

Do conservative evangelicals regret justifying Iraq war?

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WASHINGTON (ABP)—As the number of American soldiers killed passes 3,000 and Congress debates President Bush's latest strategy for winning the war, some Christians who supported invading Iraq in 2003 are wrestling with whether the invasion was a "just war" after all.

While most progressive evangelicals, mainline Protestant leaders and the Roman Catholic Church opposed the war prior to the March 2003 invasion, many Baptists and other conservative evangelicals justified the war in Christian theological terms.

"Military action against the Iraqi government would be a defensive action. ... The human cost of not taking (then-Iraqi dictator Saddam) Hussein out and removing his government as a producer, proliferator and proponent of the use of weapons of mass destruction means we can either pay now or we can pay a lot more later," said [Richard Land](#), head of the [Southern Baptist Convention's ethics agency](#), in a Sept. 2002 article published by the denomination's news service.

Amnesty International human rights activists stage a demonstration against the United States prison at Guantanamo Bay, where foreign terrorism suspects are held.

International protests against American foreign policy have focused not only on the continuing war in Iraq, but also on the larger morality of the way the “war on terror” has been conducted.

(REUTERS Photo by Karoly Arvai)

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Land later organized a group of prominent conservative evangelicals who

signed an open letter arguing that the proposed Iraq invasion satisfied classic Christian theological criteria for justifying a war—often referred to as just war theory.

Saddam Hussein “has attacked his neighbors, used weapons of mass destruction against his own people, and harbored terrorists from the al-Qaeda terrorist network that attacked our nation so viciously and violently on Sept. 11, 2001,” the letter said.

Its signers included [Prison Fellowship founder Chuck Colson](#), a member of a church affiliated with both the SBC and the moderate [Cooperative Baptist Fellowship](#).

Colson, in a December 2002 article for [Christianity Today](#) magazine, argued that the classical definition of Christian [just war theory](#) should be “stretched” to accommodate a new age in which terrorism and warfare are intertwined. He concluded that “out of love of neighbor, then, Christians can and should support a pre-emptive strike” on Iraq to prevent Iraqi-based or -funded attacks on the United States or its allies.

Since those statements, however, the war has not gone according to plan:

- Some estimates indicate that as many as 100,000 Iraqis—mostly civilians—have died violently since the invasion.
- Iraqi Christians, professionals and intellectuals are fleeing the country.
- Parts of the nation are ruled by Islamic law and sectarian militias.
- Several independent groups investigating President Bush’s reasons for invading the country have determined there was neither a connection between Hussein and the al-Qaeda terrorist network nor convincing evidence that Iraq posed an urgent threat to U.S. interests.
- U.S. soldiers trying to help Iraqi counterparts pacify the nation continue

to be killed by insurgents and terrorists.

- Polls of Iraqis show continued decline in support of American troops there.

So, do Baptist leaders still consider the war just? The answer is about as complicated as the war itself has become.

[Daniel Heimbach](#), a professor of Christian ethics at Southeastern Baptist Theological Seminary in Wake Forest, N.C., defended the war on its eve—although in limited terms.

Heimbach, appearing in a February 2003 panel discussion at the seminary, said the attack on Iraq could be considered justified if it were viewed as simply enforcing terms of the Iraqi surrender that ended the first Iraq war in 1991. In that sense, he said, the more recent war “was and continues to be, in retrospect, justified or justifiable.”

Heimbach is widely credited with outlining the just-war doctrine then-President George H.W. Bush employed during the earlier Persian Gulf War. However, on the eve of the current Iraq war, Heimbach cautioned against citing “regime change” or fears that Saddam Hussein may be supporting terrorists or planning to attack the United States as valid reasons for attacking Iraq.

“I would recommend that we not focus on what Iraq is doing to support terrorism but focus on enforcing the terms of the 1991 surrender,” he said at the time.

Heimbach acknowledged that many of the justifications officials of the current Bush administration began mentioning in justifying the war confused the motivations.

“That rhetoric has shifted. Particularly, the big shift was whether we found

weapons of mass destruction or not—and of course that has made a difference,” he said.

“If it’s justified as a continuation of the Persian Gulf War, whether you found weapons of mass destruction or not was irrelevant. But if you justify it as a prevention of the risk of nuclear attack and then you don’t find nuclear weapons, then the whole thing is hollow.”

Land and Colson both originally went further than Heimbach.

They argued, in the run-up to the war, that a reconsideration of the classical terms of Christian war theory for the age of terrorism would justify a war conducted for regime change, to spread democracy and to dismantle perceived threats to the United States.

Assistants for both Land and Colson said they were unavailable for comment on this story. However, on the third anniversary of the war last March, Land said he continued to believe the war was just.

Citing the three Iraqi elections in the past two years—the nation’s first free elections in decades—Land told the website Beliefnet: “I believe our cause in Iraq was just; I think it was one of the more noble things we’ve done. We went to liberate a country that was in the grip of a terrible dictator who had perpetrated horrible atrocities and crimes against humanity, against his own people as well as his neighbors. We removed him, and we are giving the Iraqis the ability to defend themselves and to build a stable democracy.”

Land repeated such views as recently as September, saying he believed the vast majority of Southern Baptists agreed with him that the war continued to be justified.

A spokesperson for Colson sent copies of two editions of his “Breakpoint” commentaries, both from December. In one, he lamented that the recent

Iraq Study Group's report did not mention the fate of Iraq's indigenous Christian communities.

In the other, he opposed the idea of immediate withdrawal of U.S. troops from Iraq.

"The options are pretty bleak. If we leave now with the insurrection gaining strength, Iraq will deteriorate into full-fledged chaos: the Shiites vs. the Sunnis vs. the Kurds, with unimaginable bloodletting," Colson wrote.

"Iran cannot help but step in on the side of their fellow Shiites in Iraq. In fact, this would further Tehran's ambition to become the region's dominant power, an ambition that has led Iran not only to support Iraq's Shiites, but Hezbollah in Lebanon, as well. ... If this happens, America will be even less safe than it is today."

He went on to advocate the addition of U.S. troops to help stabilize the country—a plan that Bush and Sen. John McCain (R-Ariz.) have endorsed.

However, such a plan seems to have little support with Congress or the general public.

[David Gushee](#), a Southern Baptist ethicist and professor at Union University in Jackson, Tenn., was much more cautious about the war than many of his fellow evangelicals from its beginning.

But Gushee has turned increasingly against it in recent months. In a Dec. 11 column published by Associated Baptist Press, he cautioned his ideological cohorts.

"The massive carnage in Iraq should serve as a permanent reminder to my fellow Christian conservatives that war is a moral-values issue," he wrote.

"Indeed, war is a sanctity-of-life issue. Every day's body count in Iraq should drive this point home with greater and greater urgency. Every body

that turns up with holes drilled in it, every head torn apart by gunshots, every soldier whose helicopter crashes and ends his life, every veteran who will spend the rest of his or her life with three or two or one or no limbs, is a human being of immeasurable worth, made in the image of God.”

After the Shiite-dominated Iraqi government rushed to hang Hussein for war crimes at the end of 2006, leading to charges of a botched execution that could further inflame sectarian passions, Gushee seemed to have had enough.

“The fact that we protested the way Hussein’s execution was handled will probably earn us little goodwill from Sunni Arabs who have experienced this event as a deepening of their humiliation and their vulnerability,” he wrote in a Jan. 4 column.

“I don’t see how we can justify the death of one more American soldier in the cause of a ‘democracy’ such as the one on display at the execution of Saddam Hussein. Let’s bring the troops home.”

But Southeastern Seminary’s Heimbach said a precipitous withdrawal may be morally worse than the costs the war has already incurred.

“If it gets to the point that continuing to fight is costing more than whatever is at stake in winning the fight, then you should stop,” he said.

“Now, I for myself don’t think that we’re at that point. I think that we’re making significant progress. While you shouldn’t be engaging in a war lightly without counting the costs, neither should you quickly, after investing so much in terms of life and property, say, ‘I’m just getting tired, let’s get out.’”

The bottom line for Heimbach: Would he, knowing what he now knows, still have argued as he did in 2003 that going to war with Iraq was justified?

“Absolutely I would have, but I would not have used some of the language that he (Bush) used in explaining why it was justifiable,” he said.

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