

War Without End

After 13 years committed to war, it is time to be alarmed.

Bishop [Robert W. McElroy](#) | FEBRUARY 21, 2011



The conflict in Afghanistan now stands as the longest war in American history. For this reason alone, as the United States approaches a decade of major warfare in a conflict that has shown little lasting progress, there should be a public debate that does not proceed from a blind commitment to “stay the course.” On an even deeper level, a sustained national dialogue about the war in Afghanistan is vital to the future of the United States because it touches upon a chilling prospect: the danger that major warfare has become not an exceptional necessity but an ongoing way of life.

The United States has now achieved the capacity to wage major warfare over many years without greatly burdening its economy or its general citizenry. Three factors have made this possible: 1) the sheer immensity of the American economy and its ability to float credit, which has made the costs of major wars like Afghanistan and Iraq a relatively small blip in overall government expenditures; 2) the creation of instruments of war through modern technology that minimize American casualties in warfare and greatly enhance American tactical superiority; and 3) the existence of a professional army, which limits the layers of American society that absorb the terrible trauma of casualties in war, in contrast to a general draft like that utilized in prior wars.

The result has been, as the historian David Kennedy of Stanford University notes, a situation in which “the army is at war but the country is not. We have managed to create and field an armed force that is very lethal without the society in whose name it fights breaking a sweat.” On a more ominous

level, Kennedy warns, this achievement of a sustainable war-fighting capacity by the United States has created “a moral hazard for the political leadership to resort to force in the knowledge that civil society will not be deeply disturbed.” This moral hazard has become realized in a decade-long conflagration in Afghanistan and in an independent, elective major war in Iraq that lasted six years. Because the fractious commonwealth we have attempted to forge is fragile, the war in Iraq could re-erupt at any moment.

Invasion as Transformation

The moral hazard posed by America’s vast capacity to wage war is compounded by its idealistic tendency to cast war aims in transformational terms. The United States seeks to establish as the goal of war, for example, a stable democracy no matter how inhospitable to democracy the history, institutions and culture of the country in which it intervenes. In Afghanistan the original goal of intervention was clear and circumscribed: Al Qaeda was to be rooted out from its safe havens and destroyed, and the repressive Taliban government that had given protection to Al Qaeda was to be punished and removed. In Iraq, by contrast, the goals of war were from the outset extensive and ill-defined: the removal of Saddam Hussein, the destruction of Iraq’s capacity to use phantom weapons of mass destruction, the eradication of the hold that Saddam’s Baath Party had on Iraqi society, the erection of a functioning democracy in the Middle East, the elimination of a serious threat to Israel.

In both wars the goal of societal transformation and democratization came to dominate American aims and strategy, and that goal has limited the flexibility of the United States to withdraw early in the conflicts or to accept compromise outcomes.

The fear of failure deepens the moral hazard posed by U.S. power in the world today. Once committed to war, having cast the goals of war in transformational terms, the United States feels compelled to keep fighting in order to maintain its reputation for success on the battlefield and on the global stage. As a result, the United States suffers from a paralyzing inability to bring wars to a close.

In his recent book, *How Wars End*, the editor of *Foreign Affairs*, Gideon Rose, delineates the great human and material costs that have accompanied America’s inability to end war. Mr. Rose proposes that much of this cost can be attributed to a failure of U.S. policymakers to be realistic when going into a war about what can actually be achieved. Vague or highly optimistic notions of victory have crippled war planning at the beginning, middle and end of every

major American conflict since World War II.

Today, the United States is again paralyzed by an inability to bring war to a close. Afghanistan is no longer the central location for the fight against terrorism in general or Al Qaeda in particular. There are no clear grounds for believing that the corruption-riddled government that the United States points to as the incarnation of democracy in Afghanistan will ever attain national legitimacy and long-term stability. Afghanistan's deeply ingrained suspicions against foreign invaders are increasingly being directed toward the United States and its allies. Yet America fights on.

When the administration and Congressional supporters of the war recently pre-empted the promised debate on troop withdrawals scheduled for 2011 and instead focused on a long-term commitment lasting until 2014, the reaction was deafening silence. This can be explained only by the fact that the United States has entered into a new and radically different relationship with major warfare: even 13 years of ongoing major conflict do not constitute a cause for alarm or soul-searching. This indeed is a moral hazard, for the world and for the identity of the United States.

When does a nation have a moral obligation to end its participation in a decade-old war that has no clear prospect of success? How has continuation of warfare become the moral default position for cases in which the United States is fundamentally uncertain how to proceed? Has the United States allowed its wealth and technological achievement to combine with its idealism to create a society in which major warfare is a permanent part of its national life?

Catholic Teaching on War and Peace

For the Catholic community, these questions cannot be addressed without reference to the church's teaching on war and peace in the modern age. It should be a sobering reality for every believer in the United States that at the same time that America has come to a new acceptance of war as an ongoing part of its national life and identity, the universal church has grown increasingly skeptical of the legitimacy of warfare. The Second Vatican Council declared that "it is hardly possible to imagine that in an atomic era, war could be used as an instrument of justice." Pope John Paul II declared that war is never an appropriate way to resolve problems and never will be, precisely because war creates new wounds and new, ever more complicated conflicts.

The United States has found in the cutting-edge technologies of war the foundation for its ability to wage long-term war without generating massive American casualties; the church

sees in these same technologies and their massive destructive capacities a clarion call to limit radically any resort to war. In an interview as prefect of the Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith, Cardinal Joseph Ratzinger said that “given the new weapons that make possible destruction that goes beyond the combatant groups, today we should be asking ourselves if it is still licit to admit the very existence of a ‘just war.’”

While still recognizing a delimited right to defensive warfare in extreme cases of aggression, the church’s teaching directly challenges the embrace of warfare as a regular element of state action. This is not a challenge that occurs at the level of contingent prudential application of doctrinal principles to a particular war. It is a disagreement on the level of doctrinal principle about the legitimacy of the use of warfare as a regular tool of national policy.

Catholic doctrine does not permit war (or force of arms) to democratize other countries. There is no more pressing moral lesson for the United States to draw from the wars in Iraq and Afghanistan than that it is morally illegitimate to use the weapons of war, with all their lethal and dehumanizing consequences, to remake foreign societies in our own image. Only major aggression counts in Catholic moral teaching as a just cause for war.

Catholic doctrine does not permit the continuation of warfare in order to avoid the damage that will come to one’s reputation from defeat. The church’s teaching on right intention in war absolutely precludes starting or continuing a war out of this or any other political motivation.

Catholic doctrine does not permit the use of weapons and tactics that eviscerate the distinction between combatants and civilians. The use of drone aircraft for strikes that have generated increasing civilian casualties in Afghanistan and Pakistan represents just the type of “advanced” technology that lay at the heart of Pope Benedict’s skepticism about the moral legitimacy of warfare in the present day.

Catholic doctrine does not permit continuation of war based on a mere wisp of hope. If the principle of proportionality in Catholic doctrine is to have any meaning, it must require that, in the absence of any clear probability of success after 10 years of major fighting, war must end.

The Central Question

This year should be a time of intense national debate on Afghanistan and America’s approach to war. But almost certainly it will not be. In part this is a result of the nation’s

preoccupation with the current economic crisis that has created so much suffering here and around the world. On a deeper level, there will be no searing debate about Afghanistan despite almost 10 years of warfare precisely because the moral hazard that David Kennedy has identified is real. America's economy is too vast, its war-fighting skills too advanced, its ability to limit the number and social location of American casualties too successful for even 10 years of major warfare to burden the nation seriously. The country has truly learned to wage war "without breaking a sweat."

This is a frightening reality. It raises the possibility that a decade that has not known a single day without major warfare involving the United States may be succeeded by yet another decade of continuing American warfare overseas. The countries involved may change, but the themes will be the same. The world will always be a dangerous place, and dictatorships will always be in need of reform and "regime change."

The people of the United States need to engage in a deep and piercing national dialogue on the role of war in their national identity. U.S. citizens need to understand that this nation cannot transform the world by force of arms. They must recognize that war inevitably brings horrendous unintended consequences, like the persecution and destruction of the ancient Christian community in Iraq that is currently underway. The American people need to comprehend the human devastation caused by instruments of war that skillfully limit U.S. casualties but devastate cities and families and the lives of strangers. We the people need to recognize that good intentions do not constitute a just cause for war. If we do not, we may raise a whole generation of children who have never known an America at peace. And we may create a world that turns to war as easily as we do.

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