

Rome Diary 47 / 4 February 2003

Please note my new email address!!! <rbkaiser@justgoodcompany.com>

Alas, I will be in the U.S. 'til Feb. 14 and won't be in Rome to hear my friend Michael Novak deliver a defense of the Bush administration's stated intentions to make war on Iraq. I just received an Internet invitation from Jim Nicholson, U.S. Ambassador to the Holy See, to attend Mike's 6:30 p.m. lecture on Feb. 10 at the Centro Studi Americani, Palazzo Antici Matei, Via M. Caetani 32.

From another source, I understand that Nicholson is bringing Novak and Fr. Richard John Neuhaus to Rome so they can show the pope how wrong he is to condemn a preventive war and how right the U.S. president is to mount one. (I am not sure whether Nicholson, a wealthy commercial real estate developer from Texas, is paying for their trip, or whether U.S. taxpayers are doing so.)

Presumably, Michael is prepared to tell the Rome press corps what he tells the pope. But if he follows Vatican protocol, he will not be free to tell the press what the pope tells him – as, I suspect, the pope tries to weigh Novak's arguments against the opinions of vocal Catholics (including many bishops from practically the entire civilized world) who oppose any further U.S. incursions against Iraq.

I was feeling helpless – not even able to attend Mr. Novak's talk, or report on the debate that Mr. Nicholson's invitation says will follow (moderated by an American lawyer who has long lived in Rome, Peter Alegi). Then I got a note from Sister Clare Pratt, superior general of the Religious of the Sacred Heart, telling me about something I +could do: join a grassroots movement to send little protest bags of rice to President Bush.

Quixotic? Apparently, this rice game worked during the Eisenhower administration, as you will see if you read this note to the end. After that, you may want to act, as I will, deserting my post as objective observer and becoming a bit player in a piece of agitprop theater, along with, I hope, millions of other ordinary people who may join in here.

HERE'S THE PLAN, AS PASSED ON TO ME BY CLARE PRATT, RSCJ.

TAKE IT WITH A GRAIN is a grassroots campaign underway to protest war in Iraq in a simple, but potentially powerful way.

Place 1/2 cup uncooked rice in a small plastic bag (a snack-size Ziploc bag). Squeeze out excess air and seal the bag. Wrap it in a piece of paper on which you have written, "If your enemies are hungry, feed them." Romans 12:20. Please send this rice to the people of Iraq; do not attack them."

Place the paper and bag of rice in an envelope (either a letter-sized or padded mailing envelope -- both are the same cost to mail) and address them to:

President George Bush
The White House,
1600 Pennsylvania Ave.
NW Washington, DC 20500

Attach \$1.06 in postage. (Three 37-cent stamps equal \$1.11.)

Drop this in the mail. It is important to act NOW so that President Bush gets the letters ASAP. Once you have sent the rice to President Bush, please email your city and state to: RiceReport@RiceForPeace.org so they can have a count.

In order for this protest to be effective, there must be hundreds of thousands of such rice deliveries to the White House. We can do this if you each forward this message to your friends and family.

I have no confidence that Bush will ever read this message or see this rice. However, if enough of these packets get into the mail, it will cause a post office crisis. Washington, or whenever they take DC mail nowadays, will be overwhelmed by these packets. Frankly, we need to get in millions of them. However, this can be done, and if we expect to retain any friends in foreign countries, it needs to be done now. The newspapers will get wind of it, and the unresponsiveness of Bush will become evident to the dullest.

There is a positive history of this protest! In the 1950's, the Fellowship of Reconciliation began a similar protest, which is credited with influencing President Eisenhower against attacking China. Read on:

"In the mid-1950's, the pacifist Fellowship of Reconciliation, learning of famine in the Chinese mainland, launched a 'Feed Thine Enemy' campaign. Members and friends mailed thousands of little bags of rice to the White House with a tag quoting the Bible, "If thine enemy hunger, feed him." As far as anyone knew for more than ten years, the campaign was an abject failure. The President did not acknowledge receipt of the bags publicly; certainly, no rice was ever sent to China.

"What nonviolent activists only learned a decade later was that the campaign played a significant, perhaps even determining role in preventing nuclear war. Twice while the campaign was on, President Eisenhower met with the Joint Chiefs of Staff to consider U.S. options in the conflict with China over two islands, Quemoy and Matsu. The generals twice recommended the use of nuclear weapons. President Eisenhower each time turned to his aide and asked how many little bags of rice had come in. When told they numbered in the tens of thousands, Eisenhower told the generals that as long as so many Americans were expressing active interest in heaving the U.S. feed the Chinese, he certainly wasn't going to consider using nuclear weapons against them."

I am sending you this note, sending it to more than 2000 of my intimate friends in cyberspace, hoping you will pass it on to your friends and that many of you will send

Pres. Bush this concrete, Biblical message of concern. "If your enemies are hungry, feed them."

It remains to be seen whether your effort will even be noticed by the U.S. press -- which almost always leads the cheering for any belligerous president intent on creating public enemies for whatever private reason. I found a notable exception this morning in the Los Angeles Times. In an Op Ed piece, Robert Scheer points out that Colin Powell who will, as a good soldier, be giving his president's rationale for the Iraq adventure tonight on national TV, is the same Colin Powell who acknowledged in his autobiography 20 years after our Vietnam adventure that "all the destruction brought down upon Indochina by the U.S. was based on an uneducated, unfocused and enormously costly policy that he and other military leaders had known to be 'bankrupt.'" Now, writes Scheer, a U.S. president is at it again, propounding three Big Lies, that Iraq's weapons of mass destruction pose a real threat to the U.S. and its allies, that Iraq is tied to the al Qaeda, and that delaying an invasion will endanger the U.S. "...for more than a decade," argues Scheer, "the military containment of Iraq has effectively neutered Hussein, and there is no reason to believe that can't continue."

Scheer concludes: "As Powell knows from his Vietnam experience, lies have a way of catching up with you. Years from now, if the U.S. is still spending billions trying to micromanage the Middle East and reaping its rewards in blood, Bush will be marked indelibly, like Lyndon Johnson and Richard Nixon before him, as a leader who went to war on a lie." But the press hardly noticed the pope's words on Jan. 13, when he met with the diplomats accredited to the Holy See and lamented preparations for a war against the people of Iraq, "a people already sorely tried by more than 12 years of embargo" and added that war is "never just another means for settling differences between nations." And there is no evidence that Pres. Bush did, either. But can the press – and the president – ignore a million of you?

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