

Is There Such a Thing as a “Moral War”?

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AS ANTI-WAR DEMONSTRATIONS gained in size and frequency throughout the Western world during the Gulf War, it is doubtful that many Latter-day Saints took part, if experience during earlier conflicts is anything to judge by. Anti-war displays may or may not be the best vehicle with which to demonstrate opposition to all war in general and the Gulf War in particular. However, it seems that most Latter-day Saints never even consider whether to demonstrate or not—opposition to war amongst our ranks is meagre at best. This essay is an attempt to sway more Saints to remember what I feel is an anti-war heritage, and to apply a little common sense towards the issue of war in general and the Gulf War in particular.

Polls taken in January 1991, as the Gulf War was heading towards its climax, show that the vast majority of Americans supported their government’s role in the war, although the same polls show a lack of understanding of *why* the U.S. was involved. Polls in the rest of the Western world showed that citizens were somewhat more ambiguous in their support.¹

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¹ Gallup poll quoted on CNN 22 February 1991. Canadian opinion summarized in CROP-Globe poll quoted in *The [Toronto] Globe and Mail*, 16 February 1991, and Decima poll quoted in *The Ottawa Citizen*, 17 February 1991. Non-North American opinion is an impression gained in various personal discussions with acquaintances in Germany, as well as from news broadcasts in Germany and England.

Only 50 percent of Canadians, the U.S.'s closest allies, supported the war, and usually with some qualification. The official government position, as usual, was to support the U.S. government virtually without question; in fact, the Canadian government committed, very early in the conflict, twenty-six CF-18 fighters which accompanied Coalition bombers on attack sorties against Iraq, two destroyers in the northern Persian Gulf, and several other minor "assets" (*Ottawa Citizen*, 17 Feb. 1991).

If past experience can be relied upon, and if the admittedly limited "polling" I have conducted amongst North American Saints is representative, LDS support for the war has been relatively strong. Most Church members see their support as a moral issue, involving their patriotic duty. All wars in which the United States and its allies engage are "good" wars, they reason, because it is against American morality to engage in "bad" wars.

Perhaps this is why the Vietnam War was so traumatic for Americans in general, and U.S. Latter-day Saints in particular. Perhaps for the first time since the Korean War, widespread doubts arose in many people's minds about the "righteousness" of war involving the U.S. Many "draft dodgers" came to Canada, of course, and some of these were LDS. My home teaching companion in the student ward where I lived in the mid-seventies was quite open about his reasons for coming to Canada and even claimed that his Church membership had been threatened by local Church leaders in California. Not only did he feel safer in Canada, but his status proved to be no barrier to Church activity—he was called as a counselor in the branch presidency. This particular individual returned to the U.S. eventually, but others like him have remained, and their relatively liberal attitudes towards Vietnam (and, one presumes, more recent adventures such as Grenada, Panama, Nicaragua, and Kuwait) have "leavened" Canadian attitudes in general.

Church members often react to war news with a kind of "millennialist anticipation," an almost backhanded joy arising from the belief that we are truly in the last days, that the Second Coming is coming ever closer. As Bruce R. McConkie wrote: "Truly, in the last days men 'shall be drunken with their own blood, as with sweet wine' (Isa. 49:26). All these things have begun; they are now underway, and they shall increase in intensity and in horror until that dreadful day when the God of battles himself shall descend from heaven with a shout and with the trump of the archangel" (1982, 374).

However, with some very limited exceptions, Mormonism does not have a tradition of "the just war," as defined by other Christian writers, such as St. Augustine and the current archbishop of Canterbury,

who has supported the right of Britain to go to war against Iraq. The traditional LDS view on war in general is tied to our concept of being “in the world, but not of the world.” In his essay on Zion, Hugh Nibley sets up “Babylon”—the world as it currently is—in contradistinction to “Zion,” which is the world as it ought to be, and tells us that the duty of every Saint is to flee Babylon, even if the only way we can do that is in our hearts: “In its present state the world is far from qualified to receive a celestial society in its midst. But if we today cannot achieve Zion, we can conceive of it. . . . It must always be kept in mind, not as a present reality, but as the goal toward which all the labor of the Church is a preparation (1989, 21). Generally speaking, then, our duty to Zion is to flee from—in other words, to abhor—the evils of Babylon, including war.

There are, however, two caveats to this general attitude. First is the justification (even obligation) of self-defense, as mentioned, for example, in Alma 43:47: “And again, the Lord has said that: Ye shall defend your families even unto bloodshed. Therefore for this cause were the Nephites contending with the Lamanites, to defend themselves, and their families, and their lands, their country, and their rights, and their religion.” Apologists for Western involvement in the Gulf conflict defend military force for precisely this reason. The U.S. and other Western governments emphasized time and time again that this war was not about the geopolitics of oil, but about “rights,” specifically, the right of Kuwait to have its sovereignty respected. A common parallel was drawn between Iraq’s invasion of Kuwait and Nazi Germany’s invasion of Czechoslovakia. Since Allied acquiescence to Hitler’s actions in 1938 eventually allowed Hitler a free hand to expand his aggression, these voices argued, so would Saddam Hussein expand his aggression. Today Kuwait, tomorrow Saudi Arabia and Israel.

The second caveat is the Church’s belief in being subject to civil authority. The Church has always admonished its members to obey the law, and this means participating in wars when ordered to do so. Many members seem to jump to the conclusion that this means the Church *supports* war. That conclusion doesn’t follow, however, as long as it is our bodies, not our hearts, which are committed to serving an evil enterprise. The guilt, in this case, lies with “those who ‘sit in their places of power in a state of thoughtless stupor,’ those rulers in the world who in a frenzy of hate and lust for unrighteous power and dominion over their fellow men, put into motion eternal forces they do not comprehend and cannot control. God, in His own due time, will pass sentence upon them” (in Hildreth 1982, 220). Whether wars like the Gulf War are essentially defensive, and therefore morally justifiable, has a lot to do with what I feel is a misconception. Many believe

that because the United States was founded by divine intervention, wars involving the United States are automatically morally justified, even holy wars, and are always waged against some evil like Hitler or Hussein.

Perhaps Saints who do not live in the U.S. are more likely to separate the role of the United States as the "cradle of the restoration" (where an order of government was established which both allowed the restoration and which has served as an example to the rest of the world) from its role as the continuing standard bearer of morally superior political views. The Church clearly celebrates the U.S. Constitution as an inspired document and considers the implementation of its principles by a secular government for the first time in history as virtually a divine act: "And for this purpose have I established the Constitution of this land, by the hands of wise men whom I raised up unto this very purpose" (D&C 101:80).

However, it occasionally occurs to Saints in other liberal democratic countries (especially Canada, for instance, which is both a direct heir of the liberal democratic tradition of the U.S. Constitution and, by being in North America, a geographical part of Zion) to ask whether foreign policy activities of "Zion" (the secular state, the United States of America, where the restoration occurred) are morally superior to those of other countries which also happen to be part of Zion in its greater political sense. If the U.S. and Mexico have a border dispute, must Latter-day Saints side with the U.S.? Does divine "parentage" guarantee that the U.S. is always right?

According to Ether, the nation which cradled the restoration was to be considered Zion (in the spiritual sense) only as long as its inhabitants continued obeying the commandments: "Behold, this is a choice land, and whatsoever nation shall possess it shall be free from bondage, and from captivity, and from all other nations under heaven, *if* they will but serve the God of the land, who is Jesus Christ. . . . And this cometh unto you, O ye Gentiles, that ye may know the decrees of God—that ye may repent and not continue in your iniquities until the fulness come, that ye may not bring down the fulness of the wrath of God upon you as the inhabitants of the land have hitherto done" (Ether 2:12, 11; emphasis added). To me, Ether's promise seems to indicate that America's moral authority cannot always be taken for granted, but that it is conditional upon obedience to moral principles.

We are left with just the political facts to consider, then. If the United States is morally justified in participating in the Gulf War (or any other such wars which might—indeed, probably will—occur in this region in the future) then that participation will have to be justified by more than just U.S. involvement.

What possible principles, then, could justify the war we have just fought, the Gulf War? We seemed to know what we were fighting against: the evils of Saddam Hussein were legion, and U.S. President George Bush's comparison of him with Hitler was at least partly apt (if not in scope, then certainly in intent). But what were we fighting *for*? What was the prize for winning? These kinds of "morning after" questions should have been posed before the Coalition ever commenced its actions in the Middle East.

President Bush was careful to emphasize that this war wasn't about economic interests (oil), and certainly not about defending democracy: to paraphrase an editorial in the *New York Times*: "Here we go, fighting to preserve the rights of a medieval theocracy to lop off the heads of adultresses." The cause that U.S. leaders chose as their ensign was something called "a new world order" (in Toronto *Globe and Mail*, 19 Feb. 1991). This was meant to give us a warm feeling; not only was it utopian, but it hinted at a continuation of the good fight against the Evil Empire. Of course, give or take a few incidents involving careless pedestrians and tanks in obscure Baltic countries, we all know that the Evil Empire is dead.

This has presented a great problem to the military engine of the First World. But just as in Orwell's *1984*, where the three empires could switch enemies in less time than it took for a politician to finish his speech, we too, have commenced a Big Switch.

Like Paul on the road to Damascus, we have redirected our zeal from one enemy to another. Like the Big Lie, the credibility of a Big Switch depends on successfully manipulating human nature. It seems to be the nature of humans that, once they have gained some power, they itch to exercise it (of course, I'm paraphrasing D&C 121:39), and from this basic urge emerge all conflicts, great and small. But we cannot have a conflict without an enemy, and with the leader of the Second World sporting a Nobel Prize on his résumé, we have, it seems, finally turned our attention to a far more fundamental conflict—that of the wealthy North (or First World) against the poor South (or Third World).

There is really nothing new about the issues that we are supposedly fighting over. The "new world order," according to President Bush, means a utopia where big nations will not pick on little nations, because the world police will bloody their noses. This is a fine principle, but it has been applied by the United States with glaring hypocrisy. The world community has not raised even a whimper over the brutal takeover of East Timor by Indonesia, for instance, or the near eradication of obscure oriental lands like Kurdistan, Armenia, Tibet, and Bukhara. When U.S. allies, such as Turkey, invade neighbors, such as Cyprus, the U.S. seems to turn a blind eye. This particular case is more diffi-

cult to sweep under the rug in a country like Canada, because at least a battalion of Canadian troops has been serving in Cyprus as U.N. peacekeepers since the 1960s. Even more glaring has been the United States' actions as a bully in its own right.

At the turn of the present century, the United States encouraged the artificial creation of Panama when negotiations with Colombia (to which the isthmus belonged at the time) over the building of a canal to link the Atlantic and Pacific, broke down. This was a wind sown by gunboats, and eventually the whirlwind ripened, to be reaped when the U.S. invaded Panama. Its leader, Manuel Noriega, was suddenly an undesirable. Never mind that he had been hand-picked, trained, and installed by the U.S. in the first place. He was getting uppity, threatening to speed up the implementation of an agreement with the U.S. to restore sovereignty over the Canal Zone when the U.S. military dragged their feet.

It's not really even necessary to go into detail over the strategic issues involved in the Gulf War. The American government understands Iraqi motives only too well, having themselves been inspired by them in Panama (and before that, numerous other Latin American countries, the Philippines, Hawaii, Samoa, etc.). Whereas the Americans have always held up the Monroe Doctrine as a kind of rhetorical icon to lend moral justification to their domination of the Western Hemisphere, many Arabs yearn for a new Salah al-Din (Saladin) to defeat, either literally or metaphorically, the new crusaders from the secular west and restore the glory days of the Baghdad Caliphate. A crucial waterway is an issue in the Iraqi conflict, too—the Shatt al-Arab, the channel which connects the Tigris and Euphrates rivers with the Persian Gulf. Shared with Iran, it is Iraq's only access to the ocean and is protected only by the marshy Fao peninsula on the west. The only other outlet is a small port called Umm Qasr, west of the Fao peninsula, but this is on an outlet which empties totally via Kuwait. This hemming in is the source of Iraq's strategic frustrations.

But isn't this just tough figs for Iraq? That's the way the boundaries run, we would argue, and surely it was wrong for Iraq to invade its tiny neighbor just because it didn't like its boundaries? Besides, this is hardly an act of Arab brotherliness, is it? Hardly, but then it's not something certain of our supposed allies in this Coalition wouldn't also do, given half the chance. Syria, deprived of Lebanon by France after World War I, has almost succeeded in regaining its littoral, or coastal, region, which belongs to Syria according to geography (although, alas! perhaps not according to religion). Hafez al-Assad, Syria's leader, is not a very admirable leader either. If Saddam Hussein is Hitler to the Americans, then Assad is surely Mussolini. Syria

is every bit as bleak a police state as is Iraq, yet they're our allies. At least for the present.

How did we get into this mess? Peter Jennings, the Canadian-born newscaster on ABC, castigated Americans for their lack of knowledge of the Middle East during the early stages of the invasion: "Americans get an F in Geography," he pontificated in an 18 February ABC News Special. Indeed, all of us Canadians like to look down our noses at our southern cousins' ignorance of geography. (History, too.) Nevertheless, the gaps in knowledge and self-centered attitudes are common to the entire Western world in this case, not just the U.S.

For the origins of the current borders—and therefore the current conflict—in the Middle East, we have to look back to the pivotal period of about four years following the Treaty of Versailles (1918), which ended World War I. The British were then at the height of their Empire and were led by a particularly chauvinistic and single-minded prime minister, David Lloyd George. George did everything he could to take advantage of France's and Germany's post-war weakness to expand British influence in the Middle East. This was done in the guise of protecting the great land route between Egypt, which was then a British protectorate, and India, which was the jewel of the Imperial Crown. The Ottoman Empire was seen as a crumbling, impotent has-been, and the British saw themselves as destiny's natural selection to succeed the Turks in the area. In London conference rooms, they delineated boundaries that were intended to be no more than administrative provinces of another corner of the British Empire. At no time did they ever think that these would have to serve as borders to independent countries, since the British saw the Arabs as near-savages who were unable to govern themselves and who would welcome British civilization with open arms.

The Ottoman province of Syria, which consisted of what is now Syria, Jordan, Israel and the West Bank, and Lebanon, was a confusing conglomerate of Arabic-speaking Muslims of several denominations, Arab Christians, Jews, and other exotic sects such as Baha'i and Druze. Most of the Arabian peninsula never had succumbed to the Ottomans, with the exception of the western strip, the Hejaz, where the self-promoting exploits of Lawrence of Arabia took place. Mesopotamia, from the Greek name for the region, meaning "between the rivers," was also a heterogenous mixture of Sunni and Shi'ite Muslims, Nestorian (Assyrian) Christians, Kurds, and Jews. In fact, Babylon was a great Jewish city; up to 25 percent of its population was Jewish at the turn of the century, and they controlled the city's trade (see Fromkin 1989). The Jews had been there since the Babylonians conquered Jerusalem in 600 B.C., thus predating the Arabs by 1200 years.

The Babylonian Talmud, the great book of Judaism, was written there, and it was a cultural centre of Judaism in the Diaspora.

The British waded in with contradictory and confusing purposes, most of which were commercial and/or political in nature (it would have been "gunboat diplomacy" if they had used gunboats!) and failed to understand even the most basic differences in philosophy between themselves and the local inhabitants; for instance, Islam does not separate "church" and "state" as we do in the West, and the idea of the nation-state could not be successfully imported until the industrial revolution came first. Given the U.N. mandate for Palestine, the British laid plans to establish a Jewish state west of the Jordan. But their inability to get even this one noble exception to their otherwise mercantile ventures off the ground properly has contributed to today's mess. While T. E. Lawrence was gallivanting about the Hejaz with King Hussein and his sons, Abdullah, Feisal, and Ali (who together formed the Hashemite dynasty of the Hejaz), officials from the Indian Office were supporting the Hashemites' blood enemy, Ibn Saud of the Nejd province, to the east. Ibn Saud eventually prevailed by force of arms, and Lawrence and his cohorts arranged to have Hussein's sons made the caliphs of brand new kingdoms: Abdullah got the "Arab" half of Palestine, east of the Jordan; Ali got what was left of the Hejaz before Ibn Saud took it over; and Feisal got Mesopotamia, or Iraq, as they renamed it (from the Arabic, meaning "rooted place"). To the British, all Arabs must have looked alike, and they couldn't understand why these royal organ transplants failed to take hold. Today only Abdullah's grandson, Hussein, continues to reign in his area, now called Jordan; but the Hashemite hold on Jordan is precarious, as the country is in reality largely Palestinian and owes scant loyalty to this import from the south. Those sheikdoms which Ibn Saud *didn't* manage to conquer eventually became British protectorates and are today all independent: Yemen, Oman, the United Arab Emirates, Qatar, Bahrain, and, of course, Kuwait.

The Gulf war has affected us all in various ways. The morning Iraq fired Scud missiles at Israel for the second time, I awoke in my bed at home after having just returned from a business trip. It was about 3:30 A.M. and I was suffering from intestinal pains (perhaps too much spicy lasagna at a business luncheon the day before). I was in a half-dream state and thought I was back in the Jerusalem Hilton, where I had been about a year before. I thought I had taken a direct hit from a scud missile but was grateful to be still alive and reached over for the phone to let my family know I was all right. With the help of some Pepto Bismol, I woke up from that dream, but into a potentially even more apocalyptic reality that is still with us.

It is into this kaleidoscope from hell that American forces rushed, too innocent to know the mistakes they were making. From a military point of view, the war was over in a trice; Americans are now home (more or less), the al-Sabahs are back in their palace, and the West thinks that's the end of it. However, this war is far from over, from the point of view of residents of the Middle East. Nothing is as it appears in the Middle East: when Egypt's Gammel Abdul Nasser was dealt what we thought was a humiliating defeat in the Six Days' War in June 1967, he was actually hailed as a hero in the Arab World. We don't understand why this should be so, but until we figure it out, we will continue making the same mistakes over and over. Unless we really enjoy cuddling up to snakes, we had best leave the countries of the region to sort out their own affairs.

As Latter-day Saints, we need to continue to support individual members of the armed forces (of all the countries where we live) and their families. However, we should also make our voices heard loudly and clearly: war is madness, and we repudiate Babylon.

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