, Swatos (1988) and Bivens (2008).

military's policy of "Don't Ask, Don't Tell." Hoffman would be proud.

Is this type of social action a form of magic? To claim that it is, it is necessary to abandon the traditional view of magic as fundamentally private and antisocial—a tradition that may go back as far as Hegel. While Martin Marty (1970, 228) argued that the "occult establishment" of the 1960s was introverted and narcissistic, sociologists such as Andrew Greeley (1970, 36) and Edward Tiryakian (1972, 493) have disagreed, claiming that modern occultism is millennial, charismatic, and neosacral. Indeed, the *raison d'être* of the Pentagon Exorcism appears to be a combination of esoteric gnosis with millennial expectation.

Perhaps what is most "magical" about the Pentagon exorcism is that it represents a rejection of the politics of disenchantment. Wouter Hanegraaff has defined disenchantment as a social pressure to conform to a scientific-rationalist worldview. However, he argues that scientific rationalism exists alongside another way of seeing the world which he calls "participation." Unlike rationalism, participation is analogical and not reducible to primary reasoning (Hanegraaff 2003). It is exactly this quality of participation that occurs across the approaches of Ginsberg, Hoffman, and Anger. This would also appear to be what is at stake in Sanders' claim that the exorcism marks the beginning of suprapolitics: a politics that seeks to bring about direct and holistic change, rather than by winning elections. Mailer perceived this when he wrote of the exorcism, "The new generation had no respect whatsoever for the unassailable logic of the next step: belief was reserved for the revelatory mystery of the happening" (Mailer 1971, 86). Similarly, Hoffman explained how the ritual would work: "No permits, no *New York Times* ads, no mailing lists, no meetings. It will happen because the time is ripe. Come to the Day of Judgment" (Hoffman 2005, 40). Hanegraaff goes on to reject E.B. Tylor's notion that magic is a "survival" of an outmoded way of thinking, and argues that it is in fact an evolving idea (Hanegraaff 2003, 359). Modernity has not destroyed participation, but caused it to reform itself as a "secular" or "disenchanted" magic. In this sense, the Pentagon Exorcism truly was a continuation of the pre-modern esoteric traditions invoked by the new left.

Finally, the Pentagon Exorcism may be able to explain why the occult revival of the 1960s occurred primarily among the educated middle class. Mailer suggests that the middle class youth present at the exorcism were keenly aware that they lacked real agency (Mailer 1994, 257). Hoffman and Sanders both described extreme frustration with the more sober wing of the anti-war movement. Sanders stated, "It was a bunch of people try-

ing to be creative when there was nothing we could actually do to stop the war" (Taylor 1987, 248–249). Similarly, Theodore Roszak commented on the counter culture that:

If violence and injustice could be eliminated from our society by heavy intellectual research and ideological analysis, by impassioned oratory and sober street rallies, by the organization of bigger unions ... then we should long since have been living in the new Jerusalem (Roszak 1969, 154).

This disillusionment with democracy is the very "loss of confidence" that Tiryakian links to the revival of the esoteric. Thus magic was revived, not out of a narcissistic journey of self-discovery, but out of a deep frustration with the tools of the Enlightenment to create a better society.

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