

# The War in Iraq is Lost

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Tonight I want to talk about the war in Iraq and about the events of General Conference.

I have been passionately opposed to the invasion and conquest of Iraq from the beginning. I am angry about this war.

The war in Iraq is lost. Now is the time for the United States and its several allies to leave Iraq. I believe the United States should leave Iraq by the end of this month. I know there are those who say that we cannot leave because it would make the situation worse. I disagree. The United States cannot bring peace to Iraq. The United States cannot bring democracy to Iraq. The United States cannot bring stability to Iraq. Every soldier, contractor, prison guard, administrator, diplomat and spy needs to get out of Iraq.

My conviction we should withdraw from Iraq has nothing to do with “cutting and running.” We repeatedly hear it said the U.S. will not leave until the “job is done.” Well, friends, the job is done and done poorly. In fact, it could not have been done worse. There is absolutely no reason whatsoever to trust our leaders to correct their mistakes. Whether it has been on foreign or domestic policy, we have been led down the road to disaster.

Neither does this have anything to do with pacifism. I am not a strong enough and mature enough Christian to be a pacifist. There is still violence in my soul. However, war is incompatible with Christian teaching. We are not a just war church — that’s Roman Catholic teaching — but there are instances where the United Methodist Church does accept the necessity of war. The apprehension of stateless terrorists is something that must be done through a coordinated and determined international police and intelligence endeavor.

Every aspect of the rationale for war was wrong, indeed false, save one — Saddam Hussein was a ruthless tyrant. On that basis alone, however, we would not have gone to war. There are plenty of tyrants around the world. Saddam was not massing troops and threatening to attack any of his neighbors. Saddam was not carrying out mass murder prior to the war. In fact, it was the United Nations sanctions, strongly supported by the United States, which have been killing large numbers of Iraqis this past decade. This invasion constitutes a gross violation of international law. It is not just a mistake. Thousands and thousands have died. High crimes and misdemeanors have been committed by our highest officials. It is not enough to claim they meant well. They did not.

It is difficult for Americans, or any other people, to admit defeat. We believe everything is winnable. All you need is more power, money, ingenuity, determination. But this is not necessarily so. Certain things should never have been done in the first place and if you don’t admit your mistake and apologize then you

only make things worse. Vietnam is a prime example. How often did we hear it said that we could not withdraw until the conditions were right, until we had saved the people of Vietnam, or at least South Vietnam.

We can expect to hear down the road that those who opposed the war have stabbed the United States in the back. That only if we had wholeheartedly and unquestioningly supported the war, no matter how bitter and mistaken it was, we would have won. What would we have won? You simply cannot conquer a people who don't want to be conquered.

I went to Iraq shortly before the war began and I concluded the people of Iraq, no matter how they felt about Saddam Hussein, did not want a U.S. proconsul, generalissimo, or viceroy as their leader. No Iraqi leader will be seen as legitimate as long as the United States maintains a massive military presence in that country.

We have no business being in Iraq. We have no expertise on Iraq. Our military knows how to invade and conquer a country, but we do not know how to run one. Difficult as it may have been for us to accept, what the Iraqi people wanted was for Saddam to leave and then for the U.S. to depart forthwith. However, we have been unwilling to do so. A logic of conquest has taken hold, contracts have been let, careers have and will rise and fall in Iraq, the military-industrial complex must be fed.

I was part of a delegation that met with Kofi Annan on May 24 in his office at the United Nations. We asked him to take a lead role in bringing safety and security to Iraq. The United Nations faces a difficult dilemma. After they assume control, they will be blamed for all that goes wrong while the United States plans to maintain a huge military presence in Iraq.

Each and every day the headlines report new and more terrible news about the war and the lies leading up to it. The attempts at insisting and claiming the occupation was really going well and that only bad news was being reported have been abandoned. Now, defenders of the war like Trent Lott are reduced to saying that beatings at Abu Ghraib ain't all that bad and that some of the prisoners should have been shot.

On May 26, the NY Times finally acknowledged they had been all too willing to accept the bogus claims of Chalabi's Iraqi National Congress that Saddam had weapons of mass destruction. Somehow, it has been forgotten that the major media outlets in this country including the supposedly liberal *New York Times* and *Washington Post* enthusiastically supported the invasion and conquest of Iraq. Frankly, the major opponents to the war were the mainline Protestant churches. I was recently interviewed again by German television regarding the prisoner abuse tragedy in Iraq. It was European television and newspapers who were far more interested in the opposition of U.S. churches to the war than our own conformist media. European reporters told me over and over they were stunned to learn churches here opposed war because the widespread belief in their countries is that U.S. churches are strong supporters of war.

The horrible news of torture and torment of Iraqi prisoners by U.S. soldiers and military intelligence personnel could not have come at a worse moment. I'm not convinced this was just the action of a few bad apples. The prison industry in our own country is huge and growing in size and profitability. The CIA

has established a virtual gulag system of secret prisons around the world. No nation on earth keeps more people under lock and key than does the United States. Punishment, not redemption, is the name of the game. Substandard conditions, racism, and rape are rampant throughout. What happened in Abu Ghraib was inevitable. We need to deeply examine all of this. The US now maintains some 368,000 military personnel outside the U.S. and has some 700 military installations.

On May 29, the headlines told us of the plan to have a CIA agent become the new Iraqi prime minister. "Iyad Alawi, an Iraqi neurologist known for his close ties to the CIA, was chosen Friday to be the country's interim prime minister when the Americans transfer sovereignty here on June 30." (NYT) I can't think of a worse idea. "...To this day, his organization, the Iraqi National Accord, receives financing from the CIA." It's bad enough to have a secret police agency. I can't imagine how awful it would be to have the paid employee of someone else's secret police leading one's own country. Meanwhile, one of our favorite Iraqi exiles, Ahmed Chalabi, is being investigated by us for conspiring with Iran. Chalabi is primarily supported by senior Defense Department officials.

These headlines are as bad as those preceding the war. The major media outlets in this nation colluded, in my opinion, with the administration to set the stage for war. In the May 30 *New York Times*, its public editor, or ombudsman, Daniel Okrent, raised the question: "Why had the Times failed to revisit its own coverage of Iraqi weapons of mass destruction? To anyone who read the paper between September 2002 and June 2003, the impression that Saddam Hussein possessed, or was acquiring, a frightening arsenal of WMD seemed unmistakable." This was a shameful episode in U.S. journalistic history.

On June 1, the *Washington Post* reported the Army is looking into many more cases of abuse of prisoners than the ones previously reported. "Over the past year and a half, the Army has opened investigations into at least 91 cases of possible misconduct by US soldiers against detainees and civilians in Iraq and Afghanistan, a total not previously reported and one that points to a broader range of wrongful behavior than defense officials have acknowledged." U.S. soldiers have shot, beaten and strangled some of these prisoners. On a routine basis, these prisoners are referred to by American soldiers as "hajjis," a racist and derogatory term.

Devon Largio, a recent graduate of my alma mater, the University of Illinois, titled her senior honors thesis, *Uncovering the Rationales for the War on Iraq: The Words of the Bush Administration, Congress, and the Media from Sept. 12, 2001 to October 11, 2002*. She said she wanted to figure out why we went to war. Through a computer analysis of public statements, she found 23 different reasons were given for why we had to go to war. She was asked if she discovered why we went to war and said, "I'm as torn now as when I started. I tend to accept the good intentions of the president, and it's tempting to say that if they have 23 reasons for going to war, we probably should have gone. On the other hand, I find myself thinking that if they had to keep coming up with new reasons for going to war, we probably shouldn't have done it. It's almost like the decision came first, then the rationales."

*Time* magazine reports that despite Vice President Cheney's insistence he has nothing to do with the company he used to lead, Halliburton, an email has come to light saying Cheney's office apparently signed off on the infamous \$7 billion no-bid contract. I wonder if we'll see an investigation of this matter.

After the supposed handover of power on June 30 — whatever that is supposed to mean — the new American viceroy will be John Negroponte who played a key role in directing the terrible and vicious wars against the people of Central America in the 1980s. He will oversee the largest American embassy operation in the world. In the midst of all this danger, it turns out that diplomats and intelligence agents are clamoring to be part of this enterprise so they can, in part, burnish their resume and collect hazard pay. Yes, that is part of the motivation.

The only possible way to convince the American people to support an invasion of Iraq was to assert Saddam possessed and planned to use weapons of mass destruction. The weapons just weren't there; not even a few.

I really don't want to say this, but I fear Iraq faces civil war. I predict this war will last five years and many thousands more will die. I do not say this lightly or with any satisfaction. I do not know if this war would have happened upon Saddam's death or whether his murderous sons, Uday and Qusay, would have maintained authoritarian control for years to come. Eventually, though, the consequences of the Baathist dictatorship for a country whose borders were drawn on a map by British and French bureaucrats during WWI would be unavoidable. Our invasion has only hastened the day of reckoning. In the end, the Iraqi people will have to sort all this out for themselves.

On the other hand, many believed a bloody and terrible conflict was inevitable in South Africa and that didn't happen, thankfully. However, South Africa had Nelson Mandela and Desmond Tutu. I don't see those kind of commanding figures in Iraq. Perhaps they will emerge.

We are now in the midst of The Great Mideast War. War rages in Afghanistan and Iraq and in the West Bank and Gaza Strip. Saudi Arabia may be on the brink of civil war. India and Pakistan have gone to the brink of nuclear war recently. Chechnya....

The background to these conflicts is complex. They did not emerge in a vacuum. Poverty and despair and religious fundamentalism of various stripes are involved.

There will never be peace in the Middle East if the Israeli-Palestinian conflict is not resolved. This past Tuesday I was part of a remarkable collection of Christian, Jewish, and Muslim leaders who met with Colin Powell. We strongly urged Sec. Powell to send a special envoy to re-start action and movement toward peace. The recent violence in Gaza, on top of several years of a bitter cycle of violence has led to widespread despair in the region. The importance of the Holy Land to these three faiths is central. We must work harder for peace.

Why did the churches have it right regarding the war with Iraq? Because over the past 50 years we have been both dragged kicking and screaming and have led the fight for social justice in this nation. However, the worldview of the *New York Times* and of our government leaders is one of "realpolitik." The worldview of the Christian church must be, and is, dramatically different. It has taken 2,000 years to begin to free ourselves from the imperial mindset following Constantine's conversion.

Dr. Philip Wogaman, former professor of ethics and longtime pastor of Foundry United Methodist Church, wrote a year and a half ago: “Most of us find that the longer we live, the deeper our appreciation is for certain great biblical themes. We keep finding new insights, while discarding earlier limitations and misconceptions. The longer I live, the more compelling do I find the figure of Jesus Christ. That doesn’t mean everything written by Christ, even in the Bible. But the central theme is God’s love as expressed in Christ. Jesus’ own embracing of the outcasts, the rejected, the stigmatized in his day is especially clear. It seems to me, increasingly, that that is an important reason behind his own crucifixion. And the crucifixion, itself central to each of the four gospels, is a stunning contrast between utmost evil and God’s love.”

The radical implications of this message are, I believe, what has deeply upset those who want to split the church. If the UMC is split, those who leave will become much like the Southern Baptist Convention. Their best hope for redemption is to remain. The direction of God’s history is toward peace and human freedom. I believe that completely.

Jesus lived under the boot heel of Roman oppression all his life. His ministry took place in a very difficult environment. It is stunning how completely so many Christians have divorced this basic reality from his life and teachings.

Another significant, perhaps major, terrorist attack is likely to take place here in the United States. Occasional warnings are issued and for a few days we grow concerned. But how will we react if something big happens in the next few months? Will public support for the Iraq War soar? Will a panicked public approve of plans to carry out a major military strike against another country such as Syria or Iran? Will we turn our head if there are roundups and raids and mass arrests in this country as long as we are not targeted?

Can we imagine a new and better future? Ours is the first generation with the ability to feed all the world’s people, provide housing and education and health care for everyone, combat disease, hunger and poverty. The World Bank estimates it would cost \$15 billion to provide universal primary education for children in 88 developing countries. The World Health Organization says it would cost \$21 billion to provide basic health care in these countries. Giving school children school lunches in 44 poor countries would cost \$6 billion.

Why aren’t we providing universal primary education and school lunches for the poorest children of the world and basic health care for impoverished nations? Why is this not an issue in our presidential election? Why aren’t we upset about it right here and now? What does it mean for us to be a Christian? Luke 12:48 reminds us, “From everyone to whom much has been given, much will be required; and from the one to whom much has been entrusted, even more will be demanded.”

As it is, we face the most depressing campaign in memory. The Campaign Media Analysis Group has studied the ads of the two candidates and found that 75% of President Bush’s ads are negative and 27% of Sen. Kerry’s ads are negative.

We are told repeatedly that this nation and this denomination are polarized. There are red and blue states and there are liberals and conservatives. They just can't live together. I'm not so sure this is true, but I know that it serves the fundraising purposes of political parties and attack groups to say so in order to raise money to propagate this message.

I don't believe the United Methodist Church can be easily categorized. In regard to our recent General Conference, the action taken on homosexuality is clearly a step backward. The Church and Society legislative committee had worked out a carefully worded statement that retained the condemnatory language on homosexuality but noted faithful Christians have differences. Hard-liners refused to accept the majority decision and filed a minority report which won rather narrowly on the floor of General Conference. This new statement does not even acknowledge God's grace is available to all. Central Conference delegates, particularly those from Africa, were shamelessly used by right wing leaders to secure their victory.

I sure wish I could find some of the statements made 50 years ago by some of these people regarding women in ministry and 40 years ago on the subject of the dismantling of the old Central Jurisdiction in the Methodist Church. I find it hard to believe they were in the forefront of inclusiveness and integration back then.

It's interesting to me that the Central Conferences are allowed to develop their own Social Principles which do not have to be reviewed by General Conference, but the Social Principles used in the United States can be voted on by Central Conference delegates. If one were to assume 90 percent of Central Conference delegates voted against tolerance on homosexuality and those votes were to be removed from the equation, then the vote by U.S. delegates would have favored a stance that recognized differences.

I am pleased to report that almost all of the petitions and disciplinary changes offered to the General Conference by GBCS were approved and attempts to destroy and defund the board were easily rejected. We have a strong stance against the death penalty. We now say as a denomination that "Trade agreements must include mechanisms to enforce labor rights and human rights as well as environmental standards." We believe the church should continually exert a strong ethical influence upon the state, supporting policies and programs deemed to be just and opposing policies and programs that are unjust.

We have a new terrorism resolution that asserts unilateral and preemptive actions and policies are deeply disturbing and counter-productive as they undermine international cooperation that is key to preventing further terrorist attacks. We have a strong statement on environmental justice. We call for a dioxin-free future and demand that U.S. military spending be decreased in order to fund education, housing, health care, and employment and we point out that African Americans, Hispanics, and Native Americans suffer disproportionately from joblessness, poor housing, cutbacks in education funding, and lack of health care.

The Rev. Dr. Joseph Lowery, one of the great prophets of our church and of this nation spoke at our General Conference banquet. He quoted Micah about beating swords into plowshares, pointed to the inequities between the rich and poor, and categorized the outrageously low minimum wage and lack of adequate, affordable health care as weapons of mass destruction and suggested we beat missiles into

morsels of bread and tanks into tractors. Dr. Lowery said we need to take America down by the riverside to learn war no more.

Without the Church, where would the impulses have come from to dignify women, to liberate slaves, to conceive of a human community in which all persons, equal in sin and separation from God, are also equal in and through God's redeeming grace? Outside the Judeo-Christian tradition, there is not social ethic in any human tradition where the rights of the weak and defenseless were construed as moral imperatives to the strong and self-sufficient.

Power, success, and happiness as the world defines them are ours if we have the will to fight for them hard enough. But peace, joy, and love are gifts of God freely given by God. If we believe, then we respond to God's Word without fear.

W.E.B. DuBois said, "mighty causes are calling us — the freeing of women, the training of children, the putting down of hate and murder and poverty — all these and more. But they will call us with voices that mean work and sacrifice and death. Mercifully grant us, O God, the spirit of Esther, that we may say: "I will go unto the King and if I perish, I perish."

Substituting redemption for punishment, eliminating hunger as an inherent part of our economic systems, abolishing war as the supreme expression of hate, all of these are more are choices we must make. God has made it possible for us to do this. May the gifts of God shower and reign over the people of God. Let us dedicate ourselves to live boldly, with purpose, confidence, generous hearts, and passion. May we bear witness together to God's vision for unity and God's command that justice and mercy be known throughout all of creation. Amen.

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