



Freedom or Security?

Mark M. Mattison
Grand Rapids, MI

“They that can give up essential liberty to obtain a little temporary safety deserve neither liberty nor safety.” Benjamin Franklin

Even after the tragedy of September 11, I wasn’t afraid to fly. Perhaps those who would terrorize us would like us to live in fear, avoiding air travel and constantly fearing for our lives, but I wouldn’t want to give them that satisfaction.

On the other hand, maybe we’ve allowed them to have more of an impact on our lives than we’d like to think. I’m not afraid of what a potential hijacker may do to me, but I am increasingly uncomfortable with what my own government is doing.

Beware the Teddy Bear

A couple of weeks before the anniversary of September 11, I drove with my wife and my three-year-old son to the airport to fly south for a family visit. Security personnel felt they needed to take my son’s teddy bear, run it through the X-ray machine, and then poke it and prod it to make sure it didn’t have a bomb inside. My son also apparently needed to be searched.

I suppose that’s a little better than racial profiling, but somehow the whole security exercise seems a little pointless, not to mention degrading.

I was reminded of an August 5 story from the BBC News. Apparently security staff at the Los Angeles International Airport confiscated the toy rifle of a G.I. Joe action figure because they were under strict orders not to allow any replica of a weapon on the airplane.

I guess from a security standpoint all of this must make perfect sense: As soon potential terrorists

realize that teddy bears and action figures are exempt from scrutiny, they will stuff them with radio-controlled bombs.

But it still seems a little far-fetched. To date, no suicide hijacker or suicide bomber in the U.S. (or anywhere, for that matter) has been willing to blow up his family along with a plane’s passengers.

“Give Me Security or Give Me Death”

What really concerns me, though, is the larger reality to which these anecdotes point: Our eroding freedoms as U.S. citizens. Poll after poll reveals disturbing trends about the American people’s willingness to give away key freedoms. For instance, in one poll taken by CBS News and the *New York Times* last year, 74 percent of respondents believed that “Americans will have to give up some of their personal freedoms in order to make the country safe from terrorist attacks.”

Over time, these reports, together with personal conversations, have led me to the sad but inescapable conclusion: For the most part, Americans do not value freedom.

What most Americans seem to value is security. We will fight to the death, if necessary, for security. We will give away every personal freedom, every civil liberty, for the sake of security.

Let the government listen in on our phone calls. Let them read our e-mails. (In the above-mentioned poll, 39 percent said they would have no problem with that.) Let officials stop us and search us whenever they like. No freedom is too sacred.

Unfortunately, once a freedom is given away, it is very difficult to regain. If we are not vigilant — and I believe that sadly, as a people, we generally are not — we will not realize all that we have lost until it is too late.

Grand Rapids Peace Team, an affiliate of Michigan Peace Team in Lansing, Michigan, is associated with the Institute for Global Education in Grand Rapids, Michigan. Editor: Mark M. Mattison.

Domestic Spying

Many people I talk to seem unaware that under the USA Patriot Act, which Congress has already passed, the FBI can require librarians to tell them what books people have been checking out. Under the law, the librarian can't even tell the patron, a city official, or even the Congress about the FBI's request. Do we really want the government keeping track of our reading habits?

Or consider, more ominously, the privilege claimed by the executive branch to declare anyone, *even an American citizen*, as an "enemy combatant." A designation of "enemy combatant" strips the accused of the right to a fair trial, access to legal counsel, presumed innocence, and a host of other constitutional rights.

An "enemy combatant" can be imprisoned indefinitely without charge. And the federal government has already exercised this imagined privilege.

The seriousness of this problem hit the news just a couple of weeks ago when the Senate Judiciary Committee publicized the May 17 ruling of a super-secret federal court (which I didn't even know existed), the Foreign Intelligence Surveillance Court, that the Justice Department wanted to use the USA Patriot Act improperly (as if the Act itself were not troubling enough).

Before that, news of FBI agents interrogating members of Congress — who are supposed to oversee the FBI — seemed almost surreal.

"No One Was Left to Speak Up"

Perhaps people just aren't concerned as long as the government's target is somebody else. Perhaps we don't mind the government impinging upon other people's freedoms, only our own.

Perhaps it's little skin off our noses if the government spies on Arabs or Muslims or shuts down Muslim charities. But this is exactly the point at which we, as vigilant citizens, must speak up.

Martin Luther King, Jr. often said, "Injustice anywhere is a threat to justice everywhere." The point is that an injustice visited upon someone else threatens us as well. Perhaps we would like the government to spy on potential terrorists, but do we

really want the government to spy on us? If we wait until the injustice hits our doorstep, it could be too late to stop it.

Pastor Martin Niemöller is credited with saying: "In Germany they first came for the Communists, and I didn't speak up because I wasn't a Communist. Then they came for the Jews, and I didn't speak up because I wasn't a Jew. Then they came for the trade unionists, and I didn't speak up because I wasn't a trade unionist. Then they came for the Catholics, and I didn't speak up because I was a Protestant. Then they came for me — and by that time no one was left to speak up."

Granted, we do not live in Nazi Germany and we do not live under a fascist regime. The fact that this newsletter can be published and freely distributed testifies to the fact that our freedom of speech is still pretty much intact. All I'm trying to illustrate with Niemöller's quote is that the time to defend liberty is when it's denied someone else; we dare not wait until our own liberty is threatened.

If we stand idly by while the government rounds up hundreds of suspects and "material witnesses" and tucks them secretly away, like it did when it arrested 1,200 immigrants in the wake of 9/11, the "liberty and justice for all" which we claim to value actually rings hollow.

Standing Upright

Theoretical freedoms that we surrender today may not be available to us tomorrow. Even freedom in the abstract must be protected. We dare not leave this battle to civil rights organizations alone.

If we really believe it, we must remind our legislators at every opportunity that we value freedom more than security, that we do not wish to live in a police state.

Martin Luther King, Jr. also stated that "a man can only ride your back if it's bent." The responsibility remains with each of us, both individually and collectively, to stand upright and not allow our hard-won freedoms to be stripped away for the sake of a temporary, perceived security. •

*The time to defend liberty is
when it's denied someone
else; we dare not wait until
our own liberty is threatened.*

Responding to the War-Call

Dave Blakeslee
Wyoming, MI

As I write this, President George W. Bush has just concluded a significant speech in which he laid out his administration's basic rationale for seeking the disarmament of Iraq. Though he claimed to want to avoid war if possible, his tone was clear: armed conflict, the invasion and overthrow of the current Iraqi government is a choice he's prepared to make if matters don't proceed according to his expectations or timetable.

Most of us who believe in the practical and effective value of non-violence as a way of resolving *all* of life's problems have been dismayed and discouraged by recent events in our own country and around the world. These past few months, when it became clear that our president and his supporters were embarking on a course that will probably lead to a devastating and destructive war in the Middle East, have been difficult to endure.

Our core values, our perspective on the reasons that led our nation to this predicament, and our persistent hopes that humanity might make progress in our ability to live in peace have often been scorned and dismissed as naïve, impractical, unrealistic and sometimes even weak, cowardly or treasonous. When we've appealed to our political leaders, more often than not we receive hedging, evasive replies that seem more dictated by polls than principles. It's with sadness that we once again see the persuasive influence of big money, military might, political pressure and at the heart of it all, our reluctance to give up old habits of destroying — rather than through love and goodwill, transforming — our enemies.

Though we sense the potential for "what could be" if our financial and cultural resources were directed in a more humane, constructive and peaceful direction, we are forced to acknowledge that "what will be" is likely to be yet another

collapse into the misery and suffering of brutal, devastating war.

At such a time as this, the difficulty of deciding on the best course of action is tangible. Many of us sense the call to rise up in protest, if for no other reason than to declare that the violence directed toward the nation of Iraq will not be conducted in our name or with our willing or passive consent. This gesture of protest is important and meaningful, even if it doesn't immediately produce the desired result of halting our leaders in their tracks. Even when thousands of us gather to voice our sentiments, it's still going to be likely that we will be outnumbered by the apathetic, and perhaps even

*Now, more than ever, peace
activists face the challenge
of demonstrating the
relevance of our position.*

by those who intentionally and vigorously support a war with Iraq. Such is the state of our society these days.

Though it would be easy to resign ourselves to an attitude of pessimism or contempt for the direction we see our

government move in, I believe that our responsibilities and aspirations for a better world and future are too important to allow negativity to characterize our response. Now, more than ever, peace activists face the challenge of demonstrating the relevance of our position. In an atmosphere charged with fear and uncertainty, we need to remain positive, forward-looking, engaged with the issues and concerns that preoccupy our neighbors, even those who have become mistakenly convinced that only a path of war can secure a lasting peace.

Opportunities to offer a counterpoint to the vision of President Bush and his colleagues present themselves in the context of conversations with friends, creative uses of the media, and other situations where considerations of war and its aftermath are expressed. It will require a measure of boldness, an application of critical thinking and listening skills, and deep reflection on those beliefs and principles we hold most dear if we are to remain prepared to meet that challenge.

Though we aim in the short term to halt or at least slow down the march to a war with Iraq, our

goal must be higher than even that monumental task. We must continue the endeavor of developing a culture that sees war as blind and destructive failure, a society that commits to sparing the next generation from knowing its scourge or falling into its temptations.

The seeds of peace are planted all around us, but they will not sprout and grow without our care. However discouraging the climate may be at this moment, it's within our power to still have a positive effect on our world. Wisdom and perseverance for the cause of peace is a gift we can give to our future. •

Father Peter Dougherty in Concert!

“Songs of Peace & Laughter in a Time of Conflict”

Date: Friday, October 25

When: 7:30 p.m.

Where: Ada Congregational Church, 6330 Ada Drive SE in Ada

Refreshments served will feature rich Mexican coffee & Middle Eastern treats

Sponsored by: The Grand Rapids Peace Team, The Women's International League for Peace & Freedom, and Ada Congregational Peace & Justice Community

GRAND RAPIDS PEACE TEAM
INSTITUTE FOR GLOBAL EDUCATION
P.O. BOX 68039
GRAND RAPIDS, MI 49516