

Other Views

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War in Gulf: US is not justified in light of Augustine's criteria

THE ALARMING rhetoric of the president and his Cabinet regarding the imminence, almost assurance, of war in the Persian Gulf, together with the morally questionable buildup of vast numbers of American troops in Saudi Arabia, require some serious reflection during the Christmas season. These events clearly conflict with the songs we savor at this time of the year and neither resonate with the sentiments of most of the people I meet these days nor do they find support in the ethical traditions that shaped Christian thought in the West since St. Augustine of Hippo in the early 5th century.

The situation in the Persian Gulf is serious and recent reports from Amnesty International confirm the brutality and violation of basic human rights by Iraqi troops in Kuwait. This compounds their invasion and their illegal violation of diplomatic embassies in Kuwait. Thus the response of the world in the form of United Nations sanctions and peace-keeping forces is a needed action to promote stability in a troubled part of the globe. Whether any further action is necessary, or morally justified, however, is a more complex question.

The disputed borders themselves were imperially imposed upon the Arab nations by the British in 1922. The government of Kuwait has been notoriously corrupt. The morality enshrined in the Koran has been given little respect by the West because its inner logic is virtually unknown.

In judging the conditions of a given situation in an effort to determine whether the resort to military intervention is justified, the five principles of Augustine's "just war" theory have often proved most helpful over the years. For a war to be morally appropriate, the following criteria must be present: a just cause; undertaken by legitimate authority; only as a last resort after exhausting all diplomatic means; with the good achieved clearly outweighing any negative consequences; and finally, the protection of innocent civilians in any military attack. Augustine's presumption is against war unless all these values are clearly present and protected.

In reviewing these criteria with an eye to the current crisis, I note that unfortunately the cause itself is compromised in this case. Although serious violations of international law and human rights have been documented, far too many observers also see a convergence of interests from the petroleum and defense industries. So many analysts questioning whether the US is on the verge of an eco-

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nomie recession makes the entire military buildup most suspicious.

Moreover, the cost is prohibitive at a time when growing numbers of urban and rural poor can no longer find public assistance from the same federal government that suddenly can provide astronomical sums of money to support this new military presence.

In terms of Augustine's second criterion, the legitimacy of our president's election and authority is obvious. Unfortunately, however, without the approval of Congress

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and support from the American people, one can question whether an attack against Iraq would be a legitimate use of that authority in this case.

Precisely because so many informed people have pleaded for additional time for the economic sanctions, I conclude my assessment of Augustine's third criterion with the conviction that we have not arrived at a moment when military action is morally acceptable on the score of the criterion of "last resort," certainly not by the imposed deadline of Jan. 15.

The proportionality of good vs. evil is very difficult to judge. Certainly any use of nuclear or chemical weapons by either party would result in harm to innocent non-combatants, not to mention the entire natural environment. A further future harm may stem from the fact that Iraq, which uses the very young in military action, thus jeopardizes an entire generation of future leaders.

Other issues remain troubling. The fact that the US takes much of

its military force from socioeconomic groups often desperate for employment or financial access to higher education makes these issues very complex and questionable from a moral standpoint.

As citizens of the US we too quickly forget that we also have moved against sovereign nations in the past, with Panama being the most recent example. Not only did our forces violate diplomatic embassies at this time last year, we also engaged in actions that brought the negative judgment of many moral leaders in that nation. On Dec. 3, 1989, for example, the nine Roman Catholic bishops of Panama concluded a pre-invasion expression of concern by stating: "Once more and with increased emphasis, we condemn as unjust and immoral the enforced economic measures taken against Panama, principally on the part of the United States of America. While they pretend to propitiate the return of democracy, they are stifling the bases of the Panamanian economy for years to come and they are progressively asphyxiating the Panamanian people, who languish more each day under the double aggression they are suffering."

We acknowledge that much of that action was taken to stem the tide of drugs into our country, yet seldom affirm that our nation had created the "market" and thus bears much of the responsibility.

We have learned much from the tragedy of Vietnam, which so divided our nation. Thus we pray for all those who have responded to the effort to provide a "Desert Shield" and we have sent chaplains from this archdiocese to serve the pastoral needs of our troops. Our probing questions, therefore, are directed not to the troops but to their leaders in Washington.

WE ALSO uphold the right of any soldier to exercise his or her option to make a conscientious objection to this questionable effort if war is declared.

The peace we celebrate as Christians at Christmastime is both God's gift to men and women who are the beneficiaries of divine graciousness and God's challenge as well. I write these reflections on the current political situation as one of the moral teachers of our community and a fellow citizen, not possessing the last word but compelled to raise these issues as part of the Christmas season we celebrate. May true peace reign everywhere.

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