

The Thoughtful Patriot—1991

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DURING THE FIRST FEW WEEKS of January this past year, I suspect the thoughts of most Americans seldom moved for very long from the subject of war. Most of us felt hopeful and fearful, stimulated and depressed, high and low, in rapidly alternating cycles, depending upon the news from a part of the world that scarcely occupied a moment's attention before last year. Many of us also found ourselves dwelling upon the moral issues and possible eternal significance of the events in the Persian Gulf and our country's role in them.

When my stake president asked me to speak on the subject of patriotism in our Saturday evening session of stake conference right at the outbreak of the Gulf conflict, I had a difficult time. Had the request come before the commencement of hostilities, I could have spoken more dispassionately, more abstractly on this subject. The reality of the war, not some theoretical conflict but one in which people I knew were fighting, brought the abstract home to roost in my conscience. It raised some ghosts from the past and forced me to do some hard thinking about right and wrong, good and evil.

I think that for most members of my generation, coming of age during the Vietnam War was one of the principal defining experiences of adolescence. The war came during a time when we were trying to figure out who we were and how we related to a larger world. As an ever-looming presence during civil rights marches, student power, political assassinations, and drug and sexual revolutions, the Vietnam War,

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whatever one's personal feelings about its rightness, was *the* major issue during the sixties and early seventies.

Nothing influenced my generation more than Vietnam. It was the center-stage player during one of the most difficult times in our nation's history. Vietnam divided this country more deeply and more fundamentally than anything since slavery and brought about the nearest thing to a civil war that this nation has experienced since the war between the states. My generation provided both the soldiers who fought in the war and the protesters who fought against it.

Few of the soldiers or protesters survived the experience un-scathed. A recent news magazine contained an account of a number of Vietnam veterans who have spent years in the jungles of Hawaii, living alone and hermit-like in tents with guns at their sides in an attempt to expiate the demons of that long-ago jungle war. Soldiers are not the only ones who have suffered from the post-traumatic stress syndrome of Vietnam. Among the most vociferous of those who opposed the Persian Gulf War, I recognized the voices of old protesters who never got over Vietnam, those for whom any military action by this country must, of necessity, be unjustifiable and wicked. One such woman acknowledged during a radio interview that Saddam Hussein's undeniable depravity had given members of her organization some difficulty because her particular anti-war movement had for so many years automatically supported anyone on the opposite side of a dispute with the United States government.

If Vietnam was a near civil war for the country as a whole, it was an absolute emotional civil war for my generation, the provider of both the soldiers and the protesters. For many a soldier and protester alike, the experience has never really been resolved. The fighting in the jungle ended many years ago, and the chants of the old anti-war rallies have faded away. The soldiers and the protesters became co-workers, mechanics and farmers, truck drivers and executives, insurance salesmen, doctors, and lawyers. They bought homes and had children and put on weight.

But too few of them ever achieved a complete emotional closure of their experiences during the war. Anyone who remembers the end of the Vietnam War, when the North Vietnamese army closed in on Saigon, will remember that haunting picture of the last helicopter lifting off the roof of the American embassy, carrying terrified refugees away from the fighting. That picture also clearly showed a throng of people struggling up the stairway to the landing pad, seeking to escape to peace and safety, but unable to do so. The helicopter abandoned them there on the steps, staring into an empty sky. Many in my gen-

eration among the soldiers and the protesters feel as if they were left on that stairway in Vietnam, never able to escape the experience.

When President Bush announced the commencement of air and missile attacks against Iraq, he was careful to reassure the American people that this war was not going to be another Vietnam. The president understood that, regardless of what we feel about the rightness of United States actions in Vietnam, nobody wants to relive the experience. For anyone who survived Vietnam, however, the commencement of the Persian Gulf War could not help but stir the ghosts of all the unresolved issues of that earlier era. My remarks here will include some of the thoughts and feelings that came to me as I attempted to deal with these questions and faced the issue of how to be a patriot during wartime 1991.

In a recent poll measuring American attitudes toward war, respondents were asked whether various wars were justified. A very high proportion, something over 80 percent, believed that World War II was a just war. The necessity for World War II can be clearly seen in retrospect. The dangers posed by Nazi Germany and Imperial Japan are absolutely clear to us now. However, it is easy to forget that right up until Pearl Harbor there was a large and very influential movement in this country called "America First" which was adamantly opposed to America's entry into any war against Germany or Japan. Prominent Americans, including Charles Lindbergh and Henry Ford, thought that Adolf Hitler was a wonderful leader. Very few accounts of World War II, the just war, include any mention that when it began a great many people thought it unnecessary and a foolish waste of life and resources.

It should not surprise us, then, that at the outset of an armed conflict, or even during its course, we will observe a lack of certainty on the part of some intelligent and insightful people that military action is really necessary. The consequences of war are so enormously serious, however, that we wish that there were no doubt in our minds about such a decision. Some believe that in the absence of total certainty—bombs falling on Washington—no war should ever be undertaken. How can we evaluate the rightness of a war? When is war justified?

During the April general conference following the attack on Pearl Harbor, President David O. MacKay stated:

I still say that there are two conditions which may justify a truly Christian man to enter . . . a war.

- (1) An attempt to dominate and deprive another of his agency, and
- (2) Loyalty to his country.

Possibly there is a third, . . . defense of a weak nation that is being unjustly crushed by a strong, ruthless one. (Conference Report, April 1942)

There are times and conditions other than when bombs are falling on our country when action is necessary and justified. President Franklin D. Roosevelt said the following during the period leading up to World War II:

The epidemic of world lawlessness is spreading. When an epidemic of physical disease starts to spread, the community approves and joins in a quarantine of the patients in order to protect the health of the community against the spread of disease. . . . The will for peace on the part of peace-loving nations must express itself to the end that nations that may be tempted to violate their agreements and the rights of others will desist from such a course. There must be positive endeavors to preserve peace. (in Bartlett 1968, 971-72)

Thomas Jefferson expressed a similar idea with greater brevity, "We do not expect to be translated from despotism to liberty in a featherbed" (in Bartlett 1968, 471).

We can speak at great length about the actions and responsibilities of our government in time of crisis, but such discussions, while interesting, do not address what I believe are even more important questions. What about my personal response to events such as these? What should I do? Am I merely a small part of a large nation, swept along in the tempests of war? Along what paths does a commitment to living the teachings of Jesus Christ lead individuals in difficult times?

In order for sailors to locate their position on the featureless ocean, they must know both the latitude and longitude, their position north and south, east and west. Either latitude or longitude by itself will not allow safe navigation over the seas.

Two standards of measurement come into play in keeping our moral bearings under circumstances such as the Gulf War: loyalty to country and an unwavering commitment to clearly distinguishing right from wrong. Both are necessary as latitude and longitude measurements to keep us off the rocky shoals of wartime error.

Doctrine and Covenants 134 was adopted by a conference of the Church at Kirtland in 1835 as a declaration of belief regarding governments and laws.

We believe that governments were instituted of God for the benefit of man; and that he holds men accountable for their acts in relation to them, both in making laws and administering them for the good and safety of society. (v. 1)

We believe that all men are bound to sustain and uphold the respective governments in which they reside, while protected in their inherent and inalienable rights by the laws of such governments; and that sedition and rebellion are unbecoming every citizen thus protected. . . . (v. 5)

Each of us has an obligation to support our nation and our leaders, and God will hold us accountable for our acts in relation to our coun-

try. The American system of government in particular, embodied in “the Constitution of this land, [established] by the hands of wise men whom [the Lord] raised up unto this purpose” (D&C 101:80), merits its citizens’ allegiance. Recall that loyalty to country is one factor which President MacKay said would justify a true Christian entering a war.

Does loyalty to country resolve all questions, however? If it did, we would need only do whatever our country’s leaders tell us to do. Unfortunately, this is not the complete solution. German and Japanese war criminals were loyal to their countries. So were Americans at MyLai.

Allegiance to our country is latitude, but not longitude. Loyalty to country does not require that we passively accept the decisions of our leaders. When the prophet gives us counsel, we are enjoined to pray about such revelation so that we, too, may receive a personal confirmation of its truthfulness. Our duty as citizens of a democratic nation is similarly to become personally and ethically involved in the decisions of our country, including decisions concerning war. A war of the United States is also a war of David Vandagriff and Ross Peterson and Ezra Taft Benson.

Walter Shapiro, senior writer for *Time* magazine, has written of this personal citizen responsibility for the war. While visiting the Vietnam Memorial and pondering the Persian Gulf, he had trouble thinking clearly.

Finally, I murmured, “I hope we have learned the right lessons from Vietnam. I hope I have.”

Those sentiments reflect how personally bound I feel in the decision of my government to go to war. No lesson of Vietnam has been more important than the respect for legality that prompted George Bush to win the endorsement of the United Nations and then, however belatedly, the U.S. Congress. Watching the congressional debate, I felt compelled to make my own decision on going to war as surely as if I had been elected to the national legislature. My anguished rationale for supporting the President—oil, aggression and cynicism about sanctions—turned into a footnote once Congress voted; what mattered was that at last proper constitutional norms had been followed. How easy it had been during Vietnam (a war mounted under the dubious fig leaf of the Gulf of Tonkin Resolution) to reject personal complicity in the carnage. Blame, as I do, Lyndon Johnson, Richard Nixon and Henry Kissinger for the names on the wailing wall in Washington. But today, for the first time in my life, I freely accept, as an American citizen, responsibility for a war and the terrible human suffering that is its inevitable handmaiden (1991, 74).

If loyalty to country is a moral latitude, Shapiro alludes to the necessity of a measure of longitude to chart a course through the waters around us. Nations have been wrong, terribly wrong, in the past; and the evil of blind nationalism embodied in the excuse, “I was only fol-

lowing orders," has been clear to all of us. A citizen's responsibility is not always merely to obey. In the phrase from Carl Schurz, a Civil War general, "Our country, right or wrong. When right, to be kept right; when wrong, to be put right" (in Bartlett 1968, 733).

Doctrine & Covenants 134:2 states, "We believe that no government can exist in peace, except such laws are framed and held inviolate as will secure to each individual the free exercise of conscience. . . ." Government is instituted for our benefit and not the other way around.

"We hold these truths to be self-evident; that all men are created equal; that they are endowed by their creator with certain unalienable rights; that among these are life, liberty and the pursuit of happiness; that to secure these rights, governments are instituted among men, deriving their just powers from the consent of the governed" (Declaration of Independence).

The free exercise of conscience is not only a right, but also an obligation for citizens. When faced with questions of right and wrong, serious questions which war raises, we may have the freedom to switch to another channel, but I don't think that we have the moral right to do so. We have the obligation to consider and measure the important aspects of our lives, both individually and collectively, by the standards of right and wrong embodied in the scriptures. If individual citizens are concerned about the rightness of our nation's actions, our nation as a whole will apply an enhanced and sharpened moral sense to the issues that confront it.

In the words of William Penn, "Governments, like clocks, go from the motion men give them, and as governments are made and moved by men, so by them they are ruined too. Wherefore governments rather depend upon men, than men upon governments . . . for liberty without obedience is confusion, and obedience without liberty is slavery" (in Newquist 1964, 42n2).

One important moral issue during war time is how we regard our enemies. I must confess, as I listened to the words broadcast on Radio Baghdad and heard the arguments of some Muslim spokesmen, I was reminded of "the Austrian-born philosopher Ludwig Wittgenstein [who] once remarked that if you ask a man how much is 2 plus 2 and he tells you 5, that is a mistake. But if you ask a man how much is 2 plus 2 and he tells you 97, that is no longer a mistake. The man you are talking with is operating with a wholly different logic from your own" (in Friedman 1990, 431).

It is easy during wartime to develop a hatred for those who support the other side. They don't make bad guys much worse than Saddam Hussein. There has been a tendency for us to dehumanize the Iraqis

and their fellow travelers. I believe that this is wrong. They are human beings and children of our Heavenly Father. I am angry that they have engaged in brutal actions which have caused so much suffering among innocent people. I am angry that our young men and women have had to risk their lives, leaving families behind, because of Iraqi aggression. I became angry when non-Iraqis demonstrated in the streets in support of Saddam Hussein.

I believe that this anger is justified, but I am trying hard not to let it become hate. I think that anger towards another individual is morally correct under some circumstances, but allowing anger to express itself through hatred is not. This distinction for me is similar to loving the sinner while despising the sin.

Some voices have, I believe, moved too far toward hatred, but others have gone too far in the other direction, toward passive acceptance of wrongful acts. Invading a peaceful country which does not threaten your own is never justified, even if you are Iraqi and even if you are sincere in your beliefs. One can be very sincere in one's beliefs and very wrong at the same time.

For the thoughtful patriot in 1991, righting the wrong done in the Middle East is an ethical goal. The latitude of loyalty toward country and the longitude of right and wrong chart a course which leads inevitably into the horror of war. When the course leads in that direction, one may hate the idea of war and its waste but still support one's nation in a war.

Robert E. Lee wrote of this conflicting loyalty, "True patriotism sometimes requires of men to act exactly contrary, at one period, to that which it does at another, and the motive which impels them—the desire to do right—is precisely the same. The circumstances which govern their actions change; and their conduct must conform to the new order of things" (in Dunn 1987, 118).

This describes the strange quandary in which some of my generation find themselves. Having come of age steeped in adamant opposition to the Vietnam War, we thought that this part of our lives was settled. The soldiers and the protesters had considered the issue of Vietnam with concentration born of personal involvement, and many concluded that this war was wicked. We grew up during the Cold War with nuclear oblivion only a button push away. Based on these experiences, we became pretty comfortable with the idea that most wars that we might encounter would be wicked. We based this conclusion on Lee's "desire to do right."

Then along comes Saddam Hussein, pushing infants out of incubators. We are shoved up against a contradiction. If war is wicked and if what Iraq is doing is wicked, what are we going to do if we desire to

support virtue? An old quote from Edmund Burke comes floating uncomfortably into our formerly well-settled conscience, "The only thing necessary for the triumph of evil is for good men to do nothing."

Is war the worst thing? Always? Sometimes?

John Stuart Mill said, "War is an ugly thing, but not the ugliest thing. The decayed and degraded state of moral and patriotic feeling which thinks nothing is worth a war is worse. A man who has nothing for which he is willing to fight, nothing which he cares more about than his own personal safety, is a miserable creature who has no chance of ever being free unless made so by the exertions of better men than himself."¹

If by failing to choose war, despite its terrible price, we encourage or foster or condone evil, we have made an enormous moral error. The path charted by the longitude of right and wrong always runs counter to evil.

In the words of Pahoran to Captain Moroni, "Therefore, my beloved brother, Moroni, let us resist evil, and whatsoever evil we cannot resist with our words, yea, such as rebellions and dissensions, let us resist them with our swords, that we may retain our freedom, that we may rejoice in the great privilege of our church and in the cause of our Redeemer and our God" (Alma 61:14).

It is my hope that as a nation and as individuals, we may draw from this difficult experience in the Persian Gulf a sharpened and more finely developed commitment to resisting evil in all its guises, whether in the form of dictators abroad or moral decline at home. As we fight to resist evil, may we also fight to protect, promote, and uphold the good and the right and the virtuous.

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¹ The author believes that this is an accurate quote from John Stuart Mill, but has not been able to locate a printed source. If John Stuart Mill did not, in fact, make this statement, someone should have.