

Beyond Iraq

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Two weeks ago, I said from this pulpit that unless we demand change in a troubled world, then change would not come. I stand here this morning with a heavy heart, less hopeful than I would like, and more sorrowful than usual. But I also stand before you with great conviction that the time has come to say *enough* and to demand that the United States government change its current course of preemptive violence before it is too late. The great abolitionist Frederick Douglass said:

Power concedes nothing without a demand. It never did and never will. Find out what people will submit to, and you have found out the exact amount of injustice which will be imposed upon them. The limits of tyrants are prescribed by the endurance of those whom they oppress.¹

I have never been so concerned that violence around the globe would escalate into an uncontrollable world conflict. Violence has escalated in the Middle East to a point where we stand realistically on the brink of world war as Israel fights on two fronts, against both Hezbollah and Hamas; as Iran supplies not only Hezbollah but cooperates with North Korea; as both Iran and North Korea respond with defiance to western demands to control their nuclear capabilities; as other nuclear powers like China and India demand their fair share of the world's resources of which the U.S. uses a disproportionate amount; as terrorism increases around the world; and as the U.S. finds itself bogged down in Iraq which stands perilously close to a civil war.

Although I have spoken of my opposition to war from this pulpit before, I have not in the two years since my arrival as your minister, spoken directly in opposition to the war in Iraq, which I believe history will long bear witness as one of the greatest mistakes of the United States government. We must look beyond Iraq in shaping a world in which military force is used only as a last resort and only in self-defense or the defense of another. We must look beyond Iraq in shaping a world in which terrorism is irrelevant because the conditions in which terrorism flourish are absent. Preemptive warfare, like that launched in Iraq without provocation and without just cause, will continue to result in an increase in violence and terror around the world because it fuels the causes of terrorism.

The nation and the world are on the verge of a new era, a new global reality that will define our future, that of our children, and their children. Over the past few centuries, we have shrunk our world into a global community in terms of information, commerce, international relations, and transportation. We are a global village, but we have not learned to live in global peace and justice. That is our task as people of faith, as Americans, as inhabitants of this earth.

I come to my views on war in general and this war in particular based largely on my own twenty years of military service in the Navy, most of which were as an intelligence officer; which include a graduate degree in national security affairs; brief combat action in Grenada and Lebanon; being privy to the details and execution of the 1991 Gulf War as an intelligence analyst in Washington, DC; working as a nuclear weapons inspector in Russia and as an arms control negotiator with the Russians and Ukrainians. I have spent most of my adult life as a student and facilitator of international relations with a clear understanding of the role of military action.

My views are my own, but I trust that I arrived at them with some practical experience and expertise. I come to them also from the perspective of someone who has dedicated his life more recently to the vocation of caring for the soul and working to create the beloved community.

Many Americans make a direct link between the events of September 11, 2001 and the war in Iraq because our government has made a concerted effort to speak often of them in the same breath. Although the two events are not directly related, this is a case where believing something all but makes it so. The events of September 11th, 2001 sparked a fear of the other that led to a deafening silence among the people of this nation in 2003, when President Bush made his case for invading Iraq. This silence went beyond the people, although not all of us were silent. Many of us spoke out loudly, but we were condemned as unpatriotic when we dissented. I was personally called a terrorist lover by former military colleagues when I expressed my concern about the vengeful attitudes of some who were invoking scriptural references to the wrath of God as justification for military action. This silence and fear bled also into the halls of our federal legislative branch. Senator Robert Byrd gave a telling speech in the Senate in early 2003 when he said:

To contemplate war is to think about the most horrible of human experiences. On this February day, as this nation stands at the brink of battle, every American on some level must be contemplating the horrors of war. Yet, this Chamber is, for the most part, silent—ominously, dreadfully silent. There is no debate, no discussion, no attempt to lay out for the nation the pros and cons of this particular war. There is nothing.

We stand passively mute in the United States Senate, paralyzed by our own uncertainty, seemingly stunned by the sheer turmoil of events. Only on the editorial pages of our newspapers is there much substantive discussion of the prudence or imprudence of engaging in this particular war. And this is no small conflagration we contemplate. This is no simple attempt to defang a villain. No. This coming battle, if it materializes, represents a turning point in U.S. foreign policy and possibly a turning point in the recent history of the world.²

In September of 2001, I had just begun my ministerial internship on the campus of the University of Illinois. I had a discussion on Sunday morning, September 9th with several students, who said that they didn't have a defining moment in their generation. Forty-eight hours later that moment would come. The history of the world changed course the day that a small group of terrorists hijacked four airplanes and crashed them into the financial, military, and we presume they also intended the political centers of the American empire. The term empire is often used

pejoratively, but I am using it empirically, dispassionately. The reality is that the United States is a modern world empire. We emerged from the 20th century and the modern era, after just a few hundred years of worldwide scientific, industrial, military, economic, religious, and socio-cultural revolution, as the globe's dominant force. The United States of America has the power to shape course of world events. The attacks of September 11, 2001 were simply a catalyst that would set an exercise of that power in motion.

Empires such as ours always have been and likely always will be the object of retaliation by those who feel displaced. Indeed, this nation was founded on the actions of revolution against oppression. Five years ago, we were tested and we responded. That response, however, was the predicted, expected, and desired response from the perspective of the terrorists. It was reactive, vengeful, retributive, destabilizing, and so far ineffective in both Afghanistan and Iraq. If the United States is to take on the role of world power and empire, then we must be responsible and accountable for our own actions. In time of peace and in the face of inevitable hostility, those nations with the most power need to be proactive, compassionate, and restorative, and to exercise the most restraint. The defining moment of a new generation was nothing more than what psychologists call an activating event. The response to that event and the consequences that response holds for the world are what will actually change the course of the world for better or worse. So far, the response has changed the world for the worse and made it a more dangerous place. We have seen an erosion of our own civil rights, the exercise of preemptive war without cause, an increase in international terrorism, an increase in political divisiveness at home, an imbalance of power in our own government, and unprecedented national debt.

Despite the many justifications that have been given for the war in Iraq, which time does not allow me to address sufficiently this morning, I believe the primary purpose was to test the U.S. doctrine and security strategy of preemptive conflict. If you haven't read the 2002 and 2006 *National Security Strategies*, I suggest you do so. There is much in them that is sound, well thought out, and which if followed will lead to a more peaceful world. However, in an era of globalization where one nation's interests cannot be considered independently from those of the entire world, the method in some way becomes the madness and is inherently flawed. The current *National Security Strategy* begins by saying:

It is the policy of the United States to seek and support democratic movements and institutions in every nation and culture, with the ultimate goal of ending tyranny in our world. In the world today, the fundamental character of regimes matters as much as the distribution of power among them. The goal of our statecraft is to help create a world of democratic, well-governed states that can meet the needs of their citizens and conduct themselves responsibly in the international system. This is the best way to provide enduring security for the American people.³

So, we have declared that democracy is the best form of governance for every society because it promotes freedom. We have established a goal to create a completely democratic world based on this obvious truth. Let's for a minute test this declaration by substituting the word communism for democracy. Those who promoted communism believed that sharing the means of production was the greatest path to ultimate freedom. What if we substituted the words Christianity or Islam? Many Christians and Muslims believe that their religion is the greatest or the only path to

salvation. Democracy, done well, does indeed promote human freedom, but what our government has told the rest of the world is that *this* path is the *only* path, and that we are bent on imposing it upon the rest of the world.

From the perspective of those who oppose the American empire, this is simply fuel for the fire—a fundamentalist and tyrannical declaration for world domination. What’s more, is how the passage closes—with a declaration that democracy is the path by which people around the world can conduct themselves responsibly. King George of England also thought he was telling the people of the newly formed American colonies how to behave responsibly.

Finally, that first paragraph of the *National Security Strategy* seals the deal against the United States with this non-sequiter: “This is the best way to provide enduring security for the American people.” Even if we have convinced them that democracy is the way for them, we are telling others that we don’t really care about a democratic world, we are just trying to make things safe for ourselves. This is the arrogance that Martin Luther King, Jr. was addressing when he said that Americans felt that they had everything to teach the world and nothing to learn from it.⁴

Later, the *National Security Strategy* recognizes that freedom must be *chosen* by the people who are oppressed, but continues to speak throughout of only one political continuum from tyranny to democracy. These are not the only two choices for human governance, and even democracy exists in many forms with varying degrees of freedom. Our world-dominating form of capitalist democracy doesn’t necessarily appeal to much of the world.

As if this wasn’t enough, our *National Security Strategy* clearly delineates that we reserve the right to use preemptive force to create this free democratic world. It states:

The greater the threat, the greater is the risk of inaction – and the more compelling the case for taking anticipatory action to defend ourselves, even if uncertainty remains as to the time and place of the enemy’s attack.

To forestall or prevent such hostile acts by our adversaries, the United States will, if necessary, act preemptively in exercising our inherent right of self-defense. The United States will not resort to force in all cases to preempt emerging threats. Our preference is that nonmilitary actions succeed. And no country should ever use preemption as a pretext for aggression.⁵

In essence, we have told the world that we will attack when we see fit, because we can. This is why we attacked Iraq, because we could. We can’t topple the dangerous regimes in North Korea and Iran with military force, even though at times our government’s aggressive rhetoric has implied that we could and might. But we could topple Saddam Hussein with military force, and so we did. Why should we expect any less violence or preemption from the rest of the world against us?

The previous *National Security Strategy* of the United States, published in 2002, began with this statement: “The great struggles of the twentieth century between liberty and totalitarianism ended with a decisive victory for the forces of freedom -- and a single sustainable model for

national success: freedom, democracy, and free enterprise.”⁶ Again, a declared single path that we expect every nation in the world to follow. I believe that these “great struggles” between liberty and totalitarianism are at the root of the problem that we experience today in defining patriotism, in supporting or opposing war, and in declaring war on terrorism. Americans have substituted the war in Iraq, a preemptive show of force, for their frustration about the attacks of September 11th and difficulty of going after an intangible enemy. We wanted the easy certainty of defeating Mussolini or Hitler or the Soviet Communists. But the world isn’t that simple.

Throughout the twentieth century we fought wars of good and evil, we sparred democracy against communism. Dualisms are easy to grasp, easy to convey to the masses and easy to fight within. Unfortunately, the real world rarely truly exists as a dualism. Since the end of the Cold War, the world has had a more difficult time grappling with the realities of regional conflicts, and wars without physical and national boundaries. And then the events of September 11th 2001 occurred. This enemy was not a tangible enemy. It was a coalition of anti-Americanism that exists around the globe—that was run by men from several nations, who take refuge in several nations. The U.S. government went to Afghanistan to topple a harboring government and to search for a needle in a haystack. Just as a decade of counterterrorism work during the 1990s was unable to find Osama Bin Laden, an overwhelming armed force was and is unable to defeat this enemy. And so the U.S. government accused Saddam Hussein of various crimes and UN violations and made the case for the war in Iraq. Another nation toppled in the name of democracy. And neither nation is being rebuilt to the standards that will allow democracy to flourish. If we are to salvage anything from these tragedies we must rebuild Iraq and Afghanistan as we rebuilt Germany and Japan after World War II. I fear we won’t, nor that the conditions of these societies will make it easy for us to do so.

In the meantime, we suffer the erosion of freedom and liberty at home, and we remain silent. In October 2001, Judge Andrew Napolitano, formerly of the New Jersey Supreme Court said:

In a democracy, personal liberties are rarely diminished overnight. Rather, they are lost gradually, by the acts of well-meaning people, with good intentions, amid public approval. But the subtle loss of freedom is never recognized until the crisis is over and we look back in horror. And then it is too late.⁷

Why have we as a nation been so silent and complicit as our government proceeds to world domination? When will it be too late? Our ancestors and predecessors faced this issue when this land was colonized over two-hundred years ago. Well-meaning people escaped oppression and eventually oppressed the indigenous peoples of the Americas in their quest for freedom. Well-meaning people, the founders of this nation included, built a free society based on a declaration and constitution that today remain a model of liberty and justice for the entire world. But they did so with the slave labor of African immigrants and their descendants. We faced the issue of freedom when the slaves were emancipated during a devastating civil war. We faced the issue of freedom when those of European descent moved west and committed one of the greatest genocides of human history, ending barely a hundred years ago. We faced the issue of freedom during World War II when the government incarcerated Japanese Americans and with the horrors of the holocaust in Europe. We faced the issue of freedom during MCarthyism and the “well-meaning” attempts to defend the west against Communism. After 100 years of inaction

between 1865 and 1964, when the Civil Rights Act was finally passed, we faced issues of freedom again in providing legal rights and protection for non-whites. When we celebrate our freedom, we must also recognize the abuses against that freedom even when—no, especially when—those abuses come from within. We must recognize the extreme abuses and costs by which our freedom was attained to ensure that they do not happen again.

How will we put into place the cultural revolution that will both reduce the incentive for terrorism and violence, and resolve the problems that are endemic to a society built upon and surviving on violence an oppression as the means of world domination?

As a first practical step, beyond reframing our strategy of world domination through democracy, and beyond eliminating our doctrine of preemptive conflict, I believe we must undertake the elimination of all nuclear weaponry. I hope that our descendants several generations from now will look upon nuclear weapons and other weapons of mass destruction as a dangerous past chapter in the history of humankind. If post-modern philosophy comes to any conclusion about human behavior, I hope it will be that humans learn that there are some things of which we are capable, but in which we simply ought not engage because the risks are too great. Nuclear, chemical, biological, and other weapons of mass destruction are such things. Although the threat of mutually assured destruction between the U.S. and the Soviet Union kept the two from violent revolution on the world stage, the risks and other costs made it too dangerous a game to play. It will take at least many decades, and perhaps centuries, to agree to find and destroy all such existing weapons, to ban the production of future weapons, and to create and implement even better compliance and verification regimes. But I don't believe we have a choice. Ironically and tragically, I fear that we won't actually come to the decision to disarm ourselves as such until after nuclear weapons have been used against us, or again by us against others.

Another change here at home will be to overcome the cultures of apathy and privilege that pervade our citizenry in their attitudes toward the government. This nation is a democracy in name only. Until 70, 80 or even 90 percent of the people see fit to vote we will never have a government of the people, by the people, for the people. Regardless of who gets elected to any position in this country, they are seldom put into office by more than 25% of their constituency—usually much less. Getting elected to public office then becomes a game of competing for likely voters, and in some cases, keeping that pool of likely voters low. This results in increased apathy on the part of the electorate. How will we get the masses interested in the democratic process? I think we need to look beyond the context of voting.

People aren't apathetic about voting, they are apathetic and even cynical about their vote actually making a difference. Unitarian Universalist minister Paul Rasor, author of the book *Faith Without Certainty: Liberal Theology in the 21st Century*,⁸ said to those gathered at the Southwest UU Summer Institute last month that cynicism is a luxury of the privileged. Americans are cynical because they don't feel a sense of ownership in the process of government. Because we are focused on enjoying the privileges of this great society, rather making it truly great by working for the plight of the underprivileged at home and abroad. We are cynical not because the problem can't be solved, but because we like being cynical. It's easier than the hard work and sacrifice involved in achieving true democracy and equality. But we should heed Frederick

Douglass's words in thinking about the tyranny of our own government, for this is the context in which he spoke them. "Power concedes nothing without a demand."⁹

John F. Kennedy, Jr. had such a vision over 40 years ago when he created the Peace Corps and when he said "ask not what your country can do for you, ask what you can do for your country."¹⁰ These words were not empty, idealistic pie in the sky. This is true patriotism. Patriotism is not dictated and legislated through fear, but offered as an opportunity to change the world around you.

Next, we must heed the lessons learned from the Vietnam War, the Korean War, and World War II and spare no expense at ensuring that our returning soldiers, sailors, airmen, and marines, and their families have every necessary tool at their disposal to continue *their* lives beyond Iraq. I've said before that I believe that the only moral stance we can take concerning war is to oppose its conduct but to offer every measure of support to those who must fight when necessary. Thousands of families have lost loved ones in this war, and tens of thousands more are watching their loved ones return home with post-traumatic stress disorder at least, and often severe physical and mental disabilities. This war has already perpetuated the systems of injustice at home that will further stress our health care and criminal justice systems. We should demand that our government guarantee educational, employment, and housing opportunities to our veterans and their families—the best education, mental and physical health care that the world has to offer. I find it no coincidence that our current health care crisis and the ten fold increase in incarceration in this country coincided with the conduct and the aftermath of the Vietnam War. We have a tragic tendency in the United States to put people into the worst of circumstances and then to condemn them when they fail. Let us not make this mistake again. Let us use this tragedy as an opportunity to do the right thing, not only for our veterans, but for all people.

Of course, we must demand an end to the occupation in Iraq. Because of the repeated failures to date to adequately train the Iraqi military and police forces and because there is no incentive for Iraqis not to engage in civil war, this will be a particularly difficult task. What will the world look like Beyond Iraq? If we as people of conscience, concerned not only with our own security, but that of the entire world, demand a change of course, then democracy and freedom will have a chance to prevail. If we allow our government to continue its path of imposing democracy upon the world with military force as it sees fit, then I fear we cannot even imagine the repercussions.

Again in the words of Maya Angelou,

History, despite its wrenching pain,
Cannot be unlived, but if faced
With courage, need not be lived again. ...

Women, children, me,
Take it into the palms of your hands,
Mold it into the shape of your most
Private need. Sculpt it into
The image of your most public self.
Lift up your hearts

Each new hour holds new chances
For a new beginning.
Do not be wedded forever
To fear, yoked eternally
To brutishness ...

Here on the pulse of this new day
You may have the grace to look up and out
And into your sister's eyes,
And into your brother's face,
Your country,
And say simply
Very simply
With hope—
Good morning.¹¹

¹ Frederick Douglass, [1857] (1985). "The Significance of Emancipation in the West Indies." Speech, Canandaigua, New York, August 3, 1857; collected in pamphlet by author. In *The Frederick Douglass Papers*. Series One: Speeches, Debates, and Interviews. Volume 3: 1855-63. Edited by John W. Blassingame. New Haven: Yale University Press, p. 204. [This quote exists in various versions, the version used here is from Unitarian Universalist Association, *Singing the Living Tradition* (Boston: Author, 1993), 579.]

² Senator Robert Byrd of West Virginia speaking to an Executive Session of the U.S. Senate on February 12, 2003. *Congressional Record - Senate*. 108th Cong., p. S2268. [Searchable online at <http://thomas.loc.gov/home/r108query.html>]

³ *National Security Strategy of the United States of America*. The White House, Washington, DC (March 2006), p.1. [Available online at: <http://www.whitehouse.gov/nsc/nss/2006/>]

⁴ Martin Luther King, Jr., "Beyond Vietnam" in Clayborne Carson and Kris Shepard, eds. *A Call to Conscience: The Landmark Speeches of Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr.* (New York: IPM/Warner Books, 2001). [Dr. King delivered this speech on April 4, 1967 at Riverside Church in New York City. It is available online at: <http://www.stanford.edu/group/King/mlkpapers/>]

⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 18.

⁶ *National Security Strategy of the United States of America*. The White House, Washington, DC (September 2002), Preface. [Available online at: <http://www.whitehouse.gov/nsc/nss/2002/>]

⁷ Andrew Napolitano, "Don't Tread on Freedom," *New Jersey Law Journal* 166 (October 15, 2001): 184.

⁸ Paul Rasor, *Faith Without Certainty: Liberal Theology in the 21st Century*. Boston: Skinner House, 2005.

⁹ Douglass [See note 1].

¹⁰ John F. Kennedy, Jr. *Inaugural Address*, Washington, DC, January 20, 1961.

¹¹ Maya Angelou, *On the Pulse of Morning* (New York: Random House, 1993). [Inaugural Poem read by the poet at the Presidential Inauguration of William Jefferson Clinton on January 20, 1993]