

Joseph L. Allen

# TERRORISM & JUST-WAR Thinking

The intention for a **better peace** must constantly guide national policy.

**W**e must answer two questions in the affirmative if we are to say that the United States should have resorted to war against Osama Bin Laden's Al Qaeda terrorists and their Taliban supporters in Afghanistan.

The **first** is whether it is ever justifiable to go to war. Pacifists argue that using violence is never right, in war or otherwise. Jesus said that rather than resist evil, we are to turn the other cheek. Love, pacifists maintain, is incompatible with killing. Instead Christians should help people live peaceably together.<sup>1</sup>

Christian just-war thinkers reply, on the other hand, that more basic to the meaning of love is Jesus' teaching to meet our neighbor's needs—to give food to the hungry, drink to the thirsty, clothing to the naked. Among the neighbor's most pressing needs is the need to be protected from attack. For just-war Christians, love is best interpreted not as refraining from violence, but doing what helps our neighbors' lives.<sup>2</sup>

Those who attacked the World Trade towers targeted ordinary civilians going about their daily lives. Their intention was to create as much havoc as possible

in people's peaceful lives. The United States government is obligated to try to protect people from attacks like that. It is one thing for an individual to refuse to defend oneself. It is a different matter to refuse to use violence to protect other people who are unjustly attacked. Standing aside and letting someone commit murder is refusing to take responsibility for helping other people.

## Criteria for Resort to War

If just-war Christians are right, that going to war is sometimes justifiable, their **second question** is whether it is justifiable in this case. This calls for examining the just-war criteria for resort to war.

**1** By the criterion of justifiable cause, war can be justifiable only to repair or prevent some grave wrong: to protect people from unjust attack, restore rights wrongly taken away, or defend or reestablish a more just political order. If there was ever an unjust attack, it was what the terrorists did on September 11. Everything we know about them indicates that if left alone, they will commit similar atrocities in the future. Preventing this certainly qualifies as justifiable cause.

**2** Legitimate authority is the requirement that resort to war be decided by those who bear governmental responsibility to decide for the people.

Legitimate authority is not in question in this case. The United States government—the president, with the virtually unanimous support of Congress—has made the decision and had the legal right to do so.

**3** Some just-war thinkers say that a government must declare the aims of the war. After early statements of broad objectives, and in the face of disagreement within his administration, President Bush opted for a relatively narrow set of aims: destroying Al Qaeda, removing the Taliban from power, and working for a better Afghan government. He explained that the war is against neither the Afghan people nor Islam. Thus the administration has declared the war's aims for now. But its breadth remains an issue. As of this writing, there is question whether Iraq abetted the September 11 attacks or the anthrax mailings. If it is implicated, there will be calls within the government to attack Iraq. Broadening previously stated war aims is sometimes justifiable. Whether it is must be tested anew by the criteria for resort to war.

**4** War can be justifiable only as a last resort, after peaceful alternatives have been exhausted. Al Qaeda's past terrorist activities include bombing the United States embassies in Kenya and Tanzania in 1998, attacking the U.S.S. Cole in 2000, and much more. That his-

tory and Al Qaeda's expressed outlook toward the United States make it obvious that negotiations would not be successful. Similarly the Taliban's outlook is such that negotiating with them would have been fruitless.

**5** Justifiable resort to war requires a reasonable chance of success in attaining justifiable objectives. It will not be easy to attain the government's declared aims. The Taliban has shown itself to be a tenacious opponent. It may hold out a long time, if not as a government, then as a resistance movement trying to destabilize any alternative government. Yet prospects for eventually defeating it are good, given the coalition's power. Establishing a stable Afghan government will be difficult; the country has been a battlefield since 1979. Yet finding an alternative to the Taliban is likely.

Most difficult will be the destruction of Al Qaeda. It will be hard enough to find Osama bin Laden. Even if that happens, his operatives scattered around the world are working on further terrorist attacks. They will have to be destroyed one by one, cell by cell. The alternative—allowing them to continue their terror—is intolerable.

**6** Proportionality is the sixth criterion. A country should not resort to war if the consequences would likely be worse than not doing so. We ought not underestimate the war's possible negative consequences. There is the destruction of life with accompanying hardships in Afghanistan. Also the U.S.-led attacks may incite further dedicated terrorists, despite our efforts to the contrary. An appalling risk is the overthrow of the Pakistani government, with its nuclear weapons capability, by forces sympathetic to terrorists. And other countries may be destabilized.

Such dangers must be weighed against the likely consequences of not resorting to war. That would lead to increased terrorism of many sorts. Al Qaeda constantly devises new tactics difficult to anticipate. Given the terrorists' imagination and resources, it is impossible to

thwart them without attacking them. Only a combination of methods gives any hope: diplomacy, home defense, military offense, blocking their sources of money, and providing economic aid to countries such as Pakistan. The dangers of not resorting to military attack dwarf those of going to war. At the same time the U.S. and its coalition allies must take all possible steps to reduce the negative consequences of the war.

**7** The final criterion for justifiable resort is a right intention. Any war should be waged from a desire for a better state of peace, not from hatred or for revenge on one's enemies. Anger is

inevitable and understandable, given what has been done. But anger need not lead to hatred or the sheer desire to make others suffer. Those motives have no place in Christian ethics. Just punishment of terrorists should

proceed from a concern to deliver the world from the fear of terrorism. The intention for a better peace must constantly guide national policy.

Considering these criteria and circumstances, I believe that the United States' resort to war against the Taliban and Al Qaeda is presently justifiable. That does not provide any reason to rejoice. Any war is at best, as Roland Bainton put it, "just and mournful."

### Justifiable Means

If resort is justifiable, then the war must be conducted by just means. Attackers must discriminate between military and nonmilitary targets, aim only at military targets, and make strenuous efforts to avoid noncombatants. In his September 27 speech before Congress, President Bush recognized the distinction between attack on combatants and on noncombatants. Since then the administration has repeatedly stated that its policy is to target only military forces and their civilian commanders. Still there have been a number of serious errors; e.g., damage to Red Cross and U.N. facilities and to residential areas. These are, I assume, mistakes of infor-

mation, judgment, or execution, and not intentional. Even so, we must take all possible steps to avoid such mistakes.

The other just-means criterion is, again, proportionality: no destruction beyond what is necessary to achieve justifiable aims. It is both unwise and morally wrong to destroy beyond that point. Doing so takes lives unnecessarily and makes recovery more difficult after the war. The intention for a better peace must control the means.

### A Different Kind of War

This is a war the likes of which the United States has never experienced. It is mainly against a movement—Al Qaeda, with its cells in some fifty to sixty countries. How shall we know when it is over—when its objectives have been accomplished? It may have a duration comparable to the Cold War. In the past the public has thought that wars should be ended quickly, so that the country can return to "normalcy." But an early end to this one is unlikely. As casualties increase and sacrifices occur, it may be difficult to maintain public support over the long term.

Before September 11, the administration had seemed to many to turn away from international responsibilities and to adopt a unilateral diplomacy. Since then, we have seen an about-face in many ways: appeals for assistance from other countries, consultation with allies, great appreciation for those who are helping. It is obviously in our national self-interest to proceed that way, but it was before September 11. Over the long term the United States will need the rest of the world. □

<sup>1</sup> For a summary of the pacifist position, see *War: A Primer for Christians*, pp. 16-30, 63-64.

<sup>2</sup> For fuller treatment of just-war positions, see *War: A Primer for Christians*, pp. 31-52.

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