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COMMENTARY

Palaima: Finding universal truth

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A student at St. Edward's University recently interviewed me for a Communications course on lying and deception. Her questions related to the words inscribed on the UT Tower: "Ye shall know the truth and the truth shall make you free." This saying is worth contemplating, especially in the season of peace we call Christmas.

Take the radical message of Jesus Christ. Matthew 5:9 tells us, "Blessed are the peacemakers, for they will be called the sons of God." In Matthew 5:44, Jesus challenges the prevailing Judaic and Greco-Roman world view: "But I tell you: Love your enemies and pray for those who persecute you." He was speaking to people whose truth was to hate their enemies.

When will our ostensibly Christian nation practice Christ's unequivocal truth? Jesus did not say, "If evil-doers kill innocent people, strike back with massive force and stay the course." He did not advise nations to abandon hard-won civilized principles and assert their right to unleash the violence of war upon other nations, unilaterally and unattacked.

The awful truth is that pre-emptive warfare brings no peace. By our precedent, any nation who views us as a threatening enemy has the right to attack us first. We are now free to live in unending fear.

Our Founding Fathers wrote: "We hold these truths to be self-evident, that all men are created equal, that they are endowed by their Creator with certain unalienable Rights, that among these are Life, Liberty, and the Pursuit of Happiness."

As Abraham Lincoln saw, our Declaration of Independence "set[s] up a standard maxim for free society, which would be familiar to all and revered by all; constantly looked to, constantly labored for, and even though never perfectly attained, constantly approximated, and thereby constantly spreading and deepening its influence and augmenting the happiness and value of life to all people of all colors everywhere."

All people. All colors. Everywhere. Even North Vietnam in Ba Dinh Square, Sept. 2, 1945. Ho Chi Minh trusted a victorious democratic people when they asserted the right of former colonial peoples to self-determination. He declared, "All men are created equal. The Creator has given us certain inviolable rights: the right to life, the right to be free, and the right to achieve happiness. These immortal words were taken from the Declaration of Independence of the United States of America."

We shoved him and our own truths aside. We put forward our geopolitical interests and theories of containment and dominoes. We held as self-evident that overwhelming force will make others submit to our will. Our own Gen. William Westmoreland ignored Lincoln's truth about all

people, everywhere, all colors. Westmoreland believed a fantastic thing: "Human life is cheap to the Asian. They don't feel the same way about death that we do."

We made the Vietnamese feel more and more death. Oral histories make clear that they felt about their deaths the same way people feel everywhere, sad, angry, bewildered, betrayed.

Gen. Vo Nguyen Giap tells us the truth about the Vietnamese people: "We won the war because we would rather die than live in slavery. Our history proves this. Our deepest aspiration has always been self-determination."

Yet our policymakers now do not accept this American truth. They ignore the truth former Defense Secretary Robert MacNamara eventually saw: In contemplating war, we need to empathize with our enemies.

Instead we continue to will ourselves to disbelieve our truths. On Dec. 17, Jonah Goldberg wrote in the *American-Statesman* that "all intelligent, moral and informed people can agree" that what we really need in Iraq is a military dictator like recently deceased Chilean dictator Augusto Pinochet.

In Goldberg's view, Pinochet's military coup, imprisonments, torture and 3,197 murders were necessary to prevent Chile from veering towards communism. Think about our response to 3,030 deaths on 9/11. What did we do as a nation? Then rethink the truth behind Goldberg's armchair arguments of expediency.

We can find truth in ancient history, too. UT student Alex Beard notes the similarity between our situation in Iraq and the choice facing the Athenians in dealing with an insurgency on the island of Lesbos in 427 B.C.E. An Athenian leader named Diodotus argued that the use of extreme force does nothing to discourage committed insurgents from continuing to fight against a much stronger military power and from believing in their eventual victory. He was right then. He is still right.

If we cannot follow the radical truth of Jesus, perhaps we can profit from the pragmatic truths of Diodotus, Vo Nguyen Giap and Robert MacNamara.

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