

Questions and Answers on the War in Iraq

Revised February 2007

Our nation cannot afford a shrill and shallow debate that distorts reality and reduces the options to 'cut and run' versus 'stay the course.' Instead we need a forthright discussion that begins with an honest assessment of the situation in Iraq and acknowledges both the mistakes that have been made and the signs of hope that have appeared. Most importantly, an honest assessment of our moral responsibilities toward Iraq should commit our nation to a policy of responsible transition.... Our nation's military forces should remain in Iraq only as long as it takes for a responsible transition, leaving sooner rather than later.

Toward a Responsible Transition in Iraq, January 13, 2006
Bishop Thomas G. Wenski, Bishop of Orlando
Chairman, USCCB Committee on International Policy

Any action or failure to act [in Iraq] should be measured by whether it moves toward these benchmarks and contributes to a responsible withdrawal at the earliest time, or whether it is likely to increase divisions, violence, and loss of life. Another necessary step is more sustained U.S. leadership to address other deadly conflicts in this region, especially the Israeli-Palestinian conflict and the crisis in Lebanon.

Evaluating Plans for a Responsible Transition in Iraq, January 12, 2007
A Statement of the President of the United States Conference of Catholic Bishops
Bishop William S. Skylstad, Bishop of Spokane

What is the position of the U.S. Conference of Catholic Bishops (USCCB) on Iraq today?

In the wake of the President's new plan for Iraq, on January 12 Bishop Skylstad issued "Evaluating Plans for a Responsible Transition in Iraq." The statement reiterates the "grave moral concerns about military intervention in Iraq and the unpredictable and uncontrollable negative consequences of invasion and occupation" that were expressed by the Holy See and the bishops' Conference prior to the war. However, it goes on to argue that the Conference now supports "broader regional and international engagement to increase security, stability and reconstruction in Iraq."

The statement lifts up a key moral question that ought to guide our nation's actions: "How can the U.S. bring about a responsible transition in Iraq?" Each alternative course of action "ought to be evaluated in light of our nation's moral responsibility to help Iraqis to live with security and dignity in the aftermath of U.S. military action. Our nation's military forces should remain in Iraq only as long as their presence actually contributes to a responsible transition. Our nation should seek effective ways to end their deployment at the earliest opportunity consistent with this goal."

This newest statement echoes important themes from a statement that was issued by Bishop William Skylstad in November 2006, which was discussed and affirmed by the full body of bishops in plenary assembly, and an earlier one by Bishop Thomas Wenski, Chair of the Committee on International Policy.

If USCCB supports ending the military “deployment at the earliest opportunity” isn’t it supporting just another version of “cut and run”?

No. USCCB recognizes that many Iraqis now see the presence of U.S. troops as part of the problem that fuels the insurgency. At the same time many Iraqis know that the U.S. cannot simply leave without helping to establish greater security and political stability.

What does USCCB mean by a “responsible transition”?

“Any action or failure to act should be measured by whether it moves toward [key] benchmarks and contributes to a responsible withdrawal at the earliest time, or whether it is likely to increase divisions, violence, and loss of life.” Benchmarks for progress toward a responsible transition in Iraq include:

- minimally acceptable levels of *security*;
- *economic reconstruction* that creates employment for Iraqis; and
- *political solutions* that help overcome divisions, broaden participation, and increase respect for religious freedom and basic human rights.

Each strategy or plan ought to be evaluated in light of the traditional principle of “probability of success.”

What was the position of USCCB prior to the Iraq war?

Prior to the war, USCCB repeatedly expressed grave moral concerns regarding a possible military intervention in Iraq and the unpredictable and uncontrollable negative consequences of an invasion and occupation.

If USCCB originally questioned the war, why doesn't the Conference favor an immediate withdrawal?

While USCCB and the Holy See raised grave moral concerns regarding the decision to invade Iraq, once the United States initiated military action it incurred new moral responsibilities toward the Iraqi people. As the primary occupying power in Iraq, the United States has both legal responsibilities under international law and moral responsibilities to help provide security, rebuild the country and establish the rule of law. This is why our nation cannot just look back.

What other challenges does the United States face in promoting a “responsible transition”?

Achieving a responsible transition also involves meeting four key challenges:

Fighting Terrorism Responsibly: USCCB unequivocally condemns terrorism, but in the necessary confrontation with terrorists, our nation must guard against excessive military responses that endanger civilians or abuse prisoners. Such responses can violate human rights and undermine the winning of hearts and minds in Iraq and throughout the Arab world. In addition, terrorism cannot be fought solely with military methods; we must drain the swamps of poverty and powerlessness that terrorist leaders exploit to gain recruits.

Protecting Religious Freedom: Religious freedom must be protected to promote true democracy. It would be ironic if Christians and other religious minorities had less religious freedom in post-war Iraq.

Aiding Refugees and Asylum Seekers: Our nation and others must provide more support for refugees and asylum seekers fleeing Iraq. USCCB urges the U.S. and other nations to provide greater support, including designating Iraqi religious minorities fleeing Iraq as a group of special concern for the purposes of refugee status and giving greater attention to Iraqi asylum requests in the United States.

Meeting Other National Responsibilities: While the war has great costs, the war cannot become an excuse for ignoring other pressing needs in the budget, especially the poor at home and abroad.

The bombing of the Golden Mosque in Samarra in February 2006 and the subsequent rise in sectarian violence between Sunnis and Shia make a “responsible transition” even more difficult to achieve. The need to establish security remains paramount. Terrorists and insurgents continue to target both security personnel and civilians in an effort to destabilize the new government. The U.S. remains in the difficult position of continuing to provide basic security even though its presence is still resented by many in Iraq and across the Muslim world.

Is USCCB concerned for the welfare of U.S. military personnel and their families?

Yes. USCCB has repeatedly expressed support for the military and their families who bear a disproportionate burden of the struggle in Iraq. The Conference also affirms the critical ministry of military chaplains. Raising grave moral questions regarding the war, its conduct and its aftermath, is not to question the moral integrity of military personnel. The Conference's criticism of the treatment of prisoners and detainees does not impugn the integrity of the vast majority of those who serve in the military. Asking difficult questions is a patriotic and moral duty that reflects our values and serves the best interests of our nation and those who serve it with honor.

How does USCCB view the tactic of “preventive war?”

In light of the moral criteria of the just war tradition, USCCB remains highly skeptical of the concept of “preventive war.” As the *Compendium of the Social Doctrine of the Church* clearly states: “[E]ngaging in a preventive war without clear proof that an attack is imminent cannot fail to raise serious moral and juridical questions.” (# 501)

Where can I find more information on the position of USCCB on the Iraq war?

Prepared July 2006. For Church statements on the war, visit:

www.usccb.org/sdwp/peace/churchleaders.htm For further information, contact: *Stephen Colecchi*, Director, Office of International Justice and Peace (IJP), USCCB, 202-541-3160 (ph); 541-3339 (fax); scolecchi@usccb.org. On refugee questions, contact: *Kevin Appleby*, MRS, USCCB, 202-541-3260, KAppleby@usccb.org.