CENTER VALLEY – Ask anyone, whether the proverbial man on the street or the professional commentator, and you will hear two major objections to the possibility of going to war.

The first is that no compelling reason exists. In this view, sufficient evidence is lacking to warrant military action. Even when those in the know present arguments, and support them with surveillance recordings and satellite photographs, as did Secretary of State Colin Powell, people may not be convinced. Perhaps nothing can be convincing when it comes to such a brutal and deadly course of action as war. Even General Douglas MacArthur said that he has “long advocated its complete abolition, as its very destructiveness on both friend and foe has rendered it useless as a method of settling international disputes.”

The second objection is even starker: innocent lives will be lost; far too many people on both sides will die. This is the reality of what war does. This is the price we pay for engaging in military conflict. This is a cost too high, for our country and theirs, for the world at large, and for the sake of humanity.

Uttered with great rhetorical force, this claim can be dissuasive. But the truth is that innocent people often die. And they do so in numbers higher than the casualties of war.

 Innocent people die every day and in a variety of ways. Most die of natural causes, a reality rendered benign by its very anonymity. Others die in ways more public, whether through accidents or as victims of crime. As September 11th made hauntingly clear, evil is sometimes perpetrated upon the innocent. In both cases, the innocent die. In either scenario, the result is tragic.

 Innocent people also die in ways that are more newsworthy. September 11th reminds us of true heroes, those who believe in the goodness of persons and who value that goodness to such a degree that they are willing to sacrifice themselves in trying to save others. The recent break-up
of the Columbia shuttle introduces us to real explorers, those who believe in the beauty of the universe and who courageously yearn for knowledge and search for understanding despite the dangers of the mission. And history shows us numerous martyrs, those who believe in a truth and stake their lives on it even in the face of political or religious opposition.

Heroes, explorers, martyrs – all are innocent people who die. What distinguishes their death is not their innocence, but their faith. Their lives, and their deaths, have meaning and purpose precisely because of what they believe. They believe in the true, the good, the beautiful. They stand for something beyond their individual lives, something that transcends their human mortality. They also have fallen for what they believe.

What may underlie today’s a priori refutation of war is a loss of belief, of a faith in something greater than any one, or even thousands, of us. To avoid absolutely a decision to go to war, on the grounds that innocent people will die, is in some respects to shun the world beyond, to deny the transcendent. In the long run, it mires us in our mortality.

Obviously, innocent life is to be valued. War, without doubt, is not good for this. As Pope John Paul II recently remarked to the diplomatic corps accredited to the Vatican, “It is always a defeat for humanity. ... War is never just another means that one can choose to employ for settling differences between nations.”

In view of the fact that so many people will perish as result of it, war can and must be only a last resort. “War is not always inevitable,” as the pope rightly says. But, owing to human sin, war is also not always unavoidable; for the sake of international order, it is not always evadable.

That innocent people will die is reason enough to be extremely hesitant about going to war, and reason enough to show as much restraint as possible in the acts of war. But of itself this fact does not preclude the justness of war.

Our country, our culture, our humanity is founded on our belief in the dignity and potential of human life. The extent to which this way of life is threatened is now subject to debate. Whether sufficient reason exists to engage in military action remains a matter of prudent judgment and requires conclusive evidence. But in the end, our future, rendered precarious by the terroristic shape of the world in which we live, depends not on data but on our faith and on what we stand for.

(Thomas F. Dailey, O.S.F.S. is the director of the Salesian Center for Faith & Culture at DeSales University in Center Valley.)