

**THE FIRST UNITARIAN SOCIETY OF MILWAUKEE**

# **WAR?!**

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## INTRODUCTION

Clearly, we are at a momentous time in our nation's history, perhaps even in the world's history. Once again, we are on the verge of war – our first in the twenty first century. With troops amassed and converging on Iraq, Americans – and people all around the world – are apprehensive and divided. We are torn between containment and war. We are torn between the inclination to give the inspectors more time and the yearning to get it over with.

We will not all be of one mind in this church on this issue. Nor should we expect to be. Thus, let us remember to be vigilant in being sincerely respectful of our political as well as our spiritual diversity in this community.

At the same time, let our diversity not hinder us – or, in this case, hinder me, as your minister – from freely expressing ourselves. Rather, let us be united not in the particularity of our political opinions, but in the mutuality of our larger, shared concerns for the good of our nation and for the good of the world.

**READING**            Letter from the Road: by Elizabeth Roberts  
                              "Dark Night of the Soul"    February 11, 2003

Our Reading for this morning is from an email letter from Elizabeth Roberts, written from Iraq about a month ago. Ms. Roberts was (and maybe still is) in Iraq with her husband Elias as a so-called "witness for peace."<sup>1</sup> I don't know the exact nature of their mission as witnesses for peace, but here is the letter:

### "Dark Night of the Soul"

Elias has been busy for the past days making banners, getting tents and setting up sites for a series of actions the Iraq Peace Team will initiate during the coming week. In contrast to his energy, I am paralyzed by a deep dread. I feel the war's shadow over my shoulder. And at the moment its darkness has me in its grip. I don't want to meet new people or have new experiences. What's the point, I think? This place is over! When I do talk with some old friends from my previous visit to Baghdad in November-December, we cry together. The future approaches and millions must stand silently through the coming night.

Those Iraqis who can afford it have already left Baghdad. United Nations officials are taking their vacations and humanitarian groups are being sent home. Businessmen have relocated their families. Foreigners are returning to their homelands. Journalists are surveying hotels for their structural soundness. People are selling their cars, their possessions, anything they have to help them get out of the city.

But the vast majority have nowhere to go. Five million men, women and children must stay here and endure the rain of bombs, the lack of electricity, clean water, food supplies and medicines. Schools and hospitals will close; so will shops and businesses. No one knows when and where the shells made with depleted uranium or other chemical, biological or nuclear weapons will be used. Rumors are that marshal law will be enforced.

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<sup>1</sup> Ms. Roberts spoke in the Unitarian Universalist Church of Boulder, Colorado in January 2003 about her time in Iraq, Palestine, and other places and, according to the Rev. Jackie Ziegler, a member of this church whom we ordained about seven years ago, she "touched everyone's heart and made sense." My thanks to Jackie for sharing this email.

Hassan is an out of work electrician....He is a mild man. He tries not to discuss the war in front of his four children, but [he explains,] "they hear it in school and from their friends. Yesterday Alla [my 9 year-old son] asked if we are going to die. This is their great fear, not their own death, but the loss of their mother and father."

Why? Why? Why? This is the one question every person I talk with asks. . . . Do Americans know what a catastrophe this will be? Nothing will be good between the Arabs and the Americans again. . . . I have no answers.

## WAR?!

The Rev. Dr. Andrew C. Kennedy

Nine days after Elizabeth Roberts wrote her letter from Iraq about the many Iraqis, who (in all probability) will soon be killed, I read it at my dinner table. It was Thursday, February 24 — about three weeks ago. I had finished dinner, but I remember that my dinner-time candle was still lighted.

About half way through the letter, I surprised myself as I suddenly burst into tears and started weeping.

I wept for the tens of thousands of Iraqis who will likely be killed, especially the poor. MEDAC, an international coalition of physicians, estimates the range of casualties of a war in Iraq to run from a low of about 50,000 people to a high of about 250,000 — plus another 200,000 who would likely die from the post-war effects. As Ms. Roberts noted in our reading, the well-off — the diplomats, the rich, the entrepreneurs, the foreigners — will leave (if they haven't left already). It is always the poor, it seems, who take the rap.

I wept, too, for the tens of thousands of Iraqis who, if not killed, will be grievously wounded in mind, spirit and flesh — those who will lose their eyes and legs and ears and minds.

I wept for those who will endure the absolute terror of twenty-first century warfare at the hands of the incomparably powerful Americans with our trademark “overwhelming force” type of warfare. With the initial assault, I believe they are calling it the “shock and awe” effect of 3000 bombs raining down on Baghdad within the first 48 hours. The military calls it “shock and awe.” I call it terror. This isn't “Iraq — the Movie.” This isn't Nintendo. This isn't Reality TV. This is going to be live, real-time war — only you can bet that the Pentagon won't let us see it up close. They don't dare. And we don't really want to see it, either.

Finally, I wept for my own pitiful sense of helplessness and frustration.

## II

Like yours, perhaps, my soul trembles not only for Iraq, but for America. I remind you of what Alex de Tocqueville so wisely said 150 years ago about America. “America,” he said, “is great because America is good. If she ceases to be good, she [will cease] to be great.”<sup>2</sup>

Friends, I love this country. You love this country, too, no doubt. A “patriot,” by definition, is one who loves, supports, and defends his or her country, and it is precisely as a patriot, on the eve of what I believe is a terribly misguided war, that I suggest to you that America, as powerful as we are, is ceasing here to be good. As the Old Testament prophet Ezekiel once said of the ancient Phoenician city of Tyre, “You have corrupted your wisdom for the sake of your splendor and power.” *We* have. We have corrupted our wisdom for the sake of our splendor, for the sake of our riches, for the sake of our power and for the sake of our apparent need to dominate the world. It is time, as the old Christian hymn has it, to turn back, to forswear our foolish ways.

Over the weekend of February 15, tens of millions of people all over the world took to the streets — 100,000 people in Sydney, Australia, several million in Madrid, Barcelona, and 55 other cities in Spain. A million more in Rome. Another million in London — the largest demonstration in that nation's long history. 100,000 in the Netherlands, as in Belgium and Ireland. Tens of thousands in Sweden, Switzerland, Scotland, Denmark, Austria, Canada, South Africa, Mexico, Greece, Russia, and Japan. 500,000 in Germany. Another

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<sup>2</sup> de Tocqueville, Alex, cited by Coffin, William Sloan, *Passion for the Possible* (Louisville, KY: Westminster/John Knox Press, 1993), p. 23.

500,000 in Paris and in 60 other French cities. Several million in up to 100 cities throughout the U.S.<sup>3</sup> The world is trying to get our attention in what was a world-wide event that has no precedent in all of human history. Are we listening? And what do we hear?

### III

Jimmy Carter was recently awarded the Nobel Peace Prize. In his acceptance speech on December 10, 2002, he said, "War may sometimes be a necessary evil. But no matter how necessary, it is always evil, never a good. We will not learn," Carter continued, "how to live together in peace by killing each other's children."<sup>4</sup>

Now, I will admit that Saddam Hussein has clearly been shown to be a cruel and tyrannical despot, but based on the evidence we have so far, going to war on the country he rules is simply not, in my judgment, a just, warranted, or legal war. War should only be the *very last resort*, when all other available means have been *thoroughly* exhausted. This standard has not been met. War, I believe, is not the answer here. Containment is.

As Senator Robert Byrd (and others) have made abundantly clear, if this war materializes, it will represent a turning point in U.S. foreign policy and possibly a turning point in the recent history of the world. Why? Because of the so called "Bush Doctrine," which unequivocally asserts America's right to a "unilaterally determined pre-emptive self-defense." According to the administration, this doctrine would be "the foundation of a new national security strategy." Under this policy, the U.S. is declaring that we are empowered to attack – even in the absence of any apparent provocation – whomever we think may be trying to develop weapons of mass destruction. So, here we have Iraq, who has neither attacked us nor even threatened to attack us, but we are proposing to unilaterally attack her.

These are the actions and pronouncements of what we and the rest of the world would normally call a "rogue nation." No wonder millions of people have taken to the streets all over the world! As President Jacques Chirac of France put it, "If someone tries to wage war on their own account, without other states, without an international mandate, it means all the world is confusion and a wild jungle."<sup>5</sup> Even more bluntly, Vladimir Lukin, deputy speaker of the lower house of Russia's parliament, rhetorically asked, "Do you know the difference between a policeman and a gangster? A policeman complies with rules which are elaborated not by the policeman, but [by] a certain democratic community accepted by everyone. A gangster implements his own rules."<sup>6</sup>

Last September 24, Retired General Wesley Clark stated the obvious, namely, that a war against Iraq would (and I quote) "supercharge recruiting for the terrorist networks."<sup>7</sup> Indeed, there is a front page article in this morning's *The New York Times*. It is entitled, "Anger on Iraq Seen as New Qaeda Recruiting Tool." Ditto if we leave an occupation force in Iraq for very long. Is that what we want – to supercharge recruiting for the terrorist networks?

This reminds me of the mock poster which appeared as a paid political ad by the liberal TomPaine.com organization in *The New York Times*. The poster shows Osama bin Laden pointing his finger at us like the old recruiting posters for the U.S. military (which used to say, "Uncle Sam Wants You"). The poster reads:

I want you to invade Iraq. Go ahead. Send me a new generation of recruits. Your bombs will fuel their hatred of America and their desire for revenge. Americans won't be safe anywhere. Please, attack Iraq. Distract yourself from fighting Al Qaeda. Divide the international commu

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<sup>3</sup> Statistics from Pitt, William Rivers, "Of Gods and Mortals and Empire," Truthout / Perspective, February 21, 2003, via the Internet, p. 2.

<sup>4</sup> Carter, Jimmy, "As a Citizen of a Troubled World," *The New York Times*, December 11, 2002, p. A-12.

<sup>5</sup> Chirac, Jacques, "France and Russia Ready to Use Antiwar Veto," *The New York Times*, March 6, 2003, p. A-14.

<sup>6</sup> Lukin, Vladimir P., *Ibid*.

<sup>7</sup> *New York Times*, September 24, 2002.

nity. Go ahead. Destabilize the region. Maybe Pakistan will fall – we want its nuclear weapons. Give Saddam a reason to strike first. He might draw Israel into a fight. Perfect! So, Please – invade Iraq. Make my day.<sup>8</sup>

Again, war, I believe, is not the answer here. Containment is.

Last October 7, in a letter to Senator Bob Graham, CIA Director George Tenet predicted that the likelihood of Saddam Hussein using weapons of mass destruction against the U.S. in the foreseeable future was (in his words) “low,” but it becomes, (again, in his words), “pretty high” if Iraq is attacked by the U.S. Is that what we want – to increase the likelihood of Iraq using its weapons of mass destruction against us?

I don’t think so. Which is another reason why I believe war is not the answer here.

An invasion and long-term occupation of Iraq could cost the U.S. anywhere from about \$100 billion to \$1.9 trillion dollars. Just think of what we could do with a couple of *hundred billion* dollars! Either abroad or at home – or both! Think if we put our minds to trying to address the root causes of terrorism and launched a Middle Eastern Marshall Plan with \$100 billion dollars! Or here at home, with \$100 billion dollars we could probably fix the health care system, rebuild the schools, address the affordable housing shortage, and finance state and federal elections to break the immoral link between private wealth and political power. Or we could at least get a good start on these projects.

So, here, again, this colossal expense on a recklessly unnecessary, pre-emptive war is yet another reason why I believe that war is not the answer here. Containment is.

Meanwhile, our standing in the world is taking a serious hit. We have treated not only our adversaries, but our allies and friends with unbelievable arrogance and contempt, while attempting alternatively to sweet talk and strong-arm them with all kinds of promises, threats and bribes. We are fracturing alliances with some of our oldest and dearest friends that may leave us potentially isolated, facing legions of new enemies largely alone. Rather than isolating Iraq, we are isolating ourselves. Rather than cornering Saddam Hussein, the deployment of a quarter million of our troops has effectively cornered us. “Well, gee, we can’t just turn around and go back now, can we?”

#### IV

In short, I weep, and my heart trembles for fear that our fearsome, robust, and bristling military is not being sent half way around the world to defend America. It is being sent half way around the world to massacre Iraq. Iraq doesn’t stand a chance! Its military is a third of what it was twelve years ago – and it was crushed then.

My heart goes out not only to all of the innocent Iraqis, but to all of the good men and women of our military, who are being commanded on our behalf to kill others in what I, at least, regard to be a fundamentally illegal and unjustifiable war – if not simply an imperialistic massacre. Let us remember one of the lessons from the Vietnam War, however, and embrace our returning soldiers with understanding and tenderness.

Moreover, necessary or not, prosecuted successfully or not, war always represents a failure. It sows generations of violence begetting more violence. As Martin Luther King said, “Violence is a descending spiral, begetting the very thing it seeks to destroy. . . , adding deeper darkness to a night already devoid of stars.”

Similarly, in the Old Testament, Psalm 33 says, “The warhorse is a vain hope for victory, and by its great might it cannot save.” Try as it may, the warhorse cannot save. As Thomas Mann once said, “War is a

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<sup>8</sup> TomPaine.com mon sense, c 2002 The Florence Fund, Osama says: ‘I Want You to Invade Iraq.’

coward's escape from the problems of peace." And so, as we blunder into this war, the problems of peace grow deeper. Indeed, William Sloan Coffin has wisely suggested that, "The *real* axis of evil is pandemic poverty, environmental degradation, and a world awash in weapons."<sup>9</sup> These are the problems of peace from which this war will only be a passing distraction and temporary escape.

Now, I recognize that ineffectual purity and hopeless naiveté about the evils of war are likely only to marginalize our efforts, but, at the same time, let us also clearly recognize that the twentieth century was, by far, the bloodiest century ever. Stalin, Hitler, Pol Pot, Mao, Milosevic. Dresden, Nanking, Pearl Harbor, Nagasaki, Rwanda. These are names and places that are drenched in terror and infamy and in blood that is still warm. How long can we go on this way, fighting wars like this?

We are, I would suggest, at what may be a defining moment in history, a moment full of apprehension and dread, yes, but full of promise and hope, as well. Even if America goes to war against Iraq in the coming days or weeks, as I believe we may, the world has spoken truth to power. The engines of war have been given pause — and just *possibly* may turn back. Look at the surprises we have had already! And for the first time, the advisability of a war has been openly, widely, and vigorously debated in the United Nations. This is what the United Nations is for! This has been a watershed moment for the United Nations! Far from being irrelevant, the U.N. has shown something of its twenty-first century promise here. It is, I would suggest, up to us -- up to "we, the people," the people of America and the people of the world — to fulfill that promise.

And, thus, as a small step in that direction, I invite you to please come to the Common Room today, pick up a postcard and one of the wonderful "Talking Points" sheets prepared by Dick Withers, and write a postcard to our President and to our legislators in Washington. Just maybe we can actually stop this war — or at least the next one.

And, finally, as my colleague Wayne Arnason, suggests,

Take courage, friends.  
The way is often hard,  
    the path is never clear,  
    and the stakes are very high.  
Take courage.  
For deep down there is another truth:  
You are not alone.<sup>10</sup>

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<sup>9</sup> Coffin, William Sloan, from a sermon delivered at the National Episcopal Cathedral in Washington, DC., September 29, 2002, as cited by Lin, Diana, in a letter to Senator Fitzgerald found on the Internet, emphasis added.

<sup>10</sup> Arnason, Wayne, *Singing the Living Tradition* (Boston: Beacon Press & the Unitarian Universalist Association, 1993), #698.