

A Sad Anniversary

Michael Sean Winters | Mar. 20, 2013 Distinctly Catholic

Yesterday was a great day for Catholics all around the world as our new Holy Father was officially inaugurated as the Bishop of Rome. But, yesterday was also a very sad anniversary for the world, the anniversary of the United States' invasion of Iraq.

4,475 of our brave men and women in uniform were killed since the day we began the war. Even more staggering, 43,000 U.S. soldiers were wounded. More staggering still, 134,000 Iraqis died in the war. Those who think war is ever a good option should be made to spend time with the widows and widowers of those lost, and with the children of those lost, and with the parents of those lost. There is nothing that can ever compensate for such a loss, not even a victory. And, it is hard to describe what happened in Iraq as a victory.

The United States has spent some \$1.7 trillion on the Iraq war effort. Of course, compared to the loss of life, any dollar amount is beside the point. But, I distinctly recall Secretary of Defense Donald Rumsfeld scoffing at the idea that the war would cost \$100 billion. Either he was lying or, more frighteningly, he really believed his own propaganda. I suspect it was the latter. War fever is an ugly thing, it is found in all types of political regimes, it spans the centuries, and it is always and everywhere known to give birth to tragedy. In addition to the cost mis-estimates, the Bush administration's war fevers led them to inflate the evidence — some would say invent the evidence — that Saddam Hussein was acquiring nuclear and chemical weapons. As we all now know, the "hard intelligence" the Bush administration presented to justify the war was soft and stupid.

I am not a pacifist. There are times I believe that armed military intervention is required. We were not going to stop Hitler with negotiations. Today, I wish we were doing more to protect the civilians of Syria from the tyrant who governs them, and I doubt it would take a full-scale invasion as happened in Iraq, indeed such an invasion would probably be counter-productive. But, the use of NATO airpower to enforce a no-fly zone leveled the fighting field in Libya sufficiently for that country to overthrow its tyrant and we should at the very least be doing the same in Syria. The announcement yesterday that the administration will not stand in the way of our allies doing more is a good first step, but a step that comes too late for the tens of thousands Assad's butchers have already killed.

In the case of Iraq, the Bush administration seemed to genuinely believe that they could export Jeffersonian democracy by flying it in with the 101st Airborne Division. Of course, democracy can only grow out of a set of cultural givens or, in this case, the absence of certain cultural givens like intense tribal hostilities that have long beset Iraq and were only kept in check by the brutality of Saddam Hussein's regime. Yes, in a sense, the world is better off without Saddam in power. But, in Iraq, what followed was not exactly peace. Indeed, there is still no peace in Iraq. The primary loyalties of its citizens are not to the nation-state but to the religio-ethnic tribe. Iraq is not a country the way France or Canada are countries. It is an oil field with a flag, established after World War I as the Brits carved up the old Ottoman Empire and set potentates on each of the thrones they erected. Its boundaries with its neighbors are less important than the internal boundaries between neighborhoods, and both sets of boundaries will be dangerous for a long time.

The overriding strategic effect of the war, one that was not only foreseeable but loudly warned against by people like Gen. Wesley Clark, was that Iran was strengthened. For all his evil, I do not think Saddam was as great a threat to his people, the region or the United States that Iran is and will continue to be. As long as it had a hostile Shia-controlled government to face in Iraq, Iran's ability to create mischief elsewhere was limited. Now, with a Shiite dominated government in Baghdad, the mullahs in Iran are free to threaten Israel, arm Hezbollah and Hamas, bolster the murderous regime in Syria, make nice with the Chinese, and send their president to Chavez's funeral. Again, this was foreseeable had anyone in the Bush administration had eyes to see.

Yesterday, on one of the TV news talk shows, former Congressman Patrick Murphy, the first Iraq War veteran to be elected to Congress, said, "People have never been held accountable" for the war, and he named President Bush, Vice President Cheney and others. Murphy is wrong. In 2004, the American people held the Bush team accountable and we gave them a pass. This is important. It is important to remember that the Iraq War had plenty of popular support. The war authorization received the votes of many Democrats in both houses of Congress. In the wake of the terrorist attacks of September 11, very few were willing to step up and oppose a war against a tyrant in the Muslim world. Pope John Paul II was one of those people, and the American bishops also loudly opposed the war. But, their concerns were ignored, not just by the Bush administration but by the American people. Like it or not, it was our war, and if, as Congressman Murphy suggested, people need to be held accountable, it is all of us as a nation that must shoulder the blame. Those foreigners who burned American flags when the Iraq War began may have been motivated by many things, some of them wrong-headed, but they understood that this war was an American war, not a Bush family enterprise.

We cannot undo the past. But, there is one thing we can do. Currently, under the terms of the sequester, various programs for veterans are being cut, as is the program that provides scholarships for the children of soldiers killed in war. Congress should immediately fund these programs. As well, veterans' unemployment remains higher than the national average: Companies should treat our veterans as well as they treated our nation, and try and hire them even if it requires a bit more training because their skill set does not exactly match what the job requires.

There is one other thing we can do, and that is to draw the right lessons from the debacle that was the Iraq War. The debacle does not mean that there is no time or place when force should be used, but it does instruct us that we should be wary of claims made when war fever is in the air, we should always consider the use of force a last resort, and we should not expect the U.S. military to accomplish impossible tasks like converting other countries to Western-style democracy overnight. Tyranny is a horrible thing, and Saddam's regime was tyrannical to be sure. But the chaos and civil war that followed may have been worse, for the Iraqis and for us. The war was a strategic blunder of the highest order and there were those who warned it would be so. It was not only the Bush administration leaders who did not listen. Neither did enough Americans.

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