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April 2, 2008

PRIVACY AND SAFETY

I read with some interest Mr. Edward Levy's excellent article entitled "You Safety or my Privacy", in the NE Suburban Life last week. Having lived under a military dictatorship in Brazil as a teenager, I wanted to add my perspective on his opinion.

When I was growing up, we knew that mailed letters were often read (taping them shut was not allowed so steaming them open would be easier). We knew to keep our opinions to ourselves in public. We knew to avoid any form of demonstration, lest we be mistaken for an "agitator". It was all pretty benign stuff, and we believed that if you kept your nose clean, you had nothing to fear. Only the Communists would be caught and imprisoned. Of course that safety was very tenuous. All it took was one passing mention of your name in the wrong place and the wrong time, the subsequent opening of a file in much feared DOPS (the Portuguese initials for the Department of Political and Social Order) and you would never be safe again. In the early 90's, when these files became public, thousand of ordinary people who never so much as littered the sidewalk would discover that the government was keeping tabs on them, for the most spurious reasons: you ate in the same restaurant as a known Communist every day and said "hi" to him or her. You listened to the wrong music. You had long hair and spent a lot of time reading books by the "wrong" authors. Is this beginning to sound eerily familiar?

The issue I have with Mr. Levy's piece is that while he believes the price of our safety is part or

all of our privacy, he deftly avoids the question of who defines "safety" and "privacy". These are intrinsically fuzzy concepts. My problem, based on my personal past, is that I believe as soon as the government tries to define my "privacy" as an integral (and removable) part of our "safety", bad things happen. This happened (at different times) in Russia, Germany and China, and the results are always the same: a poorer, more corrupt and less democratic society.

If Mr. Levy believes we should wage a war for "total victory" we need to declare total war, with the entire political price we will pay. As a society we are unwilling or unable to do that. Vietnam (as he mentions) was neither a total war nor a total victory, and yet we have a fruitful relationship with Vietnam today, and Communism, ostensibly the cause for the whole conflict has pretty much gone the way of the dinosaur. So there is no real need for some sort of total victory if we want to see our capitalist ideals prevail - Vietnam is living proof of this. We don't need less privacy, Mr. Levy. We need true faith in our constitution and our democratic, capitalist ideals along with a big dose of historical perspective.