Apologizing for Iraq

by Claire Schaeffer-Duffy

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The end of 2011 marked the withdrawal of U.S. troops from Iraq. In mid-December, I listened, while I baked Christmas cookies, to the various reports on NPR about a war that wheezed to an end without the signing of a treaty.

Here in my warm kitchen, where heat and electricity are a given, the destruction of Iraq seemed a distant event, a bit of news that I could take in or turn off with the flick of a switch.

Reports about the war's conclusion brought on a flood of memories. I remembered the many demonstrations I attended during the winter of 2002/2003. Worcester. Washington, D.C. New York. It was a time of frenetic peace organizing and hope.

I remembered the first time I cried for what we were doing to Iraqis. It was while watching *Fahrenheit 9/11*, Michael Moore's scathing documentary about the lies that led up to the war. In one scene, the camera lingered on an Iraqi woman undone with grief because a U.S. bomb had killed her loved ones. The woman wailed, prayed and cursed all in the same sentence. Flailing her hands heavenward, she beseeched God to rain fire down on the Americans and show us no mercy.

I thought of the Iraqis I had interviewed: Ra'ad, the Baghdadi engineer and astronomer whose career dreams were upended by the war, and Fouad, who was only 13 when the Americans invaded. During an interview, reluctantly given, he described his terrifying walks to school that took him past checkpoints and dismembered bodies, his humiliation and rage every time soldiers searched his home, and the deep-bone terror of bombings. "You felt like you were just being tortured inside; at any moment you could be killed," he said.

I thought of the soldiers I met who spoke out against the war: Camilo Mejia, Joshua Casteel, Joshua

Steiber. Of Christian peacemaker Tom Fox, abducted and killed in Iraq, and of the parents of Jeffrey Lucey, the ever-smiling Marine reservist from western Massachusetts.

"Jeff was your everyday kid," his father said. He played on the rope swing beside the stream behind his house, got confirmed at St. Francis Church, enlisted in the Marines against his mother's wishes and was deployed to Iraq to fight a war he opposed.

A truck driver for a Marine expeditionary unit, Lucey was at the forefront of a grueling ground invasion staged from Kuwait. During the chaos of the relentless push northward, he summarily executed two Iraqi prisoners of war, one of them a teen.

"Can't you see I am a murderer?" he screamed at his sister on his first Christmas back from war.

Five months later, he hanged himself with a garden hose in the basement of his parents' home.

The news about U.S. withdrawal from Iraq included analyses, look-backs, exposes and war costs. The reported financial total, $824 billion, does not include interest or the cost of caring for veterans in the decades to come, which could range from $600 billion to one trillion dollars.

As for the cost in human lives: 4,484 Americans killed, approximately 32,000 wounded, and "hundreds of thousands" of Iraqi dead, according to Michael White, the founder of icasualties.org, a website that tracked war dead and wounded throughout our nine bloody years in Iraq.

What to do with all of this information? How do we acknowledge its importance so the Iraq war does not become another bit of news we turn off with the flick of a switch? What public ritual of atonement is available to us, what communal act of penance for our hubris in invading and destroying a country?

"War has become a normal condition" for us in America, writes Andrew Bacevich, professor of International Relations at Boston University, "something the great majority of Americans accept without complaint."

And without remorse.

We may scapegoat and prosecute a few low-ranking soldiers for especially egregious acts of violence, or pay off family members of civilian victims accidentally killed, including $13,700 to the Iraqi man whose father, mother and brother died in a hail of bullets fired upon them as they lay sleeping. But such reckonings are feeble and never include an acknowledgment or apology for the whole damn business that made otherwise normal young people go berserk and caused so many deaths.

We have not apologized to the Native Americans, the Vietnamese, the Salvadorans, the Afghans, the Iraqis -- the list goes on. We have not apologized to the young people we have deployed to do the killing.

I do not believe this absence of remorse is because we are innately more hard-hearted than other peoples. History provides few examples of countries apologizing for the wars they have waged. Our seemingly endless talent for weapons development allows us to fight our wars remotely. We bomb from on high. We launch drones while sipping coffee. Such tactics are less intimately brutal than a machete on the neck, but the end result is the same -- the death of a fellow human being. Such tactics prevent us from facing what we have done.

To apologize is more risky than to forgive. Who knows what our opponent may do? Who knows what hard truths that could be revealed about ourselves? Yet apologies are essential to ending our reliance on war-making. They acknowledge the humanity of our opponent and begin to amend the cruel disregard that makes war possible.

"I am deeply sorry," said British Prime Minister David Cameron, referring to the 1972 killing of 14 unarmed demonstrators by British soldiers during a civil rights march in Northern Ireland.

Given in July 2010, the public apology marked one of the most extraordinary examples of a government apologizing to a people.

Cameron, who was just a boy at the time of the "Bloody Sunday" shootings, called them "unjustified and unjustifiable."

"What happened should never, ever have happened," he said.

These are the words we need to say to the Iraqi people. We need to plead for mercy less fire rain down on our heads. Or worse, we go off and kill again.