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

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

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

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ttU.S. news -- in another country. Last week, for instance, I listened to the ttnews in Tokyo. In the space of 24 hours, I heard a series of dizzying ttreports.

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

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

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

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

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

ttprivacy.”

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I breathed a sigh of relief when I heard Senator Arlen Specter, a
ttregistered Republican and one of the most non-partisan members of Congress that
ttthe U.S. has to offer, call for hearings to get the data the White House will
ttnot provide the Congress.

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And finally, in Japan, I sat as the Niwano Peace Prize Committee -- of
ttwhich I am an executive member -- awarded its

23rd annual Peace
ttPrize[1] of 20 million yen (about $200,000) to Israel’s “Rabbis
ttfor Human Rights.” While the world struggles to negotiate the tinderbox
tttilt in world relations since the invasion of Iraq and the increase in tensions
ttin the Middle East, this group of 130 Conservative, Reform, Orthodox and
ttReconstructionist rabbis from Jerusalem challenge their own government to honor
ttthe rights of Palestinians as well as the rights of Israelis.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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There have been those who resisted gender discrimination, as did Wangari
ttMaathai in Kenya. (See
ttHREF="http://natcath.org/NCR_Online/archives2/2004d/102204/102204h.php" style="text-decoration: none">
NCR
ttOct. 22, 2004.)

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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After all, in the words of Bishop Gunnar Stalsett, Lutheran bishop
ttemeritus of Oslo and chair of the Niwano Peace Prize Committee, “the
ttrabbis have managed to rebuild the homes of Palestinians bulldozed by the
ttIsraelis army, helped Palestinians retain their farm land, harvested their
ttolive produce, planted or provided over 10,000 trees for Palestinian land and
ttjoined a coalition of other organizations to oppose the “Separation
ttBarrier” that expropriates Palestinian land, cuts people off from their

ttfields and divides or surrounds village."

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

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

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[1] http://biz.yahoo.com/prnews/060510/lnw001a.html?.v=1