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Guilty!

John Dear | Sep. 11, 2007 On the Road to Peace

On Sept. 6, a federal judge in Albuquerque, N.M. found six of us guilty for trying to visit the office of our senator. We will be sentenced in a few weeks. The message? It is a federal crime to attempt to speak to an elected representative about the U.S. war on Iraq. Don't visit your senator. Don't get involved. Don't speak out. Don't take a stand for peace -- or you too may end up in jail.

It all started one year ago, Sept. 26, 2006, when nine of us entered the Federal Building in Santa Fe, N.M., and tried to take the elevator to the third floor to the office of Sen. Pete Domenici to present him with a copy of the "Declaration of Peace," a national petition campaign aimed at stopping the U.S. war on Iraq, bringing our troops home, and pursuing nonviolent alternatives and reparations. More than 375 similar actions took place across the nation that week.

The senator's office manager came downstairs, said she would only allow three of us upstairs, and after 45 minutes of waiting and negotiations, we nine just decided to go upstairs, figuring we had a right as group of constituents to deliver our petition to the senator's office.

As we stepped onto the elevator, a policeman put his foot in the door, and the next thing we knew, the power was turned off. So there we stayed -- for some six hours. At one point, a police officer brought over a chair for one elderly member of our group who uses metal crutches. It seemed the officer was inviting us to make ourselves at home. He even said he supported our anti-war stand.

By the end of that memorable day, with over 20 police officers, SWAT teams, and FBI officials standing in the lobby, the Homeland Security director told us we had the choice to be arrested, jailed and tried, or cited and tried. He never gave us a warning, never told us to leave, never read us our rights. We took the citations, and for the past year, have been in and out of court, waiting to testify about our attempt to visit the senator's office.

The prosecution would hear none of it. As far as the prosecutor was concerned, we went there to disrupt the Federal Building and shut down the elevator. He seemed to think we liked being in an elevator. He, of course, had been a Marine for decades, and now commands a National Guard unit, and was just back two days before the trial from directing military operations in Colorado Springs, Colo. To testify against us, he called the police and the senator's assistant. They said we had plenty of warning, said we threatened to do a sit in, and said we disrupted the government's office work.

Then it was our turn. One by one we took the stand -- Philip, Michella, Sansi, Ellie, Bud and me. Our excellent

pro bono lawyers, Todd Hotchkiss and Penni Adrian, asked us why we went to the Federal Building and what happened. We each testified that we intended to bring a copy of the "Declaration of Peace" statement to the senator's office, in the hope that it could be faxed to him, that he would sign it, and that he would work to stop this evil war.

During my testimony, I was asked about the lists of names I brought with me that day. I had printed out the name of every U.S. soldier killed in Iraq and some 10,000 Iraqi civilians killed, and said I thought they would help remind us why we were there, that perhaps we might leave them with the senator's staff. The judge interrupted me and asked if I carried those names around with me all the time. While unfortunately it's now all too common for many of us to spend our time at demonstrations reading the names of the dead, I held back from saying, "Yes, don't you? Don't you care about the U.S. soldiers who've been killed, and the countless, innocent Iraqi civilians killed?" Instead, I said I always carried with me information about the war and how to stop it.

It was a grueling, exhausting eight-hour day. At the end, the judge returned with his verdict but then launched into a speech explaining why he believed the police and the senator's staff person, and not us, particularly, not me. He said the fact that I carried with me the names of every U.S. soldier killed and 10,000 Iraqi civilians killed proved I intended to be there a long time, and shut down business in the Federal Building. He basically called us all liars, and defended the government's evil war.

I'm not so sure that on the day one year ago I did intend to shut the Federal Building down, as noble a nonviolent act that might be in such times. Only a few months before, I took a group to meet with Gov. Bill Richardson, and he received us warmly, and let me speak for 20 minutes about why he should work to end the war on Iraq, disarm Los Alamos and abolish our nuclear weapons, and end the death penalty in New Mexico. I didn't rule out the possibility that in fact Domenici's staff might be willing to hear us. In the end, however, the police themselves disrupted business as usual. They turned off the elevator. They shut down the Federal Building. They prevented us from visiting our elected representative's office.

So what do we learn from this experience? What is the message from Federal Court in New Mexico? I suppose it's this: Anyone who dares visit their senator to speak against this evil war is liable of a federal crime. Don't presume you have any rights in this so-called democracy.

The judge said he would sentence us within 30 days, so there's more to come. He asked each of us to submit a statement to him. We face 30 days in jail and a $5,000 fine, which I certainly won't pay.

Meanwhile, the real crime continues, and the real criminals get away with mass murder, with the crucial, full backing of our courts. The war goes on, the killings go on, and the lives of our sisters and brothers in Iraq, Afghanistan, Palestine and elsewhere are shattered. Our government, in its race to become a global empire, has sunk to all new levels of corruption, lying, repression and old fashioned hubris. Our task is permanent nonviolent resistance against the culture of war; nonviolence as a way of life; full-time non-cooperation with violence, war, and empire; pursuing peace as if our very lives depend on it.

All things considered, then, it's a great blessing to be found guilty of speaking out against this evil war. I hope more and more people will write their senators and congress people, especially Sen. Pete Domenici of New Mexico, and demand that they end this war; that more and more people will sign up at wwwdeclarationofpeace.org and keep building the movement against this war; that more and more people will

march for peace, vigil for peace, organize for peace, agitate for peace, speak out for peace, fast for peace, cross the line for peace, pray for peace, and find themselves guilty of pursuing a new world without war, standing beside Jesus who was also arrested, tried, and condemned for pursuing justice and peace.

In such times as these, there may be no greater blessing.

John Dear's new book, *Transfiguration* (Doubleday, with a foreword by Archbishop Desmond Tutu) is available on line or from your local bookstore. John is featured in a new DVD, "The Narrow Path," with music by Joan Baez and Jackson Browne (Find it at **www.sandamianofoundation.org** **[1]**). He lives in northern New Mexico. For information, see:
www.fatherjohndear.org **[2]**.

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