

# The War in Iraq and the Academic Study of Religion

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(excerpt)

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## THE NEOCONSERVATIVES' RELIGIOUS ROOTS

On 20 September 2001, just nine days after the twin towers of the World Trade Center fell, a virtual "who's who" of neoconservatives signed "An Open Letter to the President" urging "a determined effort to remove Saddam Hussein from power in Iraq" (Kristol et al. 2001:10). Why were the neoconservatives so eager to blame Iraq and go to war? The roots of the answers lie in their views about moral values acted out in society—a sphere that many would call religious. So it is not surprising that religious studies scholars have been able to unearth the deeper foundations of neoconservatism.

One scholar of religion, Gary Dorrien, has written the most carefully detailed histories of the movement. He stressed that neoconservatives, from the beginning, wanted the authoritative moral and cultural

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structures that religion so often provides. They "used religious arguments persuasively in their criticisms of sexual promiscuity, the breakdown of family ties, and the erosion of traditional cultural values. They found more difficulty, however, making constructive religious claims beyond these carefully chosen themes." They wanted a "language of moral absolutism not deriving from any particular religious tradition" (1993: 384, 2004: 207). They found it in politics. Neoconservatives tended to be "short

on personal religion, but long on giving meaning to their lives through political causes" (2004: 132). In a sense, political ideology became their faith.

Some observers might question whether the neoconservatives' faith really deserves to be studied under the rubric of "religion." But the movement's preeminent writer and guiding spirit, Irving Kristol, left little doubt that in his view the heart of the neocons' concerns lay squarely in the religious realm. "It is crucial," he wrote, "to all human beings at all times that they encounter a world that possesses transcendent meaning, a world in which the human experience makes sense" (1995: 134). But now, he lamented, there is "a religious vacuum" (1995: 178) in modern society, which he hoped neoconservatism would help to fill.

Kristol saw that vacuum take a quantum leap in the radicalism of the late 1960s. The root of the problem, he contended, rested on a fundamentally religious issue. The radicals mistakenly saw human nature as "not only originally good, but also incorruptible" (1996: 212). They would not admit that "the human condition place[s] inherent limitations on human possibility" (1995: 5). Although Kristol (like many of the early neoconservatives) was Jewish, he was impressed with the classical Christian teaching about the limits of the human condition: "Original sin was one way of saying this, and I had no problem with that doctrine" (1995: 5). "The lion shall lie down with the lamb," he wrote, "but not until the Second Coming"

(1995: 435). Until then, only people with enough self-discipline to control their appetites can stave off anarchy and preserve meaning (1995: 195, 196). But most people are not morally strong enough to choose self-control on their own. They need "traditional moral certainties" (Kristol 1995: 135) and "a *coherence* in the private sector achieved through the influence of organized religion, traditional moral values, and the family... those traditional moral values hitherto associated with church and synagogue" (1983: 168, vi).

During the late 1960s, Kristol and his fellow neocons believed religious and moral institutions were so radically called into question that they might trigger a "moral anarchy" that would deny all transcendent

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meaning (1995: 145). Another of the leading neoconservative voices, Norman Podhoretz, warned of an impending "spiritual plague" (2004: 127) because Americans were coming to believe that "nobody was in charge" of the world (1976: 33).

By the late 1970s, the neoconservatives saw a cure on the horizon.

"A quite unexpected alliance," Kristol called it, "between neocons, who include a fair proportion of secular intellectuals, and religious traditionalists" (1995: 195). When columnist Charles Krauthammer complained about the deteriorating moral values of American society, he prescribed a "self-abnegating religious revival" as the best antidote (1995: 17, 21). Another noted neocon, James Q. Wilson, wrote in praise of the "great" religions that they all "make you aware of the dark forces within you, equip you with the recognition that you need help to manage those forces, [and] supply you with a conviction that such help is available from Somebody or Something provided you submit to Him or It" (Wilson n.d.: 35). Neoconservatives would generally agree with the spirit of Wilson's words, because managing dark forces within is the heart of their project.

## **THE NEOCONSERVATIVES: THE ENEMY OUTSIDE AND WITHIN**

During the mid-1970s, the neoconservatives refocused their quest for authority and meaning on the realm of foreign policy, calling for renewed cold war fervor and a vast buildup of military, especially nuclear, weaponry. The first scholar to explain this turn in depth was a historian of American religions, Edward T. Linenthal. Taking their moralistic language seriously, he was able to see that the neocons were responding to the domestic impact of the U.S. loss in Vietnam: "They feared that America was morally tired and militarily weak after its failure of

nerve in Vietnam.... While the nation must maintain vigilance toward the enemy outside, it must also demand internal purity against the enemy within," (25, 23) the neocons warned.

Gathered under the banner of the Committee for the Present Danger, the neocons promoted what Linenthal described as a "national recovery [that] would begin with a kind of spiritual discipline: an inner transformation, a revival of the will to sacrifice would precede, but be directly related to, the public policy decisions that would spring from a rejuvenated nation. Nuclear weapons played a crucial symbolic role in the restorative process" (31).

Linenthal showed that the neocons were consciously using militant anticommunism and nuclear weaponry as symbols of moral strength, to restore the bourgeois values that they claimed had been undermined by

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the loss in Vietnam. Podhoretz, for example, feared that barbarism would overrun civilization because Americans were so sunk in a "national mood of self-doubt and self-disgust... failure of will... spiritual surrender" that they would no longer make the sacrifices needed to "impose their will on other countries" (1980: 31). A new cold war, demonstrating unconquerable U.S. power, would restrain the evil at loose in a chaotic international system while proving that, despite Vietnam, Americans still had the manly strength and will power to restrain their own chaotic impulses.

This view soon found its way into the corridors of power. Leo Cherne, who chaired President Ford's Foreign Intelligence Advisory Board, said bluntly: "We are in the midst of a crisis of belief and a crisis of belief can only be resolved by belief. Will depends on something most doomsayers have overlooked— crisis, mortal danger, shock, massive understandable challenge" (Linenthal 1989: 24).

The neocons scorned a counterculture that valued softness and harmony (the effeminate qualities, some said) over the raw exercise of strength and power. Dorrien, a specialist in the history of modern Protestant theology, pointed out that they were consciously following Reinhold Niebuhr's view "that moral principles appropriate to the private realm had no direct bearing on the public realm. Politics was primarily about the struggle for power by groups generally unrestrained by morality" (1993: 363).

Niebuhr's work also encouraged the neocons to be "openly distrustful of any attempts to improve the world. Instead, they were happy to settle for just preserving it" another historian of the movement, John Ehrman, wrote

(1995: 161, 121). This was the logical outcome of the neoconservative ideology. They were convinced that the communists abroad and the antiwar radicals at home shared the same goals: weakening the United States and overthrowing the traditional values of Western civilization. This nefarious coalition had already used Vietnam as an arena to weaken U.S. power and authority. It would go on exploiting any American weakness to crack the structure of our society. However, they assumed that these enemies of America were ultimately driven by an insatiable lust for power and pleasure, desires rooted in human nature itself. So there was no hope of eliminating their threat completely. The only hope was to keep them forever under control by strenuously protecting political and moral boundaries.

The neocons' new cold war abroad fused seamlessly with their counterattack on "anti-Americanism" at home because "containment" was the watchword on both fronts. In their ideology, the U.S. government, like the moral individual and the traditional institutions of

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a society, had to be constantly on the defensive; the wall of containment had to be as strong as possible, keeping control everywhere. Since there are no institutions to impose fixed rules on the global family of nations, the way God's rules were once imposed on the family and the society at home, the world would need a hegemonic power strong enough to act as God and lay down the law. And if the United States committed itself single-mindedly to playing the hegemonic role, it would by the same token be restoring the strength and authority of traditional moral rules at home. On the global scale as on the national, neoconservatism aimed to preserve a benevolent structure of authority powerful enough to keep the economic and political playing field, and the moral structures of human meaning, stable and orderly. (This analysis of neoconservatism is developed more fully in Chernus 2006.)

## HISTORICAL AFFINITIES

Critics of neoconservatism sometimes try to paint it as an aberration, wholly outside the mainstream of U.S. political history. Of course it is a unique phenomenon, as every political movement is unique. And political historians may or may not evaluate it as an unusual movement in their terms. But it is not outside the mainstream of U.S. cultural history. Its discourse structured by simple dichotomies (strong/weak, courage/cowardice, self-control/self-release, and order/chaos) coded in moral terms (right/wrong, virtue/vice, and pure/impure) has striking affinities with broadly influential trends that go back to colonial times. Historians of U.S. religion have

already suggested some provocative interpretations of this familiar structure. Their work offers a valuable resource to deepen our understanding of neoconservatism and its impact on public life. Here I want to suggest just one way that such an exploration might proceed.

The overriding question for neoconservatives is how Americans can muster the moral strength to control their own impulses and desires. Self-control has been a persistently pressing issue in white American culture ever since early colonial times. According to John F. Wilson (1979), "one of the basic sets of meaning through which American society explains itself to itself and to the world is in terms of the quest for purity.... a concern, often exaggerated, to achieve control over those aspects of life experienced as uncertain.... It has concerned control of self and through discipline has become finally self-control" (102, 103). However, "America has nonetheless seemed to experience acutely a fear of failure" (107). From the Puritans to the present, people who tried

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earnestly to control themselves have often been haunted by the fear that they might lose control.

The problem of self-control has been played out in secular as well as religious contexts, and the two are closely related. Robert Bellah devoted a chapter of his work, *The Broken Covenant* (1975), to this tension between what he called "impulse and control." He traced a line leading from the tension as a center of religious life to the analogous tension as an engine of economic life: "What began as the great Puritan drama of sin and salvation, conversion, new birth and new life became domesticated into the production of just the right amount of autonomy and guilt, decency, and efficiency to run a vast industrial economy" (84).

The same tension has shaped the individual's relationship not only with self but with others. Wilson has noted that the drive for self-control, especially when it is felt as imperfect and thus undependable, easily turns into a drive for "control over other selves.... Puritanisms are necessarily associated with essentially bipolar frameworks for conceiving of the world: good versus bad, us versus them. The puritan American while tightly disciplined is prone to be uncritical of self and hypercritical of others.... [This] presupposes a fundamentally authoritarian pattern of relationships within the world and reinforces that pattern" (103). It would be hard to find a more concise and precise summary of the principles of neoconservative foreign policy; as Kristol (1968) put it in the formative years of the movement: "We Can't Resign as Policemen of the World."

The effort to control other selves has often been legitimated by the myth of what Ernest Tuveson (1968) called the "redeemer nation." We control others only because they are chaotic, the myth says; we want to offer them a better future, with an optimal blend of order and freedom, which will give us a better future too. As we lead the world toward millennial perfection, we serve ourselves by serving the world, and vice versa— again, a basic principle of neocon foreign policy.

Of course, neither the unruly inner impulses nor the external others can ever be perfectly controlled. The resulting "uncertainty about internal coherence," Wilson's analysis continued, has led to "frequent, even systematic, recourse to the myth of the better future, soon, in which the contradictions and threats of the present will be overcome" (107). Again, though, frustration inevitably arises because the better future is always receding beyond a temporal horizon. Neither the unruly inner impulses nor the external others can ever be perfectly controlled. The best to hope for is to contain them. Since the prevailing discursive structure typically fuses both enemies into one, they must both be contained, or neither will be.

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Catherine Albanese's interpretation of American Christian conservatism aptly described this pattern, which equally characterizes neoconservatism. The quest for order, she wrote,

translates personal concern for boundaries into community effort for containment. Ordered government, ordered social services, ordered conduct of foreign policy, and the like will... keep evil at bay and erect the safeguards that protect Christian life. Thus, containment for conservatives means the management of evil. (Albanese 1981: 448)

This line of analysis suggests a new way to understand neoconservatism, as the most recent form of a distinctively American kind of quest for personal and societal coherence achieved through clear boundaries, moral purity, and rigid self-control, all acted out in the religious, political, and economic arenas simultaneously. Since so much of that quest has been expressed in religious terms, scholars trained in the study of religion can make an especially important contribution. The studies by Linenthal and Dorrien provide a substantial starting point, but there is much more work yet to be done to understand the movement and place it in its proper historical context.

Albanese has pointed to one important direction for deeper understanding. Since the perfect era never arrives, the gap between hope and reality makes life feel

less coherent, less manageable, and more frightening. And the widespread belief that America is God's chosen nation makes many Americans feel obliged to live up to a divine standard of perfect self-control and therefore always afraid— and sometimes convinced— of failure.

A combined sense of millennial chosenness and accompanying guilt encouraged people to disguise serious problems that the country faced. To admit that too much was wrong could jeopardize America's belief in its status as a chosen and millennial nation.... Americans could not admit the deepest sources of their guilt without destroying their sense of who they were. (1981: 448,449)

Instead, they went looking for new others to control, demonizing them and blaming them for all of America's troubles and fears.

This line of analysis suggests one way to interpret the underlying paradox of neoconservatism, with its seeming penchant for a war that never ends because it can never be won. Since perfect coherence and control can never be attained, the process of pursuing it is endless. Far from relieving anxiety, it is bound to create more of the anxious

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uncertainty it is supposed to relieve. Since that uncertainty generates and perpetuates the belief in evil enemies that must be contained, those enemies are equally endless. So the management of evil is a process that perpetuates itself without end. Thus, the neoconservative quest for order and security is bound to perpetuate a sense of permanent insecurity. If insecurity goes on forever, and the exercise of military might is a desirable or even necessary response to insecurity, then America's military might should be increased and used to fight wars forever.

## AFTER THE COLD WAR: IRAQ

The end of the cold war gave the neoconservatives a chance to show that this was indeed the logic driving their policies. In 1990, the nation turned its attention to Saddam Hussein's Iraq. After the Gulf War victory, President George H. W. Bush proclaimed that the United States had "put Vietnam behind us." Throughout the 1990s, there was a widespread call for a "peace dividend."\* However, a growing number of neoconservatives called for another military buildup, warning that the only alternative to U.S. global hegemony was global chaos. They also continued to link domestic and foreign dan-

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\* [i.e., to spend on social programs the vast sums of money previously earmarked for defense, now that the Cold War was over.]

gers. For example, Krauthammer, acknowledging that his desired "self-abnegating religious revival" was unlikely (1995: 21), called on America to exercise strong moral will at least in the political-military arena, to become "confident enough to define international morality in its own, American terms" all over the world (1985: 10).

The neoconservative call for U.S. domination reflected the continuing influence of Niebuhr, as Ehrman has suggested: "Even in the 1990s, they looked to him as their most reliable guide" (184). But scholars familiar with Niebuhr's thought might readily see a very selective use of his thought in the changing neocon vision. Their strategy for preserving the world began to include larger doses of improving it by spreading American-style democracy everywhere, by both peaceable and forceful means. So they tended to forget Niebuhr's stress on the limits of self-aggrandizement and his concomitant sense of irony.

In 1996, Irving Kristol's son William co-authored, with Robert Kagan, a seminal article that rallied the neocon troops (William and Kagan 1996). They urged Americans to "go abroad in search of monsters to destroy" in order to restore "the spiritual foundations on which their national well-being has been based." America's foundations should become the whole world's spiritual foundations, the article asserted, because they "are not merely the choices of a particular culture but are universal, enduring, 'self-evident' truths. That has been,

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after all, the main point of the conservatives' war against a relativistic multiculturalism." But, "the remoralization of America at home ultimately requires the remoralization of American foreign policy." William Kristol then founded the Project for a New American Century, a neocon umbrella group that urged President Clinton to overthrow Saddam Hussein's regime (Abrams et al. 1998).

When Clinton declined to take the advice, neocon luminary Richard Perle (2000) retorted that "after years of drift and weakness" under Clinton, the next president would have to pursue "an appropriately aggressive policy" against Saddam (110). The next president, George W. Bush, did just that. Immediately after the 9/11 attack, Bush told his counterterrorism advisor Richard Clarke: "Go back over everything, everything. See if Saddam did this. See if he's linked in any way" (Clarke 2004: 32). A few days later, Bush said flatly (in private), "I believe Iraq was involved" (Packer 2005: 41).

The neocons were delighted that the Bush presidency had become "a war presidency" (Kagan and Kristol 2001). They themselves responded to the 9/11 attack with what Robert Kagan called their "ready-made approach to the

world" (Packer 2005: 38). David Brooks (2001) explained the fundamentals of that approach: "Evil exists.... To preserve order, good people must exercise power over destructive people.... Every morning you strap on your armor and you go out to battle the evil ones... to show that under Pax Americana, the world is governable" (19). "The world await[s] the show of American might," Charles Krauthammer exclaimed (2001: 25).

In their "An Open Letter to the President" of 20 September 2001, neoconservatives made it clear that their call "to remove Saddam Hussein from power in Iraq" was rooted in their "ready-made" moralistic approach to the world. "Failure to undertake such an effort," they wrote, would be a fatal sign of U.S. weakness, "an early and perhaps decisive surrender in the war on international terrorism" (Kristol et al. 2001: 10). Iraq gave the neocons another theater of battle in which Americans could act out their sense of internal coherence by proving that they were not weak, that they had not spiritually surrendered, that the Vietnam War had not robbed Americans of their moral strength, spiritual discipline, and will to sacrifice.

By 2006, as the war dragged on with no clear-cut victory in sight, most neoconservatives continued to support it. "We're winning the war in Iraq," their bellwether William Kristol proclaimed in the fall of 2007. "The problem with the Bush administration has not been too much force, too much strength, too much support for democrats abroad. The problem, especially in the second term, was too little of all these" (2007).

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Yet more than half (in some polls as many as two-thirds) of all Americans had come to oppose the war.

Though opponents of the war often berated its neoconservative sponsors, they generally focused their arguments on a pragmatic point: The U.S. strategy had failed to produce a victory. Behind this complaint, scholars of religion might descry a deeper one: This war could not be suitably framed in any narrative structure with deep roots in American cultural tradition. It was not merely that the United States did not appear to be winning; it was increasingly unclear how the definitions of victory and defeat embedded in the traditional narratives might be relevant to the Iraq war.

### **LEGITIMATING THE WAR: MORAL AND RELIGIOUS CERTAINTY**

In the second half of 2007, the Bush administration struck back against its critics by reframing the war within a familiar narrative. It proclaimed that its "surge" plan (strongly promoted by Frederick Kagan [2007] and oth-

ers at the American Enterprise Institute, a leading neo-conservative think tank) was working. America's fighting men and women were getting the job done, defending helpless Iraqis, bringing order out of chaos. This story had considerable success. By late 2007, public opinion on the war had stabilized. Between 35 and 40 percent still approved the initial decision to go to war, and over 40 percent supported a continuing long-term military effort there.<sup>3</sup> Why was the neoconservative strategy able to stem the rising tide of opposition?

The news media explained it most often by citing the proclaimed drop in the level of violence in Iraq. But war critics and skeptics cast doubt on the link between the "surge" and the level of violence, and some doubted that statistics really supported the claim of a decline in violence at all (see, e.g., Rosen 2008). So the deeper (rarely asked) question was: why did so many Americans accept the administration's view and overlook or discount the countervailing evidence?

A big part of the answer lies in the administration's three-pronged discursive strategy— all three amenable to study by religion scholars.

First, the President and his top advisors continued to legitimate their Iraq policy with the whole panoply of neocon moral/religious values. They tarred war critics as weak-willed quitters who would merely "cut and run," leaving Iraq and eventually all of the Middle East

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to dissolve into chaos, giving terrorists a stronger base from which to attack the United States once again. The President argued that "precipitous withdrawal from Iraq... would embolden our enemies and confirm their belief that America is weak" (Bush 2007e). The terrorists would say that "the United States, the enemy that we attacked, turns out to be what they thought: weak in the face of violence, weak in the face of challenge" (2007c).

On some occasions, Bush insisted that the enemy's belief was erroneous: "They can't intimidate America.... They think it's just a matter of time before America grows weary and leaves.... That's not going to happen" (2006). On other occasions, though, he left the nation's moral strength an open-ended question, saying that victory depended on whether the American people had the will to win, "the courage and resolve to see it through" (2007a). In order to create the air of moral challenge so central to neoconservative discourse, he had to leave open the possibility that the American people might not have the requisite strength of will.

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<sup>3</sup> For comprehensive polling data, see [www.pollingreport.com/iraq.htm](http://www.pollingreport.com/iraq.htm).

Vice-President Dick Cheney echoed the President's tone of challenge by linking the present to the post-Vietnam past: "We know, as Ronald Reagan did, that 'no weapon in the arsenals of the world is so formidable as the will and moral courage of free men and women'" (2006). The terrorists "think they can break our will.... This is an existential conflict. It is the kind of conflict that's going to drive our policy and our government for the next 20 or 30 or 40 years. We have to prevail and we have to have— excuse me— the stomach for the fight long term" (2007a). "The only way they can win is if we lose our nerve and abandon our mission— and the terrorists do believe that they can force that outcome.... [that] we are weak and decadent, and that if we're hit hard enough, we'll pack it up and retreat" (2007b).

Secretary of State Condoleezza Rice, often seen as the "realist" counterweight to the neoconservatives inside the administration, was equally comfortable using the neocons' moralizing language. You must be "certain of your values," she proclaimed. "If you're relativist about right and wrong, then you can't lead.... You have to speak with a clarity about what is right and what is wrong" (2006). "In a world where evil is still very real, democratic principles must be backed with power in all its forms" including military (2005). "Nothing of value is ever won unless there is sacrifice" (Fletcher 2007).

The second prong of the rhetorical strategy was the President's persistent resort to more conventional religious language, which has received close scrutiny from at least two historians of religion. According to Bruce Lincoln, Bush "has shown little concern for

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consistency and coherence" throughout his political career. "His theological systems simply pile up, much like his rationales for war in Iraq." But since the 9/11 attack, Bush's rhetoric has displayed "a sophisticated theology of history that rests on five propositions: (1) God desires freedom for all humanity; (2) this desire manifests itself in history; (3) America is called by history (and thus, implicitly by God) to take action on behalf of this cause; (4) insofar as America responds with courage and determination, God's purpose is served and freedom's advance is inevitable; and (5) with the triumph of freedom, God's will is accomplished and history comes to an end" (Lincoln 2004: 28).

In Hugh Urban's view, Bush has applied this theology to the war in Iraq, casting it "as part of a much larger narrative of human history, a key moment in the unfolding of freedom throughout the world, guided by the providential hand of God" (49-50). He depicts himself "in a kind of Mosaic and even messianic role, guided by God and

waging a cosmic war against evil-doers" (54). But, Urban observed a further complexity in the biblical coding:

Bush's speeches contain a subtle kind of double coding, using careful references to specific biblical passages that are likely to be missed by most readers but heard by evangelical audiences. At the same time, however, they also contain another layer of coding, perhaps a triple coding, with specific references to neoconservative ideals.... He is able to present what are clearly neoconservative political plans for America's global hegemony and military power, while clothing them in the more palatable language of God's will as the "Author of Liberty". (2007: 110, 112)

Lincoln and Urban agree that Bush achieves his goals by the form as well as the content of his religious language. Lincoln builds his analysis on his theoretical view that any phenomenon takes on a religious quality when it claims a trans-human, and thus unchallengeable, source for its authority. Thus, Bush's "conversion of secular political speech into religious discourse invests otherwise merely human events with transcendent significance" (2003: 31). In this way, administration policies are "swathed in the holy" (2004: 29). Bush and his speechwriters sometimes achieve this effect by using specific words and phrases from the Bible, a "code" recognized only by hearers who know the Bible well. "By the end, America's enemies have been redefined as enemies of God, and current events have been constituted as confirmation of Scripture" (2003: 31).

Urban's analysis combines Lincoln's approach with his own studies of secrecy in religion. The Bush administration, he contends, "has tried

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to convince us that conformity to the mystery of God's will and conformity to the hidden agenda of the administration are both part of the same divine plan, that we should not worry or think critically but simply trust" (21) in both God's will and the administration's agenda.

The appeal to divine authority is also the source of an unseen, unverifiable kind of power, one that can serve as an ultimate motivator and an extremely effective means of persuasion.... For, like the President himself, it too is largely hidden, unseen, beyond the public gaze, and based solely on the President's request that we "just trust him". (Urban 2007: 186)

In sum, the Bush administration's pro-war rhetoric tapped into the same broad religious and cultural traditions that conservatives and neoconservatives so often draw upon. The President and his aides acknowledged that the impulse to flee a painful battlefield was understandable. But they insisted that virtuous Americans

would discipline themselves and control that impulse so their troops could defeat the threatening other, bringing order to Iraq, security to the United States, and history closer to its divinely intended goal. Thus, they correlated military strength with a strength and certainty derived from absolute moral and religious values.

The security that the administration's rhetoric and policies offered was more psychological than physical. Bush and his aides were (whether consciously or not) appealing to what Wilson called the public's "uncertainty about internal coherence" and offering a path to certainty: using war as a way to define clear moral/religious boundaries and act out "the myth of the better future, in which the contradictions and threats of the present will be overcome."

One of those contradictions was between the obligation to be perfectly self-controlled and the fear (or inevitability) of failure in self-control: how much easier to prove one's strength of control by controlling another people. Another contradiction was between the "chosen people's" ordained right to victory in every war and the lingering memory of the failure to gain victory in Vietnam. Although the second President Bush did not speak the words openly, one of his war aims was to achieve the goal proclaimed but not attained by his father: putting Vietnam behind us.

Yet the patterns described by historians of U.S. religion suggest that the attempt to resolve such contradictions—to attain internal coherence and certainty through war—was bound only to exacerbate the contradictions and the anxiety and guilt they engendered. If, as Albanese

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contended, "Americans could not admit the deepest sources of their guilt without destroying their sense of who they were," it would seem likely that they might choose to go on "keeping evil at bay" by fighting rather than confront the underlying motives that led them to fight.

The President's evangelically rooted religious discourse reinforced this approach, because it suggested that all human life could be seen most accurately, and most piously, as an endless battle against sin (see Chernus 2006: chaps 3-5). Framed by this blend of political and religious language, the neoconservative project of pursuing order and purity by the endless and violent management of evil might prove to be quite appealing.

### THE THIRD PRONG OF THE BUSH STRATEGY: "SUPPORT OUR TROOPS"

To bolster the appeal of their message, the President and his advisors deployed a third strategy, a rhetorical campaign that was perhaps their most potent weapon for fending off the critics' attacks: "support our troops." Democrats had to tread carefully in taking even the most limited steps to curb the war, constantly worrying that any of those steps might be seen by the public as failing to support the troops. By making support for the troops the central issue, the administration was able to exercise significant control over the terms of the public debate about the war, if not its outcome.

Why should it be so important to "support our troops"? President Bush occasionally suggested some answers. The troops were willing to put "country ahead of self in many ways. I'm proud to be the Commander-in-Chief of such decent people, such honorable people, and such noble people" (2007b). He praised their "desire to succeed and their determination to prevail" (2007d), their "true will to win" (2007a). Such words could make "our troops" a convenient symbol for the whole body of neo-conservative discourse about strength and self-restraint, which the administration was using to promote its war policies.

However, Bush made comments like these surprisingly rarely. Much more often he merely asserted the need to "support our troops" as an unexplained, yet unquestioned and unquestionable, fact. The public discourse about the war followed a similar pattern. There was little if any debate about what it might mean to "support our troops." "Our troops" functioned as a vaguely defined symbolic marker, making it easy for virtually everyone to agree on the unquestioned need to support them.

There was an equally broad consensus that the essential way to demonstrate support was to appropriate vast sums of money for the war.

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Politicians, keeping a close eye on public sentiment, rushed to insist that even if they opposed the war, they would never dream of cutting funding for "our troops." Massive military expenditures served as the main symbolic enactment of support for "our troops."

Why was this symbolism so potent for the general public as well as for political elites? To begin to answer that question, scholars who value "local knowledge" might turn to the one place where the war hits home most vividly for most Americans: the local media reports on the deaths of U.S. soldiers from their own communities. As a brief example, consider the descriptions of the de-

ceased— soldiers representing all races, classes, and ethnicities— in a small random sampling of such reports from April 2007.

The overriding theme in these descriptions was one that neoconservatives would prize: eschewing selfishness in order to serve others. Many of the dead were eulogized as youngsters naturally inclined to serve: "He was always concerned about other people" (Przybyla 2007). "He felt a need to serve. He had a lot of sense of responsibility" (Associated Press 2007a). "He was so dedicated to what he was doing. He was a very honorable young man and that's why he went to the war— to help others and do the right thing in life" (Gran 2007).

Whom did these soldiers (all of them volunteers) serve? "We are trying to help the Iraqi Army out with helping the communities out," one had written (Arenschield 2007). But concern for Iraqis was rare in these reports. More common was the theme of service to one's fellow soldiers. "They were brothers who lived for each other" (Associated Press 2007b). "My comrades are over there. I made a commitment, and I will finish it" (Arenschield 2007). "He was there for everyone. He was a real support for us.... he saw this as his duty, and he was a truly brave soldier who just went ahead and did his job" (Abel 2007).

Most common of all was the theme of service to one's own nation. "They are committed and they want to do what's right for the country" (Burlington Free Press Staff 2007). "He fought for freedom to come home and enjoy that freedom" (Arenschield 2007). These soldiers made the news, of course, because their selfless service led to the ultimate sacrifice of self. "All gave some, but Kevin gave all" (Nebraska State Paper 2007). "This is about a boy who had the courage to go in the military and fight and die for his country" (Preusch 2007). "This is the way that they would want to go if they had to— serving their country, standing up for the country that they love, enough to die for" (Ishimaru 2007).

The theme of self-sacrifice was often framed in overtly religious terms. "He wanted to serve God and his country. That's all he ever talked about doing" (Walker 2007). Thoughts of death often evoked an impulse

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to pray. "Please pray for him; my little brother" (Preusch 2007). "We pray for all the soldiers daily, as Michael would want us to" (Arenschield 2007). "God is in charge of all life," a minister commented, "and we need to be seeking God's strength at this time. When our lives get out of control it's the God of life we can turn to" (Przybyla 2007).

This minister's comment suggests why neoconservatives would rally around the call to "support our troops." For

them Iraq, raising powerful echoes of Vietnam, was a crucial test case of Americans' patriotic dedication to country, which they saw as a sign of both the will and the ability to control self as well as world, to demonstrate the moral virtue that traditional national narratives attributed to the American people.

But why was the call so popular with the public at large? Perhaps many Americans shared, however inchoately, the neoconservatives' concern that a perceived spread of selfishness was triggering a breakdown of shared cultural values and authoritative institutions. Perhaps the perception, or at least the prospect, of failure in Iraq heightened that concern because it created uncertainty about the internal coherence of American life and the narratives that might give it meaning.

If so, the symbolic image of "our troops" could help to restore a sense of coherence. It offered an image of ordinary American youngsters with the extraordinary virtue of selfless devotion, the demonstrated willingness to control their impulses in the service of a higher moral cause. "Our troops" might symbolize a faith that, in a world so widely perceived as saturated with impulsive selfishness, selfless devotion to duty is still possible.

The reports of military deaths also implied an unspoken message. All of these soldiers died obeying orders and, according to most media messages, trying to bring order to a chaotic land. So they could symbolize a faith that, no matter how chaotic the world might seem, order might still prevail, someone might still be in control, and the concept of authority might still be meaningful. Perhaps that is why, when asked "Who do you think is most likely to make the right decisions about the war in Iraq: the Bush Administration, Congress, or U.S. military commanders in Iraq?", fully 68% of the public chose "the military" (Myers and Thee 2007).

The "local knowledge" about an individual soldier from the local area, as reported in local media, may have allowed many Americans to identify personally with "our troops" and all that these words represented. If so, the symbolism of "our troops" may have created a reassuring sense that control of one's own self was still possible and that anyone could still maintain personal boundaries—as long as "our troops" were deployed abroad fighting to keep evil at bay. In a society that lacks a single shared narrative about, and is deeply ambivalent

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about, achieving moral boundaries through self-control, a narrative telling of heroic figures who achieve control of self and others might well appear to resolve the societal and personal dilemma. "Supporting our troops" might

be a way to act out that narrative and thus reinforce all of its reassuring messages.

The reports of soldiers' deaths implied yet another message: America is still worth serving, sacrificing, and even dying for. By entwining the images of the individual soldiers with the patriotic message, these reports suggested that America had not lost its moral strength and that it remained a pure and virtuous land because its citizens were still able to contain their own impulses as well as the chaos of others. Perhaps, then, "our troops" symbolized an affirmation that the nation's traditional values and mythic structures endured, despite a second failed war. By "supporting our troops," Americans could believe that some kind of millennialism still gives meaning to the national experience and that the quest for perfection could still be a meaningful narrative structure for their own personal experience. Moreover, in a predominantly Christian country, the story of a sacrifice of the innocent to save the rest of us (who do not deserve it) could easily make the cause for which they died seem sacred, too.

If these were in fact messages symbolically enacted in "supporting our troops," they were strikingly congruent with neoconservative messages embedded in the Bush administration's rhetoric about war, will, and sacrifice—which, in turn, echoed the neoconservative rhetoric of the post-Vietnam era. Thus, "supporting our troops" may have functioned, however subliminally, as a way for Americans—even those who saw the Vietnam and Iraq wars as failures or mistakes—to affirm that failed or mistaken wars could not undermine the values and narrative structures traditionally affirmed as essential elements of American identity.

These are speculations, to be sure. They serve here only as hypotheses for further study, which would surely disclose even more symbolic meanings of "supporting our troops." More importantly, this issue offers yet another example to illustrate how the historical and analytical-descriptive methods of religious studies can help us understand ourselves better in a time of war.

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... The list of questions that can help us understand ourselves better, simply by studying them and debating the various answers, is potentially endless. In a survey of religion and war in U.S. history (Chernus Forthcoming a), I found a number of themes that were discovered by scholars in connection with at least one war, all of which might serve to frame questions and hypotheses for studies of other wars, including the Iraq war:

- fusing religion and politics in a unified worldview and value system, typically equating religious virtue with political freedom;

- universalizing American ideals;
- wanting to use the process of history to experience and express timeless values beyond history;
- viewing America as a spiritual project and Americans as God's chosen people, leading the world to the millennium;
- hoping for regeneration or total transformation of self and world,
- often through sacrifice;
- belief in American innocence and superiority;
- a sense of American values being permanently threatened;
- the fusion of just war, holy war, and Christian humanist ideals;
- a tendency to ignore just war's limitations on violence;
- invoking natural law to legitimate cultural values;
- using the Bible as a prototype;

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- belief in original sin;
- interpreting war as punishment for the sins of one's own community;
- Americans being reluctant to fight, but when they do fight wanting a quick apocalyptic victory;
- using violence against the other to resolve or evade tensions and anxieties within one's own community.

If we had specialists in religion and war in U.S. history who could tell us how these themes and others had played out (or not) in the past and are playing out (or not) in the current war, we would know much more than we do about the "us" side of the wartime equation.

Such knowledge could go far to help heal what many scholars see as a significant problem (some would say an illness) in the American body politic. Our prevailing national narratives have led us into two massive efforts to defeat foreign enemies, in Vietnam and in Iraq, that have been widely perceived as failures and have probably created more enemies of U.S. government policy. Yet the nation's political will to break with the prevailing narratives is unclear, ambivalent, and hesitant. So we remain, as a nation, caught in a potentially endless cycle of fear, war, more fear, and more war. This would be a recipe for increasing insecurity— and tragedy.

[ . . . ]

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