

On Trusting God, Or Why We Should Not Fight Iraq

By Eugene England

This essay argues that the U.S. is conceding all moral highground as well as precluding God's blessing us by a foreign policy that consistently forgets the highest ethic of the Christian gospel ("Love your enemies, bless them that curse you, do good to them that hate you") and abandons the clear scriptural directives about what constitutes a "just war."

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TO LAUNCH AN attack on Iraq (or even to continue to maintain a huge military force in the Middle East that threatens such an attack) is wrong on three counts: It would clearly violate the highest Christian ethic of meeting force with active, even self-sacrificing love, rather than counterforce. It would violate even the less exacting ethical conditions for a "just war" laid down in the Book of Mormon and by modern prophets for nations which cannot live up to that highest ethic. Finally, it would cost far more, in lives and suffering, destruction of oil fields, and permanent enmity with the Arab and perhaps the entire Muslim world, than any possible benefits.

The Christian responsibility in the face of violence is stated clearly by Christ and clearly reconfirmed and applied to relations between nations by modern prophets. The "Prince of Peace" taught that the final test of whether we can be "perfect, even as your Father which is in heaven is perfect" is whether we can obey the command, "Love your enemies, bless them that curse you, do good to them that hate you" (Matthew 5:44–48). However, even those who have tried to obey that highest ethic in relations with family and neighbors have tended to think it too difficult to apply in international relationships. But the LDS First Presidency, in their 1981 Christmas message, proclaimed that this highest ethic holds in every situation:

To all who seek a resolution to conflict, be it a misunderstanding between individuals or an international difficulty among nations, we commend the counsel of the Prince of Peace, "Love your enemies . . . ; That ye may be the children of your Father which is in heaven." This principle of loving one another as Jesus Christ loves us will bring peace to the individual, to the home and beyond, even to the nations and to the world.¹

Though, as Mormons and U.S. citizens, we call ourselves Christian, we consistently deny Christ's command and the counsel of our modern prophets. As President Spencer W. Kimball put the case to us in 1976, prophesying perfectly our response

to Saddam Hussein:

We are a warlike people, easily distracted from our assignment of preparing for the coming of the Lord. When enemies rise up, we commit vast resources to the fabrication of gods of stone and steel—ships, planes, missiles, fortifications—and depend on them for protection and deliverance. . . . We forget that if we are righteous the Lord will either not suffer our enemies to come upon us—and this is the special promise to the inhabitants of the land of the Americas . . . or he will fight our battles for us. . . .

What are we to fear when the Lord is with us? Can we not take the Lord at his word and exercise a particle of faith in him? Our assignment is affirmative . . . : to carry the gospel to our enemies, that they might no longer be our enemies.²

I understand this to mean, in the present situation, that God can fulfill his great central purpose, to take the saving principles of the gospel to all the world—if we will aid him by trusting him enough to live those principles ourselves and not interfere through promoting war and enmity. Now that Africa and the Communist nations are being opened up to the gospel, the last areas which have not received it are the great Muslim nations. War with Iraq, which would probably spread to include Israel, Iran, Jordan, Syria, and perhaps beyond, even involving sympathetic Muslim nations like Pakistan and Indonesia, would set back the possibilities for preaching the gospel in those areas for decades. A Muslim educator has sadly put the case, “If the West uses force in the Middle East, a Westerner will not be safe in a Muslim city for 200 years.”

God’s ability to work miracles if we will give him half a chance has been powerfully demonstrated in the recent ending of the Cold War and the opening up of Eastern Europe and Soviet Union to preaching the gospel. We have been counseled constantly to pray for the leaders of nations that their hearts would be softened so they would promote peace and open doors to the missionaries. I am afraid that many of us, like me, prayed with little faith, constantly afraid that the bitter enmities of the Cold War could never end except in terrible war. But, in fact, in miraculous ways that surprised us all, God has answered our prayers: In the stunningly short space of a year, peace has come. Already missions are organized throughout Eastern Europe and even branches in the Soviet Union itself.

As I look back now it seems clear that the way God worked was by inspiring U.S. presidents, from Eisenhower through Carter, not to respond to Soviet force with counterforce. Though Soviet paranoia about maintaining secure buffer zones around its huge nation led it to invade Hungary and Czechoslovakia and Afghanistan, we did not respond with military threats, as we are doing now in the Persian Gulf. Cynics may say we only refrained because we couldn’t win—and now we can—but the positive results of our not using force then are quite clear: Eventually God was able to raise up a Soviet leader he could inspire with patience and restraint. Gorbachev withdrew from Afghanistan, even apologized to the world for the earlier Soviet invasion, and last year refused to send military aid to threatened Communist regimes in Eastern Europe.

God was therefore able to inspire the devout Catholic people of Poland and the devout Lutheran people of East Germany and the artists and playwrights and filmmakers of Czechoslovakia to lead successful non-violent revolutions that brought hope for permanent change precisely because they were non-violent. (The only revolution that has not fully succeeded is the violent and revengeful one in Romania.)

Our lack of understanding of this miracle—and of what it means to trust God—seems to me reflected in the fact that I have not yet heard one prayer or sermon, at any level of the Church, expressing thanks to God for answering our prayers. Nor do I detect, in the war-like positions of Mormons in Congress, of the *Deseret News*, and of many of the Saints I know, any trust that God could repeat this miracle and open the Middle East to the Gospel if we would pray and practice gospel principles rather than using force.

But, you might well ask, what if there is no basis for trust? What if we simply don't have the spiritual and moral force of a united Christian nation which might be able to practice the kind of effective and active love toward Iraq that would justify God's intervention on our behalf? Or what if Saddam Hussein is really what President Bush has called him, a Hitler, crazed with power and ambition, bent on taking over the whole Middle East, totally immune to peaceful overtures—a figure of evil which can be stopped only with force, as Hitler finally had to be?

God has clearly recognized that sometimes we are only capable of living lower laws and has given specific guidance for those times when, for what seem practical reasons, we need to retreat from the highest Christian ethic to the ethic of a "just war." The Nephites in the Book of Mormon were in exactly this kind of situation—attacked by Lamanites (led by ambitious dictators) who might have totally destroyed them and with them the scriptural records and Christian gospel that was the only means of salvation for either Nephites or Lamanites. As Hugh Nibley has constantly reminded us, this situation arose only because the Nephites were also wicked. (See "Good People and Bad People" in *Since Cumorah*,³ where he argues convincingly that the scriptures clearly teach that whenever there is war it is only because both sides are at fault; in war there are no good guys.) Nevertheless God was willing to help and protect them in this situation of "just war," as long as they obeyed certain clear conditions. These conditions were taught constantly and insisted on scrupulously by both General Moroni and much later by General Mormon: (1) that they fight only defensively, in direct protection, on their own soil, of their families and religion; (2) that they fight only so long as was necessary for such defense, never insisting on unconditional surrender (in fact, usually sending enemy armies home as soon as they would stop fighting); and (3) that they never shed blood in the spirit of revenge or bloodthirstiness.

WORLD WAR II, it seems to me, provides an important case study of how God blessed us when we met those conditions and stopped blessing us when we violated them. The Allies could, I believe, have prevented World War II, with God's help, if we had lived the highest Christian ethic of active love; if we had helped to build Germany up economically and unite it with other nations after World

War I, rather than revengefully taking reparations and isolating Germany in the depression and paranoia that brought Hitler to power. Even after that failure, because, led by Chamberlain, we genuinely tried every peaceful means to prevent war and because Hitler became insanely ambitious and impervious to all peaceful means, God helped us miraculously throughout the first years of the war. The victories in the Battle of Britain and Midway and Stalingrad and the cracking of the German code seem to me instances of such divine intervention.

However, by the summer of 1943 the war was essentially won, and a concerted effort for a negotiated peace could, I believe, have been blessed to success by God. An armistice could have prevented much of the holocaust, the wholesale slaughter of civilians by bombs over the next two years, the huge military casualties of the Pacific campaign and the invasion of Europe, and the legacy of a fearful and divided post-war world. Instead we insisted on unconditional surrender and increasingly talked of and practiced revenge. We did this especially in massive raids that purposely destroyed cities like Dresden and Tokyo and their populations, until we were capable of committing what President J. Reuben Clark in general conference called “the crowning savagery of the war,” killing hundreds of thousands of civilians with the atom bombs.⁴

Our failure to trust God and follow the controlled and merciful conditions for a “just war” led, I believe, not only to these terrible costs on both sides but to the continuing conflicts of the next forty years. But we have not learned our lesson from that failure or begun to trust in God, even after he has shown his power in finally ending the Cold War. We are using the same macho, violent, hate-filled and hate-producing rhetoric and unjustified violent means in the Middle East. Perhaps most appallingly we are arrogating to ourselves the role of world policeman and moral example when we have neither the power nor moral actions and aims to support those roles.

For instance, since World War II we have constantly violated our inspired Constitution (and Mormon politicians and voters have supported that violation) in allowing our presidents rather than Congress to exercise the war-making power. This has removed the caution and political debate that our Founding Fathers clearly recognized were necessary to curb the ambitious or angry violence of single leaders and their sycophantic advisers. Thus our presidents of both parties have constantly taken us into unjust wars, culminating in Viet Nam and Nicaragua, where we have clearly not enjoyed God’s blessings.

In those wars we have directly violated the conditions for just war articulated by President David O. McKay in the April 1942 conference when, speaking for the First Presidency, he outlined—and limited—the conditions for the defensive war we were then entering: “Nor is war justified in an attempt to enforce a new order of government, . . . however better the government.”⁵ Since the 2 August invasion of Kuwait, many government and military leaders have consistently stated (clearly reaffirmed by Vice President Quayle, speaking on Halloween) that our objective in our military buildup and any military action was not only to liberate Kuwait but to remove Saddam Hussein from power in Iraq. The arrogance, inconsistency, and naiveté about what such an effort would cost boggles the mind; but it is clearly the

course on which we are set and which will deny us God's blessings if we go to war.

FINALLY, THEN, WE must consider those costs about which our tough-talking leaders seem ignorant or willing to ignore. They have set as their goals punishing aggression, protecting the world's oil supply and economy by stabilizing the Gulf region, and removing the major destabilizing force, Saddam's government and huge military with its chemical and possibly nuclear weapons. The costs of doing this through war are likely to include 30 to 50 thousand U.S. casualties, destruction of the oil fields, an all-out chemical and missile attack on Israel, and then a massive Israeli retaliation, possibly with nuclear weapons. If the war continues more than a few days, which is highly likely, Jordan and Iran would join with Iraq. Then, when Egyptian, Saudi, and other Muslim forces are increasingly faced with killing other Muslims, the coalition Bush has carefully formed would break down and we would be isolated, with possibly even a world-wide turning of Muslims against us. Inevitably our long-term goals of a stable, friendly, or at least divided Middle East, free of Soviet influence, would be lost.

It seems clear we have neither the moral position nor the military means to reach our goals through force without hugely disproportionate costs, including the loss of more important long-range goals. If we genuinely held the moral high ground and could invoke the blessings of God—or even the full support of other nations, the U.N., and the World Court—we might succeed in a “just war.” But besides having an improper goal for such a war—the destruction of Iraq's government—we are guilty of completely ignoring the legitimacy of the Iraqi position, enough legitimacy to require that we negotiate rather than going to war, and the illegitimacy of our own past actions, which undermines our self-righteous denunciation of armed aggression.

Iraq's invasion of Kuwait was absolutely wrong, a violation of international law and of civilized and religious ethics. It was also probably a miscalculation by Hussein under the pressure of war debts, Kuwaiti provocation, and taking the wrong signal from huge U.S. arms support in the past as well as the comforting signals from our ambassador right up to a few days before the 2 August invasion. But it was not a simple, insane act of aggression, detached from history or defensible purpose. Nor is there any good reason to believe that the Iraqis intended to invade Saudi Arabia. (They could have simply moved on down the coast and taken over the main oil fields and cities in a few hours, long before the U.S. forces arrived, if they had intended simple aggression rather than taking something they could claim some reason for.)

Prize-winning historian Bernard Lewis, in the September 1990 *Atlantic*, traces “The Roots of Muslim Rage” and helps us understand, apparently better than our leaders do, why there is a growing confrontation between Muslims and the rest of the world, especially the U.S., which is taking the place of the Cold War in prominence and danger—and why Saddam Hussein has broad popular support even in nations whose leaders have joined our military coalition against him. The main root of the rage is the continuing humiliation by Western imperialism, which in the past 300 years has encroached increasingly on a proud and once-great religious and

military empire. This encroachment has focused in recent years on our political exploitation of the region to assure plentiful and cheap oil and our one-sided support of Israel as a visible and dangerous bridgehead of Western imperialism. Saddam is a hero to many Arabs because he is one of the very few Arab leaders to effectively stand up to the West, and in a shooting war will be able, I believe, to draw Muslims to his side.

Saddam's invasion of Kuwait and threats on Israel touch Muslim emotions and sense of justice directly. One hundred years ago Kuwait existed only as a vague sheikdom near the head of the Gulf. British attempts to contain German power extending into the Ottoman empire (which included Iraq) and later to assure access to cheap oil, led it to create Kuwait as a protectorate and then, in the early 1920s, to draw the lines that set the boundaries of Kuwait, the Emirates, Saudi Arabia, Jordan, and Iraq. They thus succeeded in preventing any nation from having a monopoly on the oil fields ("Divide and conquer" being the first rule of British imperialism) and also prevented the strongest nation, Iraq, from having access to the Gulf.

Saddam has some basis for claiming that at least part of Kuwait has always been part of Iraq and that what he did on 2 August was no different from what we did in reclaiming by force the seceded South in the Civil War. He also has some apparently legitimate grievances that Kuwait could have negotiated, instead of, as they seem to have done, possibly relying too much on our protection, thumbing their noses at him. Though aware that Iraq was heavily in debt from its eight-year war with Iran (also apparently sparked by Hussein's need for a greater access to the sea), Kuwait apparently over-produced so as to drive Iraqi oil prices down. It even pumped much more than its share from the Rumayla oil fields pool, about nine-tenths of which lies in Iraq.

Certainly Iraq should have pursued its grievances through negotiation or submission to the World Court. But it couldn't seem other than grossly hypocritical to the Iraqis (or to much of the rest of the world) for the United States, and the Soviet Union, in the week following the invasion, to condemn armed invasion of a sovereign country as "uncivilized" and deserving of violent punishment. Each of those countries has itself quite recently committed exactly the same kind of aggression. The U.S. especially is being morally hypocritical and practically naïve in asking for unified support of the "civilized" world against Iraq. We have done essentially what Saddam has done, not only in the Civil War, but many times in Latin America, in Viet Nam, in Grenada, with our raid on Libya, etc.

How would we have responded if, following our takeover of Grenada, the Soviet Union had rallied U.N. support for an embargo and an international military force arrayed against us, demanding we withdraw before there could be any negotiations? Would we have backed down, as we expect Saddam to do, or would we have protected our pride and sovereignty, even at the cost of nuclear war—as Saddam is likely to do? Do we simply believe that, because we were powerful enough to get away with it—might makes right—we will use might to make ourselves right in the Gulf?

WHAT CAN THE United States do then, given these complexities and that it is too late to start trusting God and start living the highest ethic in this situation? We can work with our Arab allies to arrange a withdrawal of our troops, in stages corresponding to replacement by their own troops and arrangements for negotiations. Then from the moral position of putting full effort into a negotiated regional settlement, with explicit recognition of Arab grievances, including their sovereignty over their oil and the need for a Palestinian homeland, we can marshal world pressure against Saddam, including not buying his oil. We can apologize for our refusal to recognize the World Court jurisdiction when it ruled against us over our mining Nicaraguan harbors and supporting armed rebels against the legitimate Nicaraguan government in 1985. Then we can push for an appeal for settlement to that Court and promise to abide by it even if it is not entirely to our liking. Similarly, we can pledge support for a settlement reached mutually by the Arab states, pushing for their leaders to take up the suggestions for negotiation made by Saddam Hussein on 12 August and removing our demand for Saddam's withdrawal as a pre-condition for negotiation.

We can renounce our past policies of condemning Arab terrorism and condoning Israeli terrorism, of calling for and investing heavily in an Israeli homeland but doing nothing to establish an at least equally defensible Palestinian homeland. We can demonstrate that we will support U.N. resolutions against Israel as strongly as we do those against Iraq.

With these efforts, which will deserve the help of God, we can trust in his bringing us a window of opportunity, in which we can begin to practice the highest ethic of effective, loving pacifism: Then we can invest resources and people in helping to create a Palestinian homeland; we can help Iraq obtain a port on the Gulf (through negotiation, the way Jordan obtained a port on the Red Sea from Saudi Arabia); we can reduce oil consumption and dependence on Middle East oil. (Part of Muslim rage is surely connected to our having developed our affluent, industrialized economy, in which we use grossly disproportionate amounts of energy, on cheap oil and our now claiming the "right" to protect that exploitive economy through force.) In addition, through the successive Middle East crises over the past twenty years, rather than learning to conserve and to depend on our own energy resources, we have increased both oil consumption and dependency on Middle East oil—from 25 percent of our consumption in 1972 to over 45 percent today.

Given such an opportunity, with trust in God, we can do the only thing that has ever stopped the naturally escalating cycles of human enmity, violence, and retribution; we can, in President Kimball's words, "carry the gospel to our enemies, that they might no longer be our enemies."

NOTES

1. *Church News*, 19 December 1981, 2.
2. Spencer W. Kimball, "The False God We Worship," *Ensign*, June 1976, 6.
3. Hugh Nibley, "Good People and Bad People," in *Since Cumorah* (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book Company, 1988), 331.

4. J. Reuben Clark, *Improvement Era*, November 1946, 689.
5. David O. McKay, *One Hundred and Twelfth Annual Conference . . .* (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book, 1942), 72.

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