As a conference introduction to ‘Iraq never again: ending war, building peace’, I explored two themes: (i) the age-old fascination with violence and war, and (ii) the crafting of a just peace for the people of Iraq. I also reflect now on the consequences for civil liberties in Australia when war becomes a foreign policy priority and if deliberations about a just peace do not occur.

The fascination with violence and with war

Those who were absorbed with aggressive, linear perspectives about the regime of Saddam Hussein were never serious about peace. On the contrary, their fascination with violence was a catalyst for war; and an appraisal of this destructive way of thinking would need to be made before any peace settlement for Iraq might be crafted (Rai 2002).

Linear or one-dimensional perspectives on ways to solve problems are characterised by a simplicity which is allegedly appealing because it is easy to understand. It involves ‘either/or’ views, are you ‘good or bad’, ‘for me or against me’? It includes a tradition of hierarchical, top down decision-making which reinforces views – often racist – about the superiority of one group in relation to another.

In the early 20th century, the British treated Iraq elites as though they could not govern their country without British protection (Fisk 2005).
Oversimplified views persisted in the months preceding the March 2003 bombing of Baghdad. British and US government circles claimed that Iraq was a one man dictatorship which could easily be defeated and would welcome the imposition of democracy. Such a facile view held sway because intelligence services were poor and because leaders like Bush, Blair and Howard would not heed advice which did not correspond to their preconceived ideas. For example, before March 2003, Arabists from Cambridge University met with Prime Minister Blair. They reported that they had the impression “of someone with a very shallow mind, who is not interested in issues other than personalities of top people” (Steele 2008, pp. 25–27). In April 2004, fifty-two retired British diplomats, most of them career specialists in the Middle East, wrote an open letter to Blair deploring Britain’s lack of prewar analysis. The diplomats said it was naïve to think that an invasion could create a democratic society. They said it was blind to assume that Saddam’s removal would not boost the interests of Shi’a Islamists and strengthen the Islamist parties’ loyalty to Iran (Cheehab 2006).

Simple reasoning about the merits of war was aided by deceit. Despite the conclusions of weapons inspection teams led by Hans Blix, the Bush administration insisted that Iraq had weapons of mass destruction (Blix 2006). In that administration’s presentations to the UN Security Council, and in Prime Minister Blair’s ‘dodgy dossier’ which said that Iraq had weapons that could reach Britain within forty-five minutes, lies followed lies. Deputy Defence Secretary Paul Wolfowitz said that he did not need direct evidence of the existence of weapons of mass destruction. Later he explained that this emphasis on weapons of mass destruction was merely the best bureaucratic reason for going to war. It was the reason which the American public would accept.

The US public’s acceptance of the Bush administration’s deceit may not have facilitated the drive towards war but it was never a hindrance. In the days following 9/11, that public was encouraged by a jingoistic media to believe that Iraq was connected to the destruction of 9/11 and was a threat to the security of the United States. A former Australian diplomat reported that of Rupert Murdoch’s 174 newspapers, not one editorially opposed the war and once the invasion began, many of their commentaries became hysterically supportive (Broinowski 2007).
Another feature of one-dimensional linear thinking is evident in decisions to act alone, to go unilateral, to disregard international law. Under Prime Minister Blair’s influence, the Bush administration sought UN cooperation when it seemed convenient but when the UN did not meet US wishes, it was derided. So emerged the US view that a legal framework was a hindrance to their policies, that unilateral action was the way to wage a war on terrorism. Within that war, Iraq could easily be included.

The refusal to learn the lesson that violence begets violence is another part of the pathology of war. Saddam Hussein was armed by the West and encouraged to wage war against Iran. Following the carnage of the first Iraq war – and no-one knows the extent of Iraqi casualties – the imposition of sanctions and no fly zones reduced Iraq to third world status. It became an easy target. The attack on Iraq in March 2003 occurred not because the country was strong but because it was weak. The cycle of violence gained momentum and perpetrators. It ranged from Saddam’s tortures and mass executions to US arrangements for extraordinary rendition, from the numerous killings of innocents by suicide bombers to US security companies such as Blackwater murdering with impunity, from an Al Qaeda website showing the execution of an American captive to the abuse of Iraqi prisoners held by US soldiers in Abu Ghraib.

The other side of the violence begets violence pathology is a disinterest in the philosophy, language and practice of nonviolence. This disinterest amounts to an illiteracy which flourishes across countries and cultures. Through the centuries men have assumed that they can dominate women and abuse them in other ways. Similar top down ways of using power have been exercised by bullies in families, playgrounds, on factory floors and in boardrooms (Rees & Rodley 1995). Far more sinister ways of using power are exhibited by terrorists who maim and murder, and by armies which kill non-combatants and then, in Orwellian fashion, claim that they always act ethically.

At this point, it sounds as though some crude psychology will explain such destructive use of power in relationships. That is only half of the story. The other half concerns the eagerness of social institutions – education, the military, religion and politics – to adopt these abusive ways
to promote policies and punish those who do not conform. Organised religion loves rules, seeks conformity and relishes punishment. The military breeds the belief that humiliation is one way to prepare soldiers and sailors for war. In his monumental work, *The prince*, Machiavelli sought to teach politicians that the possession of overwhelming force was the way to impress allies and enemies.

The merging of these institutional cultures with a mostly male-dominated psychology has forged the belief that force is a way to implement policies and that peace is some feminine notion which merits attention only when war has become too expensive. For these reasons, a first step in crafting a peace settlement for Iraq is to replace destructive ways of thinking with a multi-dimensional, life-enhancing perspective. Aggressive certainty will have to be replaced by questioning and reflection. Age-old assumptions about abuses of power will have to be replaced by a determination to be creative on behalf of and in association with others, hence my next few observations about poets.

**A lesson from poetry: when will they ever learn**

Assumptions about the value of violence can be so embedded in cultures that they are taken for granted but shifts to a different way of thinking can be helped by insights from poets. I’ll begin with the Australian poet A.D. Hope’s imagined plea, ‘Inscription for a War’ (Hope 2000, p. 129), from conscripts during the Vietnam War:

> Linger not, stranger; shed no tear;  
> Go back to those who sent us here.  
> We are the young they drafted out  
> To wars their follys brought about.  
> Go tell those old men, safe in bed,  
> We took their orders and are dead.

In his poem, ‘Men’, the pacifist poet William Stafford reminds us of the consequences of purely militaristic ways of thinking (Stafford 1996, p. 40). Wars are followed by the erection of memorials for the dead, by collections for widows, and by claims that the surviving women and children have been made more secure by the latest fighting.
After a war come the memorials – …

For a long time people rehearse
just how it happened, and you have to learn
how important all that armament was –
and it really could happen again …

Then, if your side has won, they explain
how the system works and if you just let it
go on it will prevail everywhere.
And they establish foundations and give
some of the money back.

My protest, ‘Against the latest war’, depicts how an alliance of political,
corporate and military mindsets encourages violence and makes it dif-
cult to think creatively about peace:

The inhumanity
of the Iraq carnage
is camouflaged
by states spinning
their versions of a truth
that through the ages
has served the needs
of no-one except those
who flaunt the trappings of office,
sleep with corporate harlots
and khaki mind sets
in spite of poets warning
‘It is not honourable to die for your country’,
or an author saying ‘goodbye to all that’
or even Noam Chomsky teaching
how not to be fooled
by those who want to control you.

**Thinking and crafting peace**

To replace this fascination with violence with an enthusiasm for the
means of attaining a just peace requires a change in values and in
thinking. It requires politicians, military personnel, journalists and the general public to shift from an interest in the military means of a notion like victory, to the hard slog of the day-to-day promotion of human rights. This shift depends on life enhancing ways of using power: respect for international law and a dropping of any go-it-alone, unilateral foreign policies. These are peace-oriented practices which could affect attitudes in all levels of government and civil society, in Iraq and neighbouring countries, in the United States and in all the other coalition parties to the Iraq War.

A plan for peace formulated with Iraqis would depend on a distinction between peace as an end to hostilities and peace with justice as in the attainment of citizens’ human rights. The first objective could be achieved following a ceasefire but the daily necessities of clean water, a reliable supply of food and electricity, the experience of freedom of speech and of movement would take time to accompany an end to overt violence. The first objective could be attained within a short time frame. The second objective has much in common with community development goals with a minimum five-year span.

Proposals for peace would begin with an airing of several issues by Iraqis from all walks of life (Kucinich 2008; Transnational Foundation 2007). They must be at the centre of all dialogue about proposals for peace. I also assume that the future of Iraq cannot be considered in isolation from the politics of the Middle East. In this respect the United States cannot continue to operate a policy of double standards, one for Israel and one for other countries in the region. A peace with justice settlement for the Palestinians would greatly enhance the task of crafting a peace settlement in Iraq.

In addition to the premise that Iraqis will have to be at the centre of all dialogue, it should also be acknowledged that peace in Iraq is a collective responsibility and that an ambitious peace conference would need to be arranged by the UN, the Arab League, the EU and Iraq. That conference would set the goals for rebuilding a basic quality of life for Iraqi citizens: supply of water and food, resources for health and education, for administering the rule of law, and for caring for the elderly and disabled.
Peace settlement and humanitarian service

If human rights goals are valued, it follows that there can be no military solution to the catastrophe of Iraq. Human rights goals and other humanitarian initiatives would require the withdrawal of foreign troops, the dismantling of military bases and drastic reduction in the size of the US Embassy. The vacuum created by this withdrawal would be filled by a massive humanitarian service whose arrival would coincide with the departure of the military. Soldiers out, peace-building services in. A blueprint for such a humanitarian service already exists in the proposals for the creation of a permanent UN Emergency Peace Service (UNEPS) (Johansen 2006; Herro & Rees 2008; Herro 2008), which envisages a balance of men and women, of people from diverse ethnic groups and religions and with a range of skills. In the case of Iraq there would have to be a disproportionate representation of staff from Muslim countries. They would be nurses and doctors, social workers skilled in mediation, agronomists and engineers, plumbers and bricklayers. On the need to start re-building their country after the physical devastation, Iraqi citizens have said they will need not only Medecins Sans Frontieres but also ‘bricklayers without borders’ (Rees 2008).

An adjunct to the UNEPS-style proposal could include arrangements for a carefully planned exchange of postgraduate students from various professions and occupations who will have the skills to contribute to re-building Iraq. These internships would be for three, six, nine and twelve months. When Australian universities host overseas students, our experience is that such individuals complete projects with great industry, imagination and skill. Provided that the security of overseas contributors is guaranteed, the same student commitment could be applied in Iraq; and to provide an incentive for young Iraqis, they could also be given the chance to take up internships overseas.

Financial reparation for the destruction of war will have to be an early feature of the peace settlement. There is a precedent for the ways in which the amount of reparation can be estimated and paid. Following Saddam Hussein’s 1994 invasion of Kuwait, various individuals, corporations and governments made claims for compensation and a commission of the UN Security Council estimated that $350 billion was
owing. Now the payment for the destruction of war needs to go in the other direction, back to Iraq.

Another urgent form of reparation will be the clearing up of all the debris of war, the unexploded cluster bombs, land mines, the depleted uranium and the guns of all kinds. The collection and destruction of the means of waging war will be a highly significant step towards showing that security can be achieved by nonviolence and not by the age-old methods of killing and destruction. We are back to the appeal for a life enhancing way of thinking to replace the life destroying, one-dimensional, unilateral assumptions of so many violence-fascinated governments and their servants.

After the loss of as many as one million civilian Iraqi lives, the debilitating injuries to many more and the displacement of millions of refugees to Jordan and Syria and internally within Iraq, a process of healing will be as necessary as the mortar needed to re-build homes. To this end a peace settlement could include the creation of a Truth and Reconciliation Commission headed by respected Iraqis. The precedent of the South African experience shows, in Archbishop Tutu’s words, that the means of reconciliation can be found in that middle way between general amnesia – forgetting all that has happened – and applying the Nuremberg principles of a victor’s only version of justice (Tutu 1999). A Reconciliation Commission would not replace the country’s restored systems of justice. It would evolve as a test of the participants’ ability to be in dialogue and so rediscover that creative language and practice without which a just peace is impossible.

And civil liberties in Australia

These proposals for a peace settlement in Iraq are built around the precept that security will ultimately depend on social considerations not militaristic ones. But as a result of the war on terror and the associated war in Iraq, politicians felt encouraged to think that their country’s borders and sovereignty would depend on limiting people’s freedoms. They ignored the ideal that respect for sovereignty can also be built around policies to foster freedom and on the properties of nonviolence rather than the fear of more violence. These statements also have direct relevance to the state of civil liberties in Australia.
Since 2001, the Australian Federal Government has passed over forty pieces of legislation which erode citizens’ civil liberties. This one-dimensional process began with the passage of the Australian Security Intelligence Organisation (Terrorism) Bill of March 2002. Those who drafted the legislation were playing the fear card and were obviously influenced by the even more fear-full US Patriot Act. The Australian legislation produced the new offence of terrorism, which could be punishable with up to twenty-six years imprisonment for an act made with the intention of advancing an ideological or political cause. ASIO agents were increased in number and given new powers to detain people for forty-eight hours, and to strip search anyone considered to have information pertaining to their investigation. They are not law enforcement officers and it is almost impossible to hold them accountable. Yet the Federal police do have law enforcement responsibilities and the size of their empire has increased remarkably under Commissioner Keelty. Their potential for ignoring civil liberties has increased in corresponding fashion. Their apparent withholding of information relevant to the charges against Dr Mohammed Haneef is a case in point (Ackland 2008a,b).

There is a macho characteristic to those lazy ways of thinking which enjoy secrecy and which promote the notion that mine is bigger or better than yours. The ‘mine’ refers to legislation to deal with perceived threats of terrorism. For example, not to be outdone by the Federal legislation, the NSW Government passed its own Freedom of Information (Terrorism and Criminal Intelligence) Act which decreed that people could be protected by removing from the potential scrutiny of freedom of information any document which state agencies considered relevant to a terrorist threat. Not holding powerful people accountable is another feature of that top down one-dimensionality which is such an obstacle to debates about the meaning of peace and the means of achieving peace with justice.

**Back to Iraq**

The situation created in Iraq since the shock and awe bombing of March 2003 is widely acknowledged to be markedly worse than under Saddam Hussein’s regime. This makes deliberations about peace an urgent prior-
ity. Those deliberations require a drastic shift in thinking in foreign and defence policy circles, in Australia and elsewhere.

The policy of militarisation – that possession of overwhelming power solves problems – flows from unimaginative, aggressive and lazy perspectives. Such destructive ways of thinking have occurred for far too long and at appalling financial and human costs, including an erosion of citizens’ civil liberties. Visions of peace with justice are necessary to end the occupation of Iraq and to promise that country’s citizens a far better future.

References


