

Gone are the days when war was between armies

Joan Chittister | Apr. 28, 2006 From Where I Stand

"Are you Joan?" the woman asked hesitantly. "I thought I recognized you."

I was waiting for an early morning flight out of D.C. "And what are you doing here?" I asked after some initial pleasantries.

She took a pack of pictures out of her bag. "My son is in Walter Reed Army Medical Center," she said. I felt myself go on instant alert. She began to rifle through the prints. "He has no buttocks," she said in the same even tones. "No buttocks," she said again as she looked me straight in the eye and held my gaze. "He's concave," she said making an arc with her hand.

Then she began going through the pictures faster and faster. The young man also had no arm, I saw, and he was totally blind in one eye, damaged in the other. His life, in one blast, had been completely changed. But hers had been changed, too. After two months at Walter Reed attending to the young man as only a mother can, she had lost her job. "They want us to go to war, but they don't want to hold our jobs while we do," she said. "But he can stand now," she said with a smile. "That's all that counts."

As she went on talking, showing and hurting, I realized how our civil society is being changed in so many ways -- quiet, hidden ways -- by a war for weapons that weren't there, for terrorist organizations that weren't there, for the regime change that three years later is still not really there.

And, at the same time, civil society in Iraq is even more changed than ours.

I found myself thinking again of the conference of Iraqi-U.S. women hosted in New York City by the Women's Global Peace Initiative, March 29-31. The conversation there, too, was one long unending litany of changes. Some of them are good: Saddam Hussein's tyrannical rule was, after all, over. But most of the changes that have come about since then, they told us, are not good.

There is no civil order. "We must stop violence, stop an undeclared war," one of the Iraqi women said. "Americans should help Iraqi people, not just watch people being killed in the streets and do nothing. Americans must do something about these things." But American troops, the U.S. military says, are not a police force. They are there to confront and defeat the insurgency, not to protect the people from common looters and street gangs. So they stand by when crime happens and do nothing. As a result, a once orderly social system has been thrown into disarray.

There is no institutional stability. "I am a teacher," one woman said. "Our students have no academic year. The college is very divided along religious lines. How can we help them be united. They are the leaders of the country in the future."

There are few public services, all of them limited. "The other problem is financial," one of the delegates said.

"You sent money that we never received. Five billion dollars was spent on what? On training police -- in the U.S. and Jordan. ...What happened in Iraq was not the change of the regime. It was the demolition of the entire government."

Another speaker was even more direct: Lawlessness is affecting the society. Drug addiction is rampant. Eccentric behavior is common. "This is an Iraqi problem," your country tells us, "but who created it? Why after demolishing all our efforts are you telling us to solve these things?"

A doctor said: Services have deteriorated. Personnel is not available. The health services are now poorer in 2004 than they were in 2002. Vaccination programs are regressing. Doctors are leaving the country for the sake of their own security. One hundred and fifty doctors have been killed; 500 have been kidnapped.

There is little or no economic growth. Statistics flowed out of delegates like water down a cataract. Forty to fifty percent of the people in Iraq are unemployed, a doctor said. "Women and children will pay the price of this, the doctor said. "This will not create democracy. Addiction and drugs have increased in a country that was the cleanest country on the globe. Plasma from Iraq was the cleanest in the world from AIDS. Blood-borne diseases are increasing. ... If it continues like this, it will be doom."

There are few business opportunities -- just a U.S.-controlled Green Zone where the U.S. government deals with U.S.-certified corporations while Iraqi firms are kept outside the gates, deprived of the kinds of contacts, contract negotiations, open bids and product presentations that business demands.

And, of course, there is murder in the streets, rupture in the homes. Day after day after day. "Our children are homeless now," the social worker said. "Mothers are young and widowed. The orphans are poor. ... They need psychological help. There is no help for the handicapped children. There are now street children, and they have been raped."

"We see the prisoners' rights," another woman said, "but where are the rights of the children?"

In the end, two woman said it all, I thought, both for their society and for ours. One said, "We need a system of social programs. ... The U.S.A. must put money into the right things." And the other woman added: "We need projects for rebuilding Iraq. You destroyed us; you build us up again."

In the D.C. airport, the woman was putting her thumb-worn pictures of her badly mangled son away for another time. "Thanks so much for listening," she said to me. "Thanks for your compassion."

But compassion is not enough. Two whole societies have been grievously wounded by a war that did not need to be.

There is simply no such thing anymore as a "non-combatant," an uninvolved citizen, in an all-out military assault. However possible it may once have been to make a genuine case for the "just war," war is clearly obsolete now.

And, from where I stand, so-called "pre-emptive war" in a day of "strategic" nuclear weapons is simply madness masking as governance. That "doctrine" is heresy and it must go -- not simply to protect the integrity of other nations but to preserve our own, as well.

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