

## THREE QUESTIONS ABOUT WAR WITH IRAQ A LETTER FROM LEIGHTON FORD TO YOUNG CHRISTIAN LEADERS

Shortly before Christmas I was invited with a few other religious leaders to meet with Secretary of Defense Donald Rumsfeld and other officials to discuss terrorism and Iraq. One official explained "If we are going into conflict with Iraq we need the moral support of the public."

Although I appreciated being invited to the session, I left troubled. Certainly Saddam Hussein has wrought great evil against his own people and others, greater perhaps than most of us realize. Yet I was not convinced that the connection between Iraq and terrorism was clear enough to justify war.

In the weeks since I have wrestled with the question of this war, and its moral defensibility. I had thought of writing an open letter to the president. But he has more than enough advice! So instead I write this to you, as young pastors, evangelists, and mission leaders to ask you to confront honestly and prayerfully three questions that we who follow Jesus should be asking of ourselves and those we lead.

Question #1: What is the moral justification for a "pre-emptive" war?

I am not a pacifist, although I deeply respect my friends who are. There are times, I believe, when force must be used to oppose evil. As the apostle Paul taught, rulers are given the "power of the sword" from God to "execute wrath on the wrongdoer."

Yet Paul's words must be held in tension with those of Jesus who told his disciples, as they were pulling out weapons to fight off those sent to arrest him, "Put up your sword. All who take the sword will perish by the sword."

Former President Jimmy Carter surely had it right: "War may sometimes be a necessary evil, but it is still evil." The problem is still that of the human heart. Sin distorts our decisions and motives and our ability to see and execute judgment purely.

All of us can too easily find ways to "justify" our actions. Thus some moral criteria for a "just war" and not only the claims of "realpolitik" must be our guide. This is why across the centuries thoughtful Christians have sought to weigh the pros and cons of any specific conflict in the scales of so-called "just war" theory"; e.g., that war must only be waged as a last resort, to protect the innocent, to restore justice, avoiding as far as possible injury to non-combatants, and with grounds for believing that limited military action will prevent greater evil.

What, then, justifies a pre-emptive or "preventive" war? This takes the ethics of war to a new level, and demands a higher and clearer standard. Unless military power is used with a clear moral clarity we set a precedent that may come back to haunt us and the world.

Suppose that a year from now India wishes to justify a pre-emptive strike against Pakistan, fearing that Pakistan may provide weapons of mass destruction to Kashmir rebels (or, vice versa). On what moral grounds will the U.S. and other nations be able to challenge them?

It seems to me that a preemptive war is justified only when three conditions are met:

1. That injury is threatened to a third (innocent) party.
2. That there is clear intent and demonstrated preparation to attack.
3. When it can be shown that waiting would greatly magnify the risk.

In a democracy we must trust our elected leaders to weigh these issues. Yet we may also require, if they want our "moral support", that they provide a moral and legal basis for a pre-emptive war.

It may be that in a world of violence force will sometimes be needed to stop tyrants, and protect the innocent. But such actions must always be for the sake of justice, never for vengeance, and justice be tempered by mercy.

If, then, we are called to be merciful, do we not have a moral imperative to prepare to practice mercy? How will we wage war mercifully, when Saddam Hussein may deliberately move his military forces right next to civilians?

How will we plan to make peace? Must we not be clear about our intentions now?

Question #2: What effect will war have on fellow believers in other parts of the world?

We often forget that in the Middle East and the Arab countries there are not only Muslims and Jews, but fellow followers of Christ. How will a war affect them? A friend who heads a major Christian ministry in that part of the world recently e-mailed to say:

We pray with all our hearts that by the time you receive this ... war with Iraq will have been averted. From our perspective, war against Iraq would have devastating repercussions in the region - not least of which is a serious undermining of the message of the Gospel.

The reason for this is that Arabs are interpreting war against Iraq as Christian aggression against an Islamic nation. This false perception is so deeply ingrained among most Arabs that it undermines any perception of Christianity as a message of love and peace.

As my friend says, the perception is false. Yet it is real to those who hold it! And we have a responsibility to manage perceptions, and not just deny them.

How would you respond to my friend? How do I respond? I can only let him know that I am praying that war may yet be averted, and other means found to deter Hussein. And, if not, then we must pray that the war will be as limited as possible, that civilian loss may be minimal, and that in any post-war rebuilding Christians will be able to join with many others to minister to the hungry and hurting people of Iraq, and especially to the children!

Question #3: what war is most worth fighting?

At the end of the day I have tried to look at our world not as a "religious leader", but as a grandfather. My wife and I have four precious grandchildren, ranging from a college freshman to a little girl just

learning to turn over in her crib. How will our decisions as a nation affect them? and the other billions of children in our world?

The greatest risk may not be from Hussein, but from what would happen in the ten to twenty years after a war, in attack and counter-attack, in anger and revenge. I do not want our grandchildren to grow up in a kind of global northern Ireland!

I also ask myself: what about the money? War with Iraq will cost anything from fifty to a hundred billion dollars or more. Is that the best way to spend these billions? to build a future for our own grandchildren and others?

Yet there is another war, one well worth fighting - the war against HIV-AIDS in southern Africa and much of Asia. In the long run the HIV-AIDS pandemic is a greater threat than Saddam Hussein. If the war against AIDS is lost this disease has the potential to destabilize entire continents, and much of the world.

President Bush has committed fifteen billion dollars over the next several years for the fight against AIDS in Africa. Yet this is only just a beginning. The Secretary General of the United Nations has said "With ten billion dollars a year AIDS can be globally controlled in ten years." This is a war that can be won!

I thank God for President Bush's leadership in this commitment. But I am hoping that he and UK Prime Minister Tony Blair (who a year ago called for a global "Marshall Plan" to wipe out AIDS) will with all the authority of their offices build a "coalition of the willing" in this war.

War with Iraq will end many lives. War against AIDS will save tens of thousands of lives.

So let's ask ourselves, and our leaders: which war is most worth fighting?

There's still time to seek an alternative to war. Consider this: a church in Boulder, Colorado is encouraging people to put a cup of rice in a sandwich

bag and send it to the White House with a note that says " 'If your enemies are hungry, feed them.' Romans 12:20. Please send this to the people of Iraq."

In the mid '50s famine ravaged China while the US and China were at odds over threats to the islands of Quemoy and Matsu. Such a "rice campaign" took place then but not until much later was the effect known. President Eisenhower met with the Joint Chiefs of Staff to consider US options and twice the use of nuclear weapons was recommended. Each time Eisenhower turned to an aide to ask how many little bags of rice had come in. When told they numbered in the tens of thousands, Eisenhower told his generals that as long as so many Americans were asking for the US to feed the Chinese he certainly wasn't going to consider using nuclear weapons against them. (The story is related by David Albert in People Power: Applying Nonviolence Theory)

If I had the ear of the President I would want to say:

Mr, President, please: keep the pressure on Saddam to disarm.

Please: feed the children of Iraq.

And please: lead the war against AIDS!