

An occasion of sin: The UN squeeze of Iraq

by [Todd David Whitmore](#) in the [December 2, 1998](#) issue

A constant in the conflict between the United Nations and Saddam Hussein is the imposition of economic sanctions against Iraq. Each side claims that the "humanitarian impact" of the sanctions is the fault of the other side. Though the exact impact of sanctions is difficult to ascertain, it's estimated that 500,000 people have died as the result of sanctions, about half of them children under five. The claims of each side--that it is utterly exonerated while the other side is completely guilty--strains credulity.

How should Christians think about the morality of sanctions and their impact on civilians? One traditional tool in Christian moral thought for assessing responsibility in the taking of noncombatant lives is the principle of "double effect." The principle holds that every act has at least two kinds of effects: the intended effect, the one that a moral agent is responsible for; and indirect "side effects" for which she is not morally responsible (although she should reduce their evil as much as she is able). The military's use of the term "collateral damage" is equivalent in some ways to the principle of double effect. Collateral damage is an unintended side effect of a separate and directly intended military objective.

The problem with the principle of double effect--particularly in complex situations--is that it is too simple. In a situation such as the conflict between Iraq and the United Nations, there are varying degrees of responsibility or culpability which the principle of double effect does not allow for. According to the principle of double effect, a moral agent is either culpable or not. Furthermore, in complex situations there is a shared responsibility or culpability; the principle of double effect recognizes only one party as responsible or culpable.

Finally, the clean-cut nature of the principle of double effect tempts those who use it into moral manipulation. If a complex situation is interpreted simplistically, so that there must be one party that is fully culpable while the other is not culpable at all,

then there will be a strong temptation to manipulate analysis of the situation in order to be the party counted as fully exonerated.

Anyone who is pro-U.S., for example, and uses the principle of double effect to help clarify the moral status of the Iraq crisis will have a stock in seeing Hussein as the one solely culpable for events, and the U.S. as wholly innocent. The question is whether there are other or better tools for discerning shared responsibility than the principle of double effect.

One such tool is the idea--developed most thoroughly in the pre-Vatican II "manuals" of moral theology--that moral agents can create or contribute to the "occasion of sin" of another moral agent. While intended to help instruct priests to hear confessions and determine penance, the idea of "occasions of sin" helps an analysis of economic sanctions because it overcomes the shortcomings of the principle of double effect: it allows for gradations of culpability, for shared culpability, and therefore is less subject to manipulation.

The idea behind "occasions of sin" is that one party can create or contribute to a situation in which another party is likely to sin. In general, the party that commits the sin is still most responsible for the sin, but the one that creates or contributes to the situation is not without culpability. The idea of "occasions of sin" allows us to say that Iraq bears the major portion of the culpability for the civilian deaths and that the U.S. still bears some of the responsibility.

To say that a party that creates or contributes to the occasion of sin is culpable is not to say that the other party would not have sinned at all without this particular "occasion." For example, if a person hosts a Christmas gathering where alcohol is available and invites a recovering alcoholic who then gets drunk, it does not mean that the recovering alcoholic would not have gotten drunk otherwise. In the case of Iraq, that half a million more persons have lost their lives due to the sanctions than would otherwise be the case indicates a significant contribution to the occasion of sin by the U.S. and its allies. This is not to say that Hussein is not a ruthless tyrant; he is.

Power relationships between the party that creates and contributes to the "occasion of sin" and the party that commits the sin are also important in this analysis. Indeed, in some instances, a powerful creator of a situation of sin can be more guilty than the one who commits the sin. This kind of reasoning lies behind laws that make

parents responsible for a child's truancy or delinquency.

I do not believe that the U.S. and the UN bear greater responsibility for the situation in Iraq than does the government of Iraq, but I do want to point out the unsettling way in which the U.S. has used its power to shape the image of itself as merely concerned, and not responsible, for the innocents in Iraq. In the armed conflict portion of the Persian Gulf war, the U.S. shaped the "occasion" such that it appeared as if the coalition was not directly responsible for any civilian deaths. Even the number of indirect deaths attributed to the coalition's military action was relatively small (5,000 to 10,000). However, the bombing of targets located in cities well after the military victory was at hand means that a significant number of these "indirect" fatalities were avoidable.

The "hyper-war" strategy (over 2,000 sorties a day from beginning to end without pause) limited the possibility of Iraqi soldiers--who in certain circumstances were for all practical purposes noncombatants--to surrender. Heavy bombing of infrastructure led to tens of thousands of civilian deaths after the armed conflict--deaths that were not counted as either direct or indirect because they were not considered part of the "war." The alliance's restriction on information meant that U.S. civilians could not raise questions without being met with the charge that they were not in a position to question. If not for independent efforts, the U.S. military's refusal to attempt a count of deaths would have effectively covered up a full account of the war's costs. All of these actions are attempts to shape the occasion so as to appear guiltless.

George Lopez and David Cortright, who have served as consultants for the UN's Department of Humanitarian Affairs, give further evidence that the U.S. is contributing to the occasion of sin by making the demands on Iraq more severe. They write, "The Security Council's refusal to reciprocate Iraq's partial concessions suggests that the purpose of the continuing sanctions, at least for the U.S., is no longer (or was never merely) to enforce Resolution 687. The political goalposts have been moved. Resolution 687 states explicitly that the ban on Iraqi exports will be lifted when Iraq complies with UN weapons inspections. But U.S. Secretary of State Madeleine Albright declared in March 1997 that the U.S. does not accept this view. This is implicit in the many statements from U.S. officials that the sanctions will not be lifted until Saddam Hussein is removed from power." Supporting this interpretation of U.S. intentions is a November 1997 statement by President Clinton that "sanctions will be there until the end of time, or as long as he lasts." Damn the innocents, full speed ahead.

One might respond that efforts to supply humanitarian aid--and to let Iraq sell oil for food--indicate deep concern for the noncombatants and relieve the U.S. and UN from culpability in any occasion of sin. The U.S. and UN have given Hussein the opportunity--the occasion--not to harm Iraqi citizens, at least not to bring them below subsistence levels. Therefore, any deaths of innocents is indirect and unintentional on the part of the U.S. and the UN.

Such actions on the part of the U.S. and the UN may have counted on their behalf in the early stages of the food-for-oil program, but when such efforts were rebuffed and the UN and U.S. could foresee that they would be rebuffed in the future, then the continued offer of opportunities which one knows will be rejected does not make one blameless. The U.S. and the UN are culpable when they continue to impose sanctions, in part, on the basis of conditions they know Hussein will not accept.

Here the ability to foresee consequences is a factor in one's culpability when there are further alternatives. The example of the alcoholic at the party is illustrative: one can offer the opportunity of nonalcoholic drinks, but if the friend still insists on drinking alcohol, then another approach is necessary--say, getting rid of all the alcoholic beverages or canceling the party. When Iraq refuses food-for-oil programs, the U.S. and UN must use their power to alter the occasion. Lopez and Cortright suggest two ways of doing so. The first is to use targeted sanctions: banning only military related goods and allowing trade in all other goods. The other is to match Iraqi progress in disarmament with a gradual lifting of the sanctions.

If Lopez and Cortright's proposals are tried and still do not work--that is to say, noncombatants continue to die in significant number--then it is imperative for the U.S. and UN to remove themselves from the occasion of sin. The sanctions must be lifted. According to the just-war tradition, if the norms cannot be met, then one must cease one's aggression, whatever form it takes and however otherwise justified.

This is not to say that the removal of the sanctions would make us morally pure. Removing the sanctions may mean that another set of innocents dies--as a result of Saddam Hussein's direct acts of aggression against other countries or the Kurds. It is dubious to use moral argumentation to depict ourselves as escaping guilt altogether.

During World War II, H. Richard Niebuhr wrote a series of articles for the *Christian Century* on whether and how God is in the war. He used the crucifixion as his interpretive lens and concluded that the meaning of war is that the innocent suffer.

Although Niebuhr was a pacifist, this insight can be carried over to illuminate how, in the just-war tradition under the cross, the decision to withdraw in light of the impossibility of meeting the stated moral criteria is not a claim of moral purity but a recognition that we are all guilty and therefore all in need of redemption.

This understanding of the just-war tradition also clarifies that such withdrawal does not so much leave the calculus concerning sanctions to the power-politics "realists," but rather keeps Christian discernment Christian. The U.S. may move at some point to bomb Iraq, and do so claiming that any shedding of innocent blood is on Hussein's hands. But if it does, it is important that it does so without support from those who live under the cross.