

Terrorism and 'just war'; an old tradition, new challenges: Hearts and minds

by [Glen H. Stassen](#) in the [November 14, 2001](#) issue

The mainstream of Christian ethics has contended that there can be a legitimate or “just” use of military force—legitimacy being determined by a variety of factors, such as the presence of a “just cause,” “right authority,” “last resort,” and the use of “means proportional to the end,” to cite some of the traditional language of just war thinking. In the wake of the terrorist attacks of September 11, Christian thinkers in the U.S. have again drawn on the vocabulary of this tradition as they ponder the proper response to terrorist acts. At the same time, many commentators—including some of the following four—have acknowledged that the categories of just war thinking are not easily adapted to the challenge now facing public authorities in the U.S.—the challenge of responding not to an aggressive state but to unidentified individuals whose aim is to spread terror.

A war against terrorism requires winning the battle for the hearts and minds of potential terrorist recruits. But prolonged bombing of Afghanistan until the snows come in mid-November will block food from getting to millions of innocent Afghan Muslims who have already experienced four years of drought and have no reserves. Beginning on November 17, millions of Muslims worldwide will begin the holy month of Ramadan, fasting by day, and praying in the mosque before breaking their fast at sundown. What will they be hearing in their mosques and thinking as they fast, if they are outraged that fellow Muslims in Afghanistan are starving to death because of U.S. bombing? Already the large majority of Muslims oppose the bombing. Will they be meditating on revenge and the recruitment of more terrorists if the bombing continues into the month of Ramadan?

Two principles of just war theory are reasonable hope of success and that there be a proportionality of means to ends. If the U.S. bombs Afghanistan until or even during

Ramadan and winter snows, it will drive success and proportionality far beyond reach. If the aim is to curtail terrorism, then the means must remedy the causes of terrorism, not exacerbate them.

I have been engaged in developing another paradigm for the ethics of peace and war besides that of pacifism and just war theory—just peacemaking. Just peacemaking theory names practices that prevent war and terrorism. It says we need to ask not only whether the war on Afghanistan is just. We need also to ask what practices of prevention can dissuade people from becoming terrorists.

One practice of just peacemaking—independent initiatives—is designed especially for contexts in which distrust and hostility block peacemaking. One side takes a series of visible initiatives to decrease the threat to the other side while not making itself defenseless, and invites reciprocation. The initiatives are announced in advance, and must be carried out on schedule so that they have a chance to decrease distrust. For example, President George W. Bush's father took the independent initiative to remove nuclear-armed missiles from all U.S. surface ships. Mikhail Gorbachev reciprocated, and additional initiatives yielded dramatic reductions of the nuclear threat. Independent initiatives are needed now if the campaign against terrorism is to succeed.

Afghanistan, already a desperately poor country, has had a four-year drought. It has no food reserves. The bombing and the Taliban response have caused distributors of food aid to leave the country. About 320 tons of food are needed each month to keep millions from starving. The food drops by bombers are mere drops in the bucket. By November 17, when Ramadan begins, snows will block roads and access to the people who are starving.

The first independent initiative required is an immediate bombing pause so food can be trucked in and delivered to the people. We need the initiative of a cease-fire so millions of Afghans can get food before the winter snows come. The second initiative is to continue the bombing pause during the month of Ramadan out of respect for Muslims. The third initiative is for Christians and churches to organize their own fasts during Ramadan, to identify with the hungry of the world, and to pray for peace and initiatives to alleviate the causes of terrorism. The fourth is to encourage Muslims also to meditate on initiatives they can take to persuade people not to become terrorists. These initiatives can begin to elicit a context for antiterrorism rather than more terrorism.

Surely some in the U.S. government will respond that we need to keep the pressure on the Taliban. But cease-fires for evacuating the wounded and delivering food to citizens have occurred in previous wars, without removing the threat of attacks after the cease-fire. Pressure on the Taliban will be more effective if these initiatives persuade Muslims worldwide to press for an end to terrorism.

Others will fear that during the cease-fire the Taliban will arrange for the departure of Osama bin Laden and other al-Qaeda terrorists from Afghanistan, and will promise not to be a haven for such terrorism. Then international support for bombing will fade, and peace might break out without removing the Taliban. Would that outcome be so disastrous as to outweigh the cost of the deaths of Afghans from starvation and war, the deaths of U.S. soldiers, and the turning of millions of Muslims against the campaign to curtail terrorism? Is the aim to vanquish the Taliban, or is it to end terrorism?

We need yet one more set of independent initiatives: Israeli initiatives toward justice for Palestinians. Said Cairo professor Emad Shatin: “Arabs are much more connected—historically, culturally, emotionally—to what’s going on in Palestine right now. Afghanistan is a question of harming people we feel are innocent, and there’s much concern about that. But Palestine—this is totally different. As the situation gets out of control, we can’t take our minds off it” (*Los Angeles Times*, October 21).

In 1957, Israel, France and Great Britain were mobilizing to attack Egypt and take over the Suez Canal. President Eisenhower had the personal strength to say firmly: Stop. If you make war, the U.S. will stop supplying the oil your economies need. His firmness prevented a tragic conflict, and Israel is now safer because it has peace with Egypt.

President Bush rightly criticized the occupation of Palestinian cities by the Israeli army and urged the creation of a Palestinian state. Will he have the strength to say to Israel: take a series of initiatives to allow a viable, integrally united Palestinian state free of Israel’s troops, or the U.S. will stop supplying military aid to Israel? That initiative could reduce injustice for Palestinians, curtail Palestinian and Israeli violence, make Israel safer, and greatly increase Muslim and Arab support for the campaign against terrorism.

See the other contributions to this conversation, by:

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