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The trials, and blessings, of peacework

by John Dear

On the Road to Peace

I think we've entered well into Orwell's nightmare of a post-modern, post-Christian era of permanent war. We have a war president, a Congress that writes blank checks for war, an enthralled media that trumpets war, a sheepish citizenry that lets itself get fleeced for war, churches that confer their blessings on war, and courts that legalize weapons and imprison those who say no to war. Our war isn't only permanent, but universal -- we make war on the poor, on children, on the earth, on humanity, on God.

But complaining does no good, and it's not an authentic Christian response anyway. The Christian response to a "surge of war" is a counter surge of peace, a swell of peacemakers and nonviolent resisters. All of us need to stand up, join some public action, get involved with our local peace group, speak out, and on occasion sit in. With every act of peace, unanimity comes apart and hope resurges. And we show ourselves disciples of the non-violent Jesus.

I joined eight other New Mexicans -- several grandparents, a few Pax Christi people, and a fifteen-year-old, outstanding people each of them - who entered the Santa Fe Federal Building Sept. 26 bearing a copy of the "Declaration of Peace." Ours was one of 375 actions at various local government offices around the nation. Our destination was the office of Senator Pet Domenic, a prominent warmaker. Would he consider signing our declaration? Might he promise to help bring an end to the war? Reasonable requests, we thought. We also thought our chances unlikely. Still, such a gambit warranted a try, for nonviolence, if it goes deep enough, melts hearts, transforms politics and wins friends.

We got as far as the elevator. Police forbade us from continuing and pulled the plug. So in the elevator we sat, the doors opened to the lobby. The police confided their sympathy for our cause and, while they obstructed us, they refused to arrest us. So we resorted to Plan B. From the elevator floor we read aloud the name of every U.S. soldier killed, and some 10,000 Iraqi civilians. We read for seven hours.

Finally the head of Homeland Security in New Mexico arrived and personally arrested us. Stuffed into our hands were the federal misdemeanor citations, the charge: "failure to conform with signs and direction."

This week we were supposed to stand trial in federal court. But the government has now postponed things until spring. Seems they hope to expand the case against us -- and make sure I cool my heels in jail.

Alas, it's all too likely. But it's also a small price to pay, considering the 1.5 million Iraqis who've been killed over the last 16 years. But more than that, for Christians it's the normal price to pay in the nature of things. Paying up is part and parcel of the Christian's job description. We're supposed to take up the cross of nonviolent resistance to the empire of war, and to accept the consequences.

After all, the person we follow suffered arrest, suffered an abusive stint in jail, brutality and torture, and finally execution. Such is the path for his followers, the way of daring non-violence with all its risks.

So as it stands for *us*, things are postponed, a turn of events that gives us added time to prepare. Thus an opportunity is shaping up -- an opportunity to put the war itself on trial. Here is a chance to demonstrate how the war is illegal, immoral and evil. Here's our chance, so help us God, to tell the truth -- to say before the court and its tireless clerks that the war was a pure fabrication. That the consequences have been tragic and dehumanizing. That the war is a setback for humaneness across the entire world. That the U.S. based everything on calculated lies. That here, at bottom, was a premeditated grab for Iraqi oil.

Moreover, here is our opportunity to say that the war violates international law and the Nuremberg Principles. That it has turned the world against us. That it has sowed seeds for terrorist attacks to come. That not only has the war failed to promote American security but has put everyone's at risk.

We'll say under oath the war wreaks havoc not only on the people of Iraq and the Middle East, but on the people of New Mexico, the poorest state in the land. We'll talk plainly of the colossal waste of money - more than \$50 billion, nudging toward a trillion dollars, on pace to reach two trillion dollars. And the bills are starting to arrive.

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We'll insist the money should have come here to house the homeless, feed the hungry, provide universal healthcare, improve our schools, and clean up New Mexico's radioactive environment. And we'll say that the billions in change should have gone to relieve worldwide hunger and disease, the root causes of

terrorism and war.

And we'll say a few things more. That the killing of thousands of U.S. soldiers and hundreds of thousands of Iraqis, mainly civilians, must stop. That no one deserves to die for the interests of U.S. oil corporations. That we need to pursue non-violent solutions and a non-violent foreign policy. That it is the patriotic duty of every citizen to work for an end to our government's insanity. Saddam hanged for something the U.S. has done on a far grander scale. We say, the bombings, the killings, the hangings, must stop.

As a Christian and a priest who walks in the tradition of Martin Luther King, Jr., Dorothy Day and Mahatma Gandhi, I hope to testify about the non-violent Jesus and explain that no Christian can support this war and claim at the same time to obey Jesus' commandments "Put down the sword" and "Love your enemies." Jesus blesses peacemakers; he obeys the law of God. And I think it is our religious duty, then, to obey the same law, God's law of nonviolence.

I retain a thread of hope that the senator, his staff, New Mexico's government and the U.S. government will reverse its stand and stop the killing. I continue to hope that they end this evil war, make massive reparations to the people of Iraq, and seek new non-violent, non-military policies for the people of Iraq and the world. I hope the court will find us not guilty and join us in condemning this evil war.

That is my hope. But whatever comes, my friends and I will keep on marching for peace, standing for peace, speaking for peace, praying for peace, living in peace, working for peace and occasionally sitting in for peace. We support the national march on Washington, D.C. Jan. 27 (see www.unitedforpeace.org) and the local actions across the country on March 16-19, (see www.declarationofpeace.org). Our times are times of permanent war, and the God of peace requires of us this difficult work. But I can testify that the blessings far outweigh the cost.

John Dear will speak at St. Cloud State University in St. Cloud, Minn., on Feb. 1, and embark on a nationwide speaking tour of Australia in mid-February. His new book, *Transfiguration*, with a foreword by Archbishop Desmond Tutu, will be published next month by Doubleday and is available now from Amazon.com. For further information, see:
www.johndear.org

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