

29.3.03

The Press

Fighting for the freedom of others

Thirteen years ago, Moana Cole was protesting about the looming Gulf War. Today, with war raging in Iraq, history is repeating for Cole. She talks to CHRISTOPHER MOORE.

IN THE NEWS

Moana Cole

History is sounding a strangely repetitious beat and Moana Cole hears its ominous drumming.

On January 1, 1991, Cole and three co-protesters stood in the frigid pre-dawn darkness of the Griffiss Airforce Base, New York State, to deliver their dramatic protest against a looming Western coalition war against Iraq. During the following 90 minutes, Cole and Australian Ciaron O'Reilly gouged holes in the runway tarmac, poured containers of blood in the shape of a cross across its surface, and spray-painted the words Swords into Ploughshares. Americans Susan Frankel and William Streit, meanwhile, attacked two stationary B52 bombers with mallets. The protest had been carefully planned, but more than a decade later Cole still remembers how fear was replaced by a strange feeling of normalcy, "a feeling that this was right and necessary".

Their non-violent action ended as the sun rose. Discovered, arrested, and charged with conspiracy and destruction of government property, the group was refused bail. Two weeks later, the Gulf War erupted.

The 23-year-old New Zealander spent 12 months in Blair County Jail, Pennsylvania, before being released and unceremoniously deported back to New Zealand. **March 29, 2003:** Another time, another place, and another war. The same international players are cast in the leading roles: the United States, Britain, and a western coalition of the "willing" against the regime of Saddam Hussein. As the tanks, the cruise missiles, and the smart bombs overshadow Iraq, Cole will again walk in protest, this time in Christchurch where protesters will take to the streets tomorrow against the continuing conflict. The possibility of being arrested is no longer a practical reality for Cole — a sense of responsibility to her four-year-old daughter outweighs a deliberate confrontation with the law. However, her sense of moral

outrage and solidarity with those with no voice still burns as intensely as it did on that snowy New Year's Day 13 years ago.

Moana Cole's lean, sinewy faith rejects mouthing platitudes.

It must, of necessity, often involve direct but non-violent action. Protest and dissent are essential ingredients of any healthy democracy, she says. The consumer society and market economics are soul-destroying hollow stuff delivering nothing but emptiness.

"It's very, very difficult from where we are sitting to grasp the realities of what is going on in Iraq with any degree of reality. The whole way that this war is being sold to us on a \$2 million Hollywood designer set shows exactly how it is being run. Get behind the headlines and you can see the reality."

Since December she has been the member of a weekly vigil outside the Harewood Base. She has fasted since the outbreak of the war in Iraq. It is not, she says, a question of one side being better than the other. It is a question of standing alongside the silent anonymous thousands who are suffering directly.

There is a further curious replay of history. Two of Cole's companions at the Griffiss base — Ciaron O'Reilly and Bill Streit — are in prison following recent protests against the second Iraq War. O'Reilly is in an Irish jail after "dismantling" a United States warplane at Ireland's Shannon Airbase. Streit has been imprisoned after pouring blood over the exterior of the Pentagon in Washington.

"Protest is essential to a healthy society. However, the older I get, the less I'm tied to the belief that if everybody hits the street at the same time, things will change. I don't go out there with the hope that there will be instant change," Cole says.

"I don't look to change the world but I don't want the world to change me. When you speak out, you are not being strangled by the dictates of a government. Your action is an expression of social and individual freedom.

"I've rediscovered the meaning of the word vigil. It means being awake to the fact that while 40,000 children die of starvation each day, money is still being spent on weaponry. For an hour each week, I can reconnect and think critically about these issues and how our lifestyles contribute to these injustices. There can never be peace without justice. Peace, justice, and mercy are all integrated words."

A variety of labels have been attached to a woman whose experience of the fight for social justice began as a young child. She has been called a peacenik, activist, dissident, troublemaker.

"They are labels which conjure up certain visions. I describe myself as a Catholic worker. I am one of the most conservative individuals I know, but I hope that I am someone who is continually aware of the world's human face. I analyse and process this awareness as a Christian, as a Catholic."

Cole was in her early 20s when she joined members of the Catholic Worker Movement in Queensland during protests against visits by American warships. She was in her final year at Brisbane's Griffiths University but the protests — and her arrest and brief imprisonment — became a defining moment in her life.

She was no stranger to the campaign for social justice and peace — as a young child, her parents had taken her to demonstrations and rallies while writing letters on behalf of Amnesty International ("Many of those prisoners were probably Iraqi," she notes with quiet irony) were almost part of daily family routine in Pearl and Dale Cole's house. Cole's Queensland childhood also coincided with the State Government's clampdown on public protests.

After gaining her degree in film and media studies at Griffiths, Moana Cole travelled to the United States, converted to Catholicism, and joined the Catholic Worker Movement, dedicating her life to protecting the poor and working for truth and justice.

The Catholic Church, with all its sharp paradoxes, is still the place from which Cole stands to view the world.

"It's my rock. I am perhaps on its periphery but that is where I feel

most comfortable. The Church is perhaps hierarchical, patriarchal, and co-opted by power but it is also the universal church which provides a place for everyone. It is one of the few places where you can engage in a dialogue of non-market values. In an increasingly individualistic society, this is still a place where I can connect with a sense of community in an incredibly exciting theological arena."

She quotes the founder of the Catholic Worker Movement, Dorothy Day.

"The church might be a harlot at times but she is still my mother."

"Of course I get angry. It was demoralising when this war started, although we perhaps knew that it was inevitable. It was only a question of when. There is anger at these moments; an anger which I hope is based on love and the belief that as human beings we are capable of achieving so much more. It is a sense of anger, of moral outrage, which must be aired in a non-violent way. One must witness to evil and injustice. You must speak out on behalf of those with no voice. You must examine your own life and how to lead it in a way which will be just for other people. Protest, resistance, must go hand-in-hand with a vision of an alternative society."

"There are no right answers but you must always ask the right questions — and asking these is often more terrifying than standing in front of a B52 bomber with a mallet. Everything you have been taught is put into question in the most incredibly liberating journey."

The protests, the marches, the demonstrations in New Zealand and throughout the world may not have halted the war in Iraq. The conflict rolls on inexorably. The briefings in the Hollywood designer set continue while soldiers and civilians both die. But Moana Cole still has hope.

"If we continue down the same path, we will destroy ourselves. If there is to be a future for mankind, we must continue to make loud, clear, and non-violent statements for our children's sake."



Making a stand: "If we continue down the same path, we will destroy ourselves," says Moana Cole.

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