

THE STATE OF FREE EXPRESSION

by Patrisia Gonzáles and Roberto Rodríguez

from the COLUMN OF THE AMERICAS

To know the state of the nation, we can either check our wallets or listen to the president or the Democratic response. Or we can watch a movie and be bombarded by an unexpected barrage of political messages (prior to the previews) that definitely speak to the times we're living in.

On our end, we asked eminent scholars Dr. Antonia Castañeda (St. Mary's University) and Dr. Arturo Madrid (Trinity University) of San Antonio for their views on the state of the nation. Views such as theirs are either being muted by mainstream media and/or are winding up on blacklists. We respect them not only as two brilliant elders, but also as a couple who share a life commitment to humanity.

Q: What is the state of the nation?

Antonia Castañeda: "Wrapped in the flag of a virulent patriotism that brooks no questioning, the nation is in a state of undeclared war. Declared or not, the nation's military, political, economic, ideological and socio-cultural institutions and apparati are all placed on a war footing for an indefinite period of time.

"The president is given unprecedented war powers. Civil liberties are abrogated. Congress passes the USA Patriot Act that permits secret searches, arrests, incarcerations and immigration proceedings. University presidents castigate faculty who take a critical stance. The borders are closed, then opened under tighter policing. Anti-immigrant sentiment increases proportionately. Unrelated domestic and foreign policy issues are secondary to the politics and policies of the national security state and war preparedness. In the interest of national security and return to normalcy, we are pressed to suspend critical judgment, and go shopping."

Arturo Madrid: "The events of Sept. 11 have had the effect of putting the nation in the mental state of being at war. The consequences and implications of such a mind-set are that social issues and concerns -- including justice, fairness, equal protection under the law -- are dismissed. Political and economic concerns come to the fore. Citizens are expected to suspend their criticisms of the policies of society's institutions and leaders, and accept abridgements of constitutional rights and protections in the name of 'defense.'"

"With respect to the latter, the economic well-being of workers is subordinated to the economic well-being of corporations and investors. With respect to social concerns of the nation, attention, time and monies are diverted away from the well-being of those members of society who are marginalized. This has accelerated the process of what might be deemed a 'meritocratic' society, one in which people who have privilege are able to further capitalize on it. They are able to determine who will improve their situation in the world, whether through education or other types of opportunity."

"The result will be an even more hierarchical society. The 'fortress' mentality that exists in this society is reasserting itself. One of its manifestations is that there are persons who belong and persons who don't belong. Thus, the future of this society as a democratic, pluralistic and just society is in danger."

Q: The absence of terrorism can still leave tyranny and oppression in its place. Can you comment on that?

Antonia Castañeda: "The absence of terrorism, by and large, had not moved national leaders to address domestic or global inequalities, exploitations or oppressions. In fact, global capitalism and neo-liberal economic policies exacerbated those disparities and oppressions at home and abroad. Nor do I expect that record to improve when the current terrorist threat abates."

"Eliminating the terror and violence of poverty, of injustice

in all its forms, of domestic violence, of the global sex trade, environmental devastations and other oppressions were not national priorities before Sept. 11. They will only become so as we organize to address them."

Arturo Madrid: "The mental state of being at war creates an atmosphere in which fundamental rights and protections can be suspended in the name of defense. In addition, the mental state of being at war also provides justification for bigotry and xenophobia. Both conditions are already evident."

"The rights, protections, and attitudes that inform a democratic, pluralistic and just society are not unlike integrity: constantly under assault, and once lost, impossible

or at least very difficult to regain."

The president's views are quite different, as are the views of many in the country who will likely question the right of these two scholars to speak. As the aperture for rigorous public debate continues to narrow, their call for integrity challenges us to remain vigilant in maintaining our rights and freedoms."

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Cecilio Garcia Camarillo from Albuquerque, N.M., aka Xilo, ended his journey as a poet warrior on earth. He is remembered in the Column of the Americas as a Toltec: a poet who acts, speaks and communicates in triple meaning. Always a teacher, Cecilio was a former publisher of the '70s-era *El Caracol* and a legendary figure in the world of Xicano Flor y Canto — he continued to write until the end of his journey (*Selected Poems* by Cecilio Camarillo, Arte Publico Press and collaborated in the editing of the forthcoming *Cantos al Sexto Sol: An Anthology of Aztlanahuac Writings*). His writings will continue to inspire and communicate the essence of his spirit.

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