Voices&Commentary

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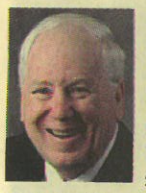
Hiding people is a delicate business at our embassies



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Blind Chinese activist Chen Guangchen holds his son, Chen Kerui, with his wife Yuan Weijing and his mother, left, in Shandong province. Chen, a well-known dissident, made a surprise escape from house arrest on April 22 into what activists say is the protection of U.S. diplomats in Beijing. CHINA AID ASSOCIATION

As the details continue to emerge regarding the dramatic events of the past week surrounding Chinese dissident Chen Guangcheng, I could not help but be reminded of the similar experiences I had during the violent and tumultuous years I served as U.S. ambassador in Cambodia.

Between 1996-1999, my embassy hid for 53 days inside our embassy compound a Cambodian political leader whose life was threatened. In addition, during outbreaks of street fighting in the capital, we opened our embassy doors to provide temporary refuge for persons fleeing from the fighting. In some cases, we then transported them to places of safety within the country, while in others drove them to the airport and escorted them onto planes so they could leave the country.

Still other circumstances arose where some Cambodians felt they were at such risk of possible harm or execution that I would go to meet them with the American flag flying on my car so that I might try to shield them from harm by standing next to them (hoping that battling forces would be reluctant to shoot down the American ambassador despite how angry they might be).

Iowa View

Counting on hot-tempered soldiers to remain calm in such a situation is not necessarily a given. In one instance, when one of our embassy vehicles was attempting to drive Cambodian-American citizens to safety at the embassy, it came under gunfire from the police, leaving more than 60 bullet holes in the car. It was a miracle no one died.

State Department rules about taking foreigners into an embassy are meant to be clear: If someone is under imminent threat of harm or death, the ambassador has authority to open the embassy door and grant protection. In any other case, a message has to be sent to Washington and then a decision will be made there about granting asylum.

Of course, real life situations can be much more murky.

In the most celebrated case during my tenure as chief of mission, I had a political dissident come to my home who said he felt that the government was going to have him killed for his political views and activities. As this came in the aftermath of considerable violence in the country, I had to devise a temporary measure that could provide some protection while the situation was investigated and while we waited for a response from Washington.

In this case, I kept the man in my home as a guest for several days believing that the Cambodian government would not intrude into an ambassadorial residence (even though it does not have the same inviolable status as an embassy).

The State Department finally instructed us that if we judged that he was truly at risk, we had the authority to move him to the embassy and provide protection. At that point I devised the plan to do this without being detected or having the threat of the car with him in it shot up as had happened once before.

We had several cars depart from my residence, with my ambassadorial vehicle going first to act as a decoy, hopefully leading any government security forces to follow me away from the embassy. Following that, a second decoy exited my residence and went in the opposite direction, hoping any residual security would follow it. Only then, did the third vehicle depart with my female deputy chief of mission in the car with the dissident.

It worked. They were able to drive unimpeded to the embassy, where the dissident spent the next 53 days eating and sleeping in an office turned into a bedroom. We refused to tell anyone, even his closest friends and family, where he was. We only said that we knew he was in "a safe place." We thus avoided a confrontation with the government, one of the most important factors in ensuring a successful resolution.

Almost two months later the political situation subsided and the assurances were given regarding the safety of the activist. We passed that information to him and allowed him to have phone conversations with persons he trusted. I told him he could stay longer, but his decision was that he felt he could go in safety.

We then mounted another operation under the cover of darkness to drop him off in a place he designated not too far from his residence. We watched him fade away into the misty darkness of Phnom Penh.

I am happy to report that now, 15 years later, he is still alive and politically involved in Cambodia. We went to great lengths to avoid a confrontation with the government, which could easily happen if they felt that their principles of self-rule over their citizens was at stake.

Understanding the psychology and the potential "loss of face" is critical to dealing successfully with such situations. It has to be exponentially more difficult in a political environment such as China.

Is having weed-free lawn worth it?

Iowa View

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"Your lawn is in battle mode" was printed on the envelope I received from the lawn care company. "Harmful weed and pest threats like dandelions, sedges, clinch bugs or grubs are showing up. ... [The company] is addressing these issues in your neighborhood right now," the letter said.

In "addressing these issues," this company and homeowners alike, spread war defoliants, insecticides and fungicides — substances highly hazardous to life. And the most common weedkiller in the lawn "battle" is 2,4-D, a herbicide with not a very distinguished military career.

In "Families of Fallen Leaves: Stories of Agent Orange by Vietnamese Writers" we learn that between 1962 and 1971 the U.S. military

tors and other beneficial insects as well.

As I write this, a friend is undergoing radiation and chemotherapy treatment for breast cancer, and her immune system is not at peak performance. This time of year, she could be walking to work where the lawn is sprayed with 2,4-D (which always has some dioxin with it). As

pesticides are used suffer elevated rates of leukemia, brain cancer and soft tissue sarcoma.

The weight of evidence is overwhelming. Is a weed-free lawn worth it?

"Your lawn is in battle mode." Nearly six decades of marketing has resulted in a learned cultural urge so unhealthy. The shame-based messages are clear: If there are any other plants in your lawn, you are being negligent, you are not a good neighbor, you are not doing your part. There is also an assumption that "these chemicals have been tested and are fine," ignoring the political nature of how a chemical stays on the market even when there is strong evidence of harm

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It's time prison sentences were reconsidered

Fran Koontz doesn't sugar coat the bad parts. She never has.

As president of an eastside Des Moines neighborhood association, she wasn't afraid to call a powerful person unqualified, or crooked. As a mother, she points out that her alcoholic, drug-addicted son, John, had not four, but nine, arrests related to drunken driving if you add driving while his license was barred.

She will tell you he became an alcoholic in college, got hooked on meth at 40, was in and out of treatment five times, and living in squalor when the final police stop sent him away for 25 years. In his car were 58 grams of meth and amphetamines, a gun, and several other people who would not be charged.

But Koontz will also tell you that John, now 55, has been clean and sober for 15 years, that she and her husband desperately want him home, and that 15 years in prison is enough.

It is enough, by any rational measure, for crimes driven by addictions in which no one else was hurt. But under federal sentencing guidelines passed in the 1980s, felony drug offenders convicted in federal courts must serve pre-determined amounts of time. It starts with a mandatory minimum of five years for a few ounces of meth, says Des Moines attorney Mark Weinhardt. If over a pound, the time doubles. With a prior drug felony, it's now 20 years, and with two, it becomes life without parole.

Koontz

The only exceptions are for defendants who rat on others, which means "It's always a race to see who can get to the government first to tell their story." Federal drug felons must serve at least 85 percent of their sentences. There is no parole. So unless the president of the United States commutes John Koontz's sentence, he won't be out for another seven years, at least.

John's father, Ray, will likely be gone by then. He is 92 and in poor health. Fran, once active on multiple committees before a stroke three years ago, has retreated from almost every cause — except one.

She's using some of her old organizing skills for it. Recently she invited a group of friends, relatives, high-powered attorneys and a columnist to a meeting in a conference room belonging to Bill Knapp II, a developer with whom Fran used to butt heads over issues like tax increment financing. They're friends now. She's seeking letters of support for a commutation appeal for her son. Former Gov. Chet Culver, U.S. Rep. Leonard Boswell, U.S. Sen.Tom Harkin, and other high-profile Iowans have written.

John's last commutation appeal was filed in 2009, but it was turned down last May 16. By that date this year, a new application will be on the desk of the U.S. pardon attorney. That's the earliest it can be considered.

But here's what they are up against:

The federal prisons are filled with people who, just like John, committed drug-related crimes and had the misfortune to be sentenced in the federal system. Because most were at a low point in their lives, they cannot ask the president for special consideration as exemplary citizens. The best they can show is evidence of transformation and contributions in prison. But only a handful of people make it — Obama commuted five sentences last year — and this is an election year.

In 2008, Des Moines lawyer Bob Holliday won a commutation from former President George W. Bush for Reed Prior, a Des Moines man who had three felony drug convictions. It took Holliday seven years of work on the case. "I sold it because of how Reed conducted himself while incarcerated," Holliday said. Prior was considered a model prisoner, helping tutor more than 100 inmates to receive their GED diplomas.

Fran Koontz can tell you the 30-day treatments John had earlier in life were not long enough, that