

Against the Idolatry of Preemption and Preemptive Strikes

By Mark Harris

THE CURRENT NATIONAL SECURITY policy of the United States, defined in the White House document of September 17, 2002 ("The National Security Strategy of the United States of America," www.whitehouse.gov/nsc/nss.html), significantly changes the way the government understands its authority for the use of military power. With the advent of a heightened sense of security concerns, the Bush administration has declared a "war on terrorism" and stated that it will strike when it wishes against objectives it perceives as foes bent on harming the United States or its interests.

This White House document is a persuasive and well-argued case for particular actions for "freedom's triumph" against terrorism, terrorists and states that wish us harm or aid or harbor terrorists. It is also a document of such astounding arrogance that Christians everywhere will increasingly see it as idolatrous in its understanding of the role of the United States, and arrogant in its identification of the good and the right with the will of the United States.

At the core of this document is the shift in the moral stance concerning preemptive attack. Preemptive attack has in the past been considered clearly aggressive rather than defensive, and those nations that exercised that option were considered morally in the wrong. The new U.S. national security policy proposes that in the wider war against terrorism, preemptive attack against a wide range of enemies is justified on the basis of the administration's perception of threat. It further states that preemptive attacks will be undertaken upon the administration's choosing, and will not require congressional approval.

There is a growing sense that the legitimate desire for a secure state has, in this administration, become joined with concerns for international economic policies and cultural arrangements that serve U.S. interests, as interpreted by this administration, far beyond what is required for security reasons. That union of security policy and national interest makes the intent of the United States less benign and more dangerous. It tempts the government

in the name of national security to actions that more clearly concern the position of the United States as the dominant world power and to actions internally that place a higher value on state-defined security than on personal liberties. The actions of the United States have come to reflect those of the great empires of the past.

In this document, national security interests justify preemptive strike against domestic enemies, citizens and non-citizens alike. Such persons lose rights normally considered absolute under the Bill of Rights of the Constitution. This loss of rights is every bit as much a matter of preemption as is preemptive attack against foreign enemies. For preemption is clearly about acting when and where the government chooses, in the name of national security.

The invasion of Iraq and the overthrow of its regime are products of a mighty power working its will. Competent or not, moral or not, the will to use that power in pursuit of what is proclaimed and justified as a right cause is a demonstration of the United States' will to power and its determination to act against its perceived foes. The United States, in its particular expression of the will to power, is a specter haunting the world.

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The idolatries of our times

Idolatry is the chief scandal and obscenity of every nation and people who put their confidence in the exercise of power and the will to power. The idolatries of this and every age, whose confidences are placed in state, or ruler, or constitution, or indeed the domesticated gods of jingoistic faiths, are immensely destructive. Against this, as followers of Jesus Christ, we place before the world his powerlessness. It is in the emptiness of that powerlessness, understood as the cross, that the power of God's love takes hold.

Episcopalians, and every other body of persons who claim to follow Jesus Christ, have every reason to witness against the idolatries of our times — against those whose source is found in the individual will to power and those whose source is in the state's will to power. We are to especially attend to the deceptiveness and craftiness of such idolatry when it is disguised as righteous judgment, righteousness and virtuous action, and when deceptions are practiced by our own government against its own people in the name of the general good.

No doubt we as churches ought to be aware of our own idolatries as well. But this should not dissuade us from the task at hand — attending to the idolatries of this nation, the United States of America, for which we pray and give thanks, and in which we enjoy (although unequally) the blessings of liberty. In these days our attention is, and ought to be, drawn more and more to the arrogance of power and its attending idolatries.

This 74th General Convention of the Episcopal Church, meeting in Minneapolis, will lament the war and offer several useful and commendable resolutions related to the understanding of just war, military service, the need for humane treatment of prisoners and the like. We particularly draw your attention to Resolution A033, "Just and Unjust Wars," and commend it for passage, but with considerable revision reflecting the need for a moral stance based not on conventions of the past, but the biblical and theological bias against idolatry. Hopefully we will remember the statements of our Presiding Bishop and House of Bishops that have provided words of encouragement and truth-telling in difficult times.

It is important that we take these steps, and yet there is little doubt that, at least at this Convention, the Episcopal Church is unprepared to engage the wider issues related to war-making in a post-modern world in which one nation, the United States of America, stands in a unique power relation to all other national

or group powers in the world. Its power will be challenged not by other nations so much as by the hatred of those who feel their lives controlled by the great power's every whim. The great power's response will be to claim its moral superiority to all such forces of hatred, and to use its overwhelming power to crush expressions of that hatred.

This church and the churches domiciled in this land may indeed be or become domesticated to the point where they are religious extensions of such a righteous state. If so, we will be party to a great idolatry.

The mission of the church

We dare not let this happen, for the mission of the church and the mission of even the most well-intentioned state are, and must remain, distinct. If this church is to be true to the Gospel of Jesus Christ, then it must wrestle with the idolatry that is at the heart of the hope placed in superpowers, empires and super-democracies. It must also, with Jesus Christ, proclaim a kingdom not of this world, rejecting every idolatry of cause, belief, god or morality that would take even an ear off the head of one of the least of those labeled as the enemy.

That is to say, this church will increasingly be pressed to speak the truth about idolatrous confidence in the American empire, the idolatry of despots and the idolatry of faiths, including our own. The relationship between our obedience to Jesus Christ and our allegiance to the state has never been easy. In fact, the historical relationship between faith and empire has marked some of the most difficult times in the life of the church. As a church we will increasingly be called upon to make choices in these matters, and unless these matters become a part of our assembly's discourse, we will come to those choices unprepared.

We must prepare, as an Episcopal Church in General Convention assembled, to speak out with force against the idolatries forming and looming on the edge of modernity. Even additions to Resolution A033 that point to the need to address the idolatry of the nation will signal a turning. If we do not attend to the evils of this new world — in which right and will are inextricably joined by the propagandists of empires and superpowers as well as by the propagandists of terror organizations and religious states — we will fail as voices of the Gospel.

We must begin here and now to counter the idolatries of the security state, the preemptive actions of such states and the idolatries of empire. ●

about the author

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