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It's time to vote in pursuit of our own best interests

Joan Chittister | Aug. 10, 2007 From Where I Stand

[***Editor's Note:*** *Sr. Joan Chittister is taking a short break, so we have tapped into her archives. This column first appeared Aug. 12, 2003.*]

I asked a friend of mine what effect he thought the war in Iraq would have on upcoming elections. He paused only so slightly. "None at all," he said. I pressed the point: "Not even in view of the fact that we have alienated some of our strongest allies?" "Joan," he said in the kind of low, patient voice reserved for slow learners, "Europeans don't vote in our elections."

I got it. The lesson was that only Americans vote here and Americans vote only for American interests. So, the question is, what is in the best interest of America now?

The "war" in Iraq is over, U.S. President George Bush announced in May [2003]. Yet, it grinds slowly but inexorably on as American soldiers die, one or two at a time, almost daily.

The operation that was to take only a few months, we are now told, will take a very long time.

Iraq has been "liberated," we say, but Iraqi protests -- public riots -- have grown in intensity. Gratitude is wearing thin.

We invaded them, we said, because they would not disarm and now, it appears, they had very little to disarm in the first place. So the question of the century becomes: How it is possible to be so certain that a country has weapons of mass destruction and so uncertain about where they are?

The "information" on which we based the invasion of Iraq, the rest of world, and we, too, know now, had all been discredited by our own intelligence agencies, as well as by U.N. inspectors, before the first bombs ever dropped.

So much for "preemptive war," for wars waged on probability theory. Or less.

Clearly pre-emptive war, even for those who have no moral qualms about it, is a very iffy thing.

Which gives new credence to another possibility: Instead of waging *preemptive war* maybe we could invest ourselves in waging *preemptive peace*. But how?

"Preemptive Peace," the theme of [the 2003] annual Pax Christi USA national conference, opened the question to invited guests from around the world, as well as to American scholars, theologians, activists and social analysts.

Etienne de Jonghe, chairperson of Pax Christi International in Belgium, underscored seven issues for particular attention, especially in the United States, if preemptive peace is to be possible. The following summary of those remarks beg for fuller attention:

Different perspectives

Outside the United States, the U.S. invasion of Iraq was seen from two perspectives.

In the Northern Hemisphere, in Europe, people were really worried. The invasion was seen as a complete rejection of public opinion and other political bodies. Europe has become wary of U.S. policy. De Jonghe said, "It has become clear that in Europe you cannot speak about war the way (the U.S.) government speaks about war. People get 'the shivers.' We have seen a whole continent destroyed. We know genocide. Seeing war become an instrument, a continuation of political policy, to see our concerns, our political systems, brushed away, has done great harm to the allies."

In the Southern hemisphere, on the other hand, people remember that the U.S. government supported the powerful there and ignored the poor. "It is the daily struggle for survival, they know, that is the crucial determination of peace," de Jonghe said.

An informed populace

The United States is the most powerful nation on earth, and the country's lack of knowledge and information about the rest of the world frightens people outside U.S. borders. "What we see of U.S public opinion makes us afraid. We are really afraid of what we see as the lack of empathy you have about the conditions and attitudes of the rest of the world," de Jonghe said. "You must bring foreign perspective to the United States. People in the U.S. are handicapped (because) they lack understanding of the outside world."

Reaching Out

We must reach out to the people of the world. Travel is one way to foster this. Exchanges of ideas and experiences helps. "We have to build bridges," de Jonghe said.

Interfaith relations

We must reflect on the long-term consequences for interfaith relationships as a result of this war. The fear is that it is reinforcing deep, historical grievances (between Muslims and Christians.) Genocides have happened before, even after World War II. These things are real.

The effect of the Christian language President Bush used while defending U.S. policies raised old fears and hatreds. Using Christian language was a diplomatic blunder of major proportion. De Jonghe said, it worried him, "but the Holy See and the pope were speaking out. That was remarkable and may have prevented a religious war."

International Court

The sabotage of the International Court by the United States, which rejected this great treaty built by the international community, was really shocking, he said. The court is a sign of hope. It only deals with "gross human rights violations." For the United States to say that it will not submit to the International Court is terrible, de Jonghe said.

U.N. Peacekeepers

Different groups, even within the peace movement around the world, are struggling with the question of the military's proper place in U.N. peacekeeping missions. Regions that suffered under colonization tend to reject peacekeeping forces. Because of their own history, they don't want to support any excuse to go into other nations. Smaller nations are more likely to accept it because they cannot protect themselves. This is the question we must consider.

American Empire

Finally, the term "The American Empire" must be taken seriously. It is not a slogan anymore. We are seeing the evaporation of American diplomacy. "We are all now in the empire. ? Those of us in the European Union know that we don't count anymore," de Jonghe said.

He said, "Europe has learned from our mistakes and bloody history that we must go the way of cooperation. We know we must even give up some of our national sovereignty in some fields to get out of the mess. People in the Southern Hemisphere see it simply as more exploitation."

Diplomacy has been replaced with a dependency on military logic alone, according to de Jonghe. "There is a capacity for military cooperation, but that's all there is," he said.

And then he closed his comments with the answer to my question, I think. He said, "But there is still hope. We saw all of you on the streets, millions of you and millions around the world. We are at a time of new solidarity."

My friend is right, of course. Europeans don't vote in U.S. elections. But we do. We will surely vote with our own interests in mind. And we should. But where do our best interests really lie now?

From where I stand, it's a question worth pondering. We have to decide now what will work best in the long run, for our children, for Christianity, for the world: preemptive war or preemptive peace?

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