

Published on *National Catholic Reporter* (<https://www.ncronline.org>)

January 8, 2013 at 12:09pm

Brian Terrell's peace witness from prison

by John Dear

On the Road to Peace

This week, the president nominated the head of the U.S. drones program, responsible for killing hundreds, perhaps thousands, of innocent women and children in Afghanistan and Pakistan, to be his new head of the CIA. That is appropriate, because the CIA runs the U.S. torture, rendition, assassination and mass-murder program in conjunction with the Pentagon. Of course, all of this pure evil goes contrary to everything the nonviolent Jesus taught. What do we Christians do? We protest the ongoing killings by these evil U.S. drones in Afghanistan, Pakistan and Yemen; continue to call for nonviolent conflict resolution; try to build a movement of nonviolence; and take nonviolent risks to stop the killings.

My friend Brian Terrell has taken many nonviolent risks to say "no" to a future of drones and permanent war. A longtime peace activist, a member of the "Creech 14" and a founder of the Strangers and Guests Catholic Worker Farm in Maloy, Iowa, Brian is currently serving six months in the federal prison in Yankton, S.D., for protesting our evil U.S. drones program.

On April 15, Brian and two friends walked onto the Whiteman Air Force Base in central Missouri to present a letter to the base commander calling for an end to the U.S. drone warfare. They tried to make the case that dropping bombs on women and children in Afghanistan and Pakistan will not lead to peace -- much less improve our own security -- but will inspire thousands of people to join the violent movements against the United States. They were immediately arrested, tried and sentenced in federal court. While our recent government war criminals, Wall Street criminals and torturers go free, Brian is holed up in a cell in South Dakota.

His wife, Betsy, told me on the phone yesterday that she had a good New Year's Day visit with Brian, and he recently wrote me an upbeat letter. He hopes to be released in late May. This is Brian's third arrest for protesting drones. In an article for their newsletter, Brian described their action:

At the Whiteman base, Ron, Mark and I attempted, on behalf of a larger group of protestors, to deliver an "indictment" to Brigadier General Scott A. Vander Hamm, the base's commander. Our indictment charged the chain of command, from President Obama to General Vander Hamm to the drone crews at Whiteman "with the following crimes: extrajudicial killings, violation of due process, wars of aggression, violation of national sovereignty, and the killing of innocent civilians." It noted the fact that "extrajudicial targeted killings by the use of unmanned air-craft drones by the United States of America are intentional, premeditated and deliberate use of lethal force in violation of U.S. and international human rights law" and demanded that these crimes immediately cease. Our polite request to the base sentries for directions to headquarters to deliver the indictment was denied and our way blocked by military police who handcuffed us and took us away. Our thirty or so companions, clearly exercising the constitutionally-protected right to peaceably assemble for the redress of grievances, were chased off the property by about fifty Air Force personnel in full riot gear who performed a carefully if grotesquely choreographed drill routine, complete with goosesteps and synchronized grunts and beating of clubs on shields.

The notorious Whiteman base used to launch B-2 stealth bombers that flew directly to Iraq, where they dropped their bombs, killed thousands, then turned around and flew home to Missouri, just in time for their Air Force pilots to have dinner with their families. They were also used at the beginning of our war on Afghanistan. These days, Whiteman is building up its drones program so the killing can be done by remote control and robotic fighter bombers.

In his sentencing statement before the judge on Oct. 11, Brian tried to make the case that the drones should be put on trial. Here's an excerpt:

Each of the government's witnesses, all of them Air Force police personnel, testified that participants in this protest were nonviolent, respectful and peaceable in assembling at Whiteman Air Force Base, a government installation, to petition that government for redress of a grievance, demanding that the remote control killing carried out daily from Whiteman cease. They testified that at no time, before or during our protest, did they perceive us as a threat. Our expert witnesses testified that our behavior was consistent with the activities that the drafters of the First Amendment intended to be protected, not persecuted, by the government. The order and security of the base would not have been compromised had the security police allowed us to proceed to the headquarters to deliver our petition. No testimony to the contrary was offered this court.

Instead of planning to accommodate a constitutionally protected peaceable assembly, however, the Air Force chose intimidation and conspired to deprive us of the rights they are sworn to protect. We learned from government witnesses that that the phalanx of goose-stepping riot police is a "Confrontation Management Team," deployed only in the case of preannounced events. Whiteman security did not call out the Team to defend the base but to intimidate citizens engaged in lawful activities.

The court was mistaken a month ago when it said that our group was "allowed" to assemble on the highway right of way by the Air Force and that this space provided for us met free speech requirements of reasonable time and place. This place in question is not only outside the base's jurisdiction, it is outside the sight and hearing of anyone on the base. The court's decision is part of a widening disintegration of civil liberties, where speech is tolerated only in designated and

remote "free speech zones" where it cannot be heard by the government, and criminalized in any place where that speech might actually have a chance to be understood. Intended or not, the court's message is a chilling one- that a citizens' constitutional right to assemble to petition the government extends only to places outside government facilities and where the government does not have to hear it. The court's easy dismissal of international law as not "trumping" domestic law has precedents, but is all the more disturbing for this fact.

Last fall, I was on trial for a drone protest in a New York State where, in contrast to this court, former United States Attorney General Ramsey Clark was permitted to testify on international law. Judge Gideon, after listening to Ramsey Clark speak of the Nuremburg Principles at length, leaned over the bench and asked him, "This is all interesting, but what is the enforcement mechanism? Who is responsible for enforcing international law?" "They are," responded Mr. Clark, pointing to us defendants, "and so," he said to Judge Gideon, "are you!" Every citizen is responsible under international law and every judge more so.

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In our trial here last month, as at our protest in April, our intention has been to put the illegally operated predator drones on trial and so we have focused on the machines that are sowing death and terror in Afghanistan and Pakistan by remote control from Whiteman Air Force Base. It was never our intention to address or to protest the weapons system that is the larger mission of Whiteman, namely the B-2 Stealth Bomber. However, Judge Whitworth, both in sentencing Mark Kenney and in our trial, you noted that your commitment to maintain the security of the B-2 weighs heavily in your decisions. For a judge to admit to being swayed by a consideration other than the law, not to mention when that consideration is the security of weapons of mass destruction, raises obvious questions about that judge's impartiality.

For my part, Judge Whitworth, I am grateful to you for calling our attention to the larger picture. It is not, of course, the technology of robotics that we protest but the murderous and criminal uses the government puts it to. Drones are the weapon of choice in the current administration's wars of aggression, but it was the B-2s from Whiteman that first violated Afghan airspace eleven years ago this week and began killing the people of Afghanistan. The crimes against humanity that began in October, 2001, with B-2 airstrikes on a defenseless civilian population continue today with drones operated from that very same base. The B-2 Bomber, blasphemously nicknamed the "Spirit Bomber," is also ready at a moment's notice to commit the ultimate and unthinkable war crime of delivering a first strike nuclear payload to any place on earth. A cold war boondoggle, the B-2's stealth capability shields it from radar the Soviets never got around to developing before their own tragic empire finally imploded.

On the official website for Whiteman Air Force Base I found the base's mission statement. It is as brief as it is vicious: "Skilled and proud Airmen providing full spectrum, expeditionary, B-2 global strike and combat support capabilities to geographic commanders and the Commander, US STRATCOM, while supporting Team Whiteman. We kick down doors and kill targets ... Weapons on Target, On Time!"

I have visited Afghanistan and know that eleven years of NATO troops "kicking down doors" has not brought peace there. Often soldiers don't seem to know whose door they've kicked in or whether the "target" they kill is who they are hunting for. B-2 bombers from a great height or even drones with state of the art video feed do no better. We know that even children are sometimes

named as targets to be killed by drones. Children regularly are among their "collateral damage." The targets themselves are often victims of assassination rather than legitimate casualties of war.

Eleven years of kicking down doors has only made the world a more frightening place and has earned our nation more enemies and less security. Whiteman's mission is not counter-terrorism; it is terrorism. [See the Catholic Worker website: www.justpeace.org]

While Brian was settling in to the horrors of the U.S. prison system last month, I was visiting Afghanistan. There, the youth of the Afghan Peace Volunteers told me that no one there knows who is or who is not a member of the Taliban. How do the U.S. soldiers 10,000 miles away back in America know who are members of the Taliban? they asked me. Most of the drone raids end up killing women and children, they said, as they told me their stories of grief and death.

"When Gandhi was talking about the cycle of violence, I think he was talking about something just as provable as the laws of physics," Brian told the local newspaper the day before entering prison. "We're taking the Golden Rule and turning it inside out. We'll do unto other people the worst thing we could imagine happening to us so that it won't happen to us. But you're not going to stop your neighbor from wanting to hurt you by hurting your neighbor."

"There is an Arab proverb that says that a true prophet is a person who can love at long distance," Brian continued. "I think what the American people desperately need is, while we have this technology to kill people who are very far away and strange to us, to be at least as ready and work just as hard to figure out how we can love the people who are so far away. I think our best ethical, moral and religious energy needs to be put toward loving these people. Otherwise, we're just making the world a much more dangerous and scary place."

As we begin a new year, I invite us to heed the peace witness of Brian Terrell and consider what more we ourselves can do for peace. Change comes through grass-roots movement building, creative nonviolent action, and risk -- or, as the New Testament explains, through our participation in the Paschal Mystery of Christ. May Brian's prison witness touch our hard hearts and inspire us to do our part to end drones, bombs, torture and warfare, once and for all.

Letters of support can be sent to: Brian Terrell, #06125-02, FPC Yankton, Fed. Prison Camp, P.O. Box 700, Yankton, SD 57078.

John Dear lead a retreat on nonviolence with Roshi Joan Halifax on Feb. 15-17 at the Upaya Zen Monastery in Santa Fe, N.M., and will speak for the abolition of nuclear weapons with Martin Sheen and Archbishop Desmond Tutu on March 1 in Oslo, Norway. He will lead a retreat, "Jesus the Peacemaker," April 5-7 in Pennsylvania. To see John's speaking schedule for 2013 or to invite him to speak in your church or school, go to John Dear's website. One of John's essays appears in the new book *A Faith Not Worth Fighting For*. His book *Lazarus, Come Forth!* explores Jesus as the God of life calling humanity (in the symbol of the dead Lazarus) out of the tombs of the culture of war and death. John's talk at the 2011 Sabeel conference in Bethlehem is featured in the new book *Challenging Empire*. John is profiled with Dan Berrigan and Roy Bourgeois in a new book, *Divine Rebels* by Deena Guzder (Lawrence Hill Books). This book and other recent books, including *Daniel Berrigan: Essential Writings*; *Put Down Your Sword* and *A Persistent Peace*, are available from Amazon.com.

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