

## Pre-emptive Strike and its Implications

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President George W Bush in 2002 formally enunciated as part of US foreign policy a claim to a right of pre-emptive strike against countries that posed a threat or challenged its military superiority. The claim raised concerns internationally that the United States was adopting a more militant unilateralist approach to international conflicts, which critics thought could weaken the structure of conflict management and international law, and undermine the norms of international conduct.

Prime Minister John Howard has linked Australia closely to the policies of the Bush Administration. On 20 March 2003, he vigorously defended allegations that Iraq had weapons of mass destruction, claiming they were a direct threat to Australia since they could fall into the hands of terrorists. 'That is the reason above all others why I passionately believe that action must be taken to disarm Iraq'. Without such weapons, he said, invasion of Iraq would be unjustified.<sup>1</sup>

Leaders of mainline Christian churches were among those most opposed to a military intervention in Iraq. Never before have the modern western democracies embarked on a war against the moral authority of the churches, which see themselves as key custodians of the just war tradition. Speaking ecumenically, councils of churches around the world demonstrated that the opposition stretched across the spectrum of mainstream denominations. In Australia also, Anglican, Uniting Church and Catholic Church leaders strongly opposed the war, echoing the views of their counterparts overseas, including in the United States itself.

Prominent opponents of the war were the Anglican Archbishop of Canterbury, Rowan Williams, and Archbishop Desmond Tutu in South Africa, as well as Pope John Paul II and leading Vatican officials. In January 2003, John Paul reiterated that war 'is always a defeat for humanity', and emphasised instead the values enshrined in the UN

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1. Tony Wright, 'Lies, Damned Lies & Intelligence', *Bulletin*, 1 July 2003, 25. See Alison Broinowski, *Howard's War* (Melbourne: Scribe Publications, 2003).

Charter and international law, especially stemming from the 'natural law' with its 'universal principles'.<sup>2</sup>

The churches repeatedly said that the alleged evidence of an imminent threat from Iraq's weapons of mass destruction failed to meet the just war conditions.<sup>3</sup> Yet George W Bush, Tony Blair and John Howard brushed aside the just war criteria, asserting that this pre-emptive strike was justified by the need to eliminate the alleged threat from Iraq.<sup>4</sup>

This paper firstly examines the legitimacy of this claim to a right of pre-emptive strike, especially as it relates to national sovereignty as a key principle of international relations.

Second, it considers the underlying moral debate between ethical universalism and a new unilateralism in the classical 'Realist' tradition of international affairs.

Third, it considers how changes in US foreign policy are being influenced by popularist conceptions of America's messianic role in the world and the role of righteous violence.

### 1. The right to a pre-emptive strike

The notion of pre-emptive strike is not new to military theorists, who have long accepted that a pre-emptive strike may be legitimated on just war principles. Writing in the seventeenth century, Hugo Grotius in *The Law of War and Peace* recognised a right of pre-emptive attack if the danger was absolutely certain as well as 'immediate, and . . . on the point of happening'. A country was also required to take all other steps to defuse the situation, and publicly declare the reasons for war so 'the whole human race, as it were, might weigh the justice of them'. But Grotius denied a pre-emptive attack was justified on 'the bare possibility that violence may be some day turned on us'.<sup>5</sup>

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2. 'The Primacy of Natural Law in International Relations', 13 January 2003, in *The Pope Speaks*, 48, 3 (May/June 2003): 146-47.
  3. Efforts by some key Catholic apologists for the war, notably Michael Novak and George Weigel, failed to convince the Vatican or the US bishops. See my *War in Iraq: Is It Just?* 15 ff.
  4. See George A. Lopez, 'Iraq and Just-War Thinking', *Commonweal*, 27 September 2002.
  5. See James Turner Johnson, 'Just Cause Revisited', in *Close Calls: Intervention, Terrorism, Missile Defense, and 'Just War' Today*, edited by Elliott Abrams (Washington DC: Ethics and Public Policy Center, 1998), 14.

More recently, Fotion and Elfstrom in their 1986 *Military Tactics* justify a pre-emptive strike if 'it is extremely likely that war is imminent anyway', that one risk destruction by waiting for the first blow, that there are no other means available to avert the crisis, and that an antagonist has no just cause for war.<sup>6</sup>

Nevertheless, such a right to pre-emptive strike has been sharply curtailed by the principle of national sovereignty, especially since the Second World War, as providing firmer constraints against the possibilities of nations going to war. The inviolability of national sovereignty simplified the moral issues surrounding war by reducing the criterion of just cause to defence against unjust aggression.

### 1.1 The 'Bush doctrine'

President Bush's affirmation of a right of pre-emptive strike surprised the international community. Bush indicated his new unilateralism in a speech at West Point on 1 June 2002. He developed the 'Bush doctrine' more fully in September 2002, in the 30-page *The National Security Strategy of the United States of America*, claiming the right to launch pre-emptive attacks. Bush declared that the US would fight 'terrorism and tyrants' and those 'compromised by terror' in every way it could in this new 'war'. 'America will act against such emerging threats before they are fully formed . . . History will judge harshly those who saw this coming danger but failed to act'.<sup>7</sup> 'While the United States will constantly strive to enlist the support of the international community, we will not hesitate to act alone, if necessary . . .'<sup>8</sup>

Many commentators saw the new Bush Doctrine as dangerously destabilising for the orderly conduct of international affairs, and asserting a new 'imperial' role for the United States. The ecumenical body, The Churches' Center for Theology and Public Policy in Washington DC, warned: 'This new doctrine is so radical in scope that it obliterates the old legal and moral standards that attempt to rein in pre-emption, that is the concept of the necessity of an immediate and

6. Nicholas Fotion and Gerard Elfstrom, *Military Ethics: Guidelines for Peace and War* (London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1986), 114.

7. President George W Bush, *The National Security Strategy of the United States of America*, 17 September 2002, iv-v. [www.whitehouse.gov/nsc/nss.pdf](http://www.whitehouse.gov/nsc/nss.pdf).

8. *Ibid*, 6.

grave threat'. The concept was also 'vulnerable to manipulation and fraud'.<sup>9</sup>

Michael Byers, associate professor at Duke University School of Law, wrote: 'The Bush doctrine is unprecedented in that it argues for a right to take pre-emptive action against potential threats, future threats. There's no suggestion that Iraq is going to attack the United States tomorrow or next week . . .'<sup>10</sup>

According to Robert Jervis writing in the eminent US journal, *Foreign Policy*, 'the fundamental objective of the current Bush doctrine . . . is the establishment of US hegemony, primacy, or empire'.<sup>11</sup> Jervis sees this development not as a result of September 11 or 'some shadowy neoconservative cabal', but as a logical outcome from the US's unrivalled position of dominance.<sup>12</sup> He considered that the war against Iraq made little sense in terms of removing Saddam or eliminating weapons of mass destruction,<sup>13</sup> but illustrated Bush's 'extraordinarily ambitious' goals to remake Middle Eastern societies. However, he asked, will the US 'exploit its power for its own narrow political, economic, and social interests?' For 'believing one has a monopoly on wisdom is an obvious way for a hegemon to become widely regarded as a tyrant . . . Avoiding this imperial temptation will be the greatest challenge the United States faces'.<sup>14</sup> Or will the US 'appear, as it did to many during the crisis in Iraq, as a kind of rogue superpower?'<sup>15</sup>

Lawrence Freedman also warned against relying too heavily on military solutions, since 'terrorism is best defeated through isolating militants from their claimed constituency, demonstrating the shameful

9. 'Christians and War in the 21<sup>st</sup> Century: A Theological Analysis', The Churches' Center for Theology and Public Policy, Washington DC, [n d, early 2003], [www.cctpp.org](http://www.cctpp.org).

10. Michael Byers, 'Iraq and the "Bush Doctrine" of Pre-Emptive Self-Defence', August 20, 2002, Crimes of War Project, at [www.crimesofwar.org](http://www.crimesofwar.org).

11. Robert Jervis, 'The Compulsive Empire', in *Foreign Policy* (July/August 2003): 83.

12. *Ibid*, 84.

13. For a detailed account of who has what weapons, see Joseph Cirincione, *Deadly Weapons: Tracking Weapons of Mass Destruction* (Washington DC: Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, 2002).

14. Jervis, *op cit*, 87.

15. Robert Kagan, 'Looking fore Legitimacy in all the Wrong Places', *Foreign Policy*, (July-August 2003): 70.

and counterproductive nature of their methods, and, if possible, addressing the grievances upon which they feed'.<sup>16</sup>

Evidently there has been a vehement struggle within US government departments about the new Bush foreign policy. According to Robert Dreyfuss writing in *The American Prospect*, a powerful group in the office of the Undersecretary of Defense for Policy, Douglas J. Feith, produced its own analysis. This was opposed by 'virtually the entire expert Middle East establishment in the United States', including the State Department and CIA area specialists. 'But because the less than two dozen neoconservatives leading the war party has the support of Vice President Dick Cheney and Secretary of Defense Donald Rumsfeld', others were marginalised. Dreyfuss argued that 'there is mounting evidence that the decision to go to war is based on intelligence of doubtful veracity, which has been cooked by Pentagon hawks'.<sup>17</sup>

Writing in *The National Interest*, Casimir A. Yost of the Edmund A. Walsh School of Foreign Service at Georgetown University lamented that 'Virtually every alliance the United States has is in shambles, as leaders adjust their policies to accommodate massive popular distrust of America. The tremendous global goodwill generated by 9/11 has been flushed away by Bush Administration rhetoric and actions'.<sup>18</sup> In his view, the US needed to return to a more multilateral approach to work cooperatively on security problems.

Another commentator in *The National Interest* feared that the emphasis on military power to effect regime and cultural changes through preventive war would lead to political and military overreach, especially if multiple crises occurred simultaneously.<sup>19</sup>

### 1.2 Misleading allegations about Iraq's weapons of mass destruction

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16. Lawrence Freedman, 'War', in *Foreign Policy* (July - August 2003): 18.  
 17. Robert Dreyfuss, 'The Pentagon Muzzles the CIA', *The American Prospect*, 16 December 2003. Available: [www.prospect.org/V13/22/dreyfuss-r.html](http://www.prospect.org/V13/22/dreyfuss-r.html). See also Elizabeth Drew, 'The Neocons in Power', *The New York Review of Books*, 50, 10 (12 June 2003).  
 18. Casimir A Yost, 'Assessing the Bush Administrations' Foreign Policy', *The National Interest*, 14 May 2003.  
 19. Jack Snyder, 'Warnings of Empire', *The National Interest*, 28 May 2003.

Just days before the Iraq war began, Vice President Dick Cheney declared that Iraq 'has, in fact, reconstituted nuclear weapons', improved its facilities to produce thousands of chemical weapons, and expanded its biological weapons program to pre-1991 levels. President Bush claimed Iraq had hundreds of tons of chemical weapons and thousands of litres of biological weapons that could kill millions, with a hidden fleet of missiles ready to deliver them. Moreover, Saddam had 'long-standing, direct, and continuing links to terrorist networks'.<sup>20</sup>

Against such assertions, the US Fourth Freedom Forum declared that the war was illegal and unjust, and in violation of the UN Charter:

The Bush administration's case for war was built on a litany of lies, with practically every claim about the supposed Iraqi weapons threat proven groundless. The White House manipulated legitimate public concerns about terrorism to assert a false connection between Iraq and Al Qaeda.<sup>21</sup>

It appears that the US government misled the world community, or was misled by its own intelligence agencies, about the supposed threat from Iraq. It remains to be seen if there will be any political accountability. One of the most disturbing aspects of the whole fiasco is that US public opinion seems so tolerant of what may well be a colossal lie, resulting in the deaths of tens of thousands of people. It is also deeply puzzling why the Australian people seem so unconcerned that the Howard government led them into war on such unconvincing grounds.

This apparent US deception about Iraq's supposed weapons of mass destruction has been part of an orchestrated campaign. It is not simply that a mistake has been made, but that the core principles and institutions of these western democracies have been perverted. If no credible weapons of mass destruction can be found, one must conclude that there was no reliable evidence of them in the first place, only conjecture and supposition. Why were the views of those, like the mainline churches around the world, who repeatedly protested that

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20. Joseph Cirincione, 'Can Preventive War Cure Proliferation?', *Foreign Policy* July-August, 2003: 66-67.  
 21. 'After War', Fourth Freedom Forum, [March 2003].

the evidence of such weapons had not been provided, simply ignored by the Bush Administration?

Indeed, there were specialist organisations in the United States, like the Fourth Freedom Forum, which provided detailed documentation to challenge the claims of the Bush Administration. A more detailed evaluation of the claims about Iraq's weapons' programs is provided by Dr Glen Rangwala of Cambridge University UK. These reports are not based on hindsight, but on information that was available to the Bush Administration. It was, it seems, deliberately ignored.<sup>22</sup>

By late 2003, the United States was embroiled in a long and contentious occupation of Iraq, and was finding its military capability, the huge costs and its political credibility at home under stress. These developments indicated that even the United States is limited in its power, and needs allies and a framework of international governance based on universal principles of justice and freedom, not on imperial delusions. In the view of James Pinkerton, the 'neo-conservative dream of world domination is over' already.<sup>23</sup> Yet at the time of writing, it is not clear if this is so in the Bush Administration itself.

## 2. Ethical universalism versus unilateralist realism

Underlying the dispute about Iraq are fundamental issues about the role of moral norms in international relations. Belief in universal moral norms underlay the formation of the United Nations and the Universal Declaration of Human Rights in 1948. But against this current of ethical universalism, the so-called 'Realist' tradition in international relations reasserted itself, giving priority to national interest over moral norms and internationalism.<sup>24</sup> Key writers in this development were Reinhold Niebuhr, EH Carr and especially Hans Morgenthau who

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22. See David Cortright, Alistair Millar, George A Lopez, and Linda Gerber, 'Unproven: the Controversy over Justifying War in Iraq', June 2003, at [www.fourthfreedom.org](http://www.fourthfreedom.org). See also the splendid detailed analysis by Dr Glen Rangwala, 'Claims and Evaluations of Iraq's Proscribed Weapons', online at Middle East Reference. org at <http://www.middleeastreference.org.uk/iraqweapons.html>.
23. James Pinkerton, 'The Neo-conservative Dream of World Domination is Over', *Age*, 28 July 2003.
24. Robert W McElroy, *Morality and American Foreign Policy* (Princeton NJ: Princeton University Press, 1992), 3.

rejected moral norms as 'sentimentalism' undermining effective foreign policy in pursuit of national interests.<sup>25</sup> The recent controversy over Iraq can be seen as a vehement revival of the 'Realist' tradition, favouring US national self-interest against those who gave greater emphasis to a multinational system based on universal moral principles.

The conflict in views is evident in the May/June 2003 issue of the prestigious US journal, *Foreign Affairs*. The lead essay, 'The Rise of Ethics in Foreign Policy: Reaching a Values Consensus', asserts: 'Morality, values, ethics, universal principles—the whole panoply of ideals in international affairs that were once almost the exclusive domain of preachers and scholars—have taken root in the hearts, or at least the minds, of the American foreign policy community'. 'And although some in America's foreign-policy community may still be using moral language to cloak a traditional national security agenda, one gets the sense that the trend is more than that . . . Moral matters are now part of American politics and the politics of many other nations'.<sup>26</sup>

Despite contradictions in US policies as recent administrations tried to balance security and ethical agendas, the authors concluded there was a near-consensus 'that morality and values should play a bigger role in US actions abroad'.<sup>27</sup> Humanitarian interventions were 'perhaps the most dramatic example of the new power of morality in international affairs'. Yet this editorial implied that its universalist moral views were being challenged in the United States. 'Even as universal values become more a part of the foreign policies of nations, those policies will still be ridden with contradictions and hypocrisies'.<sup>28</sup>

### 2.1 Michael Glennon

The 'Realist' case was vigorously argued in the same issue of *Foreign Affairs* by Michael J Glennon, Professor of International Law at Tufts University (Medford MA), presumably because his views reflected the thinking in the Bush Administration. He asserted that the UN Security

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25. *Ibid.*, 13 ff and 24.
26. Leslie H Gelb and Justine A Rosenthal, 'The Rise of Ethics in Foreign Policy: Reaching a Values Consensus', *Foreign Affairs*, 82, 3 (May/June 2003): 2–3. Gelb is President of the Council on Foreign Relations.
27. *Ibid.*, 5.
28. *Ibid.*, 7.

Council had failed over Iraq and that it was time for the US to follow its national interest rather than support abstract ethical principles, or international law and organisations.<sup>29</sup> Glennon contended that the UN charter governing the use of force had collapsed, and with it international law.<sup>30</sup>

Architects of an authentic new world order must therefore move beyond castles in the air—beyond imaginary truths that transcend politics—such as, for example, just war theory and the notion of the sovereign equality of states. These and other stale dogmas rest on archaic notions of universal truth, justice, and morality . . . Medieval ideas about natural law and natural rights ('nonsense on stilts', Bentham called them) do little more than provide convenient labels for enculturated preferences—yet serve as rallying cries for belligerents everywhere.

As the world moves into a new, transitional era, the old moralist vocabulary should be cleared away so that decision-makers can focus pragmatically on what is really at stake . . . Humanity need not achieve an ultimate consensus on good and evil. The task before it is empirical, not theoretical.<sup>31</sup>

While Glennon considered the UN fatally wounded, he was not opposed to the US beneficently 'sharing its power to construct new international mechanisms' to 'enhance American prominence, potentially prolonging the period of unipolarity'.<sup>32</sup>

Some commentators found Glennon's views alarming for supporting an imperial system developed around US national interests, thus threatening to unleash a Hobbesian world where might is right.

### 2.2 Newt Gingrich

Newt Gingrich, speaker of the US House of Representatives from 1995 to 1999 and currently senior fellow at the American Enterprise

29. Michael J Glennon, 'Why the Security Council Failed', in *Foreign Affairs*, 82, 3 (May/June 2003): 21.

30. *Ibid.*, 24.

31. *Ibid.*, 32.

32. *Ibid.*, 35.

Institute, a key think-tank for the neoconservatives, has also argued for a more assertive US foreign policy,<sup>33</sup> and attacked the US State Department for engaging in 'a "deliberate and systematic effort" to undermine Bush's foreign policy'.<sup>34</sup> Gingrich demanded a complete overhaul of the State Department. 'Moreover, the rise of a global anti-American network of activists and nations—including . . . most of the elite academics around the world (including in the United States)', meant the US had to promote more vigorously its views and 'develop the rule of law, transparency and accountability in government, and free markets across the globe'. He wrote that the British Broadcasting Corporation, according to some observers, was at least as hostile to the United States as Al Jazeera was during the entire Iraqi conflict.<sup>35</sup>

Gingrich is innocent of the irony in his calls for transparency and accountability in government, for this is precisely what critics of the US invasion of Iraq have been calling for.

### 2.3 Jean Bethke Elshtain

Some offered a more benign interpretation of the Bush Doctrine. Jean Bethke Elshtain in her 2003 *Just War Against Terror* argued for a measured war against terrorism. However she was critical of 'much of the material flowing from European capitals' that considered the United States more of a threat to peace and human rights than the Islamist terrorists,<sup>36</sup> and 'the penchant for citing wildly erroneous and inflammatory "statistics" (like the claim that 500,000 Iraqi children have perished as a consequence of US policies . . .)'.<sup>37</sup>

She envisioned the United States playing a new 'imperial' role as the world's sole superpower, not a neo-colonial role but of nation-building to prevent terrorists from using failed states as sanctuaries.<sup>38</sup> She quoted Michael Ignatieff: 'Imperialism doesn't stop being necessary just because it becomes politically incorrect. Nations sometimes fail, and when they do, only outside help—imperial power—can get them back on their feet. Nation-building is the kind of

33. Newt Gingrich, 'Rogue State Department', in *Foreign Policy* (July – August 2003), 42.

34. *Ibid.*, 45.

35. *Ibid.*, 46.

36. Jean Bethke Elshtain, *Just War against Terror: The Burden of American Power in a Violent World* (New York: basic Books, 2003), 145.

37. *Ibid.*, 146–47.

38. *Ibid.*, 167.

imperialism you get in a human rights era . . .'.<sup>39</sup> Elshtain urged that the US 'not lose sight of our national interest in favor of a utopian vision of a world in which states are diminished and international institutions work their will to the exclusion of the self-interests of particular polities'.<sup>40</sup>

Elshtain was the principal author of 'A Letter from America' (12 February 2001) signed by 60 intellectuals justifying a war against terrorism, but without demonising opponents; it rejected a crusade mentality which 'turns God into an idol to be used for man's own purposes'.<sup>41</sup> The letter recognised that 'at times our nation has . . . pursued misguided and unjust policies'.<sup>42</sup> 'We also know that the line separating good and evil does not run between one society and another . . . ultimately, that line runs through the middle of every human heart'.<sup>43</sup> Nevertheless, 'if the danger to innocent life is real and certain, and especially if the aggressor is motivated by implacable hostility . . . then a resort to proportionate force is morally justified'.<sup>44</sup>

Elshtain is a serious academic and strongly influenced by the events of September 11. She was careful to avoid depicting the struggle in quasi-Manichean terms, but understated the harm many US policies have caused. Chalmers Johnson's *Blowback* offers a stinging indictment of many past US policies and atrocities, including many coups, assassinations and support for tyrants, the use of torture and death squads.<sup>45</sup> Douglas Kellner offers an even more vociferous critique of US policies in *From 9/11 to Terror War: the Dangers of the Bush Legacy*.<sup>46</sup>

Elshtain also dismissed the concerns of Europeans about US policy without acknowledging that Europeans have legitimate national interests different from those of the United States. Nor did she consider that many people, and notably the leaders of the Christian churches, opposed the war on Iraq on the grounds that it failed to meet the just

39. *Ibid*, 177.

40. *Ibid*, 178.

41. *Ibid*, 186.

42. *Ibid*, 183.

43. *Ibid*, 188.

44. *Ibid*, 189-90.

45. See Chalmers Johnson, *Blowback: the Costs and Consequences of American Empire* (London: Time Warner, 2003).

46. Douglas Kellner, *From 9/11 to Terror War: the Dangers of the Bush Legacy* (Lanham, Maryland: Rowman & Littlefield, 2003).

war criteria. She did not mention the consistent opposition of even the US Catholic bishops to a war, and particularly their statement of 18 September 2002. Likewise she disdainfully dismissed the claims of about 500,000 Iraqi children dying as a result of US policies, despite significant evidence to support such claims.<sup>47</sup>

Elshtain has argued moderately for intervention in Iraq but did not squarely address the key just war objections to the invasion. She is correct that US power is crucial for international stability, but it is not utopian to see this power exercised in multinational organisations like the United Nations, as in East Timor and elsewhere.

As is clear from the other authors, the debate is fundamentally about whether the international order is to be based on universal moral principles acceptable to all nations or a new imperial system designed in the Realist tradition primarily to serve the interests of the United States.

### 3. Pre-emptive strike and the 'captain America complex'

The Bush Doctrine of pre-emptive strike resonates strongly with certain cultural stereotypes in the US popular imagination. In *Captain America and the Crusade against Evil: the Dilemma of Zealous Nationalism*, Jewett and Lawrence argued cogently that US attitudes to war can be seen as a contest between a more moderate and pragmatic approach to conflict, which they term 'prophetic realism', versus a much more militant enthusiasm with strong religious undercurrents, which they term 'zealous nationalism'. The more militant attitude is derived from the century Puritan consciousness with its Old Testament notions of a martial God leading his chosen people to victory over their enemies.

By contrast, the 'prophetic realism' tradition gives more weight to the dilemmas in human conduct and international relations, and finds expression in the just war tradition. But it is challenged constantly throughout US history by more fundamentalist notions of the US as

47. See my *War in Iraq*, 36-37, and Matt Welch, *Reason Magazine*, March 2002 (Available: [www.reason.com](http://www.reason.com)); also Tim Niblock, "Pariah States" and Sanctions in the Middle East: Iraq, Libya, Sudan, (Boulder CO: Lynne Rienner Publishers, 2001) and Geoff Simons, *The Scourging of Iraq: Sanctions, Law and Natural Justice* (second edition) (London: MacMillan, 1998). See also the detailed studies and publications of the Fourth Freedom Forum on [www.fourthfreedom.org](http://www.fourthfreedom.org).

God's instrument in an approaching apocalyptic conflict, seen in quasi-Manichean terms as Good versus Evil.

'Captain America' first appeared in 1941 in US comics as a superhero rescuing cities or countries from imminent doom. Jewett and Lawrence interpret this and the many other superhero figures in the US popular imagination as expressing a secular salvation myth. While fewer people today read the Bible, these myths are powerfully reinforced in popular culture through cartoons or more recently in computer games and an avalanche of US films such as 'Star Wars', and in heroes like Rambo.<sup>48</sup>

The 'Captain America complex' . . . is the uneasy fusion of two kinds of roles. Should America be the 'city set upon a hill' that promotes the rule of law even when faced with difficult adversaries? Or should it crusade on the military plane of battle, allowing no law or institution to impede its efforts to destroy evil?<sup>49</sup>

Jewett and Lawrence interpret President Bush's refusal to recognise the International Criminal Court, and indeed its threats to withhold military aid from any country that joined it, in the light of 'a national fascination with stories of selfless crusaders who, like Captain America, must . . . circumvent the law to rescue the innocent, 'no matter how many rules they break or how unpopular they may become'.

Echoing conspiracy theories that have justified so many hostilities in earlier times these doctrines warrant attacks based in suspicions rather than overt acts; they are typical expressions of the crusading mentality that this book seeks to explain and they have spread fears about the unpredictability and potential illegality of future American actions.<sup>50</sup>

This mentality advocates military action in violation of international law, and demands that if you are not with us, you are

48. Robert Jewett and John Shelton Lawrence, *Captain America and the Crusade Against Evil: the Dilemma of Zealous Nationalism* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2003), 43.

49. *Ibid.*, xiii.

50. *Ibid.*, xiv-xv.

against us. Hence the Afghanistan prisoners held at the Guantanamo base in Cuba have no standing under US law and are not recognised as prisoners of war or protected under the Geneva Convention.<sup>51</sup>

Jewett and Lawrence argue that 'The ideas of holy war have been combined with a distinctively American sense of mission in language that fuses secular and religious images', and have continued to surface throughout US history.<sup>52</sup> The biblical influence on the Puritans and other founding groups in America led to a belief that America was heir to God's promises to Israel. The Puritans arrived in New England with their 'dualistic worldview and their belief that violence would inaugurate God's kingdom'.<sup>53</sup> This rigid stereotyping of good versus evil continued as a powerful force through the Cold War, with atheistic communism and its record of atrocities readily fitting the stereotype.

Yet against the tradition of sacralised violence, other Old Testament figures denounced killing in the name of God. 'Amos sought to shatter illusions of superior virtue and inevitable victory, warning that the Day of Yahweh would be a shock rather than a comfort (Amos 5:18ff)'.<sup>54</sup> Isaiah and Jeremiah also denounced the manipulation of religion to sanction the cause of self-interested violence. Jesus repeatedly rejected the heritage of 'zealous nationalism'.<sup>55</sup> But for generations of Americans, the Book of Revelation was of decisive importance, providing the 'mythic framework for the mission of the nation'.<sup>56</sup> The fearsome vision of the rider on a white horse provided the key motif for the 'The Battle Hymn of the Republic'.

From his mouth issues a sharp sword with which to smite the nations, and he will rule them with a rod of iron; he will tread the wine press of the fury of the wrath of God the Almighty (Rev 19:13-15).

The millennial view of conflict has been reinforced by the Christian New Right and its fundamentalist interpretation of

51. *Ibid.*, xv.

52. *Ibid.*, 5.

53. *Ibid.*, 55.

54. *Ibid.*, 47.

55. *Ibid.*, 52.

56. *Ibid.*, 54.

Revelations, foreseeing imminent cosmic struggle which will usher in the Kingdom of God. Previously marginal in US politics, in the 1980s and 1990s the Moral Majority under the leadership of Jerry Falwell and others won the allegiance of thousands of fundamentalist preachers and many media, and was able to mobilise a constituency of perhaps nineteen million voters who interpreted affairs through their apocalyptic beliefs. The innovative doctrine of 'Rapture' ensured that the true believers would be taken into the heavens for safe-keeping while the earth was consumed in this cosmic battle; but the elect would return to inherit the earth.

According to Jewett and Lawrence, in a short time this fundamentalism transformed the Republican Party 'into a millenarian party resistant to federal authority, hostile to the traditional American politics of compromise, and profoundly suspicious of international law and peacekeeping. The Christian Right also reached out to the conservative Likud bloc in Israeli politics, encouraging it to resist any efforts at compromise with the Palestinians'.<sup>57</sup> With such beliefs, 'The battle of Armageddon is to be welcomed, and any effort to adjudicate conflicts through international cooperation is to be viewed as the temptation of the Antichrist'. These believers were especially hostile to the United Nations.<sup>58</sup>

After the attacks of September 11 2001, President Bush drew strongly from the rhetoric of idealistic crusade, depicting the conflict as one against 'evil', initially calling for a 'crusade against terrorism' and terming the military campaign 'Operation Infinite Justice'. At the Washington National Cathedral on 14 September, Bush declared that America was called 'to rid the world of evil'. Widespread negative reaction against such presumptuous language forced him to modify the use of such militantly religious terms.<sup>59</sup>

On 20 September 2001, Bush affirmed that God was on his side. 'Freedom and fear, justice and cruelty, have always been at war, and we know that God is not neutral between them'.<sup>60</sup> On 11 October, Bush lamented that he was amazed that people 'would hate us . . . because I know how good we are'. However, he did not want a war on Islam. 'We don't hold any religion accountable. We're fighting evil'.<sup>61</sup>

57. *Ibid*, 140-41.

58. *Ibid*, 144.

59. *Ibid*, 2.

60. *Ibid*, 16.

61. *Ibid*, 15.

Jewett and Lawrence develop a typology common to zealous nationalism in Judaism, Christianity and Islam. It bears a strong resemblance to Jacques Maritain's rejection of a crusading mentality during the Spanish Civil War.<sup>62</sup>

- 'Each side views its anger as blessed by the deity, which thereby absolutizes zeal and jihad and eliminates normal restraint.
- Each side conceives of its opponents as members of a malevolent conspiracy, originating from the realm of absolute evil, and thus sees any compromise as immoral.
- The stereotypes of the actors in the conflict are stark and extreme, with all goodness on one side and absolute evil on the other. To mourn over the deaths of such opponents thus appears to make as little sense as concern over the seasonal demise of locusts.
- . . . such opponents must either be killed or converted. Each side believes that its own violence is redemptive, while it deplores the violence of the other side as senseless and unjust.
- To allow oneself to be defeated by the other side is to abandon faith itself . . . whether devoutly religious or explicitly secular.
- Every action of one's enemies is perceived to desecrate the holy, and overcoming such desecration is seen as a religious and political imperative whose fulfilment will usher in an era of peace'.<sup>63</sup>

The temptation to a quasi-Manichean struggle in an apocalyptic conflict between demonic powers is a recurring spectre in human history, and a pernicious infection in religious traditions. Jewett and Lawrence state: 'What is demonic is not some alien conspiracy against the good but rather the religious and political perversions by those who presume to act on God's behalf'.<sup>64</sup> In the current agitated climate, these myths flow powerfully below the surface of US culture, which may help explain why President Bush has retained so much popular support for his policies.

#### 4. Conclusion

The churches are rightly alarmed about the implications of the Bush Administration's foreign policy and its pre-emptive strike in Iraq. If the

62. See Bruce Duncan, *Crusade or Conspiracy? Catholics and the Anti-Communist Struggle in Australia*, 397-98.

63. Jewett and Lawrence, *op cit*, 24-25.

64. *Ibid*, 211.



churches were simply to accede to the whims of the Bush Administration, they would have abandoned a core dimension of their own moral teaching, with its claim to an objective standard of morality in international affairs, based on justice and human rights. They would also have undermined the confidence of their adherents in their ability to bring fundamental moral principles to bear in the public forum. Even so, it is remarkable that the Bush Administration and the Australian government so easily ignored the voice of the mainstream churches. This would have been unthinkable in earlier generations and raises disturbing questions about the effectiveness of the public role of the churches.

The churches need to make vigorous efforts to include issues of war and peace in the moral education of their members. It is especially important that the US churches challenge the religious roots and 'mythic' dimensions of the 'zealous nationalism' in their own culture. However, the churches' opposition to war has challenged the US claim to a right of pre-emption, and helped prevent the conflict in Iraq being seen as a religious war between Christianity and Islam.