

The Soldiers At My Front Door

by John Dear

29 November 2003

CommonDreams.org

I live in a tiny, remote, impoverished, three block long town in the desert of northeastern New Mexico. Everyone in town -- and the whole state -- knows that I am against the occupation of Iraq, that I have called for the closing of Los Alamos, and that as a priest, I have been preaching, like the Pope, against the bombing of Baghdad.

Last week, it was announced that the local National Guard unit for northeastern New Mexico, based in the nearby Armory, was being deployed to Iraq early next year. I was not surprised when yellow ribbons immediately sprang up after the press conference.

But I was surprised the following morning to hear 75 soldiers singing, shouting and screaming as they jogged down Main Street, passed our St. Joseph's church, back and forth around town for an hour. It was 6 a.m., and they woke me up with their war slogans, chants like "Kill! Kill! Kill!" and "Swing your guns from left to right; we can kill those guys all night."

Their chants were disturbing, but this is war. They have to psyche themselves up for the kill. They have to believe that flying off to some tiny, remote desert town in Iraq where they will march in front of someone's house and kill poor young Iraqis has some greater meaning besides cold-blooded murder. Most of these young reservists have never left our town, and they need our support for the "unpleasant" task before them. I have been to Iraq, and led a delegation of Nobel Peace Prize winners to Baghdad in 1999, and I know that the people there are no different than the people here.

The screaming and chanting went on for one hour. They would march passed the church, down Main Street, back around the post office, and down Main Street again. It was clear they wanted to be seen and heard. In fact, it was quite scary because the desert is normally a place of perfect peace and silence.

Suddenly, at 7 a.m., the shouting got dramatically louder. I looked out the front window of the house where I live, next door to the church, and there they were -- all 75 of them, standing yards away from my front door, in the street right in front of my house and our church, shouting and screaming to the top of their lungs, "Kill! Kill! Kill!" Their commanders had planted them there and were egging them on.

I was astonished and appalled. I suddenly realized that I do not need to go to Iraq; the war had come to my front door. Later, I heard that they had deliberately decided to do their exercises in front of my house and our church because of my outspoken opposition to the war. They wanted to put me in my place.

This, I think, is a new tactic. Over the years, I have been arrested some 75 times in demonstrations, been imprisoned for a "Plowshares" disarmament action, been bugged, tapped, and harassed, searched at airports, and monitored by police. But this time, the soldiers who will soon march through Baghdad and attack desert homes in Iraq, practiced on me. They confronted me personally, just as the death squad militaries did in Guatemala and El Salvador in the 1980s, which I witnessed there on several occasions.

I decided I had to do something. I put on my winter coat and walked out the front door right into the middle of the street. They stopped shouting and looked at me, so I said loudly, publicly for all to hear, "In the name of God, I order all of you to stop this nonsense, and not to go to Iraq. I want all of you to quit the military, disobey your orders to kill, and not to kill anyone. I do not want you to get killed. I want you to practice the love and nonviolence of Jesus. God does not bless war. God does not want you to kill so Bush and Cheney can get more oil. God does not support war. Stop all this and go home. God bless you."

Their jaws dropped, their eyeballs popped and they stood in shock and silence, looking steadily at me. Then they burst out laughing. Finally, the commander dismissed them and they left.

Later, military officials spread lies around town that I had disrupted their military exercises at the Armory, so they decided to come to my house and to the church in retaliation. Others appealed to the archbishop to have me kicked out of New Mexico for denouncing their warmaking. Then, a general called the mayor and asked him to mediate "negotiations" with me, saying he did not want the military "in confrontation" with the church. Really, the mayor told me, they fear that I will disrupt the gala send-off next month, just before Christmas, when the soldiers go to Iraq.

This dramatic episode is only the latest in a series of confrontations since I came to the desert of New Mexico in the summer of 2002 to serve as pastor of several poor, desert churches. I have spoken out extensively against the U.S. war on Iraq, and been denounced by people, including church people, across the state. I have organized small Christian peace groups throughout the state. We planned a prayer vigil for nuclear disarmament at Los Alamos on the anniversary of Hiroshima this past August, but when the devout people of Los Alamos, most of them Catholic, heard about it, they appealed to the archbishop to have me expelled if I appeared publicly in their town. In the end, I did not attend the vigil, but the publicity gave me further opportunities to call for the closing of Los Alamos. I receive hate mail, negative phone calls and at least one death threat for daring to criticize our country. But New Mexico is the poorest state in the U.S. It is also number one in military spending and number one in nuclear weapons. It is the most militarized, the most in need of disarmament, the most in need of nonviolence. It is the first place the Pentagon goes to recruit poor youth into the empire's army.

If we are to change the direction of our country, and turn people against Bush's occupation of Iraq, we are going to have to face the ire and persecution of our local communities. If peace people in every local community insisted that our troops be brought home immediately, that the U.N. be sent in to restore Iraq, that all U.S. military aid to the Middle East be cut, and that our arsenal of weapons of mass destruction be dismantled, then we might all find soldiers marching at our front doors, trying to intimidate us. If we can face our soldiers, call them to quit the military and urge them to disobey orders to kill, then perhaps some of them will refuse to fight, become conscientious objectors and take up the wisdom of nonviolence. If we can look them in the eye and engage them in personal Satyagraha as Gandhi demonstrated, then we know that the transformation has begun.

In the end, the episode for me was an experience of hope. We must be making a difference if the soldiers have to march at our front doors. That they failed to convert me or intimidate me, that they had to listen to my side of the story, may haunt their consciences as they travel to Iraq. No matter what happens, they have heard loud and clear the good news that God does not want them to kill anyone. I hope we can all learn the lesson.

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