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Relying on Faith Instead of Facts Brought Moral Calamity

How religious zealotry led the United States into a twenty-first century crusade.

by Daniel C. Dennett

As Madeline Albright's comment clearly articulates, in principle there is such a thing as a just war. The conditions are seldom met, however, and this is no accident. Naked aggression is almost always dressed up, with varying degrees of plausibility, to look like the furtherance of a cause that is at least arguable, so defending innocent people from such aggression -- which has to be the basis for any just war -- is seldom as clear-cut a grounding as the principles of just war demand.

Moreover, as Albright also points out, even a war initiated with just intentions can be betrayed by conduct of war that violates principles of morality.

It is this, more than anything else, that utterly disqualifies the fiasco in Iraq as a candidate for just war. Saddam Hussein was an extraordinarily evil dictator, and the world is well rid of him, but the steps taken by the USA to accomplish this -- unilateral, arrogant, and shockingly ignorant about local conditions -- have brought shame on the nation.

They have also been stunningly counterproductive. Respect for America has plummeted worldwide, a dangerous development both for us in America and for those around the world whose well-being and

security is partially protected by American support for principles of freedom and equality.

Our declarations of good intent are now deservedly regarded with cynicism by our friends and suspicion by those who desperately depend on us. Inflating these declarations with religious rhetoric about God being on our side is nothing less than obscene, however sincerely these protestations of faith may be uttered.

Nothing has done more to discredit religious faith in recent years than the self-righteous overconfidence with which our leaders have “listened to God” instead of listening to the knowledgeable secular advisers who have warned them, repeatedly, of the follies they were embarking on.

Defenders of religion are eager to point out that the motivation for this war was not religious, in spite of President Bush’s blunder in calling it a “crusade,” but they must admit that the administration’s faith in faith over faith in facts has probably been the principle cause of the moral calamity that now confronts us.

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