The Superpower and the Church

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After tracing the development of current U.S. military strategy, the author suggests some truth-seeking initiatives that our bishops might consider undertaking. This article is based on the first annual Peace Lecture given at Catholic Theological Union in Chicago, Illinois, on February 14, 2006.

Fifteen years ago I joined millions of other TV spectators to observe the beginning of a ferocious aerial war against Iraq. I felt sorrow for those beneath the fiery predawn Baghdad sky. The U.S. political leadership called it a just war. I lamented that the just war had failed in its “legislative” function, the prevention of war. I sought for how we might next time apply the just war criteria with greater stringency, reminding ourselves that the just war tradition is not intended to confer righteousness on war making but to underscore the deep presumption against resorting to wars. I looked for ways in which the criteria might be interpreted more strictly, placing the bar for overriding them higher so that civilians, defeated soldiers and whole societies would not be war’s casualties.

But I felt deep shame over the outcome of the war on Iraq. The relentless bombing known as Operation Desert Storm was called by some reporters “Desert Slaughter.” Later investigations revealed that only 7 percent of the bombs dropped on Iraqis were so-called “precision” bombs that were supposed to make civilians safer. And the devastation of Iraq’s urban infrastructures was not collateral but...
intended damage that quickly brought disease, suffering, and death to Iraqi civilians. There was plenty to be said from the point of view of the “judicial” function of the just war tradition, to judge how moral or immoral the resort to war had shown itself to be.

In the summer of 1991 the Rome-based Jesuit theological journal La Civiltà Cattolica, closely linked to the Vatican, called the just war theory seriously flawed and “untenable” (La Civiltà Cattolica, 450). Fulfilling the jus in bello conditions was a practical impossibility, the editors concluded, and unleashing war with our era’s weaponry could only produce more injustices than war making could ever aspire to remedy. They advocated abandoning the concept of justifiable war in favor of disavowing war entirely.

Twelve years later, on the eve of the U.S.’s second war on Iraq, Cardinal Josef Ratzinger was asked if a war against Iraq would be just. He said that the idea of preventive war does not appear in the Catechism of the Catholic Church. Of course war came anyway. Iraqi families and U.S. military families still live with it every day three years later. Six weeks into the war he reiterated: there were not sufficient reasons to unleash a war against Iraq, and the ferocity of the weapons being used was causing unacceptable civilian death and injury. His final words were these: “Today we should be asking ourselves if it is still licit to admit the very existence of a ‘just war.’”

We will soon mark year five of war against terrorists, wars that have claimed the lives of thousands of people who were no more terrorists than the three thousand people who lost their lives on September 11, 2001. In addition to the loss of Iraqi, Afghani, and American lives, the war has produced untold suffering and chaos, deepened resentments, and, yes, produced new terrorists. My goal today is twofold. First, I would like to reflect about war American-style. Second, I will suggest in broad strokes how the U.S. Catholic Church might challenge us to search for deeper knowledge of the truth in these warring times. What I hope for from the church in the future is greater honesty about war and a commitment to non-violent alternatives.

The Doctrine of U.S. Global Supremacy

I believe the truth about war as an instrument of U.S. strategic planning is summed up by two doctrines and the reigning military strategy that links them. In 1979 President Jimmy Carter delivered a speech calling upon Americans to curb their desire for material comfort, and instead to consume less and sacrifice more. The electorate did not appreciate this sermon on conservation. Nor did they approve of his handling of the Iranian hostage crisis a few months later. Ronald Reagan, however, was seeking the presidency with the reassuring message that America had only to take back control of its destiny. Too late to salvage his relection,
President Carter recognized that the people wanted assurance of unfettered growth, entailing access to foreign oil. In 1980 Carter enunciated what would be called the Carter Doctrine, stating that the attempt of any nation to control the Persian Gulf region would be regarded as an assault on the United States. The United States would repel such action by any means necessary.

The Reagan era was one of rapid military growth. The religious right was on board, portraying U.S. military strength as a divine calling. Defense was being redefined as projecting “global power,” and shaping the international environment, with every new defense budget extending “the margins of supremacy.” A Navy planning document of the time declared that the defense of the United States required supremacy of the seas “beginning at our shorelines and extending outward to distant theaters . . .” (Bacevich, 18). We were apparently too cowed to ask how supremacy in distant theaters was a requirement of United States defense. And in a world teeming with ideological enemies, apparently no amount of military force redundancy was to be questioned. The ultimate military fantasy was the Strategic Defense Initiative—Star Wars—immunizing the United States against mutually assured nuclear destruction so that it could exercise its strategic initiatives. The goal was invulnerability.

The emerging dean of military strategy would be Albert Wohlstetter, professor of political science at the University of Chicago. Wohlstetter and his protégés Richard Pearle and Paul Wolfowitz charted the new military means by which the United States would, within a decade, become the sole superpower. It was Wohlstetter’s vision that inspired the U.S. Navy to call for an arsenal of “overwhelming precision firepower” with which it could “thwart possible aggression” and take “control of sea, land, air, space and cyberspace” (Bacevich, 18). The precision of the weapons would make regime changes possible without the political and moral fallout of large numbers of civilian deaths. After aerial surgical strikes, small mobile fighting forces wielding high tech equipment could clean up. Defense spending soared to new peacetime heights.

Military preparedness was for more expansive purposes than defense of the nation from foreign invasion. It was about expanding options in order to be able to act preemptively, unilaterally, and without challenge anywhere U.S. interests
might require. The first place in which this new military capability was to be operational was suggested by Wohlstetter, when in 1981 he called for “an improved military capability to protect Persian Gulf oil” (Bacevich, 191). That is a telling comment: our military capacity to protect someone else’s natural resources. From whom? For whom? The locus of the recent interventions is the oil-rich Middle East. Iran’s fundamentalist revolution was the first threat to Gulf stability and Soviet aggression in Afghanistan the second. But clients we enlisted to neutralize the threats, Saddam Hussein against Iran and the Taliban against the Soviets, proved unreliable. When Hussein invaded Kuwait in 1990 the United States was ready to act directly. In The Wall Street Journal Wohlstetter urged the Bush Administration to take bold offensive action with “highly effective and discriminate air attacks against key military targets” using “precise weapons, stealth and other advanced techniques for penetrating [Iraq’s] defenses” while avoiding “indiscriminate collateral damage to civilians”—“a political as well as moral necessity” (Bacevich, 163–64).

Victory came swiftly. The United States was the world’s unrivaled hyper-power. As Andrew Bacevich writes, the United States now saw itself as having global military responsibility requiring “global military presence,” from which “the US could not stand down.” In sum, “The American soldier scattered around the world in Europe, the Far East, Latin America, and now the Persian Gulf could not return home; their work was not yet done—indeed, was unlikely ever to be done” (Bacevich, 53). Bacevich notes that the United States intervened militarily six times during the forty-five-year period after WWII. That averages two interventions every fifteen years. But in the past fifteen years (1990–2005) we have used military force abroad nine times. There will be no peace or peace dividend. Between 1999 and 2004 the Defense budget increased 41 percent.

There was little doubt concerning how the United States would respond to the September 11, 2001, attacks. President Bush spelled out the new doctrine of response: “This country must go on the offensive and stay on the offensive,” he said. “In the world we have entered the only path to safety is the path of action” (Bush, 2002). The United States must commit itself to “aggressive engagement in the world.” Bush described the future of American military intent: “By a combination of creative strategies and advanced technologies we are redefining war on our terms” (Bush, 2003).

This is, I submit, the truth of war American-style: high-tech war-making capability in which the United States will directly preemptively remove threats anywhere
in the world with the illusion of a surgical precision that spares civilians. The Cold War’s “low intensity wars” against communist insurgents, deadly as they were, but conducted under the radar of world opinion, have given way to high-intensity wars on terrorists in full view of the world to see and to deeply resent. War “on our terms” appears to mean that we need not revisit the questions of just cause, last resort, or any of the other jus ad bellum considerations. Defensive wars of last resort are swept away by the Bush doctrine. No moral distinctions, no issues of the comparative nature of justice claims in a dispute, need ever arise again. This is a perpetual war of multiple battlefields depending on where terrorists surface. The civilians who live in these theaters of war must have a different truth to share.

**U.S. Doctrine and Catholic Response**

In January 2006, the Catholic bishops broke almost three years of silence about Iraq, issuing a statement entitled *Toward a Responsible Transition in Iraq*. In it they mourn the deaths of 2,100 Americans and “tens of thousands of Iraqis” and claim to share in “the pain of countless persons injured and maimed whose lives will never be the same.” What is remarkable to me is the conciliatory tone of the bishops. They speak of their desire to discuss the war in Iraq without stirring up any further “unproductive debates . . . marked by polarization” (United States Conference of Catholic Bishops [USCCB] 2006, 1). This tone contrasts sharply with a letter sent last November by ninety-five Methodist bishops to their fellow Methodist, George W. Bush. The Methodist bishops called the war immoral and unjust, confessed their own sin of silence, and pledged to work “for the things that make for peace” (United Methodist Bishops). Not so with the Catholic bishops. If they harbor misgivings about the U.S. motives in Iraq, they do not voice them. They urge the government to send “even clearer signals” that it does not intend “to occupy Iraq for an indeterminate period” but intends to transfer “some responsibility and operational control of the stabilization and reconstruction process to a more accepted international entity” (USCCB 2006, 3). Parenthetically, few Iraqis share their optimism. Of Iraqis polled last month, 80 percent said that they believe the United States will maintain permanent military bases in Iraq, regardless of the wishes of an Iraqi government.

Under the euphemistic heading of “challenges” that the United States faces in Iraq, the bishops mention the violations of the human rights “of persons in the custody of U.S. and Iraqi forces” (USCCB 2006, 4). Of course they urge the United States to avoid abuse and torture of detainees, since these human rights violations “undermine both the struggle against terrorism and the prospects of a responsible transition.” They echo Pope Benedict XVI’s reminder in his first World Day of
Peace Message that international humanitarian law offers us a way of preserving justice and truth even in the midst of war. And they express the widely held view that terrorism will lose its attraction only among peoples not facing futures of poverty, injustice, and hopelessness. But they remain silent regarding the Bush doctrine, except to say that overly aggressive military responses endangering civilians will “undermine the winning of hearts and minds” of Iraqis. The Bush doctrine is more than a source of negative public opinion. It is the cause of the death and injury to thousands of human beings, degradation of the environment, and destruction of entire economies.

But the deeper problem with the bishops’ statement is not its tone. Their statement is finally a failed effort because the bishops do not connect their concerns with any plan of action. This statement is where they end. At least half a dozen times they say that the Iraq war must be the subject of more public discussion of U.S. military policy. At a time U.S. leaders are discouraging dissent over the United States’ international posture, the Catholic Church and other American churches could help Americans pursue the truths about ourselves as a country.

The most hopeful moment in the Catholic statement becomes a reflection of the bishops’ timidity. The bishops recall the bold steps toward justice and peace taken by the hierarchies of the Catholic Church in other recent zones of conflict. They mentioned the critical contributions of the Catholic Church in South Africa, in the Philippines, and in Guatemala. Yes, those churches did issue pastoral statements critical of government action. But they did much more. They became proactive. There came a day when the Catholic Church of South Africa began to investigate crimes committed by South African security forces, to counsel draft resistance, and to take a stand of noncooperation with the Apartheid government. The church in Guatemala did not stop with a statement urging an investigation into the political crimes committed during that country’s civil war. The church chose to act, even in a political situation in which only a decade earlier the church had suffered widespread repression leading it to even close a diocese and warn church workers to flee. Of particular relevance for our situation is what the Catholic Church in Guatemala did ten years ago. The Guatemalan bishops initiated a truth commission, sending six hundred “animators of reconciliation” to take testimonies from thousands of victims, survivors, and some perpetrators. From these they compiled a four-volume record that painfully detailed the violations of human rights of fifty-five thousand...
people. This was a risky quest for the truth in contexts where bitterness between factions was still very deep, and many did not want the truth to be revealed. Indeed, Guatemalan Archbishop Juan Gerardi paid with his life within forty-eight hours of making the truth commission’s report.

The U.S. bishops urge us not to abandon our moral responsibilities to the suffering people of Iraq and to face the serious moral lapses in our behavior. They call for a national dialogue that “must begin with a search for the ‘truth’ of where we find ourselves in Iraq . . .” (USCCB 2006, 7).

**Kindling Dangerous Conversations**

Getting to the truth is risky and almost taboo in these times. At this point I am going to suggest some truth-seeking initiatives that our bishops might seriously consider undertaking if we are to emulate our courageous sister churches to the south. I offer three initiatives by which the Catholic Church might lead us into greater truth in the midst of this national crisis.

**Hearing the Truth about War**

Now is the time to challenge the official policy of the United States to remain silent regarding the human costs of the wars it wages in Afghanistan and Iraq. “We do not do body counts,” said General Tommy Franks. But if the just war condition of noncombatant immunity is to have any meaning, we need to know how many and under what circumstances civilians died in order to make an honest assessment of whether or not that condition was violated. We need to confront the deaths and enduring damage suffered by Afghans, Iraqis, and by our own military service personnel. The 1991 Gulf War was fought almost exclusively from the air. We were not on the ground in Iraq to determine how many people died. It is very dangerous for the U.S. public to be in a fantasy world thirty thousand feet above war’s consequences. We must come back down to earth to look at the “ground zeros” of other peoples’ lives for which we are responsible. What was done on the ground? Were the Geneva Conventions of 1949 or the 1984 convention against Torture and Cruel, Inhuman or Degrading Treatment or Punishment violated? A truth commission could become an effective instrument for policymakers and citizens to learn from our experiences in Iraq, as the bishops insist we must.

The consequences of the wars in Afghanistan and Iraq have been far more destructive than their architects ever anticipated. While the Hussein dictatorship in Iraq was toppled in two months, neither the United States nor Iraqis have been able to reestablish order three years later. The power vacuum has resulted in deadly chaos. Insurgents kill Iraqis who collaborate with the U.S. occupation forces, Sunnis and Shiites militias engage in spiraling cycles of vengeance against one another.
Struggles to control regions and resources have led to the deaths of hundreds of Iraqi civilians and the displacement of thousands more. The human costs of these wars are enormous. Documented civilian deaths now exceed forty thousand. As in other recent wars, civilian casualties exceed enemy combatant casualties at least ten to one. From October 2001 through March 2002 between 3,000 and 3,400 Afghani civilians were killed during U.S. aerial bombings. The “Iraq Body Count Project” has documented the deaths of between 34,711 and 38,861 Iraqi civilians through April 2006. The figures reported by this British research organization are conservative: each of the twenty-nine hundred attacks they have reported require verification by at least two reputable major news sources. They offer the following disclaimer about their statistics: “It is likely that many if not most civilian casualties will go unreported by the media. That is the sad nature of war” (www.IraqBodyCount.org). Because of the reported circumstances under which many of these civilians died, it is possible to make at least some judgments regarding the intention of those who prosecuted these wars to protect civilians from harm.

What about the effects on our own soldiers? Approximately twenty-seven hundred U.S. military personnel have been killed. An estimated thirty-six thousand have been wounded. One hundred and eighty thousand have come home. The National Center for Post Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD) says that the incidence of PTSD is “about 30 percent of the men and women who have spent time in war zones” and that “an additional 20 to 25 percent have had partial PTSD at some point in their lives” (www.ncptsd.va.gov/facts).

Who will address the healing of our veterans? Many of the men and women sent to fight these wars made it home but carry heavy burdens. In a chat room for Iraqi vets, David writes:

I no longer like to do the things that used to make me happy, and I cannot stand to be in crowds, because I fell [sic] like I have to be watching everyone. The biggest problem is my anger, I have always been a laid back person, and nothing ever bothered me. Now small trivial things send me through the roof. The VA recently gave me 10% service connected disability for high blood pressure, and the VA has also diagnosed me with PTSD, I thought they would be able to help, but all they did was give me a prescription for valium [sic], and told me that as of right now there are no groups formed for Iraq veterans group therapy [sic]. I become so angry sometimes that I have had reccurent [sic] thoughts of suicide. I do not know what to do as I am a newlywed, and just found out that my wife is preganate [sic]. It bothers me to think I am bringing a baby into the world . . . the same world where I have seen dead babys [sic], and children. . . . These images haunt me in my sleep. I feel as if I am spiraling out of control. Like im [sic] driving a car but have no control of. I should be enjoying the freedom that I helped to preserve, enjoying my new life with my new family, but this desease [sic] is taking that away from me. (IraqWarVeterans@groups.msn.com)
How can we help thousands of people like David deal with these life-threatening stresses? Can the churches provide a place for their sons and daughters to speak of the impact of their war experiences? Iraq war veterans need to speak about their experiences if they are to be healed. Across the country churches could facilitate private “listening sessions” in which veterans of the Afghanistan and Iraq wars could speak about the impact their experiences of war have had on them. This is also a way in which we must support our troops, as they return home to deal with the trauma of war.

Churches working together throughout the country could offer a step in the healing process by assembling teams of veterans, spiritual and psychological counselors, and military chaplains to conduct private listening sessions. What is heard in these listening sessions should become part of a national reflection on the human costs of the war that our citizens have borne. We have a responsibility to the wounded and their families and to the families who mourn the loss of loved ones.

**Making Reparations**

It is likely that if they have the opportunity, some returning veterans would feel compelled to address the issue of civilian deaths. What can we do to respond to the deaths of civilians in Afghanistan and Iraq? A few Afghani families went to the U.S. embassy in Kabul in 2002 to ask for medical assistance for family members injured in the U.S. bombings. Other Afghanis tried to bring claims for their livelihoods destroyed. These already impoverished people went away empty-handed. There were no 9/11 funds for them. We must take an accounting of the damages we have incurred so that we might to the degree possible make amends. Let us come back down to earth and rebuild it. It is one of the costs of war. Knowing what we, our weapons, and our methods have done would serve as the basis for rendering acts of restorative justice. Making reparations is a necessary part of the healing process. If we are seeking forgiveness and healing this is the step we must take.

**Opening Christian-Muslim Dialogue**

My third challenge to the bishops comes in light of the pervasive fear-mongering of these times. We are discouraged from having contact with so-called enemies—let alone speaking with them, understanding one another, and beginning to recognize each other’s interests. We become silent and self-censoring in thought and speech. The church must model the only means of overcoming fear of “others” that widens the distance between “us” and “them.” The only way to overcome suspicion of the “other” is to begin to converse with them, refusing to maintain the silence that national loyalty wants to require. The U.S. bishops could help Americans reach out to Middle Eastern peoples, to listen to each other in order to better understand each others’ hopes and fears. How hopeful it could be to see
American Catholic bishops talking to Muslim clerics. If the U.S. Conference of Catholic Bishops invited Catholic colleges, universities, and seminaries to host interreligious and cross-culture dialogues, would this not bring legitimacy to something that is today regarded as potentially subversive? If scores of bishops and educational institutions were interacting with Middle Eastern Christians and Muslims perhaps the efforts of domestic surveillance programs would collapse.

In response to South African apartheid the World Council of Churches spoke out and supported the South African Council of Churches. The Catholic Church as a transnational community must warn of the dangers of U.S. unilateralism and its propensity to use force in international conflicts.

**Concluding Thoughts**

Theologian and archbishop of Canterbury Rowan Williams reflected in the immediate aftermath of September 11, 2001, about a critical juncture the United States faced. The language with which Americans were addressed that day was the language of violence that conveyed hatred and contempt. How would we choose to respond? We answered back in the same language of devastation. So now we have hatred and contempt pulsating in both directions. But Williams talked about there being a space between our strong feelings and our response. Had we been willing to occupy that painful space of inaction for a while we might have found that it had something to teach us. We might have been able to act with more wisdom and with resolve to shape a different world in which people do not resort to killing innocent people to make their point. The response the United States chose—a search-and-destroy mission that enveloped everybody between us and Al Qaeda—gave our leaders a sense of release, regardless of what it accomplished.

Our nation’s conflict resolution repertoire has grown very thin. Are Americans resigning themselves to a future with no alternatives to living on high alert, endlessly preparing to strike the axes of evil before they strike us? The proposed U.S. defense budget for next year is $439 billion. Taken together, the next fifteen largest defense budgets (from China, Russia, Britain, France, Germany, down to India, Israel, and Iran) fall short of U.S. military spending by $50 billion. Williams urged us not to behave as victims or as warriors but as people of moral imagination and courage. Can’t we “stop talking so much about ‘war,’” he pleads, and instead “reconcile ourselves to the fact that the punishment of terrorist crime and the gradual reduction of its threat cannot be translated into the satisfying language of decisive and dramatic conquest?” (Williams, 45). Instead we could devote ourselves to together finding the moral resources needed to grapple with the “problems of shaping a lawful international order” and relieving oppression and marginalization of millions of human beings. Is our defense spending not a social sin of gigantic proportions? What of the human costs of our warring posture?

Can the U.S. Catholic Church—together with other churches—say no to the militarism of this nation? Peace, like the reign of God itself, is both a divine gift
and a human work. “The Church should continually pray for the gift and share in the work. We are called to be a church in the service of peace, precisely because peace is one manifestation of God’s word and work in our midst” (USCCB 1983, no. 23).

H. Richard Niebuhr many years ago offered us a vision of the churches as cells (yes, “cells”) within societies working to create other alternatives to a world at war. The Vatican is on the verge of saying no to just war teaching. But the United States is showing no signs of saying no to war. That is something that must genuinely alarm and engage U.S. Christians. Let us hope that the U.S. Catholic Church is capable of the challenge of leading us in a chastened search for the truth on which peace depends. As Catholics it is our call to work for justice and peace, to shine the Gospel’s light where we live, in the shadow of the Superpower.

References


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