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Temptation of War and the Limits of Imagination

Keynote

By

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Good afternoon!

I am honored and glad to be here, and to feel at home. I mean in terms of geography as well as in terms of communion of minds and hearts. We are celebrating today the spirit of peace, and calling for it to become a reality. Many events are taking place in the United States and around the world to demand peace and the management of conflict among nations through peaceful means. In that regard Utica, Central New York, is **not** centrally isolated.

Many of you are certainly wondering what does Africa Faith and Justice Network do; and what qualifies me, as its representative, to stand in front of you and speak in this particular and grave circumstance.

AFJN was created in 1983. That year, Ronald Reagan and Leonid Brezhnev had made the Cold War very hot. For those who can remember, be reminded that Reagan called the Soviet Union “the evil empire”, and Brezhnev responded by saying that Ronald Reagan was the most dangerous cow-boy in the world. The US Catholic church realized that the Cold War was not being fought in North America, nor in Europe, but in developing countries, particularly in Africa. Their missionaries in the field, men and women, could observe the devastating consequences of the Cold War on the African population and how the effects of the Cold War was negatively affecting their own work in Africa. So, in 1983, the US Association of Catholic Missions decided to create the Africa Faith and Justice Network, to research, analyze, educate, and advocate on African issues and, basically, try to change the US policy makers and citizens’ mentality vis-à-vis Africa.

You may still have another question in your mind: why should an NGO working on African issues be so concerned about the war against Iraq?

First, by principle. As the Roman poet, Terrence, once said (Terrence himself being of an African origin), “I am human being, and nothing human is alien to me.”

Second,¹ according to a 1991 UN study, the 1991 Gulf War caused at least 13 African countries to lose over 1% of their GDP as a result of:

(a) “Costly spikes in oil prices in fall 1990 (depleting scarce foreign exchange reserves and adding to countries’ debt burdens when they had to borrow money overseas to maintain essential oil imports).”

¹ Source: American Friends Service Committee, International Program Executive Committee.

(b) “Halts in the flow of remittances as guest workers were sent home. Some countries like Sudan and Somalia derive over 40% of their GDP from remittances. The Gulf war played a role in turning hunger initially generated by war and drought into the Somali famine in 1992-1993.” You all know what happened next when the US tried to intervene in Somalia that same period of time.

Third, “humanitarian NGOs seeking to preposition themselves to respond to impending humanitarian crisis in Iraq face a growing moral and political dilemma. Especially since the Balkan crisis, they have increasingly collaborated with military forces in delivering aid in various humanitarian crises around the world.” This equally applies to Afghanistan. “Now these NGOs find themselves becoming de facto extensions of the planned US civilian-military operations for Iraq.”

Fourth, “Africa has seen human rights protection further eroded by new security legislation passed under cover of the war on terrorism. The Bush Administration is likely to downplay human rights abuses by regimes that are cooperating in its propositioning of the US military forces to confront Iraq.”

Actually, the war on terrorism has apparently sparked a global crisis of what Marina Ottaway of the Carnegie Endowment for International Peace coined “semi-authoritarian regimes.”² They are not incomplete or failed democracies, nor democracies in the making. They are purposefully crafted to have all the appearances of democracy while actually functioning as autocracies. Even in well-established democracies, the executive branch is less and less subject to the scrutiny of the legislative body and civil liberties are in danger of being weakened.

Is war in general and war without end likely to end all wars, even in a case of a pre-emptive war like the one against Iraq, where a whole empire will be fighting against one single country? (An empire does not have allies; it only has subordinates and enemies. For that matter, the transatlantic disagreement will have no effect on the US’ plans). Let’s think a little bit about the present and the past.

The present-³ The world produces 110% of the basic food supplies needed to feed the entire planet. Still 30 million people die every year from hunger and 800 million are under-nourished. In 1960, the income of the 20% richest people in the world was 30 times higher than the income of the 20% poorest. Today, i.e., more than 40 years later, it is...82 times higher. Out of the 6 billion people living on earth, barely 500 million live

² Marina Ottaway, *Democracy challenged*, Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, Washington, D.C., 2003.

³ Ignacio Ramonet, *Les guerres du 21 ème siècle*. Galilee, Paris, 2002

relatively well, and 5.5 billion people have hard time making ends meet. The 225 biggest fortunes represent the equivalent of the combined income of the 47% poorest, i.e., 2.5 billion people. And the assets of the 15 richest people are more than the GDP of the entire sub-Saharan Africa. In the US, 32 million people have a life expectancy less than 60; more than 40 million are without medical coverage, 45 million are living under the poverty line, and there are 52 million illiterate people. The European Union has 50 million people living under the poverty line, and 18 million unemployed. Meanwhile criminal money laundry represents more than the GDP of one third of the humanity. In the meantime internet is diffusing not only knowledge but also skills, in an atmosphere of an unprecedented traffic of illegal weapons.

Lessons of the past⁴ In twenty-five centuries of history, China has enjoyed only two centuries of peace. In twenty centuries of history, the West has done no better. For example, in the 16th century, Europe had known only 10 years of peace; in the 17th century, only 4 years of peace; in the 18th century, only 16 years of peace. From 1500 to 1800, in three hundred years, Europe has known 270 years of war, i.e., in average, a new war every 3 years. Since 1945, more than 200 small wars (or low intensity conflicts) have caused more than 30 millions casualties; 3/4 of them being civilians. Currently, and for two consecutive generations, only 10% of humanity has lived in peace. If peace, as we have known it, is not harmony but absence of war, then we have not had a nuclear peace but the absence of a nuclear war. So far, we have been lucky.

Is war a credible instrument of democracy? The lesson from ancient Greeks is not convincing.⁵ In time of war as well as in time of peace, the Greeks never ceased to compete against one another. Over each period of three years, the Greeks spent more than two years at war and were never at a peace for more than ten consecutive years. In 416 BCE, Athenians told the inhabitants of the Island of Melos (by geography close to Athens and by blood close to Sparta), practically this: **either you are with us or you are against us**, because in their view, *“what is just is arrived at in human affairs only when the strength on both sides is equal, otherwise the powerful take what they can, while the weak accept what they must...and others, if clothed with the same power as we are, would do the same thing.”*⁶

As Athens then, the United States is now in that position of superpower. Not for the first time, but for the second time in modern history. The first time was right after World War II. Europe was in ruin and the US was the only country, with the hubris of Prometheus, to master the atomic fire. But mistakes made in foreign policy led to the Cold War. It took

⁴ Philippe Delmas, *Le bel avenir de la guerre*, Gallimard, Paris, 1995.

⁵ André Bernard, A. *Guerre et violence dans la Grèce antique*. Hachette, Paris, 1999.

⁶ Thucydides, *The Peloponnesian war*, 431 BCE.

40 years to get out of it. As retired Admiral Shanahan put it, a foreign policy solely based on military strength makes enemies more rapidly that it can suppress them. In deed, the Cold War era arms race was ended not solely because of the policy of Ronald Reagan as we have been told but mainly by what Matthew Evangelista called “unarmed forces,” i.e., a movement led by a group of physicists and mathematicians on both side of the iron curtain who, through collaborative efforts, made viable and verifiable disarmament possible.⁷ Of course, those scientists were free to communicate freely, in the absence of governmental pressure or “interrogation” by international inspectors. According to Matthew Evangelista’s study, scientists could have ended the Cold War in the 1950s. However, politicians managed to fight it out until the early 1990s. Albert Einstein was once asked by a journalist why scientists are so smart as to build nuclear devices but not as smart as to devise instruments to implement peace. Einstein responded in this manner: it is because politics is more difficult than physics.

The arrogance of power can clearly be seen in the allegory Hesiod told us in the *Works and Days*, c. 8th century BC: “*This is what the hawk said when he caught a nightingale with spangled neck in his claws and carried her high among the clouds. She spitted on the claw hooks, was wailing pitifully but the hawk, in his masterful manner, gave her an answer: ‘what is the matter with you? Why scream? Your master has you. You shall go wherever I take you, for all your singing. If I like, I can let you go. If I like, I can eat you for dinner. He is a fool who tries to match his strength with the stronger. He will lose the battle, and with the shame will he be hurt also! So spoke the hawk, the bird who flies so fast on his long wings.’*”⁸ (Commenting on the Gulf war of 1991, Anthony Zini said that Saddam Hussein is the only leader in the world stupid enough to confront the United States in a conventional warfare). However, in the end, Athens was exhausted and failed, and its democracy gave way to a dictatorship. As John Kennedy said in his inaugural speech, history has shown that those who talk about peace while riding the back of a tiger end up inside.

Today, the US is in a position similar to that it enjoyed in the immediate post-W.W. II period. Pearl Harbor had pushed the country to make the decision to invade Germany and Japan and to change the international system. September 11, 2001 has led to the invasion of Afghanistan and is leading to the invasion of Iraq, with another commitment to reorganize the international system. The symbolism the 9-11 attacks at the heart of the US is more powerful than the 12-8 surprise attack on the semi colony of Pearl Harbor. However, it is quite possible that historians, in the future, give more meaning to another

⁷ Matthew Evangelista, *Unarmed forces: the transnational movement to end the cold war*, Cornell University Press, Ithaca, NY, 2002.

⁸ Hesiod , *Works and days*, c. 800 BCE.

9-11. On September 11, 1990, George Herbert Bush, in a speech, defined the new world order (it didn't have a name yet) in which the competition East -West will be replaced by a confrontation North-South. Of course, the Administration was preparing to face the new reality in its own way. But G. H. Bush was not re-elected for a second term.⁹ One can accurately say that his plans had been hibernating until "W" 's election gave the opportunity to carry them on with the same people that surrounded his father. But is war a necessary ingredient for change? Conflict is, however, but war? I don't know. What I do know is that war brings war, not peace, because every war sets the stage for the next war. War, after all, is a sign of political failure...and is no substitute for resolving conflict.

The temptation of war is a limit of imagination.

In the *Atlantic Monthly* of last November [2002], James Fallows, in an article titled "The 51st State," wrote this: "*Wars change history in a way no one can foresee. The Egyptians who planned to attack Israel in 1967 could not imagine how profoundly what became the Six Day War would change the map and politics of the Middle East. After its lightning victory Israel seized neighboring territory, especially the West bank of the Jordan River, that is still at the heart of disputes with the Palestinians. Fifty years before, no one who had accurately foreseen what World War I would bring could have rationally decided to let combat begin. The war meant the collapse of three empires, the Ottoman, the Austro-Hungarian, and the Russian; the cresting of another, the British; the eventual rise of Hitler in Germany and Mussolini in Italy; and the drawing of strange borders from the Eastern Mediterranean to the Persian Gulf, which now define the battleground of the Middle East. Probably not even the United States would have found the war an attractive bargain, even though the US rise to dominance began with the wounds Britain suffered in those years*".

However in the face of the military obesity of this administration, I want to take the liberty to give James Fallows, the grade "incomplete." Actually, World War I ended the 19th century political arrangements, and started the structures of the 20th century. That ended with the collapse of the Soviet Union in 1991. The 20th century, politically, began in 1919 and ended in 1991. The 20th century, in that sense, was the shortest of all centuries. But, at the same time, it was the bloodiest in known human history.¹⁰ With the weapons massively destructive we now have everywhere, as small arms, and the weapons of mass destruction, plus all sorts of pollution, we are all survivors of the 20th century. We cannot continue like that. War is no longer the continuation of politics by other

⁹ Also see www.newamericancentury.org

¹⁰ Eric Hobsbawm, *The age of extremes: the short twentieth century*, Vintage Books, 1994.

means. It is the end of politics. Period! We have to find a way to peacefully settle dispute. That doesn't mean it is an easy path. Peace does not break out. Only war breaks out. We have to have the patience, courage and imagination to build a world in peace.

The new doctrine and soon practice of pre-emptive war will create a terrible precedent and change the fundamental principle of the international law, that of peaceful resolution of conflict among nations. Regarding democracy in the Middle East, there are other ways to introduce it: one might begin with Kuwait liberated; or a Palestinian state for example; or Jordan with the young king.

The Balkans and Afghanistan have proven that the US is more skilled in occupying a country than in rebuilding it. Whatever the advantages of the Iraqi oil might be for the United States, the scope, cost and length of occupying and rebuilding Iraq may be so high that, according to James Fallows, Iraq would practically become the 51st state of the United States. *"It has become a cliché in popular writing about the natural world that small disturbances to complex systems can have unpredictably large effects. The world of nations is perhaps not quite as intricate as the natural world, but it certainly holds the potential for great surprise. Merely itemizing the foreseeable effects of a war with Iraq suggests reverberations that would be felt for decades. If we can judge from past wars, the effects we can't imagine when the fighting begins will prove to be the ones that matter the most"*.

Let me conclude by stressing two ideas. (1) War does not put an end to all wars. On the contrary, the way a war ends sets the stage for another war, the same way a coup d'état creates the conditions for another coup d'état. (2) What is going to shape the 21st century is not the competition between Christianity and Islam but the outcomes of debates within Christian-dominated countries, the same way the 17th century religious wars have shaped modern history. We are here and now and we have a special mission.

So, let's meditate on the advice of Teilhard de Chardin: *"The age of nations is past. It remains for us now, if we do not wish to perish, to set aside the ancient prejudices and rebuild the earth."* It is possible. Why not? As another visionary said, "To do the impossible, one has to see the invisible."

Thank you.

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