



Can War Ever Be the Lesser of Two Evils?

The Case for Preemptive Use of Force to Disarm Iraq

By David A. Pendleton

War was never part of God's plan. All was perfect in Eden. Before that, all was idyllic in the universe, at least until Lucifer sinned. Then there was war in heaven, and Lucifer was expelled—by force.

There is no getting around it. Peace is preferable. Jesus Christ is the Prince of Peace, and it is his desire that we have life—and life more abundantly. Not death, and certainly not war.

As believers, we should do whatever we can to avert armed conflict and prevent war. As Christians, we are to be Christlike, peacemakers, and defenders of the defenseless. We should wage peace with the same determination and tenacity with which our generals wage war. Every effort to use diplomacy, economic sanctions, and moral suasion should be exhausted to preserve and advance the cause of harmony of peoples and nations. This is because, in a word, war is evil.

We find ourselves, however, living in a fallen world, where we are often forced by circumstances to choose between the lesser of two evils. The choice is not as easy as we may wish, because to do nothing can mean that we permit others to do evil. In certain situations, diplomacy and all other peaceful means to settle differences and resolve conflicts fail and war is inevitable. In such cases, the consequences of doing nothing can be far worse than the consequences of acting affirmatively with force.

Just war theory as developed by the Church over the centuries requires that force be employed, if at all, only where the cause is just, and that when war takes place it is prosecuted in a just way. Proportionality is considered, civilian casualties are to be minimized, and so forth.¹

This theory can be clearly stated, but less clear is its application in specific situations. The Catholic Church has done the analysis, and it is of the opinion that military force is not morally justifiable against Iraq at this time. The Adventist Church has been outspoken concerning peace, but has not officially commented on the current situation other than to urge peace.

What follows is one Adventist's perspective on the Iraqi situation.

War As Lesser of Two Evils

Ethicist Jean Bethke Elshtain has argued in a recent op-ed piece that "there are times when justice demands the use of force as a response to violence, hatred, and injustice."² This is because in some cases passivity is de facto permission for the perpetration of harm by others. To do nothing may mean that violence is committed by another against another.

When I was a first grade student at Windward Adventist School in Hawaii, I witnessed a fight between two older and larger boys and one smaller, younger boy. They pummeled him with their clenched fists in a very one-sided schoolyard scuffle, far from view of the recess monitor. Being a very young child at the time, all I could do was run to "tell a teacher."

It was with a firm hand that the teacher physically took hold of the two older boys, separated them from their hapless and helpless victim, and proceeded to march them to the principal's office. A number of other children and I then helped pick up the poor lad, dusted him off, and accompanied him to his teacher. By the time we arrived at the classroom, we were all in tears, overwhelmed by the injustice that had been done and the frustration at being defenseless first graders against these bigger boys.

It was not schoolboys that the president had in mind when he recently noted that in "the twentieth century, some chose to appease murderous dictators whose threats were allowed to grow into genocide and global war."³ Yet that schoolyard scuffle remains with me as though it had happened yesterday.

The terror of not being able to do anything, the frustration at being smaller and therefore incapable of defending the defenseless, the anger at not being able to "get them back for what they did"—all these feelings and emotions are fresh with me. I remember vowing to myself that I would never again let someone harm another like that. Never again.

Appeasement is not identical with pacifism, but it is often the predictable outcome of such a laissez-faire morality. As a yet-to-be United States president, John F. Kennedy once wrote in a bestseller, England slept while the winds of war were blowing. The signs were all about it. The signals foreboding the acts of aggression were clear to the discerning. Yet it did nothing.

In England, separated from the continent by a protective channel of water, there was no reason to get

involved. And for that matter, all of Europe did nothing as Hitler "reunited" the German-speaking people. In doing nothing, it in effect facilitated the gradual creation of one of the world's fiercest and bloodiest war machines of the twentieth century.

Winston Churchill was among the very few who early on recognized that Nazi Germany would not be appeased and that failure to anticipate and resist with force Hitler's expansionist aims would result in a much more costly and deadly war.

He was right. But because the appeasers outnumbered him, and because public opinion did not support him, he lost the debate. Hitler was not recognized for what he was until he advanced to Britain's doorstep. Was the peace preserved in the interim? Perhaps—but many died who otherwise would have been spared World War II.

It can be argued that six million Jews died in the Holocaust not only because Hitler willed it, but also because the West permitted it. The rest of the world was aware of what was happening to the Jews, many of whom were German citizens. But the West acceded to the atrocity through its inaction.

Countless deaths on the African continent have occurred over the past century not only because of ethnic hatred and tribal rivalries, but also because the West failed to intervene.

Stalin in Russia killed millions. Surely he is morally culpable. But he did it because he was permitted to do so. Only the use of force—not international law or agreed-to documents and treaties—could have or would have stopped him.

Soloth Sar, better known as Pol Pot, notorious and bloodthirsty leader of the Khmer Rouge guerrillas, was responsible for thousands, if not millions, of deaths of innocent people in Cambodia, a nation of a mere 10 million people. Can anyone argue that negotiation or discussion could have appeased that mad man? Skulls piled high "adorn" the interior of buildings he once controlled. These were his monuments. There was no effort to hide or conceal what he had done. Could anything less than military intervention by others have hindered this man?

Massacre and genocide are not inventions of the twentieth century. Mongol hordes ravaged villages long before the League of Nations was created. Zealous and misguided Crusaders killed Arab men, women, and children long before the United Nations was envisioned. Yet even with the existence of the modern



day UN, how do we explain the atrocities in Rwanda and Burundi? Those nations that have stood by idly, including the United States, cannot claim to be entirely free of guilt.

It is clear that as long as there are evil men who desire to conquer and kill others, there must be those who are willing to stand up for and defend the innocent—and to use force if necessary.

If We Do Nothing, What Will Saddam Do?

If we agree that the policy of appeasement toward Hitler was problematic, what of Saddam Hussein today? “In this century, when evil men plot chemical, biological and nuclear terror, a policy of appeasement could bring destruction of a kind never before seen on this earth,” said the president recently. “We are now acting because the risks of inaction would be far greater.”⁴

President Bush made this statement against the backdrop of an Iraqi regime that has used diplomacy to hide its weapons program.

In 1991, Saddam Hussein agreed to destroy all of Iraq’s weapons of mass destruction in exchange for ending the Persian Gulf War. Over the last twelve

the French-constructed nuclear facility has kept Iraq from thus far attaining nuclear status. Those sixteen warplanes and their surgical bombing strike may very well have prevented a nuclear attack against a civilian population.

Given the frightening destructive capabilities of such weapons, would waiting for Iraq to develop a nuclear capability advance the cause of peace and save lives? No one knows the answer.

Perhaps Iraq is far too savvy to use such weapons itself. But terrorists, using chemical, biological, or perhaps one day nuclear weapons, acquired with the assistance of Iraq, could make good on their promises to kill thousands or hundreds of thousands of innocent people in the United States or Israel.

Given the course of conduct of Saddam Hussein, it is indeed a defensible position that preemptive and preventive use of military force be employed before the day of horror, before it is too late to act.

Pacifists believe it is always wrong to use military force. Realists believe that a sovereign nation always has that option. As a Christian, I believe in certain extraordinary circumstances war can be justified.

I think the Christian position can only be that use of force is justified only where active defense of the innocent is necessary to avert the death of the innocent at the hands of others. If they can be defended without

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years the United Nations has sought to ensure compliance with this condition, passing a dozen resolutions and instituting economic sanctions until proof of disarmament was forthcoming. Literally hundreds of weapons inspectors have been to Iraq to verify disarmament. Economic embargoes could long ago have been lifted, yet Saddam has not offered proof that he has destroyed his weapons of mass destruction.

Quite to the contrary, UN inspectors have found evidence of anthrax, prohibited missiles, and chemical weapons that Iraq was not supposed to have.

Saddam Hussein has shown the desire to acquire such weapons of mass destruction, and he has demonstrated the willingness to use such weapons against civilians, including his own Iraqi citizens. Only Israel’s preemptive strike twenty-one years ago against

the use of force, that is preferable. But where force is required to preserve life and to minimize loss of life, then that is acceptable in contrast to the alternative.

I type these words during the forty-eight-hour period during which the United States has asked Saddam Hussein to leave Iraq or risk being removed and disarmed by force. I do not know whether Saddam will spare his people by leaving.

I only pray that the United States has carefully gone through the analysis to determine the rightness of any military action and to understand what justly prosecuting the war would require of us.

In the case of legal authority to go to war, United Nations Resolutions 678 and 687, both still in effect, authorize use of force in eradicating Iraq’s weapons of mass destruction. Additionally, Resolution 1441,

finding Iraq in material breach of its obligations and vowing serious consequences is still in effect. It calls not for a negotiated maintenance of the status quo. It calls for Saddam to disarm.

It now appears that so long as Saddam Hussein holds power destruction of weapons of mass destruction will not take place. Of course, in all fairness Saddam denies possessing such weapons, though his own son has threatened to unleash these very weapons, which "they do not have," on U.S. troops should Americans step on Iraqi soil.

As said above, it is not enough to have a just cause to wage war. It must be waged justly. If a military campaign is begun, it should be directed against Saddam Hussein and the lawless men who tyrannize Iraq, not against civilians. Arrangements should be made so that surrendering forces can identify themselves and be disarmed without harm. As coalition forces enter Iraq and disarm the country, American aid in the form of food and medicine should be distributed.

In some ways, the situation with Iraq may be more easy to justify on moral grounds than our own American Civil War. That war took place because the use of force was required to end slavery. There was no issue of mass genocide by the Southern plantation owners against their slaves. There was no charge that slaveholders were seeking to eliminate a race of people.

Yet that is potentially what we face today if we are to understand Saddam Hussein's words and actions literally.

Perhaps even more challenging is God's own handling of the wicked at the end of earth's history. As an omnipotent God, ensuring and providing for their eternal exile and isolation from the good is surely within his power. Yet God sees that situation as one that merits the use of force. His opposition will be destroyed, not appeased, but only after all avenues of redemption have been exhausted.

The strong have the opportunity and duty to defend the weak. Individuals and nations have the right to defend themselves and others from violence—even if it means using force. All must be done in a manner that minimizes casualties and loss of life.

War is evil. But sometimes it is

the lesser of two evils. So for now, together with John of the Book of Apocalypse, we look forward with hope and eager anticipation to that great day when "God will wipe every tear from their eyes. There will be no more death or mourning or crying or pain, for the old order of things has passed away" (Rev. 21:4 NIV).

Maranatha! Lord, come quickly!

Notes and References

1. St. Augustine is understood as the originator of just war theory, though Thomas Aquinas and other church scholars (that is, Francisco de Vitoria and Francisco Suarez) are credited with its development and acceptance. Romans 13:4 is seen as its textual support.

2. *Boston Globe*, Oct. 6, 2002.

3. Televised remarks of President George W. Bush, Mar. 17, 2003.

4. *Ibid.*

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