
Robert Jewett and John Shelton Lawrence, “Captain America Takes on Iraq”

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On October 10, the U.S. Congress issued President Bush a license for pre-emptive military strikes against Iraq. Rather than retaining its constitutional right to decide on a declaration of war, Congress delegated that judgment to an insistent, eager president. He was thus “authorized to use the Armed Forces of the United States as he determines to be necessary and appropriate.”

It’s true that this congressional authorization was a step forward from earlier this year, when the president asserted he could use force against Iraq without any new authorization. The polled preferences and cautionary statements of America’s uneasy’ electorate finally nudged George W. Bush to present a case to both the UN and the Congress. This process, clearly sought by America’s voters, steered the president’s war aims into the harbor of democratic consensus. The cultural puzzle that remains is why Congress and America’s citizens, given the opportunity to dissent, instead consented to Bush’s new doctrine of pre-emptive war to be undertaken by the president entirely at his discretion. As with the Southeast Asian debacle of the 1960s and 1970s, the second war with Iraq on our horizon should compel us to think less about individual leaders and more about the popular beliefs that empower them when they promise wars that will produce lasting peace.

In discussing the public’s continuing post-September 11th deference to this president, Fred Branfman (TIKKUN, Sept/Oct 2002, “The Need to De-Mystify the Presidency”) has suggested we see Americans’ deference to the president through the lens of a widespread fear of death, which is unconsciously relieved through granting extraordinary power to leaders who promise protection. Fear may be a factor, but we suggest that such surrender reflects an impulse more deeply anchored in the American psyche. In building a will-to-war among the American people, the president had pledged early to “rid the world of evil,” then defined the more particular “axis of evil” as part of a distinctively apocalyptic obligation. The optimistic scenario we are urged to believe tells us that the unity of the American people, backed by unequalled military power, will have a positive domino effect. With Saddam Hussein no longer free to threaten his neighbors or to assist terrorists, the Middle East will become a far less dangerous place in which free market economies flourish as militant Islam loses its appeal. Iraq’s enormous oil reserves will lubricate the growth of indigenous democratic forces in Iraq, and that influence will spread to other failed states in the region. The source of this extraordinary optimism, which entails overlooking the possibility of disastrous side effects of an Iraq War such as the use of weapons of mass destruction and the destabilizing of the entire Persian Gulf, lies beneath the surface. It derives from what we call “the Captain America complex.”

The Captain America complex is a bipolar form of civil religion that periodically blesses crusades against evil enemies, often adding the stamp of biblical authority, in the pursuit of peace. Since Captain America must always take the law into his own hands to rid the world of evil, this civil religion produces acute conflicts between the impulse for holy crusades and a commitment to the rule of law.

The Captain America complex was evident in our World War I experience, when President Wilson demonized Germany’s Kaiser in “the fight to make the world safe for democracy” while working for the League of Nations that America refused to join. The complex was also apparent during the Cold

War, when we worked to build treaty organizations like NATO and SEATO, at the same time that we were fighting secret wars that LBJ and Nixon hid from the American people. The signs of this bipolar disorder are manifest now in fervent U.S. appeals for other nations to build international institutions that will help us fight terrorists—at the very moment that we are withdrawing from treaties that would compel U.S. accountability to international rules.

Since the Captain America complex is afflicting our national judgment again, we should prepare for a long and divisive struggle that will leave domestic scars in families, educational institutions, churches, and synagogues. Unless we can leash the dogs of war, new kinds of instability will result from this war for peace. A series of crusades against the “Rogue Nations” in the “Axis of Evil,” beginning with Iraq, will evoke divisiveness that surpasses that of the Vietnam War and cause economic and political turmoil around the world. As we write, the United Methodist Church, which claims both Richard Cheney and George W Bush as members, has publicly chastised them both for pursuing a policy of pre-emptive strikes and their unseemly haste to make war. Other religious groups, comfortable with zealous nationalism, are singing their praises for the starkly dualistic moral judgments that have defined the Bush foreign policy.

Religion and the Call to War

Religion, in fact, particularly America’s dominant Judeo-Christian tradition, has everything to do with the Captain America complex. Redemptive violence has an important place in the Bible’s narratives of conquest, national security, and moral purification, and sits incoherently beside biblical messages of acceptance, coexistence, and love.

In the Book of Exodus, for example, the glories of the deity are seen as praiseworthy deeds of a “man of war” (Exod. 15:3). Yahweh’s violence presents us with an apparent paradox in that he hates violence when employed by enemy peoples but loves to use it against them. In the Noah narrative of Genesis, Yahweh condemns the world’s inhabitants for their violence but saves the physical world for one good man and his family: “I have determined to make an end of all flesh; for the earth is filled with violence through them” (Gen. 6:13). In the political contexts evoked by Israel’s struggles for autonomy or homeland, the books of Exodus, Deuteronomy, Daniel, and Ezekiel offer narratives of redemption through the destruction of enemies.

Countering those tales of violence are the critical voices of Amos, Hosea, and Isaiah, who reject zealous warfare and extol the creation of institutions of coexistence. Isaiah’s vision of a place where the nations themselves come together to cooperate and to be judged is appropriately inscribed on the wall at the United Nations Plaza in New York City. The rabbinic tradition along with most of the early Christian writings continued in Isaiah’s line, resisting the lure of zealous violence.

Yet the lure of violence has always remained. Of particular importance for the American civil religion has been the Book of Revelation, which stands triumphantly at the end of the New Testament canon, giving its hearers a grandiose flood of zealous images and ideas that negate Jesus’ teaching about coexistence even with adversaries. It pictures the plot of world history as a battle between God and God’s demonic enemies. Over and over again it promises total victory to the saints. It urges them to keep pure and undefiled while God annihilates their opponents, whom it stereotypes as bestial and irredeemable. Perhaps the most insidious impact on later generations lies in Revelation’s fusion of the humane tradition of the fatherhood of God with the zealous tradition of the annihilation of enemies. For example, the idea of God’s word, defined in Isa. 11:3, and in the early Christian tradition as the redemptive force that would replace warfare as a means of adjudicating conflicts, is transposed by Revelation 19 into an image of annihilation.

It is widely recognized that the Book of Revelation played a crucial role in the Puritanism that shaped the early stages of American Civil religion. This violent legacy is apparent in the supremely popular "Battle Hymn of the Republic" where the Prince of Peace becomes the warrior who "hath loosed the lightning of his terrible, swift sword." The verses of this hymn became the favored marching song of the Union forces during the Civil War. Its Revelation-inspired imagery expresses the belief that the destruction of enemies would finally produce lasting peace. The Confederacy, whose motto was "Deo Vindice (God Will Avenge)" shared this very same hope for their prospects if they destroyed the wicked forces of the North. They were thus spiritually disposed to take up the "Battle Hymn" as their song in the Spanish-American War of 1898. In that conflict the mission of holy violence was, for some of its champions, nothing less than redeeming the entire world.

Senator Albert J. Beveridge, an imperialist ally of Theodore Roosevelt, claimed this precisely at the beginning of the twentieth century as he spoke to the U.S. Senate: "Almighty God ... has marked the American people as the chosen nation to finally lead in the regeneration of the world. This is the divine mission of America.... We are the trustees of the world's progress, guardians of the righteous peace." Adding a biblical gloss to perfect his Christian imperialism, Beveridge quoted from Matthew 25:21: "Ye have been faithful over a few things; I will make you ruler over many things."

The biblical sanction for America's crusades has continued up to our own time. When America stood at the threshold of a major ground war in the Persian Gulf, the senior President Bush told a convention of the National Religious Broadcasters that "America has always been a religious nation—perhaps never more than now." Citing words from Ecclesiastes that there is "a time for peace, a time for war," he described the Gulf War action as a cause defined by religious absolutes—"good versus evil, right versus wrong, human dignity and freedom versus tyranny and oppression." He audaciously proclaimed that the United States sought "nothing for ourselves," and that all the Gulf War coalition partners were "on the side of God." The Reverend Billy Graham stood with him to echo the sentiment that "there comes a time when we must fight for peace." This impulse to make war with God's blessing is reinforced by the more secular entertainment culture, which repeatedly gives us images of redemption by saviors who must circumvent law and institutions to save the community.

Zealous Redemption in American Popular Culture

In addition to the overtly religious blessing of nationalistic zeal the Captain America complex has given shape to superheroic mythologies that now seem to enthrall even our president. The popular culture that seems most apt for grasping President George W. Bush's populist style of leadership in international relations comes to us in three important movies: Independence Day (1996), Air Force 1 (1997), and the Rambo film First Blood (1982). Independence Day and Air Force 1 are the most successful films ever made about American presidents, real or imaginary. The Rambo character elicited the president's approval in a bizarre incident that occurred in Germany this year. What can these blockbuster films tell us about public taste and the presidential state of mind?

Independence Day is a science-fiction genre film that uses twin American crises as its theme: the challenges to American masculinity and the destruction of the entire planet. In this film a female pundit of television's McLaughlin Group quips that the nation "elected a warrior but got a wimp." The sad news of his sagging status in the polls is delivered to the President Whitmore (Bill Pullman) by one of his female advisors.

That personal crisis is soon magnified and replicated on a large scale by the public crisis that occurs when a giant, alien-controlled spaceship appears over Washington, D.C., and other major American

cities. Whitmore tries to communicate in a friendly way by sending a helicopter as an emissary, but it is immediately destroyed. The president manages to escape before the White House explodes and burns. He is taken to a remote base, Area 51, where he learns that this is the very same species of alien that had descended at Roswell, New Mexico, in 1948. What he learns from a brief and frightening encounter is that the aliens have come to extract the earth's resources and have decreed that all humans must die. The president alone is in the position to fight the apocalyptic battle that will save the world.

Undeterred by environmental arguments against using nuclear weapons in the near atmosphere, Whitmore gambles as he launches an attack on the spaceship hovering over Houston. The attack destroys Houston, but the aliens remain. The president himself, a Gulf War pilot, steps aside from his strategic role as commander in chief and volunteers to fly a tactical missile raid against one of the space ships. His rationale, expressed to a puzzled general, is: "I'm a combat pilot—I belong in the air." This makes absolutely no sense, except in conformity with the American superhero myth that the president must now function as a lone savior to redeem the world. In fact, the president does not strike the final blow to the aliens, but his willingness to function as the lone savior redeems his own masculinity and fortifies the nation.

Looking at these events in the movie as an exercise in presidential power, we can see an assortment of constitutional circumventions that are rendered acceptable through the myth system shaped by the Captain America complex. In addition to the president's desertion of his own decision-making post, most other institutions of democratic government go missing in action. The president does not consult with Congress about declaring war on the aliens, nor does he consult with state or local governments about their emergency capabilities, nor with party leaders. The president dismisses his Secretary of Defense as a "sniveling little weasel" and does not bother to replace him. He also takes on the role of world leadership without working through any visible international institutions. We simply see that other military forces on the globe are coordinating in response to the president's leadership.

President Whitmore offers a florid affirmation of American centrality to the world's hopes, which comes before the final battle: "We will not go quietly into the night. We will not vanish without a fight. We're going to live on! We're going to survive! Today we celebrate our Independence Day." He proposes that "our 4th of July" become humanity's Independence Day from the tyranny of aliens—once those aliens have been successfully destroyed. The film scans several times through villages, mosques, and synagogues that show frightened people in prayer, obviously hoping that the United States will succeed. American's crusade has become the world's crusade, as the good humans align against the evil aliens in a war as religious as it is political. In the end, the world has been restored to safety—and is permanently indebted to the redeemer nation.

Air Force 1 also presents the American president as a superheroic redeemer figure who has contempt for diplomacy and constitutional processes. President Marshall (Harrison Ford) has been summoned to Moscow for a celebration of a joint U.S-Russian raid to capture a Kazakh, General Radek, who threatens to bring back nationalistic Communism. Disgusted by his own government's delay in intervening, he announces: "Never again will I allow our political self-interest to deter us from what we know to be morally right." The "right" here is defined in absolute terms that preclude consultative or constitutional processes. The president then issues a challenge to all enemies in the world in terms that sound very like recent rhetoric from the White House: "Atrocity and terror are not political weapons. And to those who would use them, your day is over. We will never negotiate. We will no longer tolerate you and we will no longer be afraid. It's your turn to be afraid." President Marshall's speech has a sensational effect in Moscow. Russians line the streets to wave American

flags as the presidential motorcade passes.

The president's national security adviser fumes about not being in on the decision to take such a bold stance; but his chief of staff gloats about the new mood of implacability and the publicity: "They're already calling it the 'Be Afraid Speech,'" he says to the president. And then he tells someone on the phone that "The president is ready to take Congress on. He's not going to kiss their ass for each vote." Consulted about a new crisis in Iraq, the president simply says: "Let's not waste any more time. Let's send the Nimitz back in."

The triumphal mood does not last for long, because the champions of General Radek have made a deal with a disloyal agent of the Secret Service, which quickly permits them to control Air Force One. They execute passengers and threaten the president's wife and daughter as tactics in gaining the release of General Radek. In the first confusion of the hijacking, the president—just at the moment when he was expected to take his exit using the ejection pod—has hidden on the plane. He was, as we learn, a Vietnam helicopter pilot who had won the Medal of Honor. In authentic superheroic fashion, he fights unarmed, in hand-to-hand combat, with terrorists who are thirty years younger than he. He eventually kills five of them as he stalks the lower deck, luring the armed men to their death below.

With super technical abilities, the president employs a telephone with a weak battery to get wiring instructions on dumping the fuel and uses a fax machine to order a missile attack by U.S. forces on his own plane. After helping many passengers to parachute to safety, he flies the plane himself in a tricky mid-air rescue operation.

Air Force 1 symbolically vindicates the notion of the president as the one man who can take huge risks—physical, moral, and political—and is capable of winning triumphant victories in each arena. The citizen-spectators applaud because he effectively plays the role of superheroic redeemer. In both Air Force 1 and Independence Day, the president ascends into a trans-constitutional zone where law and prudence become secondary to the task of global redemption.

These popular cinematic embodiments of the Captain America complex throw light on the current complacency in allowing the president rather than the Congress to make the final decision on war or peace. It is clearly unconstitutional, but it is mythically consistent, and for most current Americans, that appears to suffice.

The Appeal of Superheroism for American Leaders

While we do not know about President Bush's viewing experience with these exciting films, we know something about his liking for superheroes from an incident this year in Germany. To accompany a very dismissive "Masters of the Universe" article on the Bush administration's crusade against evil, Germany's news magazine Der Spiegel created a satirical cover depicting each national security player in the role of a zealous destroyer from American popular culture. George W. Bush, surrounded by his advisers, received a muscular Rambo body holding an automatic weapon and ammunition belts.

Daniel Coats, U.S. Ambassador to Germany, visited Der Spiegel's editorial offices—not to protest the caricature or the article's viewpoint about reckless unilateralism—but to report that "the president was flattered," whereupon he ordered thirty-three poster-size renditions of the cover for the White House. Each policy maker on the cover reportedly wanted a copy.

In light of Bush's affection for the character, we might wish to recall that John Rambo, in *First Blood*, burns down his hometown law enforcement headquarters after killing several officers and national guardsmen. Rambo's actions are triggered by his aching and inarticulate rage about how he is treated. He could have avoided his murderous confrontation with Sheriff Teasle and his deputies by explaining who he was, by mentioning his status as a veteran, by appealing to his First Amendment right to wear his hair as he chooses. Instead, Rambo wants to explode and finds a good match in the Sheriff, who is also preoccupied with the physical domination of everyone who walks his turf.

In *First Blood, Part II*, Rambo is released from prison to save the betrayed POWs of the Vietnam War, finally turning a shower of lead against the computers and radio equipment at the CIA control center. (This film, incidentally, was advertised with a poster proclaiming that "No Man, no Law, no War can stop him.") In *Rambo III* he carries weapons to the Mujaheddin in Afghanistan for their anti-Soviet jihad, fighting furiously at their side. Always brutally right, Rambo acts most heroically beyond the jurisdiction of failed laws, institutions and their treaties. President Bush's emotional affinity for this myth of redemption by persecuted superheroes is shared by millions of Americans.

Unfortunately, there may be a link between this popular story line and U.S. efforts to disable the International Criminal Court. In July the United States finally succeeded in gaining from the United Nations Security Council a one year exemption from any criminal prosecution by the International Court. John Negroponte, the U.S. ambassador to the UN, praised this first small step in creating a special immunity. He also reaffirmed opposition to the idea of a permanent court: "The President of the United States is determined to protect our citizens—soldiers and civilians, peacekeepers and officials—from the International Criminal Court.... No nation should underestimate our commitment to protect our citizens." Looking beyond its year of immunity, the Bush administration is also seeking Section 98 agreements, bilateral exemptions from prosecutions—with Israel and Romania its first trophies. These initiatives are being coupled with threats to withhold military aid from any country that becomes a member of the ICC.

Why would a nation engaged in a global campaign against terrorism seem so obsessively opposed to an institution well suited to its prosecution, and risk alienating most allies? Why would it completely opt out of shaping ICC statutes and procedures in directions that meet its sense of justice?

An important explanation lies in our national fascination with stories of vigilante figures like Rambo who circumvent the law to save the world. Translated as an impulse for the world stage, this mythic imperative requires shielding American crusaders in the war against terrorism—no matter how unpopular they may become or how many laws they feel compelled to break. In our two recent books, we explore the sources and implications of this trend toward unconstitutional behavior. We argue that when a zealous civil religion is joined with widely popular entertainments that encourage leaders to take the law into their own hands, the threat to a democratic society must be taken very seriously. Thus the prospect of a large new war challenges us not merely to focus on a president, newly empowered to make war "as he determines to be necessary and appropriate." We must also grapple with the legacy of a zealous, nationalistic civil religion and the emotional power of its daily ritual enactments in tales of pop superheroes. As voices for peace, we must cultivate the skeptical good sense that has at least brought the restraint of consultation to our present danger.

Beyond the Trap of War

At a time when the drift toward war can so easily infect our sense of possibility, we need to recall an

earlier moment in history when religiously apocalyptic thinkers, including President Ronald Reagan, expressed enthusiasm for a crusade with nuclear weapons. Reagan and his Armageddon-minded friends Hal Lindsey, Jerry Falwell, and Pat Robertson, saw in nuclear weapons the instrumentality of Revelation's end times. The president charmed his followers with thunderous proclamations about the absolute evil of the Soviet Union. As he put it at the time of the Korean Airlines downing in 1983, it was "a society which wantonly disregards individual rights and the value of human life and constantly seeks to expand and dominate other nations." The United States did not seem far from deploying nuclear weapons against this "evil empire" in a war to end all wars.

In response to the threat of apocalyptic warfare, peace movements energetically focused on nuclear weapons. Clergy and Laity Concerned, SANE, Freeze, Computer Professionals for Social Responsibility, Catholic bishops and others campaigned against nuclear weapons and eventually persuaded Reagan to distance himself from the millennial right. The movement helped create a political atmosphere that welcomed the Intermediate-Range Nuclear Forces Treaty that came in 1987.

President Reagan, who had prided himself on his Star Wars-inspired denunciation of the Soviets as "the evil empire," eventually traveled to Moscow pursuing an arms agreement with Gorbachev. The public rewarded him with approval for his dealing with the Soviet Union. The fact that George W. Bush has shown himself responsive to public opinion invites comparison—and strategizing for peacemakers. The large anti-war rallies of late October offer hope for cooling Washington's passion for war.

As for popular culture, we need to remember that the dominance of violent, superheroic blockbusters did not prevent the creation of other films that aroused skepticism about the Captain America complex. Dr. Strangelove invited large, multi-generational audiences to become more realistic about the risks of nuclear security. Wag the Dog raised the possibility that an American president might cynically use warfare as a way of deflecting attention from issues that reflect personal or policy failure. A contemporary example of this counter trend is the television series, West Wing, that regularly shows us a less-than-superheroic president, often mired in problems that he cannot master because he has created them himself.

We must take inspiration from these secular resources as well as remind each other of the prophetic vision that lies behind international law as embodied in the United Nations. Isaiah's God is different from the mighty warrior who urged the faithful to "slay utterly" all who thwarted the aims of the chosen people. In Isaiah's vision of a God of impartial justice, we see that

He shall judge between the nations,
and shall arbitrate for many peoples;
they shall beat their swords into plowshares,
and their spears into pruning hooks;
nation shall not lift up sword against nation,
neither shall they learn war any more. (Isa. 2:4)

This "swords into plowshares" image is carved on the walls and in the sculpture garden of the UN

building in New York. It thus stands at the center of a different, globally-focused civil religion, one that was also supported by American religionists through their advocacy and support of the founding of the United Nations in 1945. For the American people whose civil religion is rooted in “the Book,” we must regularly remind them of its counsels of peace that have led to the creation of such institutions of conflict resolution. If people of faith would recover this vision and lend their support again to such lawful institutions, the global drift toward zealous conflict could in time be overcome.

Robert Jewett is guest professor of New Testament at the University of Heidelberg and John Shelton Lawrence lives in Berkeley, CA. They have co-authored *Captain America and the Crusade Against Evil* (2003) and *The Myth of the American Superhero* (2002).

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