

VIEWPOINTS

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Special Contributor

Without formally declared wars, we won't adopt peace

This is the season that marks for Christians the birth of Jesus "khristos," meaning "the anointed one," and, according to Isaiah 9:6, the prophesied "prince of peace." In Ephesians 2:14, Jesus is peace. He dispels the hostility between Jews and Gentiles. In John 14:27, Jesus declares, "Peace I leave with you; my peace I give to you. Not as the world gives do I give to you. Let not your hearts be troubled, neither let them be afraid."

That would seem to mark the limits of what the Son of God in the Christian belief system can do. He can take away the personal troubles and fears within our human hearts and minds. He can do away with the artificial distinctions that groups of human beings use to reinforce their solidarity in strong opposition to others. But bring about real peace? Stop all armed conflicts between nations and between groups within and across nations? Not in his mission statement.

Jesus lived and died. Roman legions still marched and struck with a deadly precision not seen again until the Blitzkrieg practiced by a Christian nation entranced by notions of Aryan supremacy and anti-Semitism and deaf to the message of Ephesians 2:14. Forty years after Jesus died, the future emperor Titus besieged and took the city of Jerusalem. He could not restrain his war-addicted legions. They destroyed the temple, butchering unarmed citizens, including refugees at its altar.

When the Romans wanted peace, they attacked and created desolation. We drop bombs. Hamburg and Dresden.

Hiroshima and Hanoi. Ted Cruz wants to carpet-bomb Syrian communities to destroy the Islamic State.

A long view of human history then seems to prove that the ancient Greeks were right. The natural state for human beings is war. Peace is a rare phenomenon, an armistice that will not last long. When peace does come, it requires periodic sacred ceremonies to make it last.

According to Plutarch in his life of king Numa, when the Romans decided to wage war, they officially opened the gates of war in the temple of Janus. Plutarch reports that these gates are "closed when peace has come," but that peace "is difficult to bring about and happens rarely" since as Rome expanded, it constantly waged war upon the countries and tribal territories that surrounded it.

What lessons should we take away from the past and the Judeo-Christian tradition? In my mind, we should not delude ourselves that any leader will soon come up with a way of bringing about peace. Jesus knew better than to try and the cold facts of history prove peace can be temporary at best.

But we should adopt the sobering ancient Greek and Roman practice of marking transitions from peace to war. We should adhere to the formal prescriptions laid down within our culture. We have not sent our planes, ships and soldiers out to fight a declared war since World War II. Consequently, we now wage undeclared wars.

T.R. Fehrenbach subtitled his classic study of the Korean police action

"a study of unpreparedness" and argued in it that the United States early on "developed a belief in cheap victory." With a population more than double the size of Great Britain and France, we lost 50,000 soldiers in World War I, while those two countries lost 900,000 and 1 million. Remember "freedom fries?" A dozen years ago, it was lost on jingoistic Americans who vilified the French for not sending their men to die in the Iraq quagmire that France lost more men – 500,000 – in the first six weeks of World War II than we lost in the entire war.

President Barack Obama nine months into his first term received the Nobel Peace Prize as a kind of promissory note. In his acceptance speech, he shouted out to three wise men, Nobel recipients before him who were true princes of peace: Nelson Mandela, Martin Luther King and Albert Schweitzer. Obama's IOU still is not paid off. He presides over an inherited undeclared forever war. He relies on ill-conceived congressional authorizations, like the Authorization for Use of Military Force signed by George W. Bush in September 2001, and leaves them in effect.

Until we make a national commitment and all citizens are called upon to share in the painful effort of formally declared wars, our leaders will lack the political motivation to be princes of peace and our country will remain what Martin Luther King decried: the greatest purveyor of violence in the world.

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