

## Spiritual Criminals: How the Camden 28 Put the Vietnam War on Trial

**Michelle M. Nickerson**

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Michelle M. Nickerson's *Spiritual Criminals* is a gripping account of the Camden 28, Catholic war protesters who burglarized a federal building and were acquitted in a well-publicized trial in the early 1970s.

While eight members of the group breached a Camden federal building in August of 1971 to steal draft records, others monitored the site. After being tipped off by an informant who supplied critical logistical and financial support during the planning, FBI agents arrested the group's members. Later, the Camden 28's legal team made no attempt to prove their innocence. Instead, they attacked the war as justification for the group's actions, arguing that the government, by planting the informant, had "engineered" the members' arrests.

The trial was a media sensation, with the Camden 28 drawing support from the likes of Jane Fonda and George Carlin. The defendants argued their points with ferocity and expressed "loving kindness," creating a courtroom atmosphere "so intimate it was almost spiritual." The informant, who empathized with their war protest, called them "the greatest Christians I have ever known" and flipped to become a witness hostile to the FBI. The Camden 28 were acquitted, and the publicity and sympathy they inspired raised questions about the war and about government officials "directly undermining the work of political organizations."

In this fascinating and meticulous book, Nickerson tells the Camden 28's complicated story, relaying its "multiple origins." In addition to relating the event itself, the text includes enthralling depictions of the impassioned, idealistic individuals who comprised the Camden 28; the emergence of the Catholic Left as a major cultural movement in the 1960s and 1970s; and the incident's legacy as a pivotal Vietnam-era protest.

An authoritative text about a Vietnam-era protest and its aftermath, *Spiritual Criminals* covers a momentous historical event and demonstrates the power of social justice movements.

KRISTEN RABE (July / August 2024)

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