NATIONAL CATHOLIC REPORTER
Published on *National Catholic Reporter* (http://www.ncronline.org)

Editorial: War's end a step toward sobriety in foreign policy

NCR Editorial Staff | Jun. 7, 2013
Editorial

President Barack Obama's recent speech on international issues was a long overdue adult conversation with the American public on the state of the world, its dangers and our collective responsibility to recognize the shifts in the international landscape and the limits of power.

The speech acknowledges that the 12-year odyssey our nation has been on is coming -- must come -- to a close. The war on terrorism that we had been told was endless is ending.

"Our systematic effort to dismantle terrorist organizations must continue, but this war, like all wars, must end. That's what history advises. It's what our democracy demands," Obama said at the National Defense University May 23.

U.S. citizens, still working through the hangover of the Bush administration's profligate militarism and its insistence on dividing the world into simplistic categories of good and evil, friend and enemy, should welcome the assessment of a leader who understands that real life is never so simple.

The downside, culturally, to our inherent optimism and unlimited confidence is an unfortunate susceptibility to the grand notion of ourselves: the shining city on a hill, the guarantor of democracy around the world, the most powerful, the richest and on and on. It can make us blind to the fact that we may not be all of those things. It can, for instance, keep us insisting that we have the best health care system in the world when piles of data about outcomes and cost elsewhere paint a very different picture. We can believe that our education system is the world's best despite considerable evidence to the contrary. And we can insist that our military is the world's best and accomplishes all its missions when, again, the evidence would suggest otherwise. We end armed conflict in the 21st century when it becomes apparent that resources and will have run out, picking a spot along the line of shifting objectives where we can say we've succeeded.

Politicians are loath to puncture such myths by injecting points of realism. That is why Obama could not have delivered this speech in his first term if he really wanted a second. It provided far too much grist for opponents whose success rests on a perpetuation of an American fantasy. No president seeking a second term at this point in history would suggest, as Obama did, that we had fought unnecessary wars, that we face very difficult issues of ethics, morals and law in combating an enemy that essentially is a global guerrilla force owing no allegiance to geography or laws or a culture other than undifferentiated mayhem.

"Unless we discipline our thinking and our actions, we may be drawn into more wars we don't need to fight, or continue to grant presidents unbound powers more suited for traditional armed conflicts between nation states," he said as part of a stunning proposal to place new limits on presidential power.

The suggestion, too, was clear that we had engaged in wars we didn't need to fight, the result of both a lack of discipline in the way we think about the world and its threats, and a lack of fiscal discipline or perspective.

In arguing that increased foreign aid "is fundamental to our national security," Obama pointed out that such aid currently "is a tiny fraction of what we spend fighting wars that our assistance might ultimately prevent. For what we spent in a month in Iraq at the height of the war, we could be training security forces in Libya, maintaining peace agreements between Israel and its neighbors, feeding the hungry in Yemen, building schools in Pakistan, and creating reservoirs of goodwill that marginalize extremists."

Obama is asking the country to move beyond the kind of bluster that requires creation of a bipolar world -- us and them -- when that is no longer the reality. Whether he has the political skills, not to mention the will, to pull it off is quite another matter. Circumstance required him to include in the speech a rebuke of his own administration's inexplicable and grievous breach of press freedom. We are heartened that the president is now pushing a press shield, but it is distressing that the actions of the Justice Department under his watch made such a move necessary. And circumstances of a widespread hunger strike and insistent protests by human rights advocates -- one of whom interrupted his speech -- forced him to resolve to close the prison holding suspected terrorists as well as those cleared of such suspicions. Guantánamo is part of the hangover, another construct of the Bush-Cheney notion of American exceptionalism.

Obama has a full plate. The abuses of the Internal Revenue Service in investigating conservative political groups didn't make the speech but will be an ongoing distraction. The most significant portions of the Affordable Care Act have yet to be put in place. Comprehensive immigration reform will certainly be a time-consuming fight in the House. And obstruction -- so pervasive that Obama has been unable to fill judgeships that would have been routine in other circumstances -- seems a permanent part of the mix. So it is unlikely that the deepest considerations of his foreign policy approach will generate the kind of conversation and debate he invited.

However, a new understanding of the world, its complications and, yes, the agonies of dealing with new threats is now part of the record. That's a solid first step in getting beyond the hangover and moving toward sobriety.

Source URL (retrieved on *05/01/2016 - 18:49*): http://www.ncronline.org/news/politics/editorial-wars-end-step-toward-sobriety-foreign-policy