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Rethinking the Iraq War

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[1] In an article in *JLE* in March 2003, I argued that the looming invasion of Iraq was justified under just war criteria. Some Christian public intellectuals had taken that stand, but very few academic Christian ethicists did-at least not publicly. Most American and international church bodies spoke out against the war. Starting in summer of 2003, after news reports about intelligence errors and the deepening insurgency, I began having doubts about the position I had taken. I had the benefit of carefully thinking through all aspects of the Iraq situation as well as the foundational theological and ethical issues by writing a book with my colleague David Clough. We structured parts of our book *Faith and Force* (to appear in early 2007 from Georgetown University Press) in the form of debate that obliged me to test my arguments for the war. Through this research and writing-as well as through teaching, talking, and praying-I have come to believe that my support for the war was factually and ethically mistaken. It wasn't easy for me to come to this insight, still less to admit my flawed arguments. But it is more important for me to follow the facts wherever they lead. It is more important to abide *responsibly* by the just war ethic that I espouse, even if that means changing my mind. I hope that what I have learned from rethinking my initial position will be instructive for those who want to preserve the integrity of the Christian just war tradition.

[2] The factors that were decisive for my initial argument were the threat of Iraq's suspected "weapons of mass destruction" and the plight of Iraq's citizens under Saddam Hussein. I believed that *together* these two factors supported the case for war. In retrospect, each argument was partially flawed, and further undermined by revelations of the decisions made by the U.S. and U.K. Let me start with the WMD argument. It is clear that the threat of nuclear and other offensive weapons held by Iraq presented the most plausible reason under just war theory to consider a preemptive war, for imminent attack has long been an incontrovertible just cause. I agreed with the advocates for war that Iraq's likely preparations after it evicted weapons inspectors in 1998, its poor accounting for past programs and materiel, and its obstructions when inspectors did return constituted a serious risk. Before the summer of 2003, almost everyone thought there were WMD in Iraq. Without inspections, there was no way of knowing what the threat really was.

[3] Even after the inspectors were readmitted in November 2002, Saddam was making it very difficult for them to do their work. It seemed likely that he would dodge and evade, providing just enough information to avoid serious Security Council sanction, and wait for the will of the international community to weaken, so that the inspections could be further cramped without consequence. In that scenario, the risk of his developing such weapons couldn't be put off indefinitely. In late February, Iraq was found to have missiles with a range greater than 90 kilometers, which violated U.N. sanctions, and it resisted destroying them. Such developments,

coupled with what the Bush and Blair administrations reported to the public about their intelligence, persuaded me that Saddam was hopelessly and dangerously recalcitrant.

[4] Subsequent media investigations and studies by governmental and independent commissions have presented a dizzying picture of responsibility for intelligence faults. This much has become clear to me about the Bush and Blair administrations: (a) There were crucial flaws and many ambiguities in the intelligence they received; (b) they put pressure on the intelligence community to paper over ambiguities in the evidence and to make assessments that would bolster the case for war; and (c) they presented intelligence results to the public in exaggerated terms. Those who have repented of their initial support for the war on this ground can place a portion of the blame on the politicians and intelligence experts who had the actual evidence and assessments. I am not saying that there was no cause for serious concern, but that the decisionmaking in the face of ambiguous evidence was rash. And I wish I had been less rash in supporting the rush to "disarm" Iraq.

[5] More than this, I believe there was a principled flaw in my support. I have come to see it as a weak argument to wage wars to eliminate speculative risks. The just war tradition has long allowed *preemptive* attacks on the basis of self-defense, but not *preventive* wars to preclude a future threat from emerging. A judgment as to whether the invasion of Iraq qualified as preemption or prevention depends both on keeping the conceptual distinction straight and getting the facts right. I never thought that I was arguing for preventive war, but I did blur the distinction by arguing that it was Saddam's non-cooperation that was the issue, rather than whatever evidence would be turned up by the inspections. It is just not right to put human beings in harm's way to prevent harms that might not even be there.

[6] The second piece of my argument was humanitarian concern. Saddam Hussein was broadly acknowledged to be a dictator who wasted the resources of his country on self-aggrandizement; had his political enemies arrested and killed; brutally repressed his citizens; and had earlier developed and used chemical weapons against Kurds and Iranians. I thought such concerns should motivate the community of nations to do what was possible, legal, and just to change Iraq's leadership. The most common objection was that there was no current or imminent humanitarian crisis, such as a genocide. I was not persuaded then, and I am not now, that military intervention may justly occur *only* when genocide is ongoing or imminent. My humanitarian argument for war took a broad view: large-scale atrocities happened at certain points in the past, which deserved justice; Iraqi citizens faced ongoing low-level oppression and killing in the present; and future oppression and atrocities were all but certain to occur. The only response the world was marshalling were economic sanctions that were not changing Iraq's behavior but were taking a toll on civilians.

[7] Still, the reasonable possibility of the situation getting *worse* rather than better should have given humanitarian advocates for war, like myself, greater pause. For me at that time, this humanitarian motive bolstered what was weak in the weapons argument, and vice versa. But now I realize that a partial case for war because of the weapons risk and a partial case for war under humanitarian reasons don't add up to an air-tight case for just war. Each of the causes proffered has to be reasonable with little doubt-something like 90 to 95 percent certain-and they can't be undermined by other just war criteria. And so, while I think a humanitarian intention for the war

was ethically sound, a war on a humanitarian or any other grounds wouldn't be correct if the civilians of Iraq were likely to be worse-off afterward.

[8] It is not at all clear that Iraqi citizens have been better off in the last three years. Because the "war on terror" has been prosecuted with too much stick and not enough carrot, and because of insufficient troop strength and poor post-war planning, we have seen the Iraqi insurgency grow in numbers and the death toll mount for both Iraqis and Americans. Yet there are grounds for hope, and I would be remiss not to mention that Iraq has seen real political progress over what it has known since Saddam's Baath party came to power in 1968-indeed, since the nation was created by Western powers almost 90 years ago. Iraqis voted in three significant, free elections in 2005, an experience rare in the Middle East. Saddam and his henchmen will be tried by fellow Iraqis. Unlike some proponents, I cannot retroactively justify the war on these grounds, but it is nevertheless good to celebrate these changes. Do they point to a better future for Iraq? We have to hope that they do.

[9] I am not talking about mere optimism, that is, wishful thinking, but a hope-filled trust in the human spirit and in God's ultimate purposes. The citizens of Iraq need not be enemies, and we must hope they will not be. The Sunnis are not a monolithic group: some did participate in the elections; some will see a point in casting their lot with a constitutional Iraq rather than with nihilism and violence. Shiites, though having suffered violence at the hands of Sunni political power, have not been vengeful for the most part, but have engaged the political process in order to overcome the past.

[10] Likewise, America and the world need not be enemies, and we must hope we will not be. Americans need to learn from their mistakes and take a more humble approach to foreign relations. I believe that American citizens as a whole truly desire to help others-even, implausibly, with this war-but our image has been tarnished by flawed decisions and the refusal of our leaders to admit mistakes. It will take time and hard work to restore the luster of that image. In this effort, Christians should play a leading role. Even those of us who support just war theory must witness to hope by responding to Jesus' call to be peacemakers.