

Can We Send Our Son to Iraq with a Good Conscience?

A personal response from Fr. Dave Heney, January 2003

I was asked this question by friends of mine. I had performed the marriage of their son who was now a fighter pilot newly assigned to the gulf region. Their question is a serious one and so is the morality of war. Here is the chain of ideas that led to my answer. I know there are good people on both sides of this issue.

All war is a failure. It is a failure of people to work out their differences peacefully. War is ultimate violence for it unleashes the full fury of technology with the full force of national resources for destruction and death. Each person who dies in war was made and loved by God. Who wants to answer to God for the death of any of His creations? Step forward now. Yet what about aggression aimed at us or one of our loved ones? Can we stand aside with our families in danger? What can we do in good conscience? What would Jesus do?

Because we are created and loved by God we cannot allow anyone to harm us. We must respect our self and resist evil. Because we believe evildoers are also created and loved by God we must treat them with respect too. Everything we do must be motivated by (of all things) love for our enemy (*Matt. 5:44*). We recognize their behavior is bad for them as well as us. Our desire to stop them, even if it must include force, can be a genuine loving act.

No one wants to hurt Iraqis or Koreans, but no one wants to be Neville Chamberlain either; the British leader who in 1938 tragically delayed confronting Hitler. *We can not do nothing in the face of evil.* But we cannot act rashly either. This is a time for clear thinking and carefully weighing the facts and issues. When lives are at stake *we cannot operate emotionally or on a whim.* This is where wisdom is so important. The Just War Theory was slowly developed over centuries by wise people in many cultures to *control* the rush to war or *contain* the violence of war if it happens. No war is really ever "justified" but some actions are more just than others, to the extent they are motivated by love for our enemy.

An "American" style of war has also slowly developed. In our history it has been very hard to get Americans to fight. Precisely because we are a nation ruled by consent of the people and not the whim of kings given to emotional impulse, we were slow to wage war. We would fight if (a) attacked as innocent victims, as at Pearl Harbor, or (b) to rescue other

innocent victims, like South Korea, and even Vietnam at the beginning, but never for conquest, revenge, or power. We also need strong citizen support, unlike in Vietnam at the end. We stop evildoers and spare innocent civilians. We also reconnect with our enemies after hostilities; e.g. Japan, Germany, and even the Soviet Union. None of these countries had deep democratic traditions but changed quickly with our help. Our own history is not without shame, but the general trend, from WWI, to WWII, to Korea, Vietnam, the Persian Gulf, and Iraq, has been about fighting to protect innocence, sparing the innocent, and finishing when aggression stops. Certainly our technology has made that even more possible. In the recent Afghan war, when American planes appeared over Afghan cities, civilians actually left their homes to assemble in the open near Al Qaeda targeted buildings to watch the destruction, so confident were they in our bombing accuracy and so confident in their understanding of our motives to target only terrorists. When has that ever happened before?

This natural "American style" resembles the classic Just War Theory. These are the principles;

- **JUST CAUSE:** War must confront "a real, certain, and immediate danger," i.e., to protect innocent life, to preserve decent human existence, and dignity, or to secure basic human rights. *Danger must be grave, immediate, and certain. War must be for the purpose of restoring peace or stopping a deadly threat, not conquest, punishment, or revenge*
- **COMPETENT AUTHORITY:** War must be declared carefully and slowly by those with responsibility for public order, not by private groups or individuals. *More governments working together are better than fewer. Consensus of the people is important.*
- **LAST RESORT:** All practical and peaceful alternatives must have been exhausted, e.g.

diplomacy, negotiations, time. (this also depends on the immediacy of the threat). *The best battle is the one won without fighting.*

- **PROBABILITY OF SUCCESS:** There must be a strong chance of success where the end conditions are better than the start. *We can't make things worse. We cannot leave destruction without helping to rebuild.*
- **PROPORTIONALITY:** The damage inflicted and the costs incurred must be proportionate to the good expected. *We must limit aggression to stop or contain aggressors and spare innocent civilians. War ends when the aggressor ends.*

These principles serve to control the rush to war (*ad Bello*) and the violence in war (*in Bello*).

Split Decision

My answer to these parents involved a split decision. "We citizens do not know a moral cause for war *yet*, but if we fight it will likely be waged in a just manner." (I hope)

The United States has worked *since 1991* with many governments in the region, as well as the United Nations in several resolutions, to disarm Iraq. No one can say there is a "rush" to war here. It is uncertain, however, about the *immediacy of the threat*. Two "discoveries" could change that. If Iraq is found to be allied with Al Qaeda, which *is* at war with us, or if it has *hidden* weapons of mass destruction (WMD); these could be considered immediate and deadly threats. After all, NATO has WMD but they are not hidden, and its motives are peaceful. Iraq's hiding of WMD, coupled with their clear history of aggression, might be considered an immediate threat. Our own leaders have indicated they know this is still an outstanding claim to make, and admit that Americans will not support war without our knowing for certain of an immediate threat. Pre-emptive strikes demand even stronger proof.

However, if the United States *does* go to war, there is a very strong chance, based on our recent history in Afghanistan, that our use of armed force will be used carefully, intelligently, and for the purpose of bringing war to a swift end. Past history also indicates a very

careful sparing of innocent civilians. There is even a chance that the simple gathering of massive forces (including sending your son) may be enough to induce Hussein to exile, or the Iraqi army, fearful of losing all their equipment, of handing over Hussein themselves. Sending soldiers may itself stop war. Past history indicates we will make the situation better afterwards, by helping to build police forces, democratic institutions, and civilian infrastructure.

What about non-violence? Did not Gandhi change the British Empire with non-violence? We can voluntarily take violence onto ourselves *only* if we believe there is a good chance that our innocent suffering will inspire compassion in the other and so stop their aggression. However, we cannot volunteer *someone else to do it!* Presidents are responsible for all of us. They cannot nominate their citizens to play Gandhi. What about turning the other cheek? (Matt. 5:39) To hit someone on the right cheek you must use the back of your hand, which is an insult to our dignity, not a physical attack. Jesus is saying that since our dignity comes from God, *no person* can take away our dignity, so the slap is not a wound at all.

Compassion is the strongest force in human history. It is what compels people to rush into burning buildings or dive into rushing rivers to rescue an innocent victim. It is what compels us to restrain evildoers intent on doing massive harm. Compassion for the world demands we do the right thing even when it is dangerous. Can you think of a more dangerous place to come than planet earth? Yet Our Lord arrives with compassion for all and to reveal that *every* person is our brother and sister. We must stop terrorists and these who use WMD precisely because we love them, and know that their use of these weapons is also not good for them. If we go to war, it cannot be for punishment, revenge, or conquest. It must be as an absolute last resort and in order to stop people we love from causing even greater harm. Let our prayers for peace continue.

Fr. Dave Heney,
daveheney@gmail.com