

7

A Speech Not Given on September 20, 2001

Address to a Joint Session of Congress and the American People

MR. SPEAKER, MR. PRESIDENT PRO TEMPORE, MEMBERS OF CONGRESS, and fellow Americans:

We have been struck by lightning. A small number of our fellow human beings have decided to place their own humanity in question by committing suicide in a way that intentionally included mass murder. We are shocked; we are stunned; we are in tremendous pain, as is the whole civilized world. After a century that witnessed the inhumanity of human beings to each other on an unprecedented scale, we are forced to begin this new century with yet another episode of bloody barbarity, as if we needed to be reminded of the depths of spiritual corruption to which human beings can descend.

When I say that we have been struck by lightning, I am using a term that I have chosen carefully. The history of the human race has demonstrated that even though most human beings most of the time are peace-loving and responsible citizens, it sometimes happens that particular individuals or groups choose to allow themselves to become lightning rods for evil. They become conduits for the entry into the world of heinous behaviors that cause tremendous pain and suffering. Adolf Hitler was such a lightning rod, along with Stalin and Pol Pot. Jim Jones and Timothy McVeigh were conduits of destruction. The members of the Ku Klux Klan showed themselves to be lightning rods for evil whenever they lynched a black person. I could continue this list until it is quite lengthy, but I will stop there. The point I am emphasizing

is that even though we human beings are created in the image of God, we have the capacity to reject that image and become servants of an evil whose only goal seems to be the destruction of human life.

We are still learning about those who attacked us without warning and without making any demands, after they had apparently decided that the intentional slaughter of thousands of people was an action of which their conscience could approve. They were members of al Qaeda, a terrorist organization led by Osama bin Laden that has already killed many people in many different countries around the world. This group presents itself as the true voice of Islam. It is not. Islam, like all of the major religions of the world, is a religion of peace. The teachings of Islam specifically condemn suicide and the intentional murder of civilians. Osama bin Laden and his followers do not legitimately speak for the religion of Islam, just as the KKK does not speak legitimately for Christianity. In each case, a group of psychologically deranged people is seeking to hijack a religion, in defiance of the well established ethical traditions of humanity, to turn that religion into a weapon for the wanton destruction of human life.

In America, Muslims practice their religion alongside Christians, Jews, Buddhists, and Hindus. Such freedom of religion is a model that other countries around the world would do well to emulate. American Muslims are appalled by the actions of a small number of extremists who claim to be acting on behalf of Allah, when they are actually blaspheming Allah and doing immense damage to Islam as a religion. American Muslims realize that it may take decades or even centuries to repair the damage that has been done to the public image of Islam. I want to assure all Muslims who are listening to my words that I respect your faith; I fully realize that the struggle we face in the future is a struggle not against Islam as a religion, but against those people who attack the Muslim faith by turning it into a projection of their own twisted egos, because their love of death and killing is greater than their love for anything else.

There are those who say that in the past the human race was religious, but in the modern period the human race is becoming secularized, and religion will gradually wither away. I do not support this view. On the contrary, I believe that the twenty first century will be intensely religious and theological. I say this because we have arrived at a historic crossroads in our journey as a race. Two paths have opened up before us

that lead in very different directions. These paths are theological. Along one path, God is viewed as having a mean streak, a violent side. This God is wrathful and he demands sacrifices; he is a God of vengeance who expects his faithful followers to purify the world through acts of violence against those who have been labeled by those followers as the enemies of God. The worshippers of this God believe that they understand his will perfectly and are commissioned to carry it out, leaving a bloody trail in their wake. Along the other path, God is understood to be the champion of justice who seeks to protect all people from unjust attacks. This God is loving, compassionate, and gracious. This God does not continually demand sacrifices and rejoice in the spilling of blood. On the contrary, he is distressed by the violent actions of his children, who so often stray from the true path that leads to joy and life. The followers of this God do not assume that they have a perfect knowledge of his will, since this God transcends the limits of human understanding. They seek to increase in their knowledge of this God by studying the sacred scriptures and allowing the texts to point them in the direction of peace and reconciliation, with justice. It is my belief that these two very different visions of God will constitute the central question being debated within the human race in the twenty first century. Which one is our Creator? Which one is worthy of our praise and obedience?

Another key set of questions that will be asked in the twenty first century are those that center around the problem of understanding ourselves as human beings. Why are we violent? What motivates us to think and act the way we do? What are our potentials for change and transformation? These are vitally important questions, and we need not throw up our hands in despair of ever answering them. In fact, our leading thinkers, from previous centuries and today, have reflected deeply on these questions and have made significant strides toward answering them. Unfortunately, the insights of these thinkers have not become the common knowledge of the human race in general. There is a gap between the wisdom that our religious and philosophical teachers are able to offer us, and the lack of understanding that marks our citizenry. This situation is reminiscent of earlier centuries when certain key scientists began to understand the movements of the stars and planets more clearly than they had been understood in the past. It took a period of centuries before the insights of the cutting edge scientists, such as Copernicus, worked their way down into the basic levels of the educational system

in the Western world. I hope that it won't take quite that long for the knowledge gained by religious leaders and social scientists to work its way into our educational system so that the children of future generations can grow up understanding human behavior competently.

All of the major religious traditions of humanity have strong ethical teachings that prohibit intentional murder. When religious leaders denounce acts of violence committed by terrorists, they are drawing on these traditions. But more is needed than denunciation. Our religious leaders and our educators at all levels of study need to apply themselves diligently to the task of developing a deep understanding of how the human psyche becomes derailed, leading to unethical behavior. They need to be able to unveil, through a well articulated vision of the shape of the healthy human soul, the falseness of an ideology that seeks to justify turning human beings into expendable objects. Our cultural leaders need to have something other than just a different opinion than those who commit terrorist acts; they need to have a significantly superior insight into human psychology. Developing this insight is the task that lies before them in the coming decades. I hope that these words convey a message that is loud and clear to the intellectual leaders of the Christian, Jewish, and Muslim communities.

There are those who are saying today that the attacks we have suffered prove that "religion causes violence." This is a tired phrase that ought to be abandoned because it lacks philosophical coherence. "Religion" is an abstract concept that is very difficult to define, even for those who specialize in its study. It is not an active agent that makes people do things. There is no puppet-master called "religion" that has the power to override the free will of human beings. To suggest that there is is to put the cart before the horse. Those human beings who carry out violent acts do so for reasons that arise out of their psychopathology. If they have confused and contradictory religious ideas in their heads, and use religious rhetoric to support their hypocritical actions, this is a byproduct of their derangement, not its cause. History has shown us very clearly that atheists can be just as violent as those who are ostensibly religious; and agnostics can be just as active in working for peace as believers. So the tired phrase "religion causes violence" clearly shows that the person uttering it finds reality a bit too difficult to comprehend, leading them to give up on the task too soon.



We have been attacked. We must now reflect on how we will respond to what has happened to us—what has happened to the world. Firstly, we need to grieve with those families whose loved ones have been murdered. The grieving process is not simple and it is not quick. Those whose lives were taken will leave behind a huge hole in the hearts of their family members and friends—a hole that will contain immense pain for years to come. We must reach out to those who are mourning to support them in every way possible. We are all grieving as a nation, and we will be for years. Let us remember those who are no longer with us and receive from them a mission to carry on in our own lives all that they taught us about friendship, love, laughter, faith, and human decency. As we do so, we will honor their memory in the most fitting and upbuilding way, and we will live through and in our grief as survivors who are made stronger, not weaker, by suffering.

In the days following last Tuesday, people from all around the globe have been grieving along with us. On behalf of the American people, I thank you for your sympathy, your prayers, and your support. Prayers have been said for us in dozens of different languages, in England, Poland, Egypt, Australia, South Africa, Brazil, South Korea, India, and many other countries. Our national anthem has been played at Buckingham Palace, on the streets of Paris, and at Berlin's Brandenburg Gate. The whole civilized world has understood that this has been an attack not just on the United States, but on humanity itself. Along with thousands of Americans, citizens of 80 other nations were killed in the attacks. As the world grieves with us, we will use this opportunity to strengthen our ties with other nations, to build a strong coalition that will be able to undermine effectively the threat of terrorism in the coming years.

We must also use these dark and painful days as an opportunity for deep and sustained reflection on the shortcomings of all human beings, ourselves included. This is never a comforting message to hear. We naturally want to think well of ourselves and to compare ourselves favorably to others. It makes us feel good to see ourselves as being in the right, as being on the side of God, as being defenders of freedom against despots and their minions. Conversely, we have a natural desire to identify a selected group of other human beings as our enemies, who have a character that is diametrically opposed to ours. "They are evildoers;

they hate freedom and goodness and morality; they are the children of Satan.” This is the way we are tempted to describe them. If we allow the attacks that we have suffered to draw us into this way of thinking about ourselves and about those Others, then we have allowed the terrorists to dictate how we think and feel by making us their clones. That is what we must not do. This way of thinking that simplistically divides the world into two camps is a kind of sickness; it falsifies reality rather than clarifying it. In truth, all human beings are fallible. We are all capable of good and of evil. All cultural groups and nations have positive aspects and unfortunate flaws. Serious reflection on our own flaws, mistakes, and selfish actions is the pathway we must follow if we wish to lead humanity in a better direction in the future. It should not require an act of heinous violence to bring us to this realization. To take stock of our failings as individuals and as nations should be our continual practice.

Throughout the whole civilized world, there is an institution within society that is charged with the task of tracking down and apprehending those persons who have shown themselves to be at war with the Law by committing intentional acts of violence. The police do this difficult and dangerous job day in and day out. The attacks that we have suffered have reminded us forcefully just how courageous, dedicated, and selfless these public servants are. They risk their lives for us, to keep us as safe as we can be kept in this unpredictable world. Many of them lost their lives last Tuesday, rushing into burning buildings to help others get out of them. We will continue the work that they did to honor their memory. We will use all of the resources available to us, including our armed forces if necessary, to track down and bring to justice those who are directly responsible for planning these attacks. We will work with the international community to apprehend and bring to justice those who are indirectly responsible for the attacks by providing safe haven and encouragement to the terrorists. We will do this to protect human life from those who do not value either their own lives or the lives of others.

There may be some persons who will say that our response to the attacks we have suffered should be an expression of our *revenge* on the “evildoers.” Revenge is a deeply human emotion. It arises out of a desire to honor the dead and act in their place because they can no longer act for themselves. But it is an emotion whose place in human life belongs to the past, not to the future. Revenge seeks to balance the scales of

justice by adding more killings to those that have already occurred. This is not the sort of balance that we should be seeking. What we need is not a balancing of the scales, but a transformation of human culture, such that we learn new ways of relating to each other.

There are those who will say in the coming months and years that these attacks we have suffered are a sign of things to come. We will be told that the terrorists will continue to attack us and they will use more and more lethal weapons. Therefore we must attack them first. We must forge a policy, in other words, that arises out of a politics of fear. We must listen to the voice of our own fears, and whip up the fears of the public so that they will support our newly devised plans to attack our enemies with ferocity. We must not only punish those who have already committed crimes, but we must clairvoyantly predict who is going to commit a crime in the future so that we can kill or capture them before they have a chance to do so. I do not agree with this view and I will not go down that path. This does not mean that I am naïve and do not have an understanding of how dangerous the world is; it means that the politics of fear is a self-fulfilling prophecy. By seeking to kill the terrorists we will only create more and more terrorists. We will be drawn down into a vortex of violence that has no end. No. We will not go down that path.

We do not have a crystal ball. We cannot see the future with certainty to know what is going to happen. We can live in the present with the clearest possible understanding of the past and with a vision of the future that traces a trajectory of ethical development for the human race. As Martin Luther King Jr. once said, “I do not know what the future holds, but I know who holds the future.” We cannot manage and control history to make it come out according to our wishes, but we can live with courage and hope, knowing that the fabric of the universe, as it has been established by the Creator, tends toward justice and toward peace. Those who, through their actions, place themselves at war with the human race and its Creator are fighting against the grain of the universe. They will come unraveled one day, with or without any assistance from us, because they are actively refusing to be a part of the fabric that the Creator is making.

When attacked by evil, we are tempted to respond in kind. But one of the great religious teachers of human history, the apostle Paul, said: “Do not be overcome by evil, but overcome evil with good.” These words

are profoundly meaningful today. They present us with a question and a challenge. What does it mean to overcome evil with good? How does one do that? They challenge us to be the kind of people who can ask such a question seriously, seek answers to it creatively, and live out those answers with courage and hope. Underlying Paul's words is the insight that, in many circumstances, suffering must simply be endured. We cannot avoid suffering by inflicting suffering on others after we have suffered loss. Inflicting pain on others will not cancel our pain. The insight that Paul is expressing here arises directly out of the life and death of the man known to history as Jesus, son of Joseph and Mary. This lowly carpenter from a backwater town in a remote province of the Roman Empire two thousand years ago gave us the clearest model we have for overcoming evil with good. The Western world, with its long heritage of looking to this man for guidance, is a sphere where his teachings and example have a fighting chance of being heard and responded to. I hope and pray that we are up to that challenge.

In the Muslim community, the names of the prophets Noah, Abraham, Moses, Jesus, and Mohammed are pronounced with great respect, accompanied by the phrase, "peace be upon him." While verses in the Qur'an and the Bible can always be twisted out of context to support violent acts today, the heart of the message of the Qur'an and the Bible is a vision of peace and harmony within the human community. In the century that lies before us, a tremendous opportunity has opened up for respectful dialogue between the members of the main religions of Western civilization: Judaism, Christianity, and Islam. Out of that dialogue will grow a new world in which arguments in favor of mayhem and destruction will have no place, other than on the ash heap of discarded ideologies. The leaders of these three great religions need to develop a common message that can be communicated to those contemplating suicidal violence, a word such as this: "The whole human race needs you to stay with us in the land of the living. If you believe that by killing yourself and others you are making the world better, you are mistaken. If you truly have a desire to make the world better and struggle against evil, remain alive, and pour all of your energies into finding ways to improve the world through nonviolent means."

Americans have a long tradition of seeing themselves as "a city set on a hill," giving light to the nations. This will only be the case if our lives are characterized by the virtues of faith, hope, and love. The op-

posites of these are rebellion against God, suicidal despair, and hatred of one's fellow human beings. These vices were abundantly displayed by those who attacked us. The key to overcoming evil with good is not allowing the vicious to shape and determine our actions by drawing us into a vortex in which we mimic their violence.

By long standing tradition, it is customary for a speech such as this to end with a plea for God to bless the United States. We do make that plea today, with as much depth of feeling as we ever have in our nation's history. But we also pray for God to bless all of the nations of the world, not just our own, and we ask the Lord our Creator to give all human beings the wisdom that we will require to navigate humanely the very difficult years and decades that lie ahead of us.

Coda

As I was writing this speech, I was wrestling with the issue of plausibility. I had to express ideas that are at least remotely plausible as things that George W. Bush could say. Yet I also had to communicate ideas that are in my head and not in his head. Herein lies the difficulty. He and I are both human beings. We share a common humanity and a common Christian faith that build a bridge between us. Yet our varied life experiences, talents, relationships, and education have made us different people. (You as the reader of this book are in the same situation in relation to me as the author of this book and to George Bush; we are all different, yet we all share a common humanity.) This means that the speech I have written is both plausible and implausible at the same time. In other words, plausibility is clearly not suitable as a category within which the speech can be judged. What is the correct category? I will leave that with you as a question to ponder.

Instead of taking advantage of the golden opportunity that was made possible by horrific and tragic events, President Bush has responded with actions that are more predictable than they are creative and transformative. Terrorism is a *psychological* problem in the sense that there are people in our world whose thoughts and emotions are derailed in a way that leads them to commit deadly acts against average citizens in the hope of achieving political goals. But the primary response of the Bush administration is to seek a *military* solution to a *psychological* problem. The category mistake that is made in this way

makes the problem worse because the military actions inflame the psychological derangement and spread it contagiously to more and more people.¹ The theory is that a plan of *limited* warfare and destruction can remedy the situation. This is the most accurate way to understand the naïve expectations of the Bush administration regarding how easy it would be to invade Iraq and establish democracy there. Eric Voegelin points us in the direction of an appropriate parallel drawn from history: Luther's belief that a *limited* destruction of the Catholic Church could fix the problems he was confronted with. Reflection on the violent aftermath of the Reformation informs us concerning "the situation of the man who wants to solve complicated social and intellectual problems through limited destruction" (CWEV, 22: 239). Voegelin's thought also emphasizes the insight that democracy cannot be magically imposed on a society from the top down. Rather, democracy only arises out of a healthy philosophy animating a coherent culture. Real democracy is the fruit of healthy human souls working together for the common good. Such conditions cannot be created by military action.

Jesus turned water into wine, he healed the sick, he fed the multitudes, he walked on water, he brought the dead back to life. It is perfectly obvious what he was: a sorcerer. He was not just *a* sorcerer, he was *The* Sorcerer. In comparison with him, Christians for the past two thousand years have been the Sorcerer's Apprentice. (Where is Reinhold Niebuhr when we need him to write an essay under that title?) We have been lazy and incompetent. We think that because we have been hanging around Jesus that we can do what he did. We think that we can tackle the problem of evil by ourselves, through our military adventures. But we do not know what we are doing and we make the situation worse rather than better. President Bush has been lazy by assigning the armed forces to be his broomstick by "winning the war on terror," when it is actually his job to fight that war through intellectual and spiritual power. In the wake of the 9/11 attacks, it was his task to make the common humanity of all human beings a reality rather than just a theory. If he had done so, he would have shown that he had actually learned something from Jesus. In Jesus, the common humanity of all human beings is a lived reality. Jesus reveals that to be human is to celebrate life and not to fear death, to walk in grace rather than in self-assertion or self-loathing, to love and

1. Jessica Stern concludes her study of terrorism with the observation that it is "a kind of virus." See *Terror in the Name of God*, 283.

not hate the neighbor. One who insists on labeling people as “evildoers” in preparation for killing them has failed to learn from Jesus.

The 9/11 hijackers understood themselves to be faithful to God. But they believed that there is no Us, no human solidarity, except in death, a point they apparently thought needed emphasizing. For them, there is no value to existence as a self in this world and there is no call to love the neighbor. There is only the imperative to present oneself before the judgment seat of God. And they apparently thought that God would be pleased to be presented with a cohort of mass-murderers. On what basis can we say that they were mistaken, that this God they were serving is an idol? We can say this because Jesus (peace be upon him) taught humanity that worship of God and murder of one’s fellow human beings are mutually exclusive. This truth is equally accessible to Christians and Muslims, and it stands in judgment of both whenever they deny it.