

## **11/08/09 Sermon**

“War and Politics”

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War as a tool of American statecraft and politics has existed from the moment there were governments with power and vested interests to protect. For equally as long, UUs have contested that linkage.

As former UUA President William Sinkford observed, “We struggle against the contradictory strains that characterize the relationship between Unitarian Universalism and if not the military itself, then the exercise of that military power” – especially as a political tool.

The conflict is that we are grateful for the protection we receive, but often stand opposed to and hold peace vigils against wars – most recently over Iraq and Afghanistan. As a country, we are willing to go to war, but for UUs, only as a last resort and in the clear knowledge that war is a failure of politics and diplomacy.

It is my belief that to support an unjust war makes us willing accomplices to the slaughter of the innocents. Yet, from the other end of the telescope, we are responsible for the death and carnage of others when we don’t militarily fight genocide and other holocausts. A contradiction of Gordian proportions to be sure.

Since this is almost Veterans Day, a moral tightrope of questions emerges: How do we support our troops, yet oppose war? Is there a UU way out of this dilemma? After all, we are not a war church or a peace church opposed to all war like the Quakers. We have supported several wars throughout our history, and three modern Secretaries of Defense have been UU. They represented our pragmatic strains, in contrast to our pacifist strains.

For me, the use of war as a political tool is morally corrupt. Clearly, I stand in stark contrast to the famous military strategist Karl von Clausewitz. He said, “War is merely the continuation of politics by other means” and, thus, must be accepted as an eternal fact of life.

Throughout UU religious history, we have looked at the use of military power differently. Our Congregationalist forbearers mostly supported the Revolutionary War. The British called them a “nest of vipers.” The founder of American Universalism, John Murray, was a chaplain in the Continental Army. On the other hand, most Unitarians opposed the War of 1812.

And later we mostly supported the Union in the Civil War. Our own Julia Ward Howe wrote "The Battle Hymn of the Republic" for the Union army. Yet a decade later, she reversed herself and issued a proclamation calling for the establishment of Mothers' Day in the name of peace: "Arise, then, women of this day! Say firmly: 'Our husbands shall not come to us reeking with carnage, for caresses and applause. Our sons shall not be taken from us to unlearn all that we have been able to teach them of charity, mercy, and patience'."

So the point of all this is that we have never had a uniform response to the use of war as a tool of public policy. That continued through World War II, Vietnam and now Iraq and Afghanistan. It is important for us to stand united with all faith in time of grave national peril, yet we can never forget that we are deeply committed to the rights of the individual and to engage in actions in keeping with our conscience. We must always be aware of government attempts to infringe on our basic constitutional rights.

I believe in the concept of a "just war" although, throughout history, that has been used to rationalize religious wars such as the Crusades. In the same way, Islamic terrorists have corrupted the teaching of Mohamed. The pragmatists among us sanction the use of war to reduce violence in the world as long as it is consistent with international law, is proportional to the danger encountered, and reduces the impact on civilian populations.

Howard Zinn writes in the *Power of Non-Violence*, "We are at war and it is as if our political leaders had learned nothing, absolutely nothing from the history of the 20<sup>th</sup> Century, from a hundred years of retaliation, vengeance, war, a hundred years of terrorism and counter terrorism of violence met with violence in an unending cycle of stupidity."

Terrorism only leads to more terrorism. In such circumstances, no one is safe. As proof of that reality, one only has to look at the bankrupt Palestinian-Israeli conflict. Car bombing leads to massive retaliation with more and more civilians killed, without any foreseeable end to the cycle of violence.

How do we UU's, in this sea of competing beliefs, come to a satisfactory middle ground between war and peace? Surely we must be open to multiple points of view. Some believe in the hard application of power to bend others to our will, while others believe in "soft power" of persuasion. Such an approach respects the humanity of the other and hopes to win them to our point of view voluntarily.

One perspective on soft power can be viewed as, "If I can get you to want to

do what I want, then I don't have to force you to do what you do not want to do." We can do this if we become the leader of international efforts to support legitimate regimes and (NGO) institutions that organize collective responses to looming global challenges, particularly threatening to our own country.

I definitely tilt to the multinational approach while reserving the right to employ hard power in the very few instances where force and coercion are appropriate and necessary. Believing in the worth and dignity of all within the Web of existence, our government policies in war and peace must take into the account the interests of others. It should be obvious that the previous administration mostly abandoned the use of soft power and, as a result, our reputation in the rest of the world suffered greatly because of unilateralism and disregard for others national interests.

Mind you, I do believe that terrorism is bad without any redeeming values. The taking of innocent lives is unacceptable and evil. It must be combated with the combined use of both soft and hard power.

As UUs, our belief in democracy seems to tilt our faith to the application of soft power in domestic politics and in the exercise of national power. We must be free to choose between good and evil, even if the results are not to our liking. Under the conditions of democracy, we the people get to know the facts and decide on the justification for war or peace.

For now I lack an acceptable rebuttal to the use of pre-emptive power by those who would completely abandon traditional approaches to the use of power in the face of terrorists accountable only to themselves.

To do so will require an argument that simultaneously endorses a state possessed of sufficient power to protect its citizens while still maintaining a compelling case for the best aspects of our tradition – faith in reason, respect for diversity, the inherent dignity of each individual.

I think that you all understand this is darn near impossible. If you are anti-war in the face of determined terrorists and believe in peace for this new age, we will need a revitalized, creditable argument for peace.

We need to do more than Don Quixote in "Man of La Mancha," who dreamed the impossible dream. We need to more than dream. We have to act!