

On Mailer

DAVID BROMWICH

Collected Essays of the 1960s, by Norman Mailer,
ed. J. Michael Lennon, The Library of America.

Four Books of the 1960s, by Norman Mailer, ed.
J. Michael Lennon, The Library of America.

WE SEEM to have entered an era of mass movements and popular mobilization for social change. If so, it will be the first such moment in half a century; and to judge by the summer 2020 protests in Portland, Seattle, Minneapolis, Chicago, New York, Los Angeles, Philadelphia, and a score of other cities, and the 6 January invasion of the Capitol, the public manifestations will draw on varied constituencies in the cause of reaction as well as reform. The thirty-year interregnum of US global hegemony has been exposed as a fraud, a decoy, a cheat, a sell, and the armies of the cheated are struggling to find the words for something that happened and happened wrong. It is, as any survivor can testify, something like the mood of the late 1960s, and a good time therefore to be rereading Norman Mailer, the best chronicler of that time in American politics.

Mailer wanted to be recognized as a major writer before he cared about being famous. Read him long enough, however, and you realize he must have had both ambitions from the start. In this respect, he resembled Lord Byron, who “awoke one day to find himself famous” but surely dreamed of it the night before. Mailer plotted and planned to arrive at the eminence he would enjoy. He recalled that when his Harvard classmates, in 1943, were nursing grim thoughts about the draft, he was wondering if the great war novel would come out of Europe or the Pacific theater. It was a conscious quest and not just happy accident that led him to acquire his large fund of worldly knowledge, his easy acquaintance with the good, the bad, and the great who

are both good and bad. His egotism, incorrigible as it appeared, was gregarious. Once when Marlon Brando saw Mailer holding forth at an airport gate, he came over to ask what they were talking about and Mailer replied: "We were talking about me. But now that you're here, Marlon, what do *you* think of me?"

The Naked and the Dead—a war novel of the Pacific theater, where Mailer served as an army cook—became a bestseller in 1948 and brought its young author immediate success in the gifted postwar generation that would include Gore Vidal, James Jones, Paul Bowles, Truman Capote, and James Baldwin. Yet, by the late 1940s, Mailer had come to consider himself a revolutionary socialist, and his second novel, *Barbary Shore*, tested his conviction with an apocalyptic narrative that assured a disastrous reception in 1951. His publisher's demands for changes in his third novel, *The Deer Park*—a story of Hollywood and the blacklist—and its unhappy passage through five more publishers before it found a willing one, jolted Mailer; and for the next decade he suspended operations as a novelist. He became a columnist for the *Village Voice* (which he had helped to found); and out of his all-purpose role as city explainer, prophet, and pontificator would come the first book to carry his personal stamp throughout, *Advertisements for Myself*. A series of uncollected shorter writings, interlarded with personal narrative, commentary, and self-criticism, that book inaugurated in 1959 the period of Mailer's full-time presence as an observer of American politics and culture. As late as 1975, when he published *The Fight*—his account of the Ali-Foreman heavyweight boxing championship in Zaire—he brought a continuous energy to stories that other writers of his stature would have left to the tabloids.

In 1975, strange as it sounds, Mailer's fame was still chiefly associated with *The Naked and the Dead*. Today, if one had to pick a book to represent him, it would be *The Armies of the Night*; and most people would agree that his writing of the sixties is the heart of his achievement. Much of that work is reprinted in the two Library of America volumes edited by J. Michael Lennon. It isn't clear why Lennon has chosen to separate essay-length pieces from the books in

which they originally appeared: *The Presidential Papers of Norman Mailer* and *Cannibals and Christians*. A separate question turns on the punctilious reliance on chronology. The real sixties lasted from 1963 to 1972—bounded by the Kennedy assassination and the reelection of Richard Nixon—and *St. George and the Godfather*, Mailer's full-length book on the Nixon-McGovern contest of 1972, belongs in the same sequence with the work collected here: his *Esquire* pieces on the 1960 Democratic convention and the 1964 Republican convention; his "nonfiction novel" *The Armies of the Night*; and his book on the 1968 conventions, *Miami and the Siege of Chicago*. All these writings offer exhibitions of the author's personality that earlier canons of journalism would have rejected as an unprintable extravagance. But Mailer changed the way American politics could be written about. He never pretended to speak from inside the Democratic-Republican spectrum; and once his columns for the *Voice* had made him a recognizable figure, he seldom resisted the impulse to involve his personality in whatever interesting situation came to hand.

This temptation became a public fact in his report on the Floyd Patterson–Sonny Liston championship bout of 1962. The author's loyalties, his idiosyncrasies of perception, taste, and distaste, figured everywhere in the piece. Mailer pointed his doubts of the legitimacy of Patterson's defeat with a personal challenge to Sonny Liston at a postmatch press conference: do you have the guts for a rematch? The author, a bit player and comic foil, put himself on a level with the new champion. The event was submerged for the moment in the verbal performance, which had its own element of clowning. The artist of words taking the measure of a man who lives by his fists has a hard balance to strike, but Hazlitt did it in the first and greatest of all essays on boxing, "The Fight" (1822), and A. J. Liebling closely imitated Hazlitt's procedure in his series of *New Yorker* columns on "the sweet science." Liebling's reports would begin in mock-epic style but, as the physical risk and toll added up, the mockery would quietly recede. Mailer was at a disadvantage in this format because he had too much at stake. In the Patterson-Liston article of 1962, he competed with his subject and the subject lost.

The same warmth of purpose, but under tighter direction, would serve him effectively in his political narratives. Their delivery was rendered more piquant by his decision to treat himself as a third-person character—sometimes called Mailer, sometimes Aquarius, sometimes “the novelist” or “the reporter.” The effect was droll without playing for laughs. Mailer was discovering how a third-person account of oneself could issue in perceptions of a surprising delicacy. *The Education of Henry Adams* was his evident precursor, but Adams’s literary manner had been ironic, the sentences lapidary and ponderous, in order to bear with dignity their load of historic significance. Mailer traveled lighter.



In *Advertisements for Myself*, he confessed (having only half understood his ambition before): “I have been running for President these last ten years in the privacy of my mind.” In his apprentice political writings of the fifties, he emerged as a defiant critic of McCarthyism, an opponent of the corporate-military establishment, a radical noncelebrant of consensus liberalism. Yet his first major political piece of the sixties, the account of the 1960 Democratic National Convention entitled “Superman Comes to the Supermarket,” came closer than one might have expected to the ordinary temper of a political enthusiast. Mailer’s report looked at John Kennedy as a possible hero—a dazzling departure from the acceptance world of the Eisenhower years and one whose personality made an inviting subject for speculation. There was a shade of awe about Mailer’s approach to Kennedy; the essay has at times the glossy, purposeful air of a determined public-relations pitch. Mailer warmed to Kennedy’s social standing, his glamour, the figure he cut, as if those assets were an irrefutable virtue.

Mailer saw in Kennedy the charismatic grace of a movie star—already a common observation—but he noticed too the peculiar variability of his expressions, the way his moods seemed to flicker in and out and could seem to register a shift of his perceptible age. He was a sedate academic in midcareer, and somehow, at the same time, a

political magician in the first flush of mastery. Yet it was a different intimation that finally attracted Mailer: "Kennedy's most characteristic quality is the remote and private air of a man who has traversed some lonely terrain of experience, of loss and gain, of nearness to death, which leaves him isolated from the mass of others." The sentence alludes to Kennedy's rescue of a shipmate after their PT boat was sunk, but its meaning is apparently wider. It is as if this public man had refused to be one more player on the stage of mass men. Even so (and this was a puzzle), Kennedy was obliged to perform for the crowd, to utter their platitudes and appeal for their thoughtless confidence. And he cooperated willingly.

Kennedy would disappoint Mailer's hopes when he approved the Bay of Pigs invasion and drove the logic of the Cold War all the way to the Cuban Missile Crisis of October 1962. The seduction of his foreign policy, its top-of-the-world eloquence and bravado, derived in fact from a postwar cult of masculine assertion to which Mailer himself was attracted. Nevertheless, Kennedy signified a promise that arises only once in a generation; and the third year of his presidency, the year of the Nuclear Test Ban Treaty and the American University address, showed that the promise was not illusory after all. The unsolved murder of JFK would become, for Mailer, not only a topic of occasional journalistic inquiry but—in a succession of books including the fantastical first-person novel *An American Dream*—the clearest proof of a corruption that penetrated to the core of the establishment.

In 1964—a whole age later in the country's morale—he wrote about the Republican National Convention at San Francisco's Cow Palace. The delegates there would astonish the mainstream political class and change the manners of national politics when they booed Governor Nelson Rockefeller of New York. This was the first step in the expulsion of the Eastern establishment, all those bankers and businessmen, doctors and ministers, schoolteachers of a moderate conservative temper who had formed the backbone of the Republican Party from the time of McKinley to Eisenhower and Robert Taft. Rockefeller had been their president in waiting, and the brutality of

abuse he suffered at the hands of the Goldwater crowd was a harbinger of the right turn of the party, the ascent of Ronald Reagan, the war presidency of George W. Bush, and the Twitter messaging of Donald Trump.

All this Mailer caught in a prophetic glance, and the peroration of this second convention piece marks a new tonality in his work. Writing from San Francisco in 1964, he speaks in the past tense about present history:

The country was in disease. It had been in disease for a long time. There was nothing in our growth which was organic. We had never solved our depression, we had merely gone to war, and going to war had never won it, not in our own minds, not as men, no, we had won it but as mothers, sources of supply. . . . We had had a hero. He was a young good-looking man with a beautiful wife, and he had won the biggest poker game we ever played. . . . His strength had proved stronger than we knew. Suddenly he was dead, and we were in grief.

The “biggest poker game” may refer to the missile crisis; if so, the blend here of irony and mythmaking seems as uncertain as it was in 1960. But the darker suggestion is that America, like the Scotland of *Macbeth*, has become a nation “almost afraid to know itself.”

On the last day of the convention, Mailer observes the scene in the streets. Black and white demonstrators are singing together “We Shall Overcome”; they are also shouting “Goldwater Must Go,” while the delegates, filing out of the Cow Palace, stop and stare. Mailer notices among the protesters a young woman (clothed “nunlike” in simple black and white) and imagines words she might speak to the party regulars: “Yes, kill us, says the expression on the face of the nunlike girl with no lipstick, you will kill us but you will never digest us: I despise you all.” The essay closes with the somber judgment: “America has come to a point from which she will never return. The wars are coming and the deep revolutions of the soul.”



In the summer of 1960 or even 1964, no one could have predicted how the US involvement in Vietnam would expand to a decade-long engagement, or how the atrocities would multiply throughout the presidencies of Lyndon Johnson and Richard Nixon. In *The Armies of the Night*, a report on the 1967 antiwar March on the Pentagon, Mailer took his full swing, both as a witness of “the wars” domestic and foreign and as an observer of the “revolutions of the soul.” His participation in the 1967 protest was in some ways predictable. He had opposed the Vietnam War from the first of Johnson’s escalation, in 1964, and had been a featured speaker in the Berkeley Vietnam Day protest of spring 1965, alongside Staughton Lynd, I. F. Stone, Mario Savio, Dick Gregory, Isaac Deutscher, and Senator Ernest Greuning. Yet Mailer went to the march half-willingly, as he confessed, because it meant he would miss a high-end party in New York. Also, he had fought in the Second World War (for all his hatred of the oppressions of army life) with a patriotic underfeeling the next generation seemed unable to share. What could it mean for him to place himself now in the ranks of a citizen protest army he partly distrusted for its tasteless slogans and its voluntary regimentation? Though Mailer enlisted as one of “the notables” whose fame would somehow legitimate the event, he had no interest in promoting himself as a movement leader. He would assert his importance when his mood and the moment permitted.

The early pages of *The Armies of the Night* offer an ironic portrait of Mailer and a literary competitor, Robert Lowell. As the two prepare for the march at a dinner reception the night before, it is clear they are friendly acquaintances who chose each other’s company only to avoid the chatter of nameless others:

We find, therefore, Lowell and Mailer ostensibly locked in converse. In fact, out of the thousand separate enclaves of their very separate personalities, they sensed quickly that they now shared one enclave to the hilt: their secret detestation of liberal academic parties to accompany worthy causes.

This apparent kinship involves a patent self-deception, for the two men embody the temperamental opposites William James nicknamed the Rocky Mountain tough and the tender-foot Bostonian. The comedy gathers momentum as Lowell and Mailer almost convince themselves that they are friends; as, huddled against the crowd, they exchange a series of rehearsed compliments. Mailer is such a capable public speaker, says Lowell—"You're awfully good at that"; "Not really"—and Lowell makes things worse by his own proclamation of humility: "I'm no good at all at public speaking." By this modesty gambit Lowell "indisputably won the first round. Mailer the younger, presumptive, and self-elected prince was left to his great surprise. . . with the unmistakable feeling that there was some faint trace of the second-rate in this ability to speak on your feet." Lowell digs deeper for a show of warmth, but he measures his praise too carefully, saying that he and his wife have long believed that Mailer is "the finest journalist in America." "'Well, Cal,' said Mailer, using Lowell's nickname for the first time, 'there are days when I think of myself as being the best writer in America.'" Lowell issues a stumbling apology for this second misfire, and "They were both now somewhat spoiled for each other. Mailer got up abruptly to get a drink."

The climax of the evening shows a drunken Mailer humiliating himself in a standup harangue to a puzzled audience, executed under the watchful gaze of his literary equal and social better:

Mailer, looking back, thought bitter words he would not say:
 "You, Lowell, beloved poet of many, what do you know of the dirt
 and the dark deliveries of the necessary? What do you know of
 dignity hard-achieved, and dignity lost through innocence, and
 dignity lost by sacrifice for a cause one cannot name?"

After such an unhappy prelude, the march itself comes off with a touch of the heroic. Mailer, unlike his companions Lowell and Dwight Macdonald, gets himself arrested by crossing the line of MPs, and afterward tries to account for his mixed motives. The final interest of the book will turn on his answer to the question whether he was in earnest.

The device of third-person narration becomes at this point more than a borrowed trick of perspective. Mailer concurs with Henry Adams's belief that democracy is prone to degradation if it sheds every connection with aristocracy—the world of manners suggested by a figure like Lowell, bound by his peculiar duties, his privileges and insincerities. Mailer also shares Adams's distrust of technology: the victor in the contest of “the Dynamo and the Virgin.” But the truth is that Mailer resists both halves of the Adams antithesis, which now have their embodiments in the military-industrial complex and the new religions of the young.

At the same time, though he dislikes the hippie counterculture for the noise it makes, Mailer confesses his attraction to the group spirit of the young when it connects to a more-than-rational energy. As the hippies begin their chant to levitate the Pentagon and effect a national exorcism—“Out, demons, out!”—the reporter finds himself drawing nearer:

He detested community sing—an old violation of his childhood had been the bouncing ball on the movie screen; he had wanted to watch a movie, not sing—but the invocation delivered some message to his throat. And his foot—simple American foot—was, of course, tapping. “Out, demons, out!”

And here, despite himself, Mailer becomes a full participant in the march. He decides to “transgress” the line of MPs, and, with the warning “If you don't arrest me, I'm going to the Pentagon,” he walks through their ordered ranks, then accelerates to a trot; at which he says he was granted

a passing perception of how simple it was to get past the MPs. They looked petrified. Stricken faces went by. They did not know what to do. It was his dark pinstripe suit, his vest, the maroon and blue regimental tie, the part in his hair, the barrel chest, the early paunch—he must have looked like a banker himself, a banker gone ape!

Having been a socialist in the late forties, a prophet of hip in the fifties, and an ambiguous Democrat in the sixties (disgusted by the

paternalism and sanctimony of LBJ's Great Society), Mailer arrives at a happy recognition: "After twenty years of radical opinions, he was finally under arrest for a real cause."

His trip to prison in a police van fits him out with a companion very different from Lowell, a young American Nazi who calls him "Jew bastard red." Mailer responds at the same level of civil disputation—"Throw the first punch, baby, you'll get it all"—and their impending fight is greeted with aplomb:

They were both absolutely right. They had a perfect sense of the other. Mailer was certainly not brave enough to advance on the Nazi—it would be like springing an avalanche on himself. But he also knew that if the Nazi jumped him, one blond youth was very likely to get massacred. In retrospect, it would appear not uncomic—two philosophical monomaniacs with the same flaw—they could not help it, they were counterpunchers.

The fight is preempted by the US marshal who slams the Nazi "with moderate force, but rhythmically" against the wall of the truck.

After a long night in jail, with accompanying reflections akin to Thoreau's in "Civil Disobedience"—on the guardians of America's prisons, the judges who send people there, and the lawyers who can spring you with great ease if you are lucky—Mailer admits his satisfaction at the "merry ride" to the airport the next day. On the flight back to New York, the spirit of the protesters seems to him a "breath of release," but it brings a thought of greater changes to come: "some promise of peace and new war seemed riding the phosphorescent wake of this second and last day's siege of the Pentagon, as if the country were opening into more and more on the resonance of these two days, more that was good, more that was bad."

♦ ♦ ♦

The events of 1968—above all, the murder in April of Martin Luther King and of Robert Kennedy two months later—drained half the nation of hope for "more that was good." Mailer would cover the Democratic and the Republican conventions of that year; but by then

the Republican delegates in Miami seemed inhabitants of a different country from the cheerful mystagogues who chanted "Out, demons, out!" These people were avatars of a respectable life they had mastered from childhood; and Mailer describes them in a manner that refuses to mock or anathematize:

He did not detest these people, he did not feel so superior as to pity them, it was rather he felt a sad sorrowful respect. In their immaculate cleanliness, in the somewhat antiseptic odors of their astringent toilet water and perfume, in the abnegation of their walks, in the heavy sturdy moves so many demonstrated of bodies in life's harness, there was the muted tragedy of the Wasp—they were not on earth to enjoy or even perhaps to love so very much, they were here to serve, and serve they had in public functions and public charities (while recipients of their charity might vomit in rage and laugh in scorn), served on opera committees, and served in long hours of duty at the piano, served as the sentinel in concert halls and the pews on the aisle in church, at the desk in schools, had served for culture, served for finance, served for salvation, served for America—and so much of America did not wish them to serve any longer, and so many of them doubted themselves, doubted that the force of their faith could illumine their path in these new modern horror-head times.

This was the crowd that would elevate Nixon to the presidency, though not from any personal liking (never was a politician less apt to inspire affection). Nixon was their candidate only because the moment required a drastic application of brakes to keep the country they knew.

To someone of Mailer's politics, Nixon was a familiar bugbear, and few words are expended on him. By 1968 he had been so generally parodied by standup comics there could seem a touch of valor in not adding a layer of contempt. Mailer speaks merely of "a gap between the man who answers the questions of reporters and the man who lives behind the speaker." There was talk, at the time, of a "new Nixon"—he had promised to end the Vietnam War—but he was still the man who had told the press in 1962 (after he lost the California

governor's race), "You won't have Dick Nixon to kick around any more":

He still had no natural touch with them, his half-smile while he listened was unhappy, for it had nowhere to go but into a full smile and his full smile was as false as false teeth, a pure exercise of will. You could all but see the signal pass from his brain to his jaw. "SMILE," said the signal, and so he flashed teeth in a painful kind of joyous grimace which spoke of some shrinkage in the liver, or the gut, which he would have to repair afterward by other medicine than good-fellowship. (By winning the Presidency, perhaps.)

An unsettling insight is buried in that last parenthesis. The mystery religion of American politics holds that the passage from ordinary lawmaker to president, with no significant intervening experience or revelation, can somehow transform a bad man into a good man, or a conventionally successful man into a hero.

By the week of the 1968 Democratic convention in Chicago, the national antiwar protests seemed already a lost cause. Chicago, "city of the big shoulders," to Mailer is a city of slaughterhouses; but this recognition finds him in a mood strangely compounded of exhilaration and disgust:

A great city, a strong city with faces tough as leather hide and pavement, it was also a city where the faces took on the broad beastiness of ears which were dull enough to ignore the bleatings of the doomed, noses battered enough to smell no more the stench of every unhappy end, mouths—fat mouths or slit mouths—ready to taste the gravies which were the reward of every massacre, and eyes, simple big eyes, which could look the pig truth in the face. In any other city, they would have found technologies to silence the beasts with needles, quarter them with machines, lull them with Muzak, and have stainless steel floors, aluminum beds to take over the old overhead trolley—animals would be given a shot of vitamin-enrichment before they took the last ride. But in Chicago, they did it straight.

The Chicago beast ethic, incarnated at the convention by Mayor Richard Daley, would crush whatever hopes lingered for relief from an American violence that had turned from Vietnam inward in the summer riots of 1967 and 1968.

If Mailer cherished a certain admiration for the energy of Chicago, no such affection was owed to the liberal heroes of the Democratic Party who seemed to float above the battle. Senator Eugene McCarthy had found the nerve to oppose President Johnson in the 1968 New Hampshire primary, but his resolve weakened as the convention drew near; and though Mailer, in 1960, had paid homage to McCarthy's oratorical gift in a separate section of "Superman Comes to the Supermarket," his account of Chicago offers only a sentence on McCarthy's slackening interest in politics. Since he has made himself "three times unpopular with the delegates"—"for being right, for being proud that he was right, and for dealing only in moral property"—McCarthy, the hope of the nonrevolutionary left wing of the party, "had no chance whatsoever." A calm and austere display of virtue—a familiar and not a disagreeable feature of McCarthy's intellectualism—was fatal to his popular appeal. Teachers and preachers may assure their listeners that they are "dealing only in moral property," but a politician adequate to his calling must deal with the sentiments of the country. McCarthy, in Chicago, was present but not accounted for; the assassination of Robert Kennedy had left the party without a fighting leader.

A different kind of dissociation, as Mailer saw it, explained the failure of alliance between the counterculture and the ghetto: the union devoutly sought by the radical young. The hippies "had seen some incontestable vision of the good," so they handed flowers to policemen, but their vision would never withstand the iron weight of American reality:

The slum in which they chose to live—for they were refugees in the main from the suburbs of the middle class—fretted against them, fretted against their filth, their easy casual cohabiting, their selflessness (which is always the greatest insult to the ghetto,

for selflessness is a luxury to the poor, it betokens the spineless, the undifferentiated, the inept, the derelict, the drowning—a poor man is nothing without the fierce thorns of his ego). So the Hippies collided with the slums, and were beaten and robbed, fleeced and lashed and buried and imprisoned, and here and there murdered, and here and there successful, for there was scattered liaison with bikers and Panthers and Puerto Ricans on the East Coast and Mexicans on the West.

This was true at the time, though it was far from self-evident; and it has remained a truth unknown, a lesson not learned by the American left, to judge by the protesters of summer 2020 in Minneapolis, Seattle, Portland, and Chicago. They, too, imagined that selfless, lawless conduct would be taken as a sign of purity of heart. The sort of practical wisdom that Mailer offers here, on the idiocy of offending the manners of people you hope to convert, is the offspring of an always-active curiosity that was his deepest gift.

He took in more than other journalists, throughout the 1960s and early 1970s, because his reckless spirit gave him an affinity with the protesters. His relations with people like the Yippie leaders Jerry Rubin and Abbie Hoffman, and off-the-reservation editors like Paul Krassner, had been, all along, somewhat closer than *The Armies of the Night* and *Miami and the Siege of Chicago* let on. You would not be startled to find, somewhere in the Mailer archives, a letter to Allen Ginsberg in the vein of Byron's to Tom Moore: "If there is a row, by the scepter of King Ludd, but I'll be there; and if there is none, and only a continuance of 'this meek, piping time of peace,' I will take a cottage a hundred yards to the south of your abode, and become your neighbor; and we shall compose such canticles, and hold such dialogues, as shall be the terror of the *Times*." Mailer, the aficionado of high politics, was also born to be a natural historian of radical protests, as well as less easily classified outbreaks of anarchy. He could immerse himself in the scene and coolly report that the Yippies were successors of the hippies by virtue of their most self-indulgent trait, a surplus of aggression and mischief.

The counterculture, says Mailer, never recognized how “their simple presence hurt many good citizens in the secret velvet of the heart”; defectors from the middle class, as they were, and sworn subverters of its culture, they did not realize

the depth of that schizophrenia on which society is built. We call it hypocrisy, but it is schizophrenia, a modest ranch-house life with Draconian military adventures; a land of equal opportunity where a white culture sits upon a black; a horizontal community of Christian love and a vertical hierarchy of churches. . . . The list must be endless, the comic profits are finally small—the society was able to stagger on like a 400-lb. policeman walking uphill because living in such an unappreciated and obese state it did not at least have to explode in schizophrenia—life went on. Boys could go patiently to church at home and wait their turn to burn villages in Vietnam.

Everything of consequence that Mailer wrote between 1964 and 1972 would come back to a single emphasis and ultimate motive: his horror at what the United States was doing to Vietnam and what, in the process, it was doing to itself. His novel of 1967, *Why Are We in Vietnam?*—a bear hunt with a helicopter gunship in place of wagon and rifle—was narrated in a weirdly appropriate pastiche of Faulkner and Burroughs to convey the intoxication of the free-fire zones where soldiers were told “anything that flies” should kill “anything that moves.” The same young men were expected to return home and take up normal jobs, plan a career and start a family, and become good Democrats or Republicans.

The war came to Chicago in the form of the military vehicles that corralled protesters at the 1968 convention. Mailer walks up to the grille of one and finds it to be “a jeep with a rectangle of barbed wire on its front. In the exhibition-hall glamour of the searchlight, it glistened like a hard-shell insect eight feet long with an unforgettable radar-like conception of a mouth. He thought it was the most degrading instrument of war he had ever seen.” Once again, his encounter with the authorities comes into focus by the artifice of third-person

narration. “The reporter,” he writes, “took out his notebook and stood in front of one of these Jeeps and took notes of the dimensions.” He counts each strand of the barbed wire “with an extended finger before the eyes of the soldiers.” The driver guns the motor and it becomes a confrontation; a national guard tells him to step back, Mailer asks why and takes down the man’s name, HOROWITZ; the guard tells him don’t be a wise guy and Mailer answers with an alibi:

“I’m doing a story.”

“Step back.”

Well, he could not step back. He really had no desire to be taken in, but the officer—he could hardly blame him—had forced the issue. Now one of them would have to lose face; or else Horowitz would have to arrest him.

“It’s not quite possible for me to step back yet,” he said in his best Harvard voice.

“All right, take him in!”

“For what? Describing your Jeep?”

Nixon would go on to win the election, but the Democratic Party had already lost. The measure of the defeat was far more than a single election.



Vietnam found its successor four decades later in another war of choice, Iraq—a war a little less catastrophic for the victim country but just as taxing to the United States because of the further wars that were its natural extension. Mailer saw this coming. His last sustained political commentary appeared in *The Big Empty*, a book composed of dialogues with his son John Buffalo Mailer. The power of the Bush-Cheney administration, says Mailer, came from their instrumental use of the war as a patriotic stimulant, “a pro-tem solution” to a host of other problems:

Take a guy like Cheney. His whole attitude is: “Can do. Will do. . . .9/11 brought us back again to operating speed and now

we can coast on that patriotism.” You have to understand the depth and breadth of the cynical optimism these guys possess.

“Cynical optimism” is a precise characterization, and it clarifies the grounds of Mailer’s opposition to the American empire as well as his ultimate uncertainty about the survival of the United States. By 2006, when *The Big Empty* was published, he had stopped calling himself a Left Conservative. His politics no longer had a name. War was “the health of the state,” as Randolph Bourne said, and the United States had been at war for most of Mailer’s life. The men who worked the system, like Cheney, knew that “stupidity is their greatest asset, their political mojo. . . . They take pride in generating more and more stupidity, even as advertising men take pride in selling a piece of crap.”

In the 1960s, the decade that sealed our passage from a regional to a world empire, Mailer was the whole-length critic of the system that Bourne or Thoreau might have become had they lasted longer. His criticism went to the root; and like them, he had started early. Two days after the atom bomb was dropped on Hiroshima, Mailer wrote to his wife Beatrice from his posting somewhere in the Pacific:

We’ve always talked of humanity destroying itself, but now it seems a near thing. . . . I think our age is going to mark the end of such concepts as man’s will and mass determination of power. The world will be controlled by a few men, politicians and technicians. . . . What combination can beat the alloy of mechanism with sentimentality?

Mailer hoped to assist a large and seemingly endless enterprise on which others have worked and continue to work. He wanted to expel from the American psyche our unique craving for the alloy of mechanism and sentimentality. There was much else that mattered, in both his life and his writing, but it would have been worth a long life of writing for the integrity of that effort alone.