
Commentary

War after the Gulf

The following document has been made available to EIR by Bishop Michael Hare-Duke, Episcopalian Bishop of St. Andrews, in Scotland. It was read to open a meeting of the ecumenical body, "Action of the Churches Together in Scotland," called to consider responses in the wake of the Gulf War, which ACTS had strongly opposed. Bishop Hare-Duke was one of the first members of the Committee to Save the Children in Iraq (see article, p. 34). The paper has been slightly shortened.

On Nov. 13-16, Bishop Avak Asadourian, Primate of the Armenian Orthodox Church in Iraq and Prof. Youssef Habbi, Vicar-General of the Chaldean Catholic Church, both resident in Baghdad, visited Scotland, thanks in particular to the efforts of Bishop Hare-Duke. They called upon churches in the West to urge their governments to lift the blockade.

Every war reflects the ideological, social, and technical features of its particular context. The Gulf War was therefore conditioned by the geopolitical developments and the technological advances of 1991. These introduced new features which in their turn raised new questions about both the conduct and morality of war today. There were a large number of novel features in the experience of the Gulf War. In the first half of this paper I will try to list these and then in the second half move to a consideration of what the implications might be.

1) The war was fought against the background of the collapse of the Russian side of the East/West polarity. It was therefore possible for the one remaining superpower to set its aims virtually unchallenged. World opinion provided the only forum for debate and any opposition depended on mobilizing sufficient moral pressure to induce a shift in the U.S. stance. The objectives of the war were more implicit than explicit. They included: a) the reversal of the invasion of Kuwait; b) the securing of oil supplies from the Middle East, particularly for the West; c) the containment/overthrow of Saddam Hussein; d) the curtailment of Iraq's nuclear weapon program. As criticism mounted, the public statement of objectives changed both in content and style.

2) The war grew partly out of the geopolitical strategies adopted by the West which had seen Iraq as a useful counter-

weight to Iran in the balance of power in the Middle East. This in turn was motivated by a desire to keep control of the vital oil reserves in the area.

There still remain unsolved ambiguities in the American ambassador's communications to Saddam Hussein immediately before the invasion of Kuwait. Was she actually encouraging him to take the Northern oil wells as part of a plan to manipulate the price of oil? This is a thesis which was argued in a program shown on Canadian TV and has never been entirely satisfactorily answered. If this were correct the American administration must have assumed that Saddam's aggression would stop short of a full-scale invasion of Kuwait. It may be that this is too outrageous a theory, but whatever interpretation is put on events it seems that some kind of chess game was being played which then got out of hand.

3) The war was fought with massive media coverage, but the reporting included major distortions of the truth. The press briefings by the Coalition commanders gave the impression of a sanitized conflict. The facts which have emerged were of "near apocalyptic results wrought upon the economic infrastructure of what had been, until January 1990, a rather highly urbanized and mechanized society. Now most means of modern life support have been destroyed or rendered tenuous. Iraq has for some time to come been relegated to a pre-industrial age, but with all the disabilities of a post-industrial dependency on an intensive use of energy and technology." (Report to Secretary General of the United Nations by the first fact-finding mission led by Martii Ahtisaari.)

4) The arguments for or against the war were given an unprecedented span of public debate while the ultimatum ran its course. How far was this a realistic window of opportunity for peace-making? How far was it an attempt to gain the moral high ground while the necessary forces were being put in place? During this period much use was made of the just war theory to legitimate or to condemn the approaching military engagement.

Implications

1) The traditional dynamics of war and peace have depended upon the idea of a balance of power at various levels. Contemporary politics operate on a global scale. Events in any one place have implications for the economy and political stability of everywhere else. At the present time there is only one superpower, the U.S.A. This requires a great deal of moral responsibility by that country to avoid any suspicion that it is using its unique political and military muscle to its own advantage even when it operates through the United Nations. Such behavior is uncomfortable for other countries of the developed world, it is intolerable for the developing South who have little indication as to where they can look for support in their claims for justice if they feel themselves threatened by American attitudes.

It is clear that the U.S. is concerned to be seen to be right. Nevertheless the willingness to hear alternative moral arguments seems minimal.

How can justice be built into the world structures in the face of a long track record in human politics of the pursuit of national interests by the power holders and at the expense of others?

It is here that talk of a "new world order" becomes vitally important. It must not be defined, however, simply by the White House, because that would be another form of domination. A new world order must demonstrate by the process of its evolution a new model of participatory power.

2) In the light of events the sale of arms to Iraq requires careful review so that lessons can be learned. Was it the result of an open market economy where people felt that they had an opportunity to achieve large orders with a customer? Or was it a deliberate policy to build up the strength of Iraq in a geopolitical chess game? Western arms traders were undoubtedly Saddam Hussein's armorers, were their governments his paymasters? What should now be the attitude to the arms trade? What would be the economic effects of change in patterns of supply and demand? How can any decisions to change be made to stick?

3) During the operation of Desert Storm western governments felt public opinion must be protected from the facts. The news was distorted to obscure what was actually happening in the destruction of Iraqi society and the consequent suffering of the civilian population. This has now emerged in reports to the Secretary General of the United Nations, first by Ahtisaari and secondly by Sadruddin Aga Khan. If it was important to remain morally clean while the war was on, what does this say about our western responsibility now to the people who continue to suffer? It has not been allowed to become a major issue in world politics or indeed in the media. We are still being shielded from the knowledge of what we did. The political ends of the war are still being pursued by the use of human suffering in Iraq. As long as the sanctions remain unlifted the health and welfare of the entire people of Iraq is at risk through a deterioration of public services such as clean water, through famine due to a lack of imports of food (70% of Iraq's food is normally imported from other countries) and through the breakdown of all health services.

International agencies have begun some emergency programs. There is a curious anomaly in this as the U.N. report notes: "None of us on the Mission team could overlook a glaring paradox: At a time when the international community is beset with disasters of daunting dimensions around the globe, we continue to appeal to the same donors to fund emergency programs in Iraq which the country could pay for itself. With considerable oil reserves in the ground, Iraq should not have to compete for scarce aid funds with the famine-ravaged Horn of Africa, with the cyclone hit Bangladesh.

We saw with our own eyes . . . the raw sewage pouring into the Tigris and Euphrates, the children afflicted by malnutrition . . . conditions are already grave in all the essential sectors assessed and can only worsen in the weeks ahead. We must achieve a breakthrough to avert the looming crisis.

It remains a cardinal humanitarian principle that innocent civilians—and above all the most vulnerable—should not be held hostage through events beyond their control. These already afflicted by war's devastation cannot continue to pay the price of a bitter peace. It is a peace that will also prove to be tenuous if unmet needs breed growing desperation. If new displacements of Iraq's population result from hunger and disease, if relief is again sought across national frontiers, the region's stability will once more be set at risk with unforeseeable consequences. Humanitarian and political interests converge in the aversion of catastrophe.

If there was any justification for international intervention in Iraqi affairs after the invasion of Kuwait the current situation cries out for a continuance of a concern, but led by humanitarian rather than economic interests.

4) How do the media exercise a responsibility for reporting war? The technology for instant communication is available. What criteria should be applied to people who seek to inform the world? Increasingly, as with the BBC World Service television satellites we can tell people what is happening. Where does the responsibility lie for ensuring what is told is the whole of the truth?

5) The Just War theory seems finally to have been exploded. There is no way in which whole populations can be excluded from the effects of modern weapons. The Gulf War was not a nuclear conflict, when these considerations would have been even greater. It was an example of the way in which the delivery of "conventional" weapons can become a means of destroying a whole nation. It would appear that we will never again be able to exercise a discrimination between fighting personnel and civilian population. All, far more than in World War II are in the front line.

Unless we are prepared to say that the idea of waging war on a whole people is unacceptable, we are in danger of losing all sense of humanity. . . .

6) Many people are impressed by the evidence that Iraq might shortly have moved to the point of developing a hydrogen bomb capability. This is produced as a justification for the military intervention. This, however, raises fundamental questions about the control of all arsenals, nuclear, chemical, biological and conventional. If the acquisition of nuclear weapons was the justification for intervention in Iraq, what steps should the U.N. have taken against South Africa, Israel, Pakistan, India or China, as they approach, or have already crossed, the nuclear threshold? Could there be a justification for trying to get a minor member, e.g. Britain, out of the nuclear club?