

Preemptive Truth

“What did they know and when did they know it?”

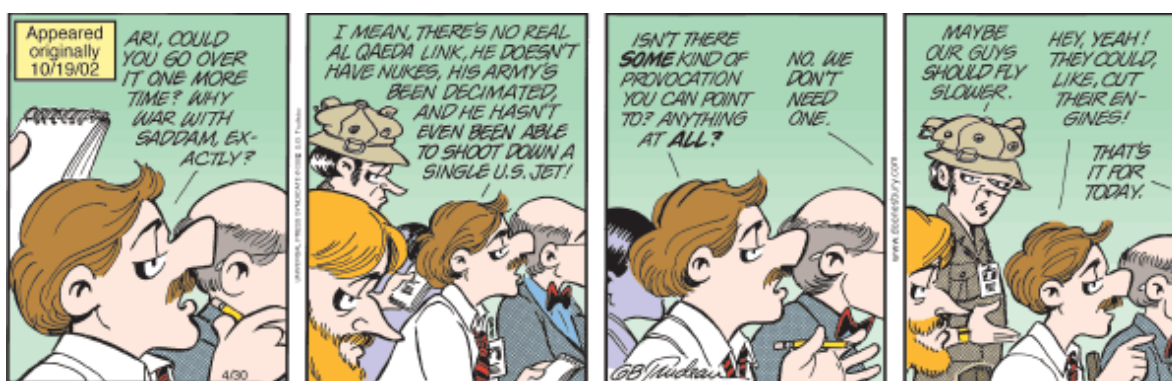
(REV.) EMMANUEL CHARLES MCCARTHY

Like one who...

Made such a sinner of his memory,
To credit his own life.

WILLIAM SHAKESPEARE

THE TEMPEST



The above Doonesbury comic strip of October 19, 2002, puts the lie to ecclesiastical, civil, commercial and media hierarchs and drum majors who try to defend their moral rectitude in relation to their support of the invasion of Iraq by saying, “If I had only known the truth, I never would have supported this war.” By October 19, 2002 what they insist they did not know until years later was public knowledge—to the point that mainstream comic strips and cartoonists could satirize the obviousness of the lies being employed to justify turning Iraq into a killing field?

After the “overwhelming atrocity” of the Vietnam War, I watched bishops, priests, ministers, theologians, politicians, celebrities, academics, columnists, university administrators, former students, TV talking-political-heads, labor union leaders and mem-

bers, judges, prosecutors, police officers, FBI agents, ordinary people in the pews or in bleachers, as well as institutions—who were politically and/or morally supportive of that war or cleverly and silently indifferent to its carnage—re-write their personal and institutional histories. This revisionist project was undertaken to make it appear they were “really against that awful thing” but did not feel that speaking out publicly in opposition to it was right, since they didn’t have all the facts at the time because of government lies that confused them or kept them completely in the dark. At the time, I had close encounters of the intense kind with a few of these faux neo-adversaries of the Vietnam War. I therefore know as a fact from personal interaction with them what they really thought, what they really did and cooperated with, and how they and their interests handsomely profited from their choice to support or to remain silent.

This should not be permitted to happen with the present “overwhelming atrocity.” Being dead wrong on the morality of an act of organized mass murder should disenfranchise a person from even being considered as a candidate to lead people in the Church, the Synagogue, the Mosque or the State in matters of serious moral import. If a person cannot morally see murder when it is mass murder, or worse, if he or she sees it and justifies it or ignores it, they should be spiritually and humanly disqualified from telling other people what to do and from being given access to means of coercion (physical, psychological or spiritual) by which to force other people to do what they want them to do.

But, unless there is an active and persevering concern to keep those who, out of culpable ignorance or moral inadequacy led others down a primrose path to destruction on a grand scale, then in the not too distant future one can expect to see something like Condoleezza Rice standing beside her counterpart Henry Kissinger, Secretary of State and War Criminal by the standards of the Charter of Nuremberg, and receiving the Nobel Peace Prize. As of the time I am writing this, this may sound absurd. But, as of the time of the 1972 “Christmas Bombings” of Hanoi, there was not a sane or insane person on the planet who could conceive the thought that Henry Kissinger, who authored the plan to drop 40,000 tons of explosives on the City of Hanoi between December 18 and December 30 of that year, would one day be a Nobel Peace Prize Laureate. And much the same happened in my own Church (Catholic) where those who saw the evil of the killing and the destruction in Vietnam and who spoke up were by-passed and rendered nugatory in the earthly Church for the rest of their natural lives, while those who were gung-ho supporters or tacitly and silently complicit were raised to positions of stature and influence in the Church. Indeed, in an extraordinary series of ironies (I am not at all sure that irony is the precise word needed here), one wholehearted supporter of the war—in “the land of the burning children” (Daniel Berrigan’s phrase for Vietnam during the war)—was made Chairman of the U.S. Bishops’ Right to Life Committee whose purpose is to protect innocent life. Another Catho-

lic supporter of the mass murder of Vietnamese was made an Archbishop and has become one of the preeminent Catholic voices proclaiming that what Catholics are doing in Iraq is in conformity with the will of God as revealed by Jesus. He has also been assigned the responsibility of evaluating for the Church whether Catholic Seminaries in the U.S. are teaching seminarians what they should be teaching them.

I suspect this same sorrowful story of the shabby quality of Christian pastoral leadership in relationship to the Vietnam War and the War in Iraq can be recounted in all the mainline and Evangelical Churches of the U.S. Now, however, the sad but seemingly incontrovertible fact is that the wheels are already in motion, at least in the U.S. Catholic Church and more than likely in all the others, to move those, who have morally supported this present unjust war, into the primary positions of ecclesiastical authority and power in the future. (One Catholic Bishop, who publicly told the people of his diocese just before the War on Iraq began that they did not have to follow what the Pope said about this war being unjust by Catholic Just War Standards, has already been promoted from being the Bishop of a small diocese to being an Archbishop of a major archdiocese.) The crumbs of war given out for supporting a war effort are not just a few new colorful ribbons on a general’s uniform for being part of an operation that successfully killed large numbers of human beings, nor are they simply the unconscionable monetary profits that only the chaos of a war economy can make available. For those who know how to play the game, war has a big barrel of the widest variety of earthy crumbs to offer to the go-along-get-along person in every position of upper echelon leadership in every organization within the warring society. All that is asked is that he or she not be too morally, intellectually, or empathically persnickety about what they are going along with and what they are getting along with.

Soon the chorus of faux neo-adversaries to the War on Iraq will fill the airways and auditoriums, the magazines and the newspapers that their constituencies read, with their version of the ancient self-exculpating refrain: “The government lied. This

administration didn't tell us (me) the truth regarding the reasons for going to war or what was going on during the war." Well, "Duh!" Was the two-thousand-year-old maxim of human wisdom that has been translated into practically every language in the world, "The first casualty of war is truth," unknown to these people, whether they be politicians, press or prelates? To this day I hear and read of ex-leaders of Church and State saying in relation to their patriotic and moral support of the Vietnam War, "The government lied to me. If I knew then what I know now I would not have supported it." Well, at least by 1966 anyone in power in Church or State, who wanted to know, could have known the evil that was occurring in Vietnam under U.S. auspices. In 1966 among many, many other public revelations in books, magazines, newspapers and on TV, a highly publicized war crimes trial of Lyndon Johnson took place in Europe, which laid out in detail abominations happening in Vietnam and the fact that it was in blatant contravention of the Nuremberg Charter and International Law. By 1966 thousands of people were demonstrating in the streets, universities and elsewhere. Archbishop Fulton J. Sheen, the most noted and respected Catholic Bishop in the U.S. and an anti-communist conservative of the first rank, said the war was unjust according to Catholic Just War Norms and that immediate withdrawal was morally mandated. For people in positions of power and authority in Church, Synagogue, Mosque or State in 1968, 69, 70, 71, 72, 73 and after, to be morally justifying and supporting the Vietnam War and subsequently pleading they were lied to by the government as the reason for their support is disingenuous.

But, it is about to happen again—except it will be more morally phony this time than then. Remember, on February 15, 2003—a month before the U.S.-led invasion began on March 19, 2003—millions of people in 80 countries and in more than 600 urban communities around the world publicly demonstrated to denounce preparations for this unjust war and to expose the reasons being given for the invasion as outright falsehoods. The Chief Weapons Inspector for the U.N., Hans Blix, was all over television telling the world that no weapons of mass destruction

had been found, let alone WMDs that were capable of imminent deployment. It borders on the radically improbable that by March 19, 2003 any leader who had the brains, experience and savvy to rise to the position of being head of a major organization, whether it be a religious one, a governmental one or a commercial one, could believe that the reasons given by the Bush administration for going to war were genuinely valid. Yet, religious, governmental and commercial leadership generally did not protest the coming mass murder of the innocent. Why? The reasons are multiple but all have to do with personal and institutional self-interests overriding all other concerns—even the unjustified destruction and maiming of hundreds of thousands of human beings.

So whether it is in your Church or your government, don't let the leadership play you for the fool, by portraying themselves as political rubes, who are "shocked, just shocked" because they were taken-in by the unscrupulous political operatives in the Bush administration who lied to them about the administration's war. Don't let them tell you behind serious and somber faces that they would have declared the war unjust (Church) or voted against it (State) if they had only known at the time that there were no WMDs that were being readied for imminent deployment. Such people, whether in Church or in government—but most especially in Church—do not deserve to be put in or to be retained in positions of power, authority and moral leadership. They will probably graciously, implicitly respond, if requested to resign their offices because of gross moral negligence or worse, as George Bush and Richard Cheney graciously, implicitly respond when caught in murderous lies: "We've got the power and you can't take it from us, so get lost!" So be it.

However you will have maintained your human and Christian integrity by not becoming part of their bloody moral sham of "If only I had known..."; a sham that is a cloaking device for hiding human beings, whose moral standards allow them to approve and/or to ignore mass murder when it is in their interests to do so. Need I say that in the Catholic, Orthodox and Protestant Churches, it has been the

laity's willingness to silently acquiesce in their leaders manifesting such a lax conscience that has been an essential piece in the process that has permitted Constantinian Christianity, with all its blatant con-

traditions of the teachings of Jesus, to survive for 1700 years. Silence, every bit as much as speech, is a choice of the will. Therefore, it also can be untruthful, unloving, unChristlike and evil.