Opinion
Guest Voices



About 50 people protested April 15 outside the Kansas City National Security Campus, a plant run by Honeywell, calling for an end to nuclear weapons and criticizing a proposed expansion of the facility. Thomas C. Fox, NCR's editor/publisher emeritus, was among 10 people arrested during the protest. (Courtesy of Thomas C. Fox)



by Thomas C. Fox

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April 30, 2024

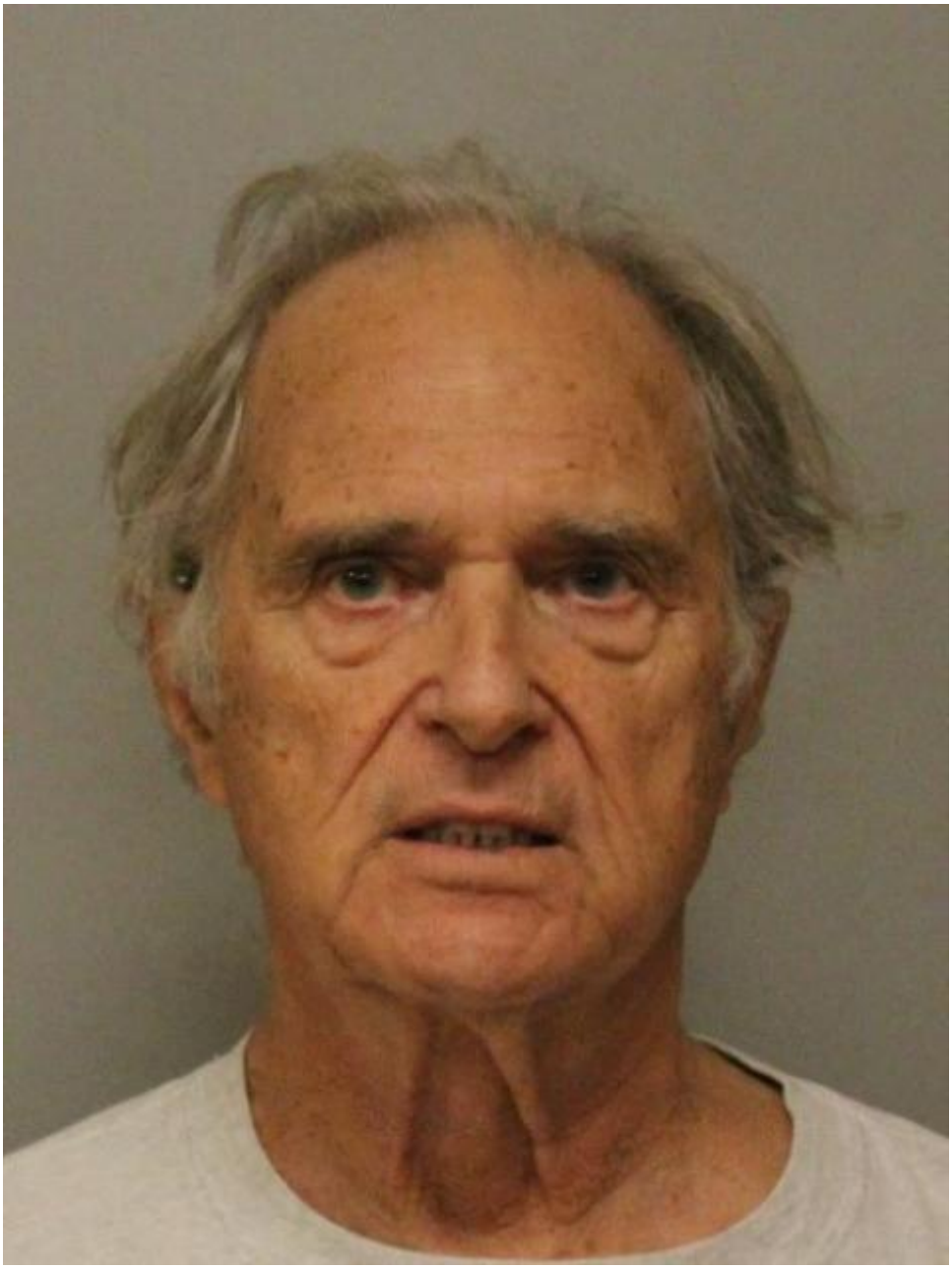
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With nuclear powers like Russia, Israel and near-nuclear Iran entrenched in conflict, the threat of atomic destruction should draw public attention. Or so I thought when I joined some five dozen Catholic Workers who gathered at Kansas City's sprawling nuclear weapons manufacturing plant in the southern part of the city. It was bonding, yet I left unexpectedly saddened.

Along with my wife, Hoa, and daughter, Catherine, I came to protest — the Catholic Workers prefer to use the word "resist" — the building and the planned plant expansion. The April 15 gathering followed a two-day retreat during which the Catholic Workers renewed vows of nonviolence, prayed together and planned the dawn resistance event. They had met at the Kansas City, Missouri, Jerusalem Farm, an "intentional Catholic community dedicated to prayer, service and simplicity."

In an Orwellian twist, the plant refers to itself as the "Kansas City National Security Campus," as if its primary purpose is holding educational seminars. Under the Department of Energy, the plant is run by Honeywell, whose motto is "the future is what we make it" and whose 2023 net profit was $5.65 billion. The Kansas City plant's operating budget is roughly $1.3 billion, providing 7,000 jobs for workers who build or process 85% of the U.S. non-nuclear weapons components.

Plans call for a $3 billion expansion, providing 2.5 million square feet of additional office and manufacturing space, the equivalent of more than 40 football fields. Missouri legislators are debating a sales tax break for all materials needed to build the addition.



Thomas C. Fox's mug shot from his April 15 arrest (Courtesy of Thomas C. Fox)

As the sun rose and darkness began loosening its grip, some 50 of us were in place as the early morning shift began driving up Botts Road, turning onto a drive leading to the plant. Among us were young families with young children, a few with infants, protesters holding banners and placards, one beating a drum. "No New Nukes," "Resist Nuclear Weapons," "Honeywell, Stop Escalating Nuclear War," and "We are here not to break the law, but to UPHOLD the law."

At best, we were bothersome. None of the cars appeared to slow down; no drivers turned heads.

In the morning stillness, the first among us to get arrested for trespassing were three who walked up to one of the 20 massive earth mover vehicles parked nearby on a dirt lot. They began to attach a stream of yellow police tape, marked with the words "crime scene," to a 10-foot rubber wheel. Once noticed by police, Jane Stoever, a longtime Kansas City peace activist, was an easy mark. After several minutes of conversation and a refusal to leave, police whisked them away in a squad car. She and her husband, Henry, another longtime Catholic activist, have led PeaceWorks Kansas City nuclear plant protests for over a dozen years, leading to more than 175 arrests.

Seven more of us decided it was time to act. We gathered in a group and began to walk the medium strip leading to the plant. A half dozen armed police awaited us. Soon, we stood face to face, we in T-shirts, some in shorts, and they in black, wearing pistols, clubs and flak jackets. They asked us to leave. They asked a second time. After we refused, the chief officer told the others to handcuff us with zip ties. They told us to sit on the curb as they towered before us. Seemingly uncertain about what to do next, they soon asked us to stand again.

Two police grabbed me under my shoulders and pulled me up. They told us to spread our legs. One officer asked me if I was carrying a weapon. They patted us down and searched us. It would be the first of five searches by various police. I shut my eyes. I felt a need to pray. The first prayers that came to mind were the Lord's Prayer and the Hail Mary, which I began to recite. I wanted to stay focused and calm. I thought about my breathing.



Thomas C. Fox (left), NCR's editor/publisher emeritus, was arrested April 15 during a protest outside a nuclear weapons plant run by Honeywell in Kansas City, Missouri. His T-shirt features an image of Jesus standing, head lowered, among several of the world's oppressed. (Courtesy of Thomas C. Fox)

After a half hour or so, more police arrived. Again, they told us to spread our legs. This time, after another body search, the officer began to remove everything from my pockets. He pulled out my wallet and cell phone. He asked if I was concealing anything. "Only hearing aids," I responded. He reached for the cap I was wearing, removed it, and glanced at the words written on it: "Grandfathers for Peace." He patted my head before replacing my cap. Not yet finished, he reached into my front pockets and pulled them inside out, hanging in front of me. Unexpectedly, I felt embarrassed.

The police ordered us to sit down again. I asked if I could kneel to relieve my back pain. It seemed like more than an hour before the first police car arrived to carry us away. My arms were still cuffed behind my back, and the police ordered me to stand

again. The new arrival told me to spread my legs, moved me and rested my body on the side of the car. He patted me down, my arms still tied behind my back. Then he placed me into the back seat of his car next to Paul Freid, one of the seven who had walked up the median to be arrested. A thick plastic panel separated us, but we could hear each other. Glancing at each other, we did not need words to communicate the bonds we immediately felt.

The last image I saw as the car took us away was my wife sitting in a chair and my daughter recording the moment with her camera. Hoa was holding a blue and white sign that read, "Pope Francis: Nukes rob humanity." She waved, and we were gone.

On the way, I learned that Freid had driven from Minnesota to the retreat and action with his wife, Sara, and two daughters, Louise and Millie. He said he recognized me from NCR. "It's the only paper I pay for," he said, bringing a smile to my face.



Hoa Fox protests nuclear weapons outside a plant run by Honeywell in Kansas City, Missouri, April 15. She was there with her husband, Thomas C. Fox, NCR's editor/publisher emeritus, and their daughter, Catherine. (Courtesy of Thomas C. Fox)

Meanwhile, we had 20 minutes with our driver, who identified himself as "Officer Self." Having arrived at the plant just minutes before to fetch us, he knew nothing about our protest. He asked why we had been protesting, allowing me some precious time to brief him on the threat of nuclear weapons.

- I told him our nation spends more than all the other nuclear weapon-possessing nations combined, and this fuels the arms race. (The U.S. spent $43.7 billion on its atomic arsenal in 2022. Russia spent an estimated $9.6 billion and China spent an estimated $11.7 billion.)
- I told him our nation would spend nearly $800 billion on "modernizing" our nuclear arsenal during the next 10 years, figures beyond imagination and rarely reported or debated in Congress.
- I mentioned Pope Francis has condemned nuclear weapons, which are robbing humanity. (In 2022, nine nuclear-armed states collectively spent a staggering $82.9 billion developing nuclear weapons.)

When we arrived at the police station, Officer Self thanked me for sharing the information. A man in civilian clothes met us and led us down a hall. He opened the door to a holding center, where two police officers cut our handcuffs, led us to a metal bench, set us down, and fastened us to the bench with new handcuffs. Adjacent to the room, I saw four jail cells holding detainees wearing blue shirts and pants.

After several minutes, they uncuffed us, asked us again to spread our legs, and again patted us down. They told us to place our index fingers on an ink pad to take our fingerprints. Before taking mug shots, the officer placed a white towel over my chest and, in the process, covered an image of Jesus standing, head lowered, among several of the world's oppressed. They then led us back to the bench and cuffed us again. I noticed a television on one of the walls. Had I chosen, I could have watched a woman selling jewelry.

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The police were methodical and sometimes friendly. I never felt threatened, though the procedures, at times, felt dehumanizing. Our penal system, like our lethal nuclear weapons production industry, is sustained, it seems, by ordinary people

doing their jobs. My deepest fear is that the entire nuclear weapons industry is so large, so based on big money interests and "the creation of jobs," it is self-propelling and out of human control. The thought that no person or groups of persons can reel it in frightens and depresses me.

Yet, I choose not to give up hope. As the Catholic Workers repeatedly say, "There's power in resistance." I found that among them, there was more cheerfulness than depression.

Meanwhile, the world is waking up to the real threat of possible human extinction that nuclear weapons pose. In a tangible sign of hope, the United Nations has adopted a treaty to abolish nuclear weapons. The Treaty on the Prohibition of Nuclear Weapons (TPNW), or the Nuclear Weapon Ban Treaty, is the first legally binding international agreement to prohibit nuclear weapons, with the ultimate goal being their total elimination. It was adopted in July 2017, opened for signatures in September 2017, and entered into force in January 2021. It currently has 93 signatories and 70 state parties.

As we left the police station, Paul's wife and two young daughters were waiting for us with big smiles. There were many family hugs, and before they walked out, Millie, age 11, said, "I can't wait to grow up and get arrested like my father."