

By Major Kevin Cutright, U.S. Army

For a few years, I have been uncomfortable with the prayers offered for deployed soldiers. As I bow my head and listen to the plea for protection or the gratitude for it, I share the sentiment, but I also hear a great omission. Where is the plea for the success of their efforts? Our leaders are staking our long-term security on crafting societies that have no room for terrorists, that will condemn instead of endorse violence in the name of religion or politics. Where are the prayers for those communities?

Some resist praying for non-Christians, as if prayer should be spent only on believers. This excuse involves an economy of prayer in which blessings are parsed out by a god whose powers are limited.

Some consider all Iraqis and Afghans terrorists, or at least complicit in terrorism. This ridiculous notion may understandably take root in the minds of soldiers threatened by insurgents who are indistinguishable from civilians (I had to stamp it out of my unit and myself in 2003, and to a lesser extent in 2009), but it's indefensible among American Christians on the homefront. We have had leaders smart enough to separate the "reconcilables" from the hardened terrorists; why have we failed to reflect this in our prayers?

Some see the efforts in Iraq and Afghanistan as too ambitious, having far too little chance for success. This would seem to warrant more prayer, though, not less.

For many of us, I think the great omission stems from something simpler and more condemning: we don't have room in our hearts to yearn for anything beyond self-security. Inside and outside the uniform, we just never think about the Iraqis' or Afghans' plight. We have let 9/11 justify a zero-sum mentality that rules out the wellbeing of others. This lack of sympathetic imagination bothers me most. It's an error of the heart instead of merely an error in logic.

This omission is not new. One enduring effect of the Cold War is precisely the stark "us vs. them" calculus brought on by Mutually Assured Destruction. But counterinsurgencies do not allow the concession to self-interest cautiously defended by Judeo-Christian thinkers in supreme emergencies. Countering violent insurgents requires both military and political action working in concert. We don't have the luxury of relying solely on military advantage to win. Local civilians must envision a better future with the supported government than with the guerrillas. Failing to keep their well-being in our prayers, and thus removed from our passions and actions, becomes a critical strategic shortcoming. We cannot credibly criticize Iraqis or Afghans that refuse to cooperate with soldiers who clearly have no sympathy for them.

As our military leaves Iraq, our prayers don't have to. Will we pray not only for the protection of thousands in our embassy and consulates, but also for their success in nurturing the well-being of all Iraqis? And, can we expand our prayers for protection to the thousands of Iraqis who remain at risk for aiding our soldiers, as Kirk Johnson recently pointed out in the NY Times? The costs involved in the last eight years should strongly motivate us to pray for Iraq's success, to

make the loss of so many and so much worth it.

The great omission is a strange absence. I yearn for the chapel service that overcomes it and guides my heart to the well-being of those we claimed to be helping. While teaching at West Point, I attended services where we dutifully prayed every week for American divisions deployed, displaying the unit's guidon next to the podium. We need to do that; yet, I also think we should display the guidon of that division's counterpart host nation unit. God's love for all the world demands that we pray for our allies and enemies as well as ourselves.

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