

## SHE ISN'T AS BEAUTIFUL AS SHE WAS SUPPOSED TO BE

M. Cherif Bassiouni. M. Cherif Bassiouni is a law professor at DePaul University and president of the International Human Rights Law Institute. Chicago Tribune; Chicago, Ill. [Chicago, Ill]26 June 1997: 1,19;2

When I took my oath of citizenship 30 years ago, I was named "outstanding new citizen of the year" by the Citizenship Council of Metropolitan Chicago and was asked to make a speech before the other 1,200 new citizens. The ceremony was formal and dignified.

I spoke with conviction and hope about the maturing social, economic and political meanings of justice and the rule of law in a diverse, tolerant and compassionate society--a society that evolves with vigor and enthusiasm because it is rejuvenated by new ideas and leavened by the constant stream of hopeful newcomers. I emphasized respect for diversity and tolerance, where one can be an American without breaking faith with national origin, indigenous culture or religious beliefs and practices. I said, with conviction, that America was not only a mighty nation but a great one because unlike the other superpowers at the time, the United States was not only guided by selfish consideration but also by altruistic higher principles in domestic and foreign affairs.

Perhaps these observations were too idealistic and even naive, but it was the '60s, and change and hope were in the air, and I was, after all, one of the hopeful newcomers. Something has been lost from that era. I see the narrowing of the national vision, the degradation of the political process, the pettiness of public life, the hedonistic pursuit of private life and a retrenchment from high moral grounds in foreign policy.

At the national level, these changes are reflected in:

- ✓ the transformation of somewhat genuine popular democracy to one dominated by financial considerations;
- ✓ the drowning of national interest in partisan and special-interest politics;
- ✓ the reducing of major social and human issues to cost affordability;
- ✓ the erosion of ethics in public life;
- ✓ substituting humanistic, scientific and professional accomplishments with media celebrities

as role models for achievement;

- ✓ glorifying sex and violence in all forms of mass communication;
- ✓ the denigration of environmental concerns;
- ✓ reducing the public debate on values to fatuous political speeches;
- ✓ confusing principle with politically correct speech.

At the international level, America became the world's only superpower, yet America has not led the world in the direction of a new world order based on democracy, the rule of law and human rights. After the extraordinary success of the Gulf War, the president of the United States called for such a new world order. The call evoked high expectations. But it was only rhetorical and the aspirations it engendered were quickly left to wither away. The return to realpolitik was a stark contrast to the unaddressed expectations of world public opinion for international justice. America quickly reverted to the politics of convenience, of short-term interests and narrow scope. One of the casualties is international justice, as many world criminals' benefit from impunity. Like most Americans, I feel like a theater-goer, merely watching a play with no input in the action on the national stage. We, that is most of the American people, have no impact on the performance or the performers. We have become spectators with a periodic ballot of what we still call democracy. The Jeffersonian ideal of democracy that I embraced when I became a citizen simply has not materialized. Maybe those ideals were only meant to be a noble inspiration. Yet even so, it seems that the inspiration has been replaced by negativism and skepticism. What is left, and maybe what really counts, is that we can still have hope and the ability to work for the realization of these ideals--the unfinished task of a civilized society. American institutions remain the best guarantee of the rule of law, and not of the rule by law. At least in America there is the hope that justice can prevail and that might does not make right, which is more than can be said about other countries. The real strength of this nation, as I have come to learn, does not rest in its military might or its wealth, but in its people--at times even in spite of its government. No other people collectively or individually demonstrate the openness, compassion, generosity and willingness to help others as do Americans. With all their flaws and imitations, Americans remain the best expression of tolerance and diversity, even though discrimination, racism and poverty still exist in our midst. When I return to the United States from an overseas trip, and hear the immigration officer say, "Welcome back!" a warm feelings surges in me along with a sense of security. And, whenever I hear "The Star-Spangled Banner" I still feel a stirring emotion. In the final analysis, that says it all.