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S U M M A R Y

In putting forth his foreign policy, President George W. Bush speaks of the United States having a “calling” or “mission” that has come from the “Maker of Heaven.” Yet, while he uses explicitly religious language more than his immediate predecessors, there is nothing exceptional about a U.S. president resorting to religious themes to explain his foreign policy. U.S. goals in the world are based on Protestant millennial themes that go back to seventeenth-century England. What has distinguished Bush from some of his predecessors is that these religious concepts have not only shaped his ultimate objectives but also colored the way in which he viewed reality—sometimes to the detriment of U.S. foreign policy.

The Chosen Nation: The Influence of Religion on U.S. Foreign Policy

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President George W. Bush’s second inaugural address was almost entirely devoted to justifying his foreign policy. And, like his other speeches on foreign policy, it was filled with references to the United States being “called” or given a “mission” by the “Maker of Heaven” and “Author of Liberty.” America’s history, Bush declared, “has a visible direction, set by liberty and the Author of Liberty.”

Bush’s speeches have exceeded those of his predecessors in the sheer number of references to God, but there was nothing unusual in a U.S. president describing the nation’s role in the world in religious terms. In his inaugural address, John Adams thanked an “overruling Providence which had so signally protected this country from the first.” In 1919, Woodrow Wilson promised that through supporting the League of Nations, the United States would lead in the “redemption of the world.” During World War II, Roosevelt declared in his 1942 message to Congress: “We on our side are striving to be true to [our] divine heritage.”

And many U.S. high officials have

invoked the same mission as Bush’s inaugural—that the United States has been called by God to achieve “the expansion of freedom in all the world.” What has differentiated one president from another, however, is how each has applied this religious injunction to events. America’s more difficult moments have come when it has allowed religious conceptions not only to dictate ultimate goals but to color its understanding of the real world in which these goals have to be met.

Framework of Understanding

Three related ideas can be found regularly in Bush’s speeches on foreign policy that are rooted in America’s religious past and have been voiced throughout its history. The first is the idea of the United States as God’s “chosen nation”—from Abraham Lincoln’s “the last, best hope of earth” to former Secretary of State Madeleine Albright’s “indispensable nation.”

The second is the idea that the United States has a “mission” or a “calling” to transform the world. During the debate over the annexation of the Philippines, Senator Albert



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Beveridge declared that God had “marked the American people as His chosen nation to finally lead in the redemption of the world.” Richard Nixon in the 1960 campaign affirmed that “America came into the world 180 years ago not just to have freedom for ourselves, but to carry it to the whole world.” And of course, George W. Bush proclaimed in April 2004 that “as the greatest power on the face of the Earth, we have an obligation to help the spread of freedom.... That is what we have been called to do, as far as I’m concerned.”

The third idea is that in carrying out this mission, the United States is representing the forces of good over evil. “There never has been—there never can be—successful compromise between good and evil,” Franklin Roosevelt said about the conflict with Germany and Japan in World War II. And George W. Bush declared at West Point in May 2003, “We are in a conflict between good and evil, and America will call evil by its name.”

These ideas, taken together, make up a *framework* of understanding that has guided many Americans—whatever their religious faith or lack of one—as they have thought about the role of the United States in the world. The individual terms of the framework—what kind of world Americans want to create and who is standing in the way—have changed over the last two and a quarter centuries. The first generation of Americans, for instance, saw themselves creating what Jefferson called an “empire of liberty” against the opposition of Old World tyranny; Jacksonian Democrats wanted to build a Christian civilization against the opposition of “savages”; Theodore Roosevelt’s generation envisioned the spread of Anglo-Saxon civilization against the opposition of barbarians and savages; and Wilson and his successors wanted to create a global democratic order against the opposition of imperial Germany, fascism, and communism. But the basic framework of a chosen nation seeking to transform the world has remained.

What Will History Teach Us?

Obviously, this framework does not exhaust the reasons why the United States has adopted one foreign policy over another. U.S. policy makers have sometimes acted in immediate self-defense—for instance, after the September 11, 2001, attacks—as well as for broader economic or geopolitical reasons. As one state department official quipped prior to the invasion of Iraq, the Bush White House would probably not have decided to go to war with Iraq if the Gulf’s main product were kumquats instead of oil. And sometimes, such as during the Indian wars of the nineteenth century, religion was merely invoked *ex post facto* to justify actions that were clearly based on quite different motives. But on major questions involving war and peace—such as the decision to annex the Philippines or go to war in 1917 or 1941—the idea of a chosen nation attempting to transform the world in the face of evil has played a significant role.

By describing Americans as having been called by God, Bush and other U.S. officials have defined this framework in explicitly religious terms. But the framework is religious in two other important ways. First, it is rooted in the Protestant millennialism that was brought to America from England and Holland in the seventeenth century. The English Puritans originally believed that England was to be the “new Israel”—the site of the millennium and of the climactic battle of Armageddon that was predicted in Revelations. After the collapse of Oliver Cromwell’s revolution in 1658, however, they transferred their hopes to Puritan New England. The American version of Protestant millennialism, as put forth, for instance, by Jonathan Edwards in the 1740s, saw that “the dawning, or at least the prelude, of that glorious work of God... will begin in America.”

In the late eighteenth century, America’s founders transformed this Biblical millennialism into what historian Nathan Hatch has called America’s “civil millennialism.” They translated Protestant millennialism into the language of American nationalism and excep-

tionalism. The chosen people—whom Edwards identified with the visible saints of New England’s Congregational churches—became the citizens of the new United States; the millennium became a thousand-year reign of religious *and* civil liberty; and the adversary became English tyranny and Old World Catholicism. In this way, Protestant millennialism ordered and gave meaning to Americans’ intentions, but the intentions were now often expressed in language of politics rather than of the pulpit.

Second, Americans approached these objectives, and the obstacles that seemed to stand in the way of their attainment, with a religious *mentality*. This mentality is characterized by an apocalyptic outlook that was prevalent in seventeenth century Protestant millennialism. Worldly conflicts are elevated into conflicts between heaven and hell, God and Satan, and good and evil. In 1777, for instance, Abraham Keteltas, a chaplain in the revolutionary army, declared that what was at stake in the war was “the cause of trust against error and falsehood; the cause of righteousness against iniquity; the cause of the oppressed against the oppressor; the cause of pure and undefiled religion against bigotry, superstition, and human inventions...In short, it is the cause of heaven against hell—of the kind Parent of the universe, against the prince of darkness and the destroyer of the human race.”

According to this apocalyptic outlook, these conflicts will not be resolved through gradual or subtle change but through cataclysmic transformation. By defeating England, or seizing Texas from Mexico, or driving the Indians out of the Black Hills, or defeating the Kaiser and then Hitler, or even driving Saddam Hussein out of Kuwait, the United States would secure not merely a temporary reprieve from

further conflict, but a triumph of civilization, a new world order, and an end to war. World War I was “the war to end all wars”; the Cold War was “Armageddon.”

This kind of religious mentality can inspire dedication to a difficult goal, and it certainly did so during World War II and the Cold War. But it can also be at odds with the empirical method that goes into appraising reality, based on a determination of means and ends. This apocalyptic mentality gravitates toward absolute dichotomies and revolutionary rather than evolutionary change. It discourages a complex appreciation of differences and similarities in favor of a rush toward generalities and simple polarities. It looks toward immediate resolution of conflict through an Armageddon-like event and eschews the postponement and modification of ultimate objectives.

The Framework of U.S. Foreign Policy

Period	Mission	Adversary	Means
Pre-revolutionary, colonial America (1600–1776)	Millennium	Papal antichrist	Example as “city on the hill”
Revolutionary and founding era (1776–1815)	Empire of liberty	Old world tyranny, “hellish fiends” (Native Americans)	Example, continental expansion, without entangling alliances
Manifest Destiny (1815–1848)	Christian civilization	Savages or “children” (Native Americans)	Example, continental expansion, without entangling alliances
Imperial America (1898–1913)	Christian civilization	Barbarians and savages (Filipinos)	Overseas expansion without entangling alliances
Wilsonian internationalism (1914–1919)	Global democracy	Autocracy and imperialism	International organization and alliances
Cold War liberalism (1946–1989)	Free world	Communism	International organizations and alliances
Bush and neoconservatism (2001–)	Spread of freedom	International terrorism, radical Islam	Unilateral action with ad hoc alliances

Other nations, including Victorian Britain, Soviet Russia, and Nazi Germany, have harbored similar, though not identical, millennial hopes and displayed a similar apocalyptic mentality. (As historian Ernest Tuveson once explained, the Marxist theory of history was itself a product of Protestant millennialism.) But these other nations have had their millennial dreams dashed on the rocks of history, whereas the United States, through centuries of almost continuous rise as a world power, has retained the fervor of its original convictions.

prominent statesmen and intellectuals advocated that the United States seek to transform the world by becoming an imperial power—not simply by establishing a model republic on the continent, but by seeking what Roosevelt called the “domination of the world.” After the United States drove Spain out of the Caribbean and the Pacific in 1898, the McKinley administration, goaded by this faction, decided to annex the Philippines and other Spanish possessions in order, McKinley said, “to educate the Filipinos, and uplift and civilize and Christianize them.”

America’s difficult moments have come when it has allowed religious conceptions to color its understanding of the real world.

An Altered Strategy

While keeping alive their hopes of transforming the world, Americans have periodically altered their strategy for doing so. From the nation’s founding until the 1890s, most U.S. policy makers believed that the United States’ best means to transform the world was by example—by creating what John Winthrop called a “city on the hill” that all nations could emulate. In 1821, John Quincy Adams, while serving as James Monroe’s secretary of state, refused pleas that the United States intervene on behalf of the Greek revolutionaries. Adams rejected “going abroad in search of monsters to destroy,” urging instead that the United States “commend the general cause by the countenance of her voice and the benignant sympathy of her example.”

In the last two decades of the nineteenth century, however, as Great Britain, France, Germany, Russia, and Japan began to carve the world into colonies, Theodore Roosevelt, Henry Cabot Lodge, and other

This experiment with imperialism proved ill-fated. The annexation of the Philippines led to a four-year war that claimed the lives of over 4,000 Americans and over 200,000 Filipinos. By his second term in office, Theodore Roosevelt had abandoned the imperial strategy and was seeking instead to position the United States as a mediator between the other increasingly warring imperial powers.

Woodrow Wilson was initially a proponent of American imperialism, but, chastened by his own unsuccessful intervention in Mexico in 1914, which provoked a nationalist backlash, and by the outbreak of the European war, Wilson developed a new strategy for transforming the world. Its aim was to “make the world safe for democracy” by dismantling the imperial system, on which Wilson blamed the war. This involved removing the incentives for conflict among the advanced nations and encouraging the transition of former colonies to self-government. Wilson did not think the United States could

generally do this by itself but by working with other nations cooperatively in international organizations. Wilson was foiled by opposition at home and abroad, but his overall approach was adopted later by presidents from Franklin Roosevelt through Bill Clinton. While reserving America's right to defend itself, these presidents vested the effort to transform the world in an array of U.S.-led international and regional organizations, including the United Nations, the International Monetary Fund, the World Bank, the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO), and the World Trade Organization.

What has distinguished the most successful U.S. presidents and diplomats has been their ability to pursue the framework's goals while retaining a realistic—non-apocalyptic—view of means and ends and capabilities. In the early 1790s, some Americans dreamed of creating a world revolution by supporting the French. In his farewell address in 1796, George Washington warned against the United States, which was a minor, marginal power, identifying itself with either side in the European struggle. He cautioned against “permanent inveterate antipathies against particular nations and passionate attachments for others.” Washington was not arguing for what would later be called isolationism, but for grounding America's ultimate objectives in a realistic appraisal of its power and of foreign threats.

During World War I, Wilson resisted the widespread perception that German ambition was the sole cause of the war. During World War II, Franklin Roosevelt rejected plans, based on a view of Germans as inherently evil, for dismembering and deindustrializing the country afterwards. In 1963, John F. Kennedy looked beyond the “long twilight struggle” of the Cold War and backed a test ban treaty with the Soviet Union. In 1971, Richard Nixon put aside his own past of demonizing “Red China” and sought to normalize relations with China. And in 1987,

Ronald Reagan signed an arms control agreement with the country he had once called the hub of an evil empire.

At other times, however, U.S. officials have become captivated by the religious mentality handed down from Protestant millennialism. In the late 1890s, Theodore Roosevelt and other imperialists, ignoring ample evidence of discord, maintained that the race to carve up colonies was leading to a more peaceful, prosperous world. Although Woodrow Wilson had a realistic view of World War I, he had an entirely unrealistic view, nourished by Protestant millennialism, of what kind of international organization could be created in the wake of the war and what it could accomplish. In Great Britain on eve of the Versailles peace conference, Wilson insisted that “as this war had drawn the nations temporarily together in a combination of physical force, we shall now be drawn together in a combination of moral force that will be irresistible.”

During the Cold War, many U.S. officials succumbed to a view of the Soviet Union as the demonic center of a seamless world conspiracy that threatened not only Western Europe but also Phoenix, Boise, and San Diego. These exaggerated fears led not only to the Red Scare at home, but to policy makers ignoring Sino-Soviet tensions for at least a decade and discounting the strong nationalist element in communist movements in Vietnam and Latin America.

During the height of this hysteria, Reinhold Niebuhr, a supporter of Truman's Cold War policies, took aim at the mentality that America's millennial view was nurturing. “Success in world politics,” Niebuhr wrote in *The Irony of American History*, “necessitates a disavowal of the pretentious elements in our original dream, and...requires a modest awareness of the contingent elements in the values and ideas of our devotion, even when they appear to us to be universally valid; and a generous appreciation of the valid elements

in the practices and institutions of other nations though they deviate from our own.”

Bush’s Colored Reality

George W. Bush has not differed from his predecessors in his commitment to Protestant millennialism. Bush’s “unique role” was Clinton’s “indispensable nation.” Bush’s pledge to “the spread of freedom” was Clinton’s commitment to “democratic engagement and enlargement.” But in applying the framework to events, Bush repudiated the Wilsonian strategy that his father and Clinton had followed. He spurned working

through international organizations—whether to protect the environment, prosecute war crimes, or wage war—except on a purely ad hoc basis and under U.S. control. His was a strategy based on what his supporters called a “unipolar” vision of the world.

Bush also allowed the framework, and its accompanying mentality, to color his view of reality. A case in point was the decision to invade and occupy Iraq. There was undoubtedly a host of different reasons why the Bush administration finally decided to do so, but there were factors in the decision that suggested that an apocalyptic mentality was distorting the administration’s view of reality. Administration members continually referred to Saddam Hussein as “evil.” They did this partly to stir up popular feeling against him and for a war, but they also appear to have endowed Saddam with qualities that went beyond any empirical understanding of the man and his life.

Bush saw Saddam not merely as a determined and bitter adversary but as a “madman”—much in the same way that earlier Americans had viewed Native American adversaries. That meant that Saddam might unleash destruction on the United States even if he and his regime were destroyed in the process. “I acted,” Bush would later say, “because I was not about to leave the security of the American people in the hands of a madman. I was not about to stand by and wait and trust in the sanity and restraint of Saddam Hussein.” The administration’s demonization of Saddam probably contributed to its seemingly unshakeable belief, contrary to the evidence of United Nations inspectors, that the Iraqi dictator was actually developing nuclear weapons.

An apocalyptic mentality was also evident in the administration’s belief that invading Iraq would set off a chain reaction that would transform the entire Middle East. It would lead, administration officials maintained, to democratic regimes in Syria, Iran, and Saudi Arabia, the marginalization of

The Religious Right’s Millennial Vision

Many of the Pentecostals and Fundamentalists who make up the religious right embrace a dissenting form of Protestant millennialism that English theologian John Nelson Darby brought to the United States in 1859. This view of history is deeply pessimistic and has often reinforced an insular view of the U.S. role in the world.

Darby contended that the period from Christ’s crucifixion to the “end times” before the millennium was a “parenthesis.” The end times would begin with the abrupt return of Jesus to “rapture” the true believers to heaven. These exemplary Christians would be spared seven years of bloody “tribulation,” which would take place in Israel to which the Jews would have returned and laid claim. At the end of seven years, Jesus would return to defeat Satan in the battle of Armageddon, and the millennium would begin.

Christians who adhered to this theory believed that their main task on earth was to lead model lives so that they could be raptured before the tribulation. For most of the last century, many of them eschewed politics and had no view of foreign policy, except for a strong interest in the Jewish return to Israel. Even now, when many have entered politics primarily to combat what they see as a secular threat to their faith, they remain wedded to a very narrow view of U.S. foreign policy objectives focused on Israel. Much of the religious right backed the war in Iraq not because they wanted to democratize the Middle East but precisely because Iraq’s Saddam Hussein had threatened Israel, which they are determined to protect in preparation for the end times.

Palestinian militants, and the end of the Organization of Oil Exporting Countries (OPEC). At a speech in Nashville in August 2002, Vice President Dick Cheney claimed that as a result of Saddam's ouster "Extremists in the region would have to rethink their strategy of jihad. Moderates throughout the region would take heart." That could certainly occur, but did not happen in the aftermath of Saddam's ouster. Cheney's statement was, of course, for public

a dissenting strain of Protestant millennialism that emphasizes Christians seeking their own salvation before the "end times." That view may have influenced Bush's initial skepticism about foreign intervention, which he expressed during the 2000 campaign, and his disdain for the United Nations, but it was not reflected in the expansive view of U.S. aims that Bush adopted after the September 11, 2001, terrorist attacks and in his tolerance of religious diversity.

The Bush administration's mistakes echo a pattern that runs through U.S. history.

consumption, but administration officials, including Deputy Secretary of Defense Paul Wolfowitz, made similar statements privately to academics and in casual, off-the-record talks with journalists.

Of course, one can attribute these errors of judgment to factors other than America's millennial heritage. Government officials make mistakes all the time for perfectly mundane reasons. But the Bush administration's mistakes echo a pattern that runs through U.S. history. From the Indian wars to the Mexican war of 1846 to the Philippine war of 1899 to Vietnam in the 1960s, Americans erroneously believed, just as they did before the Iraq war, that they would be welcomed as agents of political transformation. These beliefs reflected not just error and ignorance, but the blindness that a millennial mentality periodically encourages.

Some critics, particularly abroad, have blamed the administration's mistakes on the influence of the conservative evangelicals who make up "the religious right." The religious right has certainly influenced Republican Party politics and very specific areas of foreign policy. They have lobbied for a greater Israel—a preoccupation that grows out of their reading of Revelations—and against Christian persecution in Asia and Africa. But their general outlook on the world represents

To focus on the religious right's influence is to miss the heart of what Bush is saying when he invokes religious concepts to explain his foreign policy. Bush's belief that the United States has a "mission" or a "calling" from the "Maker of Heaven" to spread freedom around the world puts him in a mainstream of religious expression that goes back to the first settlers from England. What sets Bush off from some of his more illustrious predecessors is that in making foreign *policy*—a task that requires an empirical assessment of means and ends—he may have been guided not only by the objectives of Protestant millennialism but also by the apocalyptic mentality it has spawned. That has made for eloquent and stirring oratory, but it may have also detracted from a clear understanding of the challenges facing the United States.

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WHAT WAR IN THE PHILIPPINES SHOULD HAVE TAUGHT GEORGE BUSH, John Judis, Jim Mann, Michael Lind (panel discussion, Washington, D.C., September 27, 2004), available at www.CarnegieEndowment.org/files/Judiseventsummary.pdf.

TAKING BACK AMERICA, Anatol Lieven (*The London Review of Books*, December 2, 2004) available at www.CarnegieEndowment.org/publications/index.cfm?fa=view&id=16218.

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