

# The War on Terror – Or the Terror that Leads to War

Patrick T. McCormick  
Gonzaga University

## *Abstract*

*The most avowedly religious and Christian of all the developed nations, America is also a country perennially ready to answer the call to arms, disproportionately disposed to wage war against other nations and a wide range of social ills, and habituated to justifying these crusades and campaigns by casting them as part of some cosmic battle against the forces of evil and sin. An apocalyptic strain, which has long shaped America's religious imagination, is often used to mobilize an unreasonably frightened public into unnecessary and counterproductive "wars" and to demonize internal or external groups so as to justify violations and abuses of their rights and dignity. The present war on terror offers a classic example of the use of fear and apocalyptic theology to manipulate Americans to wage an unnecessary and counterproductive war, and it challenges Christian theology to find other ways to interpret and respond to all measures of threats facing our nation and world.*

## **Rushing to War for Fear's Sake**

Catholic thought has long held that nations may only turn to war as a "last resort" (Regan, 1996, p. 18) and recent Catholic teaching affirms a "presumption against the use of force" (Himes, 2004, pp. 150-152). Thus, whether pacifists or just war theorists, Catholics and other mainstream Christians should greet their government's call to arms critically, demanding strong evidence that this war meets all the criteria for a just war (Cavanaugh, 2003; Fiala, 2004).

However, moral theologians Thomas Massaro and Thomas Shannon (2003, pp. 17-22) join Michael Baxter (2002a, 2002b) in arguing that American Catholics continue to embrace nearly every call to arms without criticism or question – in part from fear of being seen as unpatriotic. And recent works by Christopher Hedges (2002), Andrew Bacevich (2005), Glen Stassen (2004, pp. 172-174) and others (Lucas & McCarthy, 2005) show how ready and willing the vast majority of American Christians are to give their government a blank check when it comes to war – again, in part from fear of seeming unsupportive of our troops. For all too many Americans war is the first, not the last resort.

Along with an unreasonable willingness to take up arms against other nations, Americans have also been singularly ready to address a wide range of social ills and threats with a call to arms. Indeed, among liberal democracies America is unique in its decision to declare an endless series of "wars" on drugs, crime and now terror and to rely

decision to declare an endless series of “wars” on drugs, crime and now terror and to rely so heavily upon the use of force and punishment as tools for addressing these problems (McCormick, 2000).

Perhaps, not so coincidentally, America is also a nation where the media, the market and our politicians often rely upon fear to mobilize the citizenry (Bader-Saye, 2007, pp. 11-17). Indeed, these fears have only increased as Americans have grown ever richer and more powerful; the quest to acquire more and more material goods and military hardware has not, overall, made U.S. citizens feel more secure or less frightened. Instead, with the world’s wealthiest economy and a defense budget surpassing that of the next twenty-five nations combined, Americans feel less content and secure than the generation that survived the Depression and WWII. Indeed, having made an idol of safety and security and spent countless billions in the pursuit of personal and national invulnerability, Americans remain all too easily (and disproportionately) frightened by every Cassandra sounding an alarm.

At the same time America is increasingly a nation of individuals, a place where the social fabric connecting us to our neighbors and tying one class or community to another is being constantly eroded. In the endless pursuit of wealth and liberty we find ourselves increasingly cut off from communities to which we used to belong and relying more and more upon our individual efforts to achieve financial, emotional, and physical security and safety. This path of increasing individualism has made us more and more alone and has fueled our sense of fear and insecurity, making us all the more susceptible to those who would manipulate or exaggerate our fears.

Finally, America is a Christian nation – indeed, the most avowedly religious and Christian nation in the world – long informed by a certain apocalyptic strain that expects the world to end (or to be saved) by a cosmic struggle between good and evil (Chernus, 2004; Chernus, 2006). According to this vision, faithful Christians can expect God to deal with the forces of evil and sin in the world by defeating and destroying them in a final and total battle; American Christians have shown more than a little willingness to see their own battles with other nations or struggles with various social ills as versions of this cosmic war (Griffith, 2002, pp. 75-128).

When this disproportionate fear of vulnerability is coupled with an apocalyptic theology promising the total destruction of every threat, it could well fuel an American tendency to take up arms against every danger and opponent and to cast every threat as a demonic evil that must be eradicated lest we ourselves be destroyed.

This essay will exam the ways in which rulers and nations have used fear to manipulate their citizenry into waging wars against all sorts of threats; how these threats have been grossly exaggerated to justify brutal campaigns and crusades against a demonized enemy; and how these wars generally failed to address the fears that fueled them and instead exacerbated these fears and not infrequently led to the very consequences the wars were supposed to prevent. We will begin by examining the ways ancient rulers in Egypt and Rome used fear to justify internal wars against oppressed peoples; look at the ways America’s various wars against drugs, crime and terror have been fueled by unreasonable fears; and explore ways in which our Christian faith calls us to address the terror that drives us to war.

## **Pharaoh's War on the Hebrews (Exodus 1:8-14)**

The book of Exodus begins with a call for war against the Hebrews. A new Pharaoh claims that these “strangers” pose a threat to the internal security of Egypt and, in a bit of demagoguery, fuels a national terror of this previously innocuous group of aliens. According to the Pharaoh’s propaganda, the rapidly multiplying Hebrews (whose now-forgotten ancestor had saved Egypt from a famine) are not true patriots but untrustworthy foreigners who will take up sides with Egypt’s enemies and/or desert the empire at the first opportunity. (This is a particularly nice piece of fear-mongering, simultaneously threatening Egyptians with the prospect of a legion of traitors in their midst and the possible loss of a large and productive labor force. Either the Hebrews will slit our throats while we sleep, or they will leave us with insufficient hands to harvest our fields).

In response to this supposed threat, the Pharaoh launches a crusade against these internal enemies, placing the Hebrew people under brutal overseers and setting them to forced labor building his store-cities at Pishon and Rameses. Soon the Hebrews find themselves stripped of their ancestral lands, rounded up and resettled in camps, townships or reservations, and cast into a permanent bondage the author of Exodus describes as bitter, harsh and ruthless (Exodus 1:11-14). These are not indentured servants or debt slaves but a defeated and enslaved people taken as booty in the Pharaoh’s internal war.

But, like so many wars, the Pharaoh’s campaign against the Hebrews runs into snags and resistance. The more savagely these aliens are ground down and oppressed, the more they seem to flourish, thus multiplying the fear and loathing of the Egyptian people and driving the Pharaoh to escalate his war. Enslavement and oppression having failed to eradicate this threat, the Pharaoh turns to slaughter, commanding first the Egyptian midwives and then all his subjects to kill every newborn Hebrew male, tossing their bodies into the Nile. Now all of Egypt has blood on its hands, having gone from cruel slavery to the slaughter of children and ethnic cleansing.

As a result, Egypt enters into a permanent state of war against the Hebrews – the war enduring past the death of the Pharaoh – holding them captive as a defeated people, seeking to grind them down with brutal labor and murderous abuse, and slaughtering their sons (who might, in time rise up against their oppressors). Still, Exodus reports that the Hebrews continued to increase in numbers and strength, almost as if the war against them was contributing to their flourishing, or, at the very least, provoking them to resistance.

With the arrival of Moses and Aaron, the Pharaoh is called to put an end to his campaign against the Hebrews, but his reign of terror responds to the arrival of these possible liberators by escalating the violence, increasing the cruel conditions under which the Hebrews labor and thereby seeking to squash the resistance. In the end, however, the Pharaoh’s war fails to provide the security it promises and leads to the defeat of the Egyptians. Indeed, the long, escalating war carried out by generations of Pharaohs and Egyptians ultimately produces the very catastrophe the Pharaoh and Egypt most fear – in the end the military might of Egypt is devastated by an enemy with whom the Hebrews have allied themselves, and the Hebrew people “go up from the land” of Egypt, stripping

the Pharaoh's empire of the labor force he so cruelly tried to ensnare and taking with them whatever plunder they desire. The war the Pharaoh had frightened Egypt into initiating against the Hebrews – and waged with every possible instrument of terror – brought about the very nightmare it had sought to prevent.

### **Rome and Herod's Reign of Terror**

In the time of Jesus the Roman empire and its client states enjoyed a period of great stability and security known as the *Pax Romana* (27 BCE to 180 CE), but this “Roman Peace” was largely maintained by the widespread use of terror to control or defeat insurgencies in its various colonies. Richard Horsley argues in *Jesus and Empire* that Rome was able to control the peoples and lands it conquered by relying on massive campaigns of terror and vengeance, often annihilating whole communities at the first sign of rebellion (Horsley, 2003, pp. 27-31). Like the Pharaoh, Rome relied heavily upon enslavement and slaughter to deal with the peoples it declared war against and waged military campaigns that were infamous for their savagery; like the Pharaoh, Rome regularly protested that such violence was necessary to protect its own security. The wars the empire fought against insurgents were not wars of aggression but campaigns seeking to protect Romans (and their obedient clients) from the dangers posed by these conquered and oppressed peoples.

In Palestine Herod ruled as Rome's client king and this local warlord imitated (and occasionally outdid) his imperial masters by introducing his own reign of terror (Horsley, 2003, pp. 31-34). Again, this standing war against the local population was waged out of fear, motivated by a desire to protect Herod and Rome's “security” by suppressing any resistance or insurgency. Of course, because the endless war against insurgents and rebels was motivated by fear it relied upon terror as its primary instrument, with Rome and Herod seeking to eliminate their own fear by terrorizing whole populations. No wonder, then, that public crucifixions and torture were such popular weapons in Rome and Herod's arsenal (Forrester, 2005, pp. 14-15). Waging an internal war against every sign of rebellion, Rome and its client king relied on massive use of enslavement, slaughter and crucifixion, hoping to terrorize the local peoples into complete and unquestioning obedience to their masters.

Like the Pharaoh's efforts, Herod and Rome's reign of terror provoked significant resistance and rebellion among those living in Judea and Galilee, perhaps more than anywhere else in the empire. Those in power saw these insurgents and rebels as terrorists and bandits, and certainly groups like the *Sicarii* or “dagger men,” as Horsley calls them, remind one of twentieth century terrorist groups that fought against colonial forces in places like Algiers (Horsley, 2003, p. 42). At any rate, unable to match the Roman military's superior forces, insurgents turned to terror to fight the state sponsored terror that sought to crush them (Horsley, 2003, p. 42). The fear that produced Rome and Herod's permanent wars relied upon campaigns of terror and generated campaigns of counter terror – fear begetting fear begetting yet more fear. In the end Rome did achieve some security in Judea, but only by “pacifying” the region by destroying it.

## America's "Wars" on Drugs and Crime

In America, too, we know something about being led into wars by those who manipulate or exploit our fears. For more than a century our nation has waged a series of internal (and occasionally international) "wars" on drugs, and more recently we have waged a four decade war on both drugs and crime. And now we find ourselves in the seventh year of what promises to be a decades long war on terror.

Largely we have waged these wars in response to fear, usually a disproportionate fear of remote or exaggerated dangers. Occasionally these fears have driven us to abandon or violate our fundamental moral and legal values, to turn against ourselves, and to harm our national character and undermine our real security in ways that no enemy – foreign or domestic – could. Oftentimes we have been manipulated into these wars by persons or groups whose interests are served by having our nation at war. Sometimes we have been provoked by enemies who could not hope to defeat us on the field of battle but who might hope to get us to harm ourselves by overreacting.

Since the late nineteenth century the U.S. government has been engaged in several prolonged crusades against the use of specific narcotic drugs, federal crusades that are now called "drug wars." What distinguishes these drug wars from other attempts to address the social ills associated with narcotics and addiction is that they focus on punishment and criminalization instead of prevention and treatment, relying primarily on police and the criminal justice system (and sometimes U.S. and other nations' military forces) to wage a war against the suppliers and consumers of these narcotics. A war on drugs has an enemy and relies on police and/or military forces to defeat, imprison or eradicate that opponent.

In their studies of the American drug wars, social historians David Musto (1973) and John Helmer (1975) argue that the U.S. government's crusades against opium, cocaine, marijuana and other drugs were in large part motivated by a fear of the growing power of a particular ethnic group, minority or class. As Musto (1973, p. 224) puts it, the strongest support for these drug wars came from a generalized fear in the larger society that Chinese, Blacks, Mexicans or some other immigrant or minority group were getting out of control and threatening the economic or social security of the middle and upper class. Musto (1973, pp. 51-52) also notes that the fears fueling these drug wars were often inflamed with exaggerated reports of drug use and criminal activity by the immigrant or minority group in question.

Again and again, Musto (1973, pp. 244-246) and Helmer report, U.S. drug wars took place in times of social upheaval and crisis when an identified minority or ethnic group was seen to pose a threat to the economic and social status quo, sometimes by taking jobs away from working class whites, other times by breaking social or class barriers and integrating into the larger community. In the 1870s America launched "the first of the great anti-narcotics crusades in our history," attempting to legislate against the use of opium. As Helmer (1975, p. 19) points out, this first American drug war targeted the use of opium by a swelling Chinese immigrant population believed to be taking jobs away from working class whites and occurred just as "anti-Chinese demonstrations and the

campaign to cut off (Chinese) immigration began in earnest.” America’s second drug war, running from 1905 to 1920, targeted cocaine use and was waged largely against African Americans and immigrant minorities. To encourage support for this second antinarcotics crusade the U.S. public was told that cocaine use incited blacks to engage in reckless sexual and criminal behavior, thus threatening the social fabric of society – and endangering the safety of white women. Of course this drug war was being waged at a time when many whites feared the growing economic and political power of blacks in the South and North, and both Musto (1973, pp. 5-17) and Helmer (1975, pp. 34-48) see this campaign as part of a larger effort to resist that growth.

Curiously enough, the leaders of America’s second drug war made a sharp distinction between poor and working class users of cocaine and heroin and those in the “higher social ranks” who took morphine. Doctors and middle class socialites who used morphine were to be treated medically for their addiction or dependence, while the “police approach” was to be used to deal with the use of cocaine and heroin by the so-called “outlaw class.” In other words, drug wars were to be waged against the poor and working class, against immigrants and minorities, but not against those who protected the status quo (Helmer, 1975, pp. 38-47).

In the 1930s the U.S. launched yet another war on drugs, this time targeting Mexican immigrants and their use of marijuana. As Helmer points out, American attitudes towards marijuana and a swelling Mexican immigrant population were largely benign until the Depression created a major employment crisis. At that point Mexican workers, who had been imported throughout the Southwest to provide low cost labor for the agricultural sector, were seen as a threat, and their use of marijuana suddenly became a law enforcement crisis. “Public concern about marijuana grew,” Helmer (1975, p. 56) argues, “because Americans wanted to drive Mexicans back over the border, for reasons that had nothing to do with the nature of the drug or its psychological effects.” Once again, exaggerated claims were used to fan the flames of fear fueling this drug war. While Mexicans represented a very small percentage of the population and committed few of the crimes, officials reported high rates of drug use and criminal behavior in this population.

Since the early 1970s, however, the U.S. has been engaged in a war on drugs and crime that dwarfs all previous drug wars and that has produced the largest prison system aimed at fighting crime in human history. As a result of this long-running war on crime and (especially) drugs, the population of our state and federal prisons has grown over sevenfold, increasing from less than 200,000 to nearly 1.5 million, with the total U.S. prison and jail populations reaching 2.2 million – not counting nearly 5 million more on probation or parole. One out of every 133 persons in this country is behind bars, and our national incarceration rate (750 per 100,000) is the world’s highest and 5-8 times that of other industrialized democracies. As a result, the U.S., with about half a million more prisoners than China, not only imprisons many more people than any other nation but has about a quarter of all the prisoners in the world behind its bars (McCormick, 2000, p. 509; Sentencing Project, 2007).

Ordinary citizens might presume, or at least hope, that this massive campaign has been in response to a widespread and growing epidemic of violent crime and drug use; and regular viewers of late night TV news and audiences of “tough on crime” politicians and pundits would certainly conclude that we live in an extraordinarily dangerous and violent society – a fearful age calling for drastic measures (Bader-Saye, 2007, pp. 14-19).

But, in fact, the fears fueling our nearly forty year war on crime and drugs have been grossly exaggerated. First, America’s overall crime rates parallel those of most industrialized democracies, but our government alone has felt the need to wage a war on crime or drugs that puts six to ten times as many of our citizens behind bars, creating what a former U.S. drug czar referred to as America’s “internal gulag.” Second, America’s war on drugs began at a time when U.S. drug use had been declining for several years, and our wars on crime and drugs have escalated even as crime rates and drug use dropped, and they were always out of proportion to the threat posed by either crime or drugs (Tony, 1995, pp. 83-95; Mauer, 1999, p. 145). Third, study after study reports that prevention and treatment are more effective and tremendously less expensive ways of addressing drug addiction, while few of the half million drug users in U.S. prisons receive adequate therapy or rehab. Fourth, the U.S. has intolerably high rates of violent crime (largely the result of homicides committed with firearms), including a murder rate five to seven times that of most industrialized countries (Mauer, 1999, p. 29). America’s war on crime and drugs has not been waged against these violent criminals but against nonviolent drug users. Indeed, throughout most of our current four decade war on crime and drugs, the majority of those arrested and incarcerated and re-incarcerated have been low-level, nonviolent drug offenders (Donziger, 1996, pp. 15-19).

Following the pattern established in America’s earlier wars on drugs, Michael Tonry and Marc Mauer argue that the current (and permanent) U.S. war on crime and drugs is being waged against the poor and minorities. Looking at the inmates in America’s “internal gulag” we see that most of those captured in the war on drugs and crime have been minorities, the poor, the mentally ill, and drug users convicted of nonviolent crimes.

Since 1980 the number of drug users in U.S. prisons and jails have climbed eleven fold, skyrocketing from just over 40,000 to just under half a million, and nearly 60% of those prisoners have no history of violence (Mauer & King, 2007, p. 2). Minorities make up 60% of the population of U.S. prisons and jails, and Blacks are sent to prison for drug use six times more often than whites, even though their use of illegal drugs is less than 2% higher than whites (Mauer & King, 2007, pp. 19-23). The Department of Justice reports that “56 percent of state inmates, 45 percent of federal prisoners and 64 percent of those in local jails are mentally ill” and notes rates of mental illness are even higher among women prisoners (Matthis, 2006, p. 4). Other studies show that mentally ill prisoners receive longer sentences and harsher treatment than other convicts and – not surprisingly – that they commit suicide at drastically higher rates (Staples, 2004, p. A26).

According to Tonry (1995, pp. 101-110) and Mauer (1999, pp. 143-151), America’s current war on drugs has largely targeted inner city neighborhoods where the poor and minorities are over represented. “Anyone,” Tonry (1995, p. 104) argues, “with knowledge of drug-trafficking patterns and of police arrest policies could have foreseen that the enemy troops in the War on Drugs would consist largely of young, inner city,

minority males. Marian Wright Edelman (2007, p. 8) of the Children's Defense Fund reports that at present a six year old Black boy in the U.S. has a one in three chance of going to prison in his lifetime and that "a Black youth is 48 times more likely than a White youth to be incarcerated for the same or similar drug offense." Tonry (1995, p. 97) argues that this is no accident and that in the present drug war the lives of black and Hispanic ghetto kids have been sacrificed in order to reinforce white kids' norms against drug use, and that minority scapegoating has been a consistent part of America's ongoing wars with drugs.

And yet, in spite of spending countless billions and incarcerating millions of our citizens, America's longstanding war on crime and drugs has not only failed to address the fears that fueled it, but it has actually proven counterproductive, undermining our efforts to make Americans safer and protect our citizens from criminals. Study after study has shown that rounding up millions of Americans and throwing them into prisons for longer and longer periods of time has had very little effect on drug use and crime rates (Tony, 1995, pp. 17-24, 117-123; Mauer, 1999, pp. 81-117; Donziger, 1999, pp. 200-204; Durham, 1991, pp. 28-31; Scheingold, 1995, pp. 155-156). Mandatory sentences and prison terms five to seven times as long as those handed out in other industrialized democracies have not brought U.S. crime rates or drug use below that of these other nations. Indeed, after two decades of the war on drugs, illegal narcotics were more available and less expensive in the U.S.

Moreover, along with critics like Mauer and Tonry, Jerome Miller's (1996, pp. 95-136) *Search and Destroy: African American Males in the Criminal Justice System* argues that America's war on crime and drugs has been counterproductive and criminogenic. The massive war on drugs has reduced spending in other areas of crime fighting and decimated parole programs integrating prisoners back into society. It has also overcrowded prisons with low level nonviolent drug users, forcing the early release of many violent offenders. And the targeting of inner city youths of color has meant that going to prison in many African American urban communities is considered now a rite of passage into adulthood (McCormick, 2000, pp. 522-523).

And so, like the Pharaoh's internal war on the Hebrews, America's longstanding war on crime and drugs is the product of inflamed and manipulated fears in response to an exaggerated threat and the demonizing and scapegoating of an identified minority group. It is also, like the Pharaoh's crusade, a permanent campaign relying upon the use of massive imprisonment. Like Egypt's war against the Hebrews, it has failed to achieve its goals and may even be undermining the effort to produce security. In other words, the war on crime and drugs may be contributing to the rise of both, making Americans more vulnerable to the ill effects of drugs and crime.

### **The War on Terror: A War on Fear Fueled by Fear**

In the wake of 9/11 President Bush called for a crusade and then a war against terror, and in the frightening days and weeks following the attacks on New York and Washington, it is easy to see why the White House and Congress might have called for extreme measures in response to this extraordinary and devastating terrorist attack – even



though some voices argued for a more deliberate and proportionate response (Hehir, 2001, p. 11; Johnstone, 2002, p. 60). Still, since we now know the decision to go to war against Iraq was not driven by legitimate fears of state sponsored terrorism or WMDs, it seems reasonable to ask if the fears driving us to wage a war on terror were also exaggerated (Dowd, 2006; DeCosse, 2006).

In an essay on “George Bush’s War on Terrorism and Sin” Ira Chernus (2004) argues that the call for a war on terror embraced a longstanding American tendency to cast internal and external threats as apocalyptic struggles between the forces of good and evil. The first nine months of the Bush presidency were shaped by a call for “compassionate conservatism,” but after 9/11 the White House took up the “war on terror” as its defining mantra and called upon Americans and civilized peoples around the world to embrace a cosmic struggle against the forces of international terrorism and the axis of evil nations giving comfort and support to these terrorist groups.

In choosing to wage a “crusade” against terror President Bush tapped into the religious imagination of the majority of Americans, summoning the U.S. public to respond to the threat of international terror as if it were the coming of the apocalypse. As Chernus (2004, p. 411) notes, “the political culture of the United States has always been under the influence of an apocalyptic impulse,” and Americans have long and often been ready to take up arms in an ultimate battle against the forces of sin.

In this case, however, the president was not summoning Americans to defeat or eliminate terrorism in some ultimate battle but to contain terrorism as the U.S. and its allies had contained international Communism during the four and a half decades of the Cold War. In other words, the president was summoning Americans to take up arms in a permanent war against terror, embracing a stance Chernus refers to as “apocalypse management.”

“Apocalypse management” means America is to wage a permanent and “holy war” against demonic opponents deserving neither mercy nor justice, villains with whom we cannot negotiate or compromise. This will be a war without end, a permanent state of emergency in which the government will be forever free to operate outside the normal bounds of constitutional and international law. It will also be a war in which America never needs to examine the complex political and economic roots of terrorism or the U.S. role in this problem. “Apocalypse management” also means that the war on terror is being waged to protect the status quo, to preserve present economic and political structures against any external and internal threats.

In this way, Chernus suggests, the decision to wage a war on terror exaggerates the very real (but hardly cosmic) danger posed by terrorism and portrays this threat as an apocalyptic menace against which the U.S. and its allies must marshal all of their forces in a permanent war aimed at preserving the political and economic status quo.

Like Chernus, Lee Griffith (2002, pp. 75-76) argues in *The War on Terrorism and the Terror of God* that Americans have been repeatedly manipulated into going to war by alarmist claims that we face an apocalyptic threat or must take up a cosmic battle against the forces of evil and sin. Earl Shorris (2007, pp. 13-16, 215-223) takes a slightly different tack in his recently published *The Politics of Heaven: America in Fearful Times*, where he argues that in America – a Protestant nation shaped by its Calvinist theology –

the individual fear of death and desire for salvation has been replaced by an apocalyptic terror of nuclear annihilation and worship of security; and that this terror has been manipulated to mobilize Americans in both the Cold War and the current war on terror. We are, according to Shorris, a nation living in fear and manipulated by those who would tap into or exaggerate that fear.

Nowhere is the decision to wage an apocalyptic battle against terror clearer than in the speeches President Bush delivered in the weeks and months after 9/11. As Bruce Lincoln (2003, p. 20) notes in *Holy Terrors: Thinking about Religion after September 11*, the president's repeated calls for a war against terror mirrored exactly Osama Bin Laden's declaration of a holy *jihād* against America and the West. "Both men constructed a Manichaeian struggle, where Sons of Light confront Sons of Darkness, and all must enlist on one side or another, without possibility of neutrality, hesitation, or middle ground." Each described children as the helpless victims of their enemy's campaign of terror. One appealed to all right-believing Muslims, the other to all freedom-loving Americans, and each described the conflict in religious terms – if not always using specifically religious language.

None of this is to say that the threat of international terrorism is not real or that the U.S. and other nations do not need to respond to this very serious threat. It does, however, suggest, that casting the terrorist threat in terms of an apocalyptic battle taps into the American religious imagination in ways that exaggerate the real threat and exonerate Americans from their part in this problem while providing unquestioning support for the defense of the political and economic status quo at home and abroad.

Scott Bader-Saye (2007, pp. 14-19), John Mueller and Michael Ignatieff give other indications that Americans have been disproportionately frightened into waging a war on terror. In *Following Jesus in a Culture of Fear* Bader-Saye reports on how the American media regularly exaggerates the proximity and size of threats to the U.S. public in order to generate more customers and larger audiences, on how politicians of both parties have disproportionately fueled our fears of crime, drugs, communism and terrorism to gain votes, and on how the current Bush administration has manipulated fears generated by 9/11 to gain unquestioning and unreasonable support for the war in Iraq.

Reflecting on U.S. foreign policy since WWII, Mueller reports that our government and intelligence community regularly overestimated and exaggerated the threat posed first by international Communism, later by so-called rogue states, and now by international terrorism.

It has been common, at least since 1945, to exaggerate and to overreact to foreign threats, something that seems to be continuing with current concerns over international terrorism.... Alarmism and overreaction can be harmful, particularly economically. And, in the case of terrorism, it can help create the damaging consequences the terrorists seek but are unable to perpetuate on their own. Moreover, many of the forms alarmism has taken verge on hysteria. The United States is hardly vulnerable in the sense that it can be toppled by dramatic acts of terrorist destruction, even extreme ones. The country can, however grimly, readily absorb that kind

of damage, and it has outlasted considerably more potent threats in the past. (Mueller, 2005, p. 208)

Indeed, according to Mueller, while terrorism poses a real threat, this threat has been systematically and grossly exaggerated, provoking the U.S. public to pursue unnecessary and counterproductive courses of action – often resulting in the very harms that terrorists sought (but were unable) to inflict.

Ignatieff (2004, pp. 58-81) argues that the tendency to exaggerate and overreact to the threat posed by terrorism is characteristic of liberal democracies and warns that this overreaction, sought by the terrorists, tends to harm the nation much more than terrorist attacks. According to Ignatieff, while terrorism poses a significant threat, it is much smaller than the danger posed by war and has never brought a liberal democracy to its knees. “Terrorism has damaged liberal democracies, but it has never succeeded in breaking their political systems. Liberal states turn out to be much less weak than they perceive themselves to be; indeed, their chief weakness is to underestimate their strengths” (Ignatieff, 2004, p. 73). Therefore it is an exaggerated fear of the real harm terrorists can inflict that often provokes liberal democracies to suspend or violate political liberties and civil rights, employ retaliatory and escalating violence and even commit atrocities, strategies that ultimately increase sympathy and support for the terrorists and harm the democratic society in ways the terrorists never could.

In the U.S., Ignatieff reports, the majority has responded to terrorist threats by suspending or violating the rights of some minority. Since 9/11 most Americans have willingly suspended the rights of aliens, enemy combatants, and suspected terrorists, looking the other way when the protections of constitutional or international law were waived or abrogated, and responding with disappointingly little shock and horror when reports of abuse and torture at Guantanamo Bay and Abu Ghraib were released to the public (Danner, 2004, p. 48). In this way, the harmful effects of the war on terror are directed against minorities while the political rights and liberties of the majority remain largely untouched. But, Ignatieff argues, this approach violates the very nature of a liberal democracy and inflicts damages on our constitutional democracy that no terrorist group could effect (Ignatieff, 2004, p. 61).

Indeed, this is the most consistent criticism of this or any war on terror, that by embracing a reactive and mirroring response to terror, democratic societies inflict more damage on themselves and take more lives than the terrorists were capable of doing. As Ignatieff (2004, pp. 60-61) points out, “it is the responses to terrorism, rather than terrorism itself, that does democracy the most harm.” Groups like Al Qaeda understand that “terrorism is dialectical. Success depends less on the initial attack than on instigating an escalatory spiral, controlled not by the forces of order, but by the terrorists themselves.”

Griffith (2002, p. 220) argues that while governments like the U.S. refuse to negotiate with terrorist groups because they see this as a concession, these nations make a far more serious concession to terror when they imitate and embrace its methods. “The greatest concession to terrorism is mimesis (imitation), and it is the most frequent concession.” This is true because our leaders believe that “the victor in a violent war on terrorism will

be the party that is more adept at inflicting terror.” And so liberal democracies abrogate political liberties and civil rights (usually of minorities), override the checks and balances provided by a constitutional democracy, abandon the constraints of international laws and treaties, greatly expand police powers for surveillance, arrest and interrogation, and engage in their own forms of terror (including massive and indiscriminate imprisonment, kidnapping or rendition, and abuse and torture). This is more than the terrorists could ever have hoped for.

In sum, Griffith (2002, pp. 225-232) highlights three fundamental problems with waging a war on terror. First, “violent and punitive responses have not curtailed terrorism, nor is there a reasonable prospect they will do so in the future.” Second, counterterrorist strategies often cost more lives than were taken by terrorists. And third, taking up the tools of terror violates the fundamental beliefs of democratic and biblical peoples regarding human dignity, liberty and justice, sacrificing these goods at the altar of an idol called national security.

In a piece on “Counterinsurgency Warfare as Military Malpractice,” Edward Luttwak (2007, pp. 33-42) takes aim at four years of counterterrorist efforts in Iraq and argues that both these efforts and new methods recommended in the U.S. military’s revised “counterinsurgency” field manual by Generals James N. Mattis and David H. Petraeus are doomed to failure, in large part because terror is a political and not a military problem. According to Luttwak, the only way the U.S. could win a military war on terror in Iraq or elsewhere would be to embrace brutal tactics of terror and reprisal employed by the Roman and Ottoman Empires and utilized during the Nazi occupation of conquered nations in WWII; Luttwak acknowledges that such tactics would be unacceptable for a democratic people.

James Fallows (2006, pp. 60-70), who had originally supported the invasion of Iraq, also argues against the folly of a war on terror, arguing that “a state of war encourages a state of fear.” Pointing to recent work by Ian Lustik and John Mueller, Fallows argues that instead of reducing the public’s fear in response to terrorist attacks, waging a war against terror ends up increasing and fueling those fears, creating a war psychosis in which the public feels more threatened and frightened.

The conclusion of these critics, then, would be that while declaring a crusade or war on terror in the days after 9/11 may have seemed like a useful rhetorical tool for mobilizing a nation against a grave threat, such a war is folly on several levels. First, six years after the attacks on the Pentagon and the World Trade Centers it seems clear that international terror poses a real but exaggerated threat, and that this threat has only been increased by a war on terror that has violated constitutional and international laws, created sympathy and recruits for those we fight, and produced more U.S. casualties than the terrorists killed on 9/11. Our response to terror and to manipulated and exaggerated fears has taken up the tools of terror and fear and only made us feel more frightened and terrified.

## A Christian Response to Terror: Be Not Afraid

The use of terror is primarily a political problem, and any effort to reduce it to a military problem by waging a war on terror will prove to be counterproductive. Counterterrorism all too often takes up the tools and methods of terrorism, handing the terrorists their greatest victory and surrendering the very values liberal democracies and biblical people claim to prize.

But we live in an age when religion has increasingly become a tool for both those who turn to terror and those who wage counterterrorist campaigns. The terrorist and the counterterrorist alike claim that *Gott is mit uns*. We also live in an age that is witnessing “the rebirth of the apocalyptic,” (Forrester, 2005, pp. 49-64) in a Christian nation whose populace has long been willing to cast itself as the forces of light called to take up arms against the forces of darkness (Griffith, 2002, pp. 75-128). This makes terrorism and the war on terror a theological problem.

The first step in addressing the threat of terror or the dangers of counterterrorism is to reject any Manichean notion of a line separating humanity into the forces of good and evil. A biblical faith begins with the certain knowledge that all human persons and communities are sinful and graced, that the line dividing good and evil, as Solzhenitsyn noted, cuts through every human heart and every town, tribe, people, and nation. In the world we inhabit there are no forces of light taking up arms against forces of darkness. The wheat and the weeds live side by side with one another in every human community.

A biblical faith also flatly rejects the demonization of our opponents so essential to both terrorism and counterterrorism. In the face of assertions that we are called to wage merciless crusades against murderers and infidels, or that this enemy is a vile beast without rights or dignity, the Scripture reminds us that every human being is fashioned in the image and likeness of God (Genesis 1:27), that every other person is bone of my bone and flesh of my flesh (Genesis 2:23), that Christ took on the flesh of all humanity, that whatever we do to the least of our brothers and sisters we do to Christ (Matthew 25: 31-46), and that we are to love our enemies (Matthew 5:44).

The second step in responding to any call to take up arms in a cosmic battle against evil is to recall our own sinfulness. The Christian community is a repentant church, a fellowship of sinners, and in the Gospels Christ’s public ministry begins not with a call to arms against Satan but with a call to repent (Mark 1:14). Again and again Christ chastises those who see the speck in their neighbors’ eyes but miss the beam floating in their own (Matthew 7:3-5), and in Luke’s parable of the Pharisee and the Tax Collector, Jesus reports that the one who thanked God that he was not like other men has condemned himself out of his own mouth (18:9-14). And on several occasions Christ condemns those who try to cut themselves off from all sinners, refusing to break bread with anyone tainted by evil.

Part of the repentance called for in the face of the rebirth of the apocalyptic is an acknowledgement of how we, the Christian community, have taken up the apocalyptic sword in the past and turned our neighbors into enemies and our enemies into beasts. A repentant church acknowledges that the church of the martyrs all too soon became a community that persecuted and tortured other Christians and that the history of

Christianity includes dark and violent chapters like the Crusades, the Inquisition, the Wars of Religion, and the Holocaust. Rather than inflaming our passion for justice or vengeance, news of an apocalyptic division of the human race into the saved and the left behind should fall on sober and repentant ears.

When we hear of leaders and presidents using fear and terror to control and mobilize communities, we might pause to reflect upon the ways in which our own Catholic moral tradition (Patrick, 1996, pp. 200-207) and Christian preaching from so many pulpits relied for so long upon our fears of hellfire and damnation as a way to control and mobilize the Christian community (Griffith, 2002, p. 176). Politicians and terrorists did not invent the use of fear, nor were they the first to frighten their audiences with visions of an apocalyptic annihilation.

The third step in responding to attempts to translate apocalyptic theology into calls for war is to question whether the book of Revelation should be used to justify contemporary battles against all sorts of opponents or whether the theology of Christian apocalypticism does not instead summon us to embrace a stance of reconciliation, forgiveness and even pacifism.

Duncan Forrester (2005, pp. 54-63) and Lee Griffith (2002, pp. 203-218) acknowledge that apocalyptic literature, which presents good and evil as polarized, is often used to justify all sorts of wars against demonized opponents but that Jewish and Christian apocalyptic writings in general and the Book of Revelation in particular do not serve as a call to arms. Instead, the Lamb of God has taken upon himself the violence of all humanity (our side and theirs) and been victorious over sin in and through Christ's crucifixion and resurrection. The saints are not to conquer evil or exact vengeance, for God has triumphed over evil in the most incredible – and nonviolent – of ways, by taking the power of sin into his own flesh and absorbing the violence of evil in his own body. Revelation transforms the conquering warrior into a lamb offered in sacrifice and summons the saints to celebrate and worship this God of peace.

Thus, when America's leaders take up apocalyptic imagery to justify all sorts of wars against demonic opponents, we must challenge and reject this violent use of the Christian and Jewish apocalyptic and join our bodies to the body of the Lamb that takes on the suffering of the world in order to put an end to evil and violence.

The fourth step in addressing the fears that drive us to wage all sorts of wars is to unmask and repent of our American idolatry of safety. Americans are easily frightened in part because we have an unreasonable expectation of invulnerability, so advertisers and politicians can frighten us into spending inordinate resources in search of a security or peace we will never find this side of heaven. This idolatrous worship of safety does not make us or the world more secure or peaceful but drives us to become more and more suspicious, violent and acquisitive. In its place we should embrace an ethic of vulnerability or risk, embodied by a willingness to practice hospitality, peacemaking, and generosity. (Bader-Saye, 2007, pp. 31-36, 101-148).

Rejecting an idolatrous attachment to our own safety means accepting our vulnerability as humans and thus not grasping at equality with God. It also means attending to the graver needs and insecurities of the world's victims of war, poverty, hunger, sickness and oppression and working for a higher level of security for all. In this

way, ironically, we can achieve a comprehensive (but not invulnerable) security that will be better for us as well (Thomson, 2003, p. 178).

The final step in addressing the terror that drives us to war is to step back and explore other, less destructive options. Just War Christians are called to wage war only as a last resort, and Edward Leroy Long (2004) joins other theologians and moralists in offering alternatives to the war on terror (or crime, drugs and other social ills).

One option is to recognize the real but limited threat posed by terrorists and to use a criminal justice model to address this problem. Such an approach would acknowledge the danger of terrorism while operating within the international and constitutional constraints essential to democracies.

Another option would be to address the political and economic causes leading to terrorism. Terror is often the weapon of the weak and powerless, and people usually turn to terror when recourse to democratic processes have repeatedly failed. Thus, the best counterterrorist approach would normally be to give the weak and powerless some sense of hope and justice.

A third option would be to take up the model and tools of peacemaking identified by the Christian ethicist Glenn Stassen (2003). Actively employing nonviolent tools of conflict resolution and negotiation while addressing underlying causes of injustice and violence could prove far more effective at defusing terror than a war on terror. This, of course, would call for a much greater willingness to tolerate vulnerability and to work actively for security, but it would also be more in line with Jesus' approach to the threat of violence.

In the end it will not be possible to remove all threats or to achieve invulnerability, but the path of war has not achieved these ends either and has often made the world more dangerous and fearful. Still, when next we hear alarmists crying that we must take up arms against yet another enemy, we should pause and hear the words the resurrected Christ offered his disciples – “Be not afraid.”

## References

- Bacevich, A. (2005). *The New American Militarism: How Americans are Seduced by War*. New York: Oxford University Press.
- Bader-Saye, S. (2007). *Following Jesus in a Culture of Fear*. Grand Rapids, MI: Brazos.
- Bainton, R. H. (1960). *Christian Attitudes Toward War and Peace*. New York: Abingdon.
- Baxter, M. J. (2002a). Dispelling the 'we' fallacy from the body of Christ: The task of Catholics in a time of war. *South Atlantic Quarterly*, 101 (2), 361-73.
- Baxter, M. J. (2002b, December). Catholics should be more conscientious about objecting to war. *U.S. Catholic*, 21-23.
- Brown, P. (2000). *Augustine of Hippo: A Biography* (new ed.). Berkeley, CA: University of California Press.
- Cavanaugh, W. T. (2003, May 23). At odds with the Pope: Legitimate authority and just wars. *Commonweal*, 11-14.
- Chernus, I. (2004). George Bush's war on terrorism and sin. *Political Theology*, 5 (4), 411-430.
- Chernus, I. (2006). *Monsters to Destroy: The Neoconservative War on Terror and Sin*. Boulder, CO: Paradigm Publishers.
- Danner, M. (2004). *Torture and Truth: America, Abu Ghraib, and the War on Terror*. New York: New York Review of Books.
- DeCosse, D. E. (2002). Authority, lies, and war: Democracy and the development of just war theory. *Theological Studies*, 67 (2), 378-394.
- Donziger, S. A. (Ed.). (1996) *The Real War on Crime: The Report of the National Criminal Justice Commission*. New York: HarperCollins.
- Dowd, C. (2006, October 6). Unjust & indefensible. *Commonweal*, 133 (17), 16-21.
- Durham, A. M. (1991). Then and now: The fruits of late 20<sup>th</sup> century penal reform. *Federal Probation*, 55, 28-36.
- Erickson, V. L., & Jones, M. L. (eds.). (2002). *Surviving Terror: Hope and Justice in a World of Violence*. Grand Rapids, MI: Brazos Press.



- Fallows, J. (2006, September). Declaring victory. *The Atlantic Monthly*, 298 (2), 60-70.
- Forrester, D. B. (2005). *Apocalypse Now? Reflections on Faith in a Time of Terror*. Burlington, VT: Ashgate.
- Griffith, L. (2002). *The War on Terror and the Terror of God*. Grand Rapids, MI: William B. Eerdmans.
- Hedges, C. (2002). *War is a Moral Force that Gives us Meaning*. New York: Anchor Books.
- Hehir, J. B. (2001, October 8). What can be done? What should be done? *America*, 8-12.
- Helmer, J. (1975). *Drugs and Minority Oppression*. New York: Seabury.
- Horsley, R. A. (2003). *Jesus and Empire: The Kingdom of God and the New World Disorder*. Minneapolis: Fortress Press.
- Ignatieff, M. (2004). *The Lesser Evil: Political Ethics in an Age of Terror*. Princeton: Princeton University Press.
- Johnstone, B. V. (2002). The war on terrorism: A just war? *Studia Moralia*, 40, 39-61.
- Lincoln, B. (2003). *Holy Terrors: Thinking About Religion After September 11*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.
- Long, E. L. (2004). *Facing Terrorism: Responding as Christians*. Louisville: Westminster John Knox.
- Lucas, J., & McCarthy, D. M. (2005). War is its own justification: What Americans think about war. *Political Theology*, 6 (2), 165-92.
- Lustick, I. S. (2006). *Trapped in the War on Terror*. Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press.
- Luttwak, E. (2007, February). Dead end: Counterinsurgency warfare as military malpractice. *Harper's*, 314, 33-42.
- Mathis, G. (2006, September 20). Let's get the mentally ill out of our prisons. *The Skanner*. 28 (48), 4.
- Mauer, M. (1999) *Race to Incarcerate*. New York: The New Press.
- Mauer, M., & King, R.S. (2007). *The 25-year Quagmire: The War on Drugs and its Impact on American Society*. Washington, DC: The Sentencing Project.

- McCormick, P.T. (2000). Just punishment and America's prison experiment. *Theological Studies*, 61 (3), 508-532.
- Miller, J. G. (1996). *Search and Destroy: African American Males in the Criminal Justice System*. New York: Cambridge University Press.
- Mueller, J. E. (2005). Simplicity and spook: Terrorism and the dynamics of threat exaggeration. *International Studies Perspectives*, 6, 208-234.
- Mueller, J. E. (2006). *Overblown: How Politicians and the Terrorism Industry Inflate National Security Threats, and Why We Believe Them*. New York: Free Press.
- Musto, D. F. (1973). *The American Disease: Origins of Narcotics Control*. New Haven: Yale University Press.
- Patrick, A. E. (1996). *Liberating Conscience: Feminist Explorations in Catholic Moral Theology*. New York: Continuum.
- Regan, R. J. (1996). *Just War: Principles and Cases*. Washington, D.C.: Catholic University of America Press.
- Scheingold, S. A. (1995). Politics, public policy, and street crime. *Annals of the American Academy of Political and Social Sciences*, 539, 155-168.
- The Sentencing Project (2007). Facts about prisons and prisoners. Retrieved November 6, 2007, from [http://www.sentencingproject.org/Admin/Documents/publications/inc\\_factsaboutprisons.pdf](http://www.sentencingproject.org/Admin/Documents/publications/inc_factsaboutprisons.pdf)
- Shorris, E. (2007). *The Politics of Heaven: America in Fearful Times*. New York: W.W. Norton.
- Staples, B. (2004, December 13). How the justice system criminalizes mental illness. *New York Times*, p. A 26.
- Stassen, G.H. (2003). Resource section on just peacemaking theory. *Journal of the Society of Christian Ethics*, 23 (1), 171-84.
- Stassen, G. H. (2004). Just peacemaking as hermeneutical key: The need for international cooperation in preventing terrorism. *Journal of Society of Christian Ethics*, 24 (2), 171-192.
- Tonry, M. H. (1995) *Malign Neglect: Race, Crime, and Punishment in America*. New York: Oxford University Press.

Wright Edelman, M. (2007, October 4-10). A call to action to dismantle the cradle to prison pipeline. *New York Beacon*. 14 (40), 8-9.