

SPEECH AT THE NATIONAL PRESS CLUB: WASHINGTON DC

“Religion, Foreign Policy, and the Bush Administration”

June 25, 2001

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The movement to make the promotion of religious freedom a key aim of American foreign policy has come a long way in a few short years. In the early 1990s concern about religious persecution abroad was the passion of a few lonely voices, most notably that of Nina Shea's. Today that concern is the focus of congressional law, diplomatic moves, presidential initiatives, government reports, commission hearings, national news, talk shows, church resolutions, petition drives, protests, stock divestment campaigns, and acts of civil disobedience.

A chronicle of this story suggests the classic motifs of movement politics: constituencies were galvanized, new leaders emerged, group memberships boomed, funding flowed, alliances sprouted, publications proliferated, and elan among activists blossomed. This new faith-based engagement, born out of the supposedly parochial concern for persecuted Christians, is the signal story of human rights in our time. And it has produced an advocacy infrastructure that challenges the new Bush administration to act more forcefully on behalf of religious minorities around the world. Religious freedom is no longer the neglected stepchild of human rights.

As compelling as this story is, it is still misunderstood in elite circles, including, I suspect among some on Bush's foreign policy team. The timely publication of *The Influence of Faith*, offers us an opportunity to assess the prospects for this cause.

How will the Bush administration understand its role in advancing religious freedom? What tools will it use? Can it summon the will to employ American power, for example, on behalf of African Christians and others under siege in Sudan? In short, what role will religious concerns play as the president charts the course of U.S. foreign policy?

For those of us sympathetic with the cause, these are momentous questions. But my message is this: What happens in religious America will have more to do with answering those questions than what transpires within the West Wing.

To be sure, the election of George W. Bush presents the movement with new prospects and challenges. But how the administration responds will depend, at least in part, on whether or not the church-based movement can maintain, and even intensify, its momentum. If it does, the president will act; if it doesn't, I fear that business as usual will prevail. And given the power of corporate interests in our foreign policy today, the phrase "business as usual" is more than just metaphorical.

Now, as I discuss in a chapter of this book, certain sociological aspects of American Christianity make sustaining grass roots political pressure on foreign policy a tough challenge. Church leaders are busy and a babel of competing voices can undermine unity of purpose. But based on what I have observed these past few years, and based on early signals from the Bush Administration, I remain cautiously upbeat about the prospects.

Let me begin by suggesting that the religious community has already influenced the posture of the new president. During the campaign and transition, signals from the Bush camp suggested that the administration would pursue a foreign policy rooted in a conception of the national interest that encompassed narrow economic and geopolitical calculations. Critics feared

that a Bush foreign policy premised on “crabbed realism” and “economism” would resemble a “frankly cynical country like France,” not a pretty picture.

And yet, notice what has occurred in the first months of this administration. In spite of his stated reluctance to become involved in African trouble spots, the president denounced the government of Sudan and eloquently declared that monstrous crimes committed by the regime required an American response. He appointed Andrew Natsios, a contributor to this book, as his humanitarian coordinator for aid to the Southern Sudanese, with a charge to ensure that relief supplies not be subject to manipulation by Khartoum. And he allowed State to release \$3 million of logistical aid to the rebels. The president pledged that his administration will, QUOTE, “speak and act for as long as the persecution and atrocities in Sudan last,” UNQUOTE.

Certain administrative appointments also suggest a stiffening resolve to exercise American leadership beyond pinched conceptions of realpolitik. Not the least of those is Elliott Abrams, who is not here today because he is advancing the cause of religious freedom among other duties at the National Security Council. Elliott traveled to Sudan and came back committed to the use of American power on behalf of besieged African Christians and animists there.

The president has surely responded to the remarkable coalition of conscience that formed on Sudan, which included Catholic Bishops, Jewish groups, Protestant evangelicals, Episcopal offices, and prominent black leaders. I, for one, look forward to seeing how the elite press struggles to filter the trial of the Sudan Three through conventional ideological prisms.

But the president had to respond, I believe, because the evangelical network central to his political fortunes has galvanized lay members over the plight of believers abroad.

A few background facts. White evangelicals, who backed Bush overwhelmingly in the past election, made up 40% -- *forty percent* -- of the president's **entire** electoral base, while the bulk of his remaining voters were comprised of the most religiously observant Catholics and mainline Protestants. He owes his election to fervent believers. How can he ignore their concerns?

Moreover, evangelicals in particular are uniquely reachable through a thriving network of denominational offices, publishing houses, schools, colleges, national organizations, and broadcast ministries. Evangelicals have created, in the words of Harvard's Robert Putnam, "the largest, best organized grassroots social movement of the last quarter century." Our guest Gary Bauer epitomized this through his entrepreneurial initiative in building the Family Research Council. Evangelicals today are simply "enmeshed in webs of local congregations, channels of information, and networks of association" that make them readily available for mobilization.

Thus, when evangelical leaders speak, politicians, especially Republicans, listen. Such figures as Charles Colson and Franklin Graham not only have excellent access to congressional leaders, they are friends of George W. Bush and have personally implored him to intervene in Sudan. And we know their passionate commitment is just the visible tip of the iceberg. A major survey of some 400 evangelical elites from around the country – prominent pastors, denominational heads, educators, and organizational leaders – found over three quarters saying that, QUOTE "stopping religious persecution should be given **top** priority in American foreign policy" UNQUOTE.

It is perhaps not entirely coincidental, therefore, that *on the same day* that the House of Representatives passed tough legislation restricting oil investment in Sudan, delegates of the 15

million member Southern Baptist Convention passed a resolution condemning the regime in Khartoum for its genocide and calling for direct aid to the victims. That occurred on June 13, less than two weeks ago.

The vigor of the SBC response suggests another salient fact. The very heartland most supposedly isolationist is also home of the most ardently religious Americans – the very population reachable by church-based mobilization. A large swath of the country, roughly from the South through the Midwest, is home to the majority of evangelicals. It has unexpectedly become a breeding ground of internationalists seeking a more assertive American leadership in the world. Indeed, several of the Republican champions of the persecuted in Congress hail from this evangelical heartland: like Sam Brownback of Kansas, Bill Frist of Tennessee, and especially Frank Wolf of Virginia, who can now use his perch in the Appropriations committee to advance the cause.

When you add the great institutional strength of the Catholic church to this mix, along with the toughness of Jewish lobbies, you have a formidable presence for sustained pressure against the violation of basic religious rights.

This faith-based alliance has given a shot of adrenalin to the broader human rights cause, which is always fragile, a potential victim of strategic calculations, business interests, and human selfishness. Unfortunately, there is also an odd naivety in some secular human rights advocacy, reflected in a preoccupation with developing ideal statutory language in international human rights covenants, without much talk about how despotic regimes will ignore such niceties. Often missing is an appreciation for the importance of American power properly directed at checking those despotisms. A movement that mobilizes even a small portion of religious

America will dramatically expand backing for U.S. power in the human rights cause.

This brings me to an intriguing episode that, I think, illustrates how the faith-based movement may continue to affect the trajectory of our policy. When Secretary of State Colin Powell announced his choice of Chester Crocker to be special envoy to Sudan, the nominee proceeded to sabotage his own position by demanding that he be insulated from Christian advocates or QUOTE “conservative views” at the White House. Crocker would have temporized on the evil of the regime, but that approach is increasingly untenable in light of the ecumenical groundswell of support for a more aggressive American defense of the victims. The Administration keeps getting nudged beyond its comfort zone.

Let me conclude with a word of caution. Continued support in Congress and the White House for American leadership on religious human rights depends on continued mobilization of conviction among the citizenry. Religious leaders should understand that they must keep the pressure on – raising awareness, molding consciences. The fate of people in Sudan, and of those persecuted for their faith elsewhere – rests in part on the action of believers in this, the globe’s indispensable nation.