



BRIGITTE CARNOCHAN

# And A Time For Peace

## Kathy Kelly Puts Herself In Harm's Way To Oppose War

JOHN MALKIN

**In** March 2003, while most of us observed the United States military's devastating "shock and awe" campaign against Iraq on television, Kathy Kelly was in Baghdad, experiencing the bombing firsthand. She had gone to Iraq — and not for the first time — to show her support for the suffering Iraqi people. Her most recent book, *Other Lands Have Dreams: From Baghdad to Pekin Prison* (CounterPunch, AK Press), was written mainly in small hotels in Iraq and Jordan and in U.S. prisons and jails, where Kelly served time for civil disobedience. She writes that she felt sadness and anger about the bombing, "but also a familiar sense of determination not to let the bombs have the last word."

Kelly's parents met in London in 1944, when that city was under bombardment by the Nazis. Her Irish American father, Frank Kelly, was a U.S. serviceman and former member of the Christian Brothers religious order. Her mother, Catherine, had been born an indentured servant in Ireland and later worked in a children's hospital in England. Kathy was born in 1952, one of six children. Her family home was small, and as a teenager she slept on the living-room couch. The Kellys lived on the southwest side of Chicago, where racial tensions ran high. Kathy attended classes each day at both a private Catholic school and a nearby public school, as part of a "shared time" program. The halls of the public school were sometimes guarded by police with dogs, and it was common for fights to break out between black and white students.

It was at Catholic Saint Paul High School that Kelly discovered the writings of civil-rights leader Martin Luther King Jr., who advocated nonviolence and encouraged fellow Christians to live according to their beliefs, even at great personal risk. Kelly became determined never to be a passive bystander to injustice and violence.

Kelly received a BA from Loyola University in Chicago and a master's degree in religious education from the Chicago Theological Seminary. During her graduate studies, she became dissatisfied with just writing about poverty and moved to a poor Chicago neighborhood where the Catholic Worker Movement sponsored a soup kitchen and shelter. In 1982 she married activist Karl Meyer, who challenged her to take part in protests against draft registration.

Kelly decided to devote herself full time to peacemaking after a 1985 trip to Nicaragua, where she met the victims of the U.S.-supported Contra rebels. She went on to visit Iraq during the 1991 Gulf War, and later Bosnia and Haiti, participating in antiwar actions in each country. Kelly has also been a war-tax resister for twenty-three years.

After the 1991 Gulf War, the United Nations, under pressure from the U.S., imposed on Iraq the most comprehensive economic sanctions in modern history. Eight years later a UNICEF report estimated that half a million Iraqi children had died as a result of the sanctions. In 1995 Kelly and a group of other activists formed *Voices in the Wilderness* (VITW.org), which openly broke the sanctions by delivering aid to the Iraqi people. Since then *Voices in the Wilderness* has organized seventy trips to Iraq to bring medical relief supplies, and Kelly has been to Iraq twenty-seven times.

Nonviolent civil disobedience has landed Kelly in jail on many occasions. In one instance she was arrested for planting corn on top of a nuclear-missile silo and served nine months in a maximum-security prison. In November 2003 Kelly was arrested during a protest at the Western Hemisphere Institute for Security Cooperation (formerly the School of the Americas), in Fort Benning, Georgia. The institute has been accused of training South American military and law-enforcement personnel in techniques of terror and torture. Kelly, along with twenty-seven other activists, was arrested for trespassing and spent three months in Pekin Federal Prison Camp, where prisoners earn \$1.15 an hour or less making armored plates for U.S. military vehicles.

Kelly teaches in Chicago-area community colleges and high schools, and she continues her patient and resolute opposition to violence. When she traveled to Baghdad before the start of the current war with Iraq, she ended up extending compassion not only to Iraqis terrified by the bombing, but also to U.S. soldiers. As the marines arrived in the Iraqi capital to begin the military occupation that is now more than two years old, she and other members of the Iraq Peace Team offered the tired and thirsty soldiers water and fresh dates and listened to their stories of crossing the desert and of the violence they'd experienced.

In *Other Lands Have Dreams*, Kelly writes, "One of the

*greatest gifts in life is to find a few beliefs that you can declare with passion and then to have the freedom to act on them. For me, those beliefs are quite simple: that nonviolence and pacifism can change the world, that the poor should be society's highest priority, that people should love their enemies, and that actions should follow conviction, regardless of inconvenience."*

*The first time I talked to Kathy Kelly was in 2003, at the Resource Center for Nonviolence in Santa Cruz, California. She had just returned from Iraq and seemed simultaneously filled with relief to have survived the massive bombardment of Baghdad and stricken with regret over having left behind the friends she had made there. We met again in May 2005 at a private home near Salinas, California. Her eyes shone with a fierce compassion as she described holding dying Iraqi children in her arms, encountering U.S. soldiers as they invaded Iraq, and going to jail for committing nonviolent acts of civil disobedience.*



**KATHY KELLY**

**Malkin:** You've written, "Where you stand determines what you see." When you were standing in Baghdad during the "shock and awe" bombing campaign, what did you see?

**Kelly:** We were about a hundred yards from a presidential palace that had been built for one of Saddam Hussein's sons. So what we *heard* was intense and terrifying bombardment. Morning, noon, and night, U.S. planes were bombing not only that palace, but some government buildings close by. Thankfully nothing else around us was hit. Following the bombing, just when we had started to exhale a bit, came the looting, and then the occupation. It was a very dramatic and intense time. Every day that one survived felt like a precious gift.

**Malkin:** I am curious to hear about your encounter with U.S. soldiers arriving in Baghdad.

**Kelly:** It was an unusual day. There had been a lot of confusion that morning as to how close U.S. troops were to Baghdad. Then, when the soldiers appeared, a group of them positioned themselves immediately outside our hotel. We wanted to go out and greet them with our banners that said, COURAGE FOR PEACE, NOT FOR WAR, and WAR = TERROR, but the hotel owners feared they would be persecuted if we did. So we hung the banners from a second-floor balcony instead.

When the soldiers saw us, they looked around for our spaceship! How had these Americans turned up right in the middle of Baghdad? They called up to us, "Who are you?" and we told them we were a peace team.

"Where are you from?" they asked, and we answered: Chicago, New York, Boston.

Then one of them called up, "Are you a Red Sox fan?"

That kind of broke the ice. It was clear that these men were hot, tired, and thirsty, and we had many six-packs of bottled water lined up in my room. So three of us — a seventy-two-year-old woman from Verona, New York; a young South Korean woman; and I — took some water down to the troops and

mingled with them. I went back up to fetch a box of Iraqi dates. The soldiers were quite grateful for the dates. They hadn't had anything but military rations for some time, and most of them had never seen fresh dates before.

I had many conversations with soldiers over the next several days. Some expressed remorse for the killing and the bloodshed they'd been involved in. Quite a few said that as soon as they got home, they were getting out of the military. One young man came up and asked, "Will you pray with me?" Another wanted to sit down with us and hear our side of the story.

Soldiers would come to our hotel late at night to watch the BBC, and they'd tell us about their trip from Basra to Baghdad. There had been times when they'd feared for their lives, and also times when they weren't sure if they

were shooting at civilian or military targets. As one GI put it, "We just had to shoot everybody." He added, "I sure hope that everything I saw won't register in here," and he pointed to his head.

Overhearing our conversation, an officer told us not to blame the enlisted men for what had happened. He was in charge, he said, and had made hasty decisions, and he would have many sleepless nights over the civilians who'd been killed.

One soldier said he purposefully jammed his gun so that he wouldn't have to shoot. Another said he was glad that his job was to bring up prisoners at the rear, because he didn't want to kill anybody. He had seen some of his fellow marines shoot a mother and father who didn't stop their car at a checkpoint, killing them and leaving the young boy in the back seat orphaned. The soldier said they could have just shot out the tires.

We also heard from some of them that they hadn't joined the marines to go to war. They were just looking for respect, or a way to meet financial responsibilities and get a decent education. So any sense I'd had of the marines as a sort of swaggering, self-satisfied group quickly disappeared. Maybe they behaved like victors in front of the media, but they didn't do it with us.

**Malkin:** What kind of involvement did you have with journalists in Baghdad?

**Kelly:** It was very different from the first Gulf War. The only journalists who remained in Baghdad during that war were Peter Arnett and his CNN crew and a handful of Canadian Palestinians. In 2003 there were 750 journalists housed in the Palestine Hotel, immediately across the street from ours.

One night Robert Fisk, the Middle Eastern correspondent for the British newspaper the *Independent*, was having dinner with his wife at my hotel. There was no electricity, so we were all sitting around by candlelight. The bombing outside was fierce. Fisk would poke his head out now and then to assess the situation. Everyone was wondering: would he really risk walking back to his hotel in this intense bombardment? Finally he came back and told his wife that it was time to make a run for it. And she said, in a dignified manner, "Well, all right, Robert,

**Marines . . . are trained to chant, “Kill, kill, kill, kill.” Even before they go into the military, many of them have been saturated with video violence and pornography — images that degrade our appreciation for human life. What can we expect will happen when they are in a foreign land and confronting an enemy?**



MARTIN FISHMAN

but you'll have to hold my hand." And off they went.

The journalists didn't have any inclination to report on us, and that was fine. I don't think that we were the story. Quite a few of them did ask us where we thought the stories were, but in general the journalists didn't like to fraternize with peace teams, because they needed to preserve the appearance of objectivity.

*(end of excerpt)*