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

ëOn the line' at the SOA vigil

John Dear | Nov. 20, 2007 On the Road to Peace

This weekend, some 25,000 of us gathered again outside the gates of Fort Benning, near Columbus, Ga., to demand the closing of the Western Hemisphere Institute for Security Cooperation, formerly known as the School of the Americas, or SOA. We who want it closed have dubbed it "the School of Assassins" because we believe its graduates from Latin America and Central America have used what they learned here to terrorize and torture their own people and people who stood with the poor and oppressed.

Activists have been gathering outside the gates of Fort Benning every year since 1990. In recent years, student activists have seized on the November gathering as a chance to form national solidarity and re-energize, and their numbers have swelled overall attendance. Every Jesuit school in the nation and many other Catholic schools send large delegations. With the close vote in Congress, the strong turnout of so many committed young people, and the promise of many Latin American politicians not to send troops to the SOA, we all gained new hope to press on with our nonviolent peace campaign.

The weekend offered too many highlights to record them all. On Friday night, Pax Christi hosted an excellent panel discussion on "the human cost of war" featuring Joe Colgan, whose son Ben was killed in Iraq; Katy Zatsick Scott, whose son Jason was seriously wounded in Iraq, spent eight months recuperating at Walter Reed Hospital, and now refuses to speak to his mother because she speaks out against the war; and Ra'ed Jarrar, an Iraqi activist who helped document the number of Iraqi civilians killed and now works for the American Service Friends Committee.

On Saturday morning, thousands of students from Jesuit schools heard a passionate plea from Bishop Tom Gumbleton to work for the eradication of poverty, and from Congressman Jim McGovern , D-Mass., about his steadfast work to end U.S. militarism in Latin America. The Mass that evening was also packed.

At the gates on Sunday morning, Rabbi Michael Lerner of Tikkun called us to the politics of love, compassion and generosity. Sr. Mary Waskowiak, president of the Sisters of Mercy, and SOA Watch founder, Fr. Roy Bourgeois urged us to continue the campaign. The great Indigo Girls, Amy Ray and Emily Saliers, sang about making a commitment to peace. Besides seeing many friends from all over the country, I especially enjoyed hosting Congressman Dennis Kucinich of Cleveland, Ohio.

What is the SOA?

The Army's School of the Americas moved to Fort Benning from Panama in 1984 and was replaced in 2001 by the Western Hemisphere Institute for Security Cooperation, under the Defense Department.

The annual protests outside the gate to the military installation are timed to commemorate six Jesuit priests who were killed along with

their housekeeper and her daughter in El Salvador on Nov. 19, 1989. Some of the killers had attended the School of the Americas.

The military has acknowledged that some graduates committed abuses after attending the School of the Americas, but has said in the past that no cause-and-effect relationship has ever been established.

The new Western Hemisphere Institute has mandatory human rights courses, but the demonstrators contend changes at the school are only cosmetic.

Years ago, we were both honored at a banquet by Peace Action, and asked to speak together to a sold out luncheon at a New Jersey country club. We were told to show up promptly at 10 a.m. on a Sunday morning, which we both did, only to find the place deserted and the buildings locked. We discovered that the event would not begin for three hours, so we went for a long walk and became friends.

I'll never forget asking him how he manages to be so peaceful amidst such a demanding schedule, with the exhaustive traveling, endless speeches, and many meetings. He looked me in the eye and said, "You know the answer to that, John: '"Through Him, with Him and in Him."' Amen, Dennis.

In the car from Atlanta, he was on the verge of tears as he told me that the Bush Administration is systematically preparing right now to bomb Iran next year, that we all need to wake up to this reality and do what we can to prevent it.

"The type of thinking that produced the SOA and its human rights violations is the same type of thinking that produced the U.S. war in Iraq and is producing a U.S. war against Iran," he told the crowd from the stage. "But we reject war as an instrument of foreign policy." The crowd cheered him on.

During the weekend, a thousand people attended the premiere of an excellent new film, "On the Line," (available on DVD at **www.onthelinefilm.com** **[1]**) featuring Martin Sheen and Susan Sarandon, with cameos by me and Sr. Helen Prejean. Directed and produced by Ron Schmidt and Jason Schmidt, the film explains the work of the SOA, tells the story of the campaign to close it, and shows the annual Sunday morning funeral procession. It follows the case of Brian Derouen, a student who crossed the line and spent four months in prison for his witness.

On Sunday morning, 11 people crossed onto the base and were arrested, including my Pax Christi friend Diane Hughes of Springfield, Ill. "As a citizen of the richest, most powerful country in the world, I bear responsibility for the policies of the government I have elected into office," she wrote a few weeks ago. "Having received so many blessings, much should in turn be expected of me. As a Catholic who believes in the sanctity of life, I have an obligation to honor all life in word and deed. I can't just talk the Gospel; I have to follow it with my behavior. As spotty as my record is on such witness, of all places in my life to take action, standing with and for the poor and disenfranchised is one of the most important places for me. I feel called to nonviolent witness by facing the heartless policies of my government with a prayer on my lips and a smile for my arresting officer."

A mutual friend, just back from a delegation to Colombia, gave her a bag of red clay from the banks of a river where hundreds of people were once massacred by U.S.-backed Colombian death squads. Diane carried the clay onto the base, where thousands of death squad soldiers from Colombia are currently training. She faces six months in prison for her witness. (For details, see: **www.soaw.org** **[2]**)

As Roy Bourgeois promised, it was a weekend of joy and sorrow -- joy, to be among so many committed peace and justice people of faith; sorrow, that the killings continue, that so many have died because of our government's warmaking. It all came home to us as we approached the gate on Sunday morning.

A large banner of Rufina Amaya hung near the stage. The sole survivor of El Salvador's El Mozote massacre, in which 900 people, mostly women and children were killed by U.S.-backed Salvadoran death squads, Rufina spent her life speaking out against war and telling how the SOA graduates killed her family as she watched from behind a nearby bush. A year ago, she was on a two-week speaking tour of Canada, and I happened to be in Toronto as well. She came to hear me speak. During our visit, I gave her a copy of my book, *Peace Behind Bars* , and pointed out the entries where I described how Philip Berrigan and I read about her, discussed her witness, and prayed for her in our jail cell. We embraced and blessed each other. She died suddenly in February from a heart illness. "Rufina Amaya, Presente!" we chanted.

As we approached the gate, a Guatemalan mother, featured in the film "On the Line," broke down sobbing. Over 25 years ago, on another Sept. 11, her husband, four children, and other relatives were kidnapped and disappeared by SOA-trained Guatemalan soldiers. She too has spoken out against U.S. militarism in Latin America, but has never recovered from such a horrific loss. She collapsed in grief. Roy and Dennis led her aside, and held her for 20 minutes as her body shook from sobbing. "Please close this place," she whispered to them through her tears.

Her grief, Dennis said to me as we drove back to Atlanta, is the grief of all Latin America, the result of the SOA and U.S. warmaking. The best way to begin the process of healing, restitution and rebuilding Latin America is by shutting down the SOA and using those funds for food, medicine, housing and jobs in Latin America, here and elsewhere.

And so, we'll have to keep on speaking, keep on organizing, and keep on going back until the SOA is closed down once and for all.

John Dear's new book "Transfiguration" (Doubleday) is available from **www.amazon.com** **[3]** and his booklet, "The Advent of the God of Peace," is available from **www.paxchristiusa.org** **[4]**. "The Narrow Path," a new DVD about John, is available from **www.sandamianofoundation.org** **[5]**. This weekend, he will be speaking on Prince Edward's Island, Canada, and expects to be sentenced soon for his protest last year against the Iraq war. For info, see **www.johndear.org** **[6]**.

Source URL (retrieved on *10/24/2016 - 22:44*): https://www.ncronline.org/blogs/road-peace/%C3%ABon-line-soa-vigil

Links:
[1] http://www.onthelinefilm.com/
[2] http://www.soaw.org
[3] http://www.amazon.com
[4] http://www.paxchristiusa.org
[5] http://www.sandamianofoundation.org
[6] http://www.johndear.org