

The Forbidden Words of Margaret A.

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[N.B.: The following report was prepared exclusively for the use of The National Journalists' Association for The Recovery of the Freedom Of The Press by a journalist who visited Margaret A. sometime within the last two years. JATROF requests that this report not be duplicated in any form or removed from JATROF offices and that the information provided herein be used with care and discretion.]

Introduction

Despite the once-monthly photo-ops the Bureau of Prisons allows, firsthand uncensored accounts of contact with Margaret A. are rare. The following, though it falls short of providing a verbatim transcript of Margaret A.'s words, attempts to offer a fuller, more faithful rendition of one journalist's contact with Margaret A. than has ever been publicly available. This reporter's awareness of the importance to her colleagues of such an account, as well as of the danger disseminating it to a broader audience would entail for all involved in such an effort, has prompted the deposit of this document with JATROF.

Before describing my contact with Margaret A., I wish to emphasize to the readers of this report (knowledgeable as they undoubtedly are) the constraints that circumscribed my meeting with Margaret A. Members of JATROF will necessarily be familiar with the techniques the government uses to manipulate public perception of data. Certainly I, going into the photo-op, considered myself well up on the government's tricks for controlling the contextualization of issues it cares about. Yet I personally can vouch for the insidious danger of momentarily forgetting the obvious: where Margaret A. is concerned, much slips our attention in such a way as to keep us from thinking clearly and objectively about the concrete facts before our eyes. I'm not sure how this happens, only that it does. The information we have about Margaret A. somehow does not get added up correctly. (And to tell the truth, I'm not convinced I've gotten it right yet.) I urge you who are reading this, then, not to impatiently skip over details already known to you, but to take my iteration of them as a caveat, as a reminder, as an aid to thought about an issue that for all its publicity remains remarkably murky. I thus ask my readers' indulgence for excursions into what may seem unnecessary political analysis and speculation. I know of no other way to wrest the framing of my own contact with Margaret A. out of the murk and mire that tends to obscure any objective recounting of facts relating to the Margaret A. situation.

To start with the most obvious: Margaret A. permits only one photo-op a month. The Bureau of Prisons (naturally pleased to make known to the public that the government can't be held responsible for thwarting the public's desire for "news" of her) doesn't allow Margaret A. to choose from among those who apply, and in this way effectively controls media access to her. The Justice Department of course would prefer to dispense with these sessions altogether, but when at the beginning of Margaret A.'s imprisonment they denied all media access to her, their attempt to sink Margaret A.'s existence into oblivion instead provoked a constant stream of speculation and protest that threatened them with not only the repeal of the Margaret A. Amendment,¹ but even worse a resurgence of the massive civil disorder that had prompted her incarceration and silencing in the first place. Beyond obliterating Margaret A.'s words, I would argue that the government places the next highest priority on preventing the public from perceiving Margaret A. as a martyr. That consideration alone can explain why the conditions of her special detention in a quonset hut within the confines of the Vandenberg Air Force Base is such that no person or organization—not even the A.C.L.U. or Amnesty International, organizations which deplore the fact of her confinement—can reasonably fault them. The responsible journalist undertaking coverage of Margaret A. must bear these points in mind.

Selection For And Constraints Upon The Photo-op

I've been fascinated by Margaret A. my entire adult life. I entered journalism precisely so that I'd have a shot at firsthand contact with Margaret A., and have systematically pursued that goal with every career step I've taken. (I realize that to most members of JATROF it is the implications of the Margaret A. Amendment and not Margaret A. herself that matter most. The words of Margaret A., however, for a brief time radically changed the way I looked at the world. Since losing it I've never ceased to yearn for another glimpse of that perspective. Surely of all people JATROF members can most appreciate that such a goal does not belie the ideals of the profession?) Accordingly, I studied the Bureau of Prison's selection preferences, worked my way into suitable employment and then patiently and quietly waited. I lived carefully, I kept myself as clean of suspect contacts as any working journalist can. When finally I was selected for one of Margaret A.'s photo-ops, *Circumspection has been rewarded*, I congratulated myself. Reading and rereading the official notification I felt as though I had just been granted a visa to the promised land.

An invitation to meet Simon Bartkey had been attached to the visa, however. Naturally this disconcerted me: an in-person screening by a Justice Department official is

¹This reporter knows the amendment is officially titled "The Limited Censorship for the Preservation of National Security Act," but since the only object the amendment sets out to accomplish is the total obliteration of Margaret A.'s words, surely calling it "The Margaret A. Amendment" places the emphasis where it belongs? And though their name for it is better than the anti-free speech activists' calling it the "Save America Amendment," I don't particularly hold with the free speech activists calling it the "Anti-Free Speech Amendment," either. The amendment wouldn't exist if it weren't for Margaret A. herself. And both the anti- and free speech activists seem to forget that.

quite a bit different from scrutiny of one's record. But I told myself that I'd been "good" for so long that my professionalism would see me over this last hurdle. Thus one month before I was due to meet Margaret A., my producer and I flew to Washington and met this Justice Department official assigned to what they call "the Margaret A. Desk"—an "expert" who cheerfully admitted to me that he had never heard or read any of Margaret A.'s words himself. I couldn't help but be impressed with the show they run, for the BOP has it down to a fine procedure designed to ensure that everything flows with the smoothness and predictability of a high-precision robotics assembly. Besides providing an opportunity for one last intense scrutiny of the journalists they've selected, to their way of thinking a visit to Simon Bartkey sets both the context journalists are supposed to use as well as the ground-rules.

Let me note in reminder here that Simon Bartkey has survived three different administrations precisely because he's accounted an "expert" on "the Margaret A. situation." Since the early days of the Margaret A. phenomenon each administration has fretted about the public's continuing fascination with her. Bartkey expressed it to me in these words: "This ongoing interest in her defies all logic. Her words—except for a few hoarded tapes, newspapers and *samizdat*—have been completely obliterated, and the general public has no access to them, and certainly no memory of them. The American public has never been known to have such a long attention span, especially with regard to someone not continually providing ever new and more exciting grist to the media's mill. Why then do people still want to *see* her? Why haven't they forgotten about her?" (How it must gall politicians that Margaret A. has for the last fifteen years enjoyed higher name recognition than each sitting U.S. President has during the same fifteen year period!)

Though it was the most important event in my life (I was nineteen when it happened), I can't remember any of her words. I was too young and naive at the time to hold onto newspapers and the ad hoc ephemera figures like Margaret A. invariably generate. And like most people I never dreamed a person's *words* could become illegal. One hears rumors, of course, of old tapes and newspapers carefully hoarded—yet though I've faithfully tracked every such rumor I've caught wind of, none has ever panned out.

For perhaps twenty of the fifty-five minutes I spent being briefed by him, Bartkey took great pleasure in explaining to me how the passage of time will ultimately eclipse Margaret A.'s public visibility. Leaning back in his padded red leather chair, he announced that the generational gap more than anything will finally isolate those who persist in "worshipping at the altar of her memory." His fingers stroking his mandala-embossed bottle green silk tie, he insisted that Margaret A. can mean nothing to college kids since they were only infants at the time of the Margaret A. phenomenon. He might conceivably prove to be correct, but I don't think so. The kids I've talked to find the Margaret A. Amendment so irrational and egregious an offense against the spirit of the Bill of Rights that they're suspicious of everything they've been told about it. If no records of Margaret A.'s words still exist, neither do reports of the massive civil disorder their civics textbooks use to justify the passage of the amendment. The *fact* of the Margaret A. Amendment, I think, has got to fill them with suspicions of a cover-up. Consider: the only

images they connect with Margaret A. now are the videos and photos taken of this U.S. citizen living in internal exile, a small middle-aged woman dwarfed by the deadly array of missiles and radar installations and armed guards surrounding her. I doubt that young people are capable of understanding that anyone's particular use of language could in and of itself have threatened the dissolution of every form of government in this country (much less provoked the unprecedented, draconian measure of a constitutional amendment to silence it). I've seen the cynical skepticism in their faces when older people talk about those days. How could any arrangement of words on paper, any speech recorded on tape be in and of itself as dangerous as government authorities say? And why ban no one else's speech, not even that of her most persistent followers (except of course when quoting her)? Young people don't believe it was that simple. When I listen to their questions I've no trouble deducing that they believe the government is covering up the past existence of a powerful, armed, revolutionary force. They consider the amendment not only a cover-up but also a gratuitous measure designed to curtail free speech and establish a precedent for future curtailments.

Needless to say I didn't share such observations with Bartkey any more than I offered him my theory that the new generation is not only suspicious of a cover-up but dying for a taste of forbidden fruit. While doubting its vaunted potency (or toxicity, depending upon one's point of view), they long to know what it is they're being denied. This sounds paradoxical, I admit, yet I've heard a note of resentment in their expressions of skepticism. The dangers of Margaret A.'s words may not be apparent to them, but by labeling the fruit forbidden—fruit their *elders* had been privileged enough to taste—the amendment—which they consider a cover-up to start with—is provoking resentment in this new generation coming of age. Rather than developing amnesia about Margaret A., the new generation may well become obsessed with her. In fact I wouldn't be at all surprised if new bizarrely-conceived cults didn't spring up around the Margaret A. phenomenon.

I don't mean to imply that I'd approve of bizarre cults and obsessions with forbidden fruit. The fascination I and others like me feel for Margaret A. is probably as incomprehensible to the young people as the government's fear of her words. (Our diverse reactions to Margaret A. seem to mark a Great Divide for most people in this country.) But something about the very *idea* of her—regardless of whether *her* ideas are ever remembered—the very *idea* of this woman shut up in the middle of a high-security military base because her words are so potent. . . well, that *idea* does something to almost everyone in this country, including those who find the Margaret A. phenomenon frightening (excepting, of course, the anti-free speech activists). If I were Bartkey I'd be worried: it's only a matter of time before the Margaret A. Amendment is repealed. And if Margaret A. is still alive then, things could *explode*.

Margaret A.'s "Security"

All we ever saw of Vandenberg proper was its perimeter fence and gate. Even before we'd handed our documents to the guard three people wearing nonmilitary uniforms converged on us and ordered us out onto the tarmac. One of them then climbed into the van and turned it around and drove it somewhere away from the base; the other two ordered us into a tiny quonset hut off to the right. This at first confused me, and I wondered whether there had been a foul-up of some sort, or whether the background checks had turned up something about one of us the Justice Department didn't like (and I even wondered—fleetingly—whether for some convoluted tangle of reasoning they kept her there in that quonset hut, outside the base's perimeter fence).

What followed in the hut rendered my speculations absurd. Bartkey had of course made us sign an agreement that we be subject to strip searches, that we use *their* equipment, that all materials be edited by them, and that we submit to an extensive debriefing afterwards. I bore with the strip and body cavity search without protest, of course, since journalists are commonly obliged to endure such ordeals when entering prisons to interview inmates. (I'm sure colleagues reading this know well how one attempts in such circumstances to put the best face on an awkward, uncomfortable situation.) Nor did I protest the condition that the Bureau of Prisons be granted total editorial power, for obviously the Margaret A. Amendment might otherwise be flouted. But their insistence that we use their equipment—*that* bothered me for some elusive, hard-to-define reason. Bartkey had explained that their equipment ran without an audio track, and since no one by the terms of the Margaret A. Amendment could legally tape her speech, my conscious reaction focused on that obvious point. But as I was putting my thoroughly searched clothing back on I learned that I could not take my shoulder bag in with me and realized that not only would there be no audio tape, there would also be no pen and paper, no laptop computer, no note-taking beyond what I could force into my own ill-trained mental memory. Naturally I protested. (I am, after all, the woman who relies on her computer to tell her such things as when to have her hair cut, what time to eat lunch and how long it has been since she's written to her mother.) It made no difference, of course. I was told that if I didn't choose to abide by the rules they'd take the producer and crew in without me.

After hitting us with another review of all the ground-rules, they herded us into the windowless back of a Bureau of Prisons van and drove us an undisclosed turn-filled and occasionally bumpy distance. The van stopped for at least a minute three separate times before pausing briefly—as at a stop sign, or to allow the opening of a gate (I deduce the latter to have been the case)—and then moved for only two or three seconds before coming to a final halt. When the engine cut it only then came to me in a breathless rush that what I had been waiting for nearly half my life was actually about to happen. Margaret A.'s words are forbidden. Yet for a few minutes *I* (!) would have the privilege of hearing her speak. Only "trivialities," granted, they would allow nothing else—guards with radio receivers in their ears would be on hand to see to that: but still the words would be

Margaret A.'s, and even her "trivial" speech, I felt certain, would be potent, perhaps electrifying. And I believed that on hearing Margaret A. speak I would remember all that I had forgotten about those days and would understand all that had eluded me throughout my adult life.

This pre-contact assumption derived not from romantic dreams cherished from adolescence, but from what I had (discreetly) gleaned about the conditions of Margaret A.'s life of exile. I had learned, for instance, from a highly reliable source formerly employed by the Justice Department, that the Bureau of Prisons had run through more than five hundred guards on the Margaret A. assignment, all of whom had quit the BOP subsequent to their removal from duty at Vandenberg.² What continues to strike me as extraordinary about this is that the guards assigned to Margaret A. have always been—and continue to be—taken exclusively from a pool of guards experienced in working in high security federal facilities. Each guard previous to meeting Margaret A. is warned that all speech uttered within the confines of the prisoner's quarters will be recorded and examined. Before starting duty at Vandenberg each newly assigned guard undergoes rigorous orientation sessions and while on duty at Vandenberg reports for debriefing after each personal contact with Margaret A. Yet no guard has ever gone on to a new assignment following contact with Margaret A. Another curious statistic: those assigned to audio surveillance of the words spoken in Margaret A.'s quarters inevitably "burn out" during their second year of monitoring Margaret A.³ Consider: Margaret A. is forbidden ever to speak about anything remotely "political." How then can she so consistently corrupt every guard who has had contact with her and disturb every monitor who has been assigned to listen to her (non-political: "trivial"!) conversation?⁴ It never occurred to me to wonder what Bartkey meant when he said that all conversation with Margaret A. must be confined to "trivial, non-political smalltalk." He and other officials outlined for me the sorts of questions I must avoid raising—ranging from the subject of her confinement, the Margaret A. Amendment and the public's continuing interest in her to the specific points upon which, according to rumor (since documents no longer exist, one can refer only to rumors or fuzzy nodes of memory), she had spoken during the brief initial period of the Margaret A. phenomenon. I think I assumed that the corruption of her guards had more to do with Margaret A.'s personality than with the "smalltalk" she exchanged with them (never mind that this did not address the monitors' eventual termination by the Justice

²Though the Margaret A. Amendment does not prevent the press from reporting on publicly available facts on the conditions of Margaret A.'s internment, the major U.S. media have never addressed the startling data about the high turnover in personnel assigned to Margaret A.'s "security." Considering how fascinated the public would be by such details, what then keeps the media from openly reporting such facts? Surely the entire industry cannot share the reason I had for hiding my interest in Margaret A.!

³It is a matter of public record that in one case a monitor incurred a felony charge for attempting to smuggle a Margaret A. surveillance tape out of the listening post at Vandenberg.

⁴Informed Readers may recall that the Bureau of Prisons initially eliminated all verbal communication between Margaret A. and all other human beings until the Supreme Court ruled that such treatment would virtually amount to perpetual solitary confinement, a condition they judged unnecessary for obtaining reasonable observance of the Margaret A. Amendment.

Department). Thus as our escort opened the back door of the van I in my wild state of excitement told myself I would now be meeting not only the most remarkable woman in history, but probably the most charismatic, charming and possibly lovable person I would ever have the pleasure of knowing.

Contact With Margaret A.

While my producer and crew unloaded the BOP's equipment from the van, I—the one who would later be asked on camera for my observations and impressions of Margaret A. and the conditions of her confinement—strolled around the tiny compound surrounding the quonset hut I presumed to be Margaret A's. At first I noticed little beyond the intimidating array of surveillance and security equipment and personnel. The twenty-foot steel fence reinforced with coils of razor wire and topped by a glass-enclosed visibly armed guardpost cut off view of everything outside the compound but the hot dry sky. (The southern California sun in that environment seemed stifflingly oppressive.) Several hard-eyed uniformed men carried automatic rifles. Was it possible they thought we might attempt to spring Margaret A.? My consciousness of the eyes of such heavily armed men watching waiting anticipating shook me, making me feel like a jeweler opening a safe for robbers, fearful that with one “false” (i.e., misunderstood) move I would be a dead woman. Because Margaret A. is not a “criminal,” one forgets how dangerous the government has decreed her to be.

Yet the weight of this official presence exerted a subtle impression on me I became aware of only later while “chatting” with Margaret A. The uniforms, the guardpost, the overdetermined regulation of our every movement and intention conspired to make me forget that Margaret A. has never been arraigned before a judge much less stood trial before a jury.⁵ Thus when I spotted the scraggly little plants growing in a corner of the compound's coarse dry sand, I instantly perceived an “extra privilege” generously bestowed upon her by the BOP, and so rather than enter Margaret A's quarters with a sense of how intolerably oppressive it would be to live immured within that steel fence and guardpost with its glaring mirrored windows and menacing weaponry permanently looming over one, I thought how fortunate Margaret A. was to be able to walk around outside in her compound and “garden.”

I make this confession in order to illustrate how subtly perception can be influenced. It strikes me as counterintuitive that the heavy presence of surveillance and security would

⁵Technically speaking, Margaret A. is considered to be held in preventive detention—since even one word spoken by her would legally constitute a violation of the Margaret A. Amendment. Though constitutional scholars have argued that the amendment itself violates the letter and spirit of the Constitution, its solidly reactionary composition ensures the Supreme Court's ongoing adherence to its earlier ruling against judicial interference in security measures undertaken jointly by the Executive and Legislative branches. For a brief summary of the legal peculiarities of Margaret A.'s incarceration, see the ACLU's pamphlet *When the Rule of Law Breaks Down: The Executive, Judicial and Legislative Conspiracy Against Margaret A.*

contribute to a perception of the legitimacy of Margaret A.'s incarceration, yet apparently the Justice Department's experts believe this, for that oppressive presence is never censored out of videos and stills, while a variety of small concessions that Margaret A. has won for herself have *never* survived the BOP's editing.⁶

Thus when I entered Margaret A.'s quarters accompanied by three guards and a crew grumbling over the antiquation of the BOP's equipment, I looked at all I saw through peculiarly biased eyes. It's *not so bad*, I thought as I surveyed the first of Margaret A.'s two rooms. I noted the cushions softening the pair of wooden chairs with arms, and was astonished at the beautifully executed woven tapestry covering a large part of the ugly toothpaste-green wall. *It's not as bad as most jail cells, and is certainly far better than the underground dungeons in which most political prisoners are kept*, I reminded myself. It occurs to me in retrospect that probably I wanted to believe that Margaret A. lived in tolerable circumstances so that the chances of her hanging on as long as it took to achieve her release would be reasonably high. And so before Margaret A. came into the room, my eyes fixed on the small computer sitting on a table near the outer door while I mused on how because of that computer Margaret A.'s way with words (and perhaps even her words themselves) might have a chance to survive, and rejoiced that in spite of the Margaret A. Amendment the BOP weren't sitting as heavily and oppressively on her as they do on most political prisoners.

But then Margaret A. appeared and for a few crazy, breath-stopped instants time seemed to halt. After greeting the guards (whose faces, I mechanically noted, were suddenly suffused with wariness and dis-ease) she simply stood there, a small stout figure in gray cotton shirt and pants, looking us over—as though we were there for her inspection rather than the other way around. I struggled a few agonized seconds with the frog now in my throat and glanced at the guards in expectation of an introduction. But looking back at Margaret A. I realized the absurdity of my expectation, and scorned myself for taking the guards as hosts at an arranged soiree. Though I had no idea of it at the time (and I still don't quite understand how it worked), that moment marked the loss of a professional persona that had hitherto sustained me throughout my career in journalism.

My producer finally took the initiative: "Allow me to introduce myself," she began as, holding out her hand, she advanced towards Margaret A. Margaret A., however, shattered this moment of returned normalcy, for she ignored the proffered hand and commented that creating a facade of social conventions would cost more than she herself could afford—even if we felt ourselves able to afford it.⁷

⁶Anxious to preserve a clean profile that would stand up to Justice Department scrutiny, I did not make the inquiries that would have informed me of these concessions before observing them with my own eyes. For a complete log of Margaret A.'s battles for these concessions, contact Elissa Muntemba, her principle attorney, through the California branch of the A.C.L.U.

⁷My reconstruction of our conversation with Margaret A. is, unfortunately, not verbatim. Neither my producer, myself nor the crew have eidetic memories (and if any of us had it is likely the Justice Department would have discovered such a fact and consequently disqualified us from contact with Margaret A.), and thus all recollections of Margaret A.'s words have come through a concerted effort by the group to remember, though even this was hampered by our separation from one another for the first forty-eight hours following

Margaret A.'s pointed refusal to shake hands opened another edge to an already tense situation and jolted me into a more sharply critical attitude towards everyone and everything around us. It was at that moment, for instance, that I understood to the marrow of my bones a bit of what this detention must mean to Margaret A. Previously I had felt an abstract outrage at her silencing and detention. But at that moment when Margaret A. mentioned the cost of social pretense, I *felt* the reality of her situation, I dimly sensed how apparently small things could exert enormous pressure on even a psyche strong enough to withstand the weight of official oppression such as that so constantly forced upon Margaret A.'s senses.

Having learned from my producer's embarrassment, I merely smiled and nodded at Margaret A. when my producer introduced me to her. Still Margaret A. rebuffed me, for the slight twitch of her lip (not amusement, for her ancient frozen eyes remained just as wintry and distant) made me feel foolish enough to blush (thus making me feel even more foolish). The rebuff and my reaction to the rebuff in turn provoked first resentment in me—for a moment I felt indignant at her lack of manners—and then, seconds later, abashment as it occurred to me that Margaret A. must take me for a lackey of the system that had specially targeted her.⁸

The crew did not bother with introductions, they simply set up shop and began taping with the equipment they despised. The producer reminded them to shoot without regard to our conversation, to scan everything in the two rooms of the hut and to be sure to get a shot of Margaret A.'s "garden." And then she nodded at me, as though to remind me that I should be getting on with my part of the affair, too. I looked back at Margaret A. and frantically tried to recall the first question I had planned to ask her. But nothing came, my mind had gone blank. (This hadn't happened to me since my first interview as an intern, but as I've already mentioned, Margaret A.'s entrance had so nonplused me that I'd lost my journalist's persona and the aggressiveness and cool that went with it.) Panicking, I blurted out the first question that popped into my head: "Who cuts your hair for you?"

Margaret A. flicked her eyebrows at me and snapped something to the effect that that was the sort of information the BOP would gladly provide me with. My entire body went hot with embarrassment; glancing around me I caught my producer frowning and the guards rolling their eyes. It was at that moment that it hit me: though Margaret A. is Black, all the guards I had seen at Vandenberg were, to a person, White. (I suspect it was a combination of my noticing Margaret A.'s closely clipped woolly hair and my thinking that I could not imagine any of the guards whom I had seen—male or female—ever cutting it.) I wished then I could ask her if her guards had always been exclusively White and if so how she felt about it. But apart from worrying about such a question getting me into

contact with Margaret A. in accordance with the Justice Department's debriefing procedures.

⁸For most of the time of my contact with Margaret A. I wondered, disillusioned, how I could have spent so many years yearning after a meeting that was proving to be such a letdown. Margaret A. did not stir me, she did not even warm me towards her, personally: I not only found it impossible to pity her—even though for the entire time I was in her quarters I glimpsed out of the corner of my eye the steel fence confronting the room's single window and constantly snatched covert glances at the rifles the guards carried—but several times felt a flare of resentment towards her. Margaret A. has not a charismatic cell in her body.

trouble with the BOP, I felt uneasy about what *she* might make of it. I had no idea whether the racial identity of one's guards would be relevant to someone to whom the imposition of any guards at all was an outrage. . .

Fortunately, I recalled one of the questions I had prepared, a question I thought could pass as personal (and thus "trivial"). "Has incarceration and the prospect of a lifetime of incarceration changed the way you feel about yourself as a human being?" I queried. Margaret A. looked straight into my face, as though to check out where that question was coming from. Uneasily I glanced around at the guards; though they paid no special attention to me (thus indicating the question to be acceptable, since if it weren't the BOP official monitoring the interview would have passed orders to the guards through the receivers I could see in their ears), I felt menaced by their presence as I hadn't before. *This room*, I thought, *is too small for so many bodies and machines.*

I wish I could remember Margaret A.'s exact words, but all I can give you is a paraphrase. She started with a humorous comment to the effect that one thing her incarceration had done for her was to indicate to her how seriously the official world took her, and consequently to make her take herself more seriously than she ever had before. Imagine, she said with a wry not quite sardonic smile, I was a nobody until people I had never met started listening to me. Just imagine if people took every word that came out of your mouth as seriously as they take every bullet fired out of a gun. I don't think I ever took myself particularly seriously until after they threw me into solitary confinement and allowed me no human contact. They told me it was dangerous for anyone to hear anything that came out of my mouth. For several weeks I lived in the kind of quarantine you might dream up for the deadliest most mysteriously contagious of diseases. I was sure I was going to crack up. But can you imagine the ego trip? Can you imagine your own words being considered that potent? This official reaction made me a uniquely powerful person, accorded powers never attributed to any other mortal in history that I've ever heard of. At first I couldn't take it that seriously myself. Later I got a little scared. But how could I go on being scared when there's not a chance in a million I'll ever be allowed to speak freely again? I've nothing to lose now for going as far as my sanity permits.

This reply took me entirely by surprise. I had expected her to talk about her bitterness at the unfairness of the system in denying her due process (which she could have done, I think, without necessarily mentioning the issue overtly), at the wreck her incarceration had made of her life, at the horror of her exile from friends and family. But because of the point of view she presented to me I suddenly comprehended afresh how extraordinary the apparatus of her silencing is—that so many resources are being devoted solely to that end, and how much credit, actually, they grant her by finding it necessary to protect themselves against the words of a woman who had been a simple mother and middle school teacher without party affiliation or organization (for the formation of an organization around her came only in the last three months of her freedom). The Margaret A. phenomenon had streaked into brief exhilarating visibility like the first unexpected flash of lightning crackling across a late evening summer sky.

I asked her next about whether she missed her daughter (who it is well known moved to

New Zealand subsequent to her mother's incarceration) and other family members. Margaret A. took several minutes in replying to this question, and such was the complexity and unexpectedness of her answer that I'm afraid I cannot vouch for the accuracy of my paraphrase.⁹

The press and other institutions in our world consider privacy to be a privilege, Margaret A. began, a luxury, not something that must be respected of every person. Human society would not be the same were privacy not considered a privilege. Consequently my daughter has paid a price for my frankness, a price exacted by the press and other institutions. I imagine most people would lay that exaction at my door, working on the assumption that my frankness invited disregard of my own—and therefore my daughter's—privacy. But for me the issue with regard to my daughter becomes a matter of whether or not my self-censorship would have been worth the maintenance of the status quo of my daughter's life before my words attracted widespread attention. Could I have afforded to pay the price silence would have exacted from me? It is always a question of determining what lies at stake in what one does or omits to do. Undoubtedly you yourself forfeited to a considerable extent your privacy for the sake of taking part in this photo-opportunity. I wonder if you have weighed the price of your presence here today.

It surprised me that the guards did not interrupt this speech. I myself heard some of the subversion in her reply even as she spoke, for I felt certain she was referring not only to the strip and body cavity search I had had to submit to, but to the years of keeping myself "clean" of suspect contact, years of playing the game as primly as Simon Bartkey himself could wish. I suppose her fingering of the press "and other institutions" and her references to "human society" and "our world" sounded vague enough to the monitors that they didn't grasp exactly what she was talking about. But the expression on my producer's face indicated that she had no trouble understanding Margaret A.'s words, and that like me she considered them subversive, too.

We then had only three minutes left of the allotted time. Though the camera crew had been in and out of the other room, Margaret A. and I had so far remained in the one room. I asked her if she would show me her other room while answering my last question or two. She flicked her eyebrows at me as though to deride my asking her permission while my colleagues had been aiming their cameras at whatever caught their fancy, but then gestured me to go before her through the doorless opening in the wall. I had wanted to ask her about her gardening, but when I saw the books piled on the linoleum floor beside the patchwork quilt-covered mattress I instead asked her if she read much and if so what. She said she read only poetry. I snatched a quick look at the book on the top of the pile and caught only the name Audre Lorde. Aware of time ticking away I glanced at the bath fixtures taking up most of the room and wondered at the water standing in the tub. I asked her about it, and she said she was allowed one bath a day and that her bathwater was all that she had to water her garden with. Frantically, aware that only half a minute remained, I asked her how she spent her time. Instead of answering she told me that there

⁹And indeed our joint attempt to reconstitute this answer resulted in such acrimony that in the end we finally agreed not to discuss it at all.

was no point in her attempting to reply to that question, that she knew the guard would stop her before she had finished since they had done so on the two other occasions she had attempted to answer it.

A guard then told us our time was up. This was a moment I hadn't prepared for, hadn't begun to imagine. My entire adult life had been leading up to this time spent with Margaret A., and suddenly it was over, never to be repeated, and I would never again have a chance to listen to this woman whose words are forbidden.¹⁰ I stood frozen for a few seconds, staring at Margaret A. as though to memorize the moment. Looking at her impassive, aging face I realized that our meeting meant nothing to her, that we were only another media crew come to gape, that after a few months she probably would not even remember me, that surely she considered all the media people to be faceless robots playing the game that mattered not at all to her (except, perhaps, as insurance against excessively abusive treatment by her captors).

During the next few hours I slipped into a dull numbness, mechanically answering questions and listening to the debriefers' comments, hardly caring about what might follow. I had done the only thing I'd ever aspired to, and now it was over. The interview had been a disappointment and the future looked like an anticlimax—gray, dull, pointless.

The Question of Professional Standards

After the debriefing while en route to the L.A. affiliate that had lent us the van, we joked for ten or fifteen minutes about the transparency of the BOP's "deprogramming" techniques. For me at least it had been an ordeal (and I suspect it had been for them, too, since we found it necessary to joke about it). Not only did I need to keep my wits about me in order to give the debriefers the answers they considered correct, but I just as importantly needed to preserve intact (as much as that was possible) the memory of Margaret A.'s words. All of us apparently passed muster without a glitch, for our producer assured us that the official in charge had let her know that he was pleased with our debriefings.

When finally the joking had worked some of our dis-ease out of our systems, the crew began complaining about the pointlessness of the whole Margaret A. situation. They said they couldn't see what the big deal with Margaret A. was, they contended that the Margaret A. phenomenon must always have been a super media hype since there certainly wasn't anything special about Margaret A herself. They grouched, too, about the BOP's deleting their shots of the computer, the "garden" and the partially filled tub and saucepan for bailing: touches that they had hoped would lift our photo-op above the mediocrity of those that had come before (when of course ours would show as almost identical to the others). Those particular cuts perplexed and perturbed them more than the BOP's cutting every shot in which Margaret A's lips were moving. They joked a bit about the BOP's fear of lip-readers, but then segued into a discussion of the government's paranoia in making such a big deal of a woman who was, they thought, simply boring.

¹⁰The BOP has a rule that prohibits media personnel from more than one contact with Margaret A.

After several minutes of listening in silence to the discussion, our producer disagreed. “The woman’s a destroyer,” she declared. “She’s so damned sure of herself and her opinions that only the most confident people would be capable of resisting her subversive incursions.”

The crew snickered. “What subversion?” they wanted to know. “You mean her refusing to shake your hand?”

The producer ignored this below-the-belt crack. “Those idiots monitoring us were too slow to catch what she was talking about. When she used the word ‘institutions’, only an idiot would have missed what she was referring to.” That counter-put-down shut them up—and ended the conversation about Margaret A.

No one seemed to notice my silence. And in fact I managed to talk to Elissa Muntemba and even negotiated my own on-camera interview without raising suspicions of myself.¹¹ The suspicions came later, in other contexts—after I had begun to ask of myself the very questions I believe Margaret A. in my place would insist upon asking. Not surprisingly the producer of the Margaret A. photo-op was the one to suss me out. *She* knew, even if no one else could trace it back to Margaret A.’s “influence.” “You’re a Margaret A. convert,” she accused me. “She really got to you, didn’t she.” I so detested the language she used that without considering the consequences I launched into a discussion of our complicity with the BOP. But she cut me off before I’d even finished my second sentence.

“Professional journalists can’t afford to be susceptible to subversion,” she scathed at me. *Does she understand at all what she’s saying when she uses the word ‘afford’?* I wondered. Of course she didn’t, for she went on to berate me for being a gullible fool, for betraying professional standards—and then told me I was terminated. “I won’t mention this in your file,” she said—but later I wondered what such an assurance could mean since she obviously made a point of sabotaging every attempt I made at securing new employment within the mainstream media industry.¹²

This question of professional standards is a troubling one for JATROF members. The position of journalists like my producer amounts to using the government’s contextualizations for determining the parameters of objectivity. Any consideration of facts outside of such contextualizations then become acts of subversion. If my contact with Margaret A. has taught me anything, it is that the self-censorship demanded of journalists is too high a price for me to pay. The question then becomes one of how the journalist reconciles the ideals of the profession with the practice my producer insists reflects “professional standards.”

¹¹It would have been pointless for me to have attempted serious analysis in the interview, for anything “radical” would have been cut, or the interview itself trashed. I consciously chose to toe the invisible line because I considered it important to get out the word that Margaret A. still had juice in her, that far from having been discouraged by her silencing rather she took it as sign that she was on the right track.

¹²Like other journalists who have crossed the invisible line of self-censorship, I now face the choice of changing professions or emigrating out, and choose the latter.

Summary

First, for those concerned with Margaret A. herself, I can attest to the fact that her incarceration and silencing have not demoralized or disempowered her. On the contrary, the government's efforts to obliterate her words seem to have strengthened rather than weakened the particular, distinctive articulation that characterizes Margaret A.'s speech. Should the day come when the government cannot resist public opposition to the Margaret A. Amendment (for as time passes more and more people will consider the government's fear of Margaret A. either hysterical paranoia or a cynical excuse for its tight control of the news media), Margaret A. will likely be prepared.

Second, my experience doing a Margaret A. photo-op suggests that as journalists we need to question the conflation of the government's contextualization with the parameters of objectivity and professional standards, especially when such contextualization demands the obliteration not only of words but of facts. Journalists currently work in an environment in which their asking even so simple a question as "What would the harm be in showing a shot of a bathtub?" can lead to charges of a subversive lack of objectivity. The "limited censorship" of Margaret A.'s words has thus demonstrably altered journalists' definition of objectivity and professional standards. JATROF members, I feel certain, will want to consider the cost to themselves and the profession of their continued submission to the principle of self-censorship the Margaret A. Amendment has so clearly spawned.

Following the Margaret A. photo-op I learned to the cost of my career—thinking that since I had achieved my goal of interviewing Margaret A. I need no longer be "careful"—that this censorship process extends beyond the coverage of Margaret A. into other areas. It is perhaps ironic that the initial trajectory of my career was dictated by the determination to achieve one single goal, that of personally interviewing Margaret A., when in fact that very interview has called into question the price I paid to achieve it. That price included not only a loss of personal and professional integrity, but a blinkering of my ability to see the world I live in. My meeting with Margaret A. woke me into a world I seem never to have really seen before, a world it is my mission as a journalist to expose and explore. It is my belief that Margaret A.'s words were forbidden because of their power to show us the world anew, without blinders. I may never fully share Margaret A.'s vision; I may never have a true record of Margaret A.'s words. But because of Margaret A., I now grope for the blinders that have been narrowing and dimming my vision, that I may tear them from my eyes and see a world far wider and brighter than I'd ever dreamed existed.