

Our new war president

John Dear | Dec. 8, 2009 On the Road to Peace

Last week at West Point, President Obama cited his reasons for sending more troops to Afghanistan. Obama spoke eloquently. He insisted our cause is just. It is necessary, it is crucial. Killing Afghans is the way to peace. The oxymorons rolled off his tongue.

Apparently, it does not matter that wars are bankrupting us. Or sending our young to die. Or leaving them psychologically impaired. Or degrading the environment. Or, bitterest of ironies, breeding a new generation of terrorists.

It doesn't seem to matter that most Americans want the war to stop, that most Afghans want us out. It doesn't even matter that only a hundred Al Qaeda members remain in Afghanistan. The rest have taken refuge in Pakistan. Our new war president says the war must continue.

"You would think that we don't have enough to do here at home," Ohio Congressman Dennis Kucinich said this week.

You would think that we don't have 47 million Americans who go to bed hungry, 47 million Americans who don't have any health care, 15 million Americans who are out of work, another 10 million Americans whose homes are threatened with foreclosure, people going bankrupt, and business failures. All these things are happening in our country and we're acting like a latter-day version of the Roman Empire, reaching for empire while inside we rot. We have to challenge this because our future as a nation is at stake. If we continue to militarize, we lose our civil liberties, we lose our capacity to meet our needs here at home.

We have money for Wall Street and money for war, but we don't have money for work. We have money for Wall Street and money for war, but we don't have money for health care. We have to start asking ourselves, why is it that war is a priority, but the basic needs of the people of this country are not? And how are we getting the money to pay for the war? We're borrowing it. We're going deeper into debt. We're mortgaging our future. We're creating conditions where we will become less democratic because we can't meet the most essential needs of our people. This needs to be challenged. And it needs to be challenged in a forthright way. The issue is the war; the issue is America's reach for empire. The issue is our inability to meet the needs of people here at home.

Obama and his generals are dead wrong -- this I insist with so many others. The war is illegal, immoral, impractical and plain foolish. It will further divide us. It will lead us into debt beyond our means. It will sow the seeds of terrorist attacks to come.

And one thing more, for the record. We are engaging here in mortal sin. I say this with confidence. War is not the will of God. Bombing sisters and brothers is not the way of the Gospel. This, despite our president and his generals, is not the method of Christ the peacemaker. His way? "Love your enemies. Do not violently resist

those who do evil. Put down the sword. Blessed are the peacemakers. Jesus would have us pursue nonviolent methods of resolving conflict.

The way forward is for the U.S. to press for all party negotiations within Afghanistan to create a new Afghan social contract, Joseph Gerson of American Friends Service Committee wrote this week.

This would need to be reinforced by an international conference and actions on the part of all major states involved in the war to help build and support that social contract. This, of course, also means dealing with the source of Indian-Pakistani tensions, and the geostrategic ambitions of the major powers who have insisted on playing, and losing, the "Great Game."

In this holy season of Advent, let me offer a few points. First, we have to stop making an idol out of Obama. He is not a messiah; he is not, as Cindy Sheehan jokes, "The Pope of Hope." He, like every president before him, is the spokesperson for the empire. He's increased our military budget beyond that of George W. Bush. No, our hope lies elsewhere. We have a messiah already -- one who is nonpartisan, non-ideological, and most important, decidedly nonviolent. To follow this nonviolent messiah, we must be more than liberals, (or conservatives). We need to be mature disciples. We must place our hope in the nonviolent Jesus and practice his way of nonviolent resistance.

Second, we must direct our resistance toward our nation's imperial aspirations. When Obama spoke of "protecting our national interests," he spoke like the Bushes and Reagan, like Johnson and Truman. It's the age-old logic of empire -- mass murder to protect the powerful elite. This is what we must name and resist: the anti-way of empire.

Third, we have to be suspect of "top-down" thinking. We must reclaim instead "bottom-up" grassroots movement building. Empires require their populations to be docile and obedient, to worship their leaders, to surrender their money and to kill for their elite. They instill in the masses a sense of powerlessness, a sense that nothing can be done. It's a dream come true when millions upon millions shrug and give up and shake their heads. Or better yet, buy into the myths of empire for their own aggrandizement.

Jesus, on the other hand, calls us into citizenship of the reign of God -- and to resist, nonviolently, every tradition and polity that opposes it. The change comes from the bottom up, as the Gospels show us. And Advent is a time to learn the lesson again.

Too many of us think that Obama will bring the change we want. He won't, he can't. Ours is a time of empire, addicted to injustice, violence and war. He hasn't the power to rein in entrenched bureaucracies, corporate interests, warlike traditions. What might a leader of an empire have to do with Jesus' campaign of nonviolent resistance? All he can offer is lip service.

That leaves change in the hands of the rest of us, those building the movement of nonviolence from the bottom. Recall how small it all started, in a crib, in what amounted to a homeless shelter. And from there the movement grows, in the hinterlands of Galilee, gathering steam as it approached the great warlike city. "Jerusalem, Jerusalem. If you had only known what makes for peace."

There, in the warlike city, he dies. The movement is crushed. But then, against all odds, it rises and begins again. This is how change happens, and that's what we need to remember and reclaim and relive.

And so, fourth, we need to keep rebuilding a grass-roots movement to end the U.S. wars in Afghanistan and Iraq. We need to speak out locally, help our parishes to discuss the questions, and organize public vigils against the war. We need to study and practice the methods of nonviolent resistance.

As my friend David Hartsough, a long time movement activist, told me this week: "We are on the brink of global transformation, of a true global movement of nonviolence, which means, every one of us has to be Rosa Parks. We are all Rosa Parks. We all have to take a stand for peace and justice, resist the wars and build a peace movement."

This will be a long-term project, perhaps many, many years, perhaps the rest of our lives. So we have to be rooted in prayer, patience, and love. We will need to use the three tools of every social movement: education, lobbying, public witness. But we need to base all our public work for peace in God, in the Gospels, in the Holy Spirit.

Fifth, we need to take care of ourselves. And one another. We need to say our prayers, love one another, be merciful toward ourselves, practice interpersonal nonviolence, and quietly intercede on behalf of the world's poor for the coming of God's reign of justice and peace.

We must be careful not to engage in the language of results, effectiveness or success. This is not the way of the Gospel. This is the language of empire. We heard it last week. "We have had some success," Obama said, "killing some Al Qaeda officials."

In one way or another, success is tied to violence. We are not to speak in this way or think in those terms. We are not to abide by the rules of the imperial game. Ours is a long-haul project of nonviolent resistance that recognizes the ends within the means we use. We will face defeat and appear to the world as failures. But pressing on brings nonviolent transformation.

Finally, let's put our hopes in the nonviolent Jesus, not on Obama. In these holy Advent days summon images of God's nonviolent reign, of our nonviolent messiah, of his great speeches. Let's prepare ourselves anew to become Jesus' campaigners of nonviolence. As we pray for "peace on earth," let us lament the latest push that leads to "death to Afghanis," and do what we can to welcome that greatest of Christmas gifts.

John Dear's latest books, Daniel Berrigan: Essential Writings; A Persistent Peace; Put Down the Sword, and Patricia Normile's John Dear On Peace, are available from www.amazon.com. This week, he will speak to a Catholic girls' high school in New York City, and next week, to a Catholic boys high school in Cleveland. For information, or to schedule a speaking event, visit: www.johndear.org.

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