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A call to repentance on the 10th anniversary of the U.S. invasion of Iraq

Art Laffin | Mar. 19, 2013
Viewpoint

Ten years ago on March 19, President George W. Bush ordered the invasion of Iraq. Following in the footsteps of his father, President George H.W. Bush, who 12 years before had authorized the Desert Storm invasion and bombing of Iraq for 42 days, the younger Bush, with the consent of Congress, initiated "Shock and Awe," a massive bombing campaign that led to an occupation that lasted most of a decade.

Hours before the commencement of the Shock and Awe campaign, I joined a group of 25 peacemaking friends who climbed over the fenced-off area on Pennsylvania Avenue in front the White House to make a final appeal to the president to halt this action. Shortly after we offered our prayers of intercession, we were arrested by Park Police. After hours of processing, we were released from the Anacostia Park police station later that evening. As we met our supporters, we learned the invasion had begun. Heartbroken, I could only pray: God forgive us.

News accounts the next day showed the Baghdad night sky lit up like a fireworks display. We will never know how many people were killed that evening.

The protesters were not alone in their demands. Similar pleading against going to war had also come from the U.S. Conference of Catholic Bishops and the Vatican in the months leading up to the invasion. Pope John Paul II made a number of specific appeals calling for no war. In January 2003, the pope told his Diplomatic Corps: "War is not always inevitable. It is always a defeat for humanity." And on March 7, 2003, Bishop John Michael Botean, bishop of the Romanian Catholic Diocese of St. George in Canton, Ohio, issued a pastoral letter condemning Catholic involvement in the war: "With moral certainty I say to you it [the Iraq War] does not meet even the minimal standards of the Catholic just war theory I hereby authoritatively state that such direct participation is intrinsically and gravely evil and therefore absolutely forbidden."

Many believed then, and the world knows now, that the purported government justification for bombing and occupying Iraq were based on lies and deceit. Yet 10 years later, no senior government or military leader who ordered, directed and carried out this blatantly immoral and illegal invasion and occupation has been held accountable. No apology has been made, no public act of repentance or contrition has ever been offered by any U.S. official for the unspeakable war crimes committed. The use of white phosphorus anti-personnel weapons in a massacre in Fallujah in 2004 and the torture of Iraqi prisoners at Abu Ghraib are just two cases in point.

What was the human cost of invasion and occupation for the Iraqis? A survey from The Lancet [1] found that more than 600,000 Iraqis have died, while the Opinion Research Business Survey concluded that the number was more than 1 million. An estimated 4 million Iraqis have been displaced. And an entire society has been traumatized, devastated and left in a state of upheaval. The reality is that the war will never be over for the Iraqi people.

Following the invasion of Iraq, Pope John Paul II declared in his 1991 encyclical *Centesimus Annus [2]*:

> I myself, on the occasion of the recent tragic war in the Persian Gulf, repeated the cry: "Never again war!" No, never again war, which destroys the lives of innocent people, teaches how to kill, throws into upheaval even the lives of those who do the killing and leaves behind a trail of resentment and hatred, thus making it all the more difficult to find a just solution of the very problems which provoked the war. [Section 52]

The invasion and occupation has also taken a terrible toll on U.S. troops. More than 4,400 soldiers died, and countless more were injured. A vast number of veterans now suffer from post-traumatic stress disorder, and the suicide rate has been exceedingly high, not only for soldiers who were in Iraq but also for those who were deployed in Afghanistan. Pentagon figures show that there were a record 349 suicides among active duty troops last year.

Regarding the economic cost of the Iraq war, the National Priorities Project has found [3] that the U.S. has spent more than $807 billion waging it. And a Brown University report [4] just released ahead of the 10th anniversary of the U.S. invasion of Iraq says the Iraq war has cost the U.S. more than $2 trillion, including $500 billion in benefits owed to veterans. It is inevitable that when the government squanders so much money from the public treasury, it will end up in massive debt. No wonder there is a "fiscal cliff" and sequester crisis.

In the last 10 years, peace organizations worked tirelessly to end the U.S. occupation of Iraq. We at the Catholic Worker along with many other communities across the U.S. and in Europe kept vigil and engaged in many nonviolent resistance actions to demand an end to this war. We also implored the bishops, who were conspicuously silent after the occupation, to speak out against it and the Bush administration's pre-emptive war policy. On one occasion, I had the opportunity to speak with military chaplains, including then-Archbishop Edwin O'Brien (now a cardinal), head of the Archdiocese for the Military of the U.S., and asked them to call on all Catholic soldiers to leave Iraq and not participate in this sinful occupation. This appeal was not well received. It should be noted that Archbishop O'Brien actually advised soldiers [5] they could participate in this war.

Not all soldiers followed the orders of the commander in chief or the counsel of Archbishop O'Brien. Staff Sgt. Camilo Mejia ended up serving up to a year in prison for refusing a second deployment to Iraq for reasons of conscience. Other soldiers deserted or otherwise resisted and were imprisoned. Iraq Veterans Against the War [6] was formed to oppose the war and to assist fellow soldiers who had been physically wounded and mentally scarred for life. And Pfc. Bradley Manning, Army intelligence analyst and whistleblower, has been imprisoned for more than 1,000 days for his courageous act of conscience to let the public know about U.S. atrocities in Iraq and Afghanistan. He is now being prosecuted for releasing to Wikileaks the Collateral Murder video that shows the killing of unarmed civilians and two Reuters journalists by a U.S. Apache helicopter crew in Iraq. He is also accused of disclosing the Afghan War Diary, the Iraq War Logs, and a series of embarrassing U.S. diplomatic cables. On Feb. 28, Manning pleaded guilty to 10 of the 22 charges against him, which could carry a sentence of up to 20 years. One charge he did not enter a plea for is the charge of "aiding the enemy," which could carry a life sentence.

Even though the occupation has officially ended, the CIA, private U.S. military contractors and U.S. military special advisers remain in Iraq while drone surveillance planes continue to patrol Iraqi skies.

What would Jesus, who commands us to love and not to kill, have us do? Lent is the holy season for repentance and conversion. This would be a good time, especially for the churches, to take the lead in calling the nation to truly repent for our war-making in Iraq, to ask forgiveness from the Iraqi people, to call on the U.S. government to make substantial reparations to Iraq, and to demand that all CIA, military advisers and military/security

contractors leave Iraq immediately.

Two years ago, on the 20th anniversary of the first U.S. war in Iraq, I wrote the following prayer:

> Loving God, we beg your forgiveness for twenty years of U.S. warmaking in Iraq-for destroying Iraq's infrastructure by massive bombings, for using highly toxic weapons, including depleted uranium, that contaminated Iraq's land and water, and which have caused cancer, severe birth defects and other illnesses for numerous Iraqis.
>
> Forgive us for imposing economic sanctions that killed over one million Iraqi's, mostly children.
>
> Forgive us for invading, occupying and destabilizing Iraq, causing nearly one million deaths and displacement and long-term trauma for countless Iraqis.
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> Forgive us for placing oil interests above human welfare.
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> Heal us of our moral blindness and fill our hearts with love.
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> Help us to renounce all killing, torture and violence, to stop demonizing our adversaries, to value all life as sacred, and to see the Iraqi people and all Muslims and Arabs as our brothers and sisters.
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> Help us to truly repent for the sin of war and to make reparations to the Iraqi people.
>
> Empower us to engage in nonviolent action calling for an immediate withdrawal of all U.S. military forces and private contractors from Iraq, and for an end to U.S. warmaking and military intervention everywhere.
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> O God, make us channels of your peace and reconciliation.
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> Amen.

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