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MYTHS

The cycle of poverty, fear of losing jobs to newcomers, drug addiction—these problems are all too real for many Americans. Yet too often our public debate about them gets sidetracked by myths and stereotypes that feed on our fears and are not based on facts. In this issue, we take a look at some of the myths that are currently shaping U.S. policies, and look for a more biblical approach.

No South or North

BY ELISABETH T. HARDER

*In Christ there is no East or West,
in him no South or North,
but one great fellowship of love
throughout the whole wide earth.*

This popular hymn, written by John Oxenham in 1908, captures the biblical vision of the kingdom of Christ crossing all geographic boundaries, spreading over all the earth. These prophetic words continue to challenge the myth that national borders are divinely-instituted boundaries between lands and peoples.

The underlying premise of U.S. immigration policy-making and enforcement is that the borders which separate us from our neighbors to the north and south, east and west, are far more than arbitrary markings in the soil. Borders are the symbolic filters that determine who is welcome to participate fully in society—a measure of who is “in” and who is “out.”

Immigrant laborers, primarily those from Mexico and Central America, bear a significant brunt of this premise’s consequences. Pervasive economic disparity is one factor that drives many workers across the Mexico-U.S. border in search of better wages to support families at home. But because movement across the border is strictly contained, most of those seeking access to economic opportunity or refuge must enter the United States “illegally.”

Governmental efforts to minimize the presence of undocumented workers have excessively tightened U.S. borders. Strict border monitoring by the Immigration and Naturalization Service (INS) and Border Patrol does little to keep out our southern neighbors. But it does drive them to undertake rigorous and dangerous journeys through hostile border areas. And, ironically, the risk of border crossing also prevents many workers from returning home. This has resulted in a large population of semi-permanent but undocumented immigrants in regions such as central California.

Some believe that the division between our nation and others has been divinely ordained, and that our border laws carry God’s blessing. But does this elevation of national sovereignty lose sight of the contrasting rule of Christ?

As citizens of God’s “holy nation” (I Peter 2:9) the church has a unique challenge to dispel the myth of sacred national borders. May we provide an alternative vision which leads to our neighbors being welcomed rather than shut out, shown mercy rather than treated harshly, and loved rather than feared. ■

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BY J. DARYL BYLER

God invites us to roll
away the stones that
hide the full truth.

Rolling Away the Stone

In a recent letter to President Clinton, Alain Epp Weaver, MCC Country Representative in Palestine, challenges the myth that lasting peace can be forged without telling the truth and practicing justice.

“Peace will only be sustainable if undergirded by truth,” writes Epp Weaver, “and this includes the truthful acknowledgment of Israel’s overwhelming responsibility for the creation of the Palestinian refugee problem.” He goes on to urge the President to support the right of return for Palestinian refugees as well as compensation for their losses.

The refugee issue is one of many injustices that underlie the current Oslo peace process (see page 7). Palestinian frustration reached a boiling point in early October, resulting in street protests and stone-throwing. Israeli troops responded with overwhelming force.

The dictionary defines a myth as “a fiction or half-truth, especially one that forms part of an ideology.” It is this half-truth nature that gives myths their credibility. On their face, they may seem reasonable or expedient or appeal to common sense.

Myths abound in politics. They hold great power to shape public policy and spending decisions. Myths often prey on our deepest fears: More military spending will strengthen our national security. More prisons will make our streets safer.

The role of peace and justice advocates is to humbly live and speak the truth as fully as possible. To do so exposes myths—half-truths—and weakens their power.

The story of Lazarus is instructive (John 11:1–44). When Lazarus falls ill his sisters, Mary and Martha, send an urgent message to Jesus to come quickly to their home in Bethany.

But instead of going immediately to Lazarus’ bedside, Jesus lingers two days longer in the place he is staying. By the time he finally arrives, Lazarus has already been dead for four days.

Martha and Mary each greet Jesus with the same exasperated words, “Lord, if you had been here, my brother would not have died” (vv. 21 and 32). Some in the crowd wonder aloud, “Could not he who opened the eyes of the blind man have kept this man from dying?” (v. 37).

All those present except Jesus seem to embrace the myth that death has the last word. The large stone that guards Lazarus’ grave and contains the stench of death practically shouts as much. The situation seems hopeless. If Jesus had only arrived earlier, something might have been done. But now that Lazarus is dead, there is nothing to do but mourn.

Jesus challenges the crowd to confront their myth. He asks them to roll away the stone that has buried the truth about God’s power over death. When they do, Jesus raises Lazarus from the dead, shattering the myth that death holds ultimate power.

Whether challenging myths about Middle East peace or militarism or criminal justice, God invites us to roll away the stones that hide the full truth. Doing so takes faith and courage. But the rewards are well worth it. For when we unmask the myths that undergird harmful public policies, God acts with us to transform hopeless situations. ■

WASHINGTON MEMO is written by Mennonite Central Committee U.S. Washington Office staff. It interprets national legislation and policy, seeking to reflect biblical concerns for justice and peace as represented in the work and statements of MCC U.S. and Mennonite and Brethren in Christ churches. All biblical quotes are from the New Revised Standard Version, unless otherwise noted.

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A False, But Greater Trump?

Throughout U.S. history, the issue of national security has held great preeminence. This often-invoked priority has given rise to the myth that national security might be endangered if religious liberty and conscientious objection are not limited in scope.

Some contemporary military policy concerns revolve around not only recruitment, but also the collection of dollars to prepare for war in new ways. There is a fear that conscientious objection will lead to a loss of needed personnel and revenue for military expenditures.

The National Campaign for a Peace Tax Fund was founded in 1971. The first Peace Tax Fund bill was introduced in Congress in 1972. The current bill would amend the Internal Revenue Code to allow a taxpayer conscientiously opposed to any participation in war to have his or her income, estate, and gift tax payments spent for non-military purposes only. This allows for full payment of taxes without violating deeply-held religious, moral, or ethical convictions. The Congressional Joint Committee on Taxation has repeatedly stated that the Peace Tax Fund (PTF) would create additional—though small—tax revenue.

Some policymakers and officials assume that the Peace Tax Fund is a privileged carve-out which unduly burdens others and shifts duties of the common good. However, our government has an established history of recognizing and accommodating conscientious objectors. Since 1940, alternative service has been instituted. Many who would utilize PTF have lived within a strenuously low income or dedicated their lives to public service.

Appeals for the Peace Tax Fund have brought together officials and groups of diverse opinion. Conservative and liberal policymakers and advocates and persons with just war traditions have all struggled with honoring the free exercise of religion which would support the creation of PTF. Some 29 House co-sponsors attest to this.

Perhaps they, similar to the song of the prophet and judge Deborah, have found an understanding that, from religious belief, people with a range of convictions willingly offer themselves and contribute—their duty and resources—to the public good (Judges 5:2, 9). Conscience and religious belief allow for this, even without military conscription. Our national “security” can be the better for it. ■

BY DAVID M. WHETTSTONE

“[T]he ability of a government to wage war relies less on conscripted soldiers and more on drafted dollars to pay for advanced technology. . . . These same weapons also kill when not used by denying resources to those most in need.”

—THE NATIONAL CAMPAIGN FOR A PEACE TAX FUND

CAPITAL QUOTES

“Something is wrong when the richest 20 percent of the global population receive more than 80 percent of the global income. Our challenge is to make [economic] globalization an instrument of opportunity and inclusion not fear.”

—James Wolfensohn, World Bank President, at the annual combined meeting of World Bank and International Monetary Fund.

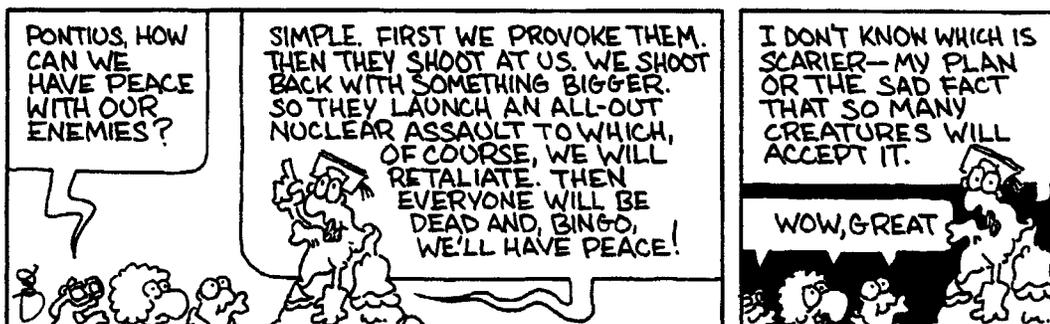
“When you get out of politics, your numbers go up. People can’t remember why they’re mad at you. They can’t even remember who you are.”

—Former presidential candidate and Senate Majority Leader Bob Dole

“To me, the idea of a state firing a ballistic missile at the United States, coming from out of the blue, when we can know where that came from and then . . . turn that nation into a radioactive parking lot, that strikes me as not a rational act for anybody in charge of a nation state, so I would put that at a very low probability level.”

—Ken Knight, a defense intelligence officer, noting the improbability of the kind of attack against which a National Missile Defense system is supposed to defend.

Ponius' Puddle



The Myth of U.S. Generosity

BY MARTIN SHUPACK

Americans on average believe that the U.S. government spends 15–20 percent of the budget on foreign aid.

In Dhaka, Bangladesh, an enterprising woman named Halima makes cane stools by hand and sells them in a local market. Her new business is the result of a \$250 loan supported by a U.S. government “micro-enterprise” aid program. Halima is now able to support her children and disabled husband.

Unfortunately, polls show that most U.S. citizens have an exaggerated sense of how much the government spends on such aid. As a result, members of Congress often justify cutting foreign aid by saying that aid has little or no public support. But this is because Americans on average believe that the U.S. government spends 15–20 percent of the budget on this aid. That’s just too generous, they think, with so many problems at home. The more appropriate amount, people believe, is around 5 percent.

Indeed, the myth of U.S. generosity is deeply rooted in America’s self image. I learned this firsthand a few years ago. A relative and I were discussing various political issues when he angrily expressed opposition to the size of U.S. foreign assistance. I asked what percentage, did he think, of U.S. government spending went to such aid. He opined that the figure was around 30 percent. I asked what percent he thought *should* go to foreign aid. He replied that perhaps the United States should give 10 percent to help poor countries, by analogy to the church tithe.

My relative was incredulous to hear that the percentage of the budget actually going to foreign assistance is less than 1 percent. Funding for non-military relief and development aid to poor countries is less than one-half of 1 percent. Polls show that people want Congress to be more generous with foreign aid *when the myth is shattered and they learn the truth about how ungenerous we actually are.*

For each person in the United States, the U.S. government gives an average of just \$29 to help people in poor countries. (The median contribution among the 21 wealthiest donor countries is \$70 per person.) This is awfully small considering the average U.S. resident receives 56 times the annual income of people living in low-income countries, where 3.5 billion people have an average annual income of just \$520 per person.

It is no myth, however, that U.S. foreign aid is saving lives. U.S. assistance is helping to immunize children from deadly illnesses, assist poor families like Halima’s to start or expand small businesses, and provide emergency food aid and safe drinking water. Aid can make an important difference for people struggling to survive. Just think what my relative’s suggestion of giving 10 percent of the national budget could do! ■

FIRST ANNUAL CONGREGATIONAL ADVOCACY AWARD

The MCC U.S. Washington Office will present its first annual advocacy award on February 18, 2001 to honor the early anti-slavery witness of Mennonites in the United States. On this date in 1688, Mennonites in Germantown, Pennsylvania became the first group to publicly oppose state-sanctioned slavery.

The award will recognize advocacy that is creative, persistent, pioneering, prophetic, focuses on others and involves participation by a significant number in the congregation. The national winner will be selected from four regional winners.

Nominees must be Anabaptist congregations engaged in current or recent public policy advocacy (national, state or local), in accord with biblical values. Nomination forms are available from the Washington Office and must be submitted by January 15, 2001.

Is Welfare Reform a Success?

The massive overhaul of public assistance in 1996, heralded then by President Clinton as an end to “welfare as we know it,” is today deemed by many a huge success. Indeed, the number of persons on the national welfare rolls has decreased by more than half since 1994, and between 50 and 60 percent of former recipients now have jobs.

It has become standard practice to celebrate the “tough love” policies that have created such dramatic results for our nation’s poor. In a September *Newsweek* article, Robert J. Samuelson advocates that “if you demand more of people—if you make them more responsible for their own behavior—you will get more from them. Their lives will improve.”

The claimed “success” of welfare reform is grounded firmly in the myth that because persons have been dropped from welfare rolls, they have been lifted out of poverty. But approximately 35 million persons in the United States today live in poverty—13.5 million of them children. In fact, the child poverty rate is higher today than it was twenty years ago. In the shuffle of persons moving from welfare to work—from government assistance to self-reliance—lies a key distinction between lowering the number of recipients and true poverty alleviation.

So-called “tough love” expressed through less expensive and harsher welfare policies is often injurious both to individuals and to society. Under many state-administered TANF (Temporary Assistance to Needy Families) programs, aid is restricted to a five-year lifetime limit, and many persons are forced to take the first job available to them. They are thus dealt the double blow of losing cash benefits *and* earning wages too low to pay for work-related expenses such as child care and transportation. The current welfare-to-work structure denies persons, especially women, opportunity for education needed to advance up the pay scale. As journalist Katha Pollitt wrote recently: “It creates a permanent class of low-skilled, low-wage workers . . .”

Alongside the crisis facing the “working poor” is that of persons forced to leave welfare but unable to work due to physical or mental disabilities. Between 30 and 50 percent of families leaving welfare rolls are estimated to have no income at all.

As followers of Christ, our vision of a good and just society is in stark contrast to one that is governed by distorted notions of tough love and “survivalistic” strategies. Our confessed ethic is Christ-like love that can do no less than care for and empower the poor individual *as well as* seek specific ways to overcome long-term causes of poverty and injustice. Biblical justice, writes Ron Sider, “does not mean that we should merely help victims cope with oppression; it teaches us to remove it.”

In the next year, welfare reauthorization will garner significant legislative attention. Let us challenge the myth that cutting the lifelines of the poor will force them to overcome poverty. Instead may we send the message that all women, men, and children should have access to enough resources for a dignified and healthy life—through jobs that provide a living income for those able to work, and generous provisions for those who cannot provide adequately for themselves. ■

BY ELISABETH T. HARDER

“Every time we celebrate someone dropping off the welfare roll without asking why child poverty rates are worse than twenty years ago, we ‘vote someone off the island.’”

—REV. YVONNE DELK
CALL TO RENEWAL’S ROUNDTABLE
ON THE CHURCHES AND POVERTY

HOTLINES

Join our advocacy action alert network! Sign up for any of the lists below, and you will receive three or four action alerts yearly on each issue. Simply send your name and address to the MCC Washington Office (see page 8).

Civil Rights & Religious Freedom

Criminal Justice

Domestic Economic Justice

Environment

Health Care

Immigration

International Relations &
Economic Justice

Militarism & International
Peacekeeping

U.S. Policy Affecting:

• Africa

• Asia

• Latin America

• Middle East

Women’s Concerns (*New*)

Lighter Fluid in the Flames

BY RACHELLE SCHLABACH

“Just as lighter fluid among flames produces more fire, more arms produce more war in the middle of social conflict. This military ‘aid’ will not put an end to the war nor eradicate drug-trafficking. It will only increase the number of deaths and the suffering of the Colombian people.”

—FROM LETTER SENT TO
NORTH AMERICAN CHURCHES
BY COLOMBIAN MENNONITE
LEADERS IN JULY.

In July, Congress approved \$1.3 billion for the drug war in Colombia, which produces 90 percent of the cocaine that enters the United States. Clearly, drug addiction is a costly and tragic problem. But the drug war in Colombia is likely to have little impact on U.S. drug consumption, while actually contributing to Colombia’s economic and social problems.

The drug war continues a policy that:

Has not worked so far. The United States has provided more than \$150 million in aid for aerial fumigation over the past ten years. Cocaine and heroin production in Colombia has steadily increased over that same period. U.S. anti-drug efforts in the Andes have succeeded only in shifting production from one region and country to another.

Is not cost-effective. A 1994 study by the RAND Corporation found that providing treatment to cocaine users is 10 times more effective than interdiction and 23 times more cost-effective than eradicating coca at its source. Meanwhile, half the treatment needs in the United States go unmet, according to the Office of National Drug Control Policy.

Ignores the role of paramilitaries. Paramilitary groups profit heavily from the drug business, and the U.S. Drug Enforcement Administration has identified a paramilitary leader as a major drug trafficker. Numerous reports—including those from Human Rights Watch and the State Department—reveal close links between the paramilitaries and the Colombian military. Yet the Colombian military is the primary beneficiary of U.S. anti-drug aid.

Worse, the drug war exacerbates problems in Colombia by:

Failing to address underlying injustices. Much of the coca is grown by small farmers who plant it alongside their food crops as a way of earning enough income for basic necessities. Many of these farmers say they are willing to stop growing coca. But they need assistance to do so, including adequate roads and access to markets for their food crops. This basic lack of infrastructure and investment by the government in rural areas is at the root of the conflict in Colombia and creates the necessity for turning to more lucrative crops like coca and poppy in order to feed families.

Wreaking havoc on the environment and health. The preferred strategy for eradicating coca in southern Colombia is aerial fumigation. In areas where sprayings have already taken place, people complain of dizziness, nausea and rashes. Farm animals become ill, and food crops are destroyed, undermining attempts to switch to legal crops. Fumigation has left the soil so contaminated in some areas that nothing will grow for years. Farmers then move deeper into the jungle, clearing the land as they go.

Displacing civilians. Families in southern Colombia are already leaving their homes to go to nearby cities or camps, in anticipation of the massive aerial spraying that is part of the U.S. plan. The U.S. government itself estimates that 10,000 people will be displaced as a result of their anti-drug activities. Others say the number could top 200,000.

Feeding the cycle of violence. The anti-drug efforts are concentrated in southern Colombia, a guerrilla stronghold. Guerrillas see assistance to the Colombian military as a direct challenge to them and are stepping up recruiting efforts accordingly. As the war escalates, more and more civilians are caught in the crossfire. Additionally, the aid threatens to derail the peace process between the government and the two largest guerrilla groups, as both sides lose incentive to negotiate. ■

Where Is the Peace?

See the new roads intersecting ahead?" Asked a Palestinian whose village we were visiting. "I have 75 *dunams* (about 20 acres) of land there. And down the hill, to the left? There are 200 *dunams* owned by my brother. We can't go there anymore."

A few days earlier, the Palestinian Central Council had delayed the promised September 13 declaration of statehood. Today, MCC colleague Alain Epp Weaver and I were seeing again the struggle for the land of the West Bank.

Israeli settlements continue to claim more and more land during this "interim period" between the 1993 Oslo Accords and the potential "final status agreement." Israel's military enforces this confiscation with guns and tear gas when Palestinians object.

"Over here 5,000 olive trees are slated for destruction," pointed out a leader of another village. "The village had 10,000 *dunams*; now 70 percent of the land is controlled by settlements."

Since Oslo, we have seen photographs of Palestinian and Israeli leaders shaking hands. Ideally, mutual recognition by enemies is a foundation for peace. Indeed, North Americans are told that the peace process is on track and that one side or the other—usually Palestinian—is simply being intransigent when differing with U.S. or the other party's proposals.

But Oslo does not appear to many Palestinians nor to some Israelis to be movement toward peace. Several fundamental flaws exist with the process itself.

First, during the interim, no one insures that geographic facts remain unchanged. The landscape does not look like it did in 1993. Israeli settlements, including bypass roads and businesses, mushroom in the West Bank, Gaza, and East Jerusalem, prejudicing any final demarcation of borders. A noncontiguous Palestine separates Palestinians from

one another. Given historical precedent, one must probe whether Israel uses the interim to intentionally alter "facts on the ground," making it appear to be less possible to return affected land to Palestinians.

A second flaw of Oslo is that, rather than safekeeping basic international rights and laws, the process negotiates them. For instance, international law promises refugees choice between repatriation, third-country resettlement or host country absorption, and addresses financial compensation issues. But many now expect Palestinians to relinquish refugee status along with these legal guarantees.

A third flaw is facilitator identity. Complete "neutrality" is rightly suspect in today's conflict transformation field. Still, the United States, given its military and financial friendship with Israel and its own regional interests, hardly seems neutral. A peace process with integrity requires someone instead of or at least in addition to the United States in an other-than-ceremonial facilitating role.

To say that the Oslo process is fundamentally flawed is not to impugn base motives to all participants. Some in each party genuinely want peace; others seemingly seek to maximize the interim for their agenda.

"Where is the peace?" asked our September hosts. "What do they want us to do? How do they want us to feed our children?" Jews remembering centuries of global persecution continue to ask the same questions. Perhaps responses to such questions are most telling as to whether Oslo can seriously be called "peace." ■

IN OTHER'S WORDS

BY ED NYCE

Ed Nycy is Peace Development Worker with MCC Palestine.

North Americans are told that the peace process is on track and that one side or the other—usually Palestinian—is simply being intransigent.

SPRING SEMINAR

**Economic Globalization:
For Richer, For Poorer?**

The 2001 MCC Washington Office Spring Seminar will focus on the theme of "economic globalization." What is it? Is it bringing new prosperity here and abroad, aggravating poverty and inequality, or a mix of both? And, finally, how can we respond to it as people of faith and conscience?

Plan now to join us in Washington April 1-3, 2001 for workshops, speakers and lively discussion of these questions. Look for a registration form in the next issue of the *Memo*.

SOUND THE TRUMPET!

ISSUE	SUMMARY	ADVOCACY NEEDED
Military Spending	Emboldened by budget surpluses and a recent government study that says the U.S. military is underfunded, the Joint Chiefs of Staff have advised Congress that the Pentagon needs an annual increase of \$48 billion to \$58 billion to maintain current force levels and ensure future readiness. Most of the increases would be used for developing and buying new weapons. U.S. military spending is already some 20 times more than the combined spending of the seven countries the Pentagon considers to be likely adversaries.	Urge the President-elect, your senators and your representative to oppose military spending increases. Suggest alternative ways to work at global security issues.

USEFUL ADDRESSES



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