

Symmetric Dualisms: Bush and bin Laden on Oct.7,2001*

Bruce Lincoln
University of Chicago

I

On Sunday, October 7,2001,less than a month after the attacks of September 11, 2001, President Bush announced the American military response in a televised address (Appendix A). Within hours,there came a riposte from Osama bin Laden who had prepared a videotape in anticipation of such military action and conveyed it to the widely viewed Arabic language network al-Jazeera, with instructions that it should be released shortly after Mr. Bush's broadcast (Appendix B).

Within the Muslim world, the bin Laden tape met an enthusiastic reception and it presented many westerners with their first sustained, relatively unmediated view of this man. Although his language and self-presentation were primarily aimed at a Muslim audience, Mr. bin Laden's charisma was still evident, even to a western audience relatively unfamiliar with the cultural codes on which he drew and relatively unsympathetic to the arguments he offered. Given that the tape showed him as articulate in his speech, coherent in his views, passionate in his commitments, also able to rebut Mr. Bush on certain points and to highlight others the President chose to ignore,it complicated attempts to depict him as evil incarnate. Treating control of the airwaves a military objective,the Bush administration quickly prevailed on American TV networks not to broadcast any further tapes from Mr. bin Laden. Rather, they should limit themselves to excerpts only, accompanied by "appropriate commentary" by responsible journalists, who could be counted on to tell the desired story. Government officials also pressured print media to adopt similar policies.¹

The censorship thus imposed effectively deprived most Americans of the opportunity to hear Mr. bin Laden and to improve their regrettably slim and shallow understanding of this man:his grievances, goals,dreams and delusions, his relative degree of rationality, as compared to the genuinely monstrous qualities of his *ressentiment*.² Further exposure might make him all the more repugnant to American audiences or might enhance his charismatic aura, but it would surely help create a better informed public: the basis of any democratic society and the proper ground from which policy ought to emerge. Although the administration has voiced fears about providing opportunities for propaganda and the transmission of coded messages to underground operatives, officials are clearly uncomfortable with anything that might permit a nuanced perception of bin Laden and create sympathy for him on any point. Far better to keep him a cartoonish stereotype of Orientalist fantasy: the "Mad Mullah," a wild-eyed, turbaned and bearded fanatic, whose innate irrationality precludes taking him seriously, but makes him a serious danger.³

If in the future we will hear bin Laden only in snippets carefully chosen and packaged for our consumption,it becomes all the more important to listen closely—and critically—to his tape of October 7, for it is a subtle, complex rhetorical performance and a revealing piece of evidence. The same can be said of Mr. Bush's speech. Indeed,it is useful to study the two texts in tandem, for they show unexpected similarities, as well as instructive differences.

II

Both men construct a Manichaeian struggle, where Sons of Light confront Sons of Darkness, and all must enlist on one side or another, without possibility of neutrality, hesitation, or middle ground. Bin Laden states that the events of Sept. 11th produced a radical estrangement and categorical division between two rival camps. His discourse, moreover, helps construct and exacerbate that division, as does the broader discourse in which he participates, which helped shape practices culminating in the 11th. "*Tell them that these events have divided the world into two camps, the camp of the faithful and the camp of infidels. May God shield us and you from them*" (§9). Bush makes the same point in the central paragraph of his text, pressing a complex and variegated world into the same tidy schema of two rival camps. The orienting binaries of this structure—good/evil, hero/villain,threat/threatened—are much the same for Mr. Bush as for bin Laden, but, predictably enough, he assigns the roles in opposite fashion. "*Every nation has a choice to make. In this conflict there is no neutral ground. If any government sponsors the outlaws and killers of innocents, they have become outlaws and murderers themselves. And they will take that lonely path at their own peril*" (§12).

Bin Laden's pronouncement "*May God shield us and you from them*" is particularly revealing for the way it establishes (and manipulates) relations among four entities, three of them marked by pronouns. Two of the pronouns—"us" and "them"—are set in opposition to each other, and the third ("you") is suspended between these two parties. The task this text takes for itself is to draw that "you" into close association with "us" and away from the enemy "them." It does this by aligning the sole noun of the phrase and its transcendent marker unambiguously with the "us": "*May God shield us—and you—from them*" (§9). In similar fashion, but working with different symbolic codes, Mr. Bush tries to discourage support for the enemy by consigning any would-be sympathizers to perdition: "*And they will take that lonely path at their own peril*" (§12).

To nail down the negative side of his binary structure, the President denounced his adversaries—not just the bombers of the 11th, but any government associated with them—as outlaws, murderers,and killers (§12). In other passages,he called his adversaries "*barbaric criminals*" (§9) who harbored "*evil plans*" (§6). For the most part, however, his favored term was "*terrorists*," a phrase repeated so often in his and in common parlance that its meaning has come to seem transparent and its appropriateness self-evident (§§1, 2, 5, 6, 9, 10, 13). Still, it is worth specifying the semantics of what has become the key signifier in our contemporary political discourse. As a rule, it

is reserved for non-state groups (often, but not necessarily Islamist) who use violence, including surreptitious attacks against civilians and others, to advance political goals that pit them in opposition to state structures, policies, and ruling elites.

There are, however, some telling exceptions that reveal how loaded is this terminology. The Contras in Nicaragua, for instance, also RENAMO in Mozambique, UNITA in Angola, and the Mujahedin in Afghanistan, when Afghanistan was Soviet-controlled all met the requirements of the above definition. But having been created by the CIA as proxies to harass regimes that incurred American disfavor, they could hardly be called “terrorists” in official parlance. Rather, “our” terrorists were usually dubbed “freedom fighters” when they had to be acknowledged: a term bin Laden, his al Qaeda network, and numerous other groups locked in struggle against powerful states would also surely claim for themselves.

Like Bush, bin Laden is also relentless in his use of a key signifier to denounce and demonize his enemies. His term of choice is “infidels,” which he repeats five times in a relatively short address (§§3,6, 8,9, 11). The Quranic resonances of this word are useful to him, as is its literal denotation (“unbeliever,” “enemy of the faith”). In Mr. bin Laden’s usage, however, it acquires a more specific and pointed contemporary referent, designating non-Muslim states that project their military, political, economic, and cultural power into spaces Muslims regard as most holy. These “infidels” include, above all, the U.S., whose stationing of troops in Saudi Arabia (home to Mecca and Medina) has been a prime concern of Mr. bin Laden’s since the 1991 Gulf War (§§10,11). More recently, he has begun to make similar points regarding the American-backed Israeli presence in Palestine, home of Jerusalem, Islam’s third most sacred city (§§3,4, 11).⁴

The moral failings bin Laden attributes to infidels include vanity (§6), arrogance (§1), and duplicity (§7), along with callous and wanton violence (§§4, 5, 7). Their offenses also consistently have a religious character, since they not only violate Islamic law, but are actively directed against Muslims and the Islamic community. President Bush is thus “*the head of international infidels*” (§§6,8), America “*the modern world’s symbol of paganism*” (§8), and for many decades Americans have been “*killers who toyed with the blood, honor and sanctities of Muslims*” (§4). Accordingly, in the opening words of bin Laden’s text, September 11 is construed as nothing less than the visitation of divine vengeance on a sinful nation: “*Here is America struck by God Almighty in one of its vital organs, so that its greatest buildings are destroyed. Grace and gratitude to God*” (§1; cf. §4).

III

While most of the characters who inhabit the two texts are noble heroes, outrageous villains, or waverers called to choose between these two rival camps, there is another set of cardboard figures, whose features are equally determined by their propagandistic utility. This consists of children in danger, who are menaced by one side and protected by the other.⁵ Mr. Bush evoked such images in three passages. In the first and most straightforward, he spoke to the situation of “*the starving and suffering men and women and children of Afghanistan*” (§7). Notwithstanding the fact that he was bombing their country, he portrayed American action as directed against a political regime and a terrorist apparatus, not the Afghani people. The bombings were “*carefully targeted actions*” (§2) directed against military targets, specifically “*Al Qaeda terrorist training camps and military installations of the Taliban regime*” (§1; cf. §6). To the suffering people of the country, and above all the innocent children, he promised airdrops of food, medicine, and supplies as a token of American friendship. “*The oppressed people of Afghanistan will know the generosity of America and our allies*” (§7; cf. §8).

In a second passage, Mr. Bush began by gesturing toward traditional associations of America with “freedom” (an evocative and polyvalent signifier that deserves more attention than is possible here), then quickly dilated this notion. By the time he was finished, he had positioned the U.S. as champion of freedom throughout the globe, hedge against darkness and protector of the weak. In this context, he conjured up the spectre of frightened children. “*We defend not only our precious freedoms but also the freedom of people everywhere to live and raise their children free from fear*” (§14).

Having dealt with starving Afghani children and frightened children in foreign lands, Mr. Bush returned to address the situation of American children in the least successful passage of an otherwise deft rhetorical performance. This was the cloying paragraph toward the conclusion of his address, in which he cited a letter he received “*from a fourth-grade girl with a father in the military. ‘As much as I don’t want my dad to fight,’ she wrote, ‘I’m willing to give him to you’*” (§21). The other children Mr. Bush described had entered his narrative only as objects: objects of suffering, pity, fear, and terrible circumstances far beyond their control; objects who had been worked on by evil others to their detriment; and objects to be worked on in the future by a moral, sympathetic American self, concerned to restore their well-being. This American girl was different, however. Although threatened by menacing forces herself, she responds as a subject in ways Mr. Bush offered as a model of how proper Americans do and ought behave: courageous, self-sacrificing, and resolute (also utterly unquestioning of their leaders).

Mr. bin Laden’s concerns for children were more local and more pointed, being most immediately focused on the plight of Iraqi children who are deprived of food, medical supplies, and sometimes also their lives by the American embargo, which has now lasted for more than a decade. Relatively little discussed in the west, this issue occasions deep concern in the Middle East, where it is often taken to reveal the cruelty of which Americans are capable and the double standard they employ in their dealings with Muslims. Bin Laden takes this analysis one step further. By connecting the Iraqi embargo to the spectre of Hiroshima and Nagasaki, he charges the U.S. with war crimes and crimes against humanity, while subtly inserting racism in the indictment. For it would seem that Americans are capable of such atrocities only when their enemies are non-white. “*They have been telling the world falsehoods that they are fighting terrorism. In a nation at the far end of the world, Japan, hundreds of thousands, young and old, were killed and this is not a world crime. To them it is not a clear issue. A million children in Iraq, to them this is not a clear issue*” (§7).

Could bin Laden have anticipated that Mr. Bush would represent himself as a protector of children? If so, his emphasis on the Iraqi young amounts to a further charge of hypocrisy. Pressing to make the most of this, he hyperbolically overstated the extent of their sufferings. However credible or incredible one might find his figure of a million victims (§4), the Iraqi children became a trope for the situation of all Muslims, whose weakness has exposed them to western aggression, particularly in the last century. The indictment Mr. bin Laden leveled also had a double edge to it. Aimed at the U.S. in the first place, it landed on Muslim leaders who have failed to speak out against the embargo, in the second. “*A million innocent children are dying at this time as we speak, killed in Iraq without any guilt. We hear no denunciation, we hear no edict from the hereditary rulers*” (§4). Against this background, bin Laden positioned himself and his followers as the most courageous and righteous defenders of their people: “*those have stood in defense of their weak children*” (§3).

IV

For all that Bush and bin Laden both represented themselves as righteous protectors of the weak, the two men projected very different types of authority. Mr. Bush’s is official and governmental, grounded in elections, laws, and the Constitution of a nation-state. In truth, it is probably misleading to regard Mr. Bush as an individual speaker, and this for two reasons. First, he surely was not the author of his address in any conventional sense. Rather, he read a text co-authored by unnamed members of his staff. The words themselves were theirs as well as his, and he spoke as the representative and director of this apparatus. Second, and much more important, he spoke in his official capacity as head of state, representing the state and beyond that, the nation. Or, to put it more precisely, the American state spoke to the American nation through him as its representation and conduit.

In partial acknowledgment, but also partial concealment of these intricacies, Mr. Bush began his address by alluding to the state authority vested first in his office and second in his person (“*Good afternoon. On my orders the United States military has begun strikes*,” §1). At two other points, he made explicit reference to his title and office, proudly placing himself among American presidents (§13) and commanders-in-chief (§18). Noting that he spoke “*from the Treaty Room of the White House, a place where American presidents have worked for peace*” (§13), he was surrounded by flags as he defined the struggle in terms of his nation’s traditional ideals. These center on peace (mentioned four times in §13, including the assertion “*We’re a peaceful nation*” §13), justice (esp. in his charge to the troops, “*your goal is just*” §20; cf. §6), and freedom (mentioned four times in §14 and used, somewhat lamely, to euphemize the mission: “*The name of today’s military operation is Enduring Freedom*”).⁶ Two of these values recur in his final clarion cry “*Peace and freedom will prevail*” (§23) and the third is probably implicit. No American call to arms is conceivable without enumeration of these cardinal virtues, but of particular analytic interest at present is their distinctly secular nature.

In contrast, the authority Mr. bin Laden claimed is religious and charismatic. The chief ideal he voiced is faith, and he spoke of his group as “*the camp of the faithful*” (§9; cf. §3), whose victory may be expected, for “*the wind of faith is blowing*” (§10). As leader of the faithful, he claimed no formal titles or office, but presented himself as a holy warrior (*mujahid*), seated on a prayer rug, with Kalashnikov and Quran close at hand. At times, his discourse bordered on the prophetic, although Muslim doctrine recognizes Muhammad as the last prophet and bars anyone since from claiming such status.⁷ In truth, bin Laden spoke very little of himself, submerging his own identity in the first person plural via an “us” he defined as “*the group that refuses to be subdued in its religion*” (§6).⁸ More menacingly, he described the hijackers of September 11th, with whom he implicitly claimed connection (while not actively taking responsibility for their acts), as “*a group of vanguard Muslims, the forefront of Islam,*” whom “*God has blessed...to destroy America*” (§3).

V

As a religious leader, bin Laden sought to mobilize a following that cuts across all political distinctions of citizenship, also all ethnic and other potential lines of cleavage, uniting all Muslims without exception on the basis of their shared faith. “*Every Muslim must rise to defend his religion*” (§10). Shared faith also implied a shared perspective, grounded in shared experiences and born of a common history. In bin Laden’s account, that history breaks into three periods: 1) a time of Islamic grandeur, which ended with the dissolution of the Ottoman Empire and the caliphate in the aftermath of the First World War; 2) a time of suffering, shame, and victimization by western powers, which lasted from 1918 until Sept. 11, 2001; 3) a period just commencing, introduced by the Islamist counterattack on the west, launched on 9/11. This is announced toward the beginning his speech: “*What America is tasting now is only a copy of what we have tasted. Our Islamic nation has been tasting the same for more than 80 years of humiliation and disgrace, its sons killed and their blood spilled, its sanctities desecrated*” (§§1–2; cf. §4).

If bin Laden aspired to mobilize all Muslims on the basis of their religion, ignoring their identities as citizens of different nation-states, Bush’s approach was precisely inverse. The prime group he sought to rally consisted of American citizens, regardless of their religious affiliations (§§13–18, 21–22).⁹ Beyond that, he portrayed himself as having assembled an alliance of religiously diverse states, support from whose leaders ratified his actions and policies, thereby confirming that these were based in shared human values, not the particular self-interest of one powerful state. “*We are supported by the collective will of the world*” (§4; cf. §§3,7,10). To that end, he kept religious language to a minimum and took special pains to assure this was not a latter-day Crusade.¹⁰ Rather, he represented himself and America as both well disposed to Muslims. “*We are the friends of almost a billion worldwide who practice the Islamic faith*” (§8).¹¹

Just as Mr. Bush labored to refute any constructions of the conflict as a war of Christians against Muslims, so Mr. bin Laden attempted to preempt inverse constructions of it as a struggle against “terrorism.” “*They have been telling the world falsehoods that they are fighting terrorism. In a nation at the far end of the world, Japan, hundreds of thousands, young and old, were killed and this is not a world crime. To them it is not a clear issue*” (§7). One gets the impression of fencers or chess-players trying to anticipate and parry the other’s favored lines of attack. Were one to press the game metaphor, it would be necessary to explore the competitors’ different styles, Mr. bin Laden’s being much more ferocious, impassioned, and unpredictable, Mr. Bush’s more plodding and cautious. This is less a difference between two personalities than between the two types of authority Max Weber described as charismatic and official-bureaucratic.

VI

Although one might expect that the religious nature of his persona, vision, and language might limit him to a vaporous, mystic, or otherworldly discourse, Mr. bin Laden was actually quite concrete in identifying his chief grievance. Thus, while the President’s rhetoric remained at the level of inspiring but vague generalizations (freedom vs. terrorism), in his closing paragraphs Mr. bin Laden adapted his equally lofty (and equally inflammatory) formulations to signal more immediately pragmatic issues. “*The wind of faith is blowing and the wind of change is blowing to remove evil from the Peninsula of Muhammad, peace be upon him*” (§10). Then, expanding the discussion to include Palestine, he made the same point again. “*I swear to God that America will not live in peace before peace reigns in Palestine, and before all the army of infidels depart the land of Muhammad*” (§11). Clearly, removal of American troops from Muslim holy lands – Saudi Arabia, above all, and Palestine in the second place – remains his prime and most immediate goal.

The American government surely does not want to yield on this demand, given that the troops stationed in Saudi Arabia help keep a friendly, if highly corrupt and unpopular regime in power, which secures the continued supply of cheap oil from Saudi fields in return. One should not underestimate the importance of this concern for an administration filled with oilmen, from the President and Vice President on down. There are also principled reasons why one would refuse the demands of blackmailers. But the administration has also been concerned not to acknowledge any construction of the conflict as a struggle over scarce resources (oil above all) or as a violent reaction to American policies many Muslims find offensive, lest this confuse the American public and sap national resolve. It is for this reason that Mr. Bush finds it best to maintain a strictly dualist narrative of civilization vs. terrorism and good vs. evil.

Others clearly prefer the variant, but equally dualistic construction provided by Samuel Huntington’s “clash of civilizations,” where the adversaries are identified as the (Judaean-Christian) West vs. Islam.¹² Although one might expect Mr. Bush to find this congenial, the fact that he has avoided incorporating it in his public statements (except as an occasional subtext) shows that he – or at least his staff – is aware of its potential dangers. In truth, it is Mr. bin Laden who benefits from constituting the struggle as one of Islam vs. the West, and it is he who propagates such a view. American interests are better served by models that permit Muslim nations to enlist – or at least, stay neutral – in a moral, but not religious campaign: one that pits civilization *per se* against all that is *uncivilized*, i.e. “terrorism,” “fanaticism,” and “evil.”¹³

VII

The speeches of Messrs. Bush and bin Laden mirrored one another, offering narratives in which the speakers, as defenders of righteousness, rallied an aggrieved people to strike back at aggressors who had done them terrible wrongs. For his part, Mr. Bush preferred to define the coming struggle in ethico-political terms as a campaign of civilized nations against terrorist cells and their rogue-state supporters. Mr. bin Laden, in contrast, saw it as a war of infidels vs. the faithful. As a corollary, the two also differed in their willingness to couch their views in religious terms, and this was probably the sharpest divergence between them.

In the twelve paragraphs of his speech, bin Laden named God seven times (§§1,3 [2x],5,9,11,12), from his opening assertion “*Here*

is *America struck by God Almighty*” (§1) to his final benediction “*God is the greatest and glory be to Islam*” (§12). At other points, Mr. bin Laden swore before God (§11), took refuge in God (§5), and called upon God for protection (§9), vengeance on enemies (§5) and promise of paradise (§3). Throughout, his discourse is saturated in religiosity, as quantitative tabulation confirms. Of the 584 words he uttered, a full 101 are plainly religious (17%), not to speak of many phrases with subtler Quranic resonance.¹⁴

In the sharpest possible contrast, Mr. Bush made very little use of language that was unambiguously religious. Of the few times he mentioned religion directly, he tended to do so with reference to the faith of others, for which he expressed tolerance and respect. There were two such examples. One was his claim “*we are the friends of almost a billion worldwide who practice the Islamic faith*” (§8). The other, his characterization of those responsible for Sept. 11 as “*barbaric criminals who profane a great religion by committing murder in its name*” (§9). Beyond that, only three of his 970 words (.3%) were explicitly and exclusively religious. One conveyed his assurance that American Presidents pray before sending troops to war (§18). The other two are found in the words with which he concluded his address. “*May God continue to bless America*” (§23). Much can be said about this phrase, and I will return to it shortly. In addition, there are some ambiguous phrases in which one can hear religious resonance if one is so inclined: “*Evil Plans*” (§6), for instance.¹⁵ But whatever one makes of these, the concentration of overtly and emphatically religious content in bin Laden’s speech was almost sixty times greater than in Bush’s.

VIII

We have seen that a prime purpose of Mr. bin Laden’s address was to construct the conflict along religious lines, pitting Muslims—“every Muslim” (§§6, 10) and “our Islamic nation” (§2)—against infidels. But he also identified a second, internal class of enemies. These are the people he referred to as “hypocrites,” by which term he designated those postcolonial state elites in Muslim nations who cooperate with Americans, help advance and protect their interests, and profit from this service (on which, see further Chapter Four). These are the people who failed to denounce the Iraqi embargo (§4), failed to speak out in support of Palestine (§3), failed to protest the 1998 American bombing of Afghanistan and Sudan (§8), but were quick to object when al Qaeda took up arms against the infidels (§3, 4, 8). Notwithstanding his calls for pan-Islamic solidarity, Mr. bin Laden’s rhetoric identified and exacerbated a sharp cleavage between those he would characterize as good and bad, or as I would have it, minimalist and maximalist Muslims. For him, al Qaeda represents proper Islam, consisting of “those who have stood in defense of their weak children” (§3), “the group that refuses to be subdued in its religion” (§6), and “the forefront of Islam” (§3). The hypocrites, in contrast, are “apostates” (§5), camp followers of the infidels (§§3, 8), and persons estranged from the sufferings of their Muslim brethren (§4).

In a climactic passage, bin Laden called down God’s judgment on such people. “The least that can be said about those hypocrites is that they are apostates who followed the wrong path. They backed the butcher against the victim, the oppressor against the innocent child. I seek refuge in God against them and ask him to let us see them in what they deserve” (§5). While he did not name the specific “hypocrites” he had in mind, they surely include the rulers of countries like Egypt, Jordan, Kuwait, and Saudi Arabia: i.e., those whom the west prefers to call “moderates.” Mr. bin Laden faults such people severely for their failure to connect Islamic discourse with their political practice and seems to suggest that the Islamic community (ummah) ought be led by institutions committed to maximalist positions and militant practice. Conceivably, extant states might reform themselves in this fashion or, that failing, leadership should fall to a group like al Qaeda itself. The threat implied in the last phrase of his proclamation — “I seek refuge in God against them” (§5)—is real, if implicit. It amounts to a call for divine judgment to manifest itself in popular uprisings against those regimes that compromise Islamic solidarity by siding with the west in the war now beginning. It was lodged most immediately—and most credibly—against Gen. Pervez Musharraf who, under intense diplomatic pressure, agreed to help fight “terrorism” and permitted the American military to use air bases in Pakistan.¹⁶

If Mr. bin Laden’s core contradiction involved the admission that politics was important as well as religion, Islam not being unitary, as religious ideals would have it, but also lacerated by political divisions, Mr. Bush’s came on similar ground. Having consistently sought political unity and denied the religious aspects of the conflict in order to avoid the possibility of fragmenting his coalition along religious lines, he was ultimately forced to acknowledge the importance of religion in subtle, but revealing ways. Pressure for this came not only from Christian conservatives, a core part of his constituency, but also a broader resurgence of popular piety, as marked by displacement of the national anthem with the strains of “God Bless America.”

While it has long been conventional for American presidents to close their speeches — particularly those that have some degree of solemnity — with the same tagline of “God bless America,” this is not an idle or insignificant gesture. Rather, it attempts to reconcile two fundamental contradictions. The first of these involves the inevitable and irresolvable tension between a secular state (under its Constitution debarred from religious matters) and a nation that places strong value on its religious commitments. Second, within the religious nation there are further unresolved tensions between Christian and pluralist models of the nation, as well as minimalist and maximalist constructions of its religiosity. “God bless America” says enough—just enough—to satisfy most factions, while offending no one gravely, save hardcore secularists.

“*May God continue to bless America*” (§23), however, goes beyond the conventional formula, and as such is linguistically marked. It suggests Mr. Bush and his speechwriters gave serious thought to the phrase and decided to emphatically reaffirm the notion that the U.S. has enjoyed divine favor throughout its history, moreover, that it deserves said favor insofar as it remains firm in its faith. Although

those so inclined may dismiss Mr. Bush's closing words as obligatory, gratuitous, and virtually devoid of meaning, others will recognize them as the tip of a vast subtextual iceberg. While brief, they provide sufficient reassurance that American policy is rooted in a faith so profound it need not be trumpeted.

IX

Two brief flights of imagery stand out in an otherwise unembroidered text and these helped Mr. Bush assert the religious nature of the conflict in the same moment he sought to deny it. Toward this end, both images contained Biblical allusions plainly audible to portions of his audience who are attentive to such phrasing, but likely to go unheard by those without the requisite textual knowledge. Thus, his statement "*the terrorists may burrow deeper into caves and other entrenched hiding places*" (§6) reduced his adversaries to hunted animals, but also gestured toward a climactic scene of the Apocalypse. This is the moment when the Lamb of God (i.e. Jesus in his character of eschatological hero and avenger) opens the sixth seal on the scroll of doom, as described in the Revelation of St. John 6.15–17.

Then the kings of the earth and the great men and the generals and the rich and the strong, and every one, slave and free, hid in the caves and among the rocks of the mountains, calling to the mountains and rocks, "Fall on us and hide us from the face of him who is seated on the throne, and from the wrath of the Lamb; for the great day of their wrath has come, and who can stand before it?"

This vision of cowering evildoers, desperately trying to escape God's judgment, associates American military attacks with the wrath of the Lord. At the same time, this passage from the New Testament indexes one from the Hebrew Bible: Isaiah 2.10–11, which addresses the unfaithful directly.

*Enter into the rock, and hide in the dust
From before the terror of the LORD, and from the glory of his majesty.
The haughty looks of man shall be brought low,
And the pride of men shall be humbled;
And the LORD alone will be exalted in that day.¹⁷*

In similar fashion, Mr. Bush's statement that anyone who sides with bin Laden "will take that lonely path at their own peril" (§12) conjures up a host of Biblical passages that contrast a path of righteousness with one of perdition. Among these, one can note Job 8.13 (Such are the paths of all who forget God; the hope of the godless man shall perish), and Isaiah 59:6–8.¹⁸

*Their works are works of iniquity, and deeds of violence are in their hands.
Their feet run to evil, and they make haste to shed innocent blood,¹⁹
Their thoughts are thoughts of iniquity,
Desolation and destruction are in their highways.
The way of peace they know not, and there is no justice in their paths;
They have made their roads crooked, no one who goes in them knows peace.*

Biblical allusions may also be perceived in several of Mr. Bush's more trenchant phrases: "*killers of innocents*" (§12) surely gestures toward Herod's slaughter of the innocents in Matthew 2 and perhaps also to Exodus 23:7 (Do not slay the innocent and righteous, for I will not acquit the wicked). Similarly, "there can be no peace" (§13). invokes the refrain of Jeremiah and Ezekiel: "The have healed the wound of my people lightly, saying "peace, peace," when there is no peace" (Jeremiah 6:14; 8:11; 8:15 and 14:19; Ezekiel 13:10 and 16. Cf. also 2 Chronicles 15:5; Isaiah 57:21).²⁰ These allusions provide a thunderous condemnation running parallel to Mr. Bush's more prosaic characterizations of the enemy as outlaws, murderers, criminals, and terrorists. The Biblical subtext is not redundant, however. Rather, for those who have ears to hear, these allusions effect a qualitative transformation, giving Mr. Bush's message an entirely different status. This conversion of secular political speech into religious discourse invests otherwise merely human events with transcendent significance. By the end, America's adversaries have been redefined as enemies of God and current events have been constituted as confirmation of Scripture.²¹

These allusions are instructive, as is the fact that Mr. Bush could only make these points indirectly, through strategies of double coding. Along with Mr. Bush's closing benediction, his Biblical references acknowledge a serious cleavage within the American public and address those Americans who could be expected to reject the religious minimalism that otherwise characterizes his text. Far from denouncing them as improper Americans, however—the way bin Laden treated his "hypocrites" as bad Muslims—Mr. Bush provided reassurance for these people. Enlisting the specialized reading/listening and hermeneutical skills they cultivate, he encouraged them to probe beneath the surface of his text. There, *sotto voce*, he told them he understands and sympathizes with their views, even if requirements of his office (also, those of practical politics) constrain him from giving full-throated voice, not just to the religious values they prefer, but to their maximalist construction of *all* values as religious.²²

Endnotes

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in Social Sciences, October 22, 2001, pieces of which were published as “The Other War: The One of Words,” *Kansas City Star*, October 23, 2001, available at <http://www.kcstar.com/item/pages/opinion.pat.opinion/3acd143c.a23..html>. A later version were presented to the History of Religions workshop at the University of Chicago.

¹ Paul Farhi, “The Networks, Giving Aid to the Enemy?,” *Washington Post*, October 12, 2001, p. C1.

² I mean this term in its strictly Nietzschean sense, as developed in the *Genealogy of Morals*, with particular reference to the priestly perspective.

³ The genealogy of this stereotype can be traced at least to the Mahdist insurrection of 1884–85 in the Anglo-Egyptian Sudan. When Mohammed Ahmed, self-proclaimed Mahdi (salvific hero), defeated the English army under Gen. Charles Gordon and captured Khartoum, caricatures of extraordinary proportions were used to rally English popular opinion in the wake of this disaster.

⁴ Prior to his October 7, 2001 address, Mr. bin Laden had spoken much less about the Palestinian situation than he did on this occasion. Some have seen this shift as an opportunistic attempt to broaden his appeal and enlist sympathies throughout the Muslim world.

⁵ Women barely enter the speech of Mr. Bush or Mr. bin Laden, although either one might well have chosen to represent himself and his people as much more concerned with the welfare of women, albeit by radically different notions of what such welfare entails. Bin Laden was silent on the topic, while Bush made only two formulaic references to “*the starving and suffering men and women and children of Afghanistan*” (§7) and “*the men and women in our military*” (§19). That women are present for Bush and absent for bin Laden is itself perhaps significant.

⁶ This announcement effectively withdrew the name given the mission in earlier statements: “*Infinite Justice*,” a designation judged potentially offensive to Muslims. Since they take the infinite to be a property of God alone, it is presumptuous for human to claim such status for their acts or values.

⁷ I do not mean to suggest that bin Laden was guilty of anything that could be interpreted as blasphemy. Rather, he played at the limits of the possible, without going over the line. At no point did he claim divine inspiration or overtly represent himself as a vehicle of revelation. Still, the force of his moral certainty, the violent judgments he called down on his enemies, and his ringing assertion “*I say that the matter is very clear*” (§6), when speaking of past, present, and future, all are hallmarks of prophetic discourse. In contrast, when Mr. Bush used a similar locution, it served to mark him as a resolute political leader, not an inspired prophet. “*To all the men and women in our military—every sailor, every soldier, every airman, every coast guardsman, every marine—I say this: Your mission is defined, your objectives are clear, your goal is just*” (§§19–20).

⁸ Both men preferred first person plural pronouns to those of the first person singular, Bush by a ratio of four to one (37:9) and bin Laden by two to one, although his frequency for both was much lesser (9:4). In contrast to Mr. Bush’s opening assertion of his own authority (“*On my orders...*,” §1), bin Laden began by describing events for which he took no personal credit, but ascribed to God’s will (“*America has been filled with horror from north to south and east to west, and thanks be to God*,” §1).

⁹ Note the play of pronouns in §§13–18, where the initial distinction between first person singular and second person plural (“*I’m speaking to you today*,” §13) dissolved into a cascade of first-person-plurals encompassing—and more actively reconstituting—the American nation. Sixteen different first-person-plural pronouns occur in these paragraphs, beginning with a moment of national self-definition (“*We’re a peaceful nation*,” §13). Subsequently, there are assertions of collective resolve (“*We did not ask for this mission. But we will fulfill it*,” §14) and an enumeration of responsible state organs (“*Our government is taking strong precautions. Our law enforcement and intelligence agencies are working aggressively... We have called up reserves*,” §15, “*our armed forces, who now defend us*” §17), after which the military is hived off as a third person “they” who defend the remaining “us” (“*They are dedicated. They are honorable. They represent the best of our country. And we are grateful*,” §18).

¹⁰ On Sept. 14, Mr. Bush described his anti-terrorist campaign as a “*crusade against a new kind of evil*.” This was widely reported and prompted so much adverse comment that four days later White House Press Secretary Ari Fleischer was forced to issue the following tortured explanation-cum-retraction. “*To the degree that the word has any connotations that would upset any of our partners, or anybody else in the world, the president would regret if anything like that was conveyed. But the purpose of his conveying it is in the traditional English sense of the word. It’s a broad cause*” (Mike Conklin, “U.S. Spokesmen Stumble through Verbal Minefield,” *Chicago Tribune* 1 November 2001, Section 5, p. 1). One also needs to evaluate Mr. Bush’s denial that his policies are anti-Muslim in any measure vis-à-vis the concrete practices his administration has adopted, both international and domestic.

¹¹ It is surely no accident that the Middle East was given first position in the list of regions from which logistical support had been obtained: “*More than 40 countries in the Middle East, Africa, Europe and across Asia have granted air transit or landing rights. Many more have shared intelligence*” (§4).

¹² Mr. Huntington first published his views as an article, “The clash of civilizations,” *Foreign Affairs* 72/3 (1993): 22–49, with spirited responses by others following in 72/4: 2–9, 10–26 and 72/5: 186–194. An expanded version then came out in book form, Samuel P. Huntington, *The Clash of Civilizations and the Remaking of World Order* (New York, 1996).

¹³ To this end, the U.S. was particularly eager to enlist Muslim states in the “anti-terrorist” campaign and to involve them in any way possible. The Turkish decision to send a token number of troops to Afghanistan was thus a welcome step, as was the statement of Prime Minister Bulent Ecevit: “*Those who portray this campaign as an action against Islam are contradicting the high values of Islam, which is a religion of peace*” Douglas Frantz, “Turkey says Elite Troops Will Join U.S. Campaign to Train Anti-Taliban Force,” *New York Times*, 2 November 2001, p. B3. Turkey was the likeliest candidate to take such a step, and this for two reasons. 1) It is the sole Islamic nation to be a member of NATO and has consistently sought close political and economic relations with European powers. 2) Under the constitution introduced by Kemal Ataturk in 1923 and based on European models, the Turkish state was established as a secular republic, notwithstanding the Islamic identity of the nation. While this arrangement has been contested in recent years by political parties who advocate a religious state, it is defended, above all, by the military, whose officers understand themselves as Ataturk’s heirs, protectors of his legacy and the institutional structures he founded.

¹⁴ The religious words and phrases in bin Laden’s speech include the following: God (7x), grace, Islam(ic) (5x), Muslim(s) (5x), bless(ed) (2x), a supreme place in heaven, infidels (5x), without any guilt, denunciation, edict (*fatwa*), hypocrisy, –ites (4x), sanctities (2x), desecrated, the land of Islam, apostates, the wrong path, refuge in God, what they deserve, believe, a display of vanity, the group that refuses to be subdued in its religion, paganism, the camp of the faithful, the wind of faith, I swear to God, Muhammad, peace be upon him (2x), God is the greatest, glory be to Islam. Beyond this, one might also consider such phrases as “What America is tasting,” “God... is the only one capable and entitled to do so,” “defense of their weak children,” “innocent children,” “when the sword fell,” “a display of vanity with their men and horses,” etc.

¹⁵ Mr. Bush’s text also includes several items that participate in religious (and more specifically biblical) discourse without being explicitly religious themselves. Along these lines one might also note “the ultimate sacrifice of their lives” (§18), “your mission is defined” (§20) and, more broadly, the discussion of generosity in §7, that of patience in §16, or the rhythmic cadences of §23 that feel almost hymnodic: “We will not waver, we will not tire, we will not falter and we will not fail.” That such expressions have a broad range of semantics and can evoke divergent associations in different constituencies of a national audience is what makes them useful, as will shortly become apparent.

¹⁶ The importance of Gen. Musharraf’s position in Mr. bin Laden’s analysis was underscored by a letter he released through al Jazeera on November 1, in which he accused the Pakistani regime of “*standing under the banner of the cross while Muslims are being slaughtered in Afghanistan*.” “Infidels” and “hypocrites” were again key terms in bin Laden’s discourse, as he called for Muslim solidarity (“*Supporters of Islam, this is the day to support Islam*”) and characterized American military action as a religious crusade (“*The heat of the crusade against Islam has intensified, its ardor has increased, and the killing has multiplied against the followers of Muhammad*”). Susan Sachs, “Bin Laden Letter Calls Upon Pakistanis to Defend Islam,” *New York Times*, 2 November 2001, p. B2.

¹⁷ Isaiah 2.10–11. Conceivably, an allusion to Joshua 10.16–26 may also be implicit, a story in which five Canaanite kings hide in a cave at Makkedah. Discovering this, the Israelites block the cave’s entrance with heavy boulders, then defeat the kings’ armies, take their cities, and return to deal with the kings, whom they humiliate and execute, but not before Joshua proclaims “*Do not be afraid or dismayed; be strong and of good courage; for thus the LORD will do to all your enemies against whom you fight*” (10.25).

¹⁸ Also relevant are Job 24.13–14, Psalms 23.35, Psalms 25.4–5, Proverbs 1.15–16, and Proverbs 4.14–15, Isaiah 3.11–12, and others.

¹⁹ Mr. Bush’s use of the phrase

His mouth is filled with cursing and deceit and oppression;

under his tongue are mischief and iniquity.

He sits in ambush in the villages;

In hiding places he murders the innocent.

Finally, although the term itself does not appear in the Biblical text, Herod’s massacre of Israelite children, described in Matthew 2.16, conventionally called “the slaughter of the innocents,” provides another clear point of reference.

²⁰ Note also the discussion of patience in §16, with possible echoes of Psalm 37:7 and James 5:7–10, as well as the mention of “battle in a foreign land, in §18, with a similar relation to 1 Chronicles 14:17.

²¹ Cf. the way those of somewhat different, new-age religious sensibilities quickly constituted the September 11 attacks as confirmation of Nostradamus’s prophecies.

²² Mr. Bush’s longstanding ties to leaders of the religious right (Pat Robertson, above all) help establish his bona fides. During the primary and general election campaign of 2000, Mr. Robertson and others held their followers solid for Mr. Bush, assuring them that he supported their values and would work for their cause once elected, even if he could not say so directly. In this fashion, they encouraged him to signal religious maximalists with winks, nudges, and coded allusions, while encouraging the faithful to listen for same.

Appendix A
George W. Bush,
Address to the Nation, 7 October 2001

§1 Good afternoon. On my orders the United States military has begun strikes against Al Qaeda terrorist training camps and military installations of the Taliban regime in Afghanistan.

§2 These carefully targeted actions are designed to disrupt the use of Afghanistan as a terrorist base of operations and to attack the military capability of the Taliban regime.

§3 We are joined in this operation by our staunch friend, Great Britain. Other close friends, including Canada, Australia, Germany and France, have pledged forces as the operation unfolds.

§4 More than 40 countries in the Middle East, Africa, Europe and across Asia have granted air transit or landing rights. Many more have shared intelligence. We are supported by the collective will of the world.

§5 More than two weeks ago I gave Taliban leaders a series of clear and specific demands: close terrorist training camps; hand over leaders of the Al Qaeda network; and return all foreign nationals including American citizens unjustly detained in your country. None of these demands were met. And now the Taliban will pay a price.

§6 By destroying camps and disrupting communication we will make it more difficult for the terror network to train new recruits and coordinate their evil plans. Initially the terrorists may burrow deeper into caves and other entrenched hiding places. Our military action is also designed to clear the way for sustained, comprehensive and relentless operations to drive them out and bring them to justice.

§7 At the same time the oppressed people of Afghanistan will know the generosity of America and our allies. As we strike military targets we will also drop food, medicine and supplies to the starving and suffering men and women and children of Afghanistan.

§8 The United States of America is a friend to the Afghan people. And we are the friends of almost a billion worldwide who practice the Islamic faith.

§9 The United States of America is an enemy of those who aid terrorists and of the barbaric criminals who profane a great religion by committing murder in its name.

§10 This military action is a part of our campaign against terrorism, another front in a war that has already been joined through diplomacy, intelligence, the freezing of financial assets and the arrests of known terrorists by law enforcement agents in 38 countries.

§11 Given the nature and reach of our enemies we will win this conflict by the patient accumulation of successes, by meeting a series of challenges with determination and will and purpose.

§12 Today we focus on Afghanistan. But the battle is broader. Every nation has a choice to make. In this conflict there is no neutral ground. If any government sponsors the outlaws and killers of innocents, they have become outlaws and murderers themselves. And they will take that lonely path at their own peril.

§13 I'm speaking to you today from the Treaty Room of the White House, a place where American presidents have worked for peace. We're a peaceful nation. Yet as we have learned so suddenly and so tragically, there can be no peace in a world of sudden terror. In the face of today's new threat the only way to pursue peace is to pursue those who threaten it.

§14 We did not ask for this mission. But we will fulfill it. The name of today's military operation is Enduring Freedom. We defend not only our precious freedoms but also the freedom of people everywhere to live and raise their children free from fear.

§15 I know many Americans feel fear today. And our government is taking strong precautions. Our law enforcement and intelligence agencies are working aggressively around America, around the world and around the clock. At my request many governors have activated the National Guard to strengthen airport security. We have called up reserves to reinforce our military capability and strengthen the protection of our homeland.

§16 In the months ahead our patience will be one of our strengths: patience with the long waits that will result from tighter security; patience in understanding that it will take time to achieve our goals; patience in all the sacrifices that may come.

§17 Today those sacrifices are being made by members of our armed forces, who now defend us so far from home, and by their proud and worried families.

§18 A commander in chief sends America's sons and daughters into battle in a foreign land only after the greatest care and a lot of prayer: We ask a lot of those who wear our uniform. We ask them to leave their loved ones, to travel great distances, to risk injury, even to be prepared to make the ultimate sacrifice of their lives. They are dedicated. They are honorable. They represent the best of our country. And we are grateful.

§19 To all the men and women in our military – every sailor, every soldier, every airman, every coast guardsman, every marine – I say this:

§20 Your mission is defined, your objectives are clear, your goal is just. You have my full confidence. And you will have every tool you need to carry out your duty.

§21 I recently received a touching letter that says a lot about the state of America in these difficult times. A letter from a fourth-grade girl with a father in the military. "As much as I don't want my dad to fight," she wrote, "I'm willing to give him to you." This is a pre-

cious gift, the greatest she could give. This young girl knows what America is all about.

§22 Since Sept. 11 an entire generation of young Americans has gained new understanding of the value of freedom and its cost in duty and in sacrifice.

§23 The battle is now joined on many fronts. We will not waver, we will not tire, we will not falter, and we will not fail. Peace and freedom will prevail. Thank you. May God continue to bless America.

Text from the New York Times, Monday 8 October, p. B6.

Appendix B
Osama bin Laden,
Videotaped Address, 7 October 2001

§1 America has been filled with horror from north to south and east to west, and thanks be to God. What America is tasting now is only a copy of what we have tasted.

§2 Our Islamic nation has been tasting the same for more than 80 years of humiliation and disgrace, its sons killed and their blood spilled, its sanctities desecrated.

§3 God has blessed a group of vanguard Muslims, the forefront of Islam, to destroy America. May God bless them and allot them a supreme place in heaven, for he is the only one capable and entitled to do so. When those who have stood in defense of their weak children, their brothers and sisters in Palestine and other Muslim nations, the whole world went into an uproar, the infidels followed by the hypocrites.

§4 A million innocent children are dying at this time as we speak, killed in Iraq without any guilt. We hear no denunciation, we hear no edict from the hereditary rulers. In these days, Israeli tanks rampage across Palestine, in Ramallah, Rafah and Beit Jala and many other parts of the land of Islam, and we do not hear anyone raising his voice or reacting. But when the sword fell upon America after 80 years, hypocrisy raised its head up high bemoaning those killers who toyed with the blood, honor and sanctities of Muslims.

§5 The least that can be said about those hypocrites is that they are apostates who followed the wrong path. They backed the butcher against the victim, the oppressor against the innocent child. I seek refuge in God against them and ask him to let us see them in what they deserve.

§6 I say that the matter is very clear. Every Muslim after this event, after the senior officials in the United States of America starting with the head of international infidels. Bush and his staff who went on a display of vanity with their men and horses, those who turned even the countries that believe in Islam against us – the group that refuses to be subdued in its religion.

§7 They have been telling the world falsehoods that they are fighting terrorism. In a nation at the far end of the world, Japan, hundreds of thousands, young and old, were killed and this is not a world crime. To them it is not a clear issue. A million children in Iraq, to them this is not a clear issue.

§8 But when a few more than ten were killed in Nairobi and Dar es Salaam, Afghanistan and Iraq were bombed and hypocrisy stood behind the head of international infidels: the modern world's symbol of paganism, America, and its allies.

§9 Tell them that these events have divided the world into two camps, the camp of the faithful and the camp of infidels. May God shield us and you from them.

§10 Every Muslim must rise to defend his religion. The wind of faith is blowing and the wind of change is blowing to remove evil from the Peninsula of Muhammad, peace be upon him.

§11 As to America, I say to it and its people a few words: I swear to God that America will not live in peace before peace reigns in Palestine, and before all the army of infidels depart the land of Muhammad, peace be upon him.

§12 God is the greatest and glory be to Islam.

Translated text taken from the New York Times, Monday 8 October, p. B7.