

Women's  
**Center for Ethics in Action**

in alliance with men

**CONTEMPLATING SECURITY**

After bounding up the City Hall stairs to watch the swearing in of Portland's City Council and new Mayor Jill Duson recently, I was privileged to be part of the throng of citizens meeting and greeting each other and their elected officials in this fair city.

It was quite a change from my recent stay in our nation's capital. The trees are gone from behind the Capitol building. Some of these rare beauties were well over 150 years old. Walls block the views of the Capitol all the way around. There is no easy access to either chamber. An underground Visitors' Entrance is under construction. Our national Legislature has an out-of-bounds, torn-up and bombed-out appearance.

A giant sign greets you as you march up the Hill from Union Station – "Official Business Only." It is to announce that First Street Northeast has been closed to regular traffic. Giant barricades have been constructed, the kind that rise up from the ground at the flick of a switch. A truck with police officers blocks your path. They are wielding large mirrors on wheels attached to long poles that they shove under the few official vehicles that are trying to pass. Checking for contraband, I presume.

Constitution Avenue is also mostly closed. That's where the Senate Office Buildings are located. Maryland Avenue: closed except for occasional one-way traffic. That's the street beside the Supreme Court. The Court is also surrounded by tall, ugly-looking temporary walls that block all views. It is being expanded presumably although more cynical observers conjecture that an underground legislative chamber is being constructed in case the Capitol has to be evacuated in a hurry. Police cars are everywhere, pulled up on sidewalks, blocking entrances, guarding the government. Over at the White House there is a completely encased metal mesh cage at least 16 feet in height surrounding the Old Executive Office Building, presumably to protect White House officials from something -- being rushed perhaps. I couldn't help thinking a gun shot could get through the mesh without any trouble. But I feel that way about the Capitol too. Just because there's a new underground compound, doesn't eliminate the danger of the dome's vulnerability to attack from above.

Other signs of new security measures in force: the Department of Defense Tours have been cancelled indefinitely. There are 14 checkpoints around the Capitol where cars are stopped and searched. Police dogs sniff a car's back seat and trunk at random intervals. Traffic is continually being disrupted. U.S. Capitol Police Chief Terrance W. Gainer was quoted in the Washington Post saying, "Counter-terrorism requires some cloak and dagger. We aim to discombobulate our adversaries. I think we do that by being vigilant but unpredictable."

Barricades, clothing searches, underground bunkers are all part of our country's national security strategy in this post 9/11 world. Massive military build-ups, pre-emptive war in Iraq and war against terrorism are our answers to the nation's imperiled security.

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Is our conception of what security entails up to speed? In the final analysis there is no ultimate security; death is, after all, inevitable. And so is some measure of misfortune in life. “Only in growth, reform, and change, paradoxically enough, is true security to be found,” Anne Morrow Lindbergh opined long ago.

Don't we have to be smarter about our understanding of human nature? We might avoid alienating a great big segment of the world's population – Muslims – if we identified with them against a tiny group of malcontents. We could lead with a hand of friendship, seek the advice and collaborative engagement of allies large and small. And at home, we might concentrate on some of the elements of security that matter most to the oldest and youngest among us, to the fabric of society – health, education and some measure of economic security.