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Four Years Later: Poets, Prophets, and the War in Iraq

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Abstract

In lieu of an abstract, below is the essay's first paragraph.

"On September 11th, 2001, I was teaching at Carroll College in Helena, Montana. On the first anniversary of the attacks, the *Helena Independent Record* asked a group of local pundits and academics to offer their thoughts on the effects of the attacks on America. Four years later, I offer my editorial again, with no small sense of sadness and with a much greater sense of urgency."

Inspirational Thoughts



Four Years Later: Poets, Prophets, and the War in Iraq

By: Linda M. MacCammon, Ph.D.
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On September 11th, 2001, I was teaching at Carroll College in Helena, Montana. On the first anniversary of the attacks, the *Helena Independent Record* asked a group of local pundits and academics to offer their thoughts on the effects of the attacks on America. Four years later, I offer my editorial again, with no small sense of sadness and with a much greater sense of urgency.

There is little doubt that America has changed since the horrific events of September 11, 2001. Initially, the changes were positive ones. The world watched in awe and admiration as Americans of every race, color, and creed came together to meet the crisis. We rallied around our flag, our president, and our way of life, demanding justice for our people and seeking retribution against the enemies of our freedom. Within a few months, U.S. military and coalition forces had effectively destroyed the Taliban and sent Osama bin Laden and his Al Qaeda network packing. But as the “War on Terrorism” has progressed, there have been other more ominous changes. There is increasing evidence that our post-September 11th sense of solidarity, patriotism, and justice has been distorted by irrational fears and a brand of power politics that make our nation vulnerable to one of history’s oldest traps—becoming the very thing we most despise.

Think about it. Before the horrors of September 11th, would we have supported President Bush’s unilateral intention to overthrow Saddam Hussein? Would we have permitted the FBI’s continued persecution of a scientist for being “a person of interest”? Would we have applauded extremists in the North Carolina legislature who threatened to block state funding to UNC for asking students to read a book on the Qur’an? Would we have tolerated the Bush administration’s attempts to stifle political dissent by questioning the patriotism of its critics? This is what’s happening in America today, and the result is a society that is less open, less free, less just, and less democratic. Such hypocrisy is both embarrassing and dangerous.

For our nation’s sake we must reject such practices and work together to regain America’s democratic and moral ideals. As a Christian theologian and ethicist, I can’t think of a better place to start than the Sermon on the Mount. Contrary to popular opinion, the commandments of Jesus to “turn the other cheek” and “love your enemies” are not for wimps. The demand that human beings think differently, that they nurture a generosity of spirit that breaks destructive behavior patterns, is something that the “us versus them,” saber-rattling mentality of the Bush administration clearly fails to do. Unless we’re willing to think and act differently, we will remain at the mercy of unimaginative leaders who seek advantage in censorship, oppression, and war. The English poet and World War I veteran, Siegfried Sassoon, wrote about such “great men.” His words are just as timely today.

Great Men

The great ones of the earth
Approve, with smiles and bland salutes, the rage
And monstrous tyranny they have brought to birth.
The great ones of the earth
Are much concerned about the wars they wage,
And quite aware of what those wars are worth.
You Marshals, gilt and red,
You Ministers and Princes, and Great Men,
Why can't you keep your mouthings for the dead?
Go round the simple cemeteries; and then
Talk of our noble sacrifice and losses
To the wooden crosses.

Since that 2002 editorial, the wooden crosses have increased to over 2,800, with more than 20,000 of our servicemen and women wounded; many with severe brain injuries. Our country still remains at the mercy of unimaginative leaders who have committed torture in our name, destroyed our country's reputation overseas, curtailed or eliminated fundamental protections of privacy and habeas corpus, burdened future generations with huge budget deficits, and permitted corporations to reap billions in war profits at the expense of our troops and the American taxpayer. Clearly, the teachings of Jesus—and those of any other religious leader you care to name—have been shelved for political and economic expediency—despite the righteous claims of the Bush administration and the Religious Right that God is on our side.

What can we do after five years of this? Plenty! We can awake from our collective coma and pay attention to what's happening in our country and in the world. We can educate ourselves through books, newspapers, documentaries, and other media. We can redouble our efforts to combat censorship, oppression, and war and hold our leaders accountable. We can write our local and state representatives. We can vote. We can reach out to Muslims, who are fighting their own brand of religious fanaticism, and learn about their religion and their way of life, which is not so very different from our own. We can continue to warn our "Christian" politicians and religious leaders that ignoring God's will—as revealed by all the great world religions—is to participate in deceit and idolatry, sins that typify "people of the lie" rather than "people of the book."

Unless we overcome the failures of corruption and complacency, our country will continue to divide and splinter as we inch ever closer to yet another disaster—one that will surely be self-inflicted. The prophet, Isaiah, warned his people of a similar fate for failures that bear a striking resemblance to our own. In Isaiah 30:9-14, God commands Isaiah to record the peoples' rejection of God's instruction as a witness against them.

For they are a rebellious people,
faithless children,
children who will not hear

the instruction of the Lord;
who say to seers, "Do not see";
and to the prophets, "Do not
 prophesy to us what is right;
speak to us smooth things,
 prophesy illusions,
leave the way, turn aside from the path,
 let us hear no more about the Holy One of Israel."
Therefore thus says the Holy One of Israel:
Because you reject this word,
 and put your trust in oppression and deceit,
 and rely on them;
therefore this iniquity shall become for you
 like a break in a high wall, bulging out, and about to collapse,
 whose crash comes suddenly, in an instant;
its breaking is like that of a potter's vessel
 that is smashed so ruthlessly
that among its fragments not a sherd is found
 for taking fire from the hearth,
 or dipping water out of the cistern.

Today we are beginning to see and feel the "break in a high wall" across our nation. The growing consensus is that the war in Iraq was a terrible mistake. More and more of us are questioning the policies and competence of the Bush administration, as well as the role of religion in politics. While there is no way of knowing for certain the outcome of future events, five years from now I pray that I can revisit my words and take pride in the knowledge that we indeed had the faith, the courage, and the conviction to overcome our failings and restore America to its former greatness.