

# In the Throes of War

Lewis R. Scudder Jr.

Matthew Arnold's poem, "On Dover Beach," still has a very contemporaneous ring out of its 19th century setting. Like a retreating tide, faith, once so all-embracing, in his time too seemed to be ...

... Retreating, to the breath  
Of the night wind,  
down the vast edges drear  
And naked shingles of the world.

Speaking to someone he loves on that ominously peaceful night of a violent age, overlooking the calm and undulating sea at Dover, Arnold sighs,

... for the world, which seems  
To lie before us like a land of dreams,  
So various, so beautiful, so new,  
Hath really neither joy,  
nor love, nor light,  
Nor certitude, nor peace,  
nor help for pain;  
And we are here as on a darkling plain  
Swept with confused alarms of struggle and flight,  
Where ignorant armies clash by night.

Christians, Muslims, Jews and others numbering in the millions demonstrated worldwide against war in Iraq. Church leaders (including the Pope and George Bush's own Methodist bishop) issued powerful statements, calling the war immoral. Whole nations took up positions against war.

Yet now it is being waged. Why should people not be puzzled about how we got into this insane and tragic situation? Ignorant armies clash in spiritual darkness, indeed! Faith retreats down the naked shingles of the world.

My daily tasks focus upon that war. We listen to BBC radio, and e-mail and web sites pour in war news. My son, Tom, and I are working on the next issue of the Middle East Council of Churches' NewsReport — translating, sorting, compiling, updating, cutting, revising, laying out and formatting. It will inescapably contain a great deal on war-related issues, not least of all because the council's member churches are in the vortex — Basrah, Mosul and Baghdad — working to meet human needs. Some of the congregations engaged in this ministry of compassion are ones the American Christian missions themselves helped nurture.

This will be a long war, a deadly war, a sad war. If ever it was, it has stopped being a war against a brutal regime and its weapons of mass destruction. It has stopped being a war to replace a ruthless tyrant and it is certainly no war of liberation. It has become a war against the Iraqi people. For all of the quasi-religious rhetoric from Washington and London, this war is consistent with America's well-established and cynical doctrine of Realpolitik. It is a war of 'national self-interest'. Already the intimations of greed are being realized. The longer it goes on the more that greed will become apparent.

Meanwhile, blood flows and terror is the daily fare. Ever more clearly, the Americans and the British have no real Arab allies except Kuwait. The combat troops are exclusively foreign to the Middle East. Far from being liberators, in every sense they are invaders. They are aliens who seem to have no motive pressing them into violence other than to bring death and destruction to thousands. Miseries inflicted by over a decade of UN sanctions have now been augmented a hundred fold and by the same hands.

Our council colleagues keep us current on what the MECC and its emergency response partners (in particular ACT International) are doing. But camps on the Iraqi borders with Jordan and Syria, meticulously prepared to receive as many as a quarter of a million Iraqi refugees, are standing virtually empty. Iraqi refugees are not coming out. The flow is in the other direction. A good third of those who, over the past ten years of sanctions against Iraq, have taken refuge in Jordan and Syria have actually gone back to Iraq. They say they are returning home to fight for their country and be with their families to face the grim times ahead. Nobody predicted this.

For some very practical reasons, Middle East Christians and their Muslim friends are keeping lines of communications open. On the eve of hostilities, the world's leading Sunnî Muslim intellectual and ideological center in Egypt, Al-Azhar, published a statement that characterized the American war as a Crusade. We heard George Bush use that loaded term early on in developing his combative rhetoric, but this was a horse of a different color. With a great sigh of gratitude, Middle East Christians welcomed a clamor of Muslim voices that chastised Al-Azhar for this, deploring how it had played into the hands of Islamist propagandists, twisting the facts.

Although timidly, Al-Azhar has retreated from its ill advised statement. There is a concerted effort by Muslims and Christians to strip George Bush and his war of any religious cover story, and to foreclose on having Arab society polarize along religious lines. Perversely, the war seems to have strengthened Muslim-Christian relations in the Middle East.

Nonetheless, each bomb dropped, each person killed on either side, each flurry of invective and each bombastic threat of further violence pushes us closer to Samuel Huntington's nightmare world, one torn to shreds in a mindless clash of civilizations. And Arab Christians and Arab Muslims do not need that. Nobody needs that! Anywhere! The only violence that redeems, a friend reminded me, is the violence of the cross of Christ. This war is the antitype of the cross.

I've been trying to sort myself out. My country is attacking a people among whom I spent my childhood, a people among whom many missionaries — Anglican, Reformed, Presbyterian, Congregational ... heavens! even Catholic — poured out their lives in witness to the gospel of peace, to the grace of Christ, and to the God-given dignity of every man, woman and child. I count not a few of them as friends. But armies clash and people die, perhaps our friends among them. I'm trying to figure out just why this is happening, and I get no valid answers.

The American hysteria whipped up for this war is hard to fathom. Even the British, America's only serious partners, are growing alarmed. All British troops have been trained, whenever possible, to soften their military image (take off helmets, rest their guns, take off dark glasses, and talk to people in a civil manner). Part of their job, once they have secured a position, is to promote a sense of humanitarian confidence among the civilian population. They call it 'peace support'. But the average American soldier has no such training or instruction. As the BBC reported on April 3rd, American soldiers mock their British colleagues. "Peace support," they scoff, "is for wimps!" What on earth is happening to us?

I am intensely aware of my American patriotism and citizenship. I am also torn by a Christian agony, an inescapable conviction that this is an evil thing unfolding. Pride of power wars with the misery of the humble poor and with the Christian conscience. As war in Iraq progresses, shed blood takes over from other driving motives. Cries of righteous indignation split the skies as the bodies of dead children and women show up on TV screens. Our ears ring; our eyes sting. I am robbed of the adrenaline rush that pride in my country should give. What is left is devastation and mounting guilt. Apprehension grows over what our world is becoming.

This is, as Robert Byrd put it, a war of choice. It is not necessary. Unilateral and preemptive military strikes by one power against other sovereign peoples shreds the international consensus that war is a last resort sort of thing. And by flying in the teeth of that post-World War II wisdom, America and Britain have divested themselves of any justification that has spiritual or moral or legal grounding. The United States comes out of this not as a superpower. A superpower has a measure of dignity, poise and statesmanship. With the exception of Byrd's and a few other voices, America is now bereft of statesmen. More and more we look like schoolyard bullies who pick on the weak and helpless.

The United States is also developing a reputation for not finishing what it starts. It abandoned Somalia; it is abandoning an Afghanistan that is still in desperate straits. In Iraq who is to say that it will not continue true to form? Indicators are that the occupation administration the Bush regime intends to put into Iraq will be committed overwhelmingly to the doctrine of the clash of civilizations. It will be strongly driven by that doctrine to humiliate and denigrate native institutions and the people's values. We may expect subjugation and exploitation on a vast scale. And, much to our shame as Americans and in denial of our roots as a democracy, America will emerge (at least for a time) as the world's only colonial and imperial power, ruling by force and coercion.

Our world is leaning far out over the cliff, and below is the chasm of chaos. International law has been trashed and replaced by the law of violence. Terror is now institutionalized, well on its way to becoming really big business. Ignorant armies clash in spiritual darkness, indeed! Faith retreats down the naked shingles of the world.



The Rev. Lewis Scudder, born and raised in the Middle East, is seconded by the Reformed Church in America to the Middle East Council of Churches. With his wife, Nancy, he has served in the Arab world since 1967, and has been associated with the MECC since 1981. He now serves as a special assistant to the council's general secretary and supervisor of the council's English language publications.