

**THE FIRST UNITARIAN SOCIETY OF MILWAUKEE**

**THE PARADOX  
OF  
AMERICAN GREATNESS**

**THE REV. DR. ANDREW C. KENNEDY  
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READING

from "About Being by A. Powell Davies  
an American"

This morning, I want to resume our two-part series of services looking at some of the critical issues our nation is currently facing, especially in these troubling, post-9-11 times. Last week, we looked at some of our nation's international issues in a service called, "The Paradox of American Power." Today, I would like to look at some of our domestic issues in a service entitled, "The Paradox of American Greatness."

Our Reading for this morning is from a sermon by the late Unitarian minister A. Powell Davies. Davies was a great preacher in the 1940s and 1950s at All Souls Unitarian Church in Washington, DC. Davies' congregation at the time included members of Congress and the US Supreme Court. In this sermon, Davies describes some of the essentials of the American character, as he saw it, and its commitments. It's a wonderful statement about what I believe is the true greatness of this country against which we need to honestly measure ourselves.

The American commitment is to universal justice, the rights of all people, not the special interests of some. It is a commitment to fair play, to patience, to tolerance, to neighborliness. It is a commitment to the common good....It is compassionate, humanitarian. It believes in humanity and in its future. It is the Golden Rule. It is based upon the claims of conscience and a faith in human goodness. It begins not in a system but within the heart.

It battles prejudice and false opinion. It seeks the truth. It is opposed to barriers of exclusiveness. Its principles are universal. It despises cowardice, including moral cowardice. But it also has no use for obstinacy, inflexibility, and intolerance. It prefers honesty to cleverness, kindness to self-sufficiency, goodwill to narrow minded aims. It is a way of life now and a faith, a vision of the future. It is a purpose to be served.

If anyone asks by what right I define these characteristics as American, I point him [or her] to those Americans the rest of us revere as great. I say that America is defined by the moral progress she has sought, and by exemplars, not by the hour of perfidy and by her little-minded greedy foes.

And if anyone tells me that these characteristics are more than American, that they are universal, I will reply that this is why they are American. Because this nation was not founded on the divisive and the separate, but upon the rights of all people. Can we restore these standards? Can we feel again the touch of greatness?

The future will depend upon the answer. Upon what takes place in heart and conscience. A nation, like an individual, must have a soul.<sup>1</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Davies, A. Powell, "The American Commitment," from "About Being an American," a sermon preached May 26, 1946, excerpted from *Without Apology: Collected Meditations On Liberal Religion*, edited by Forrest Church.

**THE PARADOX OF AMERICAN GREATNESS**  
**The Rev. Dr. Andrew C. Kennedy**

“America is the greatest nation on earth!” This declaration is like a national mantra that can be heard almost daily all around the country – from press conferences by President Bush or Secretary of Defense Rumsfeld to the corner pubs by your average beer-sipping Joe or Josefina. Indeed, as Josefina Carbonell, an Assistant Secretary in the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, put it recently,

If we have learned one thing from the events of September 11, we have learned that Americans are the most resilient people in the world. Let us continue to be strong, to take care of each other,... and stand together in good times and bad. Because we are the greatest nation on earth – the greatest people on earth. And we will prevail.<sup>2</sup>

Today, I want to respectfully challenge this notion that we are the greatest nation on earth.

I do not question that we are the most *powerful* nation on earth, militarily. I do not question that we are the *richest* nation on earth, financially. I do not question, as I suggested last week, that we are the most *dominant* nation in the world, militarily, financially, culturally, or in terms of communications, currency, language, and in other ways. But I *do* question the notion that we are truly the “greatest” nation on earth.

My concern is that we have mistaken our power for our goodness. My concern is that we have mistaken our riches for our inheritance. My concern is that we have mistaken our muscle and influence for our principles. In short, my concern is that we have mistaken our dominance for our greatness – and they are not the same.

I believe our greatness lies in our traditions of freedom, equality, and democracy – when they are properly observed. I believe our greatness lies in our traditions of governmental checks and balances, the rule of law, due process, an independent judiciary, and a bill of rights that cannot be voted out by an overzealous majority. I believe our greatness lies in our traditions free speech, a free press, freedom of assembly, freedom of religion and the separation of church and state. Like A. Powell Davies, I believe our greatness lies in our commitments to universal justice and the rights of all people, to the claims of conscience and a faith in human goodness.

My concern, however, is that we have fallen for the deception of our own marketing propaganda – again, mistaking our sheer dominance for our greatness. In other words, I believe we are deceiving ourselves and are ignoring the evidence. America is not what many

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<sup>2</sup> Carbonell, Josefina, Assistant Secretary for Aging, Administration on Aging, U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, as per a letter on the Internet:  
[http://www.aoa.gov/pressroom/MediaAdvisory2002/911\\_anniv\\_message.html](http://www.aoa.gov/pressroom/MediaAdvisory2002/911_anniv_message.html)

people are *saying* it is. America is not what many people *think* it is. Nor is America what most of us truly *want* it to be.

Now, let me make the case for these assertions and then you decide for yourself.

## II

We talk about our country being a peace-loving country, a peace-loving people. Yet consider the fact that we have fought ten major wars in ten generations. Each and every generation of Americans fights another war! We've had the Revolutionary War, the War of 1812, the Mexican War, the Civil War, the Spanish-American War, World War I, World War II, the Korean War, the Vietnam War, and the Persian Gulf War.

And right now, we may *say* that we are a peace-loving country, but it is obvious to most casual observer and to people all around the world that we are just itching to decimate Iraq. Debates in the United Nations and Congress are obviously just annoying fig leaf formalities for the deeper jingoistic desires of our current Administration.

We *say* we are a peace-loving nation, yet ours is the fiercest, most powerful military nation the world has ever known. We spend almost \$300 billion every year on our military. This is more than *nineteen times* as large as the *combined* spending of the seven countries traditionally identified by the Pentagon as our most likely adversaries.<sup>3</sup> We have standing armies with over 1.3 million military personnel on active duty stationed all over the world.<sup>4</sup> We are ready to fight not just one, but two major wars at the same time. At all times, we have both conventional and nuclear weapons strategically scattered around the world, under the seas, high in the skies, and we would like to take them into space.

As is well known, we have aided and abetted some of the world's most corrupt and ruthless dictators, people such as Somoza in Nicaragua, Pinochet in Chile, Marcos in the Philippines, and Saddam Hussein in Iraq.

Not only have we propped up some of the world's most despicable dictators, but it is now well established that through the CIA we have "destabilized" and overthrown some duly elected governments, such as Iran in 1953 and Guatemala in 1954. We have even been implicated in various political assassinations, such as Allende in Chile and Lumumba in the Congo. Additionally, as is well know, we tried, but failed, to assassinate Fidel Castro a number of times.

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<sup>3</sup> "Last of the Big Spenders," *The Defense Monitor* (Washington, D.C.: Center for Defense Information), Vol. XXVIII, Number 8, 1999, p. 3. Note that these figures are a bit out of date (1999), but the perspective is likely the same. In fact, the current administration is asking for some \$50 billion *more* for the war on terrorism. Our seven traditional adversaries, incidentally, are Cuba, Iran, Iraq, Libya, North Korea, Sudan and Syria.

<sup>4</sup>*The World Almanac 2002* (NY: World Almanac Education Group, Inc., 2002), p. 204.

In recent years, we have invaded Lebanon, Grenada, Panama, and Haiti. Scorning international law and the World Court that ruled against us, we mined the harbors of Nicaragua in 1986. We manipulated the Nicaraguan elections in the 1980s, as well.

So, with all of this, we are a peace-loving, democracy-loving nation? Well, maybe so, but let me respectfully suggest that our lofty rhetoric has not infrequently been drowned out by the screeching destruction and political malfeasance that have been unleashed by our government and its proxies for generations.

### III

Similarly, at home, we frequently imagine ourselves to be a free, peace-loving and law-abiding country, yet, again, the realities of our common life frequently belie our ideals. Consider, for example, the violence of our cities. A recent study, entitled "International Comparisons of Criminal Justice Statistics,"<sup>5</sup> looked at the homicide rates, among other things, of the European Union capital cities and some other key capital cities around the world. Washington, D.C.'s murder rate was off the charts compared to the other capital cities. Washington, D.C.'s homicide rate was sixteen times as high as Berlin's. It was twenty-one times as high as London's. And it was forty-two times as high as Rome's. Now, granted, Washington, D.C. may not be representative of the entire United States, and, thankfully, most violent crime rates have, in fact, been steadily dropping for a number of years now, but still, 15,530 people were murdered in the US in 1999 (which are the most current figures I have).<sup>6</sup> Over 15,000. This is a lot of people! For perspective, consider, for example, that in the Vietnam War (where people were actually *trying* to kill each other), we lost about 58,000 Americans in ten years, yet over 15,000 people are murdered *every year* here at home, which over ten years at that rate would be 150,000 people!

Meanwhile, we had 89,110 reported rapes in the US in 1999. 89,000! That doesn't count the ones *not* reported. We had over two million burglaries and over ten million property crimes.<sup>7</sup>

Here in Milwaukee County, domestic violence alone claims the lives, on average, of three women and one child every month.<sup>8</sup>

And guns. As Americans, we are armed to the teeth. We have about 230 million firearms in circulation in the US today. About 75-85 million of them are handguns.

One of the understandable results of all of this violence and fear is a growing concern for our children. For years now, we have had security guards roaming the halls of many of our

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<sup>5</sup> Barclay, Gordon, et.al., "International Comparisons of Criminal Justice Statistics," May 2001 per the Internet.

<sup>6</sup> "Crime in the U.S., 1979-1999," *The World Almanac 2002*, op. cit., p. 763.

<sup>7</sup> Ibid.

<sup>8</sup> These statistics are taken from a letter from the Rev. Dr. Bobbie Groth from the Milwaukee Women's Center, September 2002.

schools. After school, we worry about whether our kids can safely walk or ride their bikes home. So, we have “Block Parent” safe houses and “Stranger Awareness” programs.

There is a growing fear of child abductions now, too. Child abductions are actually rare occurrences, however, numbering only about 100 per year, so it is something that we probably shouldn’t be too worried about. Nevertheless, capitalizing on parents’ understandable fears, a whole new industry is developing. There are electronic leashes and various identification tools, including home ID kits with DNA samples, mouthmolds, and fingerprints. On the horizon are various electronic devices featuring miniature Global Positioning Systems, some small enough to implant in a tot’s earlobe. Only in America. GPS technology also comes in more conventional forms, such as one called the Digital Angel, a \$400 unit that doubles as a child’s wrist-watch. The watch sends an alert if the child wanders beyond a certain distance. The location is then accessed through a 24/7 call center or through the Internet for about \$30 a month.<sup>9</sup>

With this distinctly American blend of fear, violence, guns, and high technology, is this what we mean by the “home of the brave?” Is this the “land of the free?” Is this the American Dream, the greatest nation on earth, of which we are so triumphantly proud?

#### IV

There are other measures of the “greatness” of a nation to which I would direct your attention, as well.

Consider, for example, that in terms of the United Nation’s annually updated so-called “Human Development Index,” which this year ranked 173 countries by a composite measure of education, life expectancy, and income per person, Norway remains at the top of the list, with Sweden, Canada and Belgium close behind. Then comes Australia and then, ranking sixth, comes the United States.

Consider, for example, that in terms of life expectancy at birth – that is, how long we’re likely to live – in the so-called “developed world” (for which I have the statistics), the US ranked, not number 1, not number 2, not in the top 5, but number 20 in the list of 30 nations.<sup>10</sup>

At the other end of the life cycle, closer to birth, consider that in terms of our infant mortality rate, despite our technological edge, our nation is ranked, again, not number 1, not number 2, but 27<sup>th</sup> in the world. (Sweden is first, Japan is second).<sup>11</sup> Why are we 27<sup>th</sup>? Probably because of our poor health care delivery system, which includes some 30 million uninsured Americans who often simply cannot afford to go to doctors and hospitals just because they are sick, in need pre-natal care or other medical attention.

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<sup>9</sup> “Safe and Sound,” *Milwaukee Journal Sentinel*, August 27, 2002, p. E 1.

<sup>10</sup> Internet: “OECD: Life expectancy at birth (total population) [2001].”

<sup>11</sup> *United Nations 2000* and other sources as cited in *Health, United States*, on the Internet, “Table 26 Infant Mortality rates and international rankings; Selected countries, selected years, 1960-97,” p. 161.

In terms of literacy, the standards and testing methods have changed dramatically in recent years, so there is no longer any simple international ranking that I could find, but an old one that I could find (which is about fifteen years old) placed us at 49<sup>th</sup> among 158 members of the United Nations. 49<sup>th</sup> in literacy. More currently, a US National Institute for Literacy study recently found that 21-23 percent – or 40-44 million – Americans sixteen years or older are at the lowest of five literacy levels.<sup>12</sup>

Not surprisingly, then, thirty-two percent – almost one third – of our young people do not finish high school.

We *are* number two, however (second to Russia), in having the second highest incarceration rate in the world.<sup>13</sup> We also stand out in the world for executing people, being one of the few nations that continues to do so.

Our homeless population is robust, as well. There are 30,000 people living in homeless shelters in New York City alone.<sup>14</sup> There are hundreds, if not thousands, here in Milwaukee. Indeed, we have had one gentleman sleeping on our front porch here at church lately. And right now our Milwaukee County Executive, Scott Walker, and the County Board are wrestling with some challenging budget cuts. One of the things they are contemplating is totally eliminating – or at least drastically reducing – the \$500,000 allotted to the county's homeless and domestic violence shelters.

## V

Now, I have thrown a lot of statistics at you. Let me try to bring this together. I have already talked about what I regard as our overdeveloped military, our sometimes questionable foreign policy behavior, and the high levels of fear, violence, and guns that are so prevalent in this country. Add to that: mediocre rankings in infant mortality, life expectancy, and literacy, on the one hand, and high rankings in incarcerations, executions, and homelessness, on the other hand. All taken together, these are not the signs one would expect of the “greatest nation on earth.” Are they? And we have not yet talked about how we treat the mentally ill, the old, or the hungry in this country. Nor, in light of 9-11, have we talked about the current secret detention of people suspected of violating immigration laws, many being held without the right to see an attorney. Here in America?

Now, I am sorry to be the bearer of such disheartening, negative-sounding news, because I *love* this country. *You* love this country. So, this is a lover's quarrel. And I do not know the answers to all of these problems except that we need a major shift in our priorities. But I do think that we need to wake up and be more honest with ourselves – and wake up our nation.

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<sup>12</sup> Internet: “The State of Literacy in America: Estimates at the Local, State, and National Levels,” National Institute for Literacy, p. 2. It is important to recognize that this does not mean 40 million Americans are *illiterate*. Many of these folks *can* read and write, but their skills are so rudimentary that they are not able to function in society e.g. they cannot fill out forms, read maps or charts, follow written directions, etc.

<sup>13</sup> Barclay, Gordon, et.al., op. cit., p. 6.

<sup>14</sup> Ivens, Molly, “What's that Sound We're Not Hearing?” *Star-Telegram*, posted on the Internet 1/17/2002, www.dfw.com.

Our ideals of peace and compassion, of freedom, equality, and democracy are truly and indisputably wonderful, but they are being betrayed! We are being deceived by our own idealistic propaganda.

America is *not* what many people are saying it is. America is *not* what many people think it is. Nor is America what most of us truly want it to be. We have badly mistaken our dominance for our greatness, our power for our goodness, and the heights of our towering military strength for the loftiness of our ideals.

It is time to wake up and speak truth to power.

As a small first step, I invite you to come to the Parlor following the service today and to write a postcard to your legislators. The Social Concerns Committee is all set up and ready for us with pre-stamped postcards and so forth. I would suggest that you start locally, starting with Milwaukee County Executive Scott Walker and the County Board. Ask them to retain full funding for the homeless shelters and the domestic violence shelters. And then, if you are still on a roll, please consider writing to Senators Feingold and Kohl, Representative Barrett and President Bush.

Let us not rest nor be deceived until that day when our people are all fully literate and employed at living wages, and all are suitably housed and fed, living in diverse but safe and harmonious communities, and our country is at peace with the world. *Then* will our nation begin to look like "the greatest nation on earth." *Then* will our nation return to the deeper commitments of her soul.