Editorial: Bush's "Holy War" - May 2006 by Elton Tylenda
This is a longer version of an editorial I wrote for the Fitchburg Star newspaper (May 2006). I was reflecting upon the 3rd anniversary of our illegal invasion/occupation of Iraq.

Bush's "Holy War"

Crusades of old were a brutal part of history; they were bloodbaths that included mass slaughter of defenseless non-combatants. The so-called Christians who promoted them demonstrated a lack of understanding of the non-violent principles at the heart of Judaism and, therefore, of its offshoots Christianity and Islam, and indeed for all wisdom traditions - "blessed are the peacemakers." The centuries of "enlightenment" and "progress" since then have apparently taken us in a big circle.

At the start of what became the illegal invasion of Iraq, when war plans were already on the table - "not on my desk," Bush characterized his aggressive intentions as a "crusade." That set the tone for the current dance of death between violent "Christian" and "Islamic" fundamentalists. Insurgent leaders today refer to our occupation forces as "the crusaders." Soundly criticized, Bush and his "religious" supporters no longer use the C word. But the military has plans to recruit 600 more chaplains at nearly $46,000/yr starting salary to keep the crusade going. Applicants must be fluent in "just cause" theory and comfortable with the claim that it can be a soldier's moral responsibility to kill during wartime. In Vietnam, Chaplains prayed for successful bombing missions that burned children alive and, on the other hand, took a stand against open prostitution there. The egregiously immoral situation in Iraq makes a mockery of "just cause" altogether, but that doesn't seem to faze fundamentalists who dominate the military Chaplaincy. And now a Catholic bishop lends the seal of respectability to our most infamous School of the Americas, aka "School of the Assassins" (and torturers), giving it a new face to match its new name (WHINSEC). Will the real religious leaders of our day please stand up!?

More than three years after Bush's theatrical "mission accomplished," we find ourselves bogged down in what's left of Iraq, the cradle of civilization, and our violent attack has been met with expanding violence and terror. Initial excuses for starting this war now appear groundless or fabricated. The Vietnam war was ignited by a bogus Tonkin Gulf "incident." The administration's default excuse of removing the despot Saddam Hussein is ironic. Saddam was being armed and nurtured by our CIA while the president's dad was its director. It's become an old repeating pattern: our secret police install and arm the thugs, and later our young people die taking them out. Much worse, an exponentially larger number of defenseless civilians get killed in the process. Truth, whenever it surfaces, paints such an unflattering picture of all "holy wars" that none can be effectively promoted or sustained while truth stands in the way. Hence the necessity of making truth war's first casualty.

Whipping folks into a killing frenzy requires the mass dissemination of misinformation, half truths, and lies. The present administration, with the help of right wing media, has been very effective in spreading all of the above. A recent Zogby poll found most troops in Iraq woefully misinformed about their mission there. The majority, 85% think they are there in retaliation for Saddam's role in 9/11 and 77% think they are there to break up his Al Qaeda connections. And 52% of the American public are likewise misinformed and parrot the same mistaken reasons for sacrificing their children to Bush's crusade. There is no evidence to support these oft repeated

claims. The facts of the matter point elsewhere - to Saudi Arabia, for example, homeland of Bin Laden and most of the alleged 9/11 hijackers. American troops stationed there were protecting the anti-democratic Saudi rulers (friends of the Bush clan, blood-brothers of big oil) from their own people fomenting murderous anti-American sentiment. Facts also point to the U.A.E., the country Bush would have opened our ports to, the homeland of Taliban supporters and two of the alleged 9/11 hijackers. Like those illusory weapons of mass destruction, facts connecting Iraq to any of the above have not been found.

Although most of our soldiers have been duped regarding their mission, they're still way ahead of their leaders. Their assessments on the ground in Iraq have a familiar ring. The majority noted that the "insurgents" are mostly Iraqis (those who take exception to the illegal invasion/ occupation of their homeland) and 72% feel we should leave Iraq within a year. That sounds very much like the on-the-ground assessments of the Vietnam situation by soldiers like myself back in 1968. It was the 3rd anniversary of that war too and most government insiders had secretly confided that Vietnam was not winnable in any meaningful way. The questions had narrowed down to the means of disengagement. That dire conclusion led the architect of that war, Robert McNamara, to resign. But for self-serving reasons most insiders including McNamara continued to promote the war publicly as winnable.

Officials from president Johnson and later Nixon on down gave us the same spiel and spin I'm hearing from Bush and company today. An obscene lie both then and now was/is, "we don't torture." "Project Phoenix" alone, according to then CIA chief William Colby, led to the torture and murder of over 20,000 Vietnamese "suspects." The water torture perfected in Vietnam is still being used but has been superseded by the more devastating techniques developed since then by the CIA and used throughout its torture gulag. As professor Alfred McCoy reminds us: "in effect, the logical corollary to state-sanctioned torture is state-sponsored murder." This throwback to Middle Ages barbarism will not win many hearts and minds. As for America's image- Abu Ghraib now overshadows the Statue of Liberty!

Then as now we got the "no-cut-and-run" spiel - victory was just around the corner and General Westmoreland (what was he smoking?) was seeing light at the end of the tunnel. Today in Iraq, insurgent attacks continue to rise, from near zero at the start to over one hundred a day. As in Vietnam, whole cities have been reduced to rubble in order to save them. For more than three years running, Iraqis are trying to survive without basics like water, sanitation and electricity. Where has all the money gone? How did eight billion dollars disappear from the Provisional Authority? US sanctions killed half a million Iraqi children before this war began. How many innocent children have died since? Public approval has plummeted as the death toll rises, the cost spirals toward half a trillion dollars and civil war looms large. But in sharp contrast to reports from our soldiers on the ground, Cheney opined that "the insurgency is in its last throes;" others tell us how we're winning the "hearts and minds" of the people; General Casey assures us "things are going well" and Bush is still talking victory.

By year three of the Vietnam war and for too many years thereafter we heard over and over again: If we leave now it will mean those already killed died in vain. So we didn't leave until 35,000 more died in vain. At the end, as the cost exceeded half a trillion (2005 dollars), we left on essentially the same terms that the other side had agreed to back in 1968. The needless

additional death and destruction that we inflicted upon the Vietnamese and their small country is truly appalling and two million of them still suffer the effects of agent orange. That's a shameful legacy by any standard. Fear mongers in Congress and elsewhere assured us until the end that if we lost in Vietnam we'd be fighting the Vietnamese on the shores of California. The difference concerning Iraq is, the longer we fight them there, the more recruits are drawn from around the world to their cause and all the more likely it becomes that we WILL be fighting them here as well.

After 9/11 American troops were quietly withdrawn from Saudi Arabia and things calmed down there. Perhaps the same would happen if we left Iraq. We could set aside the hundreds of billions more that would be spent on war and fund first world countries who still have moral authority to keep the peace and repair the damage we've done. We could also offer reparations to survivors and torture victims and apologize for the reckless abandonment of civilized norms and international laws. In a less unstable South Korea, maintaining permanently "enduring" US bases there has drained tax payers of $1 trillion. If we give up the bases in Iraq there'd be more than enough money to go around. Of course, without permanent bases we'd lose control of Iraq's oil which we fought so hard to protect while the rest of the country was being sacked and looted. This might be a good thing if it helped wean us from our suicidal addiction to oil. It might help America regain its moral authority if we impeach Bush and other architects and promoters of his unholy crusade. And we should call to account clergy who prostitute religious authority to these might-makes-right barbarians. Conversely, we should raise up those religious leaders who, like Gandhi and King before them, stand firmly and speak eloquently against our accelerating slide into violence and insanity. We can do a lot to avoid mourning the 4th anniversary of counterproductive folly - of escalating violence and expanding terrorism.