

STATE OF THE COUNTRY

To Bishop Adam Jefferson Richardson, the presiding prelate of the Second Episcopal District of the African Methodist Episcopal Church, to Connie Speights Richardson, our beloved Episcopal Supervisor, Host Presiding Elder Chester Morris and Associate Presiding Elder William A. Dyson Sr., to all the clergy and laypersons assembled, your Committee on the State of the Country presents the following report:

NATURE, SCOPE AND TASK

The *right of nature* . . . is the liberty each man hath to use his own power as he will himself for the preservation of his own nature; that is to say, of his own life; and consequently, of doing anything which, in his own judgement and reason, he shall conceive to be the aptest means thereunto. . . . And consequently it is a precept, or general rule of reason: *that every man ought to endeavor peace, as far as he has hope of obtaining it; and when he cannot obtain it, that he may seek and use all helps and advantages of war.* The first branch of which rule containeth the first and fundamental law of nature, which is: *to seek peace and follow it.* The second, the sum of the right of nature, which is: *by all means we can to defend ourselves.*¹

In the aftermath of President Obama's announcement a little more than a week ago that Osama bin Laden had been discovered and dispatched by lethal force to the judgement God alone may render, our committee was moved to reconsider what this singular event betokens for how we weigh all other matters affecting the common good of our nation. We were compelled to reflect what the ethical import might be for a nation that pledges its honor in the name of God, that prosecutes war and calls it just, that celebrates its patriotic fevers in the unfurling of flags and the hooting self congratulations that spontaneously erupted among our fellow citizens when the Commander in Chief delivered the solemn news of this one man's death. We have but small measure of the attention from this conference to assess the concerns of the nation from economics to education to health care to international affairs and the like. If one were to peruse the

¹ Thomas Hobbes, *Leviathan*, ed. Oskar Piest (New York: Bobbs-Merrill, 1958) 109-110.

president's schedule on any given day she might begin to understand the depth and breadth of the nation's heats and desires, the nation's just needs and perhaps her unholy ambitions as well.

Given the dramatic pause we now sense in the usual run of complaint over unemployment, over the lagging achievement in science and math for our children, over the service of our national interests in relation to the revolutions now underway in the middle east, our committee has determined to see the significance of liquidating Osama bin Laden in the light of our memory of the events that unfolded ten years ago in New York and Washington DC. We recall now the overarching call to war after the towers fell and after the Pentagon was defaced by smoldering ruin. We remember the mounting calls for justice and the great expense that ensued to manage war on two fronts; first in Iraq and later still in Afghanistan. We remember too the growing frustration of our political leaders and the waning confidence of our people as each year the architect of those assaults evaded detection and capture. The scar of terror it seems cut deep into the American psyche and the church, synagogue and temple were made uneasy partners in the salvaging of hope that peace and prosperity could still be ours.

PROCESS AND DATA GATHERING

Our task is made both easy and difficult by the ever burgeoning sophistication of communications technology. Social networking has brought thousands, even millions of persons into artificial relations that mimic genuine friendship without the deep intimacy that shares suffering and joy. And yet it may not be so easily dismissed as anyone sensitive to Egypt's revolution is well aware. We have monitored internet sources, newspapers and weeklies, television networks and cable dispatches. We continue to do so with guarded care because we have long ago sensed an inverse relation of our access to truth to the steady increase of our access to information.

The ready flow of the latter is no guarantee of our grasp of the former. Even now we may recall with resonant wonder that Pilate may well ask today “what is Truth?” We should remember too that as the truth stood before him it uttered not a word in response. In the gathering of our data we had hoped we could hear the unspoken, read the unwritten and see the invisible Truth that should hold us all in thrall lest we kill it, kill him yet once again.

FINDINGS

I. Conspiracy theorists of every stripe have seeded the soil of our democracy like so many weeds upon the green. They have stoked unwholesome passions for the purpose of delegitimizing the presidency of Barack Obama. The so called “birthers” have engaged hapless and hazardous narratives in which Obama figures as the literal and figurative dark and shadowy usurper of American power and prestige, his long form birth certificate from the state of Hawaii notwithstanding. His early promises as a candidate to find and dispose of Osama bin Laden did not persuade his opponents on the conservative fringe that he would pursue American interests. Nor was he able to convince them that his academic *bona fides* are so far excelling as they manifestly were as any consultation of the transcripts from Columbia and Harvard would attest.

II. The action taken by American power to forestall a slaughter in Libya at the hand of Muammar Gaddafi reflects at once an unnerving expansion of conflict in foreign lands *but* the only alternative available against a silent witness to atrocities committed against the weak and defenseless. Force in defense of the innocent reminds us of the right by nature we each possess to protect those incapable of protecting themselves. It also makes us weary to think how we must reconcile the faith in the power of love with the real world urgency that we must use violence against those who would burn the world to ash. For those who would argue that we ought never to

consider a compromise between the gospel of love and the wild nature rule of self defense, let them consider that every slave insurrection of note was led by a slave preacher, that David was both a warrior and a poet, and that our very own armed forces are served so well indeed by chaplains who know the struggle and joy of bringing God near to our women and men in uniform.

III. We are encouraged to hear the bipartisan renewal of concern over the continued necessity of the war in Afghanistan. In the wake of the death of bin Laden Republicans and Democrats alike have asked for a draw down of American presence and occupation in that war torn land. We maintain the ethical purposes for which any might argue for sustaining American force there have been greatly attenuated. It would appear that a more nuanced strategy of aid and counsel for human flourishing are now in order. If there is a motto by which we might express the growing sentiment of the nation it would be “bring our troops home.”

IV. If war is ever necessary it is nonetheless always ghastly. This can hardly be contested and for reasons as obvious as the rising of the sun. The wreckage to human limb and spirit is often irreparable and what we have failed to do as a nation for the sake of our children who return bruised, broken and amputated is to provide the care of solace, training, and recovery. This is the obligation we bear them as our part of the social compact they signed in good faith when first they took the dangers of service in hand.

V. If war is ever necessary it is nonetheless always costly. The current expenditures for the wars which plague us now have plunged the nation into a debt exceeding a trillion dollars. Added to the growing expense of health care, the questionable solvency of social security and the exploding deficit, the foreign campaigns to influence world events in the direction of peace exacts a sacrifice of each of us. Surely, the tax required should reflect the fair and proportionate ability of

each person to pay. If a billionaire pays at a tax rate of only 35% while a member of the middle class pays at a rate of 28% then we might expect that conflicts will not embroil us overseas alone but they will unravel us from within. Osama bin Laden had expressed a hope that by means of terrorism he might cause Americans to spend themselves into economic ruin. Economics is a part of the war on terror too little noticed or addressed.

VI. Finally, Republicans sympathetic to the last administration have renewed the debate over the expediency of “enhanced interrogation techniques.” They argue that information leading to the location of bin Laden was acquired only by means of water boarding detainees suspected of having knowledge of the inner workings of Al-Qaeda. The moral bankruptcy of their contentions should shame us as a people and as a nation. Even if it were so, that water boarding led to the capture of bin Laden, it has never been nor will it ever be just to presume that the ends justify the means. This is a hollow conceit ungodly to consider and unholy to practice.

GOALS AND OBJECTIVES

Our committee would propose the following goals for our nation’s people of faith.

1. To scorn the trivial fascination with “carnival barkers” and the absurdities of the racists still among us but with a view to exalting what is best about American democracy in the exercise of free speech
2. To embrace our obligations to protect the innocent and to deter aggression against the impulse to liberty throughout the world
3. To honor peacemaking above every instinct to revenge and retribution and to forswear feckless military occupations that secure nothing beyond greater hostility

4. We repeat what we urged last year: *The support of troops upon departure and return because they are our first line of defense against terror and violent attack from abroad, but above all because they are our brothers, sisters, fathers and mothers*
5. The fair redistribution of the tax burden for all our people as but one means of bringing down the national debt
6. The prosecution of any and all illegality relative to torture because it is a crime against our nation's principles, against the just claims of neighbors among the nations and against humanity itself in its just claims that torture is a violation of the sanctity and dignity of human personality

RECOMMENDATION

We began this report with a passage we cite from a text by Thomas Hobbes, a text not as old as scripture nor as august but a text determined to think through what scripture makes clear in its logic of compassion and reciprocity. Hobbes knew that human life could often be “brutish, solitary, nasty and short” and because we have need to mitigate these conditions we are required to adjust our relations accordingly. What he recommended in 1651 had been the truth made living as many years before. We recommend it here as the truth more real now than ever, a truth more real in the years to come, a truth fully realized when “Thy Kingdom come.” Consider now Hobbes’ second law of nature, which he insisted was derived from the first by “which men are commanded to endeavor peace.”

That a man be willing, when others are so too, as far forth as for peace and defense of himself he shall think it necessary, to lay down this right to all things; and be contented with so much liberty against other men as he would allow other men against himself. . . . This [he continued] is the law of the gospel: Whatsoever you require that others should do to you, that do ye to them.²

² Hobbes, 110.

This is a rule golden to consider and even more brilliant in its luster by the practice thereof. Let it be done, we recommend, to the glory and honor of the God who made those of us who are Christian, and those of us who are Jewish and yes, those of us who are Muslim too.

Respectfully submitted by the members of the Committee on the State of the Country to the One Hundred Forty-fifth Session of the Virginia Annual Conference in the year of our Lord, 2011.

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