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Now wait just a little minute there

by Joan Chittister

From *Where I Stand*

It was a touching, powerful and embarrassing piece of media. In fact, it was enough to make the average, newspaper-reading U.S. citizen blush. There stood the president of the United States speaking passionate words into a Rose Garden microphone. He was excoriating Russia's "dramatic and brutal escalation" of violence toward Georgia, "a sovereign neighboring state," in retaliation for Georgia's suppression of Ossetia, its breakaway province. The action, George Bush said with properly restrained indignation, has "substantially damaged Russia's standing in the world."

It was a stupefying moment. In response to Russia's troop movements into Georgia in defense of South Ossetia, a province on Russia's southern border, George Bush, architect of the invasion of the still embroiled and desperately damaged "sovereign nation of Iraq" declared to the world that "such action [as Russia took] is unacceptable in the 21st century." Yo, George! Aren't you forgetting something?

Indeed, Bush had apparently forgotten that just weeks before his dramatic condemnation of the brutality of Russian foreign policy, the brutality of our own foreign policy in Iraq had been clearly and repeatedly exposed by our own Senate Intelligence Committee as also unacceptable. This was "a pot calling a kettle black," as my grandmother liked to say as she dismissed the rantings of political figures in full election array.

After years of stalling by Republican members of Congress, on June 5 the full report of the committee

was finally released. But not to worry. The bet is that no one is paying any attention. Least of all George Bush whose distorted justifications for the invasion of that country trumped everything the rest of the international community either knew or knew they didn't know about the ethical exoneration of a maneuver that has killed more than 4,100 U.S. soldiers, 350 of the "coalition of the willing" and hundreds of thousands of Iraqis, most of them civilians.

What's more, the report is clear: The top administration officials who made the decision to take this country to war knew they were not telling the country the whole truth about what they knew or the reasons why they themselves were so intent on the invasion, despite overwhelming doubt about the legitimacy of it.

So how is it that a president can make such an officious display of condemning - demonizing -- another nation for doing the very thing we have done? How can we possibly threaten them with international opprobrium while we bask in fabricated virtue and ignore public opinion entirely?

Which leads to the present question: Whatever happened to that good old-fashioned custom of "confession?" First, law courts depend on it. Second, religions advise it. And third, psychologists see it as a sign of mental health. The political arena, on the other hand, seems to ignore it almost entirely anymore. Three strikes and you're out.

In a world that has become the global village Marshall McLuhan predicted in the '60s --20 years before the personal computer - "the medium," has indeed, "become the message." A president who can criticize others with such vehemence for doing exactly what he has just done and can neither redo nor undo nor solve and resolve, is a message for the world: Words are meaningless now.

And the questions that derive from that message are even more troublesome: Is honesty in human relations a thing of the past? Is denial now the global political strategy where truth might be a better answer? Is projection on an international scale now a global psychological disease? And is self-criticism, the gift of the sacrament of reconciliation, no longer a virtue. And if not, what does that bode for the political system and the mental health of the country in years to come, no matter which party is in power or which candidate is elected? Is this lack of ability to exercise self-criticism itself a deterrent to our ability to operate in the international domain?

Are we in a great deal more trouble than the simple confusion that comes in an election season with ads and counter ads more the coin of the realm than honest discussion or honest platform promises?

I remember where I was standing when Dwight Eisenhower admitted that he had lied to the country about the fact that we were spying on the Soviet Union with U-2 planes equipped with suicide gear. The first crack in the national carapace could be heard across the country. After that, the fact that presidents "had to lie" for one reason or another became commonplace.

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But now, with the Rose Garden speech, something even more dismaying lurks in the air. Now, it seems, presidents lie to themselves, to the world, to us to such a degree that truth has taken a misty and shapeless turn. "What is truth?" another politician, Pilate, asks Jesus. It's a question to which we need an answer now more than ever.

Without a return to the essentials of truthful political discourse in a democracy, how much democracy is there, really? And how much cynicism has taken its place? "None of them tell the truth," the young man in the passenger seat next to me on the plane said of the John Edwards story. "I won't vote," he went on. "They're all the same. They say one thing one day, and the very opposite the next."

Well, maybe they do. But the question is why? Maybe we want to be seduced by tales of our national integrity. Maybe we never demand the kind of political confessions that could save our own reputation in the world.

From where I stand, we better do something to face all of this kind of talk soon. Or we won't be able to blame it on sleazy crooks and professional robbers. On the contrary, we will be watching the political system decline in Brooks Brothers suits and silk blouses at a dizzying pace. After all, it's a thin line between invading a country and "liberating a nation," between our nuclear bombs and theirs, between our anthrax and theirs. I'm sure, however, that in a Madison Avenue culture, we'll have better reasons for using them than they do. And if not that, we'll at least spin our spin and tell our lies with much more class and far better controlled indignation.

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