

## The Santa Fe Nine

John Dear | Oct. 3, 2006 On the Road to Peace

"We're here to collect Sen. Pete Domenici's signature on our Declaration of Peace," we said to the security official in the lobby of the Santa Fe Federal Building. "We're here to collect his promise that from now on, he will work to end the U.S. war on Iraq and bring the troops home, and pursue reparations and nonviolent solutions for the Middle East. Until we get his signature, were not leaving."

The guards stared in disbelief. They knew that New Mexico's senator is one of the Bush Administration's biggest supporters, one of the greatest defenders of nuclear weapons in history. We knew it, too. When some of our group wrote asking him to oppose the Iraq war, he wrote a letter in return -- a letter brimming with braggadocio and punctuated by boasts of his support for the war. We responded in turn by deciding to take a stand for peace, or more specifically, a sit in for peace.

It was part of a nationwide pattern. Last week, some 375 actions took place against the Bush Administration's war on Iraq. More than 250 people were arrested in acts of civil disobedience from the White House to the Los Angeles Federal Building. You won't read about it in *The New York Times*, or even hear about it on Amy Goodman's "Democracy Now," but it happened, and it's a great sign of hope.

Our own action was modest, but beautiful. For the first time in 35 years, according to local police, Santa Fe witnessed civil disobedience. Nine of us entered the Federal Building and made our request. We were promptly denied entrance, kept walking anyway, and got as far as the elevator before the police stopped us. They pulled the plug on the elevator, with the doors still open, and there we conducted our protest.

Earlier that week, I had printed out from several Web sites the name of every U.S. soldier killed in Iraq over the last few years, plus some 10,000 names of innocent Iraqi civilians. And there in the elevator we started reading those names aloud, first from the list of Americans, then from the list of Iraqis, alternating back and forth. Our voices carried to everyone in the lobby, until eventually the police forced the lobby closed.

Among us the litany of the dead hit home. It was sobering. Some began to weep. All of us bowed our heads in silent prayer as the names poured forth -- the precious names of the squandered and brutalized from an immoral, illegal and unnecessary war. Here was a lamentation, a prayer of intercession, a cold hard look at the consequences of our pursuit of Iraq's oil. The reading went on for six hours. Amazing.

The nine of us, cramped on the elevator floor, came from all walks of life -- a 15-year-old student, a retired librarian, several radical feminists, a disabled elderly man, all of us trying to take a stand for peace and life.

Congregating close was a large contingent of the Santa Fe police force, the FBI, a SWAT team, the federal marshalls, and homeland security, waiting and observing, hearing our litany. We read on and on and held our

ground. Outside, scores kept vigil, the media hovered about, and frustrated politicians passed by. Finally, around 5 o'clock, homeland security officials moved in and escorted us from the building and issued citations.

We refuse to pay the fine; we intend later this fall to appear in court and there put the war itself on trial.

A small gesture, to be sure. And though it might seem futile, in our nation's history, actions just like ours have made all the difference. From the abolitionists and the suffragists to the labor and civil rights movements to the anti-war movements, from the Boston Tea Party to Rosa Parks and the Berrigans, history shows that when good people cross the line and break the law and take a risk for justice and peace, positive social change happens.

In other words, when we enter the Paschal Mystery, when we risk the cross as nonviolent resistance to systemic, institutional injustice, a breakthrough occurs.

Sitting in and standing up for peace goes all the way back to Jesus. I wrote about it in my book *The Sacrament of Civil Disobedience*. Jesus, I wrote, was a one-man crime wave. In his passionate pursuit of justice and equality, he committed dozens of acts of nonviolent civil disobedience. His final one, turning over the tables of injustice in the temple and calling for contemplative prayer, stands as his culminating instance of dramatic, symbolic nonviolent action -- his clearest, most poignant, best-aimed gesture, a gesture aimed at the heart of Judean-Roman imperial power. It was the action that cost him his life.

His example rings true for Christians today. In our own days of war and poverty and nuclear weapons, we must take risks through our own actions of creative nonviolence. And we must keep taking them until the war ends, hunger is eradicated, and nuclear weapons are abolished. We must keep on walking the road to peace.

John Dear is a Jesuit priest and the author of *Living Peace*, and *The Questions of Jesus*, (both available from Doubleday). For information on the campaign to stop the Iraq war, see: [www.declarationofpeace.org](http://www.declarationofpeace.org) [1]. For a list of American casualties, see [www.icasualties.org](http://www.icasualties.org) [2]. For a documented list of 48,000 Iraq civilians killed, see [www.iraqbodycount.org](http://www.iraqbodycount.org) [3]. See also, [www.fatherjohndear.org](http://www.fatherjohndear.org) [4].

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