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EDITORIALS

New World Order of the pax humana

H. Paul Santmire

War establishes its own emotional momentum.

This momentum could be seen when a group of low-income single parents in Hartford canceled its support-group meeting after it was announced that allied missiles were falling on Baghdad. They, too, were swept up by the fright of the moment. Some of them, indeed, have relatives at the front lines. That terrified them all the more.

But it's by no means too soon for them, or anyone else, to put the brakes on that kind of emotional roller-coaster ride, and to stand still, at least for a moment, on the platform of intense moral reflection.

In that same neighborhood the next day, I encountered an elderly homeless man, known to many on the streets in Asylum Hill and easily recognized by his gait, his hat and his shopping cart full of bottles and cans. When I greeted him, I noticed that he was listening to reports of the war on a portable radio perched on top of his precious cargo.

I asked him what he thought of the war. Without a moment's reflection, he replied: "It's the rich making war on the poor, all over again."

Now that man might be called Socrates. His response struck me with a Socratic impact, especially in light of my earlier experience with the welfare mothers. His response was outrageous. But what if it were even partially true?

What a bitter irony it would be, therefore, for any among the poor to allow themselves to be carried away by the emotional momentum of this war.

What indeed is the New World Order for which U.S. troops are fighting, and for which untold numbers of civilians and soldiers may yet have to die? Is this war aimed to establish American economic hegemony around the globe once and for all? Is this chapter of our national history to be the final realization of our manifest destiny as the last great superpower on Earth?

In the meantime, back home, what has become of the much hailed peace dividend? What has become of our "education president?" What has become of our "environmental president?" What has become of that "kinder and gentler society" he once so solemnly trumpeted? Now that we are paying $2 million for every cruise missile, and buying off the Egyptians for $8 billion, what will happen to the poor in our own society, not to speak of those in Third World countries?

Whether we win a quick and decisive victory, or whether the war goes on for months or even years, the military establishment and its fellow travelers in this country will undoubtedly demand and — given the emotional momentum of war — receive immense new economic investments.

And where will that leave the impoverished and the homeless?

The city of Hartford was considering proposals to eliminate more than $33 million in municipal services, including more than $1.6 million for day-care centers.

"If you want peace, work for justice," Pope Paul VI said. This is a less volatile, but no less radical, statement than the assertion by that sidewalk Socrates in Hartford.

Pope Paul's statement implies a New World Order that is predicated on the just use of power, such as the international coalition President Bush forged to win support for sanctions against the Iraqi dictator, Saddam Hussein. But it also implies a New World Order that is just as surely predicated on the just use of power. This will require commitments on the part of the powerful to patient negotiation and genuine power-sharing. It will presuppose a willingness to listen to the voices of the voiceless and to honor their legitimate claims. Call this the New World Order of the pax humana.

The time has come for this nation to fight for the welfare mothers and the homeless, and their compatriots around the globe, with at least as much fervor as we are now devoting to fighting Hussein.

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