

## The Cost of Iraq: Who Pays the Price?

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**Reading** from “Voices and Choices,” a sermon by Carmen Emerson

On April 4, 1967, Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. addressed a meeting of Clergy and Laity Concerned at Riverside Church in New York City, delivering a speech titled, “Beyond Vietnam: A Time to Break Silence.” . . .

Almost 40 years later I had occasion to read the words delivered by King at Riverside . . . exactly one year before his death. The five years preceding his Riverside address had been busy ones for King: in 1963 he was jailed in Birmingham and he delivered his “I Have a Dream” speech in Washington, DC; in 1964 he was awarded the Nobel Peace Prize; he witnessed both the signing of the Civil Rights Act of 1964 and the Voting Rights Act of 1965, both resulting in great part from his commitment to and leadership in the Civil Rights Movement; in 1966 he moved into a Chicago slum tenement to draw attention to continuing discrimination in housing and employment; and by April 1967 King had focused his nonviolent protest philosophy against the socioeconomic injustices that hurt *all* Americans, black and white, rich and poor.

Although King was widely questioned and criticized for speaking out against the war in Vietnam, he was compelled to do so because he considered the war abroad a war against the poorest people at home, and he did so because, in his own words, “. . . my conscience leaves me no other choice.” *My conscience leaves me no other choice.*

With keen intellect, King offered those gathered at Riverside a clear critique of the historical and political decisions that initiated the Vietnam War and led to a commitment of American troops in Vietnam. Through his personal choices and sacrifices, he had demonstrated how to actively engage one’s life in the work of social justice, notwithstanding the long odds or the dangerous struggles inherent to challenging the status quo. . .

But it was not his intellect, his lived experience, or his credibility that moved him to speak to those gathered at Riverside. It was his *conscience* that moved him to voice his concerns: “A nation that continues year after year to spend more money on military defense than on programs of social uplift is approaching spiritual death.” . . .

Forty years later, exchange the war in Iraq for the war in Vietnam and consider the socioeconomic status of those in the Gulf Coast most hurt by Hurricane Katrina; consider the state of health care, education, affordable housing, and civil liberties in our nation; and hear King’s words again: “A nation that continues year after year to spend more money on military defense than on programs of social uplift is approaching spiritual death.” . . .

The poorest of the poor continue to pay the highest price. Louisiana taxpayers will be asked to fund \$1.2 billion and taxpayers in Mississippi will be asked to pay over \$600 million for proposed Iraq war spending in 2008. Again, these are funds that could have made immediate and lasting difference to post-Katrina recovery efforts and education, health care, and housing for those in dire need in the Gulf Coast Region and throughout the United States.

The numbers are numbing, the odds are long, the struggle is hard, and the stories are heartbreaking. But the stories are also hopeful and inspiring, reminding us that our voices and our choices do indeed matter.

## Sermon

I'm not going to speak for very long this morning. And I'm probably not going to tell you much of anything you don't already know. But what I would like to try and do is to distill a very complex set of issues and circumstances down to a summary that I believe captures the essence of the situation.

Basically, I'd like to have us look at – to remind ourselves of – three things, the first two of which make up the title of this talk. First, the cost of Iraq, or more accurately, of the American war in Iraq. And second, the question of who pays the price? And then, finally, I'd like to say a little bit about what we can do to help shift the priorities that guide our country, and to nudge the scales in the direction of justice.

There is a lot to be said on these topics, and I am interested in what you're thinking about them. And so, after a short social time after the service, those who are interested can gather here in the front of the sanctuary, to share ideas and encouragement.

So – what are the costs associated with our war in Iraq? In reading what a number of people have to say on this question, one thing that is very clear is that there are many different kinds of costs involved. For instance, in a piece called “True Costs and Consequences of War,” Anthony J. Marsella begins by acknowledging “the tragic war statistics of dead and wounded on both sides,” but then devotes space to the economic, the political, and the moral costs of the war.

The economic cost of the war becomes ever more evident as the price tag continues to soar. One recent estimate of the cost to date was \$463 billion. That's almost half a trillion. But an article two weeks ago in *The New York Observer* suggests that a vague estimate of “hundreds of billions” is “probably far too modest.” It references a new book co-written by a Nobel Prize-winning economist that warns that the war's “true budgetary cost,” excluding interest, “is likely to reach \$2.7 trillion.” [*The Trillion-Dollar War: The True Cost of the Iraq Conflict*, by Joseph Stiglitz and Linda J. Bilmes] In an environment that already features a multi-trillion dollar debt, that means trouble.

And what about the political costs associated with the war. As Marsella points out in his piece, “The war in Iraq has undermined the US commitment to internationalism and has led to a US denial of the realities of life in the global community.” Once a role-model for international leadership, our nation is now the object of criticism and suspicion around the world, as well as in the minds of a large portion of our own citizenry. Many of us do not feel that our government is doing a very good job of representing our interests and values. That political damage, under the best of circumstances, will take a long time to repair.

And finally, consider the moral costs of this war. What have our actions as a nation done to any claim we may have for moral superiority and authority? Listen to Anthony Marsella again:

No future speeches about democracy and liberty will be able to hide the fact that the United States invaded Iraq on the basis of misleading and inaccurate information and questionable motives. . .

Wars are not forgotten, nor are the arguments over those who were responsible for the conflicts. . . The moral costs of waging war and violence are critical to a nation's future sense of identity, purpose, and pride.

Unitarian Universalist Association President Bill Sinkford took a similar approach almost exactly one year ago, when the new “surge” of troops was in the offing. He sent an open letter to

members of the United States Congress along with his “Moral Balance Sheet,” summarizing the true costs of the war. In his letter to our legislators, he said in part, that

Because citizens of all faiths and political persuasions are being asked to pay to prolong the violence, it is our moral obligation to reckon the true cost of the war before we agree to continue it. To give a true reckoning, we must honestly confront what we have done in Iraq, and we also must acknowledge the many vital needs we have left unfunded because we chose to put our money toward war.

Sinkford wrapped up his moral balance sheet as follows:

Imagine what our world might look like in a few years if we had focused those resources on making the world healthier, wealthier, better educated, and safer.

As Americans, it is our duty to hold ourselves and our government accountable for any decision to spend American lives and money on a futile war. These are moral choices and they have moral consequences.

If only such considerations were more prevalent in our nation’s decision-making.

So who pays the price for all this? Certainly the highest price is paid by those soldiers and civilians whose lives are sacrificed. Their families pay a steep price as well through the loss of their loved ones. But, of course, the truth is that we all pay a part of the price, both economically and morally. By spending our resources on war, we pay the price of doing without those vital needs mentioned by Bill Sinkford that “we have left unfunded because we chose to put our money toward war.”

The Friends Committee on National Legislation has created a startling visual representation of where our income tax dollars go. It indicates that for each dollar of federal income tax we paid in 2007, the federal government spent about one cent on diplomacy and foreign aid; three cents on science, energy and the environment; another three cents on education and jobs; seven cents on government operations; eleven cents on interest on the non-military portion of the national debt; twelve cents on responses to poverty, twenty cents on health care, and forty-three cents on military spending and military-related interest on the national debt.

This graphic, my friends, indicates our national priorities. As it says at the bottom of the flyer, “The federal budget is a reflection of our country’s moral values. Does this budget reflect your values?”

Finally, in answer to the question of who pays the price: among those who pay dearest are the poor, the uninsured, and those along the Gulf Coast who lost everything in the wake of Katrina. And there’s one more group I must mention: our children and our grandchildren, who will be left to pay off the staggering debt that we are leaving behind. How much do their votes count?

So what can we do to start putting things right? I call your attention to a handout prepared by the Unitarian Universalist Service Committee called “Simple Steps for Justice.” On the reverse side, there are a number of suggestions for “What you can do”. Among other things, you can educate yourself and your community about the Gulf Coast, the Iraq war, and our continuing practice of spending more on military programs than on programs of social uplift.

You can volunteer in the recovery efforts still going on in the Gulf Coast as Matt and Mark Michrina and Ken Riznyk did last year, or help fund those efforts as we did with our offering today.

And one thing you can always do is speak out. Talk to your elected officials. And this is an election year; talk to the candidates. The handout suggests some questions you might ask them to get a sense of their priorities.

If you have other thoughts about what you – about what *we* - can do, meet me back here in about a half-hour, and let's talk about it.