

THE FIRST UNITARIAN SOCIETY OF MILWAUKEE

**Iraq
and the
New American Empire**

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INTRODUCTION

Annual Apologia for Politics in the Pulpit

Let me begin with a variation on my annual apologia for bringing politics into the pulpit from time to time.

Religion and politics, as the old saying goes, don't mix. As William Sloan Coffin suggests, however, this maxim was probably put forward by Pharaoh when he refused the plea of Moses to "let my people go" out of their bondage in Egypt. And later it was probably repeated by Hitler when a few brave church men and women – like Dietrich Bonhoeffer, Paul Tillich, and Norbert Capek – dared to challenge the State's deadly persecution of the Jews, gays and lesbians, and others. Generally when someone says, "Religion and politics don't mix," what they usually mean, I suspect, is, "Your religion doesn't mix with my politics."¹ Or vice versa.

For those who want to play it safe, that is certainly one way to do it: by assiduously avoiding all politics and social issues in church. In fact, ministers are often advised to take this course lest they create controversy in the church and lest they alienate potential contributors.

Others argue, however, as I do, that religion has been involved with politics since ancient times, and appropriately so. In fact, the prophets of Biblical times – Amos and Jeremiah, Ezekiel and Isaiah – occupy a revered place in the Biblical tradition. The prophets didn't predict the future so much as they measured the present. How? By dropping an ethical plumb line over their times and pronouncing what they found. In some instances, they found self-absorbed religious observances where justice and mercy were crying to be heard. As Amos, addressing his religious and political leaders, famously thundered, "I despise your feasts, and I take no delight in your solemn assemblies...But let justice roll down like waters, and righteousness like an ever-flowing stream."² Similarly, Jesus didn't just talk about God and heaven, angels and the afterlife. Rather, in Matthew 25, he admonished his listeners to feed the hungry, clothe the naked, and visit the sick, for this, he declared, is how all nations will be judged at the end of history.

Some years ago, I was astonished to discover (quite by accident) that one of my ancestors was a Boston minister named Jonathan Mayhew – the only other minister in the family of whom I am aware. Jonathan Mayhew (after whom my son Jack is named) lived in pre-Revolutionary War days. Mayhew was an outspoken preacher who believed that colonial resistance to tyranny was a religious duty. So, when the British imposed the Stamp Act on the colonists in early 1765, while other ministers in Boston remained silent or supported the Crown, Mayhew opposed it so zealously that he was accused of inciting the Stamp Act riots of that August. Thus, he became known as the "apostle of liberty."

Other religious leaders, like Mahatma Gandhi and Martin Luther King, have been among those who believed in thoroughly mixing religion and politics. As one of my colleagues

¹ Coffin, William Sloan, *A Passion for the Possible* (Louisville, KY: Westminster/John Knox Press, 1993), p. 35.

² Amos 5:21,24.

once put it, "If religion and politics don't mix, we are probably not taking either of them seriously enough!"³

So, religion and politics, I'm suggesting, can and do mix. The trick in a spiritual community is for us to sincerely respect each other's opinions, even if we vigorously disagree with one another. Thus, just as Amos and Isaiah, Bonhoeffer and Tillich, Gandhi and King were called to drop an ethical plumb line over their times, so, too, we, I believe, are called to drop an ethical plumb line over our times – and to pronounce what we find.

Iraq and the New American Empire

The Rev. Dr. Andrew C. Kennedy

Spirituality – and church, for that matter – without humor is blasphemy! Why? Because clerics like me and good church-people like you to take ourselves too seriously is (or certainly ought to be, at least) a venial, if not a mortal, sin. As the old saying goes, God's angels – (even those, in other words, who are closest to God him-or-herself) – stay aloft only because they take themselves lightly.

So, before I get to ranting and raving about my concerns for the soul of America, let me share a few quips about Iraq and America from three late night talk show hosts.

First, from Jay Leno: "Some Democrats say the estimated \$60 billion dollar [now \$87 billion dollar] cost of a war with Iraq could be better spent at home. When he heard that, President Bush agreed and announced plans to bomb Ohio."

From Jon Stewart: "We have it. The smoking gun. The evidence. The potential weapon of mass destruction we have been looking for as our pretext for invading Iraq. There's just one problem – it's in North Korea."

From David Letterman: "President Bush has said that he [did] not need approval from the UN to wage war, and I'm thinking, well, hell, he didn't need the approval of the American voters to become president, either."

And, finally, to add a little partisan balance, here's one more from Jay Leno: "In California, 50 women protested the . . . war with Iraq by lying on the ground naked and spelling out the word 'peace.' Right idea – wrong president."

II

Okay, fun's over, now let's get serious about the soul of America.

³ Korb, The Rev. Katy, New Orleans, "UUMA Chat" listserv, November 2000.

Some years ago, the United States canceled the debts that were owed to us by the country of Uganda. Uganda is in East Africa and was once ruled by the notorious Idi Amin. We forgave the debt with the stipulation that the money that would have been used to pay off the debt be specifically earmarked to attack the AIDS crisis in Uganda. With that money, a vigorous campaign of medical attention and education was initiated. Within three years, the number of new cases of AIDS in Uganda was cut in half, and the incidence of deaths was diminished by almost 30 percent.

Or consider what, in hindsight, must have been one of the 20th century's greatest good will and public relations boosters for the United States — the European Recovery Program of 1948 — better known as the Marshall Plan. The Marshall Plan was launched by the administration of an unelected president — President Harry S. Truman (Franklin Roosevelt having died in office) — at a time (like ours) when the Pentagon, among others, was clamoring for more money. The Marshall Plan expended more than \$12.5 billion, which was a sum roughly equivalent to \$60 billion today. With the Marshall Plan, not only did we fire the engines that rebuilt Europe, but we burnished our own image of magnanimity and generosity, as well.

While many Americans still think of ourselves in the light of the Marshall Plan generosity, of the 22 industrialized nations of the world, the United States, I'm sorry to say, is now dead last in per capita giving to the poorer nations of the world. In fact, on a per capita basis, for every dollar that America gives to the poorer countries of the world, the people of Norway give seventy dollars.⁴

Now, admittedly, if we looked at comparative military aid or arms sales, as you might expect, we would get a very different picture. Clearly, as the world's sole Superpower, military strength is America's strong suit. Indeed, even though we have no military rivals anywhere in the world to speak of, we continue to spend some \$30 million an hour, or \$500,000 (or half a million dollars) a minute, or \$8,000 a second, on our military budget. Our military budget is 17 times the combined military budgets of the six so-called "rogue" nations — namely, Syria, Cuba, Libya (although Libya may be off the list now — now that they have paid for Lockerbie), and the "axis of evil" countries Iraq, Iran, and North Korea.

Indeed, a broad consensus on both the left and the right now seems to concur that America, in effect, is an empire. A spate of books by both liberals and conservatives have recently come out on the subject — *American Empire* by Andrew Bacevich, *Empire* by Niall and Neil Ferguson, *America Unrivaled* by John Ikenberry, *The Decline and Fall of the American Empire* by Gore Vidal, and there are quite a few others.

While opinions vary widely in these books and in op-ed columns and so forth on its significance, scope, and direction, the consensus suggests that the US now indeed dominates the world not only militarily and financially, but also in terms of language, lifestyle, communications, the products of mass culture, and currency.

⁴ Cappolo, Tony, "Is America Losing Its Soul?" in *Spiritual Perspectives on America's Role as Superpower* (), p. 76.

Talk of our being an “empire” has accelerated rapidly as the current Bush administration has become increasingly unilateral. It started slowly. First, we wouldn’t sign the international land mine treaty. Then we refused to sign on to the International Criminal Court. Then we refused to ratify the Comprehensive Nuclear Test Ban treaty. Then we refused to sign the Kyoto Protocol on Climate Change. Then we abrogated the Anti-Ballistic Missile treaty. Then we opposed a small arms control pact. Then (ironically) we spurned an international biological weapons protocol. On the more proactive front of our increasing unilateralism, we boldly announced the so-called “Bush doctrine” that simply declares – in the face of longstanding international sanctions to the contrary – that the United States will decide, whenever and wherever we want, to attack whomever we want – as long as we think they may be developing weapons of mass destruction.

Then, of course, even when the United Nations Security Council boldly stood up to the United States last spring, we walked out on the UN and invaded Iraq anyway – even though we have not found any weapons of mass destruction and even though we may, in fact, have manipulated the evidence on the weapons of mass destruction all along.

III

As some of you know, a lot of what the Bush Administration has been doing in terms of our foreign policy – including our increasing unilateralism, the Bush doctrine, and the invasion of Iraq – was actually recommended some years ago by a powerful neoconservative think tank called the Project for a New American Century (or the “PNAC”). Some of the PNAC’s influential members include Dick Cheney, Paul Wolfowitz, Donald Rumsfeld, Richard Perle, and Jeb Bush. One of the PNAC’s important Publications is called “Rebuilding America’s Defenses.” It is available on the internet, if you’re interested, which I find somewhat surprising considering some of the things it contains.

Published in 2000, “Rebuilding America’s Defenses” argues that the elder Bush and Clinton administrations wasted a valuable opportunity to exploit our Superpower status following the demise of the Soviet Union. According to the PNAC, while those years are lost, we should now redouble our efforts and seize the opportunity to consolidate our dominant position in the world and so clearly establish our military superiority that no other nation will be able to even think about trying to compete with us. More specifically, this neoconservative think tank report, which clearly appears to be the “play book” for the current Bush administration, advocates that we significantly increase our military spending, modernize our forces, reposition our permanently based forces around the world, including the Middle East (perhaps in Iraq? that’s my guess), develop and deploy a global missile defense system, develop our strategic dominance in space, and control the so-called “International Commons” of cyberspace (that is, control the Internet).

This “Rebuilding America’s Defenses” report declares [and I quote]: “At present the United States faces no global rival. America’s grand strategy should aim to preserve and extend this advantageous position as far into the future as possible.” Now, remember, this report comes from a think tank called the Project for a New American Century, so many critics have

reasonably, I think, concluded that the PNAC would like to see the 21st century dominated by the United States, that is, for the next hundred years or more.

Continuing, the report chillingly, almost eagerly suggests, [and I quote]:

[N]ew methods of attack – electronic, ‘non-lethal,’ biological – will be more widely available ... ‘Combat’ likely will take place in new dimensions: in space, ‘cyber-space,’ and perhaps [in] the world of microbes. . . . [A]dvanced forms of biological warfare that can ‘target’ specific genotypes may transform biological warfare from the realm of terror to a politically useful tool.

Now, I am not exactly sure what that last sentence means – when it talks “about targeting specific genotypes to become a politically useful tool,” but I don’t think I like it!

IV

In a letter to Mandell Creighton in 1887, Lord Acton famously opined that “power tends to corrupt and absolute power corrupts absolutely.” Likewise, Thomas Bailey Aldrich wrote in 1903, “The possession of unlimited power will make a despot of almost any [one].” We are naïve to think, it seems to me, that as Americans we are above being corrupted by the unrivaled power we now possess.

Among other things, power tends to blur our judgment and corrupt our wisdom. Just because we are powerful by no means ensures we are wise. Indeed, significantly, this sentiment is found in Stephen Vincent Benet’s *Litany for Dictatorships*, “We thought,” says Benet, “because we had power, we had wisdom.”

Some of you may recall that in the New Testament, according to the book of Luke, the second of three temptations of Jesus was worldly power, the promise of worldly dominion. Jesus rejected the devil’s temptation while the Bush administration, I fear, has capitulated to it – with a vengeance. And, as a result, we are all at peril.

This is not to suggest, however, that all power is bad. Quite the contrary. Power in its simplest terms is the ability to get things done. Thus, the advantage of having power is that we can do more good, such as we did in Uganda and with the Marshall Plan in Europe.⁵ As Robert F. Kennedy once said, “The problem of power is how to achieve its responsible use rather than its irresponsible . . . use – of how to get men of power to live *for* the public rather than *off* the public.

⁵ In light of what we have seen thus far (September 2003) in Afghanistan, it does not help matters to have President Bush declare, as he did in April 2002, that the US is going to undertake a new Marshall Plan in rebuilding Afghanistan.

V

Since Biblical times, empires have often given civilization a bad name. In the Old Testament it was the Egyptians and Pharaoh wickedly enslaving and persecuting the Jews. In the New Testament it was the Romans cruelly persecuting the early Christians, including Jesus. For me, it is unspeakably sad and sobering to think that in the world's eyes, to many people, the United States must look a lot like the ancient imperial Egyptians or Romans, with our brash and swaggering attitude and our awesome military strength and firepower, bestriding the world like a colossus.

To me, while I am no politician (and I suppose by now you can see why), this is exactly the wrong way to conduct ourselves in the world. We should use our awesome power and wealth for good. That, it seems to me, in the long run, is the answer to terrorism. If we truly want peace, Pope Pius VI is right: we should work for justice. Trying to overcome terrorism with death and destruction is not going to work. (I think this is what the Israelis are finding out.) Both Buddha and Jesus instructed us to overcome evil with good. Again, I'm no politician, but this would seem to suggest more AIDS relief and Marshall Plans and fewer internationally unpopular, unilateral invasions.

If we are to be equal to the perilous times in which we live, in my judgment, we need to get a grip on our power issues. We need to radically change our course and foreswear our foolish ways. Otherwise, as William Sloan Coffin put it so wonderfully in his little book called *The Heart is a Little to the Left*, the human race is likely to go the way of the dinosaurs, which became extinct, says Coffin, through too *much* armor and too *little* brain.

There is no peace without justice. As a superpower, we need to work for justice. We need to make peace with our enemies. We need to love mercy, and we need to walk humbly with our neighbors and with all that is holy.