

Grateful, not joyful

by [John Buchanan](#) in the [May 31, 2011](#) issue



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The horrors of World War I turned many thoughtful men and women into pacifists, including the Christian theologian Reinhold Niebuhr. But in the 1930s Niebuhr witnessed the rise of Nazism in Germany, a movement based on rabid anti-Semitism and dangerous theories of Aryan racial superiority. Niebuhr decided that armed resistance is sometimes the lesser of two evils and is sometimes the moral imperative even for Christians. He said that Christians should resist evil and fight tyranny with a clear conscience—but also with a heavy heart. When Christians take up arms they are fully aware of the reality of sin not only in the aggressor, but in their own hearts as well.

Now Osama bin Laden is dead at the hands of U.S. special forces. For many Americans and people throughout the world, his having been killed was an act of simple justice: the man who headed a terrorist network that murdered 3,000 innocent people on September 11, 2001, and killed many others in other attacks throughout the world was appropriately punished. For many it was a national victory, the product of the determination of two presidents and the relentless, disciplined skill of U.S. forces.

I am of two minds in this matter. It is realistic and fitting to resist planned terrorist attacks that result in thousands of innocent deaths and to do anything possible to stop those responsible. When I heard the news of bin Laden's death, I was grateful. But I was not joyful. It did not seem to be an occasion for celebration. As a follower

of one who astonished his contemporaries by teaching that "You shall love your enemies and pray for those who persecute you"—one who taught his followers to pray, "Forgive us our sins as we forgive those who sin against us"—I'm not going to celebrate anyone's death.

I confess that I'm not up to forgiving Osama bin Laden. But I'm not going to dance in the street over his death either. The best I can do is be grateful that one dreadful chapter in the story that began on 9/11 is over. The best I can do is to ponder the mystery of human beings, with their staggering potential for both good and evil, and offer thanks for a gracious and merciful God who relieves me of the responsibility of being the judge and who in the end will sort it all out—even this sad piece of history.