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## **From Reelection to Inauguration Assessing the November Election for Clues to Bush's Second Term**

by  
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**R**ight after the November elections, the author received a surprise invitation to participate in a conference in Beijing, China designed to evaluate the American election for its impact on U.S.-Chinese relations. The conference, held on December 8, was sponsored by the Institute of American Studies at the Chinese Academy of Social Sciences and the Chinese Association for American Studies. It was sponsored by the Asia Foundation, Boeing China, and Pacific Solutions.

Three other speakers addressed matters of foreign policy, economics, and politics. My assignment was to assess the cultural and religious dimensions of American society. In the process of preparing that speech, it became clear that the much-discussed "moral values" vote, which may have made the difference in President Bush's election, was not isolated from economic, political, and foreign policy concerns. The following is a slightly condensed version of the speech.

**T**he American presidential election this year held some surprises. One such surprise was the number of voters who indicated that "moral values" mattered more to them than the economy, the threat of terrorism, or the war in Iraq.<sup>1</sup> In addition, ballot initiatives in eleven of the American states asked voters to approve state constitutional amendments affirming traditional state laws that define marriage as a union of one man and one woman. All eleven ballot measures passed by large margins, thereby assuring that homosexual relationships will not be recognized as marriages in those states, unless a future U.S. Supreme Court ruling invalidates those amendments. At the same time, voters in the State of California approved by a wide margin a multi-billion dollar state investment in stem-cell

research, including embryonic stem-cell research. Most “moral values” voters stand opposed to that kind of research.

In the language of contemporary American politics, the phrase “moral values” can mean many things. Yet most people assume that the phrase expresses convictions held by those who oppose abortion, homosexual (same-sex) “marriage,” scientific experimentation with human embryos, and the undermining or belittling of religion and its importance for public life. Most of those who hold these values also probably believe that their convictions are not merely opinions but fixed moral truths—absolutes. One question about November’s election, therefore, is whether political disagreements over these moral values are intensifying.

This question is of special importance in regard to the membership of the U.S. Supreme Court. The Supreme Court is the ultimate judicial arbiter of American Constitutional law and American commitment to the rule of law. The only authority that can overrule the Supreme Court is the people acting to amend the U.S. Constitution through Congress together with a large majority of state legislatures. It seems likely that the president will be making one or more (life-time) appointments to the Supreme Court during the next four years, and President Bush is expected to appoint Justices with a judicial philosophy different from the philosophy held by those who would have been appointed by John Kerry if he had been elected president.

The first thing to emphasize here is that the importance of moral values in national elections is not new. The current debate over same-sex “marriage,” for example, continues the public controversy over sexual morality that goes back at least to the Supreme Court’s 1973 decision, *Roe v. Wade*, which approved abortion and to the sexual revolution of the 1960s. There is also a long-running controversy over decisions by the Supreme Court decades earlier to disallow official prayer and Bible reading in public schools. The question at stake in all of these issues has to do with the relation between government—particularly the federal government—and the family, between government and education, between government and parental responsibility for children. And broadly speaking, the popular conflict has been between those who believe that the law should uphold traditional values of marriage, family, and parental responsibility for child rearing, on one side, and, on the other side, those who believe that the law should, first of all, protect and advance the freedom of individuals to decide for themselves how to live their lives and define their relationships. The latter group of citizens, which advocates the preeminence of individual rights, is no less morally impassioned. But many of them have pushed for abortion and the legalization of same-sex unions—positions that moral traditionalists oppose. That is the primary reason for the “culture wars” insofar as they exist.

The conflict between these moral viewpoints arises, in part, from a tension that is as old as the United States. One American tradition, dating back to George Washington and to the moral and legal sources of the British colonies in America, takes for granted that a self-governing republic requires morally upright citizens and leaders. And that moral uprightness depends on religion.<sup>2</sup> A second strong tradition, equally morally passionate and also dating back before the American founding, affirms that government’s primary responsibility is to protect the freedom of individuals, as

articulated in the Bill of Rights—the Constitution’s first ten amendments. Individual rights and freedom, rather than morality and religion, are the watchwords of this tradition.

Now, in both of these traditions, the idea of America is a highly moral one. Those standing in both traditions believe that the entire republic depends on whether the people and their government remain true to the moral values of America’s founding fathers. Of course economic growth and prosperity are important. Of course national defense is crucial. Of course the advancement of science and technology is indispensable. But all of those achievements depend on the nation’s moral strength and purpose. Thus, the “moral values” conflict that showed up in the November election reflects the struggle for control over the very definition of the United States.

### The American Federal System of Government

By design of the U.S. Constitution, the center of gravity in the American system of government is found in the states, not at the federal level. The American founders did not want a strong central government. Constitutionally speaking, the states created the federal (central) government, not the other way around. The states are where the laws and moral foundations of society are grounded. State legislatures and courts hold original jurisdiction over family law, education, public welfare, religious practice, the regulation of medical and legal practices, the licensing and incorporation of businesses and non-profit organizations, and the administration of criminal justice.

The federal government, by contrast, was established originally for only two primary purposes: to conduct foreign affairs and military defense and to regulate interstate commerce. The federal government was not given authority to supersede the moral and legal authority of the several states. Or to say it another way, the creation of the United States of America did not have as its purpose the creation of a new, national society in which Congress, the president, and the federal courts would be granted authority to make laws directly about marriage, family life, schools, churches, businesses, universities, and non-profit organizations in the various states.

The difficulty with this system of government today, after more than 200 years of social and economic change, is that citizens of the United States now constitute one national society. Consequently, tensions exist between state authority and the national society, and the federal government has very limited authority to *directly* govern the social, moral, and economic affairs of our national society. This is one reason why the conflict over slavery led to the Civil War in the 1860s. The American founders had allowed slavery to continue in those states that wanted to keep it. The Constitution did not resolve differences among the states over slavery at the outset. The consequence was war, not a national legislative resolution.

Unfortunately, after the war, no significant changes in the *structure* of the federal system of government were made. Amendments were added to the federal Constitution outlawing slavery and requiring equal treatment under the law for all American citizens. But the individual states continued to retain authority to make most of the laws that affected the social status, education, and economic well-being of citizens.

These historical points about the structure of American government are important because they have a significant bearing on what transpired in the November elections. If one looks closely at the decisions taken in the last 50-60 years to increase the freedom and equal treatment of individual citizens nationally, one will notice that almost all of those decisions were taken or mandated by the Supreme Court. Changing the law to end racial discrimination, to legalize abortion, and to remove prayer and Bible reading from schools, for example, did not come about by acts of Congress or by state legislatures. Rather, change came about primarily because the Supreme Court overruled state laws by using the “equal treatment” provisions of the Constitution’s post-Civil War amendments. Subsequent to the success of the civil rights movement of the 1950s and 1960s, the legal tactics of that movement were then adopted by other groups in order to try to bypass legislative bodies and to use the courts to seek the legalization of abortion, gay rights, and other social changes.<sup>3</sup>

What I am suggesting is that insofar as the November 2004 election represented an increase in morally and religiously conservative voter participation, it was, in part, the outcome of more than five decades of mounting resistance to federal judicial imposition on the states in areas of law that belonged (and in many cases still belong) to the original jurisdiction of the states and their legislatures. With the state constitutional marriage amendments approved in eleven states and with the re-election of a morally conservative president as well as the strengthening of a conservative Republican majority in the House and the Senate, it may be that the moral traditionalism of middle America is gaining ground against civil-rights individualism and nationally promoted egalitarianism.<sup>4</sup>

### Moral Values and the Wider World

In and of themselves, the fights over marriage, family, and sexuality may appear to have little connection to the larger economic, political, and foreign policy matters that were also important in the November elections. But I want to suggest that there is a closer connection here than one might think. Observe, for example, that the morally conservative President Bush and many Congressional Republicans also happen to be those who most strongly advocate increased federal spending for defense but less federal spending for social policies. The president and many moral traditionalists also want less federal regulation of the economy and lower federal taxes.<sup>5</sup> They want to reduce the federal government’s direct responsibility for Social Security provision and to take more of an economic-market approach to both Social Security and health care insurance. In other words, there is a connection, I am suggesting, between the idea of America as a strong, moral, independent, and militarily dominant nation in the world and the idea that the American federal government should, at home, defer to the responsibility of families, churches, state governments, and businesses in a free market. By contrast, there is also a close connection for many on the other side of moral America, between the preeminence they accord to the moral autonomy of individuals and the support they give to federally led national integration, social and economic equality, and a more internationalist approach to foreign and defense policies.

Of course, many American citizens do not line up fully on one side or the other of this divide. If, however, the alignment of these different tendencies became somewhat more apparent in the 2004 elections, then long-term changes in American society and politics could turn out to be significant. Many observers believe that the earlier era of federally led national integration, which lasted from the New Deal of Franklin D. Roosevelt through the administration of Richard Nixon and perhaps of Jimmy Carter, is receding further and further into the background. Taking its place is the movement toward moral and religious traditionalism, state-led social policy making, market-led (rather than government-led) integration at the national level, and a more military-oriented foreign policy.

### Moral Values, Religion, and Political Order

In the light of what has been said thus far, return with me now to the moral-values debate and the question of America's national identity. For I said earlier that the debate over same-sex "marriage," abortion, and related issues is about something bigger than those issues alone. It is about the very identity of the United States.

At its founding in the eighteenth century, the United States took its independent place in the world not simply as an experiment in republican federalism. American citizens saw themselves and their new nation as a "new order of the ages" (*novus ordo seclorum*—the slogan that appears on the back of the one-dollar bill). They thought of the new republic as a light to the nations, an exceptional nation that would be an example to the whole world. This national self-understanding came from two sources.

On the one hand, the dominant source of the idea of "American exceptionalism" was the English Puritans who settled New England in the 1600s with the aim of establishing a purified Christian community—"a city on a hill."<sup>6</sup> The Puritans thought of themselves as a new Israel in covenant with God entering a new Promised Land. By the time the United States became independent, much of that Puritan self-understanding had been taken over by the republic as a whole. The United States, surviving the Revolutionary War, saw itself as a new experiment in self-government, a shining city on a hill for all to see. God—or Providence—had ordained America to become the exemplar nation. And central to this national myth was the conviction that in order for America to retain God's blessing, the American people and leaders would have to continue to be a moral people; otherwise the experiment would fail. Fear of God, undergirding moral uprightness, was understood to be the necessary foundation of self-government. Having said this, one must keep in mind that there are no grounds in the Jewish and Christian Bibles to justify the American republic's appropriation of the identity of God's "new Israel."

The other major source of the belief that America is an "exceptional nation" was Enlightenment philosophy. Leading thinkers of the Enlightenment, who greatly influenced Thomas Jefferson, Benjamin Franklin, and other major figures, advocated the liberation of individuals from oppression by means of a rational, moral education that would sustain self-government. In this train of thought there was a distrust of traditional religion. Priests, aristocratic land owners, and all who imposed their will and

superstitions on ignorant people were the enemies of freedom and self-government. American leaders who held these views believed wholeheartedly that rational enlightenment, led by America, would determine the future course of world history.<sup>7</sup>

Americans who contended for traditional “moral values” in the November elections would, generally speaking, find their roots in the Puritan vision of what America was supposed to become. By contrast, those who have been pushing to overcome many traditional moral and religious values in order to maximize individual autonomy and self-determination find their roots, generally speaking, in Enlightenment rationalism. There are, as I’ve already emphasized, many Americans who do not fit neatly into one or the other of these two camps. But in our electoral system, citizens compete politically for the power to be able to define the whole of what America ought to be. And the political competition tends to become divided into two sides. The traditional-values culture—or let me call it the Puritan wing—in the United States is fearful that growing secularism and disregard of religion will lead to America’s moral collapse. If the schools no longer teach traditional morality and if abortion and sexual license become the rule, then God will condemn America rather than bless it. And because of moral weakness, the country will become prey to foreign aggression. That would result in its demise. Thus, a recovery of traditional moral values, a reduction of the power of the federal government to control social policy, and an increasingly strong military defense posture all go together.<sup>8</sup>

On the other hand, what I will call the Enlightenment wing of American culture fears that if the Puritan wing becomes dominant again, the United States will fall back into religious bigotry and superstition. Such a regression would bring about the demise of a common secular rationality that supposedly makes democracy possible, and that would reverse the progress the United States has made toward overcoming racial discrimination and increasing individual autonomy and equal economic opportunity for all Americans. America’s power, prosperity, and progress in the world have been made possible, as the Enlightenment wing sees it, by the initiative or support of a strong federal government. If that is jeopardized, then America’s diplomatic and economic leadership in the world will suffer because other nations will react negatively to our retreat from internationalism. One can see in this kind of argument the connection between secular rationalism, a judicially engineered civil-rights individualism, a federally led economic egalitarianism, and a diplomatically guided internationalism.<sup>9</sup>

For those Americans who more closely identify with the Puritan wing, America’s distinctive identity is to be found in its moral purity, its independence, and its strength in the world as a moral light to the nations. For those in the Enlightenment wing, America’s distinctive identity is to be found in its progress toward individual freedom and economic equality, its scientific, technological, and economic leadership in the world, and the respect it receives from other nations because of its secular achievements. The contest between these two visions is taking place right now in battles over the curricula of American schools, in court cases dealing with marriage, morals, and social policy, and in Congress over spending priorities.

In all of this, it is important to recognize that moral values and religion are not easily segregated as separate functions in American society. To be sure, the United States continues to uphold the separation of church and state, and a wide variety of religious institutions enjoy freedom of worship. It is also true that the moral issues of sexuality, marriage, children, and family are quite distinct from typical economic and defense issues. Nevertheless, the United States, in the self-understanding of many (probably most) of its citizens, is understood in its entirety as a moral and religious experiment. The Puritans certainly thought their experiment was a religious one. And this is also what the Declaration of Independence portrays: the new nation as a divinely guided political venture into a new order of the ages. Religion in America, therefore, is not only about what goes on in churches, synagogues, and mosques, where Americans are free to gather for worship. It is also about public ways of life, including an American civil religion, that contend for the political means of defining the nation as a whole.

When American presidents and presidential candidates repeatedly close their speeches by saying, “God bless America,” they are expressing this wider political sense of a national religious identity. Consequently, to understand the United States at its core one needs to compare it with many other nations, states, kingdoms, and empires, almost all of which have understood themselves as having a divine mandate or origin that gives them a unique role or place in the world. This is why the moral-values debate in the United States is about more than sex, marriage, and the definition and control of embryos. Underlying those issues is the concern about the very identity and survival of America into the future.

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## Notes

<sup>1</sup>According to CNN exit polls, 22% of voters identified “moral values” as the “most important issue”; 20% identified “economy/jobs” as most important; and 19% claimed that “terrorism” was most important. But one should keep in mind, as columnist David Brooks pointed out (*New York Times*, Nov. 6, 2004), that the phrase, moral values, “can mean anything—or nothing.” It was not the religious “moral values” voters that made the difference, Brooks concludes, but those “with conservative policy views, whether they are religious or not.” One must also keep in mind a variety of other explanations of Bush’s victory. See, for example, Sean Wilentz, “Hicks Nixed Slicks’ Pick” (*Los Angeles Times*, Nov. 7), who argues that Bush’s victory came from the rise of the country against the cities. And Frank Rich, “On ‘Moral Values,’ It’s Blue in a Landslide” (*New York Times*, Nov. 14), argues that conservative moral values did not win and are not winning. Rather, says Rich, quoting Sen. John McCain (R-AZ), “The only things the religious conservatives get are largely symbolic votes on proposals guaranteed to fail, such as the gay marriage constitutional amendment.” Business and big money are the winners and the reason for Bush’s victory.

<sup>2</sup>In an article in *The Atlanta Journal-Constitution* on November 7, 2004, Gayle White quotes the Rev. Dwight Reighard, former president of the Georgia Baptist Convention, saying: “It sounds good to say just let everybody do what everybody wants to do. But that’s called chaos. You have to have rules in society. There has to be a central core set of values and ethics. For many people in the life of this country, that has meant Judeo-Christian teachings,” starting with the Ten Commandments.

<sup>3</sup>Robert George and David Tubbs wrote on November 1, for example, that “the judicial abolition of traditional marriage laws is both undemocratic and unprincipled,” in the eyes of most Americans. In recent decades, they write, “both federal and state judges have taken away or ‘usurped’ the authority of state legislatures on important issues of morality and public policy.” In the Supreme Court’s *Roe v.*

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Wade decision, justifying abortion, “the Court manufactured a virtually unrestricted right to abortion. Seven justices nationalized the matter by rewriting abortion law for the whole country. . . [and] the jurisprudential doctrines that gave us *Roe v. Wade* also underwrite the theory according to which judges are now striking down state marriage laws”

([www.aei.org/news/newsID.21490/news\\_detail.asp](http://www.aei.org/news/newsID.21490/news_detail.asp)). Once the tactic of appealing to the courts rather than to state legislatures and Congress became popular for minority causes, the strategy has also been adopted of going to state courts in the hopes that conflicting state-court decisions will lead, by appeal to the U.S. Supreme Court, to decisions in favor of the minority group. Morton Kondracke wrote in a November 8 commentary that “the issue of gay marriage would not have been on the national agenda this year to help Republicans if Margaret Marshall, chief justice of the Massachusetts Supreme Court, and three of her colleagues had not tried to overturn centuries of custom and law by judicial fiat” (“Democrats Need to ‘Get Religion’,” *Roll Call*, Nov. 8, 2004).

<sup>4</sup>Sociologist Nancy Eiesland (Emory University) says that many religious conservatives are drawn to President Bush “by their perception that he is, at heart, much like them.” The president “expresses confidence in his religious beliefs and is willing to talk about them publicly,” says Ted Baehr, founder of an entertainment guide for Christians. The president “models an integration of belief and practice that appeals to many Americans of faith.” Speaking to the nation after claiming victory on November 3, Bush assured Americans he would “uphold our deepest values of faith and family.” (These quotations all come from Gayle White, “Election 2004: God’s Country,” *The Atlanta Journal-Constitution*, Nov. 7, 2004).

<sup>5</sup>Political scientist Philip Klinker (Hamilton College) argues that President Bush won reelection not because of “moral values” voters but because of an increase in voter turn-out among people making more than \$100,000, those “who reaped the lion’s share of Bush’s tax cut bonanza for the wealthy” ([www.wsws.org/articles/2004/nov2004/demo-n13.shtml](http://www.wsws.org/articles/2004/nov2004/demo-n13.shtml)). But, of course, there could be a considerable overlap of wealthier and moral-values voters.

<sup>6</sup>I am referring to the Puritan impact on American self-identity in a different way than does George Monbiot in Britain’s *The Guardian* (“Puritanism of the Rich,” Nov. 9, 2004). Monbiot, drawing on Max Weber, says that “Puritanism was the product of an economic transformation.” And even though the first Puritans in England “preached that men should be charitable, encourage justice and punish exploitation,” according to Monbiot, their emphasis on personal responsibility led to the “conflation of their religious calling with their commercial one. . . . [S]uccess in business became a sign of spiritual grace.” Then quoting from R.H. Tawney, Monbiot says that the late Puritans “believed that ‘the world exists not to be enjoyed, but to be conquered.’” Monbiot’s point is that George W. Bush uses Puritan religious ideas to justify his policies, which enrich the elite and impoverish the lower classes. This is an argument about government’s complicity in economic exploitation. My argument is that Puritanism supplied some of the content of American popular political self-understanding.

<sup>7</sup>For some insightful comments on the historical tension between traditional religions and Enlightenment secularism, considered in the context of America’s push for democratic elections in Iraq, see Ian Buruma’s article, “An Islamic Democracy for Iraq?” in *The New York Times*, Dec. 5, 2004.

<sup>8</sup>The number of possible citations is too great to include here. A few examples will suffice. Paul Weyrich, a well-known figure in Washington’s conservative political circles wrote on November 8, “God may not be a Republican but he heard the fervent prayers of millions of values voters to keep His hand on America one more time despite our national sins of denying the right to life, despite ignoring the biblical injunction against acts which are ‘an abomination unto the Lord’ and despite the blatant attempt to remove God from the public square. God gave this President and this President’s Party one more chance” ([www.gopusa.com/commentary/pweyrich/2004/pmw\\_1108.shtml](http://www.gopusa.com/commentary/pweyrich/2004/pmw_1108.shtml)). William Bennett, former Secretary of Education under Ronald Reagan, says, “Having restored decency to the White House, President Bush now has a mandate to affect policy that will promote a more decent society, through both politics and law. . . . Now is the time to begin our long, national cultural renewal” (Nov. 3, 2004: [www.nationalreview.com/comment/bennett200411031109.asp](http://www.nationalreview.com/comment/bennett200411031109.asp)). Referring to comments by Italy’s European affairs minister, Rocco Buttiglione, former Nixon White House lawyer Chuck Colson wrote on November 18, “some Europeans ridicule America’s resolve to be ‘a city set on a hill,’ implying that we

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should abandon the moral high ground and join them in a convictionless swamp. But there's hope [in people like Buttiglione] that the migration may move in the opposite direction" ([www.pfm.org/AM/Template.cfm?Section=BreakPoint1&Template=/CM/ContentDisplay.cfm&ContentID=14446](http://www.pfm.org/AM/Template.cfm?Section=BreakPoint1&Template=/CM/ContentDisplay.cfm&ContentID=14446)). And finally, Jerry Falwell, founder of the Moral Majority more than 25 years ago, announced his launch of a new organization on November 9, 2004 to be called The Faith and Values Coalition. In his announcement, Falwell said, "Our nation simply cannot continue as we know it if we allow out-of-control lawmakers and radical judges . . . to alter the moral foundations of America." "God burdened my heart," said Falwell, "to mobilize religious conservatives around a pro-life, pro-family, strong national defense and pro-Israel platform, designed to return America to her Judeo-Christian heritage" (<[webmaster-reply@falwell.com](mailto:webmaster-reply@falwell.com)>).

<sup>9</sup>One could also offer many citations in support of this point of view. Consider the following examples. Writing in Britain's *The Guardian* on November 3, Simon Schama (Columbia University professor and now residing in New York) described America after the election as "the Divided States of America"—divided between Godly America and Worldly America. Identifying with Worldly America, Schama characterizes it as "pragmatic, practical, rational and sceptical." Worldly America thinks that Godly America "is some sort of quaint anachronism, doomed to atrophy and disappear as the hypermodernity of the cyber age overtakes it." Schama wants Worldly America to rise to the challenge of voicing "an alternative social gospel to the political liturgy of the Godlies; one that redefines patriotism as an American community, not just a collection of wealth-seeking individuals." Kevin W. Moore, an American writing in the *Economic and Political Weekly* of India on November 6 ("Bush Triumphs: Religion, Politics, and Disenchantment"), said, "The secular among us are now more disenchanted than ever before. Secularism is, I recognise, its own form of faith: trust in rationality, in discourse grounded in fact rather than belief or myth, in public life freedom from religious dogma, and indeed in freedom of religious practice—in private. This faith has now been decisively crushed, and we are left bereft of hope" ([www.epw.org.in/showArticles.php?root=2004&leaf=11&filename=7884&filetype=html](http://www.epw.org.in/showArticles.php?root=2004&leaf=11&filename=7884&filetype=html)). *The New York Times* editors editorialized on November 5 that California had certainly come to the rescue of a promising future for medical science in America when its voters approved big government spending for stem cell research. "Now that California has enshrined stem cell research and therapeutic cloning in its constitution and state law, it may be the engine that keeps the nation moving." Thankfully, said the editors, Californians "performed a valuable service that should help keep this nation in the forefront of one of the most promising areas of biomedical research," especially since religious conservatives and President Bush will hold back federal funding and encouragement for such research.

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