Indefensible war: Iraq

by [Miroslav Volf](#) in the [September 25, 2002](#) issue

The "grave and gathering danger" hanging over the world is not so much the danger that Saddam Hussein presents (as President Bush insists) but the danger of American preemptive war against Iraq. The Bush administration believes that such a war is necessary to remove Saddam Hussein from power, thus preventing him from acquiring nuclear capabilities and deploying them along with the biological and chemical weapons already in his possession. There is no doubt that Hussein's regime is evil, oppressive and cruel toward its own citizenry, especially minorities, and that it represents a major threat to its near and distant neighbors. As Christians committed to justice and the well-being of all people, we must condemn Hussein's injustices and work toward a just government in Iraq. These same commitments should lead us, however, to condemn the proposed preemptive war.

Such a war is likely to bring long-term instability to a sensitive and volatile region and inflame Islamic extremism. It would violate standards of international law and create a dangerous precedent for other nations (China, India, Pakistan, Russia) that will decide to engage in preemptive wars that they believe are justified. Such political and legal considerations are reason enough not to start war against Iraq. In addition, Christians must highlight compelling moral reasons against such a war and draw attention to grave consequences it would have for already tense Christian-Muslim relations.

Over the centuries Christians have developed two basic attitudes toward war. Both would rule out as immoral a preemptive war against Iraq. The first is pacifism, which opposes military action in all circumstances and thus condemns a preemptive war. From the perspective of this tradition, such war would be a perversion of Jesus' basic teachings and therefore not simply unchristian but positively anti-Christian. Whereas Jesus said, "If anyone strikes you on the right cheek, turn the other also," President Bush, who claims to be a follower of Jesus, says, "If you *think* that Hussein will strike you on one cheek, hit him, along with innocent bystanders."

According to the "just war" tradition, which does not deem all military action illegitimate, a preemptive war against Iraq would be morally unacceptable. The central criterion is a "just cause." The Christian tradition has consistently understood that, in the words of Thomas Aquinas, "those who are attacked should be attacked because they deserve it on account of some fault." Preemptive war by definition does not satisfy this criterion, since it is waged not to "avenge wrongs" actually committed (Augustine), but to prevent wrongs that are only anticipated. Unless it were demonstrated that Hussein's regime posed a clearly identifiable and imminent danger to the U.S. (or to Iraq's neighbors), the war against Iraq would be manifestly unjust. No persuasive evidence of such a threat has yet been presented, and no links have been established between Hussein's regime and networks of terrorist organizations (except for a disputed and indirect report about Muhammed Atta meeting with an Iraqi intelligence agent in Prague).

A preemptive war is unjust for a very simple reason: it cannot be just to condemn masses of people to certain death in order to avert the potential death of an equal or lesser number of people. President Bush acts as if the entire population of Iraq consists of one single person. In his speech before the United Nations, Bush referred to the suffering of the Iraqi people—who oppose American intervention although they dislike their cruel leader—and cited this suffering as motivation for war. But he never mentioned the horrible deaths that would be an inescapable consequence of the war. The death toll among the Iraqi population in the planned war is likely to exceed the 100,000 Iraqi casualties of the 1991 gulf war. This would pile suffering upon suffering, for Iraqi people already groan, not only under the iron fist of their leader, but also under the sanctions imposed upon Iraq after the gulf war. According to UN statistics, 500,000 to 1 million Iraqi children have died as a consequence of sanctions. And we should not forget the likely American casualties, estimated by some at 20,000 to 30,000.

In addition to being indefensible on moral grounds, a preemptive war against Iraq would damage the already difficult relations between Christians and Muslims. In the popular Muslim perception, America is identified with Christianity. A war led by an American Christian president against a Muslim nation—even if most Muslim nations dislike that nation's regime—would be seen as a crusade against Islam. Daily pictures of suffering Iraqis in media throughout the Islamic world would fuel extremism and push young people into terrorist networks. Even more important (if one takes a long-term view of things), the war would make all efforts at dialogue

between Christianity and Islam extremely difficult. As a result, current efforts to bridge a gulf and lessen tensions between these two great traditions would be shut down.

The preemptive war against Iraq is not "a great moral cause and a great strategic goal," as President Bush claims. For political, legal, moral and interfaith reasons, it is imperative for Christians to condemn the prospect of such a war unequivocally. Christians must organize demonstrations, the leaders of its churches must make public statements, and individuals must begin collecting signatures—all to prevent the leaders of our nation from engaging in an immoral and unwise war.