

Betrayal of Trust

David and Bathsheba Revisited

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Iasiello reads this biblical text from the perspective of military personnel and in light of the unjust treatment of wounded U.S. Iraq War veterans. He retrieves anew the threefold moral challenge of *jus ad bellum*, *jus in bello*, and *jus post bellum*.

Article 51 of the *United Nations Charter* upholds the right and responsibility of every nation-state to provide for the legitimate defense of its citizens, a duty echoed in the encyclical *Evangelium Vitae* (John Paul II 1995, nos. 43–44). More than half a decade has passed since the attacks of September 11, 2001, and the debate as to how best to defend our citizens continues, as does the broader discussion as to how best to address the dangers of political and religious extremism, and especially, as they are made manifest in the threat of global terrorism. At the very heart of the controversy is a philosophical question: what is the most effective way to counter a military, political, philosophical, or religious insurgency? Should we counter insurgency diplomatically, through economic or political sanctions, using lethal force, or perhaps, employing some combination of all or some

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of the above? America's military intervention in Afghanistan in 2001 won the guarded support of its citizens and some in the international community; to date, the Iraqi invasion has not. While the threat to our national security and our citizenry weighs just as heavily now as it was following the terrorist attacks, support for the current war continues to wane, and some wonder, why?

The use of military force almost always sparks a spirited debate, and so it should, for the decision to wage war should only be made with the greatest hesitation and reluctance. Before making the decision to use force or wage war, leaders are first expected to weigh the moral dimensions of that choice in light of the *jus ad bellum* criteria offered in the just war tradition. Some *jus ad bellum* criteria leaders might consider including the following. Have all options other than war been exhausted (last resort)? Does the person or political entity waging war have the legal or just authority to do so? Does the decision enjoy some degree of international support? Is the decision being made for the right reasons, such as to safeguard the peace, ensure justice, defend the defenseless, redress a wrong, reclaim what has been wrongfully taken (just cause), and is it being waged to create a just and lasting peace for all (right intention)? What is the probability of achieving those goals (potentiality)? Will the good to be achieved outweigh the death and destruction that inevitably result from the use of armed force (proportionality)? And some might add: Has a legal declaration of war been issued?

In 1984 Secretary of Defense Caspar Weinberger captured national headlines with a speech entitled "The Use of Military Power." Weinberger proposed some additional prebellum criteria for decision-makers to consider. He suggested military force be employed: (a) only in the most vital interests of the country; (b) only with the clear intention of winning; (c) only if the military possesses the capability to accomplish clearly defined military and political objectives; and finally, (d) only when that decision enjoys the "reasonable support" of Congress and the American people. Former Joint Chiefs of Staff Chairman Colin Powell expanded the list with some criteria of his own. He suggested when war is waged, it be waged with decisive military force in hope of overwhelming the enemy and forcing its swift capitulation, thus theoretically, at least, minimizing casualties on all sides. He also warned of the dangers of waging a war without international support or one without a detailed "exit strategy."

It should be obvious that Weinberger and Powell were both motivated by some very strong personal beliefs: first, war should never be waged without strong political, popular, and, ideally, international support; and second, that the goals of war must always be clearly defined with a clear understanding of what victory you hope to attain (Gordon 2007, 53) before employing lethal force. Finally, in light of the American experience in Vietnam, Weinberger and Powell suggest that it is always politically and therefore militarily risky to engage Americans in a prolonged war, and especially conflicts costly in both life and resources. Given these insights it should surprise no one that support for the current war has eroded

significantly, despite reports that a new counter-insurgency strategy has achieved some moderate success.

What has not wavered, however, is the bipartisan and unwavering support shown by the American people toward their fellow Americans in uniform. This support appears to transcend political party affiliation and, to a significant degree, whether one supports or opposes the war. And while the decision to wage war is, in most situations, left in the hands of a nation-state's leaders and/or parliamentary body, the responsibility of caring for the veterans of a conflict rests squarely on the shoulders of every citizen. This article explores a nation's moral responsibility to care for those it sends into harm's way, a responsibility the author hears echoed in the biblical story of David and Bathsheba.

Ancient Story: Contemporary Message

The next morning David wrote a letter to Joab which he sent by Uriah. In it he directed, "Place Uriah up front, where the fighting is fierce. Then pull back and leave him to be struck down dead." So while Joab was besieging the city, he assigned Uriah to a place where he knew the defenders were strong. When the men of the city made a sortie against Joab, some officers of David's army fell, and among them Uriah the Hittite died. (2 Sam 11:14-17 NAB)

Most "people of the book" are familiar with the biblical story of David and Bathsheba. The legendary David, popular king and military superstar, gained notoriety by defeating a giant, uniting his country, and then expanding the borders and influence of ancient Israel. Second Samuel records a fierce military engagement between the Israelite and Ammonite armies. In most situations, the Israelite king would have deployed to war with his troops to provide both political and military leadership; in this instance, however, David elects to remain in the relative safety and comfort of his palace in Jerusalem.

While taking an afternoon stroll, David eyes the exceptional beauty of a neighbor; he is so taken with the woman that he sends envoys to uncover her identity (2 Sam 11:3). He subsequently summons the woman to the palace, eventually surrenders to his royal passions, and is informed, shortly thereafter, that the woman will give birth to his child. This proves all the more problematic in light of the revelation that Bathsheba is the wife of Uriah the Hittite, one of David's most capable and respected warriors.

David knew the law and especially the commands set forth in the Decalogue. He was fully aware that adultery was a capital offense, one carrying the penalty of death. Weighing his options, David decides on a devious course of action; he recalls Uriah from the battlefield, invents an excuse to consult and dine with the warrior, and then orders the soldier to visit his home before returning to the battle-

field, expectation being that the warrior would take full advantage of the unexpected furlough to enjoy the company of his lovely wife. In following the royal plan, Uriah would have spared his wife and the king a scandal, given legitimacy to their expectant (unborn) child, and allayed royal fears. What David fails to consider for all his plotting is Uriah's strength of character, for it so happens that the virtuous warrior following the code prescribed for combatants at war, refrains from sexual contact with his wife, shows fraternal solidarity with those he left behind on the field of battle, and thus frustrates the plans of his king.

With few options left, short of full disclosure, David resorts to more desperate measures: he orders Uriah's military superiors to place him at the most dangerous spot on the front lines with instructions that the other soldiers "fall back" once attacked by the enemy. When the king is finally informed of Uriah's death, he displays brilliant, albeit devious political acumen. He invites the fallen hero's widow to the royal palace to afford her the protection and comfort of a grateful king and nation. And so the episode ends, one man emerging a hero and the other, a miserable sinner. Eventually David is confronted by Nathan the Prophet. David then repents of his sin, and, according to biblical tradition, immortalizes his contrition in the Fifty-first Psalm. It is time to fast-forward to modern times.

Institutional Responsibility: Caring for One's Own

Shortly after the attacks of September 11, the Assistant Commandant of the Marine Corps (ACMC) gathered his advisors and asked them to begin operations planning for any potential military direction that might be ordered by the commander in chief. As a military chaplain, I began to focus on programs specifically designed to address the spiritual, personal, professional, and familial needs of those called to deploy. For example, deploying marines, sailors, and their families are traditionally afforded pre- and post-deployment programs, training opportunities specifically designed to empower combatants and their families to survive the stresses of long and sometimes arduous combat deployments. As the conversation developed, the ACMC reflected on his own Vietnam War experiences and made specific mention of the lack of institutional support and programming offered to combat veterans of his generation; he ordered better support mechanisms be put in place for this next generation and that tailor-made programs be provided that would proactively address the needs of troops called to fight in a long and perhaps costly war. Using the lessons learned from past conflicts as foundation stones, doctors, chaplains, and specialists in posttraumatic stress disorder (PTSD) designed or reengineered personnel programs; their goal was to empower marines and sailors to handle the physical, psychological, and spiritual stresses of combat and heal the visible and invisible wounds of war. Special attention was given to designing programs to assist combatants in their transition from the battlefield to the home front.

In a White Letter from the Commandant of the Marine Corps (03-03), all deploying marine units were directed to complete pre- and post-deployment training as part of a comprehensive *Warrior Transition Program*:

With deployments in support of Operation Enduring Freedom (OEF) and Operation Iraqi Freedom (OIF), the return of our Marines and their reunion with loved ones is marked by significant combat experience. This experience complicates the challenges Marines must face in the return and reunion process. To ease the transition from battlefield to home, our returning Marines and their loved ones require adequate preparation and supportive services to ensure their welfare. It is imperative that all service members returning from OEF/OIF deployment receive comprehensive return and reunion services. (White Letter 2003)

These programs reflected a proud marine legacy: first, one of marines caring for their own; and second, their sacred promise never to leave a fellow marine behind. To date, hundreds of thousands of young marines and sailors have participated in this programming; to date, most have successfully transitioned from the battlefield to the home front.

Unfortunately, not all servicepersons or their families have had access to these types of proactive programs, and the cost has been alarming. Sociologists report a statistically significant rise in suicides and suicide ideation among combat veterans, a spike in spousal and child abuse, and as increased numbers of combat veterans face difficulties dealing with the normal stresses of life at home, homelessness among combat veterans continues to rise (McOmber 2007, 1). Family members have suffered as well; for example, the *Journal of the American Medical Association* reports, "Army wives whose husbands are deployed to Iraq and Afghanistan have committed markedly higher rates of child neglect and abuse than when their spouses are home . . ." (Zoroya 2007, 1A). In response to these and other personnel and familial issues, the army has increased funding for its family readiness programs by more than \$100 million. This reactive response contrasts sharply to the proactive mindset exhibited by marine leadership prior to the start of the war. Caring for one's own clearly pays a significant dividend for society.

A Trust Betrayed

Perhaps we would do well to view the assistant commandant's prophetic concerns and the Marine Corps' institutional preparations prior to the start of hostilities as a reminder of a nation's moral responsibility to provide for those it sends in harm's way. The Secretary for Veteran's Affairs does not occupy a cabinet position by accident; he is given that responsibility as a reminder that the needs of veterans remain a critical priority for the American people. This legacy of

concern for veterans may be traced back to our first commander in chief, George Washington. Washington's concerns appear to be purely pragmatic; he feared that the country might take the sacrifices of its veterans for granted, with grave future consequences, and so issued a clear warning: "The willingness with which our young people are likely to serve in any war, no matter how justified, shall be directly proportional as to how they perceive the Veterans of earlier wars were treated and appreciated by their country" (Brown 2007, 1).

Unfortunately, our nation has not always displayed such concern in caring for its veterans, as illustrated in an episode of the acclaimed television series, *West Wing*. In the episode, President Josiah Bartlett is told of a veteran who failed in his attempts to procure a much-needed wheelchair from the federal government. Embarrassed and somewhat angered at the unresponsiveness of the federal bureaucracy, Bartlett, in characteristic fashion, shares a story of veterans' neglect from the past:

After the Civil War veterans had to come to DC [Washington] to get their pensions. They had to visit the [Veterans Affairs] office personally. They waited for a clerk to look through all the Civil War records until their papers were found. Do you know what the papers were bound with; red tape. That's where the expression comes from. (Sorkin 2002, Episode 9)

President Bartlett does not relate the whole story. Historians tell us that the post-Civil War Veterans Office was located on the top floor of a multistoried Washington hotel. Veterans applying for or merely picking up their disability or pension checks were forced to climb numerous flights of stairs to personally apply and sign for their money. No exemptions were ever granted, no matter the severity of the veteran's injuries; proxies were never allowed.

This past February, *Washington Post* reporters Dana Priest and Anne Hull exposed rather horrid living conditions at "Building 18" of the Walter Reed Army Medical Center complex. They reported that barracks rooms were infested with rodents, roaches, and a health-threatening mold. What made the reports all the more disturbing was the fact that these rooms were occupied by combat veterans who had recently returned from Iraq and Afghanistan, including amputees undergoing physical and mental rehabilitation. The reporters also exposed a culture of disinterest and bureaucratic dysfunction; systems and programs originally designed to assist wounded combatants in their recovery had, over time, morphed into obstacles to their recovery. Some of the wounded were even assigned to assist other wounded veterans, including some with debilitating psychological disorders (Priest and Hull 2007, AO2).

As news of these and other abuses spread, so too did the outrage expressed by the American people and their elected representatives. For example, congressional response to the situation at Walter Reed was swift, bipartisan, and decisive. Within

days of the reporters' revelations, numerous military and civilian defense officials were subpoenaed to testify before Congress; their testimony resulted in the eventual resignation of some very senior leadership including the commanding general in charge of Walter Reed, the Surgeon General, and the Secretary of the Army. Congress then voted to increase funding for veterans' care and tasked an oversight committee to monitor changes and take steps to ensure that veterans' care improved. Retired Senator and disabled veteran Robert Dole and former Secretary of Health and Human Services Donna Shalala led a task force to study veterans' care and offer recommendations for its improvement:

[They] recommended "fundamental changes" aimed at simplifying the military's convoluted health-care bureaucracy and overhauling the veterans' disability system for the first time in more than half a century. . . . The panel issued six broad recommendations intended to transform a troubled system for military health care and veterans' assistance that has left some injured soldiers languishing for years and resulted in inequitable and inconsistent disability benefits. (Vogel 2007, 1A)

In the end, abuses were addressed and the health and welfare concerns of veterans were addressed. Ethically speaking, reporters Priest and Hull uncovered more than just substandard living conditions at a temporary barracks at Walter Reed (Priest and Hull 2007, 1A); they exposed a breach of trust. In the end our nation had reneged on its promise to care for those it had sent off to prosecute its wars.

A Moral Responsibility

He is pacific in heart, victorious in war, but glorious in peace, which he desires for his people as the most precious of earthly gifts. (Craik and MacFarlane, vol. 1, bk. 3, 464)

Before the invasion of Iraq, I wrote an article addressing the moral responsibilities of the victors of war. Just war theorists believe that war is waged justly when three broad conditions are met: that it is justly declared, *jus ad bellum*; justly prosecuted, *jus in bello*; and justly terminated, *jus post bellum* (Iasiello 2004). Within each of these broad categories are specific criteria that further outline the moral parameters and responsibilities of those waging, prosecuting, or terminating war.

The article suggests a number of criteria to be followed in justly terminating a war: first, victors should approach postbellum with a humble and healing mindset; second, they are morally responsible for the just restoration of a defeated nation; third, victors must pay special attention to the innocents of the defeated nation, children, elderly, women, the infirm, and those who cannot provide for or

protect themselves; fourth, the environment must be respected in the prosecution of a war and returned to its prebellum state in the postbellum phase of a war; fifth, if war is waged for the sake of justice (and just wars are), then justice must be served in the termination stage of a conflict; sixth, nations have a responsibility to study the lessons learned from a war, especially how war might have been avoided, and/or prosecuted more justly. Finally, the article suggests that nations have a moral responsibility to care for those who prosecute its wars, to help heal the physical, psychological, and spiritual wounds of combatants, and to assist in their transition from the battlefield to the home front.

Just days before this year's annual commemoration of Veterans Day, the press reported veterans make up 25 percent of America's homeless population even though they are just 11 percent of the general adult population. Articles reported that homelessness was not only a problem among middle-aged and elderly veterans; rather, "Younger veterans from Iraq and Afghanistan are trickling into shelters and soup kitchens seeking services, treatment or help finding a job" (Hefling 2007).

Conclusion

Scripture speaks to every person in a unique and personal way; it should come as no surprise, therefore, that people in uniform read the story of David and Bathsheba differently than that of their civilian counterparts. For instance, while they would recognize that David's sin of adultery with Bathsheba was in fact a mortal one, they would go one step further and identify David's more grievous sin as that of a betrayal of trust, a betrayal with a reach much further than that of Uriah. People in uniform would probably view the betrayal as encompassing every Israelite David ordered into combat. In much the same light, perhaps there is merit and insight in viewing the betrayal of trust at Walter Reed as extending far beyond the boundaries of the hospital complex to every combat veteran who has or will serve their country. And let this be our primary lesson learned from the events of the recent past: veterans' care is much more than a legal entitlement; it is the moral responsibility of any government that elects to send citizen-warriors into harm's way.

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