

**THE FIRST UNITARIAN SOCIETY OF MILWAUKEE**

**THE PARADOX  
OF  
AMERICAN POWER**

**THE REV. DR. ANDREW C. KENNEDY  
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**THE FIRST UNITARIAN SOCIETY OF MILWAUKEE**

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## READING “Who Is My Neighbor?” by Martin Luther King, Jr.

Welcome, everyone, to the first of a two-part series of services. These services are each intended to try to help us take a deeper look at some of the critical issues our nation is currently facing in these troubling times. Today I will seek to look at our nation’s profile internationally, especially in light of 9-11, and next week I will seek to look at our nation domestically.

### II

Let me remind you at the outset, here, that discussing politics in church is a perfectly appropriate thing to do. “But religion and politics,” some may say, “don’t mix.” Usually, however, what that means is that “your religion doesn’t mix with my politics.” Indeed, some (usually the minority) would rather have us remain neutral on all political matters. However, to cite just one egregious cautionary example of why this is not good counsel, let us remember that one of the most shameful moments during the rise of Hitler and the extermination of the Jews was the pervasive silence of the European churches.

Indeed, I firmly believe, that as religious people we are called to bring our spirituality and our moral judgment into the public arena and to pronounce forthrightly what we find. As South African Bishop Desmond Tutu once said, “When the elephant has its foot on the tail of the mouse, and you say you are neutral, the mouse will not appreciate your neutrality.”<sup>1</sup> Neither should we.

Let me also remind you that in this church we neither expect nor desire conformity or uniformity of opinion. In fact, the old saw has it that wherever there are two or three Unitarian Universalists gathered, there will be eight or ten opinions stated and coffee will be served. So, as always, I do not expect you to necessarily agree with me this morning, but let us unite, nevertheless, in the mutuality of our shared concerns.

### III

Our Reading for this morning is from one of Martin Luther King, Jr.’s sermons during the Montgomery, Alabama bus boycott in 1956. King is making reference here to the story of the Good Samaritan.

More than ever before, my friends, men [*sic*] of all races and nations are today challenged to be neighborly. The call for a worldwide good-neighbor policy is more than an ephemeral shibboleth; it is the call to a way of life which will transform our imminent cosmic elegy into a psalm of creative fulfillment. No longer can we afford the luxury of passing by on the other side. Such folly was once

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<sup>1</sup> Tutu, Desmond, cited by Coffin, William Sloane, *A Passion for the Possible*, p. 36.

called moral failure; today it will lead to universal suicide. We cannot long survive spiritually separated in a world that is geographically together. In the final analysis, I must not ignore the wounded man on life's Jericho Road, because he is a part of me and I am a part of him. His agony diminishes me, and his salvation enlarges me.<sup>2</sup>

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<sup>2</sup> King, Martin Luther, *Unitarian Universalist World*, January/February 2002, p. 16.

## I. THE PARADOX OF AMERICAN POWER

### The Rev. Dr. Andrew C. Kennedy

As we have been reminded so vividly this past anniversary week, we live in a post 9-11 world. For Americans, at least, things have changed. Terrorism is a lot more real to us now. This has been unsettling for all of us – across the religious and political spectrum.

In the religious community, the terrorist attacks of 9-11 have given a huge boost to an already strong camp out there that believes that the Bible (and especially the *Book of Revelations*) predicted what we are going through right now a long time ago. These, in fact, are the so-called “End Times” that have been predicted, they say. *Time* magazine had a cover story on this phenomenon this past July. According to a poll cited in *Time*, 59% of all Americans believe the prophecies of the Biblical *Book of Revelations* will, in fact, come true. Fifty nine percent!

Putting today’s terrorism into a biblical perspective is comforting to many people. Why? Because it gives great cosmic meaning to the terrible trials and tribulations of our times. Think of it! From this perspective, it looks as though we could be living out the dramatic events described in the *Book of Revelations* over 2000 years ago. Moreover, the culmination of this great cosmic event is to be the return of Jesus, no less, and a soul-satisfying redemption, wherein the wicked are cast into hell to be eternally punished and the good (that is, the good Christians) are to be literally “raptured,” and saved, and brought unto the bosom of God.

But, folks, this is not going to happen. (Or if it does, *I* will be the most shocked minister in Hell!) But it’s not going to happen. The apocalypse did not happen when it was predicted to happen when Rome was sacked in 410 AD. The apocalypse did not happen when it was predicted to happen when the Bubonic plague wiped out one-third of the population of Europe in the fourteenth century. The apocalypse did not happen when it was predicted to happen when the Lisbon earthquake in Portugal was so severe that it caused church bells to ring as far away as England in 1755. And the apocalypse did not happen when it was predicted to happen when Hitler came to power and atomic weapons were created capable of devastating the human race after 1945.

The apocalyptic shootout at Armageddon, in my judgment, is simply an anachronistic religious fiction. It is not going to happen.

The *Book of Revelations* was written about 96 AD in order to reassure the faithful Christians who were enduring unusually cruel treatment at the time under the Roman Emperors Nero and Domitian. John of Ephesus wrote the *Book of Revelations* in literary code, using all kinds of numbers and symbols, in order to evade detection by the Roman authorities. Biblical scholars readily admit that this book has nothing to do with the events in our times 2000 years later.

Our human destiny is not fated or sealed. No one has written the book on us. There is no pre-ordained script for how life on this planet is going to turn out. There is no secret code to the Bible that unlocks the secrets of our times.

Now, for some, it may be scary to realize that we are *not* fated or scripted, because that means we are free. And being free means that we are responsible for our fates.

Indeed, it is my spiritual conviction that the world is in our hands. It is not just in the hands of a few key politicians either. It is in the collective hands of humanity – the politicians, yes, but also the teachers and key punch operators, the social workers and laborers, the lobbyists and lawyers, the rich and the refugees, the holy and the homeless. It is our job together to create the world which we will pass on to our children and to their children.

## II

Joseph Nye is dean of the Kennedy School of Government at Harvard University and is a former Assistant Secretary of Defense in the Clinton Administration. He has just published a book called *The Paradox of American Power: Why the World's Only Superpower Can't Go It Alone*.

According to Nye, not since the Roman Empire of Biblical times has one nation loomed so large above the others.<sup>3</sup> As *The Economist* once put it, "The United States bestrides the globe like a colossus."<sup>4</sup> It is true. The US tends to dominate the world not only militarily and financially, but also in terms of language, lifestyle, the products of mass culture, currency and communications – from Nike and McDonalds to CNN, Hollywood, and the Internet. As the German newsmagazine *Der Spiegel* reported, "American idols and icons are shaping the world from Katmandu to Kinshasa, from Cairo to Caracas."<sup>5</sup>

After the collapse of the Soviet Union, no nation could touch us. We freely invaded Panama in 1989 and Haiti 1994. The Persian Gulf War in 1991 proved to be a surprisingly easy victory. A few years later, we bombed Serbia into submission without a single casualty. The economy grew, the stock market thrived.

Meanwhile, in 1997, we refused to sign the convention prohibiting the use of anti-personnel land mines. In 1998, we refused to sign on to establish a charter for an international Criminal Court. In 1999, we refused to ratify the Comprehensive Nuclear Test Ban Treaty. Then, in 2001, within the first six months of the new Bush Administration, the US refused to sign the Kyoto Protocol on Climate Change. We abrogated the Anti-Ballistic Missile treaty. We opposed a small arms control pact, and we spurned a biological weapons protocol.<sup>6</sup> In each case, bristling with unassailable power, the United States essentially announced that it was unwilling to have its hands tied in any way.

Our go-it-alone unilateralism was in full bloom.

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<sup>3</sup> Nye Jr., Joseph S., *The Paradox of American Power* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2002), p. 1.

<sup>4</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>5</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>6</sup> Cohen, Roger, "Arrogant or Humble? Bush Encounters Europeans' Hostility," *International Herald Tribune*, May 8, 2001, 1, cited in Nye, *op. cit.*, in footnote 47, p. 205.

In the last several months, there have been at least two other important foreign policy announcements – both of which I find to be most disturbing – that confirm new dimensions to our American hegemonic unilateralism.

First, last March, a Pentagon planning paper revealed what *The New York Times* characterized as a “reckless”<sup>7</sup> proposal. The proposal is to develop new nuclear weapons and, significantly, to expand the circumstances under which they would be used. Here’s what’s at stake. The Nuclear Nonproliferation Treaty currently prohibits the use of nuclear weapons against non-nuclear countries. This is the so-called “no first-strike policy.” The idea is to discourage non-nuclear states from developing nuclear weapons by promising them that they will never be attacked with a nuclear weapon if they themselves don’t have any nuclear weapons. But the new Pentagon proposal would change all that (and, thus, once again, it would abrogate a very important treaty). What is the administration thinking? Well, the new proposal envisions the United States using a newly developed tactical nuclear weapon against Iraq, for example (a non-nuclear country – at least so far), if Iraq should dare to attack, let’s say, Israel, which, of course, it did attack with its SCUD missiles eleven years ago. In unusually strong language, *The New York Times* aptly suggests that if it were another country – other than the United States – making such a proposal, we would “rightly label that nation a dangerous rogue state.”<sup>8</sup>

The second recent foreign policy announcement that I find particularly alarming and confirming of our dangerous hegemonic unilateralism is the so-called “Bush doctrine.” It asserts America’s right (and I quote) to a “unilaterally determined pre-emptive self-defense.” According to the administration, this doctrine would be “the foundation of a new national security strategy,” although many observers believe that it was originally floated this summer simply as a rationale under which to attack Iraq. In any case, under this policy, the US would be empowered to attack – even in the absence of any apparent provocation – whomever we think may be trying to develop weapons of mass destruction, such as Iraq. “Potential targets,” according to the administration, also include weak states that have become, in the words of one official, “‘petri dishes’ for terrorist groups.”

In other words, never mind the United Nations, never mind the canons of international law, never mind the sanctity of sovereign states, the United States is simply declaring – with no international sanction for it whatsoever – that we 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. Period.

This, I would suggest, is outrageous! What if *every* nation were to make such a declaration? Once again, if it were another country making such a proposal, no doubt we would rightly label that nation a “dangerous rogue state,” would we not? What if China, for example, were to make such a declaration as a rationale for invading Taiwan? Or what if India were to make such a declaration as a rationale for invading Pakistan? Or vice versa?

As the op/ed columnist Molly Ivens asks, “What can this doctrine possibly achieve except creating more hatred of the United States?”<sup>9</sup>

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<sup>7</sup> “America as Nuclear Rogue,” *The New York Times*, March 12, 2002, p. A28.

<sup>8</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>9</sup> Ivens, Molly, “Don’t Worry About That,” *The Progressive Populist*, July 15, 2002, p. 22.

Here's an idea. In addition to debating new resolutions both in the United States Congress and at the United Nations demanding renewed inspections in Iraq for weapons of mass destruction – which I do think is a good idea – why not debate this new “Bush doctrine” of “unilaterally determined pre-emptive self-defense?” See what the other nations of the world think of it. Let's debate it at the United Nations and in Congress, across the nation and around the world.

### III

There is a better way, I believe. It is inspired by our historic roots in Universalism. Let me explain.

As noted a few minutes ago, there are a lot of Christian fundamentalists who sincerely believe that a few righteous Christians in the End Times will be saved and the rest of us will be damned to hell. Some other religions have their own version of this same view. The current posture of the US administration seems to suggest a secular, this-worldly version of the same thing: namely, that a few are to be saved in this world – especially here in America – and the rest are damned to hell.

Two hundred years ago, Universalism proclaimed that a good God would by nature, they reasoned, be so loving so as to somehow find a way to save everyone – universally – not just a few. What the world needs today, I would suggest, is a secular version of Universalism, a doctrine that declares unequivocally that we are all precious and that we all ought to be saved – universally – not just the powerful and privileged few.

Last year, on September 11<sup>th</sup>, America suffered a grievous, shocking, exceedingly painful blow. It was horrible, and for many it remains horrible. Yet as Rita Lasar, whose own brother died in the North Tower, suggests, in its own terrible way, the 9-11 calamity was an invitation for Americans to join the world, because, as she says, “the world is already a very troubled place”<sup>10</sup> and Americans are not often aware of this. Lasar notes that not 3,000, but 500,000 lives were lost in Rwanda in 1994. 200,000 East Timorese were killed during a recent 20-year span by Indonesia. 8,000 lives are lost in sub-Saharan Africa due to AIDS *every day*.

The question, Lasar suggests, is whether we Americans will accept this invitation.

As Americans we have a choice. We can continue on this path of arrogant, go-it-alone hegemonic unilateralism. In which case, we can continue to reject and abrogate multilateral international agreements and treaties. We can continue insisting to the world that “you're either with us or against us” and that you'd better get aboard. In this vein, we can throttle the UN and Congress to quickly pass resolutions that give us a rubber stamped green light to invade Iraq – because we are going to invade Iraq whether you want us to or not.

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<sup>10</sup> Lasar, Rita, “9-11 Shattered U.S. Isolation,” *Milwaukee Journal Sentinel*, p. 13A.

This path, however, is likely to isolate us more than we already are. And if we did not know before, we now have irrefutably sad evidence that there are no walls high enough, no moats deep enough, no ABM shields impenetrable enough, no Homeland security devices clever enough to make this country – or any country – invulnerable. Yet the more envy and hatred we engender, the more of a target we become. It's so obvious!

On the other hand, simple common sense suggests that the more secure people are in other parts of the world, the more secure we will be, too. The more international friendships we cultivate, the more cooperation we'll have in the war against terrorism.

150 years ago, Alex de Tocqueville said, "America is great because America is good. If she ceases to be good, she [will cease] to be great."<sup>11</sup>

De Tocqueville is right. America, I believe, has a largely untapped passion for peace and social justice. Let us pull back from our clenched fist unilateralism. From the heart of our goodness as a nation, let us renew our international commitments to justice, to freedom, and to peace. Let us share our power and wealth *with* other nations instead of lording it *over* them. Let us once again be a great nation because we are a good nation, not just because we have the most firepower. Indeed, let us genuinely work to save *all* people – universally – not just a few. As Jesus and Martin Luther King suggested, let us stop to aid the wounded men, women, and children on life's Jericho Road, recognizing that, indeed, they are a part of us and we are a part of them, and that our fates are ultimately intertwined.

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<sup>11</sup> de Tocqueville, Alex, cited by Coffin, William Sloane, *Passion for the Possible* (Louisville, KY: Westminster/John Knox Press, 1993), p. 23.