

The Alternative

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Dear Reader,

An interest in religion, more specifically Islam, was an immediate reaction to the events of Sept. 11. The calming words about Islam by Mr. Giuliani in New York and Mr. Bush in Washington were crucial in avoiding widespread violence against Muslims (or Middle Eastern looking people assumed to be Muslim). The United States prides itself on religious tolerance and it does do better than most of the world. The policy not very accurately called *separation of church and state* has the drawback that tolerance is often equated with ignorance. The only tolerance that is going to work in the future will be based on sympathetic understanding of the other's religion and critical understanding of one's own religion.

This issue has three essays. The first is about understanding the religion that suffuses the United States but is difficult to grasp because it is so all enveloping. A British friend noted that, while it was admirable that Tony Blair reportedly read the Qur'an on the flight from London to Washington, reading the New Testament might have been more important. But in England as in the United States a politician would be suspect if he tried to understand the religion of his own country.

The second essay is about the danger of having one's religion determined by the people one is fighting. In particular, that means picturing a world in which there is a neat split between good and evil. Of course, war almost inevitably does that. For about four or five days after Sept. 11 there was a debate whether the metaphor of *War* was appropriate to the situation of the United States. Since then, there seems not the slightest doubt in political or journalistic reports that *War* is the right term.

The third essay is about what happens when we settle into the well trod path of war versus pacifism. The Christian churches have a tradition of restraint badly named *Just war* theory. The only alternative has been called *Pacifism*. At a recent conference, I was leading a discussion entitled *Is an Ethic of Non-violence Possible?* A woman said to me *I'm a hard core pacifist; I don't want to debate non-violence.* That can be a problem with an *Ideology* of pacifism. As Erasmus noted 400 years ago, being in favor of peace doesn't get rid of violence. Only by developing structures to mediate conflicts in communities, in nations and between nations will there be peace. Non-violence is not an ideology; it is a way to live, while aware that one can only do so imperfectly in a violent world.

THE UNITED STATES IS NOT AMERICA

By Gabriel Moran

In many ways this historical moment seems to be the least auspicious time for confronting the most basic problem that this country has had from its beginning. That problem is the confusion of a fallible nation-state with a religious idea. Never has the country been so enveloped in the religious conviction of its own innocence and goodness. Nevertheless, because of the identity-shaking nature of its recent experience there is still a possibility that the United States may finally understand its place as one nation among many, a country that is no longer cavalier in its rejection of international covenants. After we have finished the one millionth rendition of *AGod Bless America*,@we may come to recognize what the United States is and how to distinguish it from America.

America was invented in the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries; the coining of the term in 1507 was to name Europe's dream of paradise. From the beginning and to the present, *AAmerica*@has had a double meaning: a religious meaning (derived mainly from the Bible) and a continental meaning. Columbus, as many people now say, did not discover America; however, he did help to invent it: the promised land across the Red Sea of the Atlantic Ocean. When British America asserted its right to be a distinct nation it deliberately conflated itself with the religious meaning of America and implicitly made claim to the continental meaning.

Of the four words in *AUnited States of America*,@ the most crucial was the third. If the country had been called the United States in America, the continental meaning of America might have flourished, the United States becoming one nation among many nations in (North, Central and South) America. Instead, the newly fashioned country laid claim to the religious idea that encompassed the continental idea. Eventually, this new entity was able to enforce its presumptuous claim: *We own this half of the earth; we have that ownership because we are not a mere nation-state but the fulfillment of the nations. Because we are the dream of humankind, all nations must look to us as their model.*

Anyone who thinks that this history is a mere relic has not been listening to how the United States speaks to the rest of the world. Admittedly, that is more difficult to do than it might seem. Every fourth sentence spoken in the country reinforces the confusion between the country and the mythical idea about the country. Patriotism - the love of a country's history, geography, people and policies - is confused with the love of an idea about the country. Patriotism would

lead one to believe that the United States has been a worthwhile though still tentative experiment for humanity, a fairly good country, a country that a citizen can honor and love despite some terrible acts in the past and deep flaws in the present. Patriotism would not lead one to scream "America is number one."

In its religious meaning, America is indeed number one - by definition. What needs to be resisted is a way of speaking that makes the United States equivalent to America. There are people who always do make the distinction, although no prominent politician is among them. Nearly everyone occasionally notices the incongruity of the equation but then most people revert to saying America when they mean the United States. It requires resistance and circumlocution to avoid calling U.S. citizens the Americans. However unlikely a change of language seems at present, the confusion within the United States and the danger to other countries cannot be addressed without a linguistic change.

America began as Europe's dream but the United States has succeeded in spreading the idea that the United States is America. In today's world, America generates great hope and intense hatred. Immigrants from around the world come with hope, expecting to find America. Half of the immigrants promptly turn around and leave when they find they are not in America; they are in the United States. The other immigrants are content with the fact that the United States can be a partial embodiment of America. Life may be miserable for me, the immigrant reasons, but it will be better for my children and my grandchildren. The glory of the United States is that often if not always that hope is realized.

The people who would like to destroy the United States often know little about it but the ignorance is not all their fault. What they know and hate is America. People like Mullah Muhammad Omar, Osama bin Laden and millions of others do not refer to the United States as their enemy. "Death to America" is their cry. For the United States, this fact is likely to confirm the belief that there is a war between a good America and evil-doing haters of justice, liberty and goodness. Undoubtedly, there are tyrants who hate the idea of liberty. But there are also millions of people who resent and hate what they actually experience at the hands of a nation that conflates itself with a religious mission. The foreign policy of the United States is often the religion of America.

This confusion is bad enough in more normal times. But when the shooting starts, the rest of the world shudders at what "America" may do. As God's anointed, it feels no need to answer to any other nation or any international body. The United States is a nation that may sometimes have to fight a war. What is going on now is something less than and something more than a war. The

United States government is looking for terrorists in as many as sixty countries, including the United States. This police action, which needs the supervision of an international body, is frighteningly entangled with America. America does not fight wars, America launches crusades. George W. Bush's use of *Acrusade* was no slip of the tongue; the term is inherent to America's mission. The crusade is not only against Muslims but against any place where evil is thought to reside. In the United States, America is by definition good; therefore, the opponents of America are by definition evil. Seen from the opposite side, America is by definition evil and any means of attack on America or defense against the assault of America is legitimate. The suicidal opponents of *America* know the religious nature of the world's conflict; it is time for the United States to discover it.

A change of language would not immediately convince our enemies to stop hating America. For much of the world *America* is destined to remain a term that represents arrogance, wealth and dangerous liberties. But the first step needed is for the United States to clarify its own self-description, thereby locating itself in the community of nations and being willing to enter into binding covenants. America, of course, does not and cannot enter into international covenants or subscribe to international laws and courts. The United Nations has been adamantly opposed from its inception by the political right wing of the United States. In recent years this has caused the scandal of the United States refusing to pay its bills at the United Nations. The right wing is not likely to ever admit a problem here. America is surely number one in the world. Any international body has to be subservient to America.

What is more distressing than this right wing attitude is the left wing in this country. Left-wing criticism throughout the twentieth century was typically directed at America. That is, the left, as much or more than the right, argues from within a cocoon of mythical language. This fact is a large part of why the left has been so impotent in the United States. No one has ever gotten anywhere in this country by attacking America. The left wing will never be effective until it focuses criticism on the United States, its government and policies.

America can be a good idea and a stirring ideal. The United States probably would not have survived the nineteenth century without America. Its civil war and the immigration of tens of millions of people might have overwhelmed the sense of national unity. But it is long past the time when a mature United States should be able to present itself to the rest of the world with an accurate perception of its own nature. Most of the rest of the world could admire the United States as a good though imperfect country whose desire is to become America. Every citizen of this land ought to be able to say: I love the

United States, I love America, and I never confuse the two.

WHAT DOES VIOLENCE BREED?

By Peter Steinfels

Violence begets violence. Violence begets more violence. Violence begets only violence. They are three variations on a theme. It is a familiar theme, sounded at various times by world religious leaders, politicians and politically minded celebrities. The list includes Martin Luther King, Jr, Pope John Paul II and the exiled Vietnamese Buddhist Thich Nhat Hanh. It also includes Madonna, Yasir Arafat and Representative Barbara Lee of California who cast the lone vote in Congress against authorizing President Bush to use force to conduct a war on terrorism.

Since Sept. 11 these phrases or similar ones have become a kind of mantra of many who either actively oppose a military response against the Taliban and Al Qaeda or who feel that the first priority is to keep any such response tightly reined in. Violence just simply begets more violence, @Bruce Stewart, the head of the Quakers=Sidwell Friends School in Washington, said a week after the terrorist attacks. Violence breeds violence, @Thomas Gumbleton, a Roman Catholic Bishop from Detroit, said before a Sept. 29 peace march in Washington.

For all their familiar ring, what do such statements mean? What are they based on? Common sense, divine revelation, historical experience, empirical testing? Here is where slight variations cease to be slight. There is a world of difference between Violence begets violence@and Violence begets only violence.@ In practice, the difference blurs as one phrase is used as shorthand for the other. Put simply, Violence begets violence@expresses a common sense reality that almost no one would deny. Whether in the case of the schoolyard bully finally getting his comeuppance or of a naked aggression on the battlefield, even the most welcome victories are never achieved without planting at least some germ of future conflicts.

Bitterness gnaws at the loser; arrogance tempts the victors; the taste of battle lingers on both sides. Will these toxins in the bloodstream prove deadly or amenable to treatment? Violence begets violence@does not say. It only warns that there will always be some price to pay and a challenge to be met. It will take more than war to end all wars.

Violence begets more violence,@on the other hand, is ambiguous. If Amore@ simply means Aurther@or Afuture@the added word changes little. But if Amore@ means or implies Agreater@violence, then the statement takes on a new cast. If

World War I were said to have led to World War II, the perhaps violence beget not only future violence but greater violence. If World War II were said to have led to the Cold War was the violence greater? By what measure? And the American Civil War? No doubt it introduced new military technology to the world and insinuated new strains of violence into the American character; but did it beget greater violence?

Obviously, to claim that violence as a rule breeds greater violence requires chains of causation and comparative measures of outcomes that must remain highly subjective and speculative. After all, did World War I itself beget World War II, or was it the Treaty of Versailles or the Great Depression or German political culture or a great many other things, all in hard-to-determine proportions?

The problem is still more severe with the strongest claim yet: Violence begets only violence. Doesn't violence beget many things? Doesn't violence also beget justice, sometimes at least, along with injustice, the proportion between them varying from case to case rather than inevitably established? The Civil War beget the end of slavery, although not racial equality. World War II beget an end to genocidal Nazism. And the war also beget, along with a democratic western Europe, the extension of Soviet totalitarianism in Eastern Europe. However one weighs such goods and evils, history gives little ground for that categorical 'Only.'

Indeed, anyone trying to trace a path through the murky terrain of recent history will stumble over another embarrassing possibility. Does nonviolence sometimes beget violence? To raise that possibility, without making it a general law, does not deny the teachings or achievements of Gandhi and King. It simply points to another widely held conclusion, that the unwillingness of democratic nations like France, Britain and the United States to resist Hitler's serial aggressions in the 1930s with military force had devastating consequences.

Nan Keohane, the president of Duke University, made a parallel case about the Sept. 11 attacks. She said: 'We are currently in a situation where violence indeed begets violence but in a different way. If the violence goes unchecked, it begets yet more violence from those who originally launched it.'

In sum, these three variations lie along a spectrum. They start from a sad but important observation about the human condition and slide to an ambiguous, debatable claim about historical events and then to an almost certainly false thesis about a single, inevitable consequence. As cautionary rhetoric, they may be useful. As formulas for resolving specific political and moral quandaries, they do not suffice. Bumper sticker phrases, even eloquent ones proclaimed by

sainted individuals, seldom do.
SACRED SPACE
By Roger Friedland

By castrating New York's twin towers and by penetrating the pentagon of power in Washington, Osama bin Laden is seeking to build a new space, a battlefield the likes of which we have not witnessed since the wars of religion ripped Europe apart. The destruction of the Trade Center and the Pentagon is part of an attempted reconstruction and expansion of a politicized sacred Islamic community. By profaning the West's most sacred sites, by their bodily sacrifice, these new warriors hope to set in motion a war and thereby to create an impassible boundary between Islamic sacred space and the rest.

The irony is that just as bin Laden's warriors used modern techniques - airplanes and electronic money transfer - to violate what he perceives as the profane space of Western modernity, we deploy pre-modern faith to conduct our war with him. The U.S. president and countless others call us repeatedly to pray and from the churches, including the National Cathedral, we are called to war. To counter Bin Laden, we have to rely on religious nationalist states like Pakistan, Iran, Saudi Arabia and India.

Osama bin Laden is out to demonstrate not just that the Islamic world can and must defend itself against Western capitalist culture, but that Allah is more powerful than American guns and money. Islamic warriors believe they have already shown this is true within the umma, the Islamic community, in Lebanon, Egypt, Yemen, Afghanistan and the Sudan.

If Bin Laden can engage the forces of the American infidels in the umma itself in a long term-term campaign of violent incursions, he is counting on showing that militant Islam can defy American power just about everywhere. For Bin Laden, the destruction of the towers was a feint designed to draw us into war on his battlefield, indeed to construct the battlefield.. We should take care that we do not become fellow builders in his Manichean architectural project, that we not build precisely what he hoped to construct through his destruction.

To win, the United States is going to have to wage a moral war as well. This is not going to be won by smart bombs and listening posts. While there are millions of Muslims who abhor what Bin Laden's warriors wrought in Manhattan and Washington, many do share his vision of the United States's posture in the world. They know that in 1991 the United States was willing to defend militarily the political existence of narrowly-based, oil-rich regimes in the Gulf, but quickly

retreated from an impoverished and fractious Afghanistan once the Cold War was over. They know that the United States has been singularly unresponsive to efforts to inject issues of social justice into the deliberations and rulings of the World Trade Organization. They know that the United States government stood by without a word while Israel radically expanded the settlements in the occupied West Bank at the same time it was negotiating a peace settlement with the Palestinians.

In constructing its coalition against terrorism, the United States is developing a particular moral architecture. It has allied itself with two global powers - Russia and China - both of whom face territorial challenges from Islamically inspired populations. Both have brutally repressed those populations.

The Islamic alliance is more problematic. To those Islamic states whose territories, security services and banks it depends on to stop Bin Laden, the United States is providing debt relief and favored-nation trading status on the one side, and promises of military support on the other. In this war, the United States is making no demands for justice, for democracy, for civil or political or human rights. Instead, the United States's conduct of this war is organized around two principles: the state as the organization that has a legitimate monopoly on violence and a free market whose circulation of money is strictly accounted by these same states. State control of violence and money is to be the machine language of the new global order.

But this response to Bin Laden's profanation only confirms his reading of our intentions. It is precisely the moral poverty of this institutional architecture - of the nation state and the capitalist coin - against which militant Islam has mobilized. In the long haul, to win this war, it will take more than guns and money. We will have to consider what it means to be the good guys.

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