

Peace activists defend break-in at US Navy base

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Seven Catholic peace activists who broke into a nuclear submarine base in Kings Bay, Georgia, last year stood before a federal judge on August 7 to argue that the charges against them should be dismissed.

The activists, known as the Kings Bay Plowshares 7, are charged with three felonies and a misdemeanor and face up to 25 years in prison each for trespassing on the US Navy base that houses six Trident submarines carrying hundreds of nuclear weapons.

The defendants, mostly middle-aged or elderly, are residents of Catholic Worker houses, a collection of 200 independent houses across the country that feed and house the poor. The Kings Bay 7 are part of a 39-year-old antinuclear movement called Plowshares, inspired by the prediction of the biblical prophet Isaiah that the nations of the world shall “beat their swords into plowshares.” Its activists have made breaking into nuclear weapons bases to hammer on buildings and military hardware and pour human blood on them a signature action.

Patrick O’Neill, a 63-year-old Catholic Worker from North Carolina who represented himself, was the first to speak before US district judge Lisa Godbey Wood. Reading from a prepared statement, he told her he was guided in his actions by the New Testament Epistle of James, which reads, “Faith without works is dead.” “My actions are an extension of my beliefs,” he told the judge. “This connection between sincerely held religious beliefs and sacramental practice (action) are one and the same.”

The facts of the case are not disputed; indeed, the seven documented their actions for the judge with photos and videos.

On the night of April 4, 2018, they stole onto the Kings Bay Naval Submarine Base in St. Marys, Georgia, by cutting a padlock and later a security fence. They spilled blood on navy insignia affixed to a wall, spray-painted antiwar slogans on a walkway, and banged on a monument to nuclear warfare using hammers made of melted-down guns.

They were caught more than an hour into their action, as three of the activists prepared to cut the heavily electrified fence leading to the nuclear storage bunkers.

The Plowshares 7 and their lawyers are using a novel defense: the Religious Freedom Restoration Act, a 1993 federal law that says the government may not burden the faith practices of a person with sincerely held religious beliefs. The law was famously used by Hobby Lobby when the company challenged the government's contraceptive mandate, arguing it placed a burden on the chain owner's Christian beliefs. The Supreme Court agreed.

Citing RFRA as part of their defense allowed the seven to talk about their religious motivations, which may not have otherwise been admissible.

Ira Lupu, professor emeritus of law at George Washington University Law School, said he had great respect and admiration for the Plowshares 7's actions but suspected they would not win a dismissal of their charges. "The government is going to say, 'We're defending the United States,'" he said. Furthermore, he added, the government can convincingly demonstrate a compelling interest in protecting these bases from trespass, interference, and disruption. —Religion News Service