NATIONAL CATHOLIC REPORTER
Published on *National Catholic Reporter* (http://ncronline.org)

Witch hunts enough to go around

Joan Chittister | May. 29, 2006 From Where I Stand

H*The New York Times* reports, 79 Montanans were convicted of sedition for speaking out "in ways deemed critical of the United States."

Forty-one of them got prison terms of one to 20 years and were fined ttfrom $200 to $20,000. In one case, 12 children of one family were put up for ttadoption after the father went to prison and the family farm failed. One of ttthese children, now 90, is still alive. She will be present for the ceremony in which the present governor of Montana, Brian Schweitzer, pardons these ttGerman-Americans, one of whom went to jail for saying that the food regulations put in place during the war were a "big joke."

Sedition. Convictions. Jail sentences. Pardons for being critical of ttgovernment policies. Impossible? Don't be too sure. It looks as if we ttcould launch a few witch hunts ourselves these days.

t

James Risen and Eric Lichtblau of *The New York Times* and Dana ttPriest of *The Washington Post* were just awarded journalism's tthighest honor, the Pulitzer Prize, for their stories on our secret torture ttchambers in Eastern European countries and domestic spying on U.S. ttcitizens.

t

As I understand it, Bill Bennett, former secretary of education, would ttlike, on the other hand, to put these three reporters in jail.

t

Bennett was clear in his condemnation of that kind of journalism. He ttsaid that the reporters "took classified information, secret information, published it in their newspapers, against the wishes of the president, against the request of the president and others that they not release it."

t

Nothing to be doubted here. Bennett calls these journalists traitors. He
ttsays they ought to be in prison rather than picking up prizes.

t

“I don’t think what they did was worthy of an award,” he
ttsaid. “I think what they did was worthy of jail. These people who reveal our secrets, who hurt our war effort, who hurt the efforts of our CIA, who hurt efforts of the president’s people -- they shouldn’t be given awards for this. They should be looked into (through) the Espionage Act.”

t

He did not, however, say anything about the president’s “selective declassification” -- leak, in common parlance -- of classified material for political reasons. To bolster his defense of the invasion of Iraq, the reason for which was beginning to unravel, Bush, we know now, had aides leak what to that point had been classified but unsubstantiated material. So, we have to assume that if Bennett wants reporters in jail for publishing material that “hurt our war effort, hurt the efforts of our CIA, hurt efforts of the president’s people,” he must mean the president, too.

t

Who, in fact, endangers the country more: A president by lying about the
ttcertain need for pre-emptive war, domestic spying or outsourced torture sites or journalists by telling the truth about the corner-cutting on the
ttConstitution?

t

After all, not only was classified material “leaked” by the
ttpresident -- former chief of staff to the vice president Lewis Libby’s
ttword, not mine -- it was suspect. Knowingly suspect.

t

The president’s own intelligence community said it could not be
ttverified. But the president used it anyway to justify what could not be
ttjustified. It was error upon error -- or treason upon treason -- if we apply
ttMr. Bennett’s value system broadly. And since Bill Bennett has become the “Value Czar” of the country, probably we should.

t

But that’s the obvious -- and almost irrelevant -- part of the
ttsituation. The real question is what, if anything, will be left of the checks and balance structure of the republic if we begin to jail reporters for telling us what we need to know to preserve the Constitution and the character of

the country.

t

Ironically enough, the very week the Pulitzer Prize was awarded, Mark
ttFelt appeared on national TV to discuss his guiding role as “Deep
ttThroat” in exposing the Watergate cover-up and the eventual resignation of Richard Nixon.

t

Question: Should Bernstein and Woodward have gone to jail rather than
ttChuck Colson, Gordon Liddy, and Bob Haldeman, who planned the robbery and,
ttworse, the cover-up by the Oval Office?

t

Think carefully here. The whole future of the country may be at stake.

t

What will happen to this democracy’s commitment to the Fourth
ttEstate, that institution of protected public voice that emerged out of the
ttFrench Revolution to act as a brake on the human tendency to autocratic
ttpretensions even in republics? If the media are denied the right to uncover and publish acts of government wrongdoing, what will happen to democracy
ttitself?

t

If we begin to jail journalists for telling us what we have a right -- a
ttneed -- to know about the way any given administration is frittering away the Constitution, the nation’s integrity will at best be the stuff of history. We will be one more banana republic governed by successive gangs of
ttopportunists, thugs and despots.

t

If journalists are denied the right to investigate those who do not
ttinvestigate themselves, how is this country to have any hope of stopping
ttcorruption in its tracks, of really being the country we have always thought
ttourselves to be?

t

From where I stand, when it becomes traitorous for an American reporter
ttto let Americans know about torture being done in their name or the domestic
ttspying to which their neighbors are being subjected, we won't need
ttnewspapers anyway. Collections of fairy tales will do. That, it seems, is a lot of what we're getting right now anyway -- and that goes for what they claim are our values.

Source URL (retrieved on *09/05/2015 - 12:44*): http://ncronline.org/blogs/where-i-stand/witch-hunts-enough-go-around