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*April 2, 2003 Publication: Lansing City Pulse (MI) Word Count: 2452*

**Last weekend the Pentagon announced that coalition forces have thus far dropped 6,000 precision-guided bombs on Iraq in the effort to rid the world of a regime that the Bush administration claims possesses “weapons of mass destruction.” The irony has not been missed by three Michigan nuns. On Oct. 6, 2002, the Roman Catholic sisters, Ardeth Platte, Carol Gilbert and Jackie Marie Hudson, who belong to the Order of**

# Preachers (Dominicans) Congregation of the Sacred Hearts in Grand Rapids, became troubled over a first-strike, 300 kiloton Minuteman-3 nuclear missile on high alert in Colorado, and decided to do something about it.

The women, who had known for years that peace activism was a part of their calling, traveled to Colorado to a farmer's field near Greeley and symbolically dismantled the warheads. Platte, at 55 was the youngest, clothed themselves in hazmat suits with the words "Citizens Weapons Inspection Team" written on the back. They accessed the site easily by cutting through a gate and proceeded to pour four baby bottles of their own blood on the 20-ton nuclear missile lid, in the form of six crosses. The women then hammered on the lid of the Minuteman-3 silo with a ball-ping hammer. They then cut down three panels of fencing to open the site for public inspection. They were able to complete a liturgy and sing songs and hymns before airforce personnel approached.

Their trial began Monday in U.S. District Court in Denver. The Michigan sisters were charged with destruction of national defense materials, sabotage and damage of government property. These are charges punishable by up to 20 years imprisonment and a \$250,000 fine. The nuns believe their action may stimulate the worldwide antiwar movement. "It stimulates the kind of courage to say that we're under the same laws that Iraq is under," Platte said in a telephone interview from jail three weeks ago. "We want to eliminate all weapons of mass destruction throughout the world. This is the only way to live in peace."

Added Hudson, "We're calling the public's attention to the criminal activity of our government."

When the three sisters planned their weapons inspection, they hadn't known the Bush administration would continue on its war path, or provoke North Korea to threaten the United States with nuclear force and rally up a Cold War hostility, which had begun to heal. "In that sense, we're in the right place," said Hudson, 68, adding that she is prepared to celebrate her 50th anniversary as a Dominican sister in jail if necessary. She said that in jail they had access to the (conservative) Rocky Mountain News as well as TV world news. But, as their lawyers reported, there was no good view of the mountains.

The Pentagon has hired a Hollywood film director, George Alison, fresh from a recent Michael Douglas film, to create a \$200,000 set from which Gen. Tommy Franks, commander of Operation Iraqi Freedom, will narrate the attacks. In contrast, the three Michigan sisters have a story you probably won't hear in Tinseltown.

The nuns entered the unmanned Minuteman-3 missile site near Greeley., at 7:36 a.m. Oct. 6 (the one-year anniversary of the U.S-led Afghanistan bombing). They hung their banner, "Sacred Earth and Space Plowshares II – 2002", on the left side of the gate. The name of the group and its actions allude to the biblical prophecies of Isaiah (2:4) and Micah (4:3) of "beat[ing] swords into plowshares." The prophesy predicts that no nation "will lift up sword" against another nation nor will they "ever again be trained to make war."

Every Minuteman-3 missile contains three warheads, each of which is roughly 20 times more destructive than the bombs dropped on Hiroshima and Nagasaki by the United States in August 1945, which killed more than 300,000 people. The radiation of one such exploded bomb would remain in the environment for 3 million years and contaminate approximately 50 square miles.

One hour after their arrival, as the nuns were praying at the site, a Humvee all-terrain truck with military personnel drove to the area, and soon thereafter the women were surrounded by soldiers, police, OSI, FBI, and a helicopter bomb squad. As the military trucks scanned the fields and the bomb squads surveyed the silo areas, the nuns' hands were handcuffed behind their backs and they were forced to lie on the ground on their stomachs.

Platte, who has carried out six peaceful weapons inspections so far, said she knew it wouldn't be difficult to access the site. "At almost every site I've ever been to, we've had to wait for the military to come. One time we went to a nuclear bunker in Michigan, and waited for 45 minutes." Like the other sisters, Platte was born and raised in Michigan. She served on the Saginaw City Council from 1973 until 1985. She taught civil resistance in Michigan and spent several months in jail after participating in non-violent protests on the Wurtsmith Air Force Base in Oscoda, Mich. She and Sister Gilbert are part of the Jonah House Community in Baltimore, Md. Jackie Hudson is a member of Ground Zero in Poulsbo, Wash.

The three pacifists selected the site in Colorado because it was located on a hill, so people could see their inspection from Highway 14, from road 113, and from a farmer's house some hundred yards away. Platte said that one must think of the gigantic leap from a commercial airliner crashing into the World Trade to the thousandfold mass murder of nuclear holocaust. "These weapons kill millions of people, and besides those 500 Minutemen-3, we still have thousands of other nuclear weapons in this country," Platte said.

The nuns and their legal team argue that if the United States threatens to or uses any weapon of mass destruction, it is every bit as illegal and criminal. A legal adviser in the case, Annabel Dwyer, said she believes that the nonviolent exposure, inspection and disarmament of one nuclear weapon at a time was "the only reasonable and possible way for our great democracy to live within the rule of law." Dwyer is an adjunct Cooley Law School professor and East Lansing resident.

The Denver-based attorney representing Hudson, Walter L. Gerash, added: "These type of weapons wipe out an entire city. They cannot distinguish civilian from military targets. Threat or use of the Minuteman-3 is a war crime." In his motion to drop the charges, he argued that the threat of imminent attack on Iraq by the current U.S. administration, without a formal declaration of war, was a war crime in violation of the U.S. Code, the laws of war, the United Nations Charter of 1945, and the International Court of Justice's Opinion on the illegality threatening to use nuclear force.

In 1994 the General Assembly of the United Nations adopted resolution 49/75 K, asking the International Court of Justice to define under what circumstances the threat or use of nuclear weapons should be permitted. The Court of Justice's advisory opinion, issued in 1996, stated that such a threat was illegal under any circumstances based on the United Nations Charter, Article 2, which prohibits threats or use of force against "the territorial integrity or political independence of any State."

In the view of President Bush, the United States reserves the right to attack any nation it perceives to be a threat or potential threat. The United States alone reserves the right to determine this risk and dictate the remedy, and the president retains the sole discretion to decide whether to go to war.

In the wake of events since the invasion of Afghanistan, international law experts have called upon Bush and British Prime Minister Tony Blair to comply with these legal obligations. In a letter published by the British Guardian newspaper March 7, a group of 16 law professors said that war in Iraq would be illegal. "The U.N. charter outlaws the use of force with only two exceptions: individual or collective self-defense in response to an armed attack and action authorized by the Security Council as a collective response to a threat to the peace, breach of the peace or act of aggression. There are currently no grounds for a claim to use such force in self-defense. The doctrine of pre-emptive self-defense against an attack that might arise at some hypothetical future time has no basis in international law. Neither Security Council resolution 1441 nor any prior resolution authorizes the proposed use of force in the present circumstances."

The Michigan pacifist nuns argue that the estimated 150 active Minuteman-3 missile silos dotting the borders of Colorado, Wyoming and Nebraska call for acting on the principles of the 1945 Nuremberg Charter, which requires individuals to take affirmative action against government policies violating the principles of international law. "Remember, the Nazis were also charged with preemptive war," attorney Gerash said. The nuns' actions of symbolic disarmament, he said, were not only legal but also morally imperative under the Nuremberg Principles. The Nuremberg Tribunal, which dealt with German war crimes after World War II, determined that "to initiate a war of aggression ... is not only an international crime, it is the supreme international crime."

In 2002, the Bush administration refused to allow the United States to be subject to the jurisdiction of the newly created International Criminal Court in the Hague (Netherlands), as if knowingly attempting to protect itself from a Nuremberg-style war crimes trial that might result from military actions such as the preemptive invasion of Iraq.

The defense team has presented an affidavit by retired U.S. Navy Rear Admiral Eugene J. Carroll, who has closely studied weapons systems during his 25 years of active duty. Carroll has testified that if a mere one half of the existing Intercontinental Ballistic Missiles and U.S. MX missiles, and one sixth of the submarine launched nuclear missiles were used, they would destroy the majority of Russia's strategic forces and produce an estimated 43 million deaths within 30 minutes.

Carroll explained that because the entire Minuteman-3 system is maintained on operational high alert, ready for launch with no advance warning to an adversary, it constitutes a destabilizing threat rather than acting as a deterrent for nuclear war. Added Carroll: "This posture remains in effect despite the end of the Cold War nine years ago."

When the sisters of the Dominican Order entered the Colorado site, they said they could literally hear the bomb ticking. "All of the equipment was in operation as we were on the site," said Hudson. They heard the motors and the air conditioning, which were illustrations that this particular site was on high alert.

Platte, Gilbert and Hudson belong to a worldwide disarmament group that was founded in 1980. More than 150 individuals have participated in roughly 70 plowshare activities and related disarmament actions. On several occasions, activists were stopped by security and arrested at weapons sites before being able to complete their intended disarmament action. Plowshare actions have occurred in the United States, Australia, Germany, Holland, Sweden, and England. The pacifists enter military bases and weapons facilities and symbolically disarm components of U.S. first-strike nuclear weapons systems: the MX, Pershing II, Cruise, Minuteman ICBM's, Trident II missiles, Trident submarines, B-52 bombers, P-3 Orion anti-submarine aircrafts, battleships with nuclear armament, and combat aircrafts such as the F-18 bomber.

On Sept. 9, 2000, Platte, Gilbert and Hudson entered Petersen Air Force Base in Colorado Springs, where 150,000 visitors were attending "The Spring 2000 Department of Defense and Open House and Air Show." They proceeded to hammer and pour their own blood on a Milstar Communications satellite and an F-18 (Hornet) fighter plane, a model used extensively in Iraq. The sisters were arrested, jailed and charged with federal criminal mischief, obstructing government operations and two counts of conspiracy. The commander of El Paso County Jail stated: "I have heard reports from supervisors that the ward has never been quieter. There are special prayer groups going on. But I have a problem with nuns being in my jail." Their charges were all unexpectedly dropped, and the sisters were released from jail a week later.

Aerospace engineer Robert C. Aldridge, who resigned from his position as nuclear weapons designer in 1973 due to the "aggressive trend in nuclear weaponry," said that the Minuteman-3 still played a critical role in Washington's foreign policy. In the START-2 Treaty for nuclear disarmament, the United States originally agreed to remove all but one warhead from each of the 500 missiles, yet this treaty was discarded in May 2002. Aldridge said, instead, the Bush administration ordered its national laboratories to perform a \$45 million feasibility study on earth-penetrating nuclear weapons, potentially leading to state-of-the-art improvements for the Minuteman, and new deadly missions. "Although the U.S. had never announced a nuclear first strike policy, except perhaps recently in very cautious terms regarding Iraq, it has most certainly aspired to a disarming and unanswerable first strike capability."

Among other experts, Francis A. Boyle, a renowned University of Illinois law professor and author of the 2002 publication "The Criminality of Nuclear Deterrence," testified in the Colorado District Court that the sisters didn't violate any alleged "national defense" interests, since the Minuteman-3 can never legally be used, according to international laws of war. He said that the fact that the Minuteman-3 existed and was on high alert reflected "the stubborn refusal of the United States to abide by its own fundamental laws of war and to proceed with negotiations

for nuclear disarmament in all its aspects.”

Hudson said that several weeks ago the Canadian Group, Rooting Out Evil (a group that includes international parliamentarians, scientists, academics, and religious and union leaders), was similarly inspired when they informed the Pentagon of their intent to inspect the Edgewood Chemical Biological Center in Maryland in search of illegal U.S. weapons of mass destruction. The group encourages people to be involved by becoming honorary weapons inspectors.

When I asked Hudson how she felt about Michigan’s flourishing peace movement – the fact that nine city councils in Michigan have passed antiwar resolutions and that thousands of residents have rallied against the war in the past few weeks – she replied, “that’s wonderful!” Hudson, who has a brother and many nieces and nephews in Midland, added: “I have never in my lifetime seen so many mass gatherings of people demanding no war.” On Feb 15, 12 million people around the world rallied against the war in Iraq. “I believe we’re in a historic moment, where we could come to the point of saying that war is no longer a solution.”

The sisters’ legal team expected U.S. District Judge Robert Blackburn to reject all of their pretrial motions. William Taylor, chief of major crimes for the U.S. Attorney’s Office, told The Denver Post on Monday that the government is taking a dim view of such civil disobedience. According to a Reuters press report, the nuns waved and smiled just before the judge ordered the courtroom cleared to make room for the prospective jurors.

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**Lansing City Pulse (MI)**

**Date:** April 2, 2003

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