

The Cost of Iraq: Who Pays the Price?
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Two months ago, a friend of mine was among a small group of adventurous travelers who visited five countries on the Arabian Peninsula: Kuwait, Bahrain, Qatar, Oman, and Dubai. Ben kept a trip diary. He wrote, “We went to the Qatari crown prince’s stables to look at the Arabian horses. But the most interesting stop was al-Jazeera, the Arab world’s version of CNN. We got a nice tour of the facility there from a young American employee, a [young woman] from Mansfield, Ohio who speaks no Arabic and has no Arabic blood in her but had been on vacation in Qatar a couple years ago and heard about the job opening there. According to her, al-Jazeera gets more heat from Arab countries about making them look bad than it gets from the West . . . “

“We drove past glittering new campuses of several U.S. universities (Georgetown, Texas A&M, Cornell, and one other), whose existence sadly stems from 9/11. Qatari and other Arab kids now fear going to the U.S. due to post-9/11 anti-Arab sentiment (real or imagined), but they still want the American education, so the universities came to them instead, by building campuses there in Qatar . . . “

“Qatar is thinking of abolishing its army because they firmly believe that if they are ever attacked, the United States will come to their rescue. Sort of flattering I guess but points up that being the world’s policeman is not a role easily relinquished. The local newspaper also had a story in it saying that the Qatari government was seeking assurances from the U.S. and Israel that if Iran developed a factory to produce nuclear weapons that the U.S. and Israel would bomb the factory out of existence. Seems a bit much to ask for help from a country [Israel] whose existence you haven’t recognized, but it underscores the point that Iran is viewed by countries on the Arabian Peninsula as their biggest threat.”¹

There are wars and rumors of wars . . . In this short excerpt from the diary of a traveler, we see hints of what the Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. called “the giant triplets of racism, materialism, and militarism.” These giant triplets are all too often the organizing principles of human society and are all too often the organizing principles of the human heart. As Unitarian Universalists, we are called to help create a world where racism, materialism, and militarism are eclipsed by anti-racism, material simplicity, and cooperation as at least the default way of relating with each other. *That’s all.* ;)

¹ Private communication from Ben B., received in April 2008 concerning a trip taken in February 2008.

“The war in Iraq has drained this nation’s resources, creating a humanitarian crisis in Iraq. Meanwhile, a multitude of needs at home remain[s] unmet.”² Among the many unmet needs at home are the needs of people along the Gulf Coast of the United States whose lives were turned upside down by Hurricane Katrina, whose lives were disrupted even more by the post-Katrina recovery process, and whose lives in the first place seldom had the relative stability of those of us who are white. In the stark words of the Unitarian Universalist Service Committee, we are trading justice for war.

Actually, in my view, it is not so much a *trade* as it is a *gamble*. We are gambling that war will bring security, prestige, and profit rather than insecurity, loss of influence around the world, and crushing debt. Gambling has been on my mind lately. The Federal Reserve recently bailed out the investment banking firm Bear Stearns. Firms such as Bear Stearns are casinos for people with money to burn. They are casinos for people who are not satisfied with meeting their immediate needs and with receiving a reasonable rate of return on money being saved for a rainy day.

When the investments of these gamblers in sub-prime mortgages went up in smoke, these gamblers were bailed out in a move which protected (in large part) the wealth of those who least need protection. Christopher Dodd, the chair of the Senate Banking Committee, asked “Was this a justified rescue to prevent a systemic collapse of financial markets or a \$30 billion taxpayer bailout for a Wall Street firm while people on Main Street struggle to pay their mortgages?”³ (And while people in “Tent City” in Ontario, California, do not have a mortgage to struggle over.)

Consider the context: a war in Iraq which has cost over \$463,000,000,000.⁴ The Unitarian Universalist Service Committee reports that taxpayers in Louisiana will pay \$1.2 billion for proposed Iraq war spending for fiscal year 2008. Yet in many places along the Gulf Coast, more than two years after Hurricane Katrina, affordable housing is impossible to find (monthly rent can be triple what it was before the deluge). The health care system itself is suffering. Only one of seven general hospitals in New Orleans is operating at pre-storm levels. Funding for mental health services has been cut although severe mental health issues are on the rise.

² “Guide to Justice Sunday,” Unitarian Universalist Service Committee, www.uusc.org/justicesunday.

³ “Bear Stearns Rescue Was Necessary, Fed Chief Says” by Martin Crutsinger of The Associated Press, published in the *Los Angeles Times*, April 4, 2008, p. C3.

⁴ “Guide to Justice Sunday,” Unitarian Universalist Service Committee, www.uusc.org/justicesunday.

I encourage you to support the Unitarian Universalist Service Committee. Visit the website for suggestions on ways to educate, to act, and to speak out. One suggestion is for us to talk with political candidates and to ask them questions about our nation's priorities in the Gulf Coast and Iraq. If you are unsure about matters of "the separation of church and state," please check the insert in today's Order of Service entitled "The Real Rules: Congregations and IRS Guidelines on Advocacy, Lobbying, and Elections."⁵

We are not the first ones to face problems of this magnitude. On April 4, 1967, one year to the day before he was killed, the Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. delivered an address at Riverside Church in New York City. "I come to this magnificent house of worship tonight because my conscience leaves me no other choice," he began. "Declaration of Independence from the War in Vietnam" was the title of his address. He said, "Many persons have questioned me about the wisdom of my path. At the heart of their concerns this query has often loomed large and loud: Why are *you* speaking about the war, Dr. King? Why are *you* joining the voices of dissent? Peace and civil rights don't mix, they say. Aren't you hurting the cause of your people, they ask. And when I hear them, though I often understand the source of their concern, I am nevertheless greatly saddened, for such questions mean that the inquirers have not really known me, my commitment or my calling. Indeed their questions suggest that they do not know the world in which they live."

"A few years ago," Dr. King said that night in 1967, "there was a real promise of hope for the poor – both black and white – through the Poverty Program. Then came the build-up in Vietnam, and I watched the program broken and eviscerated as if it were some idle political plaything of a society gone mad on war, and I knew that America would never invest the necessary funds or energies in rehabilitation of its poor so long as Vietnam continued to draw men and skills and money like some demonic, destructive suction tube. So I was increasingly compelled to see the war as the enemy of the poor and to attack it as such When machines and computers, profit and property rights are considered more important than people, the giant triplets of racism, materialism, and militarism are incapable of being conquered."⁶

The triple threat of racism, materialism, and militarism is still with us. It is tempting to stop reading the newspapers, to stop feeling the heartbreak (by whatever numbing technique may be at hand), to start

⁵ See "The Real Rules: Congregations and IRS Guidelines on Advocacy, Lobbying, and Elections" online at www.uua.org/uuawo.

⁶ "Declaration of Independence from the War in Vietnam," Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr., published in a pamphlet by the A. J. Muste Memorial Institute Essay Series, 339 Lafayette Street, New York, NY 10012.

focusing on small joys, and to start hoping for even smaller sorrows. In a few moments, Rev. Ellen and I will share our perspectives on finding hope in the midst of suffering and injustice in the world.

As I conclude this part of the service, I will speak personally and say that I am not as concerned about my complicity in materialism and militarism as I am concerned about my complicity in structures of racism. “The structure of society and the way it operates constantly reinforce the apparent naturalness of segregated lives and the illusions that sustain them,” writes Chip Smith in *The Cost of Privilege: Taking On the System of White Supremacy and Racism*.⁷ It has been hard for me to face the fact that in my day to day activities, I am predominantly around other white people, even here in California, this racially diverse state.

In memory of Dr. King and in hopes of deepening my commitment to anti-racism, the least I can do is to read the obituaries of soldiers killed in Iraq, noticing, where photos or last names give a clue, how many of those killed are people of color. This is probably a higher percentage now than 40 years ago because today military service is “voluntary.” In memory of Dr. King and in hopes of deepening my commitment to anti-racism, the least I can do is to notice the skin color of the Iraqi civilians and soldiers who have been killed. “Every man of humane convictions must decide on the protest that best suits his convictions, but we must all protest,” Dr. King said. May we support each other in protesting racism, materialism, and militarism. May it be so!

⁷ *The Cost of Privilege: Taking On the System of White Supremacy and Racism*, Chip Smith, Camino Press, Fayetteville, North Carolina, 2007, page 263.