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Insecurity: When the bearers of democracy lose it for the sake of security

Joan Chittister | Aug. 16, 2007 From Where I Stand

[**Editor's Note:** Sr. Joan Chittister is taking a short break, so we have tapped into her archives. This column first appeared May 15, 2006.]

There's something intergalactic about hearing world news -- U.S. news -- in another country. Last week, for instance, I listened to the news in Tokyo. In the space of 24 hours, I heard a series of dizzying reports.

First, I sat in on a conversation in which Japanese friends spoke about the internment of Japanese-American citizens during World War II and the effect of that experience on immigrant Americans to this day.

Then, I heard CNN report that telephone records of "tens of millions" of U.S. citizens had been turned over to the government -- the largest example of domestic spying in the history of the country -- without Congressional approval.

I watched as Senator Patrick Leahy held up a copy of USA Today incredulous that as a senator he had to get such information from a newspaper rather than from the administration and wondered aloud how we would ever maintain the Constitution without the presence of the press in this country.

I heard a senator bemoan the "leaks" that allow such a thing to happen, as if the leaking of constitutionally suspect activities was more dangerous than the activities themselves.

I listened as Senator Dianne Feinstein remarked that we were on our way to a "major constitutional confrontation" over the abuse of the Fourth Amendment that guarantees Americans "the right to privacy."

I breathed a sigh of relief when I heard Senator Arlen Specter, a registered Republican and one of the most non-partisan members of Congress that the U.S. has to offer, call for hearings to get the data the White House will not provide the Congress.

And finally, in Japan, I sat as the Niwano Peace Prize Committee -- of which I am an executive member -- awarded its 23rd annual Peace Prize of 20 million yen (about $200,000) to Israel's "Rabbis for Human Rights."

While the world struggles to negotiate the tinderbox tilt in world relations since the invasion of Iraq and the increase in tensions in the Middle East, this group of 130 Conservative, Reform, Orthodox and Reconstructionist rabbis from Jerusalem challenge their own government to honor the rights of Palestinians as well as the rights of Israelis.

The Japanese are the only people on earth who have been decimated by the only atomic bombs ever used against a people -- indiscriminately and experimentally, not once but twice. These are people, as a result, who really know what peace means and what modern warfare implies for the future of the world. To sit as I did and watch the Japanese beg the human race to do better -- as we ourselves fumble with force now, talk peace but do war -- had the quality of an out-of-body experience.

Intergalactic. Berserk. Daft. Certifiably absurd. Or as the songwriter put it years ago, "When will they ever learn ...?"

Yet, in our time, the cry for peace has come from every direction.

There have been those who have resisted foreign oppression, as Mahatma Gandhi did in the attempt to wrest India from British rule.

There have been those who resisted national oppression as did Nelson Mandela in the face of the apartheid government in South Africa.

There have been those who resisted social prejudices enshrined in law, as did Martin Luther King Jr. in a segregated U.S.A.

There have been those who resisted gender discrimination, as did Wangari Maathai in Kenya. (See *NCR* Oct. 22, 2004 [1].)

There have been those who resisted religious intolerance as does Hans Kung, anywhere and everywhere.

And now, this new icon -- a body of rabbis. In Jerusalem.

But why rabbis? Their answers are clear. They do it because of their religious obligations to, as the Hebrew scriptures put it, "the widows, the orphans and the stranger."

They do it, too, because of their country's constitutional commitment to democracy and justice.

They do it because as Jews they themselves know what it is to be oppressed.

As a result, these rabbis have risked their own public status in Israel in for the sake of all of these things: for the integrity of the country, for the religious righteousness of Judaism, as a monument to the memory of their own families whose names are listed among the victims of ethnic tensions before this one, and even in behalf of the rights of the "stranger."

Finally, they persist in the face of criticism even by other rabbis, one of whom appeared at the award ceremony intent on defending the government of Israel from opposition to its Palestinian policies.

But the Rabbis for Human Rights remained true to their principles even here. They disagreed with the political positions taken by the rabbi who had insinuated himself onto the program but defended his right to differ.

Clearly the fact that such a group can exist in Israel, sue the government, protect Palestinians and speak in another voice is itself one of the clearest signs, ironically, of Israeli democracy itself.

In the midst of our own differences, despite the cacophony of the morning news and what it implies about our own struggle ahead, such a ceremony renewed the kind of hope this world needs.

After all, in the words of Bishop Gunnar Stalsett, Lutheran bishop emeritus of Oslo and chair of the Niwano Peace Prize Committee, "the rabbis have managed to rebuild the homes of Palestinians bulldozed by the Israelis army, helped Palestinians retain their farm land, harvested their olive produce, planted or provided over 10,000 trees for Palestinian land and joined a coalition of other organizations to oppose the "Separation Barrier" that expropriates Palestinian land, cuts people off from their fields and divides or surrounds village."

From where I stand, it seems to me that if a group of rabbis can do so much to call their own country to be what it says it wants to be, surely we can do the same here. Otherwise, if the international news that the Japanese and I were watching together is accurate, it's possible that in the name of "security," the bearers of democracy may well be the first to lose it. Then we would really be insecure.

And that would be really intergalactic. Berserk. Daft. Certifiably absurd.

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[1] http://natcath.org/NCR_Online/archives2/2004d/102204/102204h.php