

Troubled by Simplistic Notions

**America must seek respect not fear,
find answers through values of mercy, love**

By LAWRENCE HART

As I read and listen to the news, I am shaken, angered, saddened. The words of the Apocalypse become pertinent to our time and nation: "You claim to be rich and successful and to have everything you need. But you don't know how bad off you are. You are pitiful, poor, blind and naked."

In Colorado, where I live, poor people dying of cancer routinely are turned away from hospitals. A 16-year-old girl was thrown into a jail cell with a dangerous sex offender, and women under arrest have been beaten by male officers twice their size. Jesus Apodaca, who crossed the Arizona desert into this country with his mother and sister at age 12, graduated from a Colorado high school with honors. But our congressman has taken steps to have Jesus deported. That's the law, the congressman argues, and he intends to see that it is followed. It may be the law, but it is a mean-spirited use of the law.

In Wisconsin, the infant mortality rate for poor African-Americans has risen since the implementation of former Governor Tommy Thompson's welfare policies; yet, this is the person that George Bush appoints as secretary of Health and Human Services. With Thompson's welfare "miracle," homelessness in Wisconsin rose dramatically, as did demand for emergency food and shelter. The biggest share of this increased demand has consisted of families (often led by employed people) with children. The president obviously approves of such economic violence against the poor. He says that the so-called "Welfare Reform Act" did not go far enough. In the name of all that is holy, and I use that expression quite literally, is this the kind of people we really want to be?

A nation that is unable or unwilling to recognize its own complicity in the oppression of the poor or the violence of global terrorism simply is incapable of producing solutions adequate to the problems it faces. The only adequate solutions are those highest aspirations of the human heart espoused by all the great faith and wisdom traditions of the world -- compassion, justice, peace, mercy, faith and some sort of reflective repentance.

In one of the Lincoln-and-Douglas debates, Douglas proudly, and rather prophetically, asserted that America had it within its power to become one of the most feared nations on earth. Lincoln replied that he would much prefer to see America become one of the most respected nations. Tragically, America chose the path of fear rather than respect even before Lincoln offered his moral alternative to the philosophy of coercion. We practiced genocide against the indigenous people of this continent (sometimes using germ warfare); we enslaved millions and continued to brutalize them even after their emancipation; and, historically, we have waged war without mercy on civilian populations.

Personally, I do not find it surprising that other nations fear a country like America, with its long history of manufacturing events in order to go to war. We now know that some of the most inflammatory pieces of evidence presented for the Gulf War were pure fabrications. Yet, the president wants us to devastate Iraq without convincing evidence of imminent danger to the American people. Given the historical record, there is no reason for the rest of the world not to be petrified at the prospect of a United States with an impenetrable defense shield and an irresistible offense.

I am troubled by the simplistic notion that those defined as terrorists are motivated by nothing more than an irrational hatred of democracy. I am troubled by a president who thinks that consulting is listening without hearing and that giving ultimatums is the same as leadership. I am troubled when the president smiles in apparent glee at the frequency with which the death penalty is imposed in Texas. I am troubled by the hypocrisy of maintaining our own school of terrorism -- The School of the Americas. I am troubled by secret searches, indefinite detentions and military tribunals. I am troubled by the economic violence against the poor that helps finance the war on terrorism. It sickens me to know that my country is responsible for the deaths of nearly a million Iraqi children under the age of 5. And the truth of Toby Keith's patriotic song is deeply disturbing to me: "You better not mess with the U.S. of A. We'll put a boot in your ass! It's the American way." Yes, indeed, it is the American way.

I am not personally accomplished in the arts of love or peace or kindness, but to paraphrase Eugene Peterson, "I would rather fail, and see my nation fail, at love and mercy than to succeed at hatred and violence and oppression and exploitation."

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