

On the road to Armageddon

Jim Fetzer

The most stunning sentences in the State of the Union were those in which George W. Bush, President of the United States, promised to expand the war against terrorism to "an axis of evil" and hinted at terrorist acts to come even more deadly than those that have gone before. The nations he identified as constituents of this grave threat were Iran, Iraq, and North Korea. It sounded like--and has been interpreted as--a virtual declaration of war.

The President's address received a very warm reception from both sides of the aisle. The Republicans were almost universally enthralled and the Democrats appeared in no mood to argue. Focus groups were virtually unanimous in their support for the President's performance. At Peter Jennings request, for example, a focus group for ABC TV in Tampa, FL, was asked if anyone disagreed with what the President had had to say. Not a hand was raised.

The darlings of the right have been euphoric. William Safire waxed eloquently in *The New York Times* (January 31, 2002) that Bush had now warned these nations that the United States "will not permit the world's most dangerous regimes to threaten us with the world's most destructive weapons". According to Safire, Bush's refusal "to leave terror states unchecked" leaves only secondary decisions to be made, namely: when and how to attack them.

Similar enthusiasm has emanated from William Kristol, whose column in the *Duluth News Tribune* (February 2, 2002) maintains that Bush has now ended a U.S. "policy

of timidity" by targeting these states as posing "a grave and growing danger", where the President has broken "definitively with with the complacency of his predecessor and the wishfulness of his own State Department" on a mission to promote principles of liberty and justice around the world.

Kristol does not consider the possibility that the "compacency of his predecessor" was the exercise of diplomacy and that Bush's approach may in fact be displacing a "policy of timidity" with a policy of stupidity. The nations that he has targeted, after all, did not sponsor the terrorist acts that brought down the World Trade Towers or that hit the Pentagon. We have attacked Afghanistan on the premise that Osama bin Laden, the world's leading terrorist, has been using that nation as a base of operations for conducting his attacks upon us.

But Iran, Iraq, and North Korea have not been modeling their conduct on that of Afghanistan. On the contrary, Iran has extended its support for our retributive strikes against Osama bin Laden. Our own intelligence reports confirm that Iraq has not been engaging in the exportation of terrorism for half a decade or more. And the President of South Korea has even based his entire presidency upon the plank that there should be a permanent cessation of hostilities with North Korea, which whom relations have recently been cordial.

Safire offers secret information in support of Bush's position, where North Korea is described as "a regime arming itself with weapons of mass destruction". Iran is said to be "secretly building nuclear weapons with Russia's help". And Iraq, the administration's "most immediate target", is supposed to have dispersed programs for constructing nuclear and biological weapons far and wide to defeat detection

by inspectors that are not even allowed to enter.

Preemptive attacks upon these nations are now described as "the Bush doctrine".

But other states are not quite as enthralled at the prospect as the President and his political chums. According to *The New York Times* (January 31, 2002), many of our own allies--from Western Europe to Russia to South Korea--have expressed fear that Bush's strong language will "widen the fissures in the coalition against terrorism, set back reformers in Iran and shut down talks with North Korea".

These appear to be very reasonable concerns, especially against a background of exercises of force by the United States that may violate international law. Our all-out bombardment of Afghanistan, especially, has involved invading not just the air space but the territorial boundaries of a sovereign nation and displacing its government by one more to our choosing. Not to draw too fine a distinction, but some might call it "terrorism".

Indeed, although Bush has said this a "war against terrorism", there has been no declaration of war, a power reserved to the United States Congress. This has raised sticky questions about the status of prisoners taken from Afghanistan, who nominally would be considered to be "prisoners of war". But Bush does not want them to be treated as POWs, because their treatment would then be bound by the Geneva Conventions.

If these prisoners are "prisoners of war", then they are entitled to very specific forms of humane treatment, including not being subjected to intensive kinds of interrogation, especially torture. They are then technically only obligated to give

their names, ranks, serial numbers, and dates of birth. Since that would inhibit extracting further information, Bush equivocates, claiming we are at war when there has been no declaration, while denying that these are "prisoners of war", even though they are prisoners of a war he has declared.

But if Bush does not have the authority to declare war under the Constitution, then what should be made of this new "declaration of war" against three other sovereign nations, none of which has attacked the United States? Think about it. Only the United States Congress can declare war, yet the President appears to be assuming that authority. As Commander in Chief, he commands our armed forces, but no one is obligated to obey an unlawful order, even from our own President.

This raises several delicate questions. Can preemptive strikes against sovereign nations who have not attacked us be lawfully ordered by the President? Would these attacks not qualify as blatant instances of violations of international law? And, as blatant violations of international law that were unlawfully ordered by the President without a Congressional declaration of war, would they not properly qualify as acts of international terrorism?

Indeed, although the administration has been reluctant to make this admission, most of the terrorists who hijacked jumbo jets and crashed them into the Twin Towers and the Pentagon were citizens of Saudi Arabia, which of course is the nationality of Osama bin Laden himself. Most of the prisoners we have taken in Afghanistan have been Saudis, too, which suggests that, if the Bush doctrine has meaning, we ought to be targeting that nation.

Until rather recently, the most dangerous regime that threatened us with the

world's most destructive weapons was the Soviet Union. The Bush doctrine, presumably, would have had us resort to a first strike to eliminate the threat it posed! But the Bush doctrine appears to be backfiring already. According to the *Star Tribune* (February 2, 2002), Bush's denunciation of Iran, Iraq, and North Korea as this "axis of evil" has ominous overtones for Russia.

This remnant of the Soviet Union has strong ties with all three nations, including support for Saddam Hussein's efforts to end UN sanctions, a trade deficit by Iraq to the tune of \$7 billion, and an \$800 billion deal to assist Iran with a nuclear power plant. Plus the US would risk the wrath of China by taking action against North Korea. Perhaps there are reasons, after all, why the State Department favors the exercise of diplomacy and why a policy of prudence in international affairs may have merit in comparison to a policy of stupidity.

Jim Fetzer, a professor of philosophy at UMD, does not understand why none of the nation's leaders has spoken in opposition to our potential violations of international law. The United States appear to be on the verge of publicly reaffirming its standing as the world's leading terrorist state.