

GLOBAL PEACE INDEX: NORWAY #1; USA #96

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Peace is not just the absence of conflict; it is the presence of justice.

--Martin Luther King, Jr.

Some years ago I read that 40 percent of Americans believed that humans are violent by nature. I'm sure that this is a much higher percentage than most other countries, although I cannot find any recent international polls on this specific question.

In the late 1990s I was faculty advisor to Students for Non-Violent Action, and in April, 1998, we organized events for the National Day of Non-Violence at the University of Idaho and Washington State University. The turn-out at these events was abysmal and "Peace Sucks" was written on one of our posters.

For many years the U. S. Institute of Peace funded almost exclusively strategic studies not peace studies, and a director of my own Martin Peace Institute once told me, incredibly enough, that my Gandhi research was not appropriate for the institute's mission.

It should then be no surprise that the U.S. fares poorly in the Global Peace Index. Norway, New Zealand, Denmark, Ireland, Japan, Finland, Sweden, and Canada top the list, while the U.S. ranks 96 out of 121 countries.

The Global Peace Index, published by the Economist Group, is a meticulous social scientific study that rates each country according to 24 indicators, including "ease of access to weapons of minor destruction (guns, small explosives), military expenditure, local corruption, and the level of respect for human rights." The U.S. ranking was brought dramatically "by its engagement in warfare and external conflict, as well as high levels of incarceration and homicide."

In 2002 there were 668 prisoners for every 100,000 Americans, while there were only 59 per 100,000 locked up in Norway, Finland, and Denmark. In 2000, there were 5.64

homicides for every 100,000 Americans, compared to 1.09 in Norway, Denmark, and Japan; 1.48 in Ireland; 1.76 in Canada; and 1.97 in Sweden.

One might argue that the U. S. must spend more money on the military because we are expected to police the world and keep aggressors in check. For example, even though Clinton did not have explicit UN permission to bomb Kosovo, the NATO countries that refused to join in the action now admit that it was the right thing to do. One cannot say the same, however, for our disastrous intervention in Iraq with the large civilian casualties, over two million refugees, extraordinary renditions to secret prisons, and the use of torture.

I think most people in the world would welcome Americans as policemen if they followed international law, responded only when there were clear threats to other nations, and thoroughly exhausted all diplomatic possibilities.

America's prisons have a shameful reputation for harsh and violent conditions. In 1999 charges of mock execution of prisoners in a Sacramento jail resulted in a successful class action suit against the sheriff. A training video for Texas' Barzoria County Detention Center encourages the use of dogs to intimidate prisoners, a procedure used as Abu Ghraib as well.

In January 2005, Army Specialist Charles Graner, one of the leaders in the abuse of Abu Ghraib prisoners, was sentenced to a 10-year sentence. The 36-year-old former Marine used to work as a security guard at a supermax prison in Waynesburg, Pennsylvania. Graner's ex-wife also filed charges of spousal abuse, including being threatened by a gun. Many nations fared poorly on the Peace Index because of very high rates of domestic violence, and the U.S. is sadly among these countries.

We should not be trusted as a global peacekeeper until we begin to solve the serious problems in our homes and cities. It is shameful the richest and most powerful country in the world cannot score better on the Global Peace Index.

Just recently I saw a bumper sticker that read "Peace is Superior Firepower." America has had too much of this machismo. Firepower may cause shock and awe, but has

also caused excessive gun deaths in the U.S. and high levels of civilian casualties in Iraq and Afghanistan.

We need to see more stickers such as "Peace is not just the absence of conflict; it is the presence of justice."

Nick Gier taught religion and philosophy at the University of Idaho for 31 years. Read draft chapters of his book on the origins of religious violence at www.class.uidaho.edu/ngier/orv.htm.