

## DECLARING WAR ON THE WICKED

A Sermon by Scotty McLennan, Dean for Religious Life  
University Public Worship at Stanford Memorial Church  
February 2, 2003

This last week, as we've formally considered the State of our Union, has been a time filled with hopes and fears, protests and prayers. I stand before you today to argue that the United States must not go to war with Iraq. I have no doubt that Saddam Hussein has long acted wickedly -- that he is filled with demons and unclean spirits.<sup>i</sup> Yet, I believe that declaring war on him, as our nation appears to be about to do, creates totally unacceptable risks of filling all of us, and the world, with demons and unclean spirits that we've barely begun to contemplate.

President Bush proclaimed in his State of the Union Address this week that the United States of America will "defend the peace and confound the designs of evil men."<sup>iii</sup> He went on to explain how "this nation is leading the world in confronting and defeating the man-made evil of international terrorism."<sup>iii</sup> Then, identifying Saddam Hussein of Iraq as "a brutal dictator, with a history of reckless aggression [and] with ties to terrorism," President Bush explained that Hussein "will not be permitted to dominate a vital region and threaten the United States."<sup>iv</sup> Instead, the President declared, "Let there be no misunderstanding, if Saddam Hussein does not fully disarm, for the safety of our people and for the peace of the world, we will lead a coalition to disarm him."

The President ended his State of the Union Address with these words: "We Americans have faith in ourselves, but not in ourselves alone. We do not know, we do not claim to know, all the ways of Providence, yet we can trust in them, placing our confidence in the loving God, behind all of life and all of history. May he guide us now, and may God continue to bless the United States of America."<sup>v</sup>

George Walker Bush is a practicing Christian, and I have no doubt that he takes his religious commitments very seriously. I believe that he means what he says when he invokes God at the end of his State of the Union Address and calls upon God to guide us now. He's surrounded by a number of other committed, practicing Christians in the White House, among them former Stanford Provost, Condoleezza Rice. Therefore, it's not surprising that there appear to be knowing references in his Address to traditional just war criteria that have been articulated by the Christian church for almost two millennia. The President explicitly says that "We will fight in a just cause and by just means."<sup>vi</sup>

He explicates the justice of America's cause by describing Saddam Hussein's threat in detail, not only in evading international weapons inspections, but also in his wicked ways with his own people. After cataloguing his torture methods, President Bush insists "If this is not evil, then evil has no meaning."<sup>vii</sup> "This nation fights reluctantly,"<sup>viii</sup> though, and war is a matter of last resort. Saddam was given a final chance to disarm by the U.N. Security Council almost three months ago, still has not accounted for tons of biological and chemical agents and missiles we knew he had, is close to having nuclear weapons, and cannot be contained post-9/11 when at any time he could slip deadly vials, canisters and crates to terrorists he aids and protects, including Al-Qaeda. Mr. Bush claims legitimate authority to act, based on a Congressional vote and a United Nations resolution, along with the promise of further consultation, as the President of a country under a "serious and mounting threat"<sup>ix</sup> not only to us, but to the peace of the world. He has no doubts about the prospects for success: "We will prevail."<sup>x</sup> In terms of proportionality, he names the gravest danger in the world today as "outlaw regimes that seek and possess nuclear, chemical and biological weapons"<sup>xi</sup> -- weapons of mass destruction. A "triumph of violence" of that magnitude cannot be allowed, "whatever the duration of this struggle and whatever the difficulties."<sup>xii</sup> However, the President is careful to say that as we wage war, "We will spare in every way we can the innocent... [and] we will bring the Iraqi people food and medicines and supplies."<sup>xiii</sup>

Just as President Bush seems to be using just war criteria to build the case for war, I will use them here and argue that none of these criteria have in fact been met. I hope I do this in humility, as a fellow Christian, since, as the U.S. Catholic Bishops recently put it, "People of good will may differ on how to apply just war norms in particular cases, especially when events are moving rapidly and the facts are not altogether clear."<sup>xiv</sup> And, after all, I am not the President of the United States, with his access to information and with the responsibilities of his office. Nonetheless, I feel it is imperative for people of good will to speak out against a war with Iraq, as citizens of this democracy and as citizens of the world, if their own conscientious analysis leads them to believe that this war would be unjust and unjustified.

Let me work back through each of President Bush's just war arguments now. Remember, each and every one of the criteria must be met for this war to be justified.

1) First of all, let's look at just cause. Traditionally this has referred to a defensive response when "the damage inflicted by the aggressor on the nation or community of nations [will be] lasting, grave and certain."<sup>xv</sup> The Bush administration has simply not made the case that either Iraq's capacity to use, or its intention to use, weapons of mass destruction is likely, much less certain.

There is no more clear and adequate evidence of an imminent attack of a grave nature now than there was five years ago. There are no proven Iraqi links to Al Qaeda and international terrorism targeting the United States. Under these circumstances, we must not go to war with Iraq.

2) Even if there were just cause, would war be the only way to deal with the threat posed by Saddam Hussein? Are we at the point that going to war is it truly a matter of "last resort?"<sup>xvi</sup> Clearly not. We have a situation of containment and deterrence of a regime which has been effective for 12 years. Political and military sanctions can be continued -- although I would hope we'd lift the economic embargo which has been partially responsible for a doubling of the death rate for small children in Iraq since 1991, according to UNICEF.<sup>xvii</sup> Iraq is militarily surrounded and contained. There are U.S.-patrolled no-fly zones. Surveillance and intelligence-gathering is at a high pitch. U.N. weapon inspectors are operating throughout the country, even if they aren't getting entirely free access to scientists. If we can continue negotiating with a more dangerous North Korea, why not with Iraq? We must not go to war with Iraq.

3) Even if the cause were just and the situation dire, does President Bush have legitimate authority to act? The majority of Americans are against the war without United Nations backing, and Vietnam should have taught us not to prosecute a war without the backing of the American people. The President claims that last November's United Nations resolution gives him all the authority needed for a war against Iraq, but that's not the way a majority of the Security Council now see it. To prosecute a war without U.N. support and without the backing of the American public would be folly at best and a disaster at worse. We must not go to war with Iraq.

4) Even if there's cause, a last-resort situation and legitimate authority for war, there must be a probability of success for a war to be just. America is strong militarily, and Iraq is not, so we may well be able to defeat their armed forces within a couple of months. But how long will we be tied down in Iraq trying to win the peace? An article by James Fallows in Atlantic Monthly last November estimated Iraq would in effect have to become our fifty-first state, with a huge humanitarian crisis, need for massive economic reconstruction, and call for some 50,000-75,000 U.S. troops for many years to restore civil order under fire and to defend Iraq's borders. There would be continuing casualties, costs would probably run in the hundreds of billions of dollars, and that would have a dramatic impact on providing services to our own citizens back here in the United States.<sup>xviii</sup> We must not go to war with Iraq.

5) Another just war criterion that must be met is called proportionality. What if it's likely that greater evil will be created by going to war than by not? If Iraq has weapons of mass destruction, given its having fired scud missiles at Israel and Saudi Arabia in the Gulf war, why wouldn't this new war itself trigger the

very use of weapons of mass destruction which we are so desperately trying to prevent? If not that, or along with it, isn't it likely that such a war will infuriate much of the Muslim world and solidify them against us? Certainly a war against Iraq could stimulate more terrorism against this country and its citizens rather than less. The world becomes more dangerous if the U.S. is seen as an aggressor nation engaged in pre-emptive war. Why shouldn't everyone else abandon the U.N. charter to pursue its own pre-emptive strikes where it feels at risk, from Kashmir to North Korea? My greatest fear is that it could bring on World War III, which could be terminal for all of us in a nuclear age. Short of that, vast environmental damage is possible if Iraq lights its own oil fields ablaze as it did with Kuwait's. Finally, concentrating our resources on a war in Iraq could well mean that Al-Qaeda itself, and related terrorist groups, and countries like North Korea, are emboldened as we have less resources and less attention to pay to those potentially greater threats. We must not go to war with Iraq.

6) Finally, would innocent men, women, and children be spared from harm in a war against Iraq, with military targets carefully separated from civilian targets? I know we have precision smart bombs, but what if we end up in door to door fighting in Baghdad? What about civilian death and suffering based on destruction of Iraq's infrastructure, piled on top of civilian death and suffering under the sanctions and embargo of the last 12 years. This is still a devastated country that we would in effect be finishing off, with a huge impact on its civilian population. United Nations estimates are of 500,000 civilian casualties, directly and indirectly due to a war, with some 2 million civilians displaced.<sup>xix</sup> We must not go to war with Iraq.

That's the way I see the Christian requirements for prosecuting a just war.

"Happy are those who do not...take the path that sinners tread," says the very first Psalm in the Hebrew Bible. "They are like trees planted by streams of water, which yield their fruit in its season." On the other hand, "The wicked are not so, but are like chaff that the wind drives away...for the Lord watches over the way of the righteous, but the way of the wicked will perish."<sup>xx</sup> Saddam Hussein's way has proven to be wicked, and it will perish. Yet, I fear that if we pursue an unjust war against Iraq, many of us will also be like chaff that the wind blows away, and our American way will perish too. Jesus was able to speak directly to the unclean spirit in the man in the synagogue in Capernaum and exorcise it. I don't know that anyone now alive will be able to do the same with Saddam Hussein. So we are left with diplomacy and inspections and sanctions and intelligence gathering and vigilance and international solidarity and humanitarian assistance to the civilian population of Iraq and patience. Then we might be "like trees planted by streams of water, which yield their fruit in its season." We must not go to war with Iraq.

## NOTES

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- i. See this morning's gospel reading, Mark 1:21-28.
  - ii. President George W. Bush, "State of the Union Address," January 28, 2003 (ABC News Transcripts).
  - iii. Ibid.
  - iv. Ibid.
  - v. Ibid.
  - vi. Ibid.
  - vii. Ibid.
  - viii. Ibid.
  - ix. Ibid.
  - x. Ibid.
  - xi. Ibid.
  - xii. Ibid.
  - xiii. Ibid.
  - xiv. United States Conference of Catholic Bishops, "Statement on Iraq" (Washington, D.C., November 13, 2002), <http://www.usccb.org/bishops/iraq.htm>.
  - xv. Ibid.
  - xvi. See Bryan Hehir, "The Hawkish Doctrine of Mr. Bush," The Tablet, January 4, 2003.
  - xvii. Ronnie Berke, "UNICEF: Death Rate for Iraqi Children Has Doubled Since Gulf War" (Associated Press, August 13, 1999), <http://www.cnn.com/WORLD/meast/9908/12/iraq.unicef/>
  - xviii. See James Fallows, "The Fifty-first State?" The Atlantic Monthly (November, 2002), pp. 53-64.
  - xix. Charles Recknagel, "Iraq: Aid Agencies Say War Will Cause Massive Civilian Suffering," Radio Free Europe (January, 2003) <http://www.rferl.org/nca/features/2003/01/21012003172208.asp>.
  - xx. Excerpted from Psalm 1, verses 1,3,4,6.