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This isn't the real America

By Jimmy Carter

11/14/05 "Los Angeles Times" -- -- IN RECENT YEARS, I have become increasingly concerned by a host of radical government policies that now threaten many basic principles espoused by all previous administrations, Democratic and Republican.

These include the rudimentary American commitment to peace, economic and social justice, civil liberties, our environment and human rights.

Also endangered are our historic commitments to providing citizens with truthful information, treating dissenting voices and beliefs with respect, state and local autonomy and fiscal responsibility.

At the same time, our political leaders have declared independence from the restraints of international organizations and have disavowed long-standing global agreements — including agreements on nuclear arms, control of biological weapons and the international system of justice.

Instead of our tradition of espousing peace as a national priority unless our security is directly threatened, we have proclaimed a policy of "preemptive war," an unabridged right to attack other nations unilaterally to change an unsavory regime or for other purposes. When there are serious differences with other nations, we brand them as international pariahs and refuse to permit direct discussions to resolve disputes.

Regardless of the costs, there are determined efforts by top U.S. leaders to exert American imperial dominance throughout the world.

These revolutionary policies have been orchestrated by those who believe that our nation's tremendous power and influence should not be internationally constrained. Even with our troops involved in combat and America facing the threat of additional terrorist attacks, our declaration of "You are either with us or against

us!" has replaced the forming of alliances based on a clear comprehension of mutual interests, including the threat of terrorism.

Another disturbing realization is that, unlike during other times of national crisis, the burden of conflict is now concentrated exclusively on the few heroic men and women sent back repeatedly to fight in the quagmire of Iraq. The rest of our nation has not been asked to make any sacrifice, and every effort has been made to conceal or minimize public awareness of casualties.

Instead of cherishing our role as the great champion of human rights, we now find civil liberties and personal privacy grossly violated under some extreme provisions of the Patriot Act.

Of even greater concern is that the U.S. has repudiated the Geneva accords and espoused the use of torture in Iraq, Afghanistan and Guantanamo Bay, and secretly through proxy regimes elsewhere with the so-called extraordinary rendition program. It is embarrassing to see the president and vice president insisting that the CIA should be free to perpetrate "cruel, inhumane or degrading treatment or punishment" on people in U.S. custody.

Instead of reducing America's reliance on nuclear weapons and their further proliferation, we have insisted on our right (and that of others) to retain our arsenals, expand them, and therefore abrogate or derogate almost all nuclear arms control agreements negotiated during the last 50 years. We have now become a prime culprit in global nuclear proliferation. America also has abandoned the prohibition of "first use" of nuclear weapons against nonnuclear nations, and is contemplating the previously condemned deployment of weapons in space.

Protection of the environment has fallen by the wayside because of government subservience to political pressure from the oil industry and other powerful lobbying groups. The last five years have brought continued lowering of pollution standards at home and almost universal condemnation of our nation's global environmental policies.

Our government has abandoned fiscal responsibility by unprecedented favors to the rich, while neglecting America's working families. Members of Congress have increased their own pay by \$30,000 per year since freezing the minimum wage at \$5.15 per hour (the lowest among industrialized nations).

I am extremely concerned by a fundamentalist shift in many houses of worship and in government, as church and state have become increasingly intertwined in ways previously thought unimaginable.

As the world's only superpower, America should be seen as the unswerving

champion of peace, freedom and human rights. Our country should be the focal point around which other nations can gather to combat threats to international security and to enhance the quality of our common environment. We should be in the forefront of providing human assistance to people in need.

It is time for the deep and disturbing political divisions within our country to be substantially healed, with Americans united in a common commitment to revive and nourish the historic political and moral values that we have espoused during the last 230 years.

JIMMY CARTER was the 39th president of the United States. His newest book is "Our Endangered Values: America's Moral Crisis," published this month by Simon & Schuster.

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