

American Political Culture in Mailer's *The Naked and the Dead*

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Abstract

Although most of Norman Mailer's early works are now out of print, *The Naked and the Dead* is still popular as ever due to the strong appeal of its existentialism and its closeness to the pulse of the post-war generation. Unfortunately, these advantages also work against it, as the indirectly stated political opinions expressed in the novel have been ignored. We can see Mailer's long held political concerns expressed in *The Naked and the Dead* exist outside of standard left-right politics. With the approach of the Cold War, Mailer's political views took on new significance. From this point of view, the profound significance of *The Naked and the Dead* comes from its declaration of war on the Truman doctrine and the liberal political assumptions during the Cold War. Through the reflection of Lt. Hearn, Mailer all but predicts the rise of McCarthyism in the 1950s. In addition, Hearn's attitude to authority and his general social alienation is a forerunner of the socio-political attitudes of the Beat Generation. Mailer's somberly titled *The Naked and the Dead* carries with it an optimistic message, which is that: the characters described in *The Naked and the Dead* can be bullied or killed, but in the end cannot be reduced to automatons, (as General Cummings expects) or forced to exceed human capabilities, (like Sergeant Croft who forces the soldiers to pointlessly climb Mt. Anaka). Mailer sees this kind of resistance to authority as the one hope of America in the late 1940s. The individual hopes of the characters in the novel are frail and

unattainable, and thus we can infer that for Mailer himself, on a personal level, this rift between hope and reality results in a purposeful estrangement from society. Every character has his own way of facing or avoiding this truth, and in reality, each wages his own private war that does not involve the Japanese, and each in turn opposes the America that he abandoned. The private wars of Hearn, Cummings and Croft and the other secondary characters are full of political significance, whether in retrospect or looking to the future. As a whole, the novel protests a stylized newsreel reality, because it is the ominous instrument of a new force situated within American political culture. In defeating the power of Fascism overseas, domestically, America raised a force more dangerous force than Fascism. In *The Naked and the Dead* the dull roar of thunder from the approaching tempest can be heard on all sides: a metaphor not of the war in the Pacific, but of the unending domestic cultural crisis.