

Sorrows of war: A contrast to the present elation

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Though Augustine is widely known—and frequently reproached—for developing the concept of a “just war,” he believed war is essentially an occasion for remorse. “The wise person will wage just wars,” he wrote, but even the possibility of war “should cause humans sorrow because humans are responsible for it.” This acknowledgment of responsibility led Augustine to an imperative: “Let everyone grieve when he thinks about the truly shocking and cruel evil involved here, and let him acknowledge his miserable state.” The most prominent architect of just war theory was more concerned that war lead to repentance than that it can, in some cases, be justified.

Augustine’s sober attitude is a profound contrast to the barely suppressed elation of many broadcast journalists covering the U.S. invasion of Iraq. The tone of coverage by CNN and Fox News invites viewers to be caught up in the excitement, not the sorrow, of war. A swaggering approach to war has been fostered by the highest U.S. officials. President Bush seemed to be gloatingly fingering notches on his pistol when, in his State of the Union address, he referred to the fate of suspected members of al-Qaeda: “Let’s put it this way—they are no longer a problem to the United States and our friends and allies.”

A sober spirit of repentance would also recognize that a failure of diplomacy (some would say a failure to engage in diplomacy at all) contributed to the conflict. One need not deny the brutality and threats of Iraq’s regime, nor the self-interested maneuvers of other nations, to recognize that the U.S. preference for military force and its disdain for diplomacy helped forestall a peaceful solution. This posture has provoked in the world a new level of uneasiness about U.S. power. The U.S. choice to go it virtually alone in Iraq has left it virtually alone.

Repentant Christians will also be mindful of the U.S.’s sloth in addressing the conflict between Palestinians and Israel. The Iraqi war is likely to inflame the white-hot

enmity toward the U.S. in the Arab world, an enmity that has been fed day by day, year by year, by the condition of the Palestinians. The U.S. has squandered years when it could have been addressing this primary source of Middle East instability and rage. If the U.S. effort to rebuild a postwar Iraq is not accompanied by a vigorous effort to realize the Palestinians' desire for an autonomous state, then much of the work will be hollow.

Foremost to be grieved, of course, is the outcome of all war: devastating loss. The loss of a future for all who die and their loved ones. The loss of normal expectations and aspiration for all those maimed or wounded. The loss of property, resources and environmental health, which will be cast aside in war's devastation. The imperative to grieve such losses, and to repent all the ways that "humans are responsible," takes precedence over the finer calculations of blame or justification.