The Bush administration wants to help establish democracy in the Middle East. Yet at a conference of Arab and western foreign ministers in Rabat, Morocco on December 10-11, the Arabs spent much of the time expressing their dissatisfaction with failure to resolve the Palestinian-Israeli conflict.

When President Bush spoke in Canada on December 1, outlining some of his foreign policy plans for his second term, he said that nurturing international cooperation would be his administration’s top priority. Yet much of the way in which he stated that goal suggested that what he meant by cooperation was trying to convince other countries to sign on to his agenda.

After U.S. defense secretary Donald Rumsfeld upset even those in the Republican camp for his statement to American soldiers in Iraq on December 8 that “You go to war with the Army you have, not the Army you might want,” some Republican leaders in Congress expressed “no confidence” in him. To express no confidence in Rumsfeld over inadequate equipment and too few military personnel is, however, to express no confidence in the president, for President Bush has reaffirmed his commitment to Rumsfeld as head of the defense department. What kind of military policy is it that continues to affirm the legitimacy of its aims month after month even while the military fails to achieve its goal of bringing order and stability to Iraq after toppling Saddam Hussein?

These and other “ironies and oddities” come under examination in Jim Skillen’s new book With or Against the World? America’s Role Among the Nations, which is expected to roll off the press in late February from Rowman and Littlefield Publishers (1-800-462-6420; www.RowmanLittlefield.com). The price of the paperback edition is $24.95, but by using the order code 4S4Skill, one can obtain the book for a discounted price of $20.00.

The following excerpts are drawn from the book’s second chapter titled “Forgotten Depths.”

“History matters to Muslims. By contrast, Americans usually ignore history.” If it is true that Americans ignore history, it is not because their memories are
unusually poor compared to others on this planet. Rather, Americans discipline
themselves to be forward looking, confident that the future will bring progress because
their aims and hard work are progressive. The past belongs to habits and patterns that
don’t need to be remembered because even greater achievements are still to come. If
some people and nations are living in the past, well, they shouldn’t be. “We are the
nation of human progress, and who will, what can, set limits to our onward march?”

The last quotation is not from George W. Bush, or a contemporary geneticist, or
Bill Gates. It comes from an editorial by John L. O’ Sullivan titled “The Great Nation of
Futurity,” published in 1839 in his newspaper The United States Democratic Review. As
Richard Gamble explains in his book on World War I, O’Sullivan applauded the fact that
“America was an original nation, a new thing on the earth,” oriented only toward the
future, “unsullied by the past.” Forgetfulness of history, in other words, is as old as
America, and now that the United States has become the most powerful nation in the
world, perhaps we should celebrate O’Sullivan’s prescience. If America’s pragmatic,
scientific, technological, economic, and political orientation toward the future of
freedom is what has carried us to the top of the world’s power pyramid, then why
shouldn’t we assume that our success represents God’s confirming blessing, offering all
the justification we need to continue our pursuit of the future, which will also be the
world’s future?

Yet posing the hypothesis of “futurity” this way seems to hint at Jean Jacques
Rousseau’s judgment that some people have to be forced to be free. In a conversation
with some leading American journalists, Samuel Huntington described the American
mind-set in just those terms: “I think in our culture there is the assumption of
universalism, the assumption that everyone else in the world is basically like us in terms
of culture and values. If they are not like us,” Huntington continued, “they want to
become like us. And if they don’t want to become like us, then there is something wrong
with them. They don’t understand their true interests, and we have to persuade or
coerce them to want to become like us.” Yet if American leaders shape foreign and
defense policies, as well as economic and educational policies, on the basis of this
conviction, do they not position the country against rather than with the world? Or is it
that they position the U.S. only against those in the world who do not agree with the
way we want to shape its future?

Ironies, Oddities, and the American Mission

Does it not seem slightly odd that the most powerful state on earth, whose
military strength exceeds that of most of the rest of the world’s militaries combined,
now feels threatened by an enemy that has no state, no taxing ability, no advanced
scientific laboratories or military production facilities, no planes, ships, or standing
army?

Does it not seem the least bit ironic that more than two and a half years after the
U.S. responded to the 9/11 assaults with its “war on terrorism,” and after swift military
victories in Afghanistan and Iraq, the terrorist threat to the U.S. may be as great or
greater than it was on 9/11? That is what CIA director George Tenet told a
congressional committee on February 24, 2004. He warned that Al Qaeda “has been transformed from a terrorist organization into a violent, world-wide Muslim movement that will threaten the U.S. and its allies indefinitely, even if its top leaders are captured” (Wall Street Journal, 25 February 2004). Does this suggest that at least some of the Bush administration’s actions are proving to be counterproductive? Before the same committee of Congress, Lowell E. Jacoby, director of the Defense Intelligence Agency, said that the situation in post-Saddam Iraq, if left unchecked, “has the potential to serve as a training ground for the next generation of terrorists” (Washington Post, 25 February 2004). Yet the American-led war against Iraq to destroy Saddam’s rogue regime was supposed to eliminate one of the sources and supporters of terrorism and thereby put terrorists on notice throughout the world that America will win this “war.” Of course, two or three years is a short time, and the huge increase in American military spending since 9/11 by tens of billions of dollars may enable the U.S. to defeat terrorism by military means and bring down or transform every state that it identifies as a “rogue.”

However, although the future may indeed become what American leaders now promise, we ought to pause to reflect on the forgotten depths of history. Could it be that America’s confidence in its hold on the future actually hinders it from recognizing when it has sailed off course? Does forgetfulness of the past keep us from understanding the reasons for some of our most abject failures, thus delaying important course corrections we should be making? For it is, after all, not very long ago that one of America’s most costly and extended military campaigns in history failed to produce a promised and certain victory over the relatively powerless Vietnamese. It was not too many years before that when the U.S. and its allies following World War II redefined political borders throughout much of the world and set up the United Nations as a means of encouraging continuous diplomacy, the early resolution of conflict, and other efforts to reduce the risk of war. And not long before that, World War I led to the dismembering of the Ottoman empire, which for 500 years had represented a large percentage of the world’s Muslims. The victorious allies then created a number of artificial states and protectorates (“mandates”) like Iraq that were expected, under western tutelage, to eventually catch up with the world of western progress. What shall we make of the disappointments and failures of those twentieth-century American designs on the future, all of which have an important bearing on the troubling international circumstances in which we now find ourselves?

Muslims, by contrast, do live by memory, inside stories of the past, even if the historical accuracy of what is present to them may at times be questionable. They remember the West’s defeat of the Ottoman empire as if it happened this morning. Consciousness of that devastation is closely bound up with living memories that originated four hundred and even fourteen hundred years ago.

There are good reasons, then, for us to ask some probing questions about why the contemporary world has the shape that it does and why it has not yet become the safe haven for democracy that Americans anticipate. Why do so many Americans and so many Muslims think about the past and the future so differently? Current global dynamics, including many oddities and ironies associated with America’s dominant role in the world, suggest that, at the very least, we ought to try to understand why
Americans possess such future-oriented self-confidence and the assured sense of their destiny as light to the nations and leader of the world.

Clash of Civilizations: America First!

America’s sense of a divinely chosen, vanguard mission in the world was born with its Puritan beginnings, gathered strength through the Revolutionary War, and was sealed in the blood of the Civil War. In 1861, Lyman Beecher preached a sermon in his Brooklyn church that was representative of the era, identifying the American cause as “liberty here, and liberty everywhere, the world over. . . . By the memory of the fathers; by the sufferings of the Puritan ancestry; by the teaching of our national history; by our faith and hope of religion; by every line of the Declaration of Independence, and every article of our Constitution; by what we are and what our progenitors were,—we have a right to walk foremost in this procession of nations toward the bright future.”

“By 1914,” says Gamble, “the American identity and sense of national mission had accumulated and synthesized a range of doctrines, ideals, and metaphors assembled from Roman antiquity, the Old and New Testaments, Enlightenment rationalism, Romantic nationalism, and evolutionary naturalism.” Long before President Reagan denounced the “evil empire” and President Bush called for an end to an “axis of evil” in the world, the pattern had been set. Americans, says Gamble, “have been habitually drawn to language that is redemptive, apocalyptic, and expansive.”

Speaking during a trip to China in 2002, President Bush quoted G.K. Chesterton’s statement that the United States is “a nation with the soul of a church.” This apt phrase remains in circulation and was easily picked up by the president because it discloses a certain truth about the American way of life. Religious faith and vision are not only private matters in America. The United States as a public entity cannot be understood apart from its founding myth that it is a specially chosen nation, a city on a hill, the exemplar nation of the future. The American polity has been constituted in part by a civil religion, guided by the faith that the nation is in special covenant with God, even if by our day many Americans no longer believe in God. Most still believe in American “exceptionalism.” The constantly repeated phrase, “God bless America,” is certainly political, but it is also obviously religious.

Most Americans feel comfortable with such language because it connects their personal faith and mode of worship with their public way of life even if the personal and public faiths conflict with one other. It is true that in the American way of life the institutions of church and state have been legally separated, but that does not mean that the state and its citizens function non-religiously. The phrase “God bless America” is not used primarily in private prayers or in worship services. Nor does it usually express a humble plea, begging God to guide, reprove, and correct government leaders so they will do justice rather than injustice. Instead, the phrase is most often heard in public, on political occasions as a confident affirmation that God is on our side over against the enemy. God will lead us to victory because we are in the right and God is for us, not for them. This civil religion is part of what makes America tick.

Clash of Civilizations: Islam Victorious!
Radical Islamists know that their divine mission requires outright opposition to Americanism. Their main objective is not conquest, says Jason Burke, "but to beat back what they perceive as an aggressive West that is supposedly trying to complete the project begun during the Crusades and colonial periods of denigrating, dividing, and humiliating Islam." Their losses and humiliations of recent centuries have left them deeply troubled and at odds with themselves and with the West (as well as with other parts of the world). Allah’s revelations to Muhammad beginning late in the sixth century after Christ are, for Muslims, the final truth about the whole of life and the meaning of history. Living in obedience to those revelations, recorded in the Qur’an, is supposed to lead the faithful to a proper reordering of life in the territory they occupy, the dar al-islam, that part of the world where submission to God is practiced. The expansion of Islam will eventually overcome the dar al-harb (the territory of conflict where submission to God is not observed) and ultimately the whole earth will become dar al-islam and live in peace.

A central moral requirement for Muslims, who pray five times every day and confess the basic truths of Islam, is to practice jihad. Jihad does not mean only, or even in the first place, warfare. It means “struggle on behalf of God” or “striving on the path of God” to bring one’s own heart and life into conformity to God’s will. Every Muslim bears this responsibility. But jihad can, under certain circumstances, also entail warfare, both offensive (ghaza) and defensive, to advance or protect the dar al-islam.

Part of what explains the rise of radical Islamism in the late twentieth century is the crisis caused by the growing gap between the weakened, splintered reality of Islam and the normative vision of what Islam once was and ought to become. This is what Huntington describes as the problem of “consciousness without cohesion” and what James Turner Johnson describes as the tension between the ideal and reality. In trying to deal with this crisis, Muslims have taken a variety of approaches, ranging from accommodation to secular governments, as in Turkey, to attempts to recover Muslim faithfulness and consistent public practice. In the case of the radical Islamists, who arose in the 1950s and 1960s, Johnson notes they have drawn on an earlier version of the rationale for defensive jihad. This idea, which developed at the time of the Crusades, was that “lands once Islamic are always properly part of the dar al-islam and Muslims are justified in retaking them as part of the individual duty of defense [fard ‘ayn]. Specific authorization by the supreme religious leader, the imam of the dar al-islam, is not needed for such jihad, for the authority to wage this war lies in the personal obligation of each and every Muslim to defend against invaders.” Today, radicals like Osama bin Laden lay claim to this justification, asserting “that wars are justified in Islamic law when they are conducted to end exploitation and oppression by the superpowers or to achieve liberation from the forces of imperialism.”

Without doubt, contemporary Islamists who are willing to commit suicide to try to thwart western civilization and American-led progress into the future present a threatening face. Movements inspired by such a vision and commitment are not to be taken lightly. But to fear Islamist radicalism as the rising wave of a mighty military
threat to America and the West would be a mistake, according to Gilles Kepel. “In spite of what many hasty commentators contended in [9/11’s] immediate aftermath, the attack on the United States was a desperate symbol of the isolation, fragmentation, and decline of the Islamist movement, not a sign of its strength and irrepressible might.”

What is clear is that Americans and their leaders should not have marched off boldly into a “war” on terrorism in the Muslim world ignorant of the deep religious roots from out of which both they and their attackers live. The forgotten depths of history and religion, modern as well as traditional, go very deep indeed.

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Notes

3Gamble, War for Righteousness, 18.
4“Religion, Culture, and International Conflict After September 11: A Conversation with Samuel P. Huntington,” Center Conversations, a publication of the Ethics and Public Policy Center, Washington, D.C. (June 2002): 13. Later in the conversation, Alan Cooperman added, “I think that a certain messianism is implicit in our idea that we need to protect not only ourselves but also representative democracy, and capitalism, and globalization, and if people in other cultures don’t want this package of things, that’s only because they don’t know enough, or are uneducated, or have a false consciousness. They should want it and they will want it, and ultimately they’ll thank us for it.” 15.
5In a fine essay on Robert S. McNamara’s ongoing attempt to come to grips with America’s failure in Vietnam, Lloyd E. Ambrosius explains that McNamara wanted both sides to admit that they had missed opportunities and made mistakes based on mutual misunderstanding and lack of knowledge. But, says Ambrosius, McNamara avoided “more probing questions about responsibility for the war and its consequences. . . . In his explanation of the war, McNamara did not ask how, even if all of Vietnam had fallen to Communism, it would have directly threatened U.S. security. He did not ask why the United States, as the world’s most powerful nation, had been so afraid of such a small, relatively weak nation in Southeast Asia. He did not ask whether, given this vast disparity in power, Washington had been more responsible than Hanoi for the war and its consequences. Nor did he ask what answers to these questions might reveal about the Wilsonianism of American political culture. . . . McNamara refused to acknowledge that U.S. goals in Vietnam in the 1960s had been unrealistic. Although recognizing then that the United States probably could not achieve its goals by military means, he could not at the time—and still could not in the 1990s—bring himself to draw the logical conclusion that Washington policymakers needed to reconsider their goals.” Ambrosius, Wilsonianism: Woodrow Wilson and His Legacy in American Foreign Relations (New York: Palgrave McMillan, 2002), 166.
7Gamble, War for Righteousness, 6.
8Gamble, War for Righteousness, 6.
9Jason Burke, “Think Again: Al Qaeda” (http://www.schwartzreport.net/).

12Johnson, *Holy War Idea*, 137-43. According to Johnson, “even in the early years of Islam and throughout the classical age of Islamic jurisprudence, the ideal of statecraft by which the *dar al-islam* was understood as a single religio-political entity under unitary rule, opposed only by the non-Muslim *dar al-harb*, did not correspond to the actual political shape or governance of the Islamic world.” 139.


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