

## **Iraq and Beyond**

**The 215th General Assembly (2003) of the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.) approved the following recommendations:**

- 1. That the statement “Iraq and Beyond” be shared widely with the church as a resource for study and reflection.**
- 2. That a brief study guide be prepared, as a companion to this statement, that includes Scripture, questions, suggested readings, maps, bibliographies, and other references or study aids.**
- 3. That the Work Group on Violence, Religion and Terrorism of the Advisory Committee on Social Witness Policy (ACSWP) incorporate in the materials currently in preparation the concerns raised here.**
- 4. That the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.) be encouraged to act through appropriate partner agencies to participate in the humanitarian response to the people of Iraq.**
- 5. That individual members, congregations, and middle governing bodies contribute to “Iraq: The Peace Fund for Solidarity with the Churches” to help those churches in the rebuilding of their capacity to make an effective witness to the love of Jesus Christ (ECO# 051722).**

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[The U.S.-led war against Iraq, the motives, dynamics, and process leading up to it, and the consequences that will flow from it have presented our church and its members with serious issues around which much reflection, theological debate, and prayerful discussion is yet to be done. To encourage a process of reflection, discussion, and understanding, the Advisory Committee on Social Witness Policy made the above recommendations.]

### **Iraq and Beyond**

How can Presbyterians seeking to be faithful understand the war in Iraq and respond with a Christian perspective?

People in Presbyterian congregations struggle with the reality of human suffering that war brings to all parties of the engagement. Families lose sons and daughters, parents and spouses. Great emotional trauma and physical pain and suffering are inflicted on innocent civilians and combatants. Human sacrifice and permanent damage is involved on all sides of the conflict. No matter what happens in the military side of this conflict, the enormous human suffering that it has entailed is cause for sorrow.

People have different understandings of what this war is all about. Congregations find themselves divided. Presbyterians know they are called to be peacemakers. For some,

peacemaking means ensuring a more stable future by taking up arms against acts of terrorism and tyranny. For others, peacemaking means emphasizing diplomacy, negotiations, and nonviolent interventions to prevent war. An important debate is taking place in some quarters as a result of the war in Iraq. A broader discussion is needed. The issues in this debate will not go away regardless of the military outcome.

Historically, the Presbyterian Church has affirmed a nuanced understanding of warfare. For instance, the Second Helvetic Confession offers this role to the Magistracy:

. . . And if it is necessary to preserve the safety of the people by war, let him wage war in the name of God; provided he has first sought peace by all means possible, and cannot save his people in any other way except by war” (The Book of Confessions, 5.256).

The Westminster Confession recognizes the legitimate use of military force for defense:

1. God, the Supreme Lord and King of all the world, hath ordained civil magistrates to be under him over the people, for his own glory and the public good; and to this end, hath armed them with the power of the sword, for the defense and encouragement of them that are good, and for the punishment of evildoers.

2. It is lawful for Christians to accept and execute the office of a magistrate, when called thereunto; in the managing whereof, as they ought especially to maintain piety, justice, and peace, according to the wholesome laws of each commonwealth, so, for that end, they may lawfully, now under the New Testament, wage war upon just and necessary occasions (The Book of Confessions, 6.127–.128).

But while acknowledging the possible legitimacy of war under certain conditions, the Presbyterian Church has also emphasized the importance of seeking peaceful reconciliation of conflict. The Confession of 1967 reminds the church that its calling to reconciliation includes the political search for cooperation and peace among nations “across every line of conflict, even at risk to national security.” The Confession of 1967 warns the church that to identify “the sovereignty of any one nation or any one way of life with the cause of God denies the Lordship of Christ and betrays [His] calling” (The Book of Confessions, 9.45).

In dealing with recent conflicts, such as the Vietnam War and the 1991 Desert Storm War in Iraq, much attention has been given to the significance of “just war” teaching as one basis for judging the moral justification of conflicts. Perhaps the most important just war principle cited in reference to the recent war is that war can be justified only if undertaken as a last resort. There has been debate as to whether the decision to mount military operations in Iraq constituted a last resort. To be sure, diplomatic efforts were undertaken. The president of the United States turned to the United Nations Security Council for approval of intervention in Iraq. In November of 2002, the Security Council reaffirmed that Iraq must disarm. The U.S. accepted the Security Council resolution for disarmament of Iraq of weapons of mass destruction it may possess with the clear expectation of the U.S. government that compliance would occur within a very limited period of time. But many other nations were seeking a more extended time to let the weapons inspections work. A clear difference of opinion existed between the United States (along with

some of its allies) and other nations concerning whether all reasonable alternative possibilities had been exhausted prior to the war decision. These differences make it difficult to contend that the conditions of last resort have been met.

Other important considerations in “just war” teaching state that military action undertaken must have a reasonable chance of success, must be in proportion to the outcome that is sought, must use appropriate force, and must protect the civilian population. At different points, the U.S. president indicated a number of objectives in support of the war, including disarmament of weapons of mass destruction, removing the dictatorial leadership of Iraq, liberation of the people of Iraq, installing a democratic government in the country, and opening the Middle East for democracy. To accomplish these goals, the president and his administration embarked on the use of overwhelming force in order to remove a possible threat to the world order before such a threat was actually exercised. Such a strategy of “preventive war” was especially necessary, the administration advocated, in the post-September 11 context of a fight against terrorism.

The strategy of "preventive war" was put forth in the U.S. National Security Strategy released by the White House in the fall of 2002 ([www.whitehouse.gov/nsc/nss](http://www.whitehouse.gov/nsc/nss)). It followed the mid year 2002 publication of Joint Vision 2020 by the Department of Defense ([www.dtic.mil/jointvision](http://www.dtic.mil/jointvision)). This document is the blueprint for how the U.S. military will fight and win the nation's wars over the next two decades and describes "the creation of a force that is dominant across the full spectrum of military operations--persuasive in peace, decisive in war, preeminent in any form of conflict" (Joint Vision 2020, U.S. Department of Defense). "Full Spectrum Dominance" is defined as follows:

The label full spectrum dominance implies that US forces are able to conduct prompt, sustained, and synchronized operations with combinations of forces tailored to specific situations, and with access to and freedom to operate in all domains—space, sea, land, air and information. Additionally, given the global nature of our interests and obligations, the United States must maintain its overseas presence forces and the ability to rapidly project power worldwide in order to achieve full spectrum dominance (Joint Vision 2020, U.S. Department of Defense, p. 6).

The new policy of full spectrum dominance, together with the strategy of preventive war, represents a significant change in U.S. military doctrine. In this posture, the U.S. reserves to itself the right to intervene with military force anywhere in the world with dominant force, unilaterally, in a preventive war to protect its interests. Moreover, those who oppose this policy believe that it has the potential to change the nature of international relations even more than acts of terrorism by any other entities. There is a great likelihood that this U.S. policy will tend to increase the anxiety within many nations. They will wonder where the U.S. will choose to strike next. The probability of increased hostility toward the U.S. and its citizens in many places around the world will be greatly increased.

Many groups, using the tenets of “just war” teaching, have raised questions about the very nature of “preventive war.” The consequences such as “preventive war” when waged against a Muslim nation, for example, might produce worldwide Muslim hostility, further terrorist acts of violence, deeper resentment of American power, and the further destabilization

of the Middle East. Moreover, those who raised these concerns thought that the human and financial cost of the war would go well beyond what is morally acceptable.

Another danger is the precedent “preventive war” sets for other governments to settle chronic conflict. The differences in these views raise a number of serious questions that require more thoughtful study and reflection. Among others, these include but are not limited to the following:

1. How does the policy of “full spectrum dominance” relate to the values of the gospel?
2. How can Presbyterians, together with other people of faith, fulfill their responsibility to actively work for peace in relation to this new U.S. military policy?
3. What are the unique responsibilities and limitations of a “superpower nation?”
4. How does a “superpower” keep the use of war for national security and the duty of humanitarian intervention appropriately connected?
5. How does a “superpower nation” keep a perspective of moral self-criticism?

Not since the Vietnam War have we had to deal with this amount of strong disagreement in times of war. Indeed, unlike what happened in the case of Vietnam, this opposition to the war against Iraq was expressed even before the war began and has not gone away even though war itself tends to override the inclination to tolerate differences. The more a war is conducted from premises that are debatable, the greater the possibility that dissent from that war will be met with official hostility. The church must urge every jurisdiction within the land, from the federal government to the local governing body, to make every effort to protect the right of disagreement, to sustain the civility of policy debate, and to tolerate demonstrations in support of all viewpoints.

In the face of the disagreement between the current administration and much of the religious community in the U.S. and around the world, as well as conflict within the church over the war with Iraq and, more generally, the doctrine of preventive war, this study offers the following for thought and discussion.

1. The anguish of those who feel that this war is unjustifiable and the conviction of those who support the war must be acknowledged as legitimate moral responses that should not be condemned. Furthermore, strong support and deep concern for United States military personnel involved in the war with Iraq does not necessarily imply support for the decision that directed them into the conflict. Moreover, Christians must maintain their concern not only for their own who are in harm’s way as a result of this war, but for all of God’s children who are in danger of suffering and death.

2. The differences of moral judgment between individual members of various religious groups must be openly acknowledged without becoming occasions for hostility or rancor. While the positions of various churches may be critical of a particular policy for well-thought-out

reasons, that does not require individual members to support those positions. It should prompt all people to pay respectful attention to the basis on which the churches have arrived at those positions and to make their differences clear with poise and graceful thoughtfulness. God alone is the Lord of the conscience in matters of moral judgment. To hold a position in obedience to conscience warrants respect from those who hold differing positions. This does not mean that debates about the morality of war should be tabled for the sake of maintaining an assumed sense of peace within congregations. Such debates are going to be part of American political, social and religious life for many years into the future and churches have an important contribution to make that process both respectful and probing.

3. The 215th General Assembly (2003) urges that in the conduct of hostilities that are now going on, or that will take place in the future, every effort possible is made to protect civilian lives and to abide by all other international conventions designed to mitigate harshness and excess in the conduct of military operations. The United Nations is the most appropriate agency for the monitoring of human rights. This involves, but is not confined to, appropriate treatment of the prisoners and hostages of war, avoidance of obliteration tactics, making provisions for the care of refugees and displaced persons, and the restoration of destroyed infrastructures. The minimization of suffering and the healing of damage must be just as central a concern as the thrust for victory.

4. The renewal of Iraq's economic and civil life must be affirmed as a moral obligation. Further, the cultural and historic traditions of a people must be regarded with respect. The initiative of the Iraqi people to reorganize the life of their nation must be encouraged and supported. Processes for self-determination must be thoughtfully planned and carried out under the supervision of the United Nations.

5. The 215th General Assembly (2003) lifts up the importance of the United Nations. It calls upon the United States to support the United Nations as the international entity that can be the most helpful agent for coordinating the rebuilding of Iraq and assuring that human rights are protected. It encourages all nations to work together through the United Nations toward reconstruction in Iraq after the war.

6. The natural resources of any nation, such as Iraqi oil and minerals, belong to the people of that nation. They should not become a commodity from which an occupying army, a foreign interim government, or even a United Nations transitional administration may benefit or support itself for an extended stay.

7. The religious community, including the Christian churches, will have a significant role to play in humanitarian aid, civic and social renewal in Iraq. The church has an opportunity to partner with sister churches in Iraq (there are five Presbyterian congregations in Baghdad) to contribute to the humanitarian recovery of the people.

The Worldwide Ministries Division suggests the following concerns for additional discussion and prayer:

1. Attitudes of resentment and hostility growing within Muslim societies toward the United States would affect, in the first instance, the relations between Christians and Muslims, especially the relations of PC(USA) partner churches with their neighbors in the region, and their long-term efforts toward mutual trust-building. Partners in Pakistan and Indonesia, for example, have already experienced such tensions.

2. Security of PC(USA) and other ecumenical mission personnel may suffer, as well as the effectiveness of their work in the present and their recruitment in the future. Several PC(USA) mission personnel have had to be temporarily evacuated, and are understandably anxious about the future of their ministries. The very integrity and credibility of our partnership relations in vast regions of the world may be in jeopardy.

3. The witness of PC(USA) partner churches and ecumenical bodies in the entire region will long be affected by the Iraq crisis. At the heart of continuing strife in the Middle East is crisis in the land of Christ's birth, life and ministry, death and resurrection. Christian witness has continued unbroken for two millennia, but now faces the severe challenge of survival in the face of massive Christian emigration caused by political and economic exigencies and the unrelenting suffering of Palestinians under military occupation.

As people of faith, we are called to love even our enemies and seek reconciliation. The conflict between the United States and Iraq is a challenge to all of us to live into the calling of our Lord to show compassion, seek justice, and demonstrate commitment to the building up of life beyond the war.

In a climate where our work may continue for some time to be inaccurately seen as projection of U.S. power, we will need a spirit of humility and patience, willingness to trust and accompany partners, and the guidance of the wisdom of the Holy Spirit.