

A Mertonian Critique of the Iraq War: An Offshoot of Fear and a Chasm in the Hidden Ground of Love

By Robert Peach

The Christian is and must be by his very adoption as a son of God, in Christ, a peacemaker.

– Thomas Merton

Last year witnessed a milestone in the preemptive United States-led War on Iraq when military news agencies reported that over 1000 soldiers¹ died for what could be considered a morally dubious cause so adamantly supported by the Bush administration; more recently, the total has surpassed 2000. In October 2002, when Congress authorized a U.S. invasion of Iraq (Senate 77 to 23 and House 296 to 133 in favor)² as a means to secure the U.S. against further terrorist threats, the Bush administration manipulated a confused and psychologically scarred American public into believing that war in Iraq was necessary, costing the lives of civilians and soldiers in a multi-billion dollar venture that has sparked division and violence on a global scale. According to Thomas Merton, the root of *all* war is fear – a fear that leads to violence, like that in Iraq, to destroy an evil purported beyond reasonable measure. With specific focus on Merton's profound insight on the human spiritual and social responsibility to uphold peace in a time of crisis, I propose a Mertonian critique of the U.S.-led mobilization against Iraq as an offshoot of fear and a chasm in the hidden ground of love.

Considering the complexity of the crisis now facing the U.S. in Iraq, a critical analysis of it would assume an extensive chronological investigation. However, it must be done through a Mertonian lens – without, of course, sounding anachronistic. In other words, the focus remains on Merton *as thought* rather than Merton *as man*. Through this scope we will see how problematic political implications seeded deep within the Iraq crisis – the injustices of preemptive war, American hegemony, fear as a tool for political manipulation, the demise of fact in wartime rhetoric, the lack of accountability among the Bush administration, and the downward cycle of violence – become more evident in light of Merton's highly applicable anti-war values of peace and non-violence. Although a majority of this Mertonian critique focuses on the misrepresentation of an administration, it also holds in effect the consent of Congress to invade Iraq and the responsibility of a people, as part of God's creation, to withstand the ignorance that threatens to destroy the common ground humanity rests upon.

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Merton as Monk, Pacifist and Activist in a Time of War

Thomas Merton grew up as a compassionate soul, sensitive to the existence of violence in a world so distressed and impoverished, yet so full of potential. Merton was always conscious of the pounding rhythms of the human war drum. Whether it was beating in arguments he had with friends and religious superiors or pounding away in the violence of World War II, the Cold War, or the Vietnam War, Merton was constantly aware of the harsh reality of human conflict. We especially learn this in his journals and letters as well his autobiography *The Seven Storey Mountain*³ and Michael Mott's biography, *The Seven Mountains of Thomas Merton*.⁴ They reveal a man who was deeply conflicted – some might say, “self-absorbed” – but very attentive to the social concerns and welfare of others and the contributions he could make to their failures and successes. Merton's writings were inspired by the internal struggle he was constantly fighting so as to live a life of Christ-inspired love through charity, and to discover his true self through peace in acts of humility and contemplation. By confronting those personal trials and tribulations with the peace of a quiet mind in Christ, Merton believed it was possible to confront external wars, although very different, with the order necessary to establish world peace.

Upon entering Kentucky's Our Lady of Gethsemani Trappist Abbey in 1941, Thomas Merton had it in mind to rid himself of the destruction caused by war – the war within (himself) and the war throughout (in the world). He would eventually realize that there was no way for him to escape a planet to which he was so intimately connected, a world that needed him perhaps more than he could ever fathom. In March of 1958, while walking through the crowded downtown shopping district of Louisville, he had a sudden conversion experience and was presented with a mystical vision of sorts. He was struck by the realization that he loved all of the people he saw. Merton recorded in his monastic journal that it “was as if I suddenly saw the secret beauty of their hearts,” the depth where neither “sin nor desire nor self-knowledge can reach, the core of their reality, the person that each one is in God's eyes,” adding, “If only we could see each other that way all the time. There would be no more war, no more hatred, no more cruelty, no more greed.”⁵ Merton discovered God through a clearly human perspective where the “ground of his own being” was the “same ground he found [in] the rest of reality, especially his brothers and sisters.”⁶ Looking at war through a Mertonian lens, then, we see it as a type of violence that blinds humankind to God's love in the throes of hatred and suffering. Within a Mertonian context, which is built upon a Christian framework, war is a threat to the human identity. That identity is the manifestation of a miracle created by a divine power and image beyond human comprehension. In this way, war is unjust by isolating humankind from its existence as one community under God. It is a Christian's responsibility, says Merton, to realize that war creates an abysmal chasm in what he calls “the hidden ground of love,” that community – the body of Christ – of which all human beings are an integral part.

Despite speculation about Merton's pacifist convictions, he was “reluctantly, but inevitably drawn” to Catholic pacifism⁷ during his lifetime, which spanned World Wars I and II, the Cold War, and part of the Vietnam War. He was an outspoken opponent of nuclear proliferation and spoke adamantly against the justification for preemptive war. He sympathized with victims of Hiroshima and Nagasaki and reflected upon the utter horrors of World War II in his visionary anti-poems entitled *Original Child Bomb* (1962)⁸ and “Chant to be Used in Processions around a Site with Furnaces” (1963) (CP 345-49). Merton also firmly deplored the Vietnam War. “The danger of nuclear war and

the threat of it in a bloody and indefensible war in Vietnam are topics he writes about frequently to his correspondents," writes Merton scholar William H. Shannon (*HGL* xi).

Merton had myriad commentary pieces published in periodicals and journals such as *Commonweal*, *The New Yorker*, *Jubilee*, *The Catholic Worker* and *Blackfriars* and two articles in *Breakthrough to Peace* (1962), for which he was the uncredited editor.⁹ Despite the 1962 prohibition from the highest authority of the Cistercian Order to publish on the topic of war and peace,¹⁰ Merton persisted in contributing what he could to the cause of non-violence and nuclear non-proliferation by circulating various mimeographed articles through his wide network of friends.. After the ban was lifted, he included a Vietnam War protest in his collection *Faith and Violence* (1968).¹¹

In what he appropriately called "The Cold War Letters," eventually published in Merton's volumes of letters,¹² Merton wrote to a wide range of activists and friends about concerns of social justice and freedom through the powers of peace, love, and non-violence amidst the fog of war. Especially after his conversion experience in 1958, Merton realized that as a member of the human race, he was "not going to sit back and watch his country, his people, destroy themselves."¹³ Steadfast in his convictions, he wrote to a friend, Etta Gullick, in 1961 saying that he was "perfectly convinced that there is one task for me that takes precedence over everything else: working with such means as I have at my disposal for the abolition of war" (*HGL* 347). Knowing that truth was at stake under a morally unstable U.S. government during a time of great tension between the U.S. and the Soviet Union – who were in a nuclear arms race – Merton saw the necessity of proclaiming truth (as it is perceived by Christians in the Gospels) through his various letters and writings on peace. "I cannot in conscience willingly betray the truth or let it be betrayed," he writes; "The issue is too serious" (*HGL* 347). During the Cold War, Merton saw the irrevocable destruction implicit in the evil philosophy of total war. He was also sensitive to the eschatological implications of nuclear war, a concern related to the destiny of humankind. In this sense, Merton recognized war as "the ultimate blasphemy: a weapon designed to destroy human life, God's noblest creation, while carefully preserving the material products of human effort" (Zahn 138).

As a Christian committed to carrying out the mandates extolled by Christ in the Gospel, Merton saw a contradiction in arbitrarily supporting unjust wars that lead inevitably to death and destruction. He saw war as anti-life, in a sense, and believed that Christians should follow the truth of the Gospels, which often opposes the evils of violence against one's neighbors. "Christians are obliged to strive for peace 'with all the means at their disposal,'" writes Merton in reference to Pope John XXIII's encyclical *Ad Petri Cathedram*.¹⁴ The Christian and peacemaker should strive to depend on God's word as revealed through Christ and the Gospels in patient and humble understanding. In humility and meekness of heart, writes Merton, it is possible to open oneself up to hope (*FV* 26), the hope necessary to confront war wrought by falsehood and fear.

With this in mind, Merton wrote an open letter to the American hierarchy of Catholic Bishops in the September 1965 issue of *Worldview* as the Second Vatican Council was reaching a close. "The modern world," warns Merton, "is one which still believes in war, from guerilla warfare to total and even nuclear war" (*WF* 89). He reminded the Church repeatedly of Christ's "eschatological message of love and salvation" (*WF* 91) which was relevant to an escalating crisis in Vietnam and is just as relevant to the Iraq War today. Each war carries ramifications that affect the course of the future for humankind. Merton was adamant in his conviction that the Church should be a living testimony to the eschatological message of love, which he believed has the power to save human destiny from

ultimate destruction. Merton felt that whatever the Council said on war must be “said in such terms that the primacy of love is stated with a clarity that cannot be doubted or misconstrued” (*WF* 91), thereby placing faith before politics during a time of international crisis. He promoted non-violence as the Christian alternative to war and often spoke against the violence inherent in the status quo (*FV* 137, 141). He believed such violence was the byproduct of falsehood and deception; non-violence, on the other hand, is “not for power but for truth” (*NA* 145).

The Irrationality of the Military Mind

Throughout the Cold War and part of the Vietnam War, Merton often spoke against American elitism, especially in U.S. foreign policy. “Everything the enemy does is diabolical and everything we do is angelic . . . our [weapons] are the instruments of divine justice,” writes Merton sarcastically (*WF* 20). Merton saw a sense of bravado in U.S. considerations for nuclear attack or its invasions in Vietnam because the country’s convictions were not rooted in the compassion necessary to bring the freedom and justice it supposedly sought to deliver to the world. Because of the hypocrisy he observed in the political ploys of the ruling members of American society during his time, Merton dissented from them through his writings. He not only protested against the physical destruction of war, but also “against a suicidal moral evil and a total lack of ethics and rationality with which international policies tend to be conducted” (*WF* 21). Commenting on the military mindset of an aggressive America, Merton writes: “Even more serious . . . is the fact that the moral, or amoral preconceptions of the military mind, and particularly the oversimplified assessment of a political threat, implemented by a dogmatic and fanatical political creed, will certainly have grave influence upon military decisions at a high level” (*BP* 13).

The cataclysmic outcome of the Iraq War would have undoubtedly put Merton’s “pen to work” (*Zahn* 141). The Iraq War was launched in a spirit of American elitism against which Merton would have directed such disapproval. This crisis resulted from an attitude of U.S. exceptionalism:¹⁵ an elitist philosophy which holds that America the super-power is responsible for international police action to ensure democracy or “freedom” elsewhere even if it means resorting to violence. There existed a preconceived notion within the U.S. that former Iraqi dictator, Saddam Hussein, was an irreconcilable threat to its national security. It was because of the hypothetical hazard (of weapons of mass destruction, a.k.a. WMD) that the U.S. government made the decision to launch a preemptive strike against Iraq – a decision now the subject of much debate and regret.

Preemption as Unjust

By its very definition, a preemptive attack is one that is taken in the case of an imminent, ongoing threat.¹⁶ The Iraq War was preemptive because the U.S. launched a war of aggression based on its fear of an alleged destructive weapons program in Iraq that Hussein could use in a terrorist attack against the U.S. Sometimes called a preventive war, a preemptive strike assumes the right to attack any potential challenge to U.S. national security (or its global authority, as some peace activists believe¹⁷). In the case of Iraq, the strike was a war of aggression founded upon faulty intelligence and a threat that has been diminished by various intelligence agencies.

Essentially, the preemptive war doctrine is fuel for the fires of perpetual violence, a violence

that Merton consistently targeted as the product of fear, and unjust according to modern Catholic morality, which says that under no circumstances can a war of aggression be accounted just: "Pope Pius XII declared it was our supreme obligation to make 'war on war' (1944). At that time he stressed our moral obligation to ban all wars of aggression. . . . Therefore a Christian who is not willing to envisage the creation of an effective international authority to control the destinies of man for peace is not acting and thinking as a mature member of the Church" (*BP* 104). In a January 30, 1962 letter (*Cold War Letter* 26) to W. H. Ferry, who was vice president of the Center for Democratic Institutions at Santa Barbara at the time of the correspondence, Merton speaks out against the moral injustices of a preemptive attack. At its best, according to Merton, a war must be one of defense, which the Iraq war has proven not to be. Merton writes:

Traditional teaching on war taught that a condition for just war was the moral certitude that one could actually achieve something by going to war. This meant two things. One that there was no disproportion between the destruction on one hand and the good achieved on the other, and that there was really after all some good to be achieved. The modern Popes have of course said that they did not think war was a just and reasonable means of settling international disputes, and declared that we should not resort to it any more. That it resulted not only in great physical evil (even conventional weapons did this) but greater spiritual evil (*HGL* 207).

Merton would unquestionably have a problem with this U.S.-led action in Iraq as it signifies a grave moral problem within the workings of U.S. foreign policy. With the U.S.-led strike in Iraq we are presented with a conventional ground war that was launched on the basis of a *perceived* (not *actual*) threat. As a result, the U.S. has resorted to the greater evils of continual bloodshed and a rising death toll that are disproportional to the fleeting good that has been achieved.

The Root of All War is Fear

Merton lived and wrote during a period of great tension, yet it was exactly that tension which he felt compelled to ease through his Christocentric peace teachings. By doing so, he defended true freedom fashioned by truth, not deception; love, not hate; peace, not war. Merton believed that the root of all war is fear, "not so much the fear men have of one another as the fear they have of *everything*. . . . If they are not sure when someone else may turn around and kill them, they are still less sure when they may turn around and kill themselves. They cannot trust anything, because they have ceased to believe in God."¹⁸ In looking at the Bush administration's case for invading Iraq, it becomes clear that fear was used as a way to arouse American support for the war despite the reservations of various intelligence agencies, the United Nations (U.N.), and members of the international Catholic community (i.e. Pope John Paul II, Vatican Hierarchy and the U.S. Conference of Catholic Bishops).

Spencer Ackerman and John B. Judis reported in *The New Republic* that there was no consensus within the American intelligence community that "Saddam represented such a grave and imminent threat. Rather, interviews with current and former intelligence officials and other experts reveal that the Bush administration culled from U.S. intelligence those assessments that supported its position

and omitted those that did not.”¹⁹ The Bush administration saw, in the words of Merton, an alleged “crime in others” – in Iraq under Hussein – and tried to “correct it by destroying them or at least putting them out of sight” (NSC 112). Pinpointing Iraq for the crime of weapons proliferation, the Bush administration essentially heightened the fear of an already confused and terrified American public – still recovering from the psychological aftershocks of the 9/11 terrorist attacks – to garner public support for the war (a mid-August 2002 Gallup poll showed a majority of public support for the war with Saddam, with 53 percent in favor and 41 percent opposed) (Ackerman and Judis 2). In *The New York Review of Books*, Thomas Powers wrote: “Bad as those [9/11] attacks were, high administration officials concluded that a still greater danger existed – the possibility that terrorists would arm themselves with chemical, biological, or nuclear weapons, something they could hope to acquire only from outlaw regimes. President Bush identified his candidates for this ‘axis of evil’ in his first State of the Union message in 2002 – North Korea, Iran, and Iraq” (Powers 3). This assessment was confirmed by the Ackerman/Judis report which claimed that the administration had it in mind to go to war with Iraq as early as the fall of 2001, following the 9/11 attacks, when Deputy Defense Secretary Paul Wolfowitz “floated the idea that Iraq, with more than 20 years inclusion on the State Department’s terror-sponsor list, be held immediately accountable” (Ackerman and Judis 2). The threat of nuclear attack from Iraq was too good a case for the administration to give up and fear ultimately ruled the realm: “Remember, now the dangers we’re talking about are not 3,000 dead Americans a day, but 30,000 or 300,000, or even – God forbid – 3 million,” said Rumsfeld in a sensationalized October 2002 speech (Powers 6). From early on, there was an apparent ambiguity in the administration’s case for war. There were no clear grounds for the war and Merton would have recognized the preemption as a product of fear instilled by an administration preoccupied by the threat of evil. “[W]e build up such an obsession with evil,” writes Merton, “both in ourselves and in others, that we waste all our mental energy trying to account for this evil, to punish it, to exorcise it, or to get rid of it in any way we can” (NSC 113).

Inadequate Knowledge as the Basis for the Iraq War

The Bush administration, in its “war on terror” against the “axis of evil,” amidst unsubstantial weapons evidence, “began to speak often and loudly of Saddam Hussein’s weapons of mass destruction as not merely a theoretical danger, but an established fact” (Powers 2). But, as Merton states, “Moral decisions have to be based on adequate knowledge” (BP 11). Based on what we know from various assessments, the U.S. government’s decision to go to war could be considered immoral because there was no adequate knowledge to support its purpose. In October 2004 the “established fact” of an alleged weapons program was refuted. U.S. weapons inspector in Iraq, Charles A. Duelfer, proved that Iraq had no illicit weapons ability between 1991 (after the Gulf War) and 1996.²⁰ Although this inspection was made in 20/20 hindsight, it echoes intelligence findings that were inconclusive back in 2002: “According to a *New York Times* report in February 2002, the CIA found ‘no evidence that Iraq has engaged in terrorist operations against the United States in nearly a decade, and the agency is also convinced that President Saddam Hussein has not provided chemical or biological weapons to Al Qaeda or related terrorist groups’” (Ackerman and Judis 2). Yet even then, President Bush seemed sold on the idea of going to war with Hussein. Addressing an audience in Cincinnati in October 2002, he said: “The Iraqi regime . . . possesses and produces chemical and

biological weapons. It is seeking nuclear weapons. It has given shelter and support to terrorism. . . . The danger is already significant, and it grows worse with time. If we know Saddam Hussein has dangerous weapons today – *and we do* – does it make any sense of the world to wait . . . for the final proof, the smoking gun that could come in the form of a mushroom cloud?” (Powers 2).

The problem is that neither the American public, Congress, nor the Bush administration really did know if such a weapons program existed. The International Atomic Energy Agency (IAEA), with general CIA endorsement, held no evidence that Iraq was reconstituting a nuclear program (Ackerman and Judis 3). On top of these findings, Greg Thilmann, the former director of strategic proliferation and military affairs at the State Department’s Bureau of Intelligence and Research (INR) said that when he was office director between 2000 and 2002, the INR never “assessed that there was good evidence that Iraq was reconstituting or getting really serious about its nuclear weapons program” (Ackerman and Judis 3). Meanwhile, regardless of CIA suspicion and the intelligence community’s uncertainty, it was well known that the United Nations Special Commission (UNSCOM) actions, as a result of Operation Desert Storm, had destroyed a substantial amount of Iraq’s chemical warfare agents and production equipment between 1991 and 1998 (Ackerman and Judis 3). Tension between the administration and the intelligence community mounted between the end of 2002 and the beginning of 2003. In spite of the substantial intelligence reports that pointed to a vanishing case for war to disarm Hussein, the administration moved ahead to support its cause for preemption and declare it to the public.

Merton admittedly professed a “frank hatred of power politics” and wrote his Cold War Letters with a bias of “uninhibited contempt for those who use power to distort the truth or to silence it altogether” (*WF* 19). There is little doubt that the Bush administration is responsible for such distortion. By the end of January 2003, the President delivered his notorious State of the Union address wherein are the “sixteen words” based on faulty British intelligence: “The British Government has learned that Saddam Hussein recently sought significant quantities of uranium from Africa” (Powers 3). The accusation was immediately perceived to be inaccurate by intelligence analysts who claimed that Iraq never purchased the uranium to be used as part of a non-existent Iraqi nuclear weapons program (Ackerman and Judis 9). Vice President Cheney had given British intelligence information, which allegedly showed Iraq’s purchase of uranium from Niger, to the CIA. The CIA then authorized a prominent diplomat to three African countries to investigate. The diplomat returned “after a visit to Niger in February 2002 and reported to the State Department and the CIA that the documents were forgeries” (Ackerman and Judis 9). This report was in turn circulated within the Vice President’s office, according to the ambassador, but administration officials like National Security Advisor Condoleezza Rice and Defense Secretary Donald Rumsfeld began making claims anyway. With such a shaky relationship existing between the Bush administration and an upset international community as well as the numerous intelligence agencies, there was what Merton would call a “pure power play” (*HGL* 281) in progress in the pre- and post-invasion months.

Wrestling for Power

Besides the intelligence agencies, the Bush administration also undermined the authority of the U.N., practically fulfilling a seeming prophecy written by Merton in *Breakthrough to Peace*: “Indeed, the big powers have been content to use the UN as a forum for political and propagandist

wrestling matches and have not hesitated to take independent action that led to the discrediting of the UN whenever this has been profitable to them" (*BP* 91-92). Wrestling seemed to be what the administration was best at. It simply refused to consider the intelligence findings, repeatedly disregarding them, as can be seen with Secretary of State Colin Powell and other administration officials. In February of 2003, Powell was delivering his assessment of the situation surrounding Iraq to the U.N. He was ready to present the U.S. resolution to go to war in Iraq with the help of coalition forces, including those of England, despite ongoing U.N. weapons inspections under Resolution 1441. Speaking before the U.N. Security Council on February 5, Powell supported claims that the U.S. had made against Iraq's supposed weapons program, disregarding U.N. weapons inspections which found no evidence of a program and a 12,000 page report released by Hussein's government that "stocks of banned weapons had been destroyed, and prohibited weapons programs had been ended" (Powers 3). Despite the assessments, the U.S., with a majority vote in Congress, began "Operation Iraqi Freedom" on March 19, 2003.

Evidently, the Bush administration and Congress consistently displayed a "willful blindness"²¹ going into the Iraq War. The U.S. ran away, as Merton states, "from the responsibility of thinking," thus making "rational thought about moral issues absurd by exiling [themselves] entirely from realities into the realm of fictions" (*NSC* 114). In the case of the Iraq War, peaceful resolutions were discarded in the growing likelihood of war, as the means (violence) was used, ironically enough, to justify the proposed end (world peace). And so it seems that, in the words Merton used against the Vietnam War, the Iraq War was and is "without necessity, a brute piece of stupidity and frustration on the part of people who have no imagination or insight and no moral sense" (*HGL* 281).

Caught between Layers of Falsehood

Speaking about the escalation of conflict as a result of falsehood amidst international dialogue, Merton writes that all such attempts at diplomacy end in "more and more ludicrous failures" (*NSC* 115) as is true of the Iraq War. With pre- and post-invasion intelligence assessments, it is evident that, as Merton states: "There has been above all a tendency to insulation behind a thick layer of misinformation and misinterpretation, so that the majority opinion in the United States is now a highly oversimplified and mythical view of the world divided into two camps: that of darkness (our enemies) and that of light (ourselves)" (*WF* 20). In consequence of the Bush administration's use of fear as a tool for political manipulation, the U.S. has become what Merton would call, a "warfare state built on affluence, a power structure in which the interests of big business, the obsessions of the military, and the phobias of political extremists both dominate and dictate our national policy" (*WF* 20).

Such political maneuvering did not go unnoticed, however. Between the assessments of the Senate Intelligence Committee (SIC) and the 9/11 Commission, the Bush administration has fallen under harsh scrutiny in the last year. Since the beginning of the war in March of 2003, the SIC and the 9/11 Commission have continually nullified reasons given for U.S. aggression against Iraq. Close to nothing has been found as far as weapons of mass destruction are concerned. Of every weapon "cited by Powell in his U.N. speech only one was actually found – sixteen empty munitions discovered by the U.N. inspectors in a scrap heap" (Powers 5). The CIA had at one time worried that there might be 30,000 more, but David Kay, a weapons expert appointed by CIA Director George

Tenet to run the CIA's Iraq Survey Group, testified before congressional intelligence committees that he failed to find them. "The conclusion seems inescapable," wrote Powers: "On the eve of war, and probably for years beforehand, Iraq had no weapons of mass destruction, and it had no active program to build them" (Powers 5).

Michael Hedges of *The Houston Chronicle* wrote that Republican committee chairman Sen. Pat Roberts of Kansas said the SIC report "documented a 'global intelligence failure' that led Bush, the U.S. Congress and the public to reach conclusions about Iraq that were flatly wrong."²² Hedges cited the major findings of the SIC testimony: "The intelligence community fell victim to 'layering' . . . conclusions that are hotly contested when initially reached become accepted fact to be expanded upon" (Hedges 3). Other such findings conclude that the Bush administration relied on a critical 2002 National Intelligence Estimate (NIE) that it "overstated" and ultimately relied on "outdated, false and worthless information improperly interpreted by analysts" who fell victim to a "group think" in which "a general presumption of Iraqi arms took on a life of its own and went unchallenged by analysts who might take an opposing view" (Hedges 3).

Although the Bush administration won the domestic debate over Iraq, it had done so by withholding from the public details that would have undermined the case for the ongoing Iraq War, details that would have prevented anti-American sentiment that arose as a result of the preempted strike. During the Vietnam War, Merton spoke of anti-American sentiment that occurred as a result of it: "Americans do not seem to realize what effect the war is really having. The hatred of America which it is causing everywhere . . . is not just the result of [communist] propaganda" (*FV* 93). Merton's statement is eerily premonitory considering the continued (anti-American) violence in Iraq and throughout the Middle East. As Democratic vice chairman Sen. Jay Rockefeller of West Virginia said, the intelligence failures will have the tragic result of negatively affecting U.S. national security "for generations to come. . . . [U.S.] credibility is diminished. [Its] standing in the world has never been lower. We have fostered a deep hatred of Americans in the Muslim world, and that will grow" (Hedges 2).

Violence Begets Violence and a Weakened Political Foundation

In *Faith and Violence* Merton recalled a distraught Buddhist nun from Vietnam who said, "You Americans come to help the Vietnamese people, but have brought only death and destruction" (*FV* 91). In Iraq, American troops were sent to "help" the Iraqi people, but all they are considered to have brought is "death and destruction" as well. It appears that the Iraqi people the U.S. has attempted to liberate are trapped in a seemingly unsolvable dilemma. To use Merton's words, they are caught between "two different kinds of terrorism [U.S. aggression and Iraqi insurgency]," they are presented with "nothing but a more and more bleak and hopeless prospect of unnatural and alienated existence" (*FV* 90). The hope of a promising, stronger future for the Iraqis has been disparaged by continuous outbreaks of violence and a carelessly imposed governing system that has done little to create order.

The pre-existent political disorder in Iraq – caused, in part, by its weak economic structure, which U.S.-backed sanctions did little to help strengthen – made it a society in which foreign military occupations would inevitably arouse violent nationalist sentiment even when the population wants to oust an oppressive dictatorship like that of the Hussein regime. Thus, despite the dubious

reasons proposed by the Bush administration for invading Iraq – whether it was to root out WMD or save the country from Hussein – the U.S. resorted to what Merton would label as “means that precisely made good ends impossible to attain: war, violence, reprisals, rapacity” (SSM 185). On top of this, there was a general misunderstanding of the political climate within Iraq amongst U.S. government officials. Before the outbreak of violence in the Iraq War, some political experts doubted the possibility that it would be a convenient “three-month” war as was assumed by ranking members of the U.S. military and the Bush administration. Those officials, who were in favor of the war, failed to realize that bringing democracy to Iraq could take years or even decades. As a result of the confusion surrounding the state of affairs in Iraq and the its involvement therein, the U.S. opted to make a violent attempt to establish a top-down democracy (Chomsky 1) within a culture practically unfamiliar with such political language, instigating a succession of chaos and instability in both the democratic process and the subsequent fight to quell insurgency efforts.

In the late spring of 2004, an Iraqi interim governing council strategized by L. Paul Bremer, leader of the Coalition Provisional Authority in Iraq, was finally established under Interim Prime Minister Ayad Allawi. But a CIA report warned that “none of the postwar Iraqi political institutions and leaders have shown an ability to govern the country or even preside over drafting a constitution or holding an election.”²³ That very problem remained as the pressure rose between the majority Shiite Muslims (who make up 55 percent of the population according to a 1990 census)²⁴ and the minority Sunnis. Both of the Muslim sects threatened to boycott the democratic elections that were scheduled for January 31 of 2005, for fear of misrepresentation in parliament. Neither of the Arab factions were said to trust the American-led enterprise in Iraq and were infuriated by the volatile security situation. “‘A lot of people want democracy here, but they are just not comfortable with elections under American supervision,’ said Wamid Omar Nadhmi, the leader of the Arab Nationalist Movement, a largely Sunni political party” (Filkins A1).

Along with the uncertainty of the democratic process, there remained little hope amidst the miserable present as insurgent guerilla movements such as that of Moqtada al-Sadr, a radical Shiite cleric, raged on. Al-Sadr, who was once described by coalition forces as “the leader of a ‘rag-tag’ band of insurgents” wreaked havoc against American troops and innocent Iraqis in the Shiite stronghold of Najaf, 100 miles from Baghdad.²⁵ Sadr had it in mind to get the U.S. out of Iraq and establish an Islamic republic there like that in Iran. Ironically enough, Iraqi’s interim Prime Minister Allawi told the media in response to Bush’s September 2004 U.N. address that “It’s very important for the people of the world really to know that we are winning, we are making progress in Iraq.”²⁶ However, the reality of the situation there speaks much differently, considering the nightly mortar and rocket fire, daily car bombings, kidnappings, beheadings, uprisings by Iraqi insurgents, and a continually rising death toll among American troops and Iraqi civilians.

Uproot Fear in the “Hidden Ground of Love”

Leading up to the onset of the U.S.-led preemptive war against Iraq in March 2003, the Bush administration manipulated a fearful American public by augmenting intelligence to suit a case for war that claimed Iraq was both linked to the Al Qaeda terrorist network and responsible for a biological, chemical, and nuclear weapons program under an oppressive Hussein regime. The U.S. subsequently witnessed a catastrophe that Merton would undoubtedly find to be the byproduct of

political deceit against a duped America – “reduced to passivity, confusion, resentment, frustration, thoughtlessness and ignorance” (*WF* 20) – and the cause of an unjust war in Iraq. Prefacing an essay on the threat of thermo-nuclear extermination, Merton speaks of wars in which “political and military strategists moved one step too far and could not turn back” (*BP* 7). The Iraq War stemmed as a result of a political strategy that drew America into an offensive war that was admittedly inescapable. President Bush guaranteed the world that freedom would “find a way” and that it was better off without Hussein in power,²⁷ yet the violence has continued in Iraq and anti-American sentiment has increased across the globe. For a war that was fought with the expectation that it would make the world, as Merton might put it, “imperturbably safe for the free and comfortable life” (*BP* 7), it has done little to fulfill such a promise of freedom. What began as an attempt to root out WMD in the fall of 2002 steeped into a seemingly insurmountable quagmire and an emergency in U.S. foreign policy and human morality. In its violent push for democracy in Iraq, Merton would probably see that the U.S. has adopted what he called a policy of “liquidation of those who oppose us, of unrestrained use of total war, of a spirit of fear and panic, of exaggerated propaganda, of unconditional surrender, of pure nationalism” (*WF* 21-22). As an unfortunate consequence of fear, the Iraq War is an important reminder of humankind’s accountability for the daily decisions it makes that affect the dignity of human life: “Every individual,” says Merton, “has a grave responsibility to protest clearly and forcibly against trends that lead inevitably to crimes. . . . Ambiguity, hesitation and compromise are no longer permissible. We must find some new and constructive way of settling international disputes” (*BP* 116).

As for a resolution to the problem of war, Merton proposes that “in the end the first real step toward peace would be a realistic acceptance of the fact that our political ideals are perhaps to a great extent illusions and fictions to which we cling out of motives that are not always perfectly honest” (*NSC* 116). Merton reminds us that humans live in a time “when we are faced with a stark choice between disastrous all-out war, or the abolition of war” (*HGL* 180). He implies that without the foundation of a firm spiritual relationship with others through compassion, humility, and charity, the latter will never happen. Accordingly, individuals do not have to look very far in order to discover the source of society’s wars: “Instead of hating the people you think are warmakers, hate the appetites and the disorder in your own soul, which are the causes of war. If you love peace, then hate injustice, hate tyranny, hate greed – but hate these things *in yourself*, not in another” (*NSC* 122). This delineation must be kept in heart and mind not only for political leaders considering war as an avenue for justice, but also for pacifists and advocates of non-violence looking to make changes in the policies of those political leaders. At the same time Merton notes: “We have to recognize the implications of voting for politicians who promote policies of hate. We must never forget that our most ordinary decisions may have terrible consequences. It is no longer reasonable or right to leave all decisions to a largely anonymous power elite that is driving us all, in our passivity, towards ruin. We have to make ourselves heard” (*BP* 116).

By starting in one’s own heart and mind, the movement for peace can then work its way through the rest of the world to which we are all so deeply connected as “persons, each infinitely precious and all linked to one another in a network of relationships, grounded in God, that made them one” (*HGL* ix). It is only when one finds the “happiness of being one with everything in that *hidden ground of love*” (*HGL* ix) that humankind will be able to grow in a spirit of unity and the truth of peace. Such peace, however, is impossible without love, which “can exorcise the fear which is the

root of all war" (NSC 119). "We have to open our hearts to a universal and all-embracing love that knows no limits and no obstacles," urges Merton, "a love that is not scandalized by the sinner, a love that takes upon itself the sins of the world. There must be total love of all, even of the most distant, even of the most hostile" (WF 23).

Although some would argue that Merton's conclusions are those of soft utopian idealism, they are more than that: "Obviously war cannot be abolished by mere wishing. Severe sacrifices may be demanded and the results will hardly be visible in our day" (BP 116). Merton believed that such sacrifices must be grounded in a deep-rooted concern for the human condition in its struggle to defeat everyday fears – fears that have the potential to lead the world into total war. Thus, the conversion of the soul towards non-violence must involve an aim of "healing and reconciliation of man with himself, man the person and man the human family" (FV 15). When this metanoia of the heart and soul occurs, it is possible to find that hidden ground of love of which Merton speaks, free of fear's weeds and loosed of hatred's chain fetters.

- 1 Patrick Kerkstra, "U.S. War Total Passes 1,000," *The Philadelphia Inquirer* (10 Sept. 2004): A2+.
- 2 Thomas Powers, "The Vanishing Case for War," *The New York Review of Books* 50.19 (5 Nov. 2003) 9; www.nybooks.com/articles/16813; subsequent references will be cited as "Powers" parenthetically in the text.
- 3 Thomas Merton, *The Seven Storey Mountain* (New York: Harcourt, Brace, 1948); subsequent references will be cited as "SSM" parenthetically in the text.
- 4 Michael Mott, *The Seven Mountains of Thomas Merton* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1984).
- 5 Thomas Merton, *Conjectures of a Guilty Bystander* (Garden City, NY: Doubleday, 1966) 142.
- 6 Introduction to Thomas Merton, *The Hidden Ground of Love of Love: Letters on Religious Experience and Social Concerns*, ed. William H. Shannon (New York: Farrar, Straus, Giroux, 1985) ix; subsequent references will be cited as "HGL" parenthetically in the text.
- 7 Gordon Zahn, "Merton on Peace," *Thomas Merton: Pilgrim in Progress*, ed. Donald Grayston and Michael Higgins (Toronto: Griffin House, 1983) 136; subsequent references will be cited as "Zahn" parenthetically in the text.
- 8 Thomas Merton, *Original Child Bomb* (New York: New Directions, 1962); reprinted in Thomas Merton, *Collected Poems* (New York: New Directions, 1977) 291-302; subsequent references will be cited as "CP" parenthetically in the text.
- 9 For a thorough look at Merton's peace writings in context, see Thomas Merton, *Passion for Peace: The Social Essays*, ed. William H. Shannon (New York: Crossroad, 1995); see also Thomas Merton, *The Nonviolent Alternative*, ed. Gordon Zahn (New York: Farrar, Straus & Giroux, 1980); subsequent references will be cited as "NA" parenthetically in the text.
- 10 See the Introduction to Thomas Merton, *Witness to Freedom: Letters in Times of Crisis*, ed. William H. Shannon (New York: Farrar, Straus, Giroux, 1994) x; subsequent references will be cited as "WF" parenthetically in the text.
- 11 Thomas Merton, *Faith and Violence* (Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame Press, 1968) 87-95, 109-110; subsequent references will be cited as "FV" parenthetically in the text.
- 12 See WF 22-69 for a listing of all the Cold War Letters and their location in the five volumes of Merton's correspondence.
- 13 David Odorisio, "Unfolding the True Self in the Life and Writings of Thomas Merton," *The Merton Seasonal* 28.2 (Summer 2003) 21.
- 14 Thomas Merton, "Peace: A Religious Responsibility," *Breakthrough to Peace: Twelve Views on the Threat of Thermonuclear Extinction* (New York: New Directions, 1962) 95; subsequent references will be cited as "BP" parenthetically in the text.
- 15 See Bruce F. Murphy, "The Perils of American Exceptionalism," *Commonweal* (8 Oct. 2004) 20-21.
- 16 See Noam Chomsky, "Does the USA Intend to Dominate the Whole World by Force?" *Z Net* (2 June 2003): www.zmag.org/content/showarticle.cfm?ItemID=3712; subsequent references will be cited as "Chomsky" parenthetically in the text.
- 17 See Chomsky 1.
- 18 Thomas Merton, *New Seeds of Contemplation* (New York: New Directions, 1961) 112; subsequent references will be cited as "NSC" parenthetically in the text.
- 19 Spencer Ackerman and John B. Judis, "The Selling of the Iraq War: The First Casualty," *The New Republic* (20 June 2003): www.truthout.org/docs_03/070703A.shtml; subsequent references will be cited as "Ackerman and Judis" parenthetically

in the text.

- 20 Douglas Jehl, "U.S. Report Finds Iraqis Eliminated Illicit Arms in 90s," *The New York Times* (7 Oct. 2004) A1+.
- 21 Trudy Rubin, "Willful Blindness: The Bush Administration and the Iraq War," Diplomat-in-Resident Forum, Dan Rodden Theatre, La Salle University, Philadelphia, PA (20 Oct. 2004).
- 22 Michael Hedges, "Senate Report Slams CIA: Intelligence 'Failure' Cited in Road to War," *Houston Chronicle* (10 July 2004): www.chron.com/cs/CDA/ssistory.mpl/special/iraq/2671808; subsequent references will be cited as "Hedges" parenthetically in the text.
- 23 Jonathon S. Landay, "CIA has a bleak analysis of Iraq," *The Philadelphia Inquirer* (12 Nov. 2003): www.philly.com (Sept. 2004).
- 24 Dexter Filkins, "Top Shiite Cleric is Said to Fear Voting in Iraq May Be Delayed," *The New York Times* (23 Sept. 2004) A1+; subsequent references will be cited as "Filkins" parenthetically in the text.
- 25 Janet Reitman, "City of Fear," *Rolling Stone* (16 Sept. 2004) 55-56.
- 26 Ron Hutcheson and Warren Strobel, "Bush calls for U.N. aid in Iraq," *The Philadelphia Inquirer* (22 Sept. 2004) A1+.
- 27 David E. Sanger and Richard W. Stevenson, "Stump Speech Retooled, Bush Goes on Attack" *The New York Times* (7 Oct. 2004) A1+; subsequent references will be cited as "Sanger and Stevenson" parenthetically in the text.