

Memories of nine years at war in Iraq

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I lived my childhood against the stained wallpaper of the Vietnam War. My children have lived theirs against the gnawing realities of the wars in Iraq and Afghanistan, and it's hard to believe that one of those wars is finally over.

As I grapple with the legacy of our immoral misadventure in Iraq, the main thing that stands out is the terrible, mind-numbing cost. More than 4,000 U.S. soldiers are dead and 33,000 wounded. An estimated 178,000 suffer traumatic brain injuries, more than 2,000 are amputees, and hundreds have committed suicide. Some estimate more than 1.4 million Iraqis died in the war, which cost more than a trillion dollars.

But my mind also turns to some personal memories from the last nine years. I remember sitting in my office listening to a news report in September 2002--at the beginning of my third year of seminary teaching--and realizing that President Bush was bent on invading Iraq. I contacted Stanley Hauerwas and floated the thesis that at this moment, pacifist ethicists and just war ethicists could all agree: invading Iraq would be morally wrong. Hauerwas agreed, and by September 23 we had crafted a statement and built a list of more than 100 ethicists condemning the impending war.

Our petition drew modest media attention, and the war's supporters responded quickly. The *Washington Times* enlisted David Davenport to write an op-ed saying that these ethicists need not be heeded. Other pro-war religious leaders--Jean Bethke Elshtain, Charles Colson--were equally dismissive in print.

But some broadcast media exchanges were more interesting. I had an extended debate with George Weigel on

an NPR segment hosted by Scott Simon. And Religion and Ethics Newsweekly covered the moral dimensions of war extensively and peerlessly, as it has ever since.

We ethicists couldn't stop the war, but we did help jump-start a conversation. President Bush had effectively intimidated most Democrats into silence by questioning their patriotism. But eventually the country came to see, as it did with Vietnam, that the moral folly of the whole exercise rendered it unjust.

Closer to home, I remember the last two years of my son's high school days, during the war's grimmest phase in 2006-07. As a big kid with a buzz cut, he was a prime target for military recruiters when he strolled our local mall. He finally developed a quick retort for the constantly circling recruiters: "You just don't know my dad." That seemed to do the trick.

I also recall a trip to Walter Reed Hospital. A friend needed knee surgery, and his wife was deployed. So I volunteered to take him to Reed, wait all day and take him home.

My frequent sojourns to the cafeteria took me past the prosthetics lab. On one trip I saw two men approaching, one about my age and one my son's, both tall and with a military bearing. I smiled at the dad and then looked at the son--and saw a beautiful, athletic boy who was missing an arm. I felt a rush of nausea as I considered what they'd just been through. Against every impulse, I looked into the father's eyes again as we passed in the hall. I saw his anger and despair. And I thought about my son.

In 2002 an Illinois state senator made a speech in Chicago that would eventually lead him to the White House. Barack Obama is president today in large part because of his early and principled stand against the Iraq War. It is to his credit that he kept his major election promise to end this misbegotten war.

Obama's opposition to the war motivated me to travel the country in 2008 working on his campaign. I saw then how hungry Americans were to bring this nightmare to an end. The

experience helped me understand better Reinhold Niebuhr's notion of becoming a "tamed cynic." The war fed my cynical side, but the country's realization that it was a fiasco has tamed a fair amount of my cynicism about our politics.

While reflecting on the end of the Iraq War, we mustn't lose sight of the need to get out of Afghanistan, too. Along with their moral consequences, these long wars have contributed to our economic problems. It's time to focus on nation-building here at home. With one war over, we're in a better place to do that.