

U.S. has moral obligation to Iraqi people

NEW YORK – The United States has a moral obligation to the people of Iraq that must be met regardless of when U.S. troops ultimately withdraw from that country. That was the conclusion of the panelists at “Exit or No Exit? Morality and Withdrawal from Iraq,” a New York forum held Sept. 18 and attended by 450 people on the Lincoln Center campus of Jesuit-run Fordham University.

“We must distinguish between the ethics of intervention and the ethics of exit,” said Gerard F. Powers, director of policy studies at the Joan B. Kroc Institute for International Peace Studies at the University of Notre Dame and former director of the U.S. bishops’ Office of International Justice and Peace.

“The U.S. intervention may have been an optional, immoral war, but the post-intervention U.S. involvement is not an optional moral commitment,” he said.

Quoting the U.S. Catholic bishops, Powers said that the U.S. intervention “has brought with it a new set of moral responsibilities to help Iraqis secure and rebuild their country and to address the consequences of war for the region and the world.”

Jean Bethke Elshtain, the Laura Spelman Rockefeller professor of social and political ethics at the University of Chicago Divinity School said: “We cannot separate the morality of exit from the consequences of exit. We have a moral obligation to see it through, so that after the American exit, there will not be a violent deluge. To abandon these people would be an act of moral dereliction.”

Elshtain cautioned, “There is no ‘sell-by’ date on this issue. Some calls for getting out immediately are irresponsible.”

She said, “We’re still in Europe 60 years after World War II,” but noted that the postwar situation in Iraq is unlike that in Europe. “This is not like fighting fascism. A wholesale change to democracy is not possible,” she said.

Michael Walzer, a political philosopher at the Institute for Advanced Study in Princeton, N.J., said that it is not possible to get 160,000 troops, 90,000 contracted workers and 40,000 armored vehicles out of Iraq in one year without repeating the “ignominious end” to the Vietnam War.

Walzer said that the U.S. obligations include securing the Kurds and the Sunnis; guaranteeing the safety of those who have helped the United States or put

themselves at risk; and contributing to the cost of resettling Iraqi refugees, while finding a way to continue the struggle against terrorism.

"Strenuous diplomatic effort is needed to get other countries engaged," said Walzer. "Talk won't produce results if we are in retreat."

Sohail Hashmi, associate professor of international relations at Mount Holyoke College, said that the U.S. should withdraw from Iraq as soon as possible, leaving a small contingent of forces to train Iraqis and work as part of a multilateral effort.

Hashmi said, "If we leave Iraq soon, the civil war may escalate, but the shock of the American departure may provide the catalyst for Iraq to solve its own problems and the catalyst for regional powers to help.

"It is the obligation of the Muslims to keep their house in order. Iraq was a mess before the U.S. intervention. The responsibility lies with the Arab states and their leaders, who made it all possible and necessary by turning a blind eye (to Iraq's aggression against Iran)," Hashmi said.

Powers said attention must be given "to an ethic of responsibility. As a temporary, substitute political authority, what the U.S. owes Iraqis is akin to what the U.S. owes its own citizens ... and not all that different, morally, than our duties to help the people of New Orleans recover from Hurricane Katrina."

"The U.S. is deeply implicated in the turmoil in Iraq," Powers said. "The U.S. role in Iraq might not be 'ancient,' but it is very much a part of any hatreds there. The United States can no more walk away with a clear conscience than a father can abandon the mother of his illegitimate child."

Powers cautioned that "a precipitous U.S. withdrawal, driven by a narrow conception of U.S. moral responsibilities, could contribute to an even deeper and widening spiral of violence that could, ironically, even necessitate a reintervention for humanitarian and security reasons down the road."

Walzer said that the U.S. has an obligation to try to stop ethnic cleansing in Iraq. "No human being is off the hook when mass murder is going on - and certainly not the most powerful state in the world." Walzer also said that the U.S. government has a responsibility to keep track of civilian casualties. At the very least, he said, "proportionality calculations require it."

Elshtain said, "We have well-developed criteria for determining justification before a war, and less for post-bellum (action). Moral regret does not have to wait on historic assessment." Citizens should engage in reflections now to better respond to conflict

and humanitarian concerns in the future.

Walzer said that the U.S. should pay reparations to the Iraqis. “We don’t believe in collective guilt, but we do have collective responsibility and reparations are one way to recognize that. The burden is divided through the tax system among all of us: those who opposed the intervention and those who supported it.”

The panel discussion was co-sponsored by the Fordham Center on Religion and Culture and the Joan B. Kroc Institute for International Peace Studies at the University of Notre Dame. It was moderated by Trudi Rubin, foreign affairs columnist for The Philadelphia Inquirer.