

The 'American Inquisition'

By James Reston Jr.

Through the mist of time, the Spanish Inquisition has come down to us as one of the most barbarous periods in all of history. Its viciousness peaked in the late 15th century, during the reign of the messianic "Catholic kings," Ferdinand and Isabella.

Paranoia gripped Spanish society as the Inquisition coincided with a Christian war against the Muslims of southern Spain. Clandestine trials, secret prisons, rampant eavesdropping, torture, desecration of Islam's holy books, and gruesome public executions created an atmosphere of pervasive terror. Suspects were assumed to be guilty, with no recourse to a defense, to a jury, or to a legitimate court.

In the chaos now roiling the Western world, does any of this sound familiar?

It is time to ask whether the United States, with some of these same touchstones, is entering a period of its own peculiar Inquisition. Of course, there are no burning places for heretics in America now. No Tomás de Torquemada presides over this period of internal anxiety and investigation.

But the word, inquisition, is not exclusive to Spain in the Middle Ages. It is a useful term for historians to characterize phases of history that are distinguished by religious intolerance, by Christian holy war and Islamic jihad, by racial profiling and xenophobia, by show trials, and by snooping of secret police.

Paranoia abounds

This country, too, is seized with collective paranoia. President Bush knows, as Ferdinand, Isabella and Torquemada knew, that constant warnings about secret terrorists are a powerful deterrent to dissent and a useful tool for consolidating political power.

Bush, like his Spanish precursors, presses for a unity of faith and a credo of purification. His faith mixes the secular and the spiritual. Its hallmarks are Jeffersonian democracy for all the world, unquestioning patriotism and revitalized Christianity. Unbelievers in this holy trinity are to be ferreted out. Not to subscribe to the methods in the war on terrorism is not so much dissent as heresy.

The American Inquisition began on Sept. 16, 2001, five days after the monstrous attack, when Bush proclaimed his "crusade." That was the defining moment for this era of U.S. history.

In the years since, Bush has demonstrated all the passion and single-mindedness of King Ferdinand. The American secret police force is not called the Holy Brotherhood as it was in 1492, for today's brotherhood is more electronic than human. On Capitol Hill, Cabinet members, past and present, call search warrants obsolete. Be-



By Alejandro Gonzalez, USA TODAY

The paranoia that gripped Spanish society in the 15th century echoes even today. The result? A country struck by fear resorts to torture and spies on its citizens. And like King Ferdinand, President Bush couches his righteousness on Iraq in faith and in democracy.

ware. We are all "mined" for our "data."

How different is this really from the spying that went on in the Spanish Inquisition? Suspect words or acts do not change that much with time. In Inquisitional Spain, neighbors were supposed to report a suspicious neighbor to the Holy Office. Now, symbolic words or actions are detected electronically.

In the past few months, Americans have been treated to the extraordinary spectacle of a U.S. president arguing for torture in the lofty state-rooms of the U.S. government. Memos float around his Department of Defense, stressing that U.S. interrogators should cease their persecution if their victims come close to "organ failure." The world wants to know what is going on in the star chambers of secret U.S. prisons around the world. The U.S. administration scoffs. The Geneva Conventions are called quaint, and

the court in The Hague, Netherlands, cannot touch us. Standards for war crimes and crimes against humanity are for non-Americans.

Forms of torture

For the historian, symbolic acts such as torture often define an era, and the American brand of torture has a particularly medieval quality. "Waterboarding," as it is called (as if it were a sport like surfboarding or skateboarding), uses cellophane instead of gauze with water to subject the suspect to near drowning and suffocation. So today this is called an "enhanced" technique of interrogation. But the pitcher and gauze were just as effective in the 15th century. The intent is really no different from that of Torquemada's interrogators: to make the subject talk even though that talk might be drivel.

It is not surprising that a leader, who believes that his Christian God chose him to be president at this moment in history and that his Almighty speaks directly to him, should preside over this American Inquisition. Bush's messianic bent came to light vividly in June 2003, when he announced that his God had inspired him to go fight those terrorists and to end the tyranny in Iraq. What, one wonders, is his God telling him now about the chaos?

This supposed pipeline to heaven is, of course, not new for kings and potentates. On his deathbed in 1516, King Ferdinand told his minions that he could not die yet: God had told him that he would move on from the conquest of Granada to lead a great crusade that would recapture Jerusalem. The messianic impulse is commonplace in history.

Now, we are just a few years into the Iraq era. The situation is getting worse, and there is no end in sight. When this nightmare ends, years of self-examination are sure to follow as happened after the Vietnam disaster. The Iraq syndrome will be lengthy. In the meantime, American Inquisition takes root. It is more hard-edged and mean-spirited than the Vietnam crackdown... for one reason.

Though Bush's explanations for his wayward adventure may constantly change, though the enterprise may show itself to be a military and moral catastrophe of historic proportions, this American leader and his circle of illuminati are utterly convinced of their righteousness. Toward their detractors they misappropriate, like inquisitors before them, the verse of John 15:6:

"If any abide not in me, he should be cast forth as a branch and shall wither, and they shall gather him up and cast him into the fire, and he shall burn."

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