

DILEMMAS OF WAR AND PEACE

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I speak from grave concern this morning about the seemingly inexorable move to American war against Iraq. I speak not with any special knowledge of international or military affairs, nor do I speak with any special political insight. I don't know all the facts. No one can. And sadly, I cannot trust that what the Administration tells us is truth.

But like many of you, I have been reading widely and listening carefully. This past Monday night, I heard Congressman Barney Frank speak his opposition and concern at the UU Society of Wellesley Hills. On Thursday night, at First Parish in Bedford, I listened to the Rev. John Buehrens, former President of the Unitarian Universalist Association and now minister in Needham, as he reported on his recent trip to Iraq with the National Council of Churches.

I speak this morning as a religious leader, as a Unitarian Universalist, and as the minister of this historic church. I speak as a citizen concerned about the future of my country. I am concerned that as a nation we are in grave danger of losing our soul for the sake of security, cheap oil, and an arrogant lust to reorganize the Middle East on our terms.

More fundamentally, as a spiritual being, I speak from a deep respect for the dignity, worth and sacredness of every human being. I speak as a human being with the same innate capacity as each of you for compassion and a deep yearning for justice and peace. I speak from a humanitarian concern for the well-being and future of the children - our children, Iraqi children, Israeli children, Arab children - and all their children.

Like most of you, I would much prefer to talk on Sunday mornings about spiritual things, things that are uplifting and beautiful, peaceful and loving. I would much prefer to ponder the mystery of the cosmos and the meaning of life. But as Martin Luther King, Jr., whose birthday we celebrate next week, has said, "A religion true to its nature must also be concerned about (human) social conditions. ... Any religion," he said, "that professes to be concerned with the souls of people and is not concerned with the social conditions that cripple them is a dry-as-dust religion."

As Unitarian Universalists, we are committed to "a free and responsible search for truth." We are committed to the "goal of world community with peace, liberty, and justice for all." As people of conscience, we are called "to confront powers and structures of evil with justice, compassion, and the transforming power of love." For our own spiritual integrity and well-being we must bear witness to our faith out in the world.

So as people of faith, we *must* talk about war and peace. And we need to talk about these today. Time is running short. As we speak, American military forces are gathering in the Middle East, as they have been for some time. The Administration says that by the end of January there will be an armed force of 100,000 in the Middle East, in place, and ready to invade Iraq. Just the morning, the headlines read "150,000." Foreign press has been reporting that America has been at war already for four months in Iraq with air attacks and special forces targeting air defense systems. Here at home, the rhetoric of war is rising.

All this is profoundly and terribly wrong. How fervently I hope that it is not too late. As people of faith, as Americans who love their country, we must wake up and let our voice be heard. This war is wrong.

I have been perplexed at how little public debate there has been. With little discussion, Congress voted to authorize armed attack. But I sense many Americans are feeling an uneasy ambiguity. We are caught in the dilemmas of war and peace. All of us are patriots in the deepest sense. We love our country. We cherish and defend its ideals. But war is a nasty business. We don't want to think about it, but war is organized murder by our sons and daughters and in our name. We have the moral imperative, therefore, as citizens to challenge our government to be very sure that whatever our actions they be just and wise.

There are dilemmas of war and peace unique to the present crisis. America and the whole world is still reeling from the shock of September 11. We are engaged in what will be a prolonged and difficult struggle against the hideous crime of terrorism. At the same time, there is no question that Saddam Hussein and his regime in Iraq are especially nasty and brutish. They have abused the human rights of their people with a shocking ruthlessness and cruelty. They have terrorized and slaughtered thousands of their own citizens. They have threatened their neighbors. Iraq is a problem. But then, so are many other tyrannies, and Iraq may be neither the worst nor the most dangerous - North Korea, as one example.

Weapons of mass destruction *are* a serious and dangerous problem wherever they are. They make the world a very dangerous place. The world community cannot tolerate belligerent behavior by one nation against a neighbor, nor should it tolerate the gross abuse of human rights by any government against its own people.

All this is true, but on simply practical grounds, do the facts justify armed invasion? Do the facts justify the terrible loss of life and human suffering that armed invasion will necessarily cause, especially for thousands and thousands of children? And even if the facts can be convincingly shown to justify attack, who should do the attacking and by what authority? Many Americans, it seems, share with me the deep concern that America should not be launching war on its own, and for many practical reasons alone, like cost and world opinion, not even to mention reasons of morality and international law.

But the religious and moral dilemmas of war and peace go even deeper. Within religion itself is the creative tension between compassion and justice. Religion teaches that love is the most durable power and the law of being, and that love shows itself as love for neighbor and love for God. Religion cherishes the sacredness of life; it abhors killing and war. But, religion also recognizes that there are powers and structures of evil in the world. Deep compassion for others who suffer oppression and moral outrage at injustice demand the active opposition to evil.

As religious people, we are called to confront evil, to preserve community, and to establish community of justice and peace. But religion calls us to confront evil not with aggression, but with the creative power of love. At the same time, most religion recognizes that evil can become so powerful that the force of arms is sometimes necessary to defeat the evil. Making peace is seldom easy.

Good people of faith resolve the religious dilemma in a number of ways. One way is pacifism. The pacifist response to evil holds that all war is immoral and that a person of conscience can never participate in war. I myself am not a pacifist, nor are many Unitarian Universalists. But I honor the pacifist tradition, and it bears an important witness to the spiritual possibility of our humanity. Most religious traditions, and in particular Christianity, Islam, and Judaism, have developed systems of moral criteria to determine the justice and moral conduct of any armed struggle or war against evil. These systems constitute what are known as moral theologies of "just war."

I submit this morning, that our Administration, and in our name, is unleashing a military adventure that is terribly unwise - on practical grounds alone. But it will also prove, I fear, to be a humanitarian and a moral catastrophe as well. A preemptive American attack on Iraq may prove to be one of the worst foreign policy disasters in American history, and - it is *morally unjustifiable*.

Now, I have little doubt that our immense military power can easily overwhelm Saddam Hussein's weak army and perhaps in short order. Iraq is a weak, already defeated country. It has few weapons of any consequence. Its economy is devastated. After more than a decade of U.S. imposed sanctions, its people are impoverished, suffer poor health, malnutrition, and high rates of child mortality. They barely survive at a subsistence level on U. N. food rations and only two or three dollars a month. Iraq has no choice but to allow U.N. weapons inspectors to roam essentially at will throughout their country, and so far finding very little, except incomplete documentation. I cannot imagine how Iraq today so threatens America that we must invade the country- even if Saddam Hussein is a brutal thug, right up there with the folks who rule Syria, North Korea, and other equally nasty tyrannies.

But even with an easy military victory, an attack on Iraq has to be a disaster simply in pragmatic terms. First, an American attack can only destabilize an already fragile and struggling part of the world. It can only further deepen the hostility against what is seen as American military, economic, and cultural imperialism. The Islamic world is a great and rich culture. It is a rightfully proud culture. Today it is engaged in a titanic struggle within itself to come to terms with the forces of modernity, to educate and lift its people out of poverty, and to reform its governments, economies, and social institutions. It must do these things to achieve a vigorous and prosperous future.

But the Islamic world must also do this on their own terms and in their own way, drawing on the deep resources of their culture and preserving their own dignity. They need our encouragement, help and support. They do not need nor do they want our war. For America to impose its own agenda on the Islamic world with force will only deepen the resentment, anger and hostility that is already so obviously and understandably there.

Secondly, this war on Iraq is a great distraction. It is a distraction from the war on terrorism. And it is a distraction from other more urgent and pressing global problems. Despite the very determined efforts of our Administration, no evidence has been found of any connection between the Iraqi regime and the Al Qaeda terrorists. If anything, they are natural enemies.

Iraq is not an Islamic state. Its government, as nasty as it is, is a secular government. An American attack on Iraq can only further increase the Islamic world's distrust of the United States. What we need in the fight against terrorism is cooperation with Islamic countries, not suspicion and hatred.

War on Iraq distracts world attention from the very serious Israel Palestine conflict, which seems to be deteriorating into a downward spiral of violence, retribution, hatred and fear. American preoccupation with Saddam Hussein is distracting America from providing the leadership that is needed if catastrophe on the West Bank is to be averted before it is too late, and a peaceful resolution of the conflict achieved. War on Iraq also distracts the entire world from very serious global problems of the environment, world poverty, and AIDS.

Moreover, this war will not end when American soldiers enter Baghdad. We will be there for many years - or at least we will have the moral obligation to be there as a major force - to maintain order, build new institutions of government, and establish peace among the many

factions which are deeply suspicious and hateful of each other - Kurds, Shi'ite and Sunni Muslims, and others. (Current experience in Afghanistan is not encouraging. I fear that we are investing too little there to establish the rule of law that is necessary for peace.) The belief that Iraqi people will welcome Americans with dancing and joy, I fear will prove to be a myth. There is no evidence of wide spread support within Iraq for an American "liberation." Twelve years of suffering under American sanctions appear to have only bonded the people to their leader, as much as they hate him and fear him. The different factions in Iraq, while hating each other, they hate American domination even more. That is my understanding. Granted, there are Iraqi refugees who want to see Saddam Hussein overthrown, but we need to exercise great caution and wisdom before generalizing on the basis of what may be a small and fragmented cheering section with its own agendas.

Therefore, if America does invade Iraq, it seems that American forces will most likely need to be there in large numbers for a long time at great cost. There will be a continuing cost in lives, there will be a cost of more than \$100 billion to the American economy. Such a cost will be a huge diversion of funds from housing, education, job training, health care, human services, and environmental protection - funds that are desperately needed here in our own country.

Next, a preemptive attack on Iraq will set a terrible precedent in international relations. What kind of a wild world will we unleash where any nation can freely and preemptively strike its neighbors without concern for international agreements and law. Are we not causing the unraveling of a still fragile system of institutions and codes of international law that have taken the world's nations decades to build? Pakistan, North Korea and Israel are only three countries already justifying their threats of preemptive aggression. We can see the system of international law beginning to unraveling before our eyes.

And finally, a war on Iraq will be a humanitarian catastrophe. An already impoverished and malnourished population of some 24 million people is at grave risk following the breakdown of what little still works. And no matter how smart our bombs, civilian casualties are likely to be high. Saddam Hussein may well be locating military facilities next to and even within schools and hospitals and vice versa. Are we prepared for the inevitable carnage that will be shown on the evening television?

So, on purely practical, pragmatic grounds, war on Iraq is a terrible mistake. It will be a foreign policy disaster. It will be a distraction from urgent world concerns, a diversion of resources, a distortion of our economy, and a humanitarian catastrophe.

But war on Iraq cannot be justified on moral or ethical grounds, either.

First, there is no just cause. Despite all its rhetoric, the administration as yet has not shown actual cause sufficient to justify war. So far, the United Nations weapons inspectors have found little, if any, evidence that Iraq possesses weapons of mass destruction. It seems highly unlikely that Iraq can achieve nuclear capability any time soon. I would be surprised if Saddam Hussein does not still possess some number of biological or chemical weapons, which by the terms of the Gulf War he is obligated to destroy. But Iraq is a weak country. Saddam Hussein's regime may be a problem for its neighbors. But so are many of its neighbors to each other. I submit that the only causes that could conceivably justify invasion on moral grounds are an outright aggression by Iraq against another country or genocide within Iraq perpetrated by its own government. Iraq poses no threat to America sufficiently dire to justify armed attack and the humanitarian catastrophe it would surely cause. War against Iraq, therefore, cannot be justified on moral grounds, not at this time.

Secondly, America must honor the moral criteria of just authority. Even if just cause for war can be persuasively shown, war must be justly authorized, and only as a last resort. The Security Council of the United Nations has unanimously called for weapons inspectors. America must let the inspectors do their job. And then, if the international community as a whole perceives that Iraq is a sufficiently serious threat, and only then, armed invasion might conceivably be justified, but only if it will be conducted under the authority of the world community, namely the United Nations. (I can also imagine a scenario where humanitarian relief may need to be delivered to the Iraqi people under international armed escort, if the Hussein regime refuses to provide for their basic needs.)

This criteria of just authority is morally just as important as just cause. When I hear our President threaten the world with preemptive armed aggression without regard for international law, I fear for America. I fear for its spirit as a republic and its soul as a democracy founded on ideals of human dignity and equality and the rule of law. America is at present the dominant economic and military power in the world. This is simply a fact. Instead of threatening the world with military force, we must be using our power responsibly for the sake of a world community of justice and peace. America must use its power to foster and strengthen institutions and systems of international law and especially the United Nations. America must use its power peacefully to encourage and support progressive forces in other nations as they strive to modernize and improve the prospects of their people. America must provide visionary leadership and diplomacy on global problems of poverty, disease, and preserving the environment, which are fundamental to the future of our planet.

Is America about to squander and abuse its power through hubris, arrogance, and overreaching in its desire to impose its will on others by force? History is strewn with the ruins of empires that have risen and fallen, including the republics of Athens and Rome. Martin Luther King, Jr., offered this warning. He offered it in a different context, but its truth bears on the present dilemmas of war and peace.

"If you succumb to the temptation of using violence in your struggle, unborn generations will be the recipients of a long and desolate night of bitterness, and your chief legacy to the future will be an endless reign of meaningless chaos." (Sermon, Montgomery, 1956)

America is embarking on a military adventure that is terribly unwise on practical grounds alone. But it will also prove, I fear, to be a humanitarian and a moral catastrophe. I say it again. A preemptive American attack on Iraq will be one of the worst foreign policy disasters in American history, and - it is *morally unjustifiable*.

What can we do? We must speak out. We must tell our friends and neighbors about our concern. We must speak out to our elected officials and to the presidential candidates. We need to provoke a desperately needed public debate. Send letters and post cards. Make phone calls to our elected officials. Let them know. They need to hear our voices. Attend vigils. Bear witness to our faith and to the ideals that make America great. Congress has already voted, but they still control the appropriation of funds, our tax dollars. They need to hear our voices.

Most of all, we need to prepare ourselves spiritually. We must never give in to the fatalistic resignation that it's too late. I believe that a decision for war has already been made. But it can still be delayed. It must be delayed. We must act vigorously with a positive hope. We must also find ways to support humanitarian relief to the people in Iraq.

The hour is one of grave danger. The hour is also one of great opportunity for a triumph of the human spirit. War represents a failure of the human imagination. We can give in to

resignation and worry. We can wish pathetically for peace. Or we hold fast to hope and act boldly and courageously for making a more just and peaceful world. Loving peace is easy. Making peace is where the hard work is. Making peace is where our faith lives.

May God grant us the wisdom and the courage.

May we never give up on the potential greatness of the human spirit.

Amen.