

"ATTENTION, MOVE! THIS IS AMERICA!"



Attention, MOVE! This is America!, Margot Harry, Banner Press, Chicago, @ 1987.

On May 13th, 1985, the City of Philadelphia surrounded, bombed and burned a house occupied by a black radical group called MOVE. Along with the MOVE house they burned up much of the black middle-class neighbourhood. The house at the time of the assault was occupied by thirteen people: seven adults and six children. The only survivors were 30-year-old Ramona Africa and 13-year-old Birdie Africa.

Margot Harry's book is marked by thorough research and clear insight into the horrifying extent that the state will go to in order to silence radical opposition. The Philadelphia police has a fierce history of violence, particularly against blacks and other minorities. According to a city spokesperson, the bombing of the MOVE house was to demonstrate that "we won't tolerate deviant behaviour that affects others." The destruction of a black neighbourhood, the murder of eleven people, five of them children, is somehow supposed to be understood as necessary protection of society.

The book illustrates to us that, contrary to the city's projected image of poor planning and inadequate supervision, in actuality it was planned long in advance by Mayor Goode, Police Commissioner Sambor and the FBI, among others. The

two years leading up to the Osage Avenue massacre were filled with all types of preparation for the MOVE assault, such as constant house surveillance: aerial photos, wall thicknesses and other information was obtained. Preparation included building a mock-up of the MOVE house at the Fire Academy, to test if the enormous amount of water pressure from a Squirt watercannon would shoot the front bunker built by MOVE off the roof. It succeeded.

Neighbours who were against MOVE reported on them to the city. MOVE's presence in the neighbourhood was distressing to some people. They had habits of keeping many dogs, throwing organic waste out on their lawn, wore long dreadlocks, and used a loudspeaker to denounce the state and demand the release of nine MOVE members imprisoned after the Powelton Village assault on MOVE in 1978. Although their use of course language over the loudspeaker may not have made them ideal neighbours, the massacre that occurred, rendering the block into a flaming war zone, could hardly have been considered an appropriate response.

Harry examines every aspect of the MOVE assault before, during and after. One important issue she takes on is the presence of the children in a house chosen to be bombed. Why weren't they removed? Four days before the assault,

Sambor called the Human Services Commissioner and asked to have the MOVE children picked up. The commissioner said she could not do this as she had never received a single report of abuse or neglect of the children at 6221 Osage Avenue. The city did not remove the children.

On Mother's Day, May 12th, residents were ordered to evacuate by 10 pm. Prior to that they had to show ID to go to their homes. Refusal to evacuate would lead to arrest. About 500 people were removed, some voluntarily, some forced to. Visions of South Africa rolled by with police helicopters overhead, detectives taking names in the crowds, etc. Goode's response to one of the community activists trying to stop the assault was that he would appear "irresponsible" if he backed out now. Margot Harry analyzes the phenomenon of a black mayor waging war on people of his own race. It is also dealt with by other writers in the first appendix...a compilation from several prominent black americans including Alice Walker, Richie Havens, Florynce Kennedy and various civil rights activists and attorneys. Theresa Africa, one of the women to die in the house, said to a friend on May 12th, "I know -- they're here to kill us...Tell them we want justice. And tell them that we want to live."

But at 5:35 am the next day Sambor was lying on his belly in the doorway across the

street. Through his bullhorn he shouted, "Attention MOVE! This is America! You have to abide by the laws of the United States." They were given fifteen minutes to surrender in front of an arsenal that included sixteen cops with M-16s (these were developed for Vietnam with high-velocity bullets). There were 12-gauge shotguns, Browning automatic rifles with scopes, .357 magnums, seven Uzi submachine guns, a .45 calibre Thompson machine gun, two M-60 machine guns, two .50 calibre machine guns with armour-piercing ammunition, and a 20 mm antitank gun. The seven adults and six children did not come out.

Several blocks were blanketed and choked from tear gas and smoke projectiles. Under this cover teams went in on either side of the house to blow holes in side walls. Squirt guns started shooting 1000 gallons of water per minute on the roof. In the next ninety minutes police fired at least 10,000 rounds at MOVE. The Squirt guns pounded nearly 640,000 gallons of water on the roof for five hours. The next step was to drop a bomb on the MOVE house. This bomb contained over three pounds of C-4, a very powerful military explosive. On impact it sent off a 7200-degree heat wave, setting the roof on fire, consuming the entire house and 61 other homes. The fire department let it burn.

The atrocities go on and on. The "democracy" of

the United States of America found it fit to gun down a house, drop a bomb on it, set fire to it and let the whole block down. They also shot down two children trying to escape incineration by gunning them down in the back alley. The police claimed they were two armed men.

After being knocked out by reading Harry's book, learning what *really* happened, the strengthening scene comes at the end when she covers the trial. There's obviously no happy ending to this nightmare and the trial, unbelievably, is not against the perpetrators of these murders, but against Ramona Africa, the only surviving adult of the blaze. The city felt the need of justifying their horrendous actions by finding her guilty of something. And their kangaroo court did manage to sentence her. But it wasn't easy. They were faced with a confident woman of strength and conviction. She acted as her own attorney and refused to play by their rules. She used every chance she could to expose the farce of a trial for what it was. She said to the judge, "The cops, the whole city of Philadelphia, is trying to wash the blood off their hands and they are using you as the water and you're going along with it...I'm not on trial. You are. The city of Philadelphia is on trial."

The book is shocking reading, mainly because it's fact and not fiction. It should be read to know what the government can, and will, and has done. Margot Harry gives us well-researched material, filled with analytical comment and political insight. It should not be forgotten that the day after the bloody massacre, Mayor Goode said at a televised press conference, "I would do it over and over again, because it was the right decision. I do not like the result, but based upon my information, it could not have been much worse...I stand behind the decisions made and I stand behind my managing director, police commissioner and fire commissioner. They did outstanding jobs under extremely difficult circumstances." What next, boys?

-- Sarah O

