

Sacrificed for what?

From the Editors in the [July 9, 2014](#) issue



U.S. war casualties at Dover Air Force Base in Delaware, [from 2006](#).

As Iraq descended into a sectarian battleground and President Obama scrambled to bolster the government of President Nouri al-Maliki, the editors of the *Chicago Tribune* urged the Obama administration to intervene forcefully and to “do everything possible to defend the sacrifice of those nearly 4,500 U.S. service members killed, and another 30,000 wounded, in the Iraq War.”

The memory of American sacrifices in Iraq over the past decade hovered over many reports on the Iraq crisis. Commentators pondered whether the soldiers who fought and died to create the current Iraqi government had made sacrifices in vain. “Vets watch as insurgents undo sacrifices in Iraq,” said one headline. “Iraq war veterans think their sacrifice has gone down the drain” was the headline of a report on National Public Radio.

The dismay of the troops is understandable. U.S. forces fought brutal battles to seize cities like Mosul and Fallujah, and now those areas have fallen into the hands of Sunni militants connected with al-Qaeda—the very terrorist organization that the United States sought to eliminate during the invasion and occupation.

It is a sign of political health, however, that few Americans—whether policy makers, military veterans, or citizens—seem to agree with the *Tribune* that the sacrifices of the past war exert a claim on the present or offer a guide to policy.

We rightly admire people who make a sacrifice—who give up something valuable for something else regarded as more valuable. Sacrifice has deep moral and religious

resonance. When a person makes a sacrifice for a cause, the cause itself has a tendency to become hallowed.

But this moral dimension of sacrifice has a dark side, one often exploited by nations (and editorial writers) in matters of war. When soldiers act selflessly and courageously in service to their country, the country's effort seems to acquire legitimacy on the basis of the sacrifice. To cast doubt on the cause or means appears to cast doubt on the nobility of the sacrifice.

That's why nations find it hard ever to admit that going to war was a mistake and seek instead to "defend" and honor previous sacrifices by asking for more of the same policy and more of the same sacrifice.

Christians can respect all kinds of sacrifice because all sacrifice resembles in some small way Christ's self-giving. Yet Christians also know that sacrifice can be a form of idolatry, a gift offered to a false god. Therefore we can fully respect the sacrifices made by American soldiers in Iraq without feeling obliged to defend or retain the policies that provoked them.