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What if somebody gave a war Ö

Joan Chittister | Aug. 31, 2006 From Where I Stand

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Some years ago now I saw a poster that read, ?What if somebody gave a war and nobody came?? It was a winsome, wistful thought, I figured. After all, don?t men love war? Aren?t they only too eager to go? Hasn?t it been built into them that war is heroic and necessary, natural to the male personality and glorious? Don?t they call it a real privilege to die for their country while they kill the people of other countries -- the ones of which the poet Thomas Hardy spoke when he wrote,

> ?Yes; quaint and curious war is!
>
> You shoot a fellow down
>
> You?d treat if met where any bar is,
> Or help to half-a-crown.?

But now I?m not so sure that the poster?s suggestion might not be more likely than I could ever have dreamed.

The possibility may lie in the intertwining of two stories: one about the Irish in 1690; the other about the United States in 2006.

In the first, the Irish tell a story about the Battle of the Boyne that might very well be a cogent insight -- if not a warning -- for our own times. King James II, in an attempt to oust his usurper from the throne of England, attacked him in Ireland but was being soundly beaten. Racing away from the battlefield at top speed, he came upon a laborer breaking rocks on the side of the road.

The laborer looked up at the king on horseback and called to him, ?Could you tell me, sire, who won the Battle of the Boyne today?

?And why would you give a care in the first place, sir?? the king shot back. ?Whatever the case, tomorrow you?ll simply go on breaking stones.?

There are two ways to read the story. The first implies that nothing much changes for the average person no matter who wins on the battlefield. Wars are decided by armies on behalf of kings, it seems.

The second way to read the story is that the status of the king -- whose position hinges on victory -- might very well be drastically different.

In our own time, the first of those readings seems to be shifting precipitously, though almost silently. People are being affected mightily by war. The second meaning -- that wars also affect the governments that wage them -- may be more salient than ever.

The truth is that unlike the time of kings and armies whose success or failure determined the political landscape of a place but had little effect on the daily lives of those in the contested territory, it is exactly the citizenry of a nation, its laboring classes, its common people, who are now most in danger.

At the turn of the 20th century, only 5 percent of the dead in any war was civilians. In World War I, the number of civilian casualties increased to 15 percent. By the end of World War II, civilian deaths accounted for 65 percent of the total number of war dead. In our own time, with the ?ethnic cleansing? of whole populations and the advances of technological weaponry, over 90 percent of the victims of war are civilians.

In modern warfare, the intermixture of what constitutes a military target and a civilian one -- an electric grid, for instance, a dam, a science lab, a bus, a market, a safe house -- is blurred to the point of extinction. It is exactly the lives of normal people that are being destroyed in the name of freeing them. According to a recent U.N. report (cited in Time magazine, Aug. 28, 2006), nearly 6,000 Iraqis, for instance, were killed in May and June and 3,400 in July alone, three years after we so proudly -- and arrogantly ?accomplished? that mission. In addition, more than 180,000 Iraqis have become refugees and those numbers are rising daily.

No doubt about it: the average person is both principal target and wholesale victim now, however much we claim to adhere to ?the rules of war.? Civilians now have a huge stake in who wins and loses in their name. They are helpless in the face of military onslaught, powerless in the face of political machinations. While politicians refuse to negotiate, people go on dying without ever even knowing what side they?re on or who?s shooting at them.

At the same time, however, there is something else happening, more quietly, more surreptitiously, but with far greater impact, perhaps, on the future of conflict resolution on the globe.

The U.S. Marine Corps announced a recall of 2,500 Marines to active duty in Iraq and Afghanistan ? many have already served in Iraq. The 2,500 is an initial number, Marine officials say; there is no cap on how many could be called up in the future. The Army has recalled some 10,000 soldiers to active duty. (CNN, Thursday, Aug. 24, 2006)

Why the recalls? Because other young men and women are not signing up to go. That?s why. Somebody is giving a war for them and they are declining the invitation to attend. They have better things to do with their lives, perhaps? Or perhaps they make a distinction between self-defense and invasion and are deciding that the two are not the same thing, not of the same moral weight or civic requirement, regardless of the present attempts to equate them. Or maybe they simply do not want to return home destroyed in body and soul for the sake of an agenda they consider more the king?s than theirs.

War and war makers are now more in question than usual. The implications are far-reaching for all of us, soldiers and civilians, churches and citizenship groups, individuals and social change organizations.

We all have some decisions to make about how we want to relate to the rest of the human community. After all, we can?t cede conscience to the next generation alone as we did once before in Vietnam. ?How goes the war today, sir?? is the concern of each of us since, uniformed or not, we all stand to live with its consequences for years to come.

From where I stand, it seems to me that the rock breaker in the Boyne Valley, the young Americans who are

refusing to participate in unprovoked violence toward unknown others, and oh, yes, the king himself, all have plenty to lose by ignoring the question.

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