

The war on Iraq – was there a better way?

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The war on Iraq: there was a better way. Those of us who marched knew that there was a better way. Those of us who sent letters to UN members knew that there was a better way. Those of us from the churches who joined the rallies, knew Christ called us all to a better way. That way is exemplified by the Decade to Overcome Violence.

Tom has suggested that just war theory does not include a presumption against violence. Whether or not he is correct historically, he is wrong in terms of the best contemporary thinking. Both the churches, and the nations who are members of the United Nations, are committed to non-violent resolution of disputes. The churches have supported and worked with the United Nations precisely because it is about non-violence and about reducing conflict and reasons for war by recognizing and enhancing human rights.

The United Nations has just held a Decade to Promote a Culture of Peace for the Children of the World. The UN has a major emphasis on peacebuilding and the prevention of violence. Alongside this decade, the World Council of Churches initiated the Decade to Overcome Violence (DOV). Both are about eliminating violence and creating a just and peaceful world.

All the member churches of the National Council of Churches in Australia have endorsed the DOV as a joint project, in response to the World Council of Churches initiative. It is the principles of the DOV, and not just war theory, that provide the proper starting point for any Christian assessment of the war on Iraq.

Christian principles

The principles of the Decade to Overcome Violence, taken from the National Council of Churches website, are:

- Respect for the opponent/everyone as human beings
- Care for everyone involved in a conflict
- Refusal to harm, damage or degrade people/living things/the earth
- If suffering is inevitable, willingness to take it on oneself rather than to inflict it on others; not retaliating to violence with violence
- Belief that everyone is capable of change
- Appeal to the opponents' "humanity"
- Recognition that no one has a monopoly on truth, thus aiming to bring together our "truth" and the opponents' "truth"
- A belief that means are the ends-in-making, so the means have to be consistent with the ends
- Openness rather than secrecy.

I take these not as rules, but as middle axioms – general directions for progressive attainment, towards which we work. They do not presume a single policy approach, but they do set the broad framework within which we do our thinking about how to handle situations. They are goals towards which we work.

The question for this debate is: which of these principles were breached in the lead up to the Iraq war, during the war, and in the time since George Bush declared “Mission Accomplished” in May 2003? What did we know at the time about how they were being breached, and what more do we know now? Many of us recognized in February and March last year, that these principles were being breached.

This leads also to a question for Bp Tom Frame in response to his article in *The Australian* in support of the war as a just war: Which of the DOV principles were breached in the assumptions that you made in your article arguing that the war on Iraq was just?

The National Assembly of the Uniting Church in Australia, in July 2003 passed an extensive resolution about peace and non-violence. Here are some of the relevant paragraphs in which it picks up suggestions from the WCC as to what the decade means for the way we live and respond to the world:

2. In response (to the DOV) to commit to:

- a) Work together for peace, justice, and reconciliation at all levels: local, regional, and global;
- b) Embrace creative approaches to peace building which are consonant with the spirit of the gospel;
- c) Interact and collaborate with local communities, secular movements, and people of other living faiths towards cultivating a culture of peace;
- d) Empower people who are systemically oppressed by violence, and to act in solidarity with all struggling for justice, peace, and the integrity of creation; and
- e) Repent together for our complicity in violence, and to engage in theological reflection to overcome the spirit, logic, and practice of violence.

6 (b) Reliance on weapons for peace and security can never achieve a just and lasting peace. Security achieved through armament is sustained by fear of the enemy and can never see the world reconciled.

I want now to turn to the role of the church in the debate about the war. I must confess that I was taken aback by Tom’s article in *The Australian*, because it seemed contrary to the proper role of the church. In contemporary theological thinking, taking seriously the incarnation of Jesus Christ and his liberative work, the role of the church is

- never to reinforce the great powers of this world
- always to take the side of those who lack power, and whose voice is silenced in the debate
- always to challenge the ideology of violence and
- always to expose the misuse of power.

The church’s role in public debate is to offer alternative discourse, ie an alternative view of the issues, and an alternative praxis, ie an alternative way of expressing one’s faith in life. This involves challenging assumptions, evaluating claims on the basis of the church’s alternative assumptions, offering alternative ideas, and drawing on biblical and theological tradition to challenge worldly values and to assert a different way of acting. It involves developing principles to guide advocacy and action, and then acting for peace and justice, resisting violence in all its forms. The DOV is an example of all this.

Evaluating the reasons given for the war

In this section I offer comment on a number of the reasons that have been given in attempts to justify the war on Iraq.

The war on terrorism

If the war was part of the war on terrorism, we must ask: Whose terrorism? A war on terrorism does not make sense. As Gore Vidal has said: you can't declare war on an abstract noun.

The recent crimes committed by terrorists such as on September 11 or in Bali or Spain are horrific criminal acts. Nevertheless, we need to put them in perspective. This is not a simple case of good versus evil. Some of today's "terrorists" were allies of the USA yesterday, and were even trained by the USA, eg Osama Bin Laden.

The recent hype about terrorism lacks perspective and proportionality. More people die everyday as a result of the unpayable debt of the poor countries, than have died in the last ten years as a result of "terrorist" attacks on the west. In the USA, there are more murders in one year than the total number of people than have died in the last ten years as a result of "terrorist" attacks on the west.

What is the proper response to terrorist actions? Terrorist acts are crimes. They should be investigated as such, and the offenders prosecuted, as has happened after the Bali bombing. But there is a need to also rethink some of the actions of the West. Don't give them weapons and training in the first place. Don't continue the arms trade that leaks weapons to them. And change the policies of the Western nations that kill people.

Ray Williamson, General Secretary of the NSW Ecumenical Council, said this week in a media release for the Palm Sunday events in Sydney: if we want to stop violence in the Middle East: "the most effective beginning would be to address the primary violence against the Palestinian people - that is, to reverse the military occupation and confiscation of their land. That would be the single most constructive step to reduce 'terrorism' in the world". Not the war on Iraq.

Self-defence

The USA claimed the war was self-defence, arguing that because of the nature of contemporary weapons, nations that see themselves as being at risk of attack are entitled to launch a pre-emptive strike.

The doctrine of pre-emptive strike is a departure from the accepted understanding of self- defence in the United Nations charter. Self defence is normally in response to actual attack . Until this war, pre-emption has been seen as permissible only in exceptional circumstances. The onus has been on those who initiate pre-emptive strike to show that the threat is real, significant and imminent. Governments that engage in a pre-emptive strike cannot act out of ignorance – they have a responsibility to make sure that they have sound intelligence, and that they understand it correctly. The burden of proof rests on the governments that go to war, not on anyone else. They have to get it right.

If there is not a real threat, pre-emptive strike is military aggression. And that, in fact, is what Australia has done. We sent our defence forces off to commit military aggression on our behalf. It is inexcusable.

It is time the Australian and USA governments stopped all the buck passing and that both nations came to terms with the fact that we were military aggressors.

The situation where we are most appropriately rely on just war theory is in situations of self-defence, as a way of defining the limits of violent response. This involves criteria such as the following:

- Self defence is in response to actual attack or threat of imminent attack
- Legitimate authority
- Right intention
- Probability of success
- Proportional to attack
- Goal of achieving peace based on justice
- Not harm non-combatants
- Last resort

These criteria, I think, are fairly close to those proposed by Tom Frame. However, I want to add some other components. Most discussions of just war theory and humanitarian intervention make three unstated assumptions. That the intervening nation itself has “clean hands”, and is acting with sincerity and honesty. These three assumptions do not hold in the case of the USA waging war on Iraq. We will look at this in more detail below. It doubtful that Australia satisfies the criteria of sincerity and honesty.

The USA announced this war would make use of “shock and awe” and “overwhelming force”. We must wonder whether, even if weapons of mass destruction had been found, such strategies are consistent with a motive of self-defence and just war criteria.

We also must ask: Do we want to live in a world where pre-emptive strike is the norm? It is probable that other nations will now take the USA and its coalition as having set a precedent that they can follow when they feel threatened by a neighbouring country, or by one of the nations that went to war on Iraq.

Weapons of mass destruction

The main reason given for the war was that Saddam Hussein had an active program to develop weapons of mass destruction, and possessed large quantities of wmds. The problem is not simply that new evidence suggests that he did not have the weapons. We need to put the claims in a wider perspective.

First, the weapons inspectors asked for more time because they had not found weapons in spite of numerous inspections of sites where they were expected to be found.

Second, the USA is itself by far the largest owner of weapons of mass destruction. They have used such weapons to deadly effect. They engage in weapons research, manufacture, deployment, threat of use and actual use. Their weapons, research and trade includes:

- Weapons of mass destruction – nuclear, chemical, biological. They are the only nation to have used nuclear weapons, ever.
- “Tactical” nuclear weapons

- Weapons of indiscriminate destruction – land mines, depleted uranium weapons, booby traps, cluster bombs
- Large scale conventional weapons
- Conventional weapons – in enormous quantities.

Their aerospace power doctrine commits them to developing new weapons to deploy in space.

Third, we must remember that the US provided Iraq with weapons of mass destruction in the past and condoned their use. The USA government licensed delivery to Iraq from 1985-1991 of chemical warfare precursors, chemical warfare equipment, biological warfare materials (incl. Anthrax, botulum toxin) and missile fabrication and guidance equipment. Western nations supported Iraq against Iran, but use it as evidence of Saddam Hussein's aggression. George Bush Snr refused to impose sanctions when Iraq gassed the Kurds.

Fourth, we need to remember the dishonest claims made in the propaganda to justify this war. Here are some quotes.

Intelligence gathered by this and other governments leaves no doubt that the Iraq regime continues to possess and conceal some of the most lethal weapons ever devised.

- George W. Bush, address to the U.S., March 17, 2003

The people of the United States and our friends and allies will not live at the mercy of an outlaw regime that threatens the peace with weapons of mass murder.

- George W. Bush, address to U.S., March 19, 2003

There is no doubt that the regime of Saddam Hussein possesses weapons of mass destruction. And...as this operation continues, those weapons will be identified, found, along with the people who have produced them and who guard them.

- Gen. Tommy Franks, press conference, March 22, 2003

This is about an imminent threat.

- White House spokesman Scott McClellan, press briefing, Feb. 10, 2003

Intelligence "analysts never said there was an imminent threat" from Iraq before the war.

- CIA Director George Tenet, speech, Feb. 5, 2004

Ending Saddam Hussein's regime

My personal view of Saddam Hussein is that he was a vicious and murderous dictator who violated international law and human rights with impunity. He was dangerous and unfit to govern.

We need, however, to remember the history. My visual presentation includes a photo of Donald Rumsfeld meeting with Saddam Hussein in 1983. At the time, he worked for a pharmaceutical company. His task, at this meeting, was to negotiate the supply of weapons to Saddam Hussein.

This is but one example. For years, the USA collaborated with Saddam Hussein. The USA supplied weapons, technology, and loans to Saddam Hussein for the war on Iran, because that war suited the USA. The USA silenced journalists who drew attention to Saddam Hussein's human rights violations and the torture and deaths for which he was responsible up until the Gulf War in 1991, when the USA turned on him.

We also need to set the terrible deaths caused by Saddam Hussein alongside the terrible deaths caused by UN sanctions. The estimates of the deaths caused by UN sanctions vary from 500000 to 1.5 million deaths in Iraq in the 12 years 1991-2003. This exceeds the number of deaths Saddam Hussein is alleged to have caused. The main reason for death by UN sanction is the extreme approach taken by USA to refuse entry to Iraq of anything that might possibly be used in a weapons program, eg medical supplies such as vaccines, anti-biotics and syringes.

My point is that we should not demonise Saddam Hussein as if he is totally evil and those who went to war against him are totally good. The Western nations do not have clean hands. We are being neither sincere nor honest when we pretend otherwise.

The other thing that needs to be said is that if Saddam Hussein was the reason for the war, there were non-violent methods that ought to have been explored. Saddam Hussein could have been tried by an international tribunal, such as the one now dealing with the crimes committed in former Yugoslavia. If he was committing crimes against humanity or genocide after July 2002, he could be tried by International Criminal Court. The main problem is that the USA opposes the International Criminal Court and other international courts because they cannot control them and do not want anyone else to judge US citizens. Australia supports the International Criminal Court.

USA and Australian security

One argument for the war is that national governments in the USA and Australia have the right and responsibility to ensure security for their people. This argument, like the others, needs to be put in perspective. No nation has an absolute right to security. Every human being has a right to security. 1 Iraqi life = 1 American life = 1 Australian life. Anything else is racism. This means that no one has the right to make themselves secure by violating the rights of others. The human condition is vulnerability – there is no absolute security for any one nation. True security requires peace, justice and the rule of law. And finally, it is silly to talk about a war to enhance national security, when the use of a pre-emptive strike sets a precedent for other nations to follow, dismantling previously existing restraints on violence.

Enforcing UN resolutions

Another argument has been that the USA and Australia, and the other participants in this war, were enforcing UN resolutions. The first problem is that there was no United Nations Security Council resolution authorising this war. The Security Council had declined to pass such a resolution. It is hypocrisy to act in this way when claiming to enforce UN resolutions. To get resolution 1441 passed, US had to give an assurance that it contained no hidden automatic triggers for military action; this excludes the use of earlier resolutions as well. Lawyers around the world who opposed the war on legal grounds sent legal advice to Bush, Howard and Blair to this effect.

A second point is that if this war was about enforcing UN resolutions in the Middle East, then we must ask about Israel. Israel has failed to fulfil a number of UN resolutions.

The Australian government says these are not binding, while those about Iraq are.

This is half true. The resolutions are those of the General Assembly, not the Security Council.

However, we also need to be honest about why the Security Council has not passed resolutions about

Israel: the USA has used its veto to prevent the Security Council adopting any binding resolutions on Israel, no matter how badly it treats Palestinians.

An even more important issue is the attitude of the USA itself towards the United Nations and international treaties. The USA has undermined the United Nations by starving it of funds for many years. It has also undermined, refused to ratify, or broken treaties and agreements including

- The ABM treaty
- Treaties about the use of space only for peaceful purposes
- Biological weapons convention
- Land mines treaty
- Nuclear test ban treaty
- UN convention against torture
- Kyoto agreement on climate change
- International Criminal Court

Conclusion

In short, the reasons that were given for the war on Iraq do not stand up as legitimate reasons. Australia participated in an act of aggression, where the real USA motives seem to have been profiteering, control of the Middle East, control of oil, and domestic politics.

In Australia, the Minister for Foreign Affairs, Alexander Downer, in February admitted that we went to war on Iraq to cement our ties with the USA.

All of this was obvious to the peace movement in 2002 and was why we opposed the war for months before it occurred. A presumption against violence makes far more sense than accepting violence. Whether we start from the churches' DOV principles or from the UN Charter, war is something we may not legitimately initiate. Participating in peacekeeping forces that protect people who are under violent attack as in East Timor, is, of course, a separate matter.

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