

JUST FAITH AND ACTION:
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Toward a “coalition of the resentful”

As many as two million people are likely to be left homeless within Iraq after a US invasion. An estimated 600,000 to 1,450,000 refugees are likely to flee Iraq. A staggering 10 million people will require immediate food assistance.

This leaves me with an immense sense of sadness. The Archbishops of Canterbury and Westminster suggested this month that war marks “a sense of failure” of humanity to resolve issues that divide. To me that sense of failure rests immutably with us. I think back to the days after September 11th, when the entire world’s outpouring of empathy and concern presented us in the United States with a stunning opportunity. In our grief, we could have moved toward finding a new way to be “citizens of the world community bound together in a common sense of vulnerability” – as Episcopal Presiding Bishop Frank Griswold remarked recently. Instead, “our reaction has been one of bald assertion of our strength and our power.” President Bush sees reticence toward war a mark of failure, and he speaks of success as assembling a war “coalition of the willing.” The intense anti-Americanism present around the globe suggests that while nations, dependent upon the US and vulnerable to US vindictiveness, may ultimately accede to US pressure, we will not be seeing “a coalition of the willing;” we will have “a coalition of the resentful.”

Why our leaders do not seem to take such hostility seriously is a puzzle. A sense of relatedness is foundational to both theology and diplomacy. When we choose heavy-handed intimidation to deal with our world, we undermine, we destroy relationship, not enhance it. And we should make no mistake about it, there is a great price to be paid for our government’s simplistic analysis of the nature of the world – brazenly claiming our goodness and branding others as evil: It creates widespread resentment, hostility, and distrust. These feelings do not dissipate when the bombs stop falling. Such a long long way from policies that could have built upon the compassion for us that September 11th generated. I grieve for that lost opportunity, and I am angered at the prospect of this “elective” war. It is a tragedy.

Why this passion for war? Yes, Saddam Hussein is a tyrant, but does the Bush administration seek to remove him for his tyranny? No. What then are the grounds for the Bush administration’s passion? “He is a threat to the United States.” How is he a threat? He has “weapons of mass destruction.” Well, does he have nuclear weapons? No. Does he have chemical and biological weapons? Maybe. Has he threatened to use them against the US? No. Does he have the capacity to deliver them to the US? No. Is he connected to the terrorists who do threaten the US? Bush says so, but his evidence is appallingly weak: A terrorist who came to Baghdad to have his leg amputated, and a terrorist cell in a region of Iraq that is not under Saddam Hussein’s control. So is there an imminent threat? No. But isn’t Saddam Hussein failing to cooperate with UN resolutions? Definitely, but lack of cooperation is not grounds for war. Yet he’s a tyrant; why not overthrow him anyway? There are risks, immense risks. Not just the millions of Iraqi civilians, not just the hundreds if not thousands of American and British military casualties – rather it has to do with war as shattering of the fragile bonds between us as children of God. For those of us with a passion for Africa, the implications of American imperialism (we must reclaim that word from discarded rhetoric, for this is really what we are talking about) are as threatening in their own way as Bush’s zeal for war is to the Middle East. Our prayer, our voice, must be for peace with justice... must be an affirmation of our common humanity.

*Yours faithfully,
Leon Spencer*

If there are others you would like us to send these reflections to, please pass their names and addresses on to us. Alternatively, if these reflections are unhelpful, just let us know and we’ll remove you from our list.

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