

Monday, February 25, 2008

This week in D.C.: "Practicing Human Rights Law in America"

Â Bill of Rights.Â (From the public domain.)Â Thanks to a listserv member for announcing this week's seminar on "Practicing Human Rights Law in America," which runs February 25-28 at the George Washington University Law SchoolÂ (from where I graduated) in Washington, D.C. The agenda is here. Â The program starts at 4:30 p.m. each day. Today's two panels will cover the death penalty and "Helping Refugees and Victims of Human Trafficking." Included on the death penalty panel is Diane Rust-Tierney, Executive DirectorÂ of theÂ National Coalition to Abolish the Death Penalty. Diane has a special place in my heart; I first met her twenty years ago when she spoke at my law schoolÂ on the death penalty along with Leigh Dingerson (then the NCADP executive director) when Diane was at the ACLUÂ fighting the death penalty. Â Wednesday and Thursday each have three panel discussions, plus a film screening of Rape Is...on Wednesday and a concluding reception on Thursday.Â I did my best during law school toÂ light a candle for justice while reading many distressing poorly-decided Constitutional opinions which often made me wonder whether anybody other than the lateÂ Justices Brennan and Marshall gave enough of a damn about giving true meaning and teeth to the Bill of Rights and the rest of the Constitution.Â In that regard,Â fellow student David Epstein and IÂ started a law school Amnesty International chapter, andÂ I ultimately turnedÂ my obsession over learning how deep and wideÂ run human rights violations in the United States,Â intoÂ heavily positive energy which stays with me to this day.Â Subsequent to my law school graduation, the clinical program there added the International Human Rights Clinic. The clinic has been supporting extraditing former Peruvian leader Alberto Fujimori to Peru. One thing that made me feel more distant from Amnesty International was its repeated calls -- after I finished law school -- for bringing human rights violators to "justice". I pointed out my reservations on this to an Amnesty member involved with one of these calls to "justice", not only because I have not yet found any prosecutorial system that I sufficiently trust, but because it is ironic to seek to have a human rights violator "brought to justice" by the same justice system that spreads injustice. I have similar reservations about the law school human rights clinic's support for extraditing Fujimori. This particular Amnesty member did his best to justify this "bring to justice" approach, and I continue having my reservations. Â In any event, the immigration law clinic was among my favorite parts of law school, especially when I helped obtain political asylum for one of my clients (another asylum-seeking clientÂ was denied at his deportation hearing, when we were unable to overcome the high hurdle of his alleged shopping for a third country before arriving in the United States). It is great to see the human rights message being shouted loud and clear through this week's "Practicing Human Rights Law in America" program.Â Jon Katz.

Posted by Jon Katz in Constitutional Law at 19:45