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President Bush's Discourse on War Against "Terrorism"

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1. Reactions Immediately after 9/11

Right after September 11, 2001, the Star-Spangled Banner was displayed everywhere in America. This kind of patriotic reaction might well have arisen in Europe if 9/11 had happened in one of that region's countries. However, the U.S. went one step further. Invocation of the words "God Bless America" and singing of the patriotic song "God Bless America" rapidly became commonplace throughout the country.

On the night of 9/11, many members of Congress gathered on the front steps of the Capitol, joined hands, and sang "God Bless America." The scene was broadcast on TV throughout the country. Later, in his speech of September 20, 2001, President Bush mentioned this scene and said that the hearts of all the people who saw it were deeply moved.

In this unprecedented national crisis, President Bush tried to unite the people under the Star Spangled Banner and in the name of God. The "God" here is not a god in the sense of a common noun, but God as a proper noun: the God of the Holy Bible. Herein lies a distinctive characteristic of American religion.

2. President Bush's Religious Discourse on War

When I analyze the speeches by President Bush since 9/11, I can recognize that his logic to justify the wars against Afghanistan and Iraq has been very consistent, from the night of 9/11 to his State of the Union Address given this February.

At the end of the Second Memorial Ceremony commemorating 9/11, President Bush delivered a speech to the nation from Ellis Island, next to the Statue of Liberty. The Statue of Lady Liberty stands in New York Harbor, holding her torch up high. Originally, she welcomed immigrants coming to the United States from Europe. Ellis Island was the first official entry points for those immigrants who had passed the health screening. I think this speech, at this highly symbolic venue, clearly represents the character of President Bush's understanding of 9/11, as well as his understanding of the ideal of the United States of America and the meaning of the nation's existence. The following is from his speech on that occasion:

> The attack on our nation was also an attack on the ideals that make us a nation. Our deepest national conviction is that every life is precious, because every life is the gift of a Creator who intended us to live in liberty and equality … We respect the faith of Islam, even as we fight those whose actions defile that faith.…
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> Our country is strong. And our cause is even larger than our country. Ours is the cause of human dignity; freedom guided by conscience and guarded by peace. This ideal of America is the hope of all mankind. That hope drew millions to this harbor. That hope still lights our way. And the light shines in the darkness. And the darkness will not overcome it. May God bless America.

We shouldn't neglect what's implied in the statement "…our cause is even larger than our country." President Bush meant that there exist ideas and values that transcend the nation. The question here is whether President Bush expressed these sentiments with a true understanding of their significance.

President Bush understood that the terrorists' attack on the United States was an attack on freedom and democracy, that is, American civilization. This interpretation of events by President Bush has not changed since 9/11.

What exactly does "American civilization" mean? In the series of speeches made by President Bush, he holds out "freedom" as the key factor in "American civilization." This "freedom" is the cause for which the nation of America was founded. It is not too much to say that the significance of America's existence lies in the realization of this "freedom."

I had assumed that America's war against terrorism was motivated by the fear of the homeland becoming a battlefield or the fear of the next 9/11, and I had dismissed the President's religious discourse to justify the wars as rhetoric. However, when I read the second Inaugural Address by President Bush on January 20, 2005, I began to think that the idea of freedom and democracy is the core element in the global strategy of the second Bush administration. I will quote some parts of it.

> The survival of liberty in our land increasingly depends on the success of liberty in other lands. The best hope for peace in our world is the expansion of freedom in all the world.
>
> So it is the policy of the United States to seek and support the growth of democratic movements and institutions in every nation and culture, with the ultimate goal of ending tyranny in our world.
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> All who live in tyranny and hopelessness can know: the United States will not ignore your oppression, or excuse your oppressors. When you stand for your liberty, we will stand with you.

> We have confidence because freedom is the permanent hope of mankind.

President Bush repeated this in his State of the Union Address on February 2, 2005.

> The only force powerful enough to stop the rise of tyranny and terror, and replace hatred with hope, is the force of human freedom.

America's cause justifying the war against terrorism, now the war against Iraq, is the same as America's cause for the founding of the nation, which is and was to realize "the pursuit of life, freedom, and happiness." To be concrete, it is the cause to liberate the people of Iraq from the tyrannical oppression of Saddam Hussein. The United States has fought against tyranny since World War I. At the time of World War I, it was the fight against the tyranny of the Kaiser of Germany. At the time of World War II, it was the fight against the tyranny of Nazi Germany, Fascist Italy, and Imperial Japan. In the cases of the Korean and Vietnam Wars, it was the fight against Communism as tyranny. In the case of the Gulf War and the Iraq War, it was the fight against the tyranny of Saddam Hussein. It is the mission of the United States to fight against tyranny. This is America's interpretation of a just cause for going to war.

As I stated at the beginning of my presentation, President Bush's discourses to justify the war against "terrorism" have been expressed in religious terms and conceptions. However, I think the core element of his speech is not religion, but the ideas and ideals of the United States. We can see the same motivations at the time of the foundation of the American nation. Let us revisit the core theme of the Declaration of Independence.

> We hold these truths to be self-evident, that all men are created equal, that they are endowed by their Creator with certain unalienable Rights, that among these are Life, Liberty and the pursuit of Happiness.

The equal rights to life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness are the fundamental concepts of basic human rights. This is the central idea of Enlightenment thought. The "Founding Fathers" could have expressed America's foundational concepts in non-religious words, in a manner that insisted on human equality and unalienable rights. But it was more appropriate and natural in that era to use biblical words, or the words of American Civil Religion, such as "all men are created equal" and "they are endowed by their Creator with certain unalienable Rights."

This situation remains relevant even today. I mentioned earlier that after 9/11 the invocation "God Bless America" spread rapidly throughout the country. "God" here means "the God of the Holy Bible." Those who believe in the religions of the "Judeo-Christian tradition" make up 90% of the population of the U.S.A. Therefore, it seems quite natural to explain America's "cause" with the term "God." There is no other word to substitute for "God" as the symbol to unify a diversified America.

3. Searching for a Way to Coexistence

There is really a great gap between the ideal and reality in the Islamic religion and its world, as well as in the Christian religion and its world within the United States. We cannot achieve productive results if we simply criticize an opponent because of this gap between the ideal and reality. Religion, its society, and the nation must make efforts to overcome the gap between the ideal and reality.

Both the Islamic world and the United States are now in the process of trying to reach their respective ideals. The main problem that both Islam and Christianity have to confront is the difficult decision on what is actually necessary for both religions and their worlds as they continue the process toward the ideal.

I think that the most pressing requirement for both Islamic and Christian worlds may be theological insight into their real situations, in order to coexist with different others. In the case of the United States, which is currently the world's only superpower and at the same time a very religious nation, we may say that it is necessary for the country to gain theological and self-critical insight into how it should realize the American ideal, as well as its global strategy to make American ideas—that is, democracy and freedom—a universal or global standard.

I understand that if we use the term "fundamentalist," we must define this term very carefully. However, I would like to use "fundamentalist" as a term that can be applied generally, not only to Christianity, Judaism, or Islam, but also to the American nation.

The nuances of the term "fundamentalist" have changed since Iran's Islamic Revolution as well as the rise of the Christian Fundamentalists who backed the election of Ronald Reagan in 1980. I'd like to characterize the post-1980 use of the term "fundamentalist" by two key traits: active participation in real-world politics, and a sense of "idolatry" with respect to a particular religious or national ideal.

Here, idolatry means asserting one's own religion and religious ideas, or one's own nation and national ideas, as the Absolute. The fundamentalists confuse their religion with an absolute and transcendent God. On other occasions, they confuse their own nation with an absolute "Kingdom of God." If we apply the term "fundamentalist" in this manner, I think we can say that President Bush's understanding of the nation of America, and that of its global mission to the world, is a kind of fundamentalism. I would like to call this "American Fundamentalism."

I also think that the counterpart of American Fundamentalism in the Islamic world may be called "Islamic Fundamentalism." This belief system is a deviation from the true tenets of the Islamic faith, and I understand that this post-modern definition of Islamic Fundamentalism is not the traditional definition of Islamic Fundamentalism.

The urgent task before us is to overcome the new forms of fundamentalism in America and Islam, and to restore the authentic ideals of Islam and America. We have to search for a way to respect different religions and values, and thus the dignity of others, and for a way to coexist with each other.