

America is a religion

US leaders now see themselves as priests
of a divine mission to rid the world of its demons

The death of Uday and Qusay,” the commander of the ground forces in Iraq told reporters on Wednesday, “is definitely going to be a turning point for the resistance.” Well, it was a turning point, but unfortunately not of the kind he envisaged. On the day he made his announcement, Iraqi insurgents killed one US soldier and wounded six others. On the following day, they killed another three; over the weekend they assassinated five and injured seven. Yesterday they slaughtered one more and wounded three. This has been the worst week for US soldiers in Iraq since George Bush declared that the war there was over.

Few people believe that the resistance in that country is being coordinated by Saddam Hussein and his noxious family, or that it will come to an end when those people are killed. But the few appear to include the military and civilian command of the United States armed forces. For the hundredth time since the US invaded Iraq, the predictions made by those with access to intelligence have proved less reliable than the predictions made by those without. And, for the hundredth time, the inaccuracy of the official forecasts has been blamed on “intelligence failures”.

The explanation is wearing a little thin. Are we really expected to believe that the members of the US security services are the only people who cannot see that many Iraqis wish to rid themselves of the US army as fervently as they wished to rid themselves of Saddam Hussein? What is lacking in the Pentagon and the White House is not intelligence (or not, at any rate, of the kind we are considering here), but

receptivity. Theirs is not a failure of information, but a failure of ideology.

To understand why this failure persists, we must first grasp a reality which has seldom been discussed in print. The United States is no longer just a nation. It is now a religion. Its soldiers have entered Iraq to liberate its people not only from their dictator, their oil and their sovereignty, but also from their darkness. As George Bush told his troops on the day he announced victory: “Wherever you go, you carry a message of hope - a message that is ancient and ever new. In the words of the prophet Isaiah, “To the captives, “come out,” and to those in darkness, “be free”.”

So American soldiers are no longer merely terrestrial combatants; they have become missionaries. They are no longer simply killing enemies; they are casting out demons. The people who reconstructed the faces of Uday and Qusay Hussein carelessly forgot to restore the pair of little horns on each brow, but the understanding that these were opponents from a different realm was transmitted nonetheless. Like all those who send missionaries abroad, the high priests of America cannot conceive that the infidels might resist through their own free will; if they refuse to convert, it is the work of the devil, in his current guise as the former dictator of Iraq.

As Clifford Longley shows in his fascinating book *Chosen People*, published last year, the founding fathers of the USA, though they sometimes professed otherwise, sensed that they were guided by a divine purpose. Thomas Jefferson argued that the Great Seal of the United States should depict the Israelites, “led by a cloud by day and a pillar of fire by night”. George Washington claimed, in his inaugural address, that every step towards independence was “distinguished by some token of providential agency”. Longley argues that the formation of the American identity was part of a process of “supersession”. The Roman Catholic church claimed that it had supplanted the Jews as the elect, as the Jews had been repudiated by God. The English Protestants accused the Catholics of breaking faith, and claimed that they had become the beloved of God. The American revolutionaries believed that the English, in turn, had broken their covenant: the Americans had now become the chosen people, with a divine duty to deliver the world to God’s dominion. Six weeks ago, as if to show that this belief persists, George Bush recalled a remark of Woodrow Wilson’s. “America,” he quoted, “has a spiritual energy in her which no other nation can contribute to the liberation of mankind.”

Gradually this notion of election has been conflated with another, still more dangerous idea. It is not just that the Americans are God’s chosen people; America itself is now perceived as a divine project. In his farewell presidential address, Ronald Reagan spoke of his country as a “shining city on a hill”, a reference to the Sermon on the Mount. But what Jesus was describing was not a temporal Jerusalem, but the

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kingdom of heaven. Not only, in Reagan's account, was God's kingdom to be found in the United States of America, but the kingdom of hell could also now be located on earth: the "evil empire" of the Soviet Union, against which His holy warriors were pitched.

Since the attacks on New York, this notion of America the divine has been extended and refined. In December 2001, Rudy Giuliani, the mayor of that city, delivered his last mayoral speech in St Paul's Chapel, close to the site of the shattered twin towers. "All that matters," he claimed, "is that you embrace America and understand its ideals and what it's all about. Abraham Lincoln used to say that the test of your Americanism was ... how much you believed in America. Because we're like a religion really. A secular religion." The chapel in which he spoke had been consecrated not just by God, but by the fact that George Washington had once prayed there. It was, he said, now "sacred ground to people who feel what America is all about". The United States of America no longer needs to call upon God; it is God, and those who go abroad to spread the light do so in the name of a celestial domain. The flag has become as sacred as the Bible; the name of the nation as holy as the name of God. The presidency is turning into a priesthood.

So those who question George Bush's foreign policy are no longer merely critics; they are blasphemers, or "anti-Americans". Those foreign states which seek to change this policy are wasting their time: you can negotiate with politicians; you cannot negotiate with priests. The US has a divine mission, as Bush suggested in January: "to defend ... the hopes of all mankind", and woe betide those who hope for something other than the American way of life.

The dangers of national divinity scarcely require explanation. Japan went to war in the 1930s convinced, like George Bush, that it possessed a heaven-sent mission to "liberate" Asia and extend the realm of its divine imperium. It would, the fascist theoretician Kita Ikki predicted: "light the darkness of the entire world". Those who seek to drag heaven down to earth are destined only to engineer a hell. #

George Monbiot's book, The Age of Consent: A Manifesto for a New World Order, is published by Flamingo. His previous books Poisoned Arrows and No Man's Land are republished this week by Green Books.