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# American Nationalism and U.S. Foreign Policy from September 11 to the Iraq War

PAUL T. McCARTNEY

The deliberate and deadly attacks which were carried out yesterday against our country were more than acts of terror. They were acts of war. This will require our country to unite in steadfast determination and resolve. Freedom and democracy are under attack. . . . This enemy attacked not just our people, but freedom-loving people everywhere in the world. . . . This will be a monumental struggle of good versus evil. But good will prevail.

—President George W. Bush, 12 September 2001<sup>1</sup>

More than three years have passed since the terrorists of al Qaeda brutally attacked the United States and spurred the country into a new era in its history. When the World Trade Center collapsed into a dusty heap while the nerve center of American military might burned with a passenger jet lodged in its side, a generation of Americans who had not yet been born when President John F. Kennedy was assassinated sadly acquired its own tragic defining moment. Yet, America's preoccupation shifted quickly but divisively toward Iraq, and the surreal intensity of September 11 and its aftermath seems to belong to a different time. While it still remains possible to recall how Americans actually experienced that tragic day, it would be useful to evaluate how Americans came to grips with the terrorist attacks, how their attention was directed seamlessly

<sup>1</sup> George W. Bush, "Remarks by the President," 12 September 2001, accessed on the White House website at <http://www.whitehouse.gov/news/releases/2001/09/20010912-4.html>, 2 October 2001.

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to war with Iraq, and how September 11 has more broadly shaped subsequent U.S. policy making. In this paper, I consider the lessons that this dramatic episode holds for helping us to understand the connection between U.S. foreign policy and American nationalism.

More specifically, I argue that enduring nationalist themes provided the basic structure in which Americans organized their comprehension of and reaction to the terrorist attacks. In addition, by employing the legitimating power of nationalism to furnish the “official” interpretation of September 11, President George W. Bush was able to provide a context in which Americans could understand and accept a set of foreign policy goals far broader and more ambitious than a simple response to the immediate attacks would have suggested. The only way to ensure that such atrocities never happen again, Bush decided for the United States, was to change the global context that had made them possible. Changing the world in this way—to suit American interests by making it more consistent with American values—has always been an implicit component of American nationalism. Thus, the terrorist strikes provided a rare clarifying moment in the nation’s collective consciousness, when both American national identity and U.S. foreign policy were reinvigorated—separately and in relation to each other—and a national focus and sense of mission, absent since the end of the Cold War, reemerged. Bush’s call for a worldwide war against the perpetrators and his relentless characterization of them as evil laid the groundwork in the American consciousness (if not the world’s) for his militaristic designs against Saddam Hussein’s regime, a policy that was clearly central to his breathtakingly ambitious vision for America’s role in the world as described in the administration’s formal foreign policy statement, the National Security Strategy.

Both the blending of national identity with U.S. foreign policy in Bush’s rhetoric and his manner of enunciating U.S. foreign policy goals in lofty and frequently moralistic terms were consistent with established tradition. Reliably but uneasily, the United States has always maintained both a sweeping identification with the whole of humanity and an insular preoccupation with its own lofty distinctiveness, and it has used this paradoxical combination as the basis for claiming its righteous entitlement to lead the world. National identity and foreign policy are intimately connected in the United States because the former rejects (formally, at least) ethnic or other ascriptive bases of national identity and relies instead on an ideological construction of the nation that insists on the global relevance of the American project. (Many scholars have made a strong case that it is misleading to characterize American national identity in terms of its ideology because of the pervasively ascriptive bases of its laws, politics, and culture. I do not disagree with this position, but argue that racial, ethnic, and other ascriptive characteristics have been interpolated into the American ideology in ways that have left its principles sufficiently intact to evolve along with American culture. In other words, at any given moment, American political principles are expressive of their cultural context, which gives particular form to the ideology’s otherwise abstract content. More to the point, the ascrip-

tive dimensions of American national identity have been less relevant to the dynamic that I am describing.)<sup>2</sup> The American style of foreign policy reflects an ideological and cultural interpretation of both the nation and its place in the world, one that posits that the United States enjoys universal significance because it is an archetype of virtue and the locomotive of human progress. This American penchant for ascribing transcendent value to itself and for defining itself as exceptional reflects the influence of intellectual and religious tendencies that flourished under historical circumstances that almost seemed tailored to nurture them and that gained strength as the state became more powerful.<sup>3</sup> It has yielded two conflicting impulses—exemplarism, or the desire to stand apart from the world and serve merely as a model of social and political possibility, and vindicationism, the urge to change the world to make it look and act more like the United States.<sup>4</sup> Bush's foreign policy is vindicationism with a vengeance.

This paper's argument is presented in three sections. In the first, I review the nature and sources of the missionary dimension of American national identity and examine, in particular, its relation to American foreign policy. Second, I analyze President Bush's framing of the terrorist attacks and show how he worked rhetorically toward a clear enunciation of the Bush doctrine. My deconstruction of his speeches will emphasize his insistence on American virtue, values, and power; and it will draw special attention to the civil-religious dimension of his rhetoric—an aspect of American identity that is mistakenly ignored in most foreign policy analyses.<sup>5</sup> Third, I locate the tendencies of subsequent foreign policy emphases within the framework of the Bush doctrine, paying specific attention to the war against Iraq. Finally, I argue that while American universalism remains an appropriate element of American national identity, it can no longer be usefully interconnected with a notion of American exceptionalism that sharply distinguishes Americans from the rest of the world. If the

<sup>2</sup> For the best presentation of this argument, see Rogers Smith, *Civic Ideals: Conflicting Visions of Citizenship in US History* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1997). On the relationship between race and U.S. foreign policy, see Thomas Ambrosio, *Ethnic Identity Groups and U.S. Foreign Policy* (Westport, CT: Praeger, 2002); Gerald Horne, "Race from Power: U.S. Foreign Power and the General Crisis of 'White Supremacy'" in Michael J. Hogan, ed., *The Ambiguous Legacy: U.S. Foreign Relations in the "American Century"* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1999), 302–336; and Michael Hunt, *Ideology and U.S. Foreign Policy* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1987).

<sup>3</sup> Arthur M. Schlesinger, Jr. "America: Experiment or Destiny," *The American Historical Review* 82 (June 1977): 505–522.

<sup>4</sup> This distinction between exemplarism and vindicationism is discussed more fully in works such as Henry Kissinger, *Diplomacy* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1994), 17–56; H.W. Brands, *What America Owes the World: The Struggle for the Soul of Foreign Policy* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1998); William W. Cobb, Jr., *The American Foundation Myth in Vietnam: Reigning Paradigms and Raining Bombs* (New York: University Press of America, 1998); Elliot Abrams, ed., *The Influence of Faith: Religious Groups and U.S. Foreign Policy* (Lanham, MD: Rowman & Littlefield, 2001), 1–33; and Edward McNall Burns, *The American Idea of Mission: Concepts of National Destiny and Purpose* (New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press, 1957).

<sup>5</sup> But see Abrams, *The Influence of Faith*.

broad contours of American national identity cannot be expected easily to change, then its more cosmopolitan elements should receive renewed emphasis in a manner better suited to the country's global stature. Unfortunately, the current administration has done precisely the opposite by stressing the particularities of the American experience and asserting rather than demonstrating the virtue of the American national project. Essentially, the United States relies today simply on superior military power to ground its claims to moral excellence. This is, both morally and politically, treacherous ground on which to stand at a time when the world demands American leadership.

### AMERICAN NATIONALISM AND U.S. FOREIGN POLICY: EXCEPTIONALISM AND UNIVERSALISM

Uniquely among the great powers, both the United States and the collective identity of its people were consciously *created*, and with a sense of purpose.<sup>6</sup> During their War of Independence, Americans manifested the conviction that their nationalist revolt against Great Britain was a truly revolutionary episode and that their goal was not only to attain justice for themselves, but also to usher in a new, democratic era in human history.<sup>7</sup> Thomas Paine (though not an American himself) declared for instance, “We have it in our power to begin the world over again,”<sup>8</sup> indicating how, from the very beginning, Americans have believed that their polity represents a new development in human history, a particularistic community of universal significance.<sup>9</sup>

Put another way, American national identity has been premised upon the belief that the nation's binding principles are rooted in qualities and capacities shared by all people, everywhere.<sup>10</sup> On the world stage, though, the United States cannot help but act as a single, discrete entity, however universal its pretensions. It is but one state among many. As a result, U.S. foreign policy frequently tries to have it both ways—to assume that America's national interest and the greater good of mankind are one and the same. This approach has resulted in a self-referential understanding of the norms that are to govern the world. It has also encouraged the hope that someday the world will indeed be universally guided by American principles, even as the United States, as the figurehead and governor of the new order, maintains its right to particularistic

<sup>6</sup> Brian Klunk, *Consensus and the American Mission* (Lanham, MD: University Press of America, 1986); William Pfaff, *The Wrath of Nations: Civilization and the Furies of Nationalism* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1993).

<sup>7</sup> Lawrence J. Friedman, *Inventors of the Promised Land* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1975).

<sup>8</sup> Thomas Paine, “Common Sense” in Nelson F. Adkins, ed., *Common Sense and Other Writings* (New York: Macmillan, 1953). See also, Walter A. McDougall, *Promised Land, Crusader State: America's Encounter with the World Since 1776* (New York: Houghton Mifflin, 1997).

<sup>9</sup> James H. Moorhead, “The American Israel: Protestant Tribalism and Universal Mission” in William R. Hutchison and Hartmut Lehman, eds., *Many Are Chosen: Divine Elections and Western Nationalism* (Minneapolis, MN: Fortress Press, 1994), 145–166.

<sup>10</sup> Hans Kohn, *American Nationalism: An Interpretive Essay* (New York: Macmillan, 1957).

loyalty. Needless to say, this “solution” to the tension between national discreteness and universalist pretension has been regarded by others as crudely arrogant, a fact that Americans have been slow to recognize.

Embedded in Americans’ belief in their nation’s universal significance is a sense of mission, which sometimes emerges as a crusading mentality. This sense of destiny also reflects American exceptionalism, the conviction that the United States is qualitatively different from—and better than—other states. The objective basis for considering the nation to be exceptional is its ideological nature, “the creed of our political faith,” as Thomas Jefferson put it.<sup>11</sup> In the words of Seymour Martin Lipset:

Becoming American [is] a religious, that is, ideological act. . . . The United States is a country organized around an ideology which includes a set of dogmas about the nature of a good society. Americanism . . . is an “ism” or ideology in the same way that communism or fascism or liberalism are isms. . . . In Europe, nationality is related to community, and thus one cannot become un-English or un-Swedish. Being an American, however, is an ideological commitment. It is not a matter of birth. Those who reject American values are un-American.<sup>12</sup>

The belief that the United States is an exceptional nation defined by a creed is inherently normative. As Daniel Bell argued, exceptionalism means more than simply being “different” from others; every society, indeed every individual, is unique in some way, and there is no great pride to be gotten from that fact.<sup>13</sup> Exceptionalism, therefore, connotes an element of superiority, an intangible but clearly recognizable quality that we can identify in geniuses and other people of extraordinary talent on the individual level, for example, and that is rooted in what is sometimes referred to as the “genius” of America’s political organization at the collective level. American exceptionalists note that the United States somehow managed to solve the previously intractable challenge of establishing a political regime that is both stable and free, thus demonstrating its possession of some special quality that other states lacked. In turn, this ennobling discovery entitled Americans to lead other nations so that they might thereby enjoy some of the exemplar’s success; even more, it has generally been understood to carry for Americans a *duty*, a peculiar responsibility to lead others and share its self-evidently desirable liberty.<sup>14</sup>

<sup>11</sup> Thomas Jefferson, “First Inaugural Address” in Davis Newton Lott, ed., *The Presidents Speak: The Inaugural Addresses of the American Presidents, from Washington to Clinton* (New York: Henry Holt, 1994).

<sup>12</sup> Seymour Martin Lipset, *American Exceptionalism: A Double-Edged Sword* (New York: W.W. Norton, 1996), 18, 31.

<sup>13</sup> Daniel Bell, “The ‘Hegelian Secret’: Civil Society and American Exceptionalism” in Byron E. Shafer, ed., *Is America Different? A New Look at American Exceptionalism* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1991), 46–70.

<sup>14</sup> For potent criticisms of the idea of American exceptionalism, see J. Victor Koschmann, “Review Essay: The Nationalism of Cultural Uniqueness,” *American Historical Review* 102 (June 1997): 758–768; Ian Tyrrell, “American Exceptionalism in an Age of International History,” *American Historical Review* 96 (October 1991): 1031–1055; and Reinhold Niebuhur, *The Irony of American History* (New York: Charles Scribner’s Sons, 1954).

The normative dimension of American national identity builds from two disparate sources. The first, American civil religion, is the religious expression of American nationalism; it imparts to Americans the conviction that their enterprise is of truly transcendent value. The second is the Enlightenment, which not only provided the liberal theory that gave form to the American political system, but also supplied a crucial component of America's global teleological ambition. Each tradition merits brief comment.

America's civil religion allows Americans to express their patriotic sentiments in religious language and vice-versa by imagining that a fundamental consistency exists between their political preferences and the theological imperatives of their faith.<sup>15</sup> Despite the claim that some have made that "it is somewhat misleading . . . to refer to the civil or national religion as a 'common denominator' faith," American civil religion in both style and substance bears the strong imprint of America's religious mainstream.<sup>16</sup> Historically, this has meant that its rhetorical and substantive content has been deeply structured by Protestant beliefs: despite its ecumenism, American civil religion rejoices in the favor of Providence, not Allah or Buddha.

America's civil religion provides a way for the nation to interpret its collective, signature experiences according to the logic of ultimacy. In particular, it has often suggested a special role for the country in millennial history. For example, the two most significant events to give substance to America's civil religion were the Revolutionary War and the Civil War. Each conflict inculcated a strongly redemptive message, the first from the corruption of the Old World, the second from the collective sins of the United States itself.<sup>17</sup> Ernest Lee Tuveson, a religious historian, notes how each war, the second in particular, was regarded at the time as "more than just another war about a moral issue, even if a great one; it was *the* crisis of mankind, even if only one nation was involved."<sup>18</sup> That an internal war could be regarded in apocalyptic terms shows that in American civil religion, the nation-state itself is regarded as figuring prominently and directly in God's broader plan for the human race. Civil religion allows Americans to express in the language of transcendence that the United States is an exceptional country and that the American people have a providential destiny. A certain unshakable confidence attaches to foreign policies that are believed to be not only approved by God, but perhaps even required by His inscrutable plan for mankind; civil religion can subtly impart that

<sup>15</sup> Robert N. Bellah, "Civil Religion in America" in Russell E. Richey and Donald G. Jones, eds., *American Civil Religion* (New York: Harper & Row, 1974), 21–44. See also, Dante Germino, *The Inaugural Addresses of American Presidents: The Public Philosophy and Rhetoric*, with a preface and introduction by Kenneth W. Thompson (New York: University Press of America, 1984).

<sup>16</sup> Conrad Cherry, *God's New Israel: Religious Interpretations of American Destiny*, 2nd ed. (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1998), 11.

<sup>17</sup> See Cherry, *God's New Israel*, 11–12; and Bellah, "Civil Religion," 30–32.

<sup>18</sup> Ernest Lee Tuveson, *Redeemer Nation: The Idea of America's Millennial Role* (Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press, 1968), 195–196.

aura to American actions. One can understand neither the crusading moral spirit that imbues American nationalism nor the centrality of the sense of American mission to U.S. foreign policy without taking due account of American civil religion.

The Enlightenment (at least a watered-down version of it) was also embedded at the country's founding and came intensively to structure the national consciousness.<sup>19</sup> Its normative political vision encouraged widespread individual freedom in order that under the guidance of science, the human race could progress toward perfection. Although, on one level, the protection of humanity's natural liberty sought by Enlightenment political theorists was regarded as an end unto itself, the ultimate purpose of this freedom was progress. If people were free, then they could attain perfection, both individually and as a race. What this progress required was a break from the past, whose corrupt institutions were not amenable to the development of a scientific, forward-looking worldview. A fresh beginning was needed, with past practices discarded and replaced with a new world order founded on reason. National and religious loyalties were productive of little but superstition and bloodshed; they thus had to be abolished. This was the hope and vision of many Enlightenment thinkers: a new beginning in human history, when an individual's relations with both others and herself would be founded on a new set of principles and values that would enable her at last to become perfect, in conditions of freedom, equality, and justice. It should be pointed out that American Enlightenment thinkers tended to espouse less-robust visions of human perfectibility than their European, especially French, counterparts, and the movement's antireligious posture certainly gained no traction in the United States. Nevertheless, the general worldview of liberal optimism was held in common by American and European thinkers alike, particularly the commitment to progress in freedom.

Given these hopes, it is not difficult to see how Enlightenment thinkers placed special value first on North America, which they regarded as a continental *tabula rasa*, and later on the state that was born there. (Obviously, the slate was not in fact "clean," and the fact that the European settlers could regard it as such indicates the strength of both their racism and their willingness to bend their perception of social realities to make them conform to their idealistic vision. It is beyond the purview of this paper to address the significance of racial particularism in American national identity, but the reader should bear its importance in mind when considering the connection between American national identity and foreign policy, especially when the United States deals with the nonwhites who comprise most of the world's population.) Americans agreed with many Enlightenment precepts, particularly regarding government, and they eagerly subscribed to the Enlightenment's esteem for their mission. As Wilson

<sup>19</sup> For what remains the best account of the Enlightenment's importance to American political identity, see Louis Hartz, *The Liberal Tradition in America*, with a new Introduction by Tom Wicker (New York: Harcourt, Brace & Company, 1991).



Carey McWilliams writes, “The new theories were flattering, appealing to the uncertain pride of America. For more than one theorist of the Enlightenment—Herder and Blake, among the still prominent—America was the redemptive land which had escaped European corruptions and recovered the liberty of nature. Free to experiment with the new social and moral teachings, America was ‘the first lodge of humanity,’ and from her example might arise the freedom and brotherhood of man.”<sup>20</sup>

The United States represented in many respects the literal break from the past demanded by the Enlightenment vision, and its existence heartened those who anticipated impatiently humanity’s new start. For these optimists on both sides of the Atlantic, the United States promised to be the instrumentality by which man’s highest hopes could be realized. Because it lacked both a feudal tradition and an overarching religious establishment, it could quietly and without great convulsions institute a model form of democratic government and society.<sup>21</sup> America’s geography and founding moment crystallized in the Enlightenment mind the recognition that this nation presented the ideal opportunity for putting into practice the values of the new era. In this way, the Enlightenment not only encouraged Americans to adopt a liberal form of government, it also contributed to the missionary dimension of their collective identity.

### THE IDEA OF AMERICAN MISSION AND U.S. FOREIGN POLICY

In practice, American nationalism influences U.S. foreign policy by layering altruism on top of basic, self-interested power-seeking behavior while allowing Americans to believe that their good intentions lack a selfish dimension and are truly, in some objective way, good for others. Americans seek to implant or strengthen democratic governance in other states not only to make other peoples “free” (and however culturally insensitive Americans may be in this desire, articulations of this goal are generally sincere), but also and primarily because doing so expands American power. As the divinely appointed vehicle for attaining lasting human progress, the United States is entitled to interpret for other states their own best interests, which are inevitably found to be consistent with those of the United States. After all, inasmuch as the United States both implements God’s purposes and leads the secular progress of mankind, other states logically cannot have legitimate interests that oppose America’s. By conceptually merging the U.S. national interest with the improvement of other countries in this way, the idea of American mission allows the United States to enhance its own power on the world stage not by “conquering” other states, but by “liberating” them.

By spreading its core values, the United States advances the new stage in human history whose inauguration was marked by the country’s founding. Strength-

<sup>20</sup> Wilson Carey McWilliams, *The Idea of Fraternity in America* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1973), 173.

<sup>21</sup> See Hartz, *The Liberal Tradition*, 3–32.

ening the role of the United States in world affairs is therefore, *ipso facto*, legitimate and good for the world. As Arthur Schlesinger, Jr., wrote, “So the impression developed that in the United States of America the Almighty had contrived a nation unique in its virtue and magnanimity, exempt from the motives that governed all other states. . . . [This] brought the republic from the original idea of America as exemplary experiment to the recent idea of America as mankind’s designated judge, jury, and executioner.”<sup>22</sup> According to American nationalist doctrine, in short, the United States can justifiably increase its power and prestige on the world stage, consistently with its mission, because, unlike any other nation-state, it embodies and promulgates values that all people share, even if they do not know it yet. As the following section will show, President Bush has freshly generated a focused sense of mission through his handling of the terrorist attacks and re-articulation of America’s world role. Notably, America’s new mission as spelled out by Bush draws significantly from its Protestant roots.

#### FRAMING THE ATTACKS AND DEFINING THE BUSH DOCTRINE

Such an awesomely powerful experience as that which the nation underwent in September 2001 requires framing and contextualization by one who has the authority to do so. People need help getting their minds around events and circumstances that are otherwise incomprehensible. They need someone to explain to them the meaning of what they are going through, to answer the “why” questions that signature moments provoke. In the United States, it falls to the president to provide this service, and indeed this responsibility lies at the heart of the president’s role in American governance. As the figurehead of the nation, the president is understood both to embody and to express its values, character, and purpose, and this status allows the president uniquely to speak both to and for the country as a whole. He is, in fact, expected to do so when conditions warrant.

The president’s role as figurehead is also one that confers tremendous power, which he can use to generate support for favored policies.<sup>23</sup> A president’s ability to shape public opinion is enhanced during crises because it is then that the American people most urgently cast about for leadership and solutions. It is also magnified in the realm of foreign affairs, where the president’s constitutional authority is comparatively greater than in domestic affairs, especially since the Supreme Court’s dubious but controlling decision in *U.S. v. Curtiss-Wright*, which asserted (with little basis) that the president’s overriding authority in international affairs is rooted in sovereign prerogative rather than a constitutional allocation of power.<sup>24</sup> It is not coincidental, therefore, that the

<sup>22</sup> Schlesinger, “America: Experiment or Destiny,” 517.

<sup>23</sup> Sam Kernell, *Going Public: New Strategies of Presidential Leadership* (Washington, DC: CQ Press, 1986).

<sup>24</sup> 299 U.S. 304, (1936).

strongest and most meaningful statements regarding American national identity have come from presidents during wartime. September 11 was just the most recent event, like the Civil War or World War II, when Americans looked to their leader to help them understand what they were going through and what it meant for them as a people. It was also an opportunity for the president to seize control of the national agenda and shape the country's grand strategy in foreign policy. In classic fashion, President Bush accomplished both tasks by invoking nationalism and foreign policy in the service of each other.

In addition to providing reassurance, the speeches that Bush gave to the American people during the crucial week and a half between the attacks and his 20 September emergency State of the Union Address had two broad goals. The first was to equate the United States with freedom, compassion, and tolerance, qualities that Bush claimed made the country the target of the "evildoers" enmity. Bush's goal, which he easily achieved, was to define the world in Manichean terms, with the United States symbolizing "good" and its enemies embodying "evil." Doing so provided implicit moral justification for the outcome of his second goal, which was to prepare the public to accept the policy manifestations of the eventual administration response. These two rhetorical strategies worked in tandem, so that in the course of employing emotionally charged and provocatively nationalistic imagery, Bush incrementally introduced to the public the core elements of his antiterrorism and subsequently broader foreign policy agenda.

### AMERICA THE FREE, HOME OF COMPASSION AND TOLERANCE

As the quote introducing this paper reveals, President Bush had begun describing the terrorist strike as an attack on freedom as early as 12 September. He elaborated this theme in his remarks at the National Cathedral two days later during a civil-religious ceremony marking the National Day of Prayer and Remembrance (such healing events, charged with religious and nationalist imagery, follow every major national disaster). In this speech/political sermon, Bush declared, "In every generation, the world has produced enemies of human freedom. They have attacked America, because we are freedom's home and defender."<sup>25</sup> In a subsequent press conference, he added that the terrorists "can't stand freedom; they hate what America stands for."<sup>26</sup> These examples can be multiplied, and Bush's steady and unflinching repetition of the assertion that the United States was targeted *because* it represents freedom quickly became assimilated into Americans' understanding of the nature of their foes.

<sup>25</sup> "President's Remarks at National Day of Prayer and Remembrance," 14 September 2001, accessed on the White House website at <http://www.whitehouse.gov/news/releases/2001/09/print/20010914-2.html>, 2 October 2001.

<sup>26</sup> "Remarks by the President upon Arrival at the South Lawn," 16 September 2001, accessed on the White House website at <http://whitehouse.gov/news/releases/2001/09/print/20010916-2.html>, 2 October 2001.

In addition to freedom, Bush also identified two other features as being part of the national character—compassion and tolerance—and according to the President, the terrorists attacked them, too. In one of his early speeches, for example, Bush affirmed, “In this trial, we have been reminded, and the world has seen, that our fellow Americans are generous and kind, resourceful and brave.”<sup>27</sup> Later, he announced, “We’re too great a nation to allow the evil-doers to affect our soul and our spirit. . . . This is a great land. It’s a great land, because our people are so decent and strong and compassionate.”<sup>28</sup> And in remarks condemning anti-Muslim activities, he declared, “Those who feel like they can intimidate our fellow citizens to take out their anger don’t represent the best of America, they represent the worst of humankind, and they should be ashamed of their behavior. This is a great country. It’s a great country because we share the same values of respect and dignity and human worth.”<sup>29</sup>

Clearly, these expressions of American integrity were intended to reaffirm Americans’ sense of worth and to support appropriate private conduct during a volatile period. Any leader in any country will testify to the goodness of his or her nation during a time of trial, and Bush was extraordinarily effective in helping the American people through those dark days. In conjunction with his steadily more militaristic rhetoric and identification of the enemy as evildoers who not only lacked American virtues but specifically attacked the United States because of them, his consistent equation of America with virtuousness served as well to dichotomize the world between those, such as the United States, who are good and those who oppose it, who are evil. In this way, by painting America and its enemies with such a broadly abstract and moralistic brush, Bush left himself no gray areas within which to conduct foreign affairs, one consequence of which is that those who disagree with the United States for any reason are thereby identifying themselves as either evil or, at best, morally flawed. At the time, though, this moralistic language seems to have been what the American people wanted and needed to hear. This tension between the demands of geopolitics and the need for American statesmen to use ideologically charged nationalistic language remains one of the tragic ironies of American politics.

Framing the attack as one motivated by a hatred of freedom and compassion enabled the president to emphasize that America’s retaliation would be directed against moral outliers, and not against Islamic countries per se. “We don’t view this as a war of religion, in any way, shape or form,” he announced, for example. “And for those who try to pit religion against religion, our great nation will stand up and reject that kind of thought. . . . We’re going to lead the

<sup>27</sup> “President’s Remarks at National Day of Prayer and Remembrance.”

<sup>28</sup> “Remarks by the President Supporting Charities,” 18 September 2001, accessed on the White House website at <http://www.whitehouse.gov/news/releases/2001/09/20010918-1.html>, 4 October 2001.

<sup>29</sup> “Remarks by the President at the Islamic Center of Washington, DC,” 17 September 2001, accessed on the White House website at <http://whitehouse.gov/news/releases/2001/09/20010917-11.html>, 2 October 2001.

world to fight for freedom, and we'll have Muslim and Jew and Christian side by side with us."<sup>30</sup> This was an important point to make, and Bush did both the country and American nationalism a great service when he praised the Islamic faith.<sup>31</sup> Of course, these comments were made necessary by ugly incidents from around the country in which Muslim Americans and Arab Americans (and even a South Asian Sikh) were targeted by some of their white, Christian compatriots, who seemed to believe that September 11 marked the beginning of a religious war. The suggestion of holy war had also been reinforced by one of Bush's own comments, in which he said, "This crusade, this war on terrorism is going to take a while."<sup>32</sup> To be fair to the President, it is almost certain that he did not have the capital "C" Crusades in mind when he made that off-the-cuff remark. As our earlier discussion of the idea of American mission should make clear, a "crusading" spirit has always attached itself to American foreign policy, and it is reasonable to assume that Bush used the term in that sense. On the other hand, it is revealing that Bush did not consider how his Islamic audience would have interpreted his use of the word "crusade," coming as it did from an avowed Christian fundamentalist in response to an attack by Muslim individuals.

Indeed, given civil religion's prominence in America's nationalist mythos, it is not at all surprising that both Muslims and many non-Muslims, including Europeans of all stripes, have believed that America's war against terrorism has had a Christian dimension. The National Day of Prayer and Remembrance, after all, was held in a Christian house of worship, and the symbolism of the President preaching literally from the altar communicated far more about the religious center of gravity in the American nation than did his subsequent pleas for tolerance. As one might expect, moreover, his comments on this occasion were particularly evocative of civil-religious imagery, as his closing remarks indicate: "On this national day of prayer and remembrance, we ask almighty God to watch over our nation, and grant us patience and resolve in all that is to come. . . . May He bless the souls of the departed. May He comfort our own. And may He always guide our country. God bless America."<sup>33</sup> Of course, the President could not have done otherwise than lead this service even if he had been so inclined, and his sermon was ecumenical and deeply appreciated by Americans of all faiths. Nevertheless, the substance of his comments there and elsewhere during the first few days and weeks after the attacks reaffirmed the civil-religious dimension of American nationalism and helped the nation to take comfort in the belief that despite suffering apparent retribution for unnamed sins, they were, in fact, a good and noble people whose values and bearing still enjoyed divine favor.

<sup>30</sup> "Remarks by the President at Photo Opportunity with House and Senate Leadership," 19 September 2001, accessed on the White House website at <http://whitehouse.gov/news/releases/2001/09/20010919-8.html>, 5 August 2002.

<sup>31</sup> "Remarks by the President at Islamic Center."

<sup>32</sup> "Remarks by the President Upon Arrival at the South Lawn."

<sup>33</sup> "President's Remarks at National Day of Prayer and Remembrance."

Bush's civil-religious fervor, it should be further pointed out, did not emerge spontaneously during the postattack climate of jingoistic mourning. Rather, it would be more accurate to say that September 11 created a particularly acute context within which Bush's already well-developed nationalism could find both ready articulation and an unusually receptive audience. Clear evidence of his pre-September 11 religious nationalism, for example, peppers his inaugural address, as when he perorated, "We are not this story's author, who fills time and eternity with his purpose."<sup>34</sup> Yet, it would be mistaken to understate the powerful role that the attacks themselves played in not only clarifying American nationalism but also in merging it with American foreign policy. If anything, September 11 roused Bush's righteous patriotism and gave it focused meaning and purpose.

### DEVELOPING THE DOCTRINE

In the chaos of September 11 and its aftermath, the desire for vengeance understandably surged through Americans' veins. In his address to the nation on the night of the attacks, therefore, Bush plainly stated: "The United States will hunt down and punish those responsible for these cowardly acts," adding, "The resolve of our great nation is being tested. But make no mistake: We will show the world that we will pass this test."<sup>35</sup> From the very outset, then, it was obvious that the United States would use force to strike back at those who viciously murdered its innocent civilians, and no state would have been expected to do otherwise. Given the fact that the actual perpetrators were dead, however, the question was, who to go after?

On 13 September, Bush gave his first hint of an answer when he announced that "*those who helped or harbored the terrorists will be punished—and punished severely. The enormity of their evil demands it.*"<sup>36</sup> The following day at the national prayer service, Bush ratcheted up the moralism in his rhetoric, and in the process, he expanded the range of potential targets. "Our responsibility to history is already clear: to answer these attacks and rid the world of evil."<sup>37</sup> On 17 September, he clarified his moralism somewhat:

We are planning a broad and sustained campaign to secure our country and *eradicate the evil of terrorism*. . . . Great tragedy has come to us, and we are meeting it with the best that is in our country, with courage and concern for others. Because this is America. This is who we are. This is what our enemies hate and have attacked. And this is why we will prevail.

<sup>34</sup> "President George W. Bush's Inaugural Address," 20 January 2001, accessed on the White House website at <http://whitehouse.gov/news/inaugural-address.html>, 23 September 2003.

<sup>35</sup> "Remarks by the President upon Arrival at Barksdale Air Force Base," 11 September 2001, accessed on the White House website at <http://www.whitehouse.gov/news/releases/2001/09/20010911-1.html>, 2 October 2001.

<sup>36</sup> "Presidential Proclamation: National Day of Prayer and Remembrance for the Victims of the Terrorist Attacks on September 11, 2001," 13 September 2001, accessed on the White House website at <http://www.whitehouse.gov/news/releases/2001/09/20010913-7.html>, 2 October 2001 (emphasis added).

<sup>37</sup> "President's Remarks at National Day of Prayer and Remembrance."

(Bush was explicit in extending the object of the American response beyond the immediate perpetrators when he said, “After all, our mission is not just Osama bin Laden, the al Qaeda organization. Our mission is to battle terrorism and to join with freedom-loving people.”<sup>38</sup>)

In just a few days, then, the President succeeded in forcefully reassuring the American people that they were great, strong, and good and that they would punish with force those who had made them suffer. But in his moral posturing and nationalistic fervor, he also promised them more: the United States would not only punish the network behind the nefarious suicide pilots, it would also eradicate terrorism itself. Further, the United States would target not only terrorists but also those who aid them. Thus, when at last he felt prepared to articulate fully the country’s formal response to the terrorist attacks, President Bush had already prepared the American people to accept what needed to be done and to believe that the country’s response would reflect the essential spirit of American national identity. But in seizing the opportunity to refashion the national mission, he also left America’s options extremely open-ended. In this way, he spelled out a strategy that went far beyond what a narrow tailoring to the proximate causes of September 11 would have suggested. The result is what we now call the Bush doctrine.

### THE BUSH DOCTRINE: FIRST DRAFT

Bush devoted a substantial portion of his 20 September emergency State of the Union Address, in which he first spelled out his doctrine, to identifying America’s new enemies. In particular, he named al Qaeda and the Taliban regime as the objects of immediate concern, and he made some very specific requests of the latter if it were not to risk facing American military might.<sup>39</sup> As we now know, the Taliban refused these demands, and the United States removed it from power in Afghanistan. When he had previously defined the enemy more broadly than these two groups, Bush had identified states that harbor or support terrorism as “hostile regimes,” but in this address, he went further: “Every nation in every region now has a decision to make,” he intoned. “Either you are with us or you are with the terrorists.” Like any great moral issue, apparently, America’s global war on terror could not tolerate neutrality.<sup>40</sup>

Blending his new “with-us-or-against-us” posture with traditional, universalist constructions of American nationalism, Bush then described the new war on terror as one to be waged for the good of mankind. “This is not, however, just

<sup>38</sup> “Remarks by the President to Employees at the Pentagon,” 17 September 2001, accessed on the White House website at <http://whitehouse.gov/news/releases/2001/09/20010917-3.html>, 4 October 2001 (emphasis added).

<sup>39</sup> George W. Bush, “President Bush’s Address on Terrorism before a Joint Meeting of Congress: Transcript,” 21 September 2001, accessed on *New York Times on the Web* at [www.nytimes.com/2001/09/21/national/21BTEX.html](http://www.nytimes.com/2001/09/21/national/21BTEX.html), 21 September 2001.

<sup>40</sup> *Ibid.*

America's fight," he claimed. "And what is at stake is not just America's freedom. This is the world's fight, this is civilization's fight, this is the fight of all who believe in progress and pluralism, tolerance and freedom." In this way, Bush both transformed an attack against one country into an attack on the "civilized" world—a suggestion of collective security that he acknowledged in a passing reference to NATO<sup>41</sup>—and cemented the globally Manichean perspective that he had been encouraging since the attacks.

Interpolated within these descriptions of American national identity and the enemy that opposed it were suggestions about what exactly the country would do to win the "war." Most important was his hint that the use of military force was imminent, and that it would be directed against terrorists wherever they happened to be. In addition, he promised to "starve terrorists of funding" and to use "every means of diplomacy, every tool of intelligence, every instrument of law enforcement" to destroy the terrorist networks. He would nurture a multilateral coalition to achieve this end, which would be bound not only by shared values but also by a shared vulnerability to terrorism. Bush also announced the creation of the Office of Homeland Security, indicating the new priority of the government's bureaucracies.

Ultimately, Bush framed the conflict against terrorism as implicating the world's destiny. On one side were al Qaeda and other "enemies of freedom," who had the goal of "remaking the world and imposing [their] radical beliefs on people everywhere." On the other side was the United States, with its own ideas about how the world should look:

As long as the United States is determined and strong, this will not be an age of terror. This will be an age of liberty here and across the world. . . . In our grief and anger, we have found our mission and our moment. Freedom and fear are at war. The advance of human freedom, the great achievement of our time and the great hope of every time, now depends on us. Our nation, this generation, will lift the dark threat of violence from our people and our future. We will rally the world to this cause by our efforts, by our courage. . . . Freedom and fear, justice and cruelty, have always been at war. And we know that God is not neutral between them.<sup>42</sup>

This earliest incarnation of the Bush doctrine thus held that the United States would use military force against terrorists of global reach and against the states that harbor them. It would also engage in a multilateral strategy of freezing financial assets and sharing intelligence in pursuit of the goal of a global freedom built in America's image. These were fairly specific priorities, albeit broadly framed, and they responded to the assault of September 11. As we have since witnessed, though, Bush's broadly dichotomous language has proven to be as important to his foreign policy objectives as these concrete proposals, and the logic behind the rhetoric has spawned a comprehensive vision that builds on this post-September 11 groundwork even as it defines a radical new blueprint for international relations and America's role in them.

<sup>41</sup> Ibid.

<sup>42</sup> Ibid.



## FINALIZING THE DOCTRINE: FROM NYC TO BAGHDAD AND BEYOND

Since Bush first enunciated his doctrine in September 2001, he has added two significant dimensions to it. The first is his association with the “enemy” of those who develop weapons of mass destruction (WMDs). He first alluded to this threat in his United Nations speech of 9 November 2001—less than two months after the terrorist attacks and long before Iraq was on most people’s radar screens—when he warned, “Civilization itself, the civilization we share, is threatened.”<sup>43</sup> Bush more formally incorporated these actors into the Bush doctrine by memorably uttering, during his annual State of the Union address in January 2002, “States like these [he mentioned specifically Iran, Iraq, and North Korea], and their terrorist allies, constitute an axis of evil, arming to threaten the peace of the world.”<sup>44</sup> Bush’s use of this by-now notorious phrase was premised on these states’ desire to develop WMDs, a dubious criterion for such severe moral evaluation (especially when one considers that the United States itself has developed many such weapons), but one that Americans were prepared to accept as long as it somehow related to terrorism. Bush continued to stress the centrality of WMDs to his antiterror agenda throughout the year following the terrorist attacks, and by seamlessly integrating this concern into his post–September 11 doctrine, he normatively and conceptually tied his subsequent Iraq policy into the deep structure of America’s global posture. In March, for example, Bush stressed that “Men with no respect for life must never be allowed to control the ultimate instruments of death.”<sup>45</sup> He repeated the new mantra a month later: “And for the long-term security of America and civilization itself, we must confront the great threat of biological and chemical and nuclear weapons in the hands of terrorists or hostile regimes. . . . History has called us to these responsibilities and we accept them. America has always had a special mission to defend justice and advance freedom around the world.”<sup>46</sup>

The second major development in the Bush doctrine, preemption, laid the groundwork for Bush’s Iraq policy even more forcefully. In a major foreign policy statement, his graduation speech at West Point on 1 June 2002, President Bush spelled out America’s new policy. As one of the most important recent addresses on U.S. foreign policy, this speech merits particular attention. In it, Bush was unusually clear in articulating the rationale for America’s preemption

<sup>43</sup> George W. Bush, “Text: President Bush Addresses the U.N.,” 10 November 2001, accessed on *The Washington Post Online* at [www.washingtonpost.com/wp-srv/nation/specials/attacked/transcripts/bushtext\\_111001](http://www.washingtonpost.com/wp-srv/nation/specials/attacked/transcripts/bushtext_111001), 10 November 2001.

<sup>44</sup> George W. Bush, “Prepared Text: The State of the Union Address,” 29 January 2002, accessed on *The Washington Post Online* at <http://washingtonpost.com/wp-srv/onpolitics/transcripts/sou012902.html>, 29 January 2002.

<sup>45</sup> “Remarks by the President on the Six-Month Anniversary of the September 11th Attacks,” 11 March 2002,” accessed on the White House website at <http://www.whitehouse.gov/news/releases/2002/03/20020311-1.html>, 5 August 2002.

<sup>46</sup> “President Promotes Compassionate Conservatism,” 30 April 2002, accessed on the White House website at <http://www.whitehouse.gov/news/releases/2002/04/20020430-5.html>, 5 August 2002.

(or, more accurately, *prevention*) policy: “We cannot defend America by hoping for the best. . . . If we wait for threats to fully materialize, we will have waited too long. . . . We must take the battle to the enemy, disrupt his plans, and confront the worst threats before they emerge.”<sup>47</sup> By explicitly advocating the violation of one of international society and law’s most fundamental norms, that against external aggression, while simultaneously eschewing the need for international approval, Bush moved the United States considerably closer to an unambiguously unilateralist posture. The United States, he communicated through this policy, would not be bound by the same rules as other states. His rationale was American exceptionalism (“The twentieth century ended with a single surviving model of human progress,” he claimed at one point), but the real basis of his position was American power.<sup>48</sup> Nevertheless, he argued, because the United States represents universal moral values, other states should not regard this posture as dangerous to them—unless they are on the wrong side of the moral coin: “Because the war on terror will require resolve and patience, it will also require firm moral purpose. In this way our struggle is similar to the Cold War . . . [and] moral clarity was essential to our victory in the Cold War. Moral truth is the same in every culture, in every time, and in every place. . . . We are in a conflict between good and evil, and America will call evil by its name.”<sup>49</sup>

### THE BUSH DOCTRINE, FULLY FORMED: THE NATIONAL SECURITY STRATEGY

All of the elements of Bush’s vision for America’s global role came together in the National Security Strategy (NSS), which was released on 20 September 2002.<sup>50</sup> This document systematically laid out the administration’s vision for America’s place in the world, and it contained no surprises. Indeed, each section of the strategy was introduced with an excerpt from one or another previous speech—some of which have also been quoted here. In the NSS, Bush asserted the universality of American values and the inherent entitlement of the United States to establish the conditions according to which international relations should operate. As G. John Ikenberry put it, “It is a vision in which sovereignty becomes more absolute for America even as it becomes more conditional for countries that challenge Washington’s standards of internal and external behavior.”<sup>51</sup> Noting the country’s military and economic advantage

<sup>47</sup> “Remarks by the President at 2002 Graduation Exercise of the United States Military Academy,” 1 June 2002, accessed on the White House website at <http://www.whitehouse.gov/news/releases/2002/06/20020601-3.html>, 5 August 2002.

<sup>48</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>49</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>50</sup> For the best analysis of this document, see Edward Rhodes, “The Imperial Logic of Bush’s Liberal Agenda,” *Survival* (Spring, 2003): 131–154.

<sup>51</sup> G. John Ikenberry, “America’s Imperial Ambition,” *Foreign Affairs* 81 (September/October 2002): 44–60.

over both its actual and its potential competitors, the NSS made clear that both American interests and human progress depended on the continuation of this power gap: “Today, the United States enjoys a position of unparalleled military strength and great economic and political influence. . . . We will maintain the forces sufficient to support our obligations, and to defend freedom. Our forces will be strong enough to dissuade potential adversaries from pursuing a military build-up in hopes of surpassing, or equaling, the power of the United States.”<sup>52</sup> Unabashedly, the NSS defended this posture by reference to “a distinctly American internationalism that reflects the union of our values and our national interests.” It continued, “The aim of this strategy is to help make the world not just safer but better.”<sup>53</sup> In this way, and throughout the document, as the following synopsis will demonstrate, both the exceptionalism and the universalism of American national identity were consistently invoked to frame and legitimate—and in many cases, in fact, to constitute—the stated foreign policy interests. The NSS is the official statement of the Bush doctrine, and its vision is startling in its scope.

Repeating an argument first made in the West Point address, the strategy argued that the world was at a turning point and that a new era in international politics was dawning: “Today, the international community has the best chance since the rise of the nation-state in the seventeenth century to build a world where great powers compete in peace instead of continually prepare for war. Today, the world’s great powers find ourselves on the same side—united by common dangers of terrorist violence and chaos. . . . We are also increasingly united by common values.”<sup>54</sup> Bush envisioned a central role for the United States in the building and maintenance of this world order and found justification for this position in its universalism: “Freedom is the non-negotiable demand of human dignity; the birthright of every person—in every civilization. . . . Today, humanity holds in its hands the opportunity to further freedom’s triumph over [its] foes. The United States welcomes our responsibility to lead in this great mission.”<sup>55</sup>

The specific actions outlined in the NSS that would help to make concrete these grandiose sentiments include the following: support “human dignity”; strengthen antiterrorism alliances; defuse regional conflicts; eliminate the threat of WMDs; enhance free markets and free trade; “expand the circle of development by opening societies and building the infrastructure of democracy”; develop multilateral agendas; and upgrade the military.<sup>56</sup> It is worth taking a moment here to refer to some of the language used in the NSS to frame a few of these objectives as a way of demonstrating the moralistic and nationalistic logic of the Bush doctrine. Regarding the goal of “Champion[ing] Aspirations for Hu-

<sup>52</sup> George W. Bush, “Full Text: Bush’s National Security Strategy,” 1, 22–23.

<sup>53</sup> *Ibid.*, 3.

<sup>54</sup> *Ibid.*, 2.

<sup>55</sup> *Ibid.*, 3.

<sup>56</sup> *Ibid.*, 3–4.

man Dignity,” for instance, the NSS noted that “the United States must defend liberty and justice because these principles are right and true for all people everywhere. . . . Embodying lessons from our past and using the opportunity we have today, the national security strategy of the United States must start from these core beliefs and look outward for possibilities to expand liberty.”<sup>57</sup> The war on terrorism, moreover, was treated not simply as a security threat: “In the war against global terrorism, we will never forget that we are ultimately fighting for our democratic values and way of life. Freedom and fear are at war.”<sup>58</sup> And in promoting its economic vision, Bush reminded readers that “The concept of ‘free trade’ arose as a moral principle even before it was a pillar of economics.”<sup>59</sup>

Many elements of the strategy seemed to be directed specifically at justifying the by-then clearly developing war against Iraq. In particular, the NSS undertook a painstaking explanation about how both WMDs and preemption were central components of America’s broader foreign policy vision. The NSS tied the two concerns together in a manner that clearly argued that the primary indicator of whether the United States would find itself obligated to intervene in a given state was the type of regime that ruled it. Of immediate concern were “a small number of rogue states that, while different in important ways, share a number of attributes.” Rogue states sponsor terrorism, ignore international law, threaten their neighbors, “brutalize their own people and squander their national resources for the personal gain of the rulers.” They strive to acquire WMDs “to be used as threats” and “reject basic human values and hate the United States and everything for which it stands.”<sup>60</sup> Unmistakably, Iraq satisfied these criteria. The NSS insisted that preemption was the only viable policy for dealing with rogue states because they were destabilizing and unpredictable, unlike America’s previous adversary, the Soviet Union. Furthermore, given these characteristics during a time marked by the threat of global terrorism and the capacity of modern technology, preemption, properly applied, included preventive action aimed at eliminating threats before they became manifest.<sup>61</sup>

In the NSS, therefore, we can see how Bush carried forward on the current of American nationalism September 11’s urgent posture and began applying it indirectly to Iraq. Certainly, the NSS was not meant to serve merely as a justification for the evolving Iraq policy, but it did spell out evocatively why an American invasion was justified by the logic of both interests and values.

## THE WAR AGAINST IRAQ

The NSS presents a broad vision for U.S. foreign policy, and many of its stated goals are both commendable and consistent with the nobler strands of Ameri-

<sup>57</sup> *Ibid.*, 4–5.

<sup>58</sup> *Ibid.*, 7.

<sup>59</sup> *Ibid.*, 14.

<sup>60</sup> *Ibid.*, 10.

<sup>61</sup> *Ibid.*, 11–12.

can political thought and practice. Who could argue, after all, with defending human dignity or helping to defuse regional conflicts? Nevertheless, the statement too conveniently provides a coherent framework for justifying what was by then the obvious focus of the administration: regime change in Iraq. Rumors of the administration's intentions regarding Iraq had been circulating for some time before the release of the NSS (according to Richard Haas, the director of the policy planning staff at the State Department, the decision was set by early July).<sup>62</sup> When President Bush formally dispelled these rumors by unconditionally confirming them, he chose to make his announcement in a speech to the United Nations on 12 September 2002—just after the first anniversary of September 11. (The first clear statement from the administration stating that it had designs on Saddam Hussein actually came from Vice President Dick Cheney, in his speech to the National Convention of the Veterans of Foreign Wars on 26 August 2002. The 12 September 2002 speech was the first statement offered by the President himself.<sup>63</sup>) If the timing was insufficient to convey the symbolic merging of the Iraq agenda with the more general response to September 11, his rhetoric eliminated any lingering doubts.

In his 12 September 2002 speech, Bush sought to argue systematically that Iraq was in violation of several international laws and that the world community must respond vigorously to the challenge this situation represented. Although it is not the purpose of this paper to explore the machinations leading up to the war or to assess the validity of the war itself, it is pertinent to excerpt here some of the key speeches surrounding the war to show how Bush not only mingled it into the emotional viscera of September 11, but also legitimated it according to the nationalist themes detailed above. In his 2002 UN speech, for instance, Bush insisted:

With every step the Iraqi regime takes toward gaining and deploying the most terrible weapons, our own options to confront the regime will narrow. And if an emboldened regime were to supply these weapons to terrorist allies, then the attacks of September 11 would be a prelude to far greater horrors. . . . We must choose between a world of fear and a world of progress. We cannot stand by and do nothing while dangers gather. We must stand up for our security and for the permanent rights and hopes of mankind. By heritage and by choice, the United States of America will make that stand. And, delegates to the United Nations, you have the power to make that stand as well.<sup>64</sup>

A few weeks later, on 7 October 2002, Bush made his pitch directly to the American people from the Cincinnati Union Terminal. In his speech, he de-

<sup>62</sup> Nicholas Lemann, "How It Came to War," *The New Yorker* (31 March 2003): 36–40, 39.

<sup>63</sup> See Richard Cheney, "Full Text: In Cheney's Words," 26 August 2002, accessed on *New York Times Online* at <http://www.nytimes.com/2002/08/26/international/middleeast/26WEB-CHENEY.html>, 26 August 2002.

<sup>64</sup> George W. Bush, "Text: Bush's Speech to the U.N. on Iraq," 12 September 2002, accessed on *New York Times Online* at <http://www.nytimes.com/2002/09/12/politics/12AP-PTEX.html>, 12 September 2002.

tailed various atrocities the Hussein regime had committed upon the Iraqi people as a way of demonstrating its evil character. Several times, Bush referred explicitly to the terrorist attacks of September 11, at one point even linking Saddam's regime to the al Qaeda terrorist network—a connection that has never been convincingly proven and that has always been the weakest component of the administration's case for war.

In these and other speeches, Bush and other members of his administration pleaded that war would only be a last resort and that all sides hoped that a peaceful resolution could be found to the suddenly urgent crisis surrounding Hussein's alleged development of WMDs. From the moment that Iraq supplanted Afghanistan as the focus of the administration and of public discourse, however, it appeared obvious that there would be war. Bush therefore needed to convince the American people—and possibly the world, although that audience seemed secondary—that war's sacrifice was both necessary and honorable. The Bush doctrine performed this task. As noted, Bush consistently and repeatedly referred to September 11 in his Iraq speeches, thus reinforcing in Americans' minds a protean connection between the two, and in his major speeches touching on the topic, he made sure to recur to the nationalist imagery that he had already commandeered in the service of his doctrine.

In his 2003 State of the Union of Address, for example, Bush transitioned from his summary of the immediate administration response to September 11 to his discussion of Iraq by providing a summary of twentieth-century U.S. foreign policy that celebrated a noble superpower saving the world from evil. Bush's conclusion of the address—the time when presidents reliably invoke great and woolly abstractions to characterize the nation—employed such classically nationalist themes in a way that clearly implicated their relevance to U.S. foreign policy:

Americans are a resolute people, who have risen to every test of our time. Adversity has revealed the character of our country, to the world, and to ourselves. America is a strong nation, and honorable in the use of our strength. We exercise power without conquest, and sacrifice for the liberty of strangers. Americans are a free people, who know that freedom is the right of every person and the future of every nation. The liberty we prize is not America's gift to the world, it is God's gift to humanity. We Americans have faith in ourselves but not in ourselves alone. We do not claim to know all the ways of Providence, yet we can trust in them, placing our confidence in the loving God behind all of life, and all of history. May He guide us now, and may God continue to bless the United States of America.<sup>65</sup>

Throughout his speeches surrounding the Iraq war, Bush not only relied on God to justify his actions, he also claimed that the United States was ushering in a new, more democratic era. On 26 February 2003, for example, he justified the looming war by claiming:

<sup>65</sup> George W. Bush, "State of the Union Address," 28 January 2003, accessed on *New York Times Online* at <http://www.nytimes.com/2003/01/28/politics/28CND-TEXT1.html>, 28 January 2003.

The world has a clear interest in the spread of democratic values, because stable and free nations do not breed the ideologies of murder. They encourage the peaceful pursuit of a better life. . . . A new regime in Iraq would serve as a dramatic and inspiring example of freedom for other nations in the region. . . . By the resolve and purpose of America, and of our friends and allies, we will make this an age of progress and liberty. Free people will set the course of history, and free people will keep the peace of the world.<sup>66</sup>

Finally, having thus characterized America's mission to Iraq and the world, it was only to be expected that Bush would celebrate the conclusion of the "main part" of the hostilities by declaring, "In this battle, we have fought for the cause of liberty, and for the peace of the world." Bush wrapped his characterization of the war in nationalist imagery that not only referred to American history and values, but also hinted that service to America is akin to service to God:

Our commitment to liberty is America's tradition—declared at our founding, affirmed in Franklin Roosevelt's Four Freedoms, asserted in the Truman Doctrine and in Ronald Reagan's challenge to an evil empire. We are committed to freedom in Afghanistan, in Iraq and in a peaceful Palestine. The advance of freedom is the surest strategy to undermine the appeal of terror in the world. . . . American values and American interests lead in the same direction: We stand for human liberty. . . . Those we lost were last seen on duty. Their final act on this Earth was to fight a great evil and bring liberty to others.<sup>67</sup>

There is little reason to doubt that President Bush, as a leader whose obvious nationalism colors his perspective of global affairs, ever doubted that American security (filtered through the experience of September 11) and the peace and liberty of the world are coterminous.

## DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSION

Clearly, President Bush has mastered the art of marshalling nationalist symbolism in support of his foreign policy vision. This skill is both useful and problematic, for while American national identity has proven to be remarkably durable, current events suggest that it has become in some ways dangerously obsolete. Inasmuch as the United States is now at the center of the international system,<sup>68</sup> it can no longer find moral self-justification in being untainted by a corrupt world that it has been chosen to lead out of the dark ages, as historically it has liked to believe. Rather, it is essential that the United States accept that its relationship with the international order has changed since the early days of the

<sup>66</sup> George W. Bush, "President Discusses the Future of Iraq," 26 February 2003, accessed on the White House website at <http://www.whitehouse.gov/news/releases/2003/02/20030226-11.html>, 24 May 2003.

<sup>67</sup> George W. Bush, "President Bush Announces Combat Operations in Iraq Have Ended," 1 May 2003, accessed on the White House website at <http://whitehouse.gov/news/releases/2003/05/20030501-15.html>, 24 May 2003.

<sup>68</sup> Stephen G. Brooks and William C. Wohlforth, "American Primacy in Perspective," *Foreign Affairs* 81 (July/August 2002): 20–33.

republic when the core elements of American national identity were first set in place. In particular, traditional claims to moral distinctiveness must be abandoned. Unless its multilateral and nation-building dimensions—the cosmopolitan shadows of American national identity—are re-emphasized and strengthened, American universalism will continue to spawn a self-deceiving and increasingly dangerous paternalism. By this I do not mean to argue that American norms are flawed or that liberalism is not, on balance, preferable to its chief competitors. In general, Americans have accomplished many good things, both in terms of establishing liberal democracy as the norm for domestic governance and in regard to fostering a more stable and prosperous international community. Rather, it is the missionary disposition, the smug “holier-than-thou” character of American nationalism that must change. Simply put, it is time that Americans shed their self-identity as an exceptional people and accept instead their mature identity as integrated global citizens.<sup>69</sup>

Part of what is at stake is what Joseph Nye calls American “soft power,” or the ability of the United States to influence global affairs without coercion by relying only on the attraction of its norms and success.<sup>70</sup> The very existence of American soft power demonstrates that American nationalism does, in fact, have a noble side, which most of the world’s societies have recognized at some point or other.<sup>71</sup> Indeed, international norms today closely resemble those that the United States claims to champion. The world may not yet be at Francis Fukuyama’s “End of History,” but international law and current world opinion each rests inordinately on the same liberal democratic norms that the United States promulgates.<sup>72</sup> This global situation suggests that claims to American universalism are less fatuous than anti-American demonstrators have been prone to argue; freedom, as Woodrow Wilson and Bush each claimed for his own purposes, certainly does have a global appeal. The challenge confronting Americans as they enter a “new world order” will be to disentangle this recognition from the belief that only the moral agency of the United States can lead to the realization of humanity’s promise.<sup>73</sup>

The methods that the United States employed to achieve its goals between September 11 and the Iraq war, however, have generally perpetuated the globally unpopular, chauvinistic, and ultimately dangerous tendencies of American nationalism while undercutting those aspects of the American experience that other peoples have found attractive. Because America’s new foreign policy di-

<sup>69</sup> On this point, see Henry Nau, *At Home Abroad: Identity and Power in American Foreign Policy* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 2002).

<sup>70</sup> Joseph Nye, *The Paradox of American Power: Why the World’s Only Superpower Can’t Go It Alone* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2002).

<sup>71</sup> Geir Lundestad, “‘Empire By Invitation’ in the American Century” in Michael J. Hogan, ed., *The Ambiguous Legacy: US Foreign Relations in the “American Century”* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1999), 52–91.

<sup>72</sup> Thomas M. Franck, “The Emerging Right to Democratic Governance,” *American Journal of International Law* 86 (January 1992): 46–91.

<sup>73</sup> See Graham T. Allison, Jr. and Robert P. Beschel, Jr., “Can the United States Promote Democracy?” *Political Science Quarterly* 107 (Spring 1992): 81–98.



rection was spurred by an attack on American soil, which itself has become interwoven into the national mythos, militarism has become among the most pronounced features of the country's global posture. Unilateral militarism is a strategy that not only casts American exceptionalism in an ugly light but also belies, or at the very least distorts, claims to American universalism. Given the fact that as this paper shows, American nationalist rhetoric has been a fixture in Bush's foreign policy speeches, an unavoidable consequence is that the militaristic tactics employed by the administration will color the world's perceptions of American norms and identity. This result is both unfortunate and unnecessary.

A substantial source of the Bush doctrine's moral difficulties is rooted in its—and, more generally, American nationalism's—problematic association of a distinct political community with higher values. Consider the concept “freedom,” for example, which Bush has relied heavily upon to define the United States. Any abstract term such as freedom can only have a substantive meaning that is determined in part by its cultural context. In the United States, the meaning of the term “freedom” has evolved as American notions of justice have changed over time, as any casual reading of the history of any particular constitutional right amply demonstrates.<sup>74</sup> When one associates such a general concept with any particularistic community or practice in the way that both President Bush and, more generally, American nationalism have related the United States to freedom and human dignity, the effect is not only to endow the community with the esteemed qualities of the abstraction, but also to define the principle according to the imperfections of the community. In the new age of American imperialism, as Bush insists on corrupting American principles with a casual prioritization of the country's strength, he risks rendering American principles meaningless. Virtue can only be buried under so much hypocrisy before it loses its moral force. It would be a profound shame if the United States were to squander its opportunity to help spread democracy in a meaningful and systematic way by employing means whose logic so clearly contradicts the ends.<sup>75</sup>

Today, after a century in which the American mission to spread the nation's values and ideals abroad enjoyed obvious success, the United States is exceptional only in the preponderance of its power. Precisely because the United States has succeeded in abetting the spread of democracy, it is no longer ideologically exceptional, and because it is now deeply networked into the international system, it cannot eschew the ordinary requirements of geopolitical participation, as it once was able to do (although its involvement in world affairs was always greater than the myth of early American isolationism maintains). The values that Americans have always claimed to represent must be viewed not as *descriptions* of American identity, but as ideals to which the nation must

<sup>74</sup> See Eric Foner, *The Story of American Freedom* (New York: W.W. Norton & Co., 1998).

<sup>75</sup> See Rhodes, “The Imperial Logic of Bush's Liberal Agenda”; and John Gerard Ruggie, “Third Try at World Order? America and Multilateralism after the Cold War,” *Political Science Quarterly* 109 (Autumn 1994): 553–570.

aspire, not only domestically, but also in its relations with the rest of the world. If the United States is in some way a literal embodiment of the values that it esteems, then it is no longer accountable to the standards those values represent. Instead, its practices become definitive of the standards to which others are to be held accountable. When one considers the deep flaws of this (or any other) state, the implications of this normative matrix become quite worrisome.

There is another, more practical reason for abandoning exceptionalism: the Manichean streak, rooted in American exceptionalism, that can lurk beneath the surface of American nationalism is unwise in international relations because it distracts policy makers from the messy realities of global politics. Realist theorists of international relations, beginning with E.H. Carr, have made it abundantly clear that pursuing black-and-white ideals at the expense of proximate, accessible political goals is not only unwise but also, ultimately, destructive. Unfortunately, September 11's moral "clarification" on this point was, once again, counterproductive because the terrorist attacks naturally invited a fiercely binary view of the world and America's role in it. The logic that the Bush doctrine has tapped into goes something like this: inasmuch as the United States embodies what is good and just, to oppose its interests is *ipso facto* to define oneself as evil. This stance is especially ill-suited to America's current world stature, and it risks encouraging both ideological backlash and great-power balancing. Thus, as he finds himself increasingly tempted to ignore world opinion as he defines America's new world role, Bush would do well to recall Senator J. William Fulbright's insight:

Power tends to confuse itself with virtue and a great nation is peculiarly susceptible to the idea that its power is a sign of God's favor, conferring upon it a special responsibility for other nations—to make them richer and happier and wiser, to remake them, that is, in its own shining image. Power confuses itself with virtue and tends to take itself for omnipotence. Once imbued with the idea of mission, a great nation easily assumes that it has the means as well as the duty to do God's work. The Lord, after all, surely would not choose you as His agent and then deny you the sword with which to work his will.<sup>76</sup>

Scholars in the post-Cold War era have frequently argued that the United States must redefine the national interest so that it can conform more productively to new global realities.<sup>77</sup> What this paper's arguments suggest is that the national interest will not—cannot—change unless and until the national identity upon which it rests also changes. The tragic flaw of the Bush doctrine is that it draws on a model of American nationalism that has become outdated. In that sense, the tragedy is not only Bush's, but also our own.

<sup>76</sup> J. William Fulbright, *The Arrogance of Power* (New York: Random House, 1966), quoted in Cherry, *God's New Israel*, 328.

<sup>77</sup> See Allison and Beschel, "Can the United States Promote Democracy?"; Nau, *At Home Abroad*; Nye, *The Paradox of American Power*; Ruggie, "Third Try at World Order."