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We Know In Part (part 1)

Victory in war is a tragic delusion. It is an anachronism. In the first presidential debate, Sen. John McCain repeated his goal of maintaining a U. S. military presence in Iraq until the warriors could come home with victory and honor. Yet, General David Petraeus has said: "This is not the sort of struggle where you take a hill, plant the flag and go home to a victory parade. . .it's not war with a simple slogan,"

Sen. McCain, as do we all, interprets the world against a fusion of past/present horizons. (Hans Georg Gadamer) The past is never past. Like tree rings, the past is in the center of the present and the present will be surrounded by the future. Sen. McCain imagines what is possible today based on his understanding of the past. It is based on an outdated paradigm of war. Today, nearly everyone is armed. Governments cannot decide when the war is over.

The true threat to human security is not weapons of mass destruction. Rather, it is the proliferation of conventional weapons and small arms. As far as I know, no one died today from a chemical, biological or nuclear weapon. However, thousands die daily from small arms. They are easy to obtain for terrorist criminals and for psychologically disturbed high school and college students. And the United States is one of the leading arms merchants in the world.

The work in Iraq is to maintain security in a country torn by sectarian strife and mistrust, a country suffering under the burden of a lack of some basic needs. The work of building a stable and secure Iraq is work that cannot be finished through military power. Iraqis will have to work together to reconcile their differences, learn to trust each other and work together to make their country livable. A continued American military presence seen as a neo-colonial occupation would only retard this process. Iraqis ought to employ the just peace principles of grass-roots peacemaking and sustainable economic development. The security responsibilities belong to the Iraqi government.

Biblical wisdom teaches that we see through a glass dimly. We know in part. We prophesy in part. (I Cor. 13:9) This is because we are temporal beings. We live in and are limited by time and space. Our vision is perspectival. We cannot see or comprehend all, all at the same time. Sen. McCain's fusion of past/present horizons is more past than present. The power-over paradigm that the vocabulary of victory implies fails in this moment in history. We need to create a power-with paradigm.

After a war that has cost billions of dollars, tens of thousands of lives and has displaced millions, there is no such thing as coming home in victory and honor.

Part 2

Just peacemaking is counterinsurgency. At a different moment in time, counterinsurgency is just peacemaking.

In the late French philosopher Jacques Derrida's concept of differance, one thing is the other thing different and deferred. Particular entities exist within their own integrity, occupying both space and time. They are different, and at another moment, they are the same. Such is the case with just peacemaking and counterinsurgency. In the so called war on terror, the United States military is fighting insurgents in both Afghanistan and in Iraq. The question before the next president will be: how best to execute this war on two fronts?

In the first presidential debate between Sen. John McCain and Sen. Barack Obama, Obama repeated his intent to pull troops out of Iraq on a 16-month timeline and to put more troops into Afghanistan. He stated further that "if we have bin Laden and his top lieutenants in our sights and Pakistan is unable or unwilling to act, then we should take them out." This would be a mistake. Peace and security for the people of Afghanistan and Pakistan ought to be our goal. The goal of finding and of killing bin Laden and al Qaeda's leadership is hardly worth one human life.

The prevailing logic is that al Qaeda plans and trains terrorists from the safety of the mountains on the Afghanistan/Pakistan border. And, for the sake of the security of the United States our military has to capture or kill its leaders. The United States may be able to capture and kill major players in al Qaeda, but the U.S. cannot kill the idea of al Qaeda. No weapon can shoot the ideology that fuels it. Other people can and will step into the leadership positions vacated by those we capture or kill. Further, they can do their work of terror in any number of places on the face of the planet. The way to destroy al Qaeda is to render it irrelevant and to demonstrate that its ideology is bankrupt and obsolete.

Biblical wisdom tells us that we know in part, we prophesy in part. That partiality not only has to do with the perspectival character of our knowing, but it also has to do with our methods of interpretation. Interpretation happens within contexts. America's actions create a context for interpretation. The history, culture, religion, and political economy of Afghanistan and Pakistan also provide contexts for interpretation.

In this postcolonial moment, it is important to remember that Afghans and Pakistanis have lived through occupation and in the case of Pakistan, colonial domination. They both have lived through civil war and internal political instability. Both peoples live with poverty, with a lack of clean water and workable sewage systems. When American soldiers roll into their countries, when American drones drop bombs on targets intending to kill al Qaeda and innocent people die instead, they no doubt see a neocolonial move to control their government's leaders and thereby to control the natural resources of the nations. Afghanistan and Pakistan are rich in natural gas. Given U.S. ties to India, Pakistan sees a friend of an enemy violating its borders. Added to all this, Islam becomes a prism through which to see the world and to resist Western domination both politically and culturally. For some, in this context, al Qaeda's arguments make sense.

Enter just peacemaking as counterinsurgency.

Just peacemaking recognizes the importance of respect for human dignity, and human dignity demands that we work to provide basic needs – food, clean water, shelter, clothing, health care, education, employment, safety and a voice in government. Human dignity also requires that human beings have opportunities to create space for artistic expression, for the joy of life that makes life worth living. Male and female deserve these things equally. Basic needs ought to provide both sustenance and joy, thereby creating an environment for crafting a just peace. Thus, care of the civilian population becomes the most important tactic in a counterinsurgency doctrine.

This is where just peace becomes counterinsurgency. This is where counterinsurgency becomes just peacemaking. In the U.S. Army Marine Corps Counterinsurgency Field Manual, writing in the foreword, John A. Nagl says the U.S. army was not prepared for the insurgency in Iraq. “It had not trained its soldiers that the key to success in counterinsurgency is protecting the population, nor had it empowered them with all of the political, diplomatic, and linguistic skills they needed to accomplish that objective” (xv)ⁱ

Gen. David Petraeus, when commanding the 101 Airborne Division in Mosul, regularly asked his command: “What have you done for the people of Iraq today” (xv)? The reasoning here is that insurgents thrive among ordinary people who, for one reason or the other, do not turn them over to authorities. When a counterinsurgent army wants to take away this support, it has to provide the people with a reason to switch allegiances and protection when they do. Thus, counterinsurgency where the basic needs of the people are primary presents several paradoxes. Among them are: “Sometimes, the more you protect your force, the less secure you may be” (48).ⁱⁱ Counterinsurgency forces accept more risk when they are among the people. They share the risks with the population (48).

Another paradox. “Sometimes doing nothing is the best reaction” (49). This paradox cautions against overreaction. Yet another paradox. “Some of the best weapons for counterinsurgents do not shoot.” Counterinsurgency knows that people need economic security, a voice in their politics and hope. “Particularly after security has been achieved, dollars and ballots will have more important effects than bombs and bullets” (49).

Opponents of this counterinsurgency strategy see it as military malpractice. Military historian Edward Luttwak argues in an essay in Harper’s Magazine, that insurgents compel the cooperation of the people through violence. His reading of history tells him that the only way to defeat an insurgency is to “out-terrorize” the insurgents. Such a tactic would be morally unacceptable to the United States, thus such is not possible for the United States military to conduct. In my opinion, Luttwak is right that a hard fisted domination of the population is beyond the pale for a democratic society such as the United States that sees itself as a moral exemplar to the world.

The only tactic left to us is just peace theory as counterinsurgency. Just peace theory calls for security, democracy and economic development. When they are in place, there is a greater opportunity for nonviolent conflict resolution. The army can provide security, but it ought to work with other nongovernmental and intergovernmental agencies to provide economic development and democracy.

In the case of Afghanistan and Pakistan, the Taliban and al Qaeda are thought to base their operations in the Pashtun region that has its own history, ethnic identity and geography. Its territory was cut in two when the Russians and the British drew the boundary between Afghanistan and British India in 1893.ⁱⁱⁱ The Pashtuns still ignore the border. Further, the Taliban has ties to people in Pakistan who are sympathetic with their ideas of an Islamic state. This faction exists in tension with secularists. Military action inside Pakistan will further destabilize that country and harden Pashtun loyalties to their kinsmen and to the Taliban.

The paradox here is that perhaps the military ought to do nothing more than provide basic security for a vulnerable population. Just peace theory calls for regionalism. This means that all of Afghanistan and Pakistan's neighbors, including Iran and China, ought to be invited to participate in a summit to decided along with the Afghan and Pakistan governments how to work together to provide clean water and a proper sewage system in these two countries, especially in the border regions. They ought to extract the natural gas resources for the benefit of the people. Education is essential. They ought to turn poppy fields into wheat fields and work with local leaders to provide security. This would create a new context of interpretation within which the people can understand U.S. intentions. In this way the U.S. and its allies can overcome evil with good, because Osama bin Laden and the leaders of al Qaeda will go the way of all flesh no matter what we do.

ⁱ Lt. Colonel John A. Nagl, foreword, The U.S. Army Marine Corps Counterinsurgency Field Manual, (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2007).

ⁱⁱ The U.S. Army Marine Corp Counterinsurgency Field Manual, (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2007), 48-49.

ⁱⁱⁱ "Afghanistan". Encyclopaedia Britannica. 2008. Encyclopaedia Britannica Online. 08 Oct. 2008. <http://www.britannica.com/EBchecked/topic/7798/Afghanistan>

"Pakistan." Encyclopaedia Britannica. 2008 Encyclopaedia Britannica Online. 08 Oct. 2008 <http://www.britannica.com/EBchecked/topic/438805/Pakistan>

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