Word & World
Volume 25, Number 2
Spring 2005

American Destiny and the Calling of the Church

PAUL A. WEE

The United States of America stands at a turning point in its history. The next few years will determine whether this nation will move to exert its vast military power to change the face of the world unilaterally, beginning with countries of the Middle East, or whether it will be content to be part of a larger configuration of nations functioning through the more painstaking and slower process of consensus.

The present historical moment also represents a spiritual turning point, that is, a time when the very assumptions that underlie our self-understanding as a nation will be questioned and perhaps redefined. Reflection on what some have called "the national destiny" raises important questions for us: Who are we as U.S. Americans after 229 years of history as a nation? What is our role in the post-Cold War, post-9/11 world? What is our vocation, our calling, and is this consistent with our original sense of national purpose?

There is a further question. What is the role of the church in this process of reflection? Will the church simply be swept along by decisions made at the level of the Executive, the Congress, and the Pentagon, or will it bring a critical perspective to bear that is based on its biblical and confessional heritage? A related question has to do with the role of the local congregation. Is there a unique function that the local congregation might carry out in bringing biblical and theological resources to bear on the role of the nation in the world?

Has the United States assumed a new and dangerous understanding of its national destiny? Disagreements over this question will be sharp. Local congregations should be places where people of different opinions are able to gather to address the most difficult issues.

This essay represents one response to the questions raised above. It can be summarized in the following two theses:

1. The present direction of United States foreign policy represents a departure from the original understanding of our destiny as a nation. We are witnessing a development in our national political life that, in spite of its allure, is politically precarious, theologically untenable, and dangerous for this country and for the world. I refer in particular to an emerging understanding of our national destiny that allocates to the "one remaining superpower," the USA, the right—indeed the obligation—to impose its vision of democracy and free trade on an increasingly hostile world.
2. As this vision takes greater shape through political and military actions, it is the task of the church to engage in a serious debate on the question of the nation's role in the world. In the face of an emerging ideology of national supremacy, it belongs to the church to call the nation back to its original calling, namely, to be a light of justice to the world by leadership and example.

This position is not stated lightly. It recognizes the weight of global leadership that has been placed on the United States. Thrust into a post-Cold War world with massive global responsibility and an awesome military arsenal to back up its will, the nation will naturally and rightly seek to redefine its identity as well as the contours of its emerging role in the world.

In the following remarks I would like to do two things: (1) describe briefly, within the context of the historical understanding of American destiny, the determination of a group of leaders in government and the military to employ U.S. power to change the world, and (2) ask how the church, in particular the local congregation, might best respond to what I would term the ideology of national supremacy.

The Idea of American Destiny

The Pilgrim Heritage

The American sense of destiny—its "vocational consciousness," as some have called it—has deep roots in the country's history. As most schoolchildren are aware, the original settlers understood themselves as fulfilling a missionary calling to be a light of freedom and justice to the world. Like the Israelites of old, they thought themselves called by God to be the new Israel, to enter the promised land of the New World with a mission to create something qualitatively new.

Perhaps the most well-known statement of American destiny is recorded by the Puritan John Winthrop as he sailed for America in 1630. In his sermon, "City upon a Hill," Winthrop says:

> Now the only way to avoid this shipwreck and to provide for our posterity is to follow the counsel of Micah, to do justly, to love mercy, to walk humbly with our God,...we shall find that the God of Israel is among us, when ten of us shall be able to resist a thousand of our enemies, when he shall make us a praise and glory, that men shall say of succeeding plantations: the Lord make it like that of

> New England: for we must consider that we shall be as a City upon a Hill, the eyes of all people are upon us.

"the original settlers understood themselves as fulfilling a missionary calling to be a light of freedom and justice to the world"

It belongs to the calling, the vocation, of the new country that it work for justice in this new land and in all the world. In its earliest formulations, this was not an arrogant creed of imperial design, but a creed of responsibility toward humanity and accountability toward God. As the less-quoted portion of Winthrop's sermon makes clear:

> [T]he eyes of all people are upon us, so that if we shall deal falsely with our God in this work we have undertaken and so cause him to withdraw his present help from us, we shall be made a story and a byword through the world, we shall open the mouths of enemies to speak evil of the ways of God...we shall shame the faces of many of God's worthy servants, and cause their prayers to be turned into curses upon us till we be consumed out of the good land whither we are going.[1]

Although this early formulation spoke of responsibility toward humanity and accountability toward God, the creed of American destiny was also interpreted to justify the fulfillment of more imperial designs. The identification of this land with ancient Canaan was used by some to express an arrogant sense of privilege that provided the rationale for driving Native American people from their lands. They were simply Canaanites who could be justifiably deprived of land, water, and personal dignity. Continental expansion became an integral part of the country's mission, its Manifest Destiny, a phrase that became increasingly commonplace in the mid-nineteenth century.

This sense of destiny would later be used to justify the drive to expand through the acquisition of foreign territory. The Spanish-American War was the event that, perhaps more than any other, brought the United States dramatically onto the stage of world history as a global power. Without going into the questionable rationale for the war with Spain, it should be noted that the four-month confrontation led to American military supremacy and the acquisition of Cuba, Guam, Wake Island, the Hawaiian Islands, Puerto Rico, and the Philippines.

With respect to U.S. policy toward Latin America, we need only recall that, based on President Theodore Roosevelt's interpretation of the Monroe Doctrine, any Latin American country could be invaded by the United States if there was any evidence of "flagrant wrongdoing." There was of course no independent arbiter of what "flagrant wrongdoing" meant in a particular situation. Yet under this mandate a number of countries were in fact invaded, among them Colombia,

[1]John Winthrop, "City upon a Hill" (1630), at www.mtholyoke.edu/acad/intrel/winthrop.htm (spelling modernized).

Panama, Honduras, Guatemala, the Dominican Republic, Cuba, Haiti, Nicaragua, and Mexico.

"the primary role of American power is to enforce an order of political authority and world trade that serves the national interest of the United States"

American Destiny Today

In our own time, a revived debate about the national destiny has been accompanied by profound questions about the nature and scope of America's role in the world. What are the responsibilities that go along with the status of being the one remaining superpower? Does the United States have a special responsibility to ensure world order? Gary Dorrien, professor at Kalamazoo College, has asked recently whether there is a unique leadership role that the country is called to assume simply for reason of its vast military and economic power. He states:

> The United States is the most awesome power that the world has ever seen. Its economy out-produces the next eleven nations combined, accounting for 31 percent of the world's output. It floods the world with its culture and technology. It spends more on defense than the next eighteen nations combined. It employs five global military commands to police the world; it has 750 military bases in 130 countries, covering two-thirds of the world; it has formal military base rights in forty countries; each branch of the armed services has its own air force; the U.S. Air Force operates on six continents; the U.S. deploys carrier battleships in every ocean; and the U.S. Special Forces conducts thousands of operations per year in nearly 170 countries.[2]

There are times—like during the recent tsunami disaster in South Asia—when this vast arsenal stands ready to assist with humanitarian relief efforts. Yet its primary role is to enforce an order of political authority and world trade that serves the national interest of the United States. The destruction of the World Trade Center was clearly designed as an attack on a major symbol of U.S. economic dominance, a part of what professor of sociology at the University of California, Mark Juergensmeyer, terms "performance violence,"[3] an act of theater perpetrated for the purpose of conveying a message in a dramatic way. He goes on to say that, in the war against terrorism in which we are presently engaged, we would be remiss if we did not consider seriously the resentment that has been created by the fact that it is primarily the United States that not only lays down the rules of trade, but benefits from them as well.

Yet the rise of a revitalized sense of national destiny was evident before the terrorist attack on 9/11. Already in 1989, in the immediate aftermath of the col-

[2]Gary J. Dorrien, *Imperial Designs: Neoconservativism and the New Pax Americana* (New York: Routledge, 2004) 224.

[3]Mark Juergensmeyer, *Terror in the Mind of God* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2001) 126.

lapse of the Soviet Union, a group of U.S. politicians and political theorists[4] argued that a unique moment had now arrived in world history for the creation of a democratic world order. The disintegration of the communist empire, they argued, had created a window of opportunity for the creation of a new global order dominated by the only nation that was equipped—morally, politically, and militarily—for the task, the United States of America.

A product of this thinking was the *National Security Strategy*, promulgated by President Bush on September 20, 2002, which called for a reassertion of U.S. values in the service of U.S. interests on a global scale. The policy vowed to respond to the attacks on the U.S. and to "rid the world of evil." It called for unilateral military action when necessary, including the launching of preemptive strikes against regimes considered hostile to the U.S. The document claimed that uniquely American values, "freedom, democracy and free enterprise," coincide with what is good for the global community.

> These values...are right and true for every person, in every society—and the duty of protecting these values against their enemies is the common calling of freedom-loving people across the globe and across the ages.[5]

Although the new strategy belongs to the post-Cold War national agenda, its proponents claim that it is consistent with the classic understanding of American destiny. It is the present historical moment that has given it fresh and urgent meaning.

> This is a time of opportunity for America. We will work to translate this moment of influence into decades of peace, prosperity, and liberty. The U.S. national security strategy will be based on a distinctly American internationalism that reflects the union of our values and our national interests.[6]

Author Joshua Muravchik writes:

> For our nation, this is the opportunity of a lifetime. Our failure to exert every possible effort to secure [a new world order] would be unforgivable. If we succeed, we will have forged a Pax Americana unlike any previous peace, one of harmony, not of conquest. Then the twenty-first century will be the American century by virtue of the triumph of the humane idea born in the American experiment.[7]

Bolstered by a revitalized sense of national purpose, the president decided to respond to the terrorist attacks by Al Qaeda by invading not only Afghanistan but Iraq. This was not because Iraq—it should now be clear—was in any way involved in the events of September 11, but because the elimination of Saddam Hussein was

[4]Among them were Irving Kristol, Jeane Kirkpatrick, Richard Perle, Michael Novak, Joshua Muravchik, Charles Krauthammer, Paul Wolfowitz, Dick Cheney, Donald Rumsfeld.

[5]*The National Security Strategy of the United States of America*, www.whitehouse.gov/nsc/nssa, p. 1.

[6]Ibid, p. 3.

[7]Joshua Muravchik, *Exporting Democracy: Fulfilling America's Destiny* (Washington, DC: AEI, 1992); cited by Dorrien, *Imperial Designs*, 77.

seen as the first step toward the goal of installing prodemocratic, pro-American governments throughout the Middle East. As Richard Clarke, National Security Coordinator for Security, Infrastructure Protection and Counterterrorism under Presidents Clinton and George W. Bush, testifies, he (Clarke) was put under considerable pressure by President Bush to find some link between the Iraq government and the terrorist attacks of 9/11. He found none and thus faults President Bush, who "launched an unnecessary and costly war in Iraq."[8] Based on his commitment to the larger agenda, however, Rumsfeld put it this way to the National Security Council:

> Imagine what the region would look like without Saddam and with a regime that's aligned with U.S. interests. It would change everything in the region and beyond it. It would demonstrate what U.S. policy is all about.[9]

There is some debate on the *order* in which governments of the Middle East are to be replaced. General Wesley Clark, Supreme Commander of NATO, was informed in the aftermath of 9/11 that the Pentagon had a five-year plan to overthrow the governments of Iraq, Syria, Lebanon, Libya, Iran, Somalia, and Sudan. Charles Krauthammer called for the overthrow of Afghanistan, Syria, and Iraq. Former Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu argued that Hamas and Hezbollah be included in the list. Others argued that North Korea, Saudi Arabia, and Egypt be added.

Whatever the order, however, the bottom line of the new global agenda is clear: the present moment in history provides a window of opportunity for the United States to employ its military might to replace a number of repressive regimes with governments that are democratic and friendly to America. This course of action, it is argued, is the only possible option that will avoid global chaos and prevent further attacks on the United States. It belongs in fact to America's calling, its national destiny.

"in assessing this grand vision of a new world, it must be said that, at least at first glance, it is extremely compelling"

A Compelling Vision

In assessing this grand vision of a new world, shaped by American values and power, it must be said that, at least at first glance, it is extremely compelling. Imagine for a moment that autocratic governments in the Middle East, from Egypt to Saudi Arabia, to Iran and Syria, had suddenly become free and democratic. Imagine that hard-line Islamic clerics had been replaced with leaders committed to egalitarian democracy. Add to that a nuclear-free North Korea and a negotiated or imposed peace, however that is to be achieved, between Israelis and Palestinians.

[8]Richard A. Clarke, *Against All Enemies: Inside America's War on Terror* (New York: Free Press, 2004) x.

[9]Cited in Dorrien, *Imperial Designs*, 14.

Just think of a steady, uninterrupted flow of oil and a supply of markets to boost the national economy.

In spite of the shambles of Iraq, it remains the United States alone that has the will and the means to turn this vision into reality. A bit of "shock and awe," yes, but democracy and human rights on the other side. As for the findings of the Pew Research Center, that the nations of the world that had gathered in support of the United States after 9/11 are now fearful of America and its unilateral use of military power, these fears will be allayed once they realize that what is happening is not only for the good of America, but for their own good and for the good of the global community as well.

Or is this vision flawed? Are its assumptions about the inherent goodness of America—as well as it ability to deliver—overstated? What, if anything, does the church have to offer to the present debate?

The Calling of the Church

The Lessons of History

The church is called to proclaim the redeeming power of the cross of Christ and to confess that Jesus Christ is Lord. This is the essence of the church's message. Seldom in history was this proclamation made with such far-reaching effect as it was in Germany in 1934. Aware of the crisis in the understanding of the national destiny that was sweeping the country and infecting the churches, representatives from Lutheran, Reformed, and Union churches gathered in the town of Barmen, where they debated and finally adopted a number of statements drafted by Swiss theologian Karl Barth. These brief articles of faith, which were directed at a church that was selling its soul to the state's ideology of national supremacy, came to be known collectively as the Barmen Declaration. As the nation, supported by the majority churches, moved toward an almost messianic sense of its destiny, Article 1 stated simply:

> Jesus Christ, as attested by Holy Scripture, is the one Word of God which we have to hear and which we have to trust and obey in life and in death. We reject the false doctrine that the Church could and should recognize as a source of its proclamation, beyond and beside this one Word of God, other events, powers, historic figures and truths as God's revelation.

In the face of the stance of the German Christians (Deutsche Christen) that the nation was being called by God to fulfill a grand, imperial destiny, the Confessing Church was warning the church of the dangers of such a pretentious claim.

It would be inappropriate to make any simplistic comparisons between the contemporary situation in the United States in the first decade of the twenty-first century and that of Germany in the 1930s. Germany's descent into the ideology of Arian supremacy, anti-Semitism, and territorial acquisition has no parallel in the policies or actions of the United States in our day. There are, however, lessons to be learned from history, and I believe that we neglect them at our own peril. The wit-

ness of the Confessing Church in Germany contains a sharp question to the church in the United States today: Are you, by your action or inaction, giving support to an inflated understanding of America's role in the world? Are you allowing the proclamation of God's grace in Christ to be replaced by a type of civil religion in which the church simply supports the ideology of the state?

Civil Religion in America

Conrad Braaten, senior pastor of the Church of the Reformation on Capitol Hill in Washington, D.C., describes the "subtle, yet powerful influence" of civil religion in the United States today.[10] Civil religion is the elephant in the sanctuary, "the identification of faith with the prevailing national ideology." He goes on to say that civil religion is not to be confused with "healthy patriotism," namely, a commitment to "our nation's core values that 'all people are created equal with certain inalienable rights and that among these are life, liberty and the pursuit of happiness.'" Rather, civil religion is present when "a sacred aura is conveyed to the existence of a nation-state, assigning to it a divine origin, a sense of divine guidance and a promise of divine destiny."[11]

Braaten claims, and I believe rightly, that the quest for empire that is gaining a larger following in the United States today reflects an underlying mentality that characterized many in Germany at the advent of the Third Reich. What does it mean to follow Christ at such a time? Braaten answers with reference to Dietrich Bonhoeffer: "Bonhoeffer was convinced that the answer to this question was to be found in the study of the Scripture, in prayer, and in theological discussion of the meaning of discipleship *within the congregation*" (emphasis his).

It should be noted, however, that Bonhoeffer, who would later move from his leadership role in the Church Struggle (*Kirchenkampf*) to active participation in the resistance movement, was himself among those caught up in the fervor over Germany's destiny. Only later would he come to see that such an attitude was flawed, that the nation's weakness lay in her *hubris*, "in her belief in her almightiness, in the lack of humility and faith in God and the fear of God."

> When the war broke out the German people did not consider very much the question of guilt. We thought it to be our duty to stand for our country and we believed of course in our essential guiltlessness.[12]

Commenting on the rationale behind the decision of the U.S. Administration to go to war in Iraq, South African Methodist Bishop, Peter Storey, who was on the forefront of the antiapartheid struggle, asks this:

> Could it be that there is a new arrogance abroad in today's America? The arro-

[10]Conrad Braaten, "An Elephant in the Sanctuary: Engaging Issues of War and Peace," *Congregations* 30/4 (Fall 2004).

[11]Ibid., 2.

[12]Dietrich Bonhoeffer, quoted in Eberhard Bethge, *Dietrich Bonhoeffer: A Biography* (London: Collins, 1970) 199.

> gance of Empire? It may be that those who lead this most powerful nation in the world are more sure than they should be that they can control even unintended outcomes.

"Could it be that there is a new arrogance abroad in today's America? The arrogance of Empire?"

Referring to the "good" motives behind Queen Victoria's vision to usher in a global Pax Britannica based on an agenda to bring God, law, and morality to the uncivilized, a vision that ended in the subjugation and exploitation of the people and resources of India and Africa, Storey writes:

> I was born into the last days of another Empire, one upon which, we were told, the sun would never set. As I look back upon that Empire, I recall how *sure* we were about how *good* we were, and how *right* we were. I know now often we were *bad* and *wrong*.[13]

There is similar insight in Reinhold Niebuhr's classic study, *The Irony of American History* (1952). Niebuhr claims that American history is ironic insofar as its original vision of being called by God to be a beacon of freedom and justice to the nations has been contradicted and refuted by history itself. Pretensions to virtue and innocence, which are at the heart of the national faith in the ability to master history, have at times been contradicted by our actions in history. Irony is present when there is a failure to realize the contradiction. America's faith in its own inherent goodness and its ability to overcome the demonic in history, I would contend, suffers the ironic contradiction of that faith by failing to perceive its own weakness and limitations.

The Role of the Congregation

I conclude by making a plea for open and nonpartisan discussion of the emerging understanding of national destiny described above. It is precisely in the congregation, I would argue, that people of differing social, economic, and political stripes are able to address the most difficult issues that are before the community, the nation, and the world. One of these is the debate over America's role in the world.

In a recent article, Martin Marty pleads for free and open debate on the critical issues of the day. He asks, "[I]f we regard government and thus politics—which can mean 'regard for the *polis*, the human city'—as being 'ordained by God,' can we not in our parishes find some ways to discuss issues and there subject each other's commitments and opinions to some sort of biblical and theological analyses?"[14]

As congregations address this issue, they should first agree that the expression

[13]Peter Storey, "An Unseemly Rush to War—and Reason to Pause" (monograph, 2004).

[14]Martin Marty, "Let's Talk Politics," *The Lutheran*, October 2004, 22.

of differing views must never threaten the spiritual unity of the congregation. They are advised to tap the wealth of biblical, theological, and ethical resources available through the seminaries and offices of the church. I also believe it helpful to make clear from the outset that, in the course of lively debate on America's destiny, no one is being asked to abandon healthy pride in country or a commitment to John Winthrop's original vision of America as being a beacon of freedom, "a city upon a hill."

The question for Christians in America is whether they are willing to understand this vision in terms of God's vision of justice and peace for the whole world, whether they are willing to allow the national interest to be subservient to the global interest, whether they are able to sing "God bless America" within the more embracing faith that, as the psalmist writes, "all the nations belong to [God]" (Ps 82:8).

This faith is uniquely reflected in a hymn by Lloyd Stone. The hymn is set to the well-known music of Jean Sibelius's *Finlandia*, but the words, written between two world wars, contain a strong message for our own day:

> This is my song, O God of all the nations,
> a song of peace for lands afar and mine.
> This is my home, the country where my heart is;
> here are my hopes, my dreams, my holy shrine;
> But other hearts in other lands are beating
> with hopes and dreams as true and high as mine.
>
> My country's skies are bluer than the ocean,
> and sunlight beams on cloverleaf and pine;
> But other lands have sunlight, too, and clover;
> and skies are everywhere as blue as mine.
> O hear my song, O God of all the nations,
> a song of peace for their land and for mine.[15]

PAUL A. WEE, now of Alexandria, Virginia, is an ELCA pastor and former assistant general secretary for International Affairs and Human Rights of the Lutheran World Federation.

[15]Lloyd Stone, "This is my song," online, for example, at www.saintaidin.org/song.html.