

Iran, Iraq, and the State of U. S. Foreign Policy

A Talk for the Unitarian Universalist Society of Amherst

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Thank you very much for the warm welcome! It's too beautiful a day to be cooped up in a building like this! I got to spend a couple of hours driving up here over The Berkshires, admiring just how glorious life can be! It doesn't get any better than a day like this, and especially a day when we celebrate "Mom"! So I hate to interject with some commentary that might be seen by some like throwing a dark cloud over a beautiful day like this.

But I think when we reflect on a day like this — and especially a day when we celebrate "Mom" — and what is "Mom"? A symbol of life, a giver of life, a sustainer of life — that we would be doing a disservice to life if we didn't reflect on the reality of the condition we find ourselves collectively facing today, and when I say "collectively," I speak, of course, of we Americans, we the people of the United States of America. Because while we might get lost in the beauty of the moment, we might succumb to the songbirds chirping; we might sit back and gaze at a cloudless sky and say, "My goodness, how wonderful life is!" but let's never forget that while we sit here today, while we enjoy the blessings of life here in America, overseas, 145,000 of our fellow citizens, the men and women who honor us by wearing the uniform of the armed services of the United States of America — whether they be Army, Navy, Air Force, Marines, Coast Guard — are deployed in harm's way as we speak!

Given the reality of time zones, they're coming to the end of their day, and, if statistics hold true — I haven't seen the data yet — two are dead, a dozen wounded, and, you know, there's something worse than death when we talk about war, and we need to reflect on that! You see, when you die, it's over; it's done; there's closure! Yes, there's the horrible knock at the door; yes, the family is notified; yes, there are tears! There's the trauma of the body coming home, the body being laid to rest, but there is closure! People get to move on with their lives!

But thanks to modern medicine, we now have a situation where our warriors can survive damage to their bodies that in the past would have killed them, and this damage is horrific! It's hard to say this as a parent; I remember when my wife gave birth to our daughters, the very first concern was the health of the kids. You know, you count the fingers; you count the toes; you say, "Hey, they've got all the pieces. Is it working?" You know, you're nervous! And then you realize "My goodness!" You've got these perfect little babies, and you give them life, and you nourish them. You raise them, and you invest so much time in making them these wonderful human beings, and then they turn to adults, and you turn them over to adulthood. Little lives, and they do some silly things sometimes, but they do amazing things, because kids are good, and kids grow up to be good adults, and sometimes good adults say, "You know, I want to serve my country! I want to help my fellow man!" and they join the military.

Then they come home broken! Death is easy, guys: it's over; it's done! What happens, though, when the improvised explosive device goes off next to their armored vehicle? It addles their brain! What happens when it rips off the arms and legs, the toes, the fingers that you counted? You said, "Are they there?" when they came out; now they come home, and they're not there! What happens to these torn and battered human beings who volunteered to serve our nation? They went off to war, and they've come home less than what they were! What happens when

they come home physically intact, able to walk, but their brains have been scarred by the unimaginable?

We need to reflect on this because we cannot escape in the beauty of the day if we're going to call ourselves citizens of the United States of America. We cannot claim to be part of the human condition if we remain ignorant to that which we have wrought, and we need to understand that, ladies and gentlemen! When we talk about soldiers deployed overseas, this is not something that occurs in isolation. We simply can't point a finger to the decision-makers in Washington, D.C. and say that it is **their** fault, because these are **our** soldiers; these are our fellow men; these are our fellow Americans who are deployed overseas! So we need to think about that!

Now, I'm proud to be an American; I love my country! It's one of the reasons why I joined the Marine Corps! I wanted to serve my country! Now, you know, kids got to be honest when they join the Marines, especially strapping young football players! We don't join to hold hands, light candles, and sing *Kumbaya*! We join the Marine Corps because it's a symbol: "the few, the proud! We didn't promise you a rose garden. In the Marine Corps, we don't make promises; we only make commitments!" You've seen the ads, and they're remarkable ads! In fact, they lured me in! I wanted to wear that blue uniform! I wanted to stand proud and say, "I have done something!"

And, you know, when you finish the training program in the Marine Corps, you have accomplished something! It's not easy! You put that uniform on with pride, and you say, "I am here! You can count on me! I'm here for you! I'm here for my country! I'm here for everybody in the audience today! If you need me, I will be there, and I will be prepared to make the ultimate sacrifice: I will lay down my life for you!" And I was ready for that! I was the most highly-trained killing machine the world had ever seen! And I didn't see a problem with that! You see, I didn't see a problem saying, "On the one hand, I am here to serve to protect you; on the other hand, I am the destroyer of life!"

Inherent inconsistencies, contradictions in that statement: "I will protect your life by destroying life!" It wasn't **my** fault; that's what the system produced! You know, on the one hand, it's not necessarily a bad thing. I mean, think about it; think about it here back at home, right across the street, what have you got here in Amherst [Massachusetts]? The Fire Department! I drove by – some great guys working in there; probably some great gals working in there! Great citizens of Amherst working in the Fire Department! And we like them, don't we? We think they're great people, especially if we have to dial 911! I mean, we love our firefighters at that point in time! You know, we buy them nice red shiny fire engines, and we put them in a house, give them uniforms. Do we love fire? Not on your life! We don't give medals to arsonists; we put arsonists in jail! As a society, we reject fire! We hate fire! We despise fire, but we love our firefighters! What do we practice every October, nationwide? Fire Prevention Month! Because, as a society, we reject fire; we say we want to prevent fire!

There's something wrong when we talk about our military; something went dreadfully wrong! You see, we created a military. As a society, somehow we feel that the military is incomplete unless it's doing its job! And remember, ladies and gentlemen, the military doesn't do a job called "putting **out** the fire!" The military does its job by **lighting** the fire! The military isn't about **saving** lives; the military is about **taking** lives, and we should never forget that! Now, I'm not naïve; I've been around the world a couple of times and understand that there are people and

organizations out there who seek to do harm, and that societies need to organize in a manner to protect themselves from institutions such as that! And the military, in my humble opinion, is justified, so long as its mission is to **protect!** But if we take a look at how we have utilized our military over the course of our nation's history, very few times can we honestly say that our military has gone forth to **protect** us. On far too many occasions, we send our best and our brightest off not to do good, but to do harm and do harm in a manner which is not reflective of the collective good!

And when we think about the current manifestation of how America interfaces in the world today, we take a look at the conflicts we're involved in or the conflicts that we may be involved in, I think you would be hard-pressed to say that what the United States is doing is reflective of the genuine goodwill of the American people! I mean I want to do good; everybody does! You see somebody who needs help, you hold out a helping hand! You see somebody who needs assistance walking across the street, you go help them walk across the street! You have a neighbor whose house needs repair, you chip in! You show up! You assist! That's what we do! We're very good at doing that!

And somehow, we as a society transfer our own individual desires to do good into the actions taken by our government without thinking about it! We say because **we** want to do good, because we want to reach out and help, therefore, when our government goes abroad, it must be a mirror image of what we're about! So when the government says we need to go into Iraq to take care of a brutal dictator named Saddam Hussein, who threatens not only our people but the international community with weapons of mass destruction and a link – a known link! – with the forces of international terror, that as a society we must prevent the nexus of WMD and terrorism coming together so that we aren't again faced with a horrific attack on our soil such as we experienced on September 11, 2001, we the people say, "You know what? You're right! We need to go forward in that manner!" And we don't sit down and think; we don't ask questions; we **assume** that there is this genuine good intent behind this policy.

And we hear the same thing today about Iran: Iran is a nation pursuing nuclear weapons; Iran is the largest state sponsor of terror in the world today, and we cannot allow this desire to acquire nuclear weapons to link up with this terroristic attitude to create a nexus that again threatens the United States, and we must do something! We must be proactive! And many people, despite the lessons we've learned from Iraq, feel "Yes, we must be activists! We must move forward!" And that's the direction we're heading in! It's a sad state of affairs!

Now, why is this the case? Why can we function so well at the local level — and I do believe we function pretty well here in America at the local level! I'm never more proud to be an American than when I drive through small town America, big town America, and even big city America! You know, we're not perfect! No one is; we're human beings, after all! Even when you bring all America together, we're still a collective of human beings, with all the foibles and problems that that entails! But we do our best; we try, and we function fairly well as a society, at least on the surface! Why don't we function well abroad? Why have we failed in Iraq? Why is it that we're getting to embark on yet another failure in Iran? Why is it every time the United States interfaces with the international community lately, it generates friction that manifests itself in illwill and potential violence? Is it the fault of those whom we elect to represent us in higher office, or does the fault lie deeper?

And this is the hard part, ladies and gentlemen, because I will contend that the fault isn't that of our elected representatives. The fault is us, we the people of the United States of America! Think about it! We say we want to do good; we say we are an activist society. When we see a problem, we seek to solve the problem. Now, let's just start off with that and address it. America the beautiful; we the people of the United States of America, all 300 million of us, operate globally as if we have an inherent right, we, the 300 million, to dictate the terms of coexistence with 6.8 billion others! The hubris, the arrogance of that position: that somehow we are the only ones capable [?] of coming up with a solution. If we were populated by 300 geniuses who collectively had more insight into how the world operated than anybody else, I might actually think that "Give us a chance here!"

But when you reflect on the reality of the 300 million, while we may be some of the most technologically-advanced people on the face of the earth, we're collectively probably the most ignorant people in the world today about the world we live in, and yet we feel that we have this inherent god-given right to tell the world how to live their lives! And when they choose not to follow the direction, the dictation, of the United States, we feel that we have an imperative to move forward and take action!

There's a problem here, but the problem is even much deeper than that, because this could be fixed! This could be overcome with the acquisition of knowledge and information, so that our activism was actually set down on a sound track! You know, no one minds if somebody comes in and politely, and respectfully, and with insight, says, "Hey, what you're doing might not be the right way to fix this problem. Might I suggest something?" Now, we're all humans and we would get our dander up a little bit, but after a little while reflect and say, "Now they might have a point here!" — if it is truly done in a spirit of genuine help and assistance.

Let me give you an equation that you want here. I'm a former Marine; I don't claim to be a great mathematician! This is not Einstein's theory of relativity I'm about to pass on to you: $e = mc^2$. No, it's much simpler, much more basic, and much more disturbing: $x = y + z$. That's the theory of American relativity when it comes to the rest of the world.

X: that's our collective appetite; that's what we the people, all 300 million of us, **need**; that's the stuff we consume! That's our appetites; that's our egos; that's "**x**"! "**Y**" is that which America owns that can feed **x**. You see, so long as $x = y$, we have harmony. If we want something and we produce it, we meet our own needs. It's a problem of the collective to determine how we partition, how we apportion, **y** to meet **x**. That's an internal, domestic American problem. It won't be perfect; it will be ugly; there'll be politics involved! There'll be people unhappy; there'll be people happy. Some people will make money; some people will lose money. But you know, in terms of America's relation with the world, it's harmony because America is meeting America's requirements!

But when we the people create **x** as this gigantic number that far outstrips **y**'s ability to feed it, we now need to have this additional element to the equation: **z**, and **z** is what the world has that we want! And we need to understand that we the people, all 300 million of us, have built this gigantic number **x** that we can no longer meet with **y**, and yet we're not willing to reduce **x**! In our arrogance, we continue to make **x** an even greater number! As a society, we succumb to the narcotic of consumerism, and we need to reflect on this! People say, "Why are our soldiers dying

in Iraq? Why are they getting ready to die in Iran?” And people say, “Well, it’s because of George Bush’s foreign policy!” Well, prior to that, it could be because of Bill Clinton’s foreign policy.

The bottom line is we blame it on the foreign policy of people that are disassociated from ourselves without reflecting on the fact that this foreign policy is driven by the $x = y + z$ equation. We demand that x be balanced. Y cannot balance it; we therefore need z . Z is what the world has — it doesn’t belong to us — that we need to acquire on terms that are economically beneficial to we the people of the United States of America. So the next time you say, “Why are we doing this? Why are we overseas? Why are we sticking our nose in other people’s business?,” I will tell you the answer is simple: it’s because we demand z to add on to y to balance x , that we have appetites that collectively dictate the foreign policy! We are addicted to our own standard of living that we collectively no longer have the means of sustaining on our own.

Therefore, we hide in small town America. We gather; we say we want to do good. We say that we want to live in peace and harmony with the world, but we continue to embark down the path of consuming that which we don’t control, thereby dictating to those whom we elect to higher office to embark on foreign policies to feed our addiction. It’s far too easy to sit back and blame it on someone else! It’s far too easy to say if we just elect a new president, all our problems will be solved! It’s far too easy to blame it on Congress; it’s far too easy to blame it on the media! But the bottom line, ladies and gentlemen, if we truly want to resolve these problems, if we claim to be a nation of peace, then we must learn to live in peace and harmony with the rest of the world, and we cannot do that so long as we operate in accordance with an equation: $x = y + z$ that mandates our continuous acquisition of z !

That’s the bottom line! And until we, the United States of America, we the people, change the way we live, alter our relationship with the world, we’ll find that next Mother’s Day, and the Mother’s Day after that, and the Mother’s Day after that, while we may lament what’s going on, we have done nothing to change it.

So on this Mother’s Day, what I ask, what I implore, what I beg of everybody in this audience today to reflect on is how do we truly honor “Mom”? Do we honor “Mom” by superficially saying that we embrace life while we embark on an existence that guarantees the United States will continue to waste life — its own and others? Need I remind you while we weep for over 4,070 Americans who died in Iraq that upwards of a million Iraqis have lost their lives? And if we go to war against Iran, while we may be weeping and mourning over more thousands of Americans, the end result will be even more human life shattered and wasted!

It’s not an activist foreign policy, ladies and gentlemen; it’s not about doing good! If we reflect on it, we were misled into both of these conflicts: the one we’re fighting, and the one we **may** fight! Truth is no longer part of the equation! We assume we’re doing good, when the reality is we don’t want to dig too deep because we might be a little bit ashamed about what we find: that rather than doing good in the world, America has become the power that does the most bad; that when we speak of the world’s problems, it’s not the “**others**” that have created the problems; it’s how **we** choose to interface with the rest of the world!

It's a tough thing to swallow, but we do "Mom" a disservice by not cherishing the fingers, the toes, the arms, the legs of that which she brings into this world! If we truly want to celebrate life, then we need to celebrate all aspects of this life! That includes how we interface on a daily basis, not only with our fellow members of this congregation, with our town people, with the people in our state, the people in our country, but know, ladies and gentlemen, if we truly want to resolve this issue, if we want to head down a path of genuine peace, we must learn to live in harmony with the rest of the world, where America does not feel it has an inherent right to gain access to z to balance y to feed the addictions of x . Let's solve the x factor, and truly maybe in a generation we can have a Mother's Day which celebrates not only life but the fact of a nation that's no longer engaged in policies that waste life!

Thank you very much! It was a pleasure talking with you!