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War in the Obama years

Mike Sweitzer-Beckman | Dec. 10, 2009

It hasn't even been a year since Barack Obama took office as President of the United States, but he already has 24/7 analysis on what he's done (or not done). Liberals are craning their necks wondering when he is going to do something that earns him the Nobel Peace Prize [1] he received today, and conservatives are pouncing on him for spending so much money. Last week, Obama made his first big move in terms of the war in Afghanistan, deciding to raise the troop levels by deploying 30,000 more troops in the middle of 2010. What does this mean for Catholics who voted for Obama on the basis that he was the anti-war alternative to George W. Bush and John McCain?

A year ago, bloggers and other commentators were saying that American Catholics who were voting for Barack Obama in the November 2008 presidential election were going to hell and that the church has lost its soul. Whether you agree or not, it's fascinating to realize that somewhere around 54 percent of American Catholics voted for Obama [2], risking their souls (and possibly a chance to receive the Eucharist, depending on who their bishop is). According to the Whispers in the Loggia [3] report from Election Day, states with high Catholic population densities went for Obama, including Rhode Island, New York, and New Jersey.

Many supporters and liberal lawmakers are against [4] his decision to raise the troop levels in Afghanistan. While it's disappointing for many supporters to hear of his decision, some could argue that it fits into the rubric of the just war theory. Just war theory is an ethical reflection on whether a war is justifiable or not. Obama has already authored some national bestsellers; he's a prolific writer and thinker. He no doubt poured a lot of thought into this decision. With Afghanistan, he has to think about Osama bin Laden, the roots of the horrific September 11, 2001, attacks, and how to quash another one from happening. One of the arguments of a just war is that the number of lives lost from participating in this war will be less than if no action is taken. Of course, it's hard to measure two parallel paths of history and what could have been. The truth is that this war has been going for eight years, and while Obama offers a timeline for withdrawal (a difference from the Bush administration), it's unclear who or what can hold a president to a war timeline. It seems that nothing ever has.

On the flip side, Obama has chosen to support a regime in Afghanistan that is widely disregarded by the people it supposedly represents. Generations of Afghanis have only known being at war with a big national superpower, previously with the Soviet Union and now with the United States. Brave New Films [5] produced a recent video about how Afghanis really don't want to see this war continue. Over 850 American troops have already died in this war, and another 600 troops from other coalitions have died as well. It's unfathomable how many Afghani civilians have died in this war, as a UN report estimates that 2,100 Afghan civilians have died in armed conflict in the last year alone.

Some Obama supporters would say that President Obama inherited this quagmire of a war in Afghanistan from George W. Bush and he's just stuck with trying to resolve it. However, we are now in December 2009, and we are clearly now in the era of the Obama presidency and not Bush-Cheney. This war may not have been started by Obama, but he is the one in charge now, and his administration's actions are going to start speaking louder than poetic speeches.

The time has come for those who voted for Obama on an anti-war premise to begin mobilizing as feverishly as they did when Bush began declaring wars with Middle Eastern countries. Obama has said that he would use his accepting the Noble Peace Prize as a call to action for the American people. It is time to follow his call to action and hold him and his administration accountable for this war. The antiwar movement is already in full swing: noon hour demonstrations took place all over the country the day after Obama's speech at West Point. Veterans who have served in the Middle East [6] this decade are calling for an immediate withdrawal of troops. After a decade of lies and broken promises to the troops under the previous administration, it's time for the Obama administration to live up to its campaign visions and give us hope for a world without bloodshed on the hands of Americans.

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