

If thereâs a just way to wage war, what about ending one?

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WASHINGTON, D.C. (RNS)—For centuries, Christianity's [theory of "just war"](#) has helped religious and political leaders determine when, if ever, war is justified and how to conduct a moral military campaign.

Now, as the United States prepares to reduce troop levels in Iraq this summer and Afghanistan next year, the 1,500-year-old theory is being deployed on a less familiar mission—ending the wars ethically.

Ethicists and theologians believe just war theory has much to offer in guiding strategy, but hewing to its insights could add numerous challenges, particularly to the withdrawal from Iraq.



President Obama meets with General Raymond T. Odierno, Commanding General, Multi-National Force-Iraq, during a visit with U.S. troops at Camp Victory in Baghdad. (RNS PHOTO/White House/Pete Souza)

Recently, leading just war theorists gathered at Georgetown University to

consider thorny post-war issues, including refugees and lingering political and religious unrest.

Eric Patterson, assistant director of Georgetown's [Berkley Center for Religion, Peace & World Affairs](#), said the challenge facing ethicists and policy makers is, "Why we have a peace deal, (yet) we can't seem to root an enduring peace."

One reason: the secular authorities and institutions responsible for leaving a war zone "haven't thought deeply enough about some of the moral and ethical issues. ... That leads right back to just war," he said.

Policy makers are now finding that the same theory that some of them used to justify the 2003 U.S. invasion of Iraq now holds them to uncomfortably high standards upon exit.

Since just war includes a duty to reconcile and rebuild, the United States has incurred a lengthy list of unfulfilled obligations in Iraq, said Tobias Winright, associate professor of moral theology at [Saint Louis University](#).

Responsibilities include cleaning up munitions sites and submitting to the jurisdiction of the International Criminal Court, which could lead to Americans being on trial for war crimes, he said.

Applying just war concepts to an Iraq exit plan means Americans are going to be held accountable for things that they are morally responsible for, said Winright, co-author of a forthcoming book on post-war justice, what theorists call "*jus post bellum*."

In an effort to envision *jus post bellum*, scholars are identifying the relevant principles in a tradition that stretches back to the ancient worlds of St. Ambrose and St. Augustine. At the same time, they face the challenge of prioritizing competing principles.

For example, Michael Walzer of the Princeton, N.J.-based [Institute for Advanced Study](#), invokes the protection of innocents as a central tenet of just war. When extended to a post-conflict environment, he said, coalition forces must leave Iraq in relatively stable condition.

It also compels the United States to provide sanctuary for Iraqis who cooperated with the U.S. and its allies.

“One of the crucial principles of ‘in bello’ (during war) justice is to minimize the risks you impose on the civilian population,” said Walzer, author of the 2004 book [Arguing About War](#) and 1977’s *Just and Unjust Wars*. “And you have to do that when you’re getting out also.”

Others say leaving a stable Iraq is important, but note that justice involves a delicate balancing act among competing goods. For [David DeCosse](#), editor of a 1992 reflection on the morality of the Persian Gulf War, the just war principle of “rights vindication” means Iraqis are entitled to inherit an environment that lets them determine their own destiny.

Yet at some point, others note, autonomy for Iraqis may require foreign powers to pass down a less-than-stable situation.

“The Iraqis have made it clear that a major U.S. military presence should end,” said [James T. Johnson](#), a just war expert at Rutgers University. “And we have to accept that, even if the society is not yet in as good a shape as would be desired.”

In Winright’s view, secular doctrines based on international law have lost sight of a crucial principle for all stages of war—right intent. That principle obligates war-making regimes to conduct, and conclude, war for one specific purpose, namely to “restore a just and lasting peace.”

When that sense of purpose is lost, he notes, wars are waged for lesser causes, or can simmer in perpetuity. In leaving Iraq, he argues, America

must embrace and interpret the idea of “right intent” anew—or risk being haunted for decades by an unjust end to a controversial war.

“If we are going to embark on just wars,” Winright said, “then hopefully this (jus post bellum) category will really give nations pause to think about ... not just, ‘How do we go into a war?’ or ‘How to do we conduct a war?’ but also, ‘How are we going to end it in a way that’s just?’”

Not all just war thinkers are trying to raise the bar beyond what American forces have acknowledged as their responsibilities. [Jean Bethke Elshtain](#), an ethicist and just war scholar at the University of Chicago, has emphasized continuing responsibility for Iraq’s political stability, infrastructure, and security, until the Iraqis can handle those tasks for themselves.

“The worst possible outcome would be to leave the Iraqis in worse shape than before the war,” Elshtain said. “And, given that the Republic of Fear of Saddam was so hideous, you would have to go some length to achieve that.”

Still, there are limits to the high price of ending a war.

Walzer invoked the just war principle of proportionality, which warns against the use of excessive force to remedy a problem. In post-war Iraq, Walzer said, additional military commitments at this stage would be unjust if they aren’t likely to achieve a commensurate increase in stability.

“Maybe a very long occupation could produce a better regime,” Walzer said. “But the costs would be disproportionate.”