

Ahmadinejad's U.S. visit was a missed opportunity for us

Joan Chittister | Oct. 2, 2007 From Where I Stand

Mahmoud Ahmadinejad, president of Iran, part of President George Bush's "Evil Empire" came to town last week. The question is who knows and who cares and who knows enough to care anything rational about it anyway? Good questions.

According to the latest Pew Research Center Survey on Religion and Public Life, 58 percent of the more than 3,000 respondents said they knew little or nothing about Islamic practices, but 70 percent of non Muslims said they did know that Islam was very different from their own religious beliefs. (*Los Angeles Times*, Wed., Sept 26, 2007) At the same time, the numbers of U.S. citizens whose attitudes toward Muslims are unfavorable are rising. What's even more disconcerting is that few Americans even know a Muslim personally. Those who do, the survey found, were more likely to be positive about Islam than those who did not.

The problem is clear: If feelings between the two groups harden -- one fearing violence, the other fearing prejudice -- the mercury of animosity on both sides rises, too. And with it the potential for civic polarization and, eventually, global warfare.

Clearly, then, we each have a personal stake in peace, a responsibility to see that our governments are not permitted to choose our enemies for us. Clearly, prejudice is the foundation of war, the ground upon which warring governments stand for support, the strategy of national threat that governments use to seduce a people away from peace. And we have all heard it used. It is "the weapon of mass destruction" that was, according to President Bush and Prime Minister Tony Blair, only "12 minutes away from our shores."

We know the strategy works. We've been there. And thousands are now paying the price of the subterfuge.

But all the while we talk about "freedom of speech." It is the banner under which we stand, the Americanism of which we are most proud.

For years, U.S. diplomats stayed in touch with Soviet officials during years of the worst threat the world had ever known. In the crosshairs of one another's nuclear weapons daily, a red phone sat on a desk in the Kremlin and in the Oval Office in the United States to make sure that no lower-level accident, miscalculation, over-reaction, prejudice, fear began the end of the world.

In our own time, we were told that a nation ravaged for a decade by sanctions was poised to destroy the West in

one fell swoop. And we believed it despite the educated skepticism of most of the rest of the world. Now we are being told that another country, one other man, Mahmoud Ahmadinejad himself, has the power -- has the intention -- to destroy us, as well. Like cats sniffing around cheese in a trap, we are being prepared, some think, for another invasion. This time Iran.

At the center of the issue, surely, lies both understanding and freedom of speech. Understanding, survey participants say, we lack. Free speech we say we have. But one depends on the other. In which case, forget Iran's weaknesses, we may just have failed our own principles badly.

In Iran's present government structure, according to the Iran Chamber Society, a decision -- every decision -- is legal and effective only after the approval of the Supreme Leader, a cleric. In this case, that is Ayatollah Ali Khomeini. Even national elections are lawful only when the Supreme Leader signs his approval.

The Supreme Leader also controls the armed forces and all intelligence and security operations. Only the Supreme Leader can declare either war or peace. He appoints the entire judiciary, the radio and TV networks and the Council of Guardians.

The President of Iran, Mahmoud Ahmadinejad, has a high public profile but is subordinate to the Supreme Leader in all things. According to the Iran Chamber Society, "Iran is the only state in which the executive branch does not control the armed forces." Point: If we have someone to fear in Iran, Ahmadinejad is not the one. No matter how bizarre, unpredictable, erratic or threatening he may seem to the Western mind, he can't push any buttons, send any troops, or build any bombs. We have made him out to be a great deal more than he is.

That may be the first thing we ought to understand.

Then, maybe we ought to look at our own past history and present use of "freedom of speech." This is a country that greeted Nikita Khrushchev in 1960 with a 21-gun salute at Andrews Air Force Base in Washington, drove him and President Eisenhower by presidential cavalcade 13 miles through Washington to his residence, treated him to conversations with a host of the highest officials in the country, toured him through Manhattan, San Francisco and Los Angeles and ended his stay with a visit to Camp David. This is the country that met its counterparts with courtesy and, after almost 30 years, finally talked and listened its way, one Soviet leader at a time, to the end of the Cold War.

That was freedom of speech. For us and for them.

In this era, our administration will not talk to those they call our enemies. A president of one of our most illustrious universities, President Lee Bollinger of Columbia, introduces Mahmoud Ahmadinejad, a foreign dignitary, on camera with a rant of insulting diatribes, and the city police refuse to allow him, a foreign figurehead -- someone, it is said, who has less power than the Prince of Wales -- to visit Ground Zero with a wreath.

You have to wonder what we might have learned by allowing him to present himself without our labeling him

first. You have to think about whether or not he might really have been trying to reach out a bit and what happened when we refused the handshake. You have to contemplate what might have happened if we had taken the opportunity to talk with him decently. What if we could both have come to see the human in one another? And more than all of that, what if we had been true to ourselves?

You have to question what we really mean by "freedom of speech." And for whom?

There was one bright spot in the debacle, however. One group of U.S. citizens trusted that the process of freedom of speech was still worth risking. In a chapel across the street from the United Nations, in a meeting conducted without advance publicity, a panel of Christian leaders from the U.S. and Canada -- a Quaker, a Catholic, an Anglican, a Baptist and a representative from the World Council of Churches -- before an audience of 140 other religious leaders held a two hour question and answer period with President Ahmadinejad that was low-key, respectful, and honest. No topics were ruled out. No questions were denied. No insults were traded. (*The New York Times*, Goodstein, "Ahmadinejad Meets Clerics," September 27, 2007)*

Did it do anything? In the realm of immediate political postures, probably not. But it did signal to both sides that it was possible to step back from the brink -- if you really believe in freedom of speech. And it may have signaled to the world that there is such a thing as "being Christian."

From where I stand, the moment was a call to both spiritual and political maturity. We missed on one. Thanks to the courage of a few, we may have managed to salvage the other.

[***Editor's Note:** *NCR* editor at large Tom Roberts attended the meeting between Ahmadinejad and Christian leaders. Read his account in the Oct. 12 issue of *National Catholic Reporter*.]

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