

Keeping Vigil at The Gate

Jeff Moebus

Jeff Moebus, a two-tour Vietnam veteran, retired from the U.S. Army in 1998 after 28 years of service. On June 3, 2001, Moebus completed a 52-day fast and vigil at the front gate of Fort Benning: he fasted one day for every week that Congressional Medal of Honor recipient Charlie Liteky was then serving in federal prison for his SOA protests at Fort Benning. Moebus named two purposes driving the fast and vigil: “to offer up a personal sacrifice as an act of remembrance, repentance, and reconciliation for all victims of the SOA/WHISC”; and “to bring spiritual and faith-based forces to bear on the process by which the SOA/WHISC either will be transformed into an agent and agency of true peace, justice, liberty, equality, reconciliation, and love—or will be closed down.”

Moebus lives with his wife Kathy in New Orleans.

What follows are excerpts from the journal Jeff kept during his fast and vigil at The Gate.

The Mass Reading today was from the Acts of the Apostles, and was about Saul’s conversion experience that left him temporarily blind and ultimately Paul. It called to mind another conversion experience, the one that has led me from the act of retiring from the Army after 28 years of service (22 on active duty) as a Master Sergeant, to the fact of getting a ban-and-bar letter from the Commanding General at Fort Benning for “crossing the line” at the November 2000 SOAW Vigil, all in the span of a little more than two years.

In 1992, I stumbled across some “alternative” websites that viewed Christopher Columbus’ action not as a “discovery” but as an “invasion,” and not as the bringing of “civilization” to a “new world,” but as the onslaught of exploitation, enslavement, and extermination in the name of “Christian civilization.” This was a view of history that was completely alien to me, was vaguely unsettling, and was, in fact, the beginning of the end of my life as a centurion in Empire.



Fast forward to 1994. There is an Indian Uprising in a place called Chiapas down at the extreme southeastern end of Mexico, hard up against Guatemala. It is linked to the implementation of the North American Free Trade Agreement (NAFTA), and introduces the Internet as a weapon to be used by peoples in resistance. I am sucked in by a blizzard of Zapatista information about the root causes of their rebellion. I am introduced to concepts, institutions, organizations, and worldviews that are completely alien to my sheltered perspective on life at the end of the 20th century, including neoliberalism, globalization, free trade, and structural adjustment programs. Again fast forward to 1999. It is June in Anchorage, Alaska. I am by now retired. The plight of the Native Alaskan jumped off the streets of Anchorage and launched me into a crash course on the history and outcome of the interaction between the indigenous and the invaders of that particular part of the world.

Next thing I knew, it was Thanksgiving 1999, and I was in Chiapas on a human rights/environmental justice delegation sponsored by the Mexican Solidarity Network, the Rainforest Action Alliance, and ACERCA (Action for Community and Ecology in the Regions of Central America).... The Empire that crucified Jesus is the same Empire that Columbus worked for, and is the same Empire that is crucifying the oppressed, marginalized, impoverished, and wretched of the earth, and the earth itself.

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Would Jesus carry an M-16 against the farmers in Colombia? Would he teach others how to use one? Can a body, mind, and heart trained to kill a neighbor still have the ability to follow the central Christian commandment to LOVE that neighbor? These are questions I want to discuss with the good people who pass by this gate, who take courses on this base, and who live in this town.

The only reason that Empire is still in business is because it has the power and might of the military force at its disposal.... I am coming to believe more than ever that it is possible to take back the planet, one step—one heart and mind and soul—at a time. And the place to begin is with the soldier. I will be inviting Fort Benning soldiers to consider alternatives to military service, including conscientious objector status. If we could get even one Latin American or U.S. soldier (or one of the civilians employed here) to rethink his (or her) profession and how she or he is being used as a cog in a vast, monstrous machine, we will have taken a step toward victory. It's really just a matter of consciousness-raising, no?—for everybody.

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The real adversary is the worldview that generates U.S. political, economic, military, and diplomatic policy and action toward Latin America. So why am I doing the Fast and Prayer Vigil here and not in Washington, DC? Because the ghosts of the victims of the SOA/WHISC hang out at the Fort Benning Road Gate, and they need comfort and solace, solidarity and support. But, above all, they need prayerful and reflective action. I have realized that when Judy Liteky called The Gate “a sacred place,” it wasn’t because of what the living have done there, but because of what the dead cannot do there.

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I confess a need to “feel good about myself.” I confess a greater need to feel good about my country and what it does to the crucified peoples of Latin America. I confess a desire to be able to look at the relationship that exists between the United States and the masses of Latin America and not see expropriation, exploitation, enslavement, and extermination as methodology and objective.

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I think I told you that I am signed on as a GI Rights Network counselor. Our task is to provide counsel to U.S. service members and their families who are confronting difficulties and are looking for ways to address and solve those difficulties. I got my first GI Rights Network call last evening: a young Benning soldier and his family confronting some unpleasant realities about life in the Army. We had a good initial chat, and then we spoke for almost two hours as I laid out for him his options, the process and procedure for pursuing each option, and possible outcomes. It kind of reminded me of back when I was an Inspector General in the Army, serving as something of an ombudsman for GIs confronting the system.

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The news from Quebec weighs on the heart and the mind. The Summit of the Americas [is] laying the final framework for establishment of the Free Trade Area of the Americas (FTAA).... The necessary documents have been signed and strategies have been established to ensure implementation of the FTAA by 2005....

The vision articulated by President William Taft in 1912 thus moves closer to realization: “The day is not far distant when three Stars and Stripes at three equidistant points will mark our territory, one at the North Pole, one at the Panama Canal, and one at the South Pole.

The whole hemisphere will be ours in fact as, by virtue of our superiority of race, it already is ours morally.” Taft went on to describe the imperative of U.S. foreign policy in the rest of the hemisphere as “including active intervention to secure ... our capitalists’ opportunity for profitable investment.”

[Similarly] the mission statement of the U.S. Southern Command, which has strategic and tactical operational responsibility for everything south of the Rio Grande, includes the following terminology: “protecting the supply of strategic natural resources and access to the markets.”

The only way that Empire will realize the envisioned free trade zone in the western hemisphere from the North Pole to the South Pole is if it is enforced by state-of-the-art military and national security state repression, terror, and tyranny. [It is] the worldview that is attempting to implement the FTAA that our minds must grasp if we are to understand why the SOA/WHISC exists.

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Yesterday’s Prayer Book offering is from Latin America, and is gripping in its simplicity and its power: “O God, to those who have hunger, give bread; and to those who have bread, give the hunger for justice.” I am forced at least daily to confront my status as one of the Comfortable, the Complacent, and the Complicit, and to ask hard questions about what I intend to do to change that.

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Bread Not Stones. At approximately 8:04 this morning, the voice of the people was most definitely heard as we cranked up the Fast and Prayer Vigil at the Fort Benning Road Gate. Next to the sign showing the [numerical] Day of the Fast is a board carrying the Message of the Day. It is, and has been for several days now, “BREAD NOT STONES.”

The message is that the oppressed, marginalized, impoverished peoples of Latin America (and Africa and Asia and Oceania and Europe and North America, while we’re at it) do not need Stones; they need Bread. They don’t need soldiers trained in the art and science of Low Intensity Conflict, counterinsurgency, or counter-drug commando operations. They need teachers and nurses and doctors and sanitation engineers and carpenters and plumbers and clean water and food and land to grow it on. Well, you get my drift. At any rate, at approximately 8:04 am, somebody responded to the message. As the in-

coming traffic onto Fort Benning barreled by, somebody tossed a loaf of Nature's Own 100% Whole Wheat Bread at the sign (or me, I guess). And sped on by.

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Adorning the huge sign announcing that you are entering Fort Benning is the emblem of The Infantry Center, a blue shield with a vertical (point up) bayonet emblazoned on it and the words "FOLLOW ME" arcing above the blade. For 11 days now I've been staring at that and wondering why it bothers me so. Suddenly, it hit me.

I have one of those Bibles-on-a-CD that lets you do word searches. Punching in "follow me," I found what I thought I remembered: Jesus had used that exact phrase on no less than 18 occasions during his public ministry as recorded in the Gospels. This is another reason to be here at Benning: to offer a countervailing tendency to all those hearts and minds being filled with the idea that "Follow Me" is a war cry, a summons to advance into the teeth of combat and to close with and kill the enemy.

In point of fact, "Follow Me" is a peace song, a summons to advance into the teeth of a world gone mad in the pursuit of and service to idols, and to close with and transform, through revolutionary nonviolent love, thy enemy. Being here may help one or two of these young soldiers recognize or remember this simple fact.

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Today is a water-only fast day in honor and remembrance of the third anniversary of the assassination of Guatemalan Bishop Juan Gerardi. He was assassinated two days after the publication of the *Recovery of the Historical Memory (REMHI)* report, which documents two decades of terror in that country at the hands of the military and its paramilitary allies. More than 150,000 people were killed and another 50,000 detained and disappeared during the period. Bishop Gerardi had ordered the report as a means to uncover the truth and begin the process of forgiveness and reconciliation.

One of the men to be tried for his murder, Colonel Byron Disrael Lima Estrada, is a graduate of the SOA who then went on to head the D-2 Military Intelligence agency at the time of the genocide campaign in Guatemala's civil war. The policies and actions carried out during the civil war by the Guatemalan government through its military and associated paramilitary forces was simply a continuation of

the process begun in 1954, when the U.S. overthrew a democratically elected government at the behest of United Fruit and other transnational corporate interests. The threat of democracy in Latin America was just beginning to emerge back then.... Bishop Juan Gerardi was murdered for daring to seek, uncover, expose, and declare the truth. I fast in his honor and memory.



Jeff Moebus speaks with Maj. Joe Blair (US Army ret.). Blair was an SOA instructor and is now a prominent SOA/WHISC critic.

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Had an interesting variety of drop-ins today. One was a young lieutenant waiting to start Ranger school next week who actually knew quite a bit about Chiapas, NAFTA, and the Zapatista uprising, and who agreed that the FTAA will undoubtedly bring about similar upheavals throughout the rest of Latin America. I could sense that he viewed that prospect from the perspective of job security. I couldn't help but wonder how his young wife seated in the back seat, lovingly tending to their 3-month-old baby, viewed the matter.

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A question from Fr. Cesar Jerez Gavan, SJ, on the occasion of a commencement address in the U.S. (Jerez was the Jesuit Provincial in Central America and a very close, trusted advisor and friend of Archbishop Romero): "Do you plan to use your degree for your own profit, be it profit in the form of money, power, status, or respect? ... Will you become people who use your knowledge for the furtherance of justice, or live the 'good life' of manipulated, unconcerned people..., who grant honorary degrees to people from the Third World, but refuse to join them in the fight for justice and liberty...?"

And an observation from Fr. Jon Sobrino (the Salvadoran liberation theologian who survived the Jesuit massacre in 1989 only because he was out of the country at the time): “Those who respond to the suffering of the poor often recover in their own life the deep meaning they thought they had lost; they recover their human dignity by becoming integrated into the pain and suffering of the poor. From the poor they receive, in a way they hardly expected, new eyes for seeing the ultimate truth of things and new energies for exploring unknown and dangerous paths...”

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The theology of liberation and the theology of nonviolence together can and will defeat the theology of Empire. I know that like I know that the sun will rise in the east tomorrow morning. We just have to figure out how to open up the space to permit that to happen, to be able to receive the grace that is simply waiting to be unleashed. Articulating and living the Gospel in peace and social justice work can be formidably challenging if not outright tricky; few of us in North America have ever been really exposed to the connection, at least in the ways that Latin Americans have. [These are] more ways that the impoverished peoples of those lands have untold wealth to offer us. *gm*

