

ΤΩ ΧΡΟΝΟΥ ΚΑΙΡΩ

“In the Nick of Time”

Occasional Essays
and Other Stuff
for Christian Students

Presented by the
President of

Central Baptist
Theological Seminary
of Minneapolis

American Christianity needs leaders. American Christianity needs *Christian* leaders. Christian leaders explain the Scriptures, bringing them to bear upon life's urgent questions. Christian leaders exemplify the life of faith, finding their ultimate satisfaction in God alone. They unite intellectual discipline with ordinate affection, turning their entire being toward the love of God. These essays are dedicated to the task of inviting today's Christian students to become tomorrow's Christian leaders.

—Kevin T. Bauder

“...Be instant in season, out of season; reprove, rebuke, exhort with all longsuffering and doctrine.”

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September 23, 2005

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What about the “Axis of Evil”?

This morning's news brings word of a deal with North Korea that may end the stalemate over nuclear weapons in that country. It also brings word of a speech to the United Nations by the new president of Iran in which he defiantly asserted his nation's right to develop nuclear arms. The leaders of the Western democracies appear to be increasingly uncomfortable with the Iranian attitude. All of this leads to the question, Would the United States be justified in taking unilateral action in Iran or North Korea as it did in Iraq?

Of course, this question leads inevitably to the next question, i.e., whether the United States was justified in taking unilateral action in Iraq. Much of the world answers that question in the negative, and a small but growing segment of the American electorate seems to agree. After all, no weapons of mass destruction have been found there.

Christians cannot permit questions like these to be reduced to matters of political expedience. All human relationships carry a moral dimension, including the relationships between nations. Wars can be just or unjust, and American Christians have a duty to do all that they can to ensure that any war in which their nation engages is just. Justice requires more than that a war be in the best interest of their country.

Many reasons were given to justify the recent American invasion of Iraq. The reason that gets the greatest amount of attention was the assertion that Iraq either had or was likely to have weapons of mass destruction. A second reason involved putative links between Saddam Hussein and Al Qaeda. A third reason involved Saddam Hussein's tyranny against the people of Iraq, not limited to his suppression of the Shi'ites and butchery of the Kurds.

Almost no one now believes that Hussein had any weapons of mass destruction. There is still some possibility that he could have hidden them well or smuggled them into Syria after the outbreak of the conflict. That possibility, however, is not one upon which we can reckon. For the moment, we must suppose that the WMDs did not exist.

Furthermore, many questions have been raised about Saddam's ties to terrorist organizations. Little proof now exists for the presence of terrorist training camps in Iraq. The dictator's ties to financial support of terrorism are also shadowy. One wonders whether the evidence would hold up in a court of law.

No one doubts Saddam's cruelty or his oppression of the Iraqi people. Does an invasion of Iraq, however, imply that the United States has a right to topple every oppressive regime in the world? And if oppression does not grant such a right in other cases, then how could it license an invasion in this case?

These are the things that the doubters are saying. These considerations appear to create a dilemma for the United States, for both Iran and North Korea are advancing toward nuclear weapons (if they don't already have them) and are governed by oppressive regimes. It would appear that either the United States is obligated to invade Iran and North Korea, or else that the United States had no moral ground for invading Iraq.

This is a false dilemma. The situations of North Korea and Iran are not parallel to the situation in Iraq in at least one important respect. As the result of its failed war against Kuwait, Iraq was under the terms of a cease-fire since April of 1991.

How was this cease-fire imposed? Late in 1990, Iraq invaded the nation of Kuwait, resulting in the intervention of several nations under the auspices of the United Nations. Led by American troops, the enemies of Iraq had counter-invaded, defeating the Republican Guard, decimating Saddam Hussein's imposing armored divisions, and advancing on the capital. Realizing that he was facing imminent overthrow, Saddam consented to the terms of an agreement that ended hostilities. This agreement was a cease-fire, not a declaration of peace. The distinction is important. Properly speaking, a state of war remained between Iraq and the invading nations. If Hussein violated the terms of the cease-fire, those nations were entitled to resume hostilities at their leisure.

That Saddam violated the terms of the cease-fire is not in question. The agreement required Iraq not only to dispose of all WMDs and to dismantle its facilities for their production, but also to submit to UN inspections as a guarantee that the manufacture of these weapons would not be resumed. As is well known, Saddam obstructed the efforts of the inspectors at every turn, refusing to grant tangible assurances of the absence of WMDs. Hussein even expelled the inspectors from Iraq. When the inspectors were readmitted, they were unable to secure ready confirmation that Saddam had not resumed the production of WMDs.

In short, Saddam Hussein was an oath-breaker who had to be perceived as a threat. The only question involved the seriousness of the threat, both in terms of its immediacy and its severity. In view of his repeated violations of the 1991 cease-fire, no additional circumstances were necessary to justify the invasion of Iraq. Any of the original invading countries would have been entitled to resume hostilities. The moral right of the United States to do so is beyond question. The second invasion of Iraq under George W. Bush was an instance of just war.

Of course, this does not tell us whether it was a wise or politically expedient war. Those are different questions. Not every just war is a judicious war. In view of the terrorist attacks in 2001, however, the administration did have to take all threats seriously (it still does). The most legitimate function of governments is to safeguard their citizens from attacks by external forces. For President Bush not to have treated the Iraqi situation gravely would have been an abdication of his duty.

He also has to treat Iran and North Korea gravely. There is a difference, however. Neither of those nations is under the same terms of cease-fire as those that existed with Iraq. North Korea is under a cease-fire (a very old one now), but its terms are different. Iran is not under a cease-fire of any kind.

This means that military action against those nations would have to be justified on different grounds than the military action in Iraq. Such grounds may or may not exist: it would be up to the president to make a case for war if he thought that war was necessary. For the time being, Christians should not suppose that they must grasp either horn of the dilemma. The conflict in Iraq was just. At least one of the grounds that made it just, however, does not apply to the rest of the "Axis of Evil." ✕

This essay is by Kevin T. Bauder, president of Central Baptist Theological Seminary. Not every one of the professors, students, or alumni of Central Seminary necessarily agrees with every opinion that it expresses.

Psal. LXXXII.

John Milton (1608-1674)

1 God in the great assembly stands
Of Kings and lordly States,
Among the gods on both his hands
He judges and debates.

2 How long will ye pervert the right
With judgment false and wrong
Favouring the wicked by your might,
Who thence grow bold and strong?

3 Regard the weak and fatherless
Dispatch the poor mans cause,
And raise the man in deep distress
By just and equal Lawes.

4 Defend the poor and desolate,
And rescue from the hands
Of wicked men the low estate
Of him that help demands.

5 They know not nor will understand,
In darkness they walk on,
The Earths foundations all are mov'd
And out of order gon.

6 I said that ye were Gods, yea all
The Sons of God most high

7 But ye shall die like men, and fall
As other Princes die.

8 Rise God, judge thou the earth in might,
This wicked earth redress,
For thou art he who shalt by right
The Nations all possess. ✠

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