

How Rep. Walter Jones has turned his guilt over the Iraq War into acts of empathy

## **The GOP congressman has sent nearly 12,000 letters to Americans whose loved ones died in the war he voted to authorize.**

by [Peter W. Marty](#) in the [June 20, 2018](#) issue



Rep. Walter B. Jones Jr. [Some rights reserved](#) by [Gage Skidmore](#).

I've counseled all kinds of people whose consciences were stricken by this or that regret. My advice? Avoid using personal guilt as a spiritual motivator. Religious people seem especially good at beating themselves up in the (false) belief that they're deepening their faith through mental self-flogging. There are far more positive ways to inspire a future than by wallowing in guilt. Nursing a regret that one cannot shake or bear to discard is eventually debilitating. If we judge our mistakes

as too heinous to be forgotten or forgiven, God's acceptance of us will always seem elusive.

Recently, I've come to see the need for making a distinction between a person's guilt and their sense of guilt. Guilt has its own reality outside of a person's feelings. If I rob a bank, I'm guilty of a crime and must live permanently with that guilt. The guilt is as indelible as the crime. Nothing can wipe it away. A sense of guilt usually accompanies guilt, but not always. I may feel as though I did nothing wrong in that robbery. And a sense of guilt, which has deep reality within a person's own mind, doesn't have to be a permanent reality in the same way that guilt is.

I thought about this distinction recently when contemplating the letter-writing commitment of Rep. Walter Jones, a Republican congressman from North Carolina's third district. For 14 years now, Jones has made a point of signing and sending letters to Americans whose son, daughter, or spouse was killed in Iraq or Afghanistan. He has sent nearly 12,000 letters. Many of them include personal handwritten notes he scribbled in his Greenville office late at night. His reason for writing stems from the guilt he lives with for voting for the Iraq War in 2002. As he ponders the enormous suffering caused by the war, that vote continues to haunt him.

"I will never forget my mistake because people died because of my mistake," he told a reporter last year. "I bought into believing that President Bush didn't really want to go to war. That's how naive I was . . . I could have voted no, and I didn't." He acknowledges that reelection concerns kept him from voting his conscience. "In my heart, I believe I let God down."

The vote Jones cast is as permanent as the guilt he derives from it. But he views penance as a way to atone for the hurt he has caused others. Since every guilt, in the first instance, is guilt before God, Jones treats every letter as a personal apology to God. By making amends in this way and holding himself accountable to families he has let down, this devout Catholic is managing his sense of guilt through acts of empathy and hope.

In these partisan times, when a courage shortage in Congress rules the day, Jones's attention to conscience, faith, and personal guilt is commendable. He seems to understand that the moral responsibility of a legislator has less to do with winning a vote for one's party and more to do with asking whether a vote is truly a blessing to

those who depend on its outcome.

*A version of this article appears in the print edition under the title “When guilt is good.”*