Providentialism, Foreign Policy, and the Ethics of Political Discourse

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> "We have a place, all of us, in a long story; a story we continue, but whose end we will not see…It is the American story…We are not this story's Author, Who fills time and eternity with His purpose. Yet his purpose is achieved in our duty; and our duty is fulfilled in service to one another." -- George W. Bush, 2001

> "We go forward with complete confidence in the ultimate triumph of freedom…Not because we consider ourselves a chosen nation; God moves and chooses as He wills…History has an ebb and flow of justice, but history also has a visible direction, set by liberty and the Author of Liberty…we are ready for the greatest achievements in the history of freedom." – George W. Bush, 2005

Introduction. It is already clear that, like Ronald Reagan before him, President George W. Bush will be viewed as a far more historically significant figure than most observers anticipated when he first ran for the White House. For me he has a far less historic but nonetheless special significance. He came to power as I was writing *Stories of Peoplehood: The Politics and Morals of Political Membership* (2003). Both his rhetoric and his policies have provided amazingly apt illustrations of that book's empirical claims about how political leaders advance "stories of peoplehood" to win support for their vision of their political community's proper identity and aims. But they also have provided profoundly disquieting challenges to the book's normative argument, that we should welcome a democratic politics in which clashing "comprehensive views," including religious views, are openly espoused. Since he ran for Governor of Texas and especially from his First Inaugural Address to the present, George W. Bush has advanced a religious understanding of American peoplehood quite explicitly, and since September

11, 2001 he has especially done so in the context of American foreign policy—in ways that I, like many observers, find deeply disturbing.

The quandary this paper addresses, then, is this: if we recognize the importance of "stories of peoplehood" to the creation and maintenance of successful and morally defensible political societies, and if we acknowledge that religious stories can rightfully play a significant part in those processes, can we still find grounds to criticize the ways and means President Bush is deploying religious stories of peoplehood, especially in regard to U.S. foreign policy? This quandary is, I believe, a common one among Bush's critics. Many who have been troubled by the President's providentialist rhetoric have been reluctant to criticize it severely, fearing conservative charges that they are simply hostile to the expression of religious perspectives in public life.

I argue that, despite their undoubted sincerity, President Bush's religious statements can rightly be deemed ethically dubious contributions to political discourse. They are not dubious just because they are religious, or because they are a type of "comprehensive view," or even because they fail to provide reasons all can in principle accept. They fail on their own substantive terms, as religious arguments advanced in the service of democracy. Bush's providentialist accounts claim certainty while remaining largely devoid of specific appeals to any identifiable religious authorities. They also repeatedly imply, though never quite claim, divine mandates for controversial specific policies, particularly in the periods when legitimation for those policies seems most crucial. And they are structured not only to discourage but to de-legitimate democratic criticism and dissent, all to a much greater degree than the discourses of Bush's recent presidential predecessors, including Ronald Reagan. This kind of providentialist

discourse bears the hallmarks of a "story of peoplehood" that is being used politically to gain an aura of ethical legitimacy for policies that are otherwise unlikely to be seen as in accord with the nation's dominant moral traditions.

Stories of Peoplehood. To make this case, let me briefly reprise the account of the importance of stories of peoplehood that I developed while trying to make sense of the history of America's citizenship laws. That task led me to formulate some more general ideas about how political communities are forged and sustained. My core argument is that, because no political communities are simply natural, they must be politically created by leaders who forge coalitions around shared, or at least overlapping, visions of how their preferred form of common life will provide members with valuable benefits. To be sure, political societies are always formed partly through coercive force, by which powerful groups impose membership and governance on unwilling populations. But no ruler has ever had enough coercive power to hold a whole community together by force alone. People always have to form political communities in part through the voluntary cooperation of a critical mass of members. Thus they always need not only coercive force but also persuasive stories.

I argue that such community-building narratives are always comprised of three types of elements: economic stories, which promise that membership will prevent economic exploitation, provide rewarding personal economic opportunities, and lead to overall community prosperity, now and for future generations; political power stories, which promise protection against coercive abuses and a share in the collective power of a strong political community, often through guarantees of actual or virtual representation; and what I term "ethically constitutive" stories, stories that present membership as an

expression of traits that are somehow intrinsic to who members are, in ways that are ethically valuable. Religious stories of "chosen peoplehood," racial stories of membership as manifest destiny, claims for membership in an especially appealing culture, accounts of shared noble ancestors, glorifications of birth in a special land or territory are all examples of ethically constitutive stories.

All reasonably successful, enduring "stories of peoplehood" include some version of all three of these elements, because each has almost inescapably important attractions that the others do not so easily provide. The appeal of promises of economic and physical security and opportunities for greater wealth and political power will be clear. But there are at least three circumstances in which political leaders are likely instead to stress ethically constitutive themes.

First, all long-lasting political societies go through some economic and political bad times, so each faces periods when its leaders cannot credibly claim that they are providing all members more in terms of wealth and power than might be attained by giving allegiance to different leaders or even different communities. Second, most societies also often have periods when they pursue wealth and power through policies that sorely need explicit ethical justification, because they appear to violate some of the society's own moral traditions. And finally, societies generally institutionalize important features of their unifying ethically constitutive stories, in the form of national churches, racially and ethnically restrictive citizenship rules, ancestral shrines, and the like; so leaders often rally support by stressing ethically constitutive themes when those institutions are in some way threatened (Smith 2003, 103, 118, 121). Because these three circumstances often occur, political leaders frequently have incentives to highlight

ethically constitutive stories, making active support for their vision of community and their policies seem ethically appropriate, indeed imperative. And because everyone has always grown up shaped by such stories, leaders who draw on existing accounts to craft compelling ethically constitutive narratives are always more likely to succeed than those who neglect such stories or tell them badly.

Though stories of peoplehood, with economic, political power, and ethically constitutive elements, are advanced to bond particular political societies, they are not phenomena that fall primarily within the domain of "domestic politics." They are, rather, one of the two basic types of means, along with force, through which boundaries between "domestic" and "foreign" realms are created and sustained. The leaders seeking support for their vision of political community have to be aware of all potential rivals who may wield coercive power and/or compelling narratives to capture the allegiance of some or all of their constituents. It does not matter whether those rivals are within the bounds of the political community as currently defined, like leaders of rival political parties or secessionist movements, or whether they are outside, like potential conquerors or leaders of adjacent ethnic, linguistic, or religious communities who wish to annex those they claim to be rightfully part of "their" people. Stories of peoplehood must be crafted to inspire allegiance against both sorts of competitors, with the emphasis depending on who seems most threatening at any particular time. As a result, stories of peoplehood always have implications for foreign as well as domestic policies; and sometimes foreign policy concerns predominate in them, as has come to be the case for George W. Bush.

Stories of Peoplehood and the Ethics of Democratic Life. On the basis of this account of how political "people-building" inevitably proceeds in fact, I have argued for

a normative view on how the political life of modern democratic societies should be conducted. This view differs in some important respects from the positions of many contemporary liberal democratic and "deliberative democratic" theorists. My core contention is that, because the politics of creating and sustaining enduring forms of political community *inevitably* involves the propagation of and competition amongst ethically constitutive stories of membership, it is worth than pointless--it is impractical, counterproductive, and unjustifiable--to attempt to rule out some sorts of ethically constitutive accounts as inappropriate for public discourse. Doing so only makes liberals and democrats appear arrogant and intolerant, legitimating their opponents.

Instead, I suggest that we place our bets on an admittedly risky politics of robust contestation among competing visions of common membership and purpose, with theocratic religious, racist, chauvinistic, and anti-democratic conceptions all as entitled to participate as any. The ethos governing such a politics would only urge recognition that all views are legitimately subject to intense criticism; that positions hostile to democratic processes and human rights are likely quite rightly to alienate many members; and that no deference need be given to positions advanced simply as matters of personal conscience or religious faith. I have termed this view of the proper conduct of politics "Madisonian," for it generalizes Madison's famed solution to the problem of faction, including religious factions. Rather than attempting to eliminate such groups, the Madisonian strategy is to favor arrangements and practices under which they will multiply and compete politically. The hope is that in the resulting competition, many political actors will feel compelled to shed extreme and harsh views that prevent them from broadening their constituent base. Otherwise they are likely to face defeat, whether

through electoral processes or, if they do not honor those, through force. I recognize that there is no guarantee that such a politics will always promote compromises and moderation in all contexts. Yet I think it is more likely to do so in more places in the long run than a politics which tries, futilely but repressively, to sideline many of the sorts of ethically constitutive accounts that do so much to bind political communities, motivate political engagement, and give meaning to human life.

I have elaborated this view and responded to various eminently reasonable objections more fully in *Stories of Peoplehood*. Here I want only to underline the ways it differs from the views of standards for a desirable "public ethos" advanced by some major recent theorists. Notably, John Rawls, Amy Gutmann and Dennis Thompson, and many theorists and activists influenced by similar concerns have urged political participants in all modern societies, including the United States, to conduct their politics in line with non-mandatory but morally imperative standards of "public reason." Those standards require that whenever political candidates, governing officials, and judges address political issues in any public forum, they must stress reasons for political actions that are acceptable to other reasonable citizens—with those citizens viewed as free and equal persons, and with "reasonable" defined as embracing "a constitutional democratic regime and its companion idea of legitimate law" (Rawls, 1999, 132-33, 136-38).

Such a regime must include rights of free speech, and those rights mean that legally, these public figures can in fact say anything they like. Rawls also accepts that it may be appropriate for them to articulate controversial philosophic and religious grounds for their positions, *along with* arguments that can reasonably be expected to appeal to everyone (1999, 135, 152-54). Yet he still advocates acceptance of a moral "duty of

civility" which would exhort political actors, when engaged in public advocacy, to "give up forever the hope of changing the constitution so as to establish" their religion's "hegemony" or to establish measures "to ensure its influence and success. To retain such hopes and aims would be inconsistent with the ideal of equal basic liberties for all free and equal citizens." Rawls maintains that without such an ethos governing political conduct, "without citizens' allegiance to public reason and their honoring the duty of civility, divisions and hostilities are bound in time to assert themselves….harmony and concord depend on the vitality of the public political culture and on citizens' being devoted to and realizing the ideal of public reason" (1999, 150, 174-175).

Amy Gutmann and Dennis Thompson have advanced a related but distinct view of the kinds of public ethos or standards that should guide citizens and officials seeking to realize "deliberative democracy." Like Rawls, they urge all to justify public policies "by giving reasons that can be accepted by those who are bound" by those policies (Gutmann and Thompson, 1996, 52). They believe this norm of providing "mutually justifiable reasons" undergirds three principles: reciprocity, publicity, and accountability. The lead principle is reciprocity. It urges us to find reasons that are both empirically plausible and morally acceptable, not to everyone, but to everyone who is similarly motivated to find reasons acceptable to others. Gutmann and Thompson argue that some religious positions and other "comprehensive views" can meet these criteria, so they are more receptive to the expression of religious beliefs in public life than is Rawls.

But there are bounds to their receptivity. If religious fundamentalists claim, for example, that public school teaching about different religions has a disillusioning impact that cannot be shown empirically, or if fundamentalists insist on a restricted education

that is empirically likely to undercut the development of critical reasoning capacities and other prerequisites of democratic citizenship in their children, then not only can their policy positions be rejected. Their discourse can be held to fail to rise to the standards of deliberative democratic discussion. It gives reasons that cannot even in principle be accepted by those who are motivated to find reasons acceptable to others whom they respect as fellow participants in deliberative democratic processes (1996, 63-69).

How does my Madisonian view differ from all this? In contrast to Rawls, rather than suggesting to political figures that it is "uncivil" to say publicly what they may be saying quite passionately privately or semi-privately, the ethos of honest contestation that I favor would urge them to articulate their visions as fully as possible. Public debate would include elaboration of the ethically constitutive stories they invoke, the manner and degree to which they favor democratic political processes and guarantees of basic rights, and what all this implies for Americans and non-Americans as individuals and group members, and for desirable forms of political peoplehood. Proponents of different viewpoints would then be encouraged to subject these contrasting visions to sharp criticisms, including challenges to any *lack* of forthrightness on these matters. That means, however, that these criticisms would not focus at all on whether these views were sufficiently "civil," or even on whether they were "reasonable" given presumptions of the propriety of liberal rights and democratic governance within the peoples that comprise the world today. It would focus on whether the substantive claims being advanced are intellectually and morally convincing, or whether they rely on factually false premises and propose morally damaging directions.

In other words, unlike Rawls or Gutmann and Thompson, I would not say to a fundamentalist parent that standards of "public reason" or "deliberative democracy" make it wrong to propose educational policies that ban any teaching that could threaten the belief that the Bible is the literal word of God. I would argue to him and to my fellow citizens that these educational policies are questionable even in terms of many of the religious traditions the fundamentalist invokes; that they are likely to produce ill-equipped and often rebellious, irreligious children; and that they would generate a curriculum that on many issues would probably be factually flat wrong. Though Gutmann and Thompson also suggest such arguments, they do so in the context of accusing such fundamentalists of violating the more basic principle of reciprocity. That accusation amounts to a dismissal of fundamentalists for failing to live up to the deliberative democrat's architectonic morality for the conduct political life, rather than representing the sort of direct engagement with the substance of rival views that I am urging. I believe that through most of U.S. history, public debates over illiberal religious and racial views, which have now led most public figures to abandon advocacy of extreme positions, have quite properly been conducted much more through this kind of robust, substantive critical engagement than through Rawlsian or "deliberative democratic" tactics.

Instead of political participants publicly saying little about their illiberal opponents' views other than that they were "uncivil" and "unreasonably" reliant on arguments that lacked "reciprocity" or were otherwise not "public reasons," it has been more customary for figures like the African-American writer Martin Delany, addressing religious arguments for black subordination in the 1850s, and Massachusetts Senator

George Hoar, opposing scientific defenses for racially exclusionary immigration laws in the 1880s, to use every sort of contention that might persuade. They made some arguments that Rawls might approve, but they also called attention to the scientific inadequacy and theological weaknesses of the positions they attacked, and they often offered equally comprehensive and equally contentious alternative theological, scientific, and moral claims (Smith, 1997, 247-48, 359-60). Insofar as the U.S. has moved toward greater acceptance that it is wrong to enshrine one religious viewpoint or doctrine of racial supremacy as nationally authoritative, that progress has been achieved with, not without, deep public engagement with contrasting ethically constitutive visions. To some hard-to-determine degree, those public contests have contributed both to strategic rethinking of what positions can be successfully promoted publicly, and internal reconsideration of what the substantive views of heretofore inegalitarian and illiberal groups actually should be.

For Gutmann and Thompson, to the degree that those developments represent only strategic rethinking about what public positions to present in order to build a winning coalition, they may well seem to amount only to aspects of the "political bargaining" that they associate with a public ethos of "prudence," rather than the development of the genuine sense of moral reciprocity, sociability and respectful cooperation that deliberative democrats seek (58). I do not think it is wrong to see much that is merely prudential in the compromises produced by robustly competitive democratic politics; but I would stress more than Gutmann and Thompson that such strategic behavior is not only practically inescapable. It is often a stage in moral development. Moral perspectives can change as people go through intense struggles over

conflicting comprehensive views; then accept, perhaps grudgingly, a compromised modus vivendi; and then discover that these practical accommodations prove workable, even satisfying, ultimately commendable. Many American Protestants today have learned that they can co-exist with Catholics so well that the old animosities that made it seem impossible that a Catholic could be elected President are almost forgotten. Gradually, many white Americans are learning the same lessons about black Americans; Colin Powell and Condoleeza Rice are now seriously considered as presidential candidates. But in neither the case of Catholics or African-Americans did accommodations arise from anything like universal acceptance of mutually justifiable reasons for doing so. Many acquiesced to political necessity, and then gradually came to embrace new conceptions of what was morally right. Gutmann and Thompson acknowledge the inescapable place of strategic accommodations and bargaining in the political life of even a healthy deliberative democracy, but they may understate its potential long-term morally educative, even transformative, consequences.

They are nonetheless right that compromises cannot in themselves provide moral defenses for their outcomes, and that many "bargains" represent the bleak acquiescence of the weak to unjust arrangements. Still, out of their disdain for these sorts of compromises, Gutmann and Thompson, like Rawls, ultimately tell many religious believers that their views are not only substantively wrong, they are not fit in principle to be part of proper political conversations. Those religious adherents who are not committed to advancing reasons that can be shared by all their fellow citizens, those who question the value of critical reason, those who do not even affirm the dignity and worth of all human beings, are all deemed to hold views that cannot be part of deliberative

democratic politics. Nor can they even "appropriately" criticize the standards of deliberative democracy, because they offer no alternative way of promoting cooperation among those who have severe moral disagreements (67).

In contrast, the ethos of robust democratic contestation I propose welcomes not only strategic compromises and reformulations but also the forthright expression of even intolerant, fundamentalist religious views. It does not even insist that proponents of such views must accept the right of others to criticize them. It simply urges others to criticize. The expectation is that, far from producing a politics devoid of moral content as Gutmann and Thompson rightly say that a politics of mere "prudence" may be, this contestation will often be highly morally charged, and the moralities involved will not always offer reasons that opponents can in principle accept. Losers may therefore feel that those who govern them do so illegitimately, and so they may resist; or they may seem to be deterred from resistance only by fears of failure, not any sense of moral obligation.

Often, however, I think they will eschew intense resistance because they see that being minimally cooperative is a better way to position themselves to win in the future. Hence they may genuinely choose to remain participants in a politics of robust democratic contestation—and that means that there will be continuing opportunities for this politics to persuade some to temper their more extreme views, perhaps even to come to grasp the moral force of many of their opponents' positions. In many cases, I suspect that leaders and members of undemocratic, intolerant movements may be more likely to accept compromises, and even to reconsider their own demonologies, if their fellow citizens treat them in these antagonistic yet respectful ways. I do not wish to overstate that potential: I do not suppose that any "ethos" for the conduct of public institutions,

whether Rawls's, Gutmann and Thompson's, mine, or some other, is likely to play a greatly determinative role in political outcomes. But I think that we can accomplish more to promote concord by encouraging all parties, groups and movements participants to articulate their commitments fully and honestly, while urging (but not requiring) all participants to meet opposing views with serious engagement, than we can by encouraging disregard for all those who fail to offer what academics deem to be appropriate arguments.

For these reasons, which require further development and defense, I have been more receptive to the presence of a variety of comprehensive views, including religious views, in public life than Rawls or even Gutmann or Thompson are. But that receptivity produces my quandary. From the standpoint of an ethos of "robust democratic contestation," what grounds can be found for criticizing President Bush's providentialist rhetoric and the role it plays in justifying, perhaps guiding, his foreign policies?

The Providentialism of George W. Bush. Not only defenders but even many critics of the President often presume that there is really nothing new in his religious rhetoric. All Presidents say "God Bless America" repeatedly and imply, sometimes crudely, sometimes subtly, that God is on the side of their policies. Most also assert that America has a special place in the world as a result of divine favor; in the nation's more vulnerable early years, it was said that "God loves fools, drunkards, and the United States of America." We may or may not like it, many contend, but there is nothing new in what George W. Bush is saying or doing.

I have not yet completed all the research necessary to show that this claim is empirically false, but I have done enough to be confident that it is overstated. I have

surveyed the nomination acceptance speeches, inaugural addresses, and state of the union addresses of the five presidents elected over the last three decades, from Jimmy Carter through George W. Bush.[1] The patterns I summarize here are based on those major official speeches, though especially in the case of the second Bush, my prime concern here, I also cite his other notable addresses to illustrate those patterns further and show their pervasiveness.

There are many commonalities found throughout these speeches, regardless of presidential party. All these presidents have regularly affirmed their belief in the inalienable rights of the Declaration of Independence, sometimes noted as stemming from a Creator; and all have expressed confidence that America has some sort of special role in promoting freedom and democracy in the world, though they have defined and justified that role differently. Both Democratic and Republican Presidents have indeed also often referred to the nation's religious traditions. The Democratic Presidents, Carter and Bill Clinton, have referred to religion somewhat less frequently than the Republican Presidents, Ronald Reagan, George H. W. Bush, and George W. Bush; but they have done so more often via specific scriptural references. Republicans have referred more often to specifically providentialist accounts of America's place and special role in world history, but always without specific authority from religious texts. Still, no recent President, Democrat or Republican, has invoked religious providentialism as frequently as George W. Bush. His references have increased over time, and they also have been more closely associated with justifications for specific polices, particularly in times of crisis, than those of any of his predecessors. This last element is in fact virtually absent in

the major Democratic presidential addresses, even during difficult times such as the era of the Iran hostage crisis.

Let me take the Democrats first. In accepting his nomination in 1976, Jimmy Carter praised America as the first nation clearly dedicated to "basic moral and philosophical principles" of human equality and to the "inalienable rights" of the Declaration of Independence, and in his Inaugural Address he affirmed America's dedication to those "absolute" rights while quoting the prophet Micah on the importance of doing justice, loving mercy, and walking "humbly with thy God."[2] These religious sentiments were not, however, uttered in relation to any specific policy proposals. In his 1978 State of the Union Address, Carter maintained that "the very heart of our national identity is our firm commitment to human rights" and cited the Bible to assure Americans that they could "move mountains."[3] Again, however, this provided general reassurance, without reference to the transport of any particular rock formations. And in his 1979 State of the Union speech Carter also affirmed America's "special place of leadership in the worldwide struggles for human rights," but he did not specify on what authority America could claim that "special place."[4] Otherwise, Sunday School teacher Carter's nomination acceptance, inaugural, and State of the Union Addresses are surprisingly devoid of religious language. He does not even urge God to bless America as often as other Presidents.

Bill Clinton's 1992 nominating acceptance speech twice quoted "Scripture" on the importance of having an inspiring vision; and using religious terminology, he promised a "New Covenant" with the American people to realize the "vision and values of the American people."[5] His first Inaugural Address again quoted Scripture while

urging Americans to pursue their "timeless mission" of achieving "America's ideals," realization of rights of life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness, in America and "around the world."[6] His 1995 State of the Union Address, especially, returned to this theme, holding that America's founders based their new country on "a single powerful idea," that "all mean are created equal, endowed by their Creator with certain inalienable rights," that "every generation" of Americans since have sought to preserve that idea—the American Dream—and to "deepen and expand its meaning to new and different times."[7] His later speeches reasserted these views, citing the prophet Isaiah in his 1997 State of the Union in support of renewed efforts to extend the American idea, "the most powerful idea in the history of nations."[8] But Isaiah here served as a source of inspiration for Americans to choose this course, not as justification for claiming that they were providentially destined to do so.[9] And again, though Clinton did initially structure his presidential rhetoric around the quasi-religious language of a "covenant," in fact his religious references are brief ornaments on speeches that rest largely on readings of American history, when they are not simply extensive lists of policy proposals.

Turn now to the Republicans. Ronald Reagan, to a lesser degree George H. W. Bush, and especially George W. Bush have repeatedly made clear that their political worldviews have rested far more on religious providentialist concepts of America than any other foundation. No theme was dearer to Ronald Reagan than the notion that America was destined by "Divine Providence" to be the shining "city on a hill" that John Winthrop spoke of to the Pilgrims. Reagan invoked that image when he announced his candidacy for the Presidency in 1979, in his 1984 nomination acceptance speech, and in his final State of the Union address, as well as many other occasions.[10] In his Inaugural

addresses, he repeatedly made clear that he understood this to mean that America should be an "exemplar of freedom and a beacon of hope" to all the world, and that God "intended" and "called" the American people to play this role, so that God was the true "author" of America's "dream of freedom."[11] One of Reagan's most eloquent expressions of this view came in a speech outside my data set, at the 1986 Statue of Liberty commemoration, where the President celebrated the nation's history of welcoming immigrants by saying, "I have always believed there was some divine providence that placed this great land here between the two great oceans, to be found by a special kind of people from every corner of the world, who had a special love for freedom."[12]

As noted, this explicit providentialism does not appear in the comparable speeches of modern Democratic Presidents, and Reagan was always aware that it could be controversial. In his 1984 State of the Union Address, Reagan observed, in a defense of school prayer, that "we must be cautious in claiming that God's on our side, but I think it's all right to keep asking if we're on His side."[13] In addition to religious support, moreover, Reagan also often emphasized what he saw as the lessons of history and history's "calls" to Americans.[14] But this was clearly divinely guided history, and over time Reagan stressed more and more strongly that God had given the love of freedom and the right to freedom to all humanity and had "entrusted in a special way to this nation" a responsibility for the "defense" of freedom at home and around the world.[15] Reagan also increasingly emphasized over time that "the unborn child is a living human being entitled to life, liberty and the pursuit of happiness" granted by "our Creator."[16] In these latter two regards, particularly the last, he moved closer to suggesting that particular policies

that he advocated were more consistent with divine intentions, though his religious rhetoric remained overwhelmingly an inspirational view of American identity in general, not a justification for specific positions.

President George H. W. Bush stated in his Inaugural Address, "my first act as President is a prayer" to use his new power to "help people, serve the Lord," and he then went on to say that a new chapter in history's "book of many pages" was beginning, one in which, as "the story unfolds," it seemed that "Freedom" was being "reborn."[17] In subsequent State of the Union addresses, he stated like Carter that "freedom is at the very heart of the idea that is America," and he argued like both his predecessors that America had a "unique responsibility" to promote freedom in the world, though he did not explicitly present this as a divine duty in the manner of Reagan.[18] But beyond his habit of ending speeches with "God Bless America," as Reagan and Clinton did often and Carter did rarely, the elder Bush did not speak extensively of religion in his major official speeches, nor did he stress providentialist themes.

His son, in contrast, has not only harkened back to the religious providentialism of Ronald Reagan; he has elaborated and extended those views. And like his father, he has done me the particular favor of repeatedly employing the terminology of national "stories." When George W. Bush accepted the Republican presidential nomination in 2000, for example, he promised, like his father, to write new "chapters in the American story."[19] But his major statement of this theme came in his ensuing Inaugural Address, a remarkable speech worth quoting at greater length. President Bush began:

> We have a place, all of us, in a long story. A story we continue, but whose end we will not see. It is the story of a new world that became a friend and liberator of the old, a story of a slave-holding society that became a servant of freedom, the story of a power that went into the world to protect but not possess, to defend but

> not to conquer. It is the American story. A story of flawed and fallible people, united across the generations by grand and enduring ideals. The grandest of these ideals is an unfolding American promise that everyone belongs, that everyone deserves a chance, that no insignificant person was ever born. Americans are called upon to enact this promise in our lives and in our laws; and though our nation has sometimes halted and sometimes delayed, we must follow no other course . . . Our democratic faith is more than the creed of our country, it is the inborn hope of our humanity, an ideal we carry but do not own, a trust we bear and pass along; and even after nearly 225 years, we have a long way yet to travel."[20]

In these opening passages, President Bush movingly defines American peoplehood, and the identity of Americans, in terms of their participation in a shared story stretching beyond them into the past and on into a future that lacks certainty but not direction. His telling of the American story commendably recognizes American shortcomings, while valorizing a democratic faith involving concern and respect for all persons as the "grandest" of American ideals. Accordingly, Bush connects this national story with a more universalistic one, stressing that this ideal is common to and should be realized for all humanity. In all these regards, Bush offers a story of peoplehood that I personally find admirable, indeed inspiring.

Yet despite these strengths, Bush's speech also has disquieting features. The passage just cited intimates the distinctively Protestant notion of a divine vocation or "calling" as our guide to our civic lives. In the speech's close, the fundamentally religious character of President Bush's view of American identity becomes more explicit:

> …After the Declaration of Independence was signed, Virginia statesman John Page wrote to Thomas Jefferson, "We know the race is not to the swift nor the battle to the strong. Do you not think an angel rides in the whirlwind and directs this storm?" Much time has passed since Jefferson arrived for his inauguration. The years and changes accumulate, but the themes of this day he would know, our nation's grand story of courage and its simple dream of dignity.
>
> We are not this story's author, who fills time and eternity with His purpose. Yet His purpose is achieved in our duty, and our duty is fulfilled in service to one

> another. Never tiring, never yielding, never finishing, we renew that purpose today; to make our country more just and generous; to affirm the dignity of our lives and every life.
>
> This work continues. This story goes on. And an angel still rides in the whirlwind and directs this storm.

Stirring as they are, these passages clearly come close to the sort of effort to insure the "influence and success" of President Bush's religious views that John Rawls criticizes. Again, unlike Rawls, I welcome this open expression of the ethically constitutive beliefs that guide this important political actor's sense of American purposes, at least in part. It is true that Bush offers no reference or support for this religious understanding of American identity beyond the veiled Protestantism of his terminology, but in this speech that is less disturbing, because his religious language is not tied closely to any specific, disputed policy proposals. From the standpoint of an ethos of democratic contestation, indeed from the standpoint of the "democratic faith" Bush endorses, the chief discomfiting feature is his insistence that, despite their democratic ideals, the American people are not really the authors of the American story. It is really a story of duty to divine purposes, not democratic self-direction, deliberative or otherwise. Still, the tension between faith in divine predestination and human free will has a long and honorable history in American political and theological thought going back at least as far as Jonathan Edwards. I recognize that it can seem unfair to fault President Bush for not dealing more satisfactorily with this profound dilemma.

But this "predestination" theme has become more troubling, I contend, as Bush's providentialism has evolved in response to what have admittedly been searing challenges. After the vicious September 11 attacks, Bush both heightened his reliance on religious

rhetoric and gave it increasing specificity. In his September 20, 2001 speech to the nation, the President identified Al Qaeda and Osama bin Laden as the perpetrators of the attacks and Afghanistan's Taliban regime as their protectors, and he declared them the first targets in a new "war on terrorism." He argued that America was "called to defend freedom" in this way and he concluded, "The course of this conflict is not known, yet its outcome is certain. Freedom and fear, justice and cruelty, have always been at war, and we know that God is not neutral between them."[21]

The theologian Caryn Riswold has expressed concerns about this speech that are largely consonant with my own. She argues that Bush's language inescapably suggests that his call to arms is "justified by God," whose sanction justifies Americans in "*certainty* of the outcome" of Bush's policies (a certainty that his First Inaugural did not so clearly assert). She concludes that the speech "stakes a claim that America is the favored nation under God, and presents subtle justification for violence that begs for question, challenge, and serious criticism. It communicates a religious worldview that justified its veiled call for holy war, equating patriotism with faith in a God who is not neutral. The presidential address was a religious response, presenting a retribution theology as national policy, and communicating an arrogance that undermined its own power" (Riswold, 2004, 44-46). Again, I am far from opposed to expressions of religious worldviews in politics, and I do not expect to purge political rhetoric of arrogance. But I believe Riswold is right to see in Bush's speech a confident assertion of certain religious authority for his actions that is unusual in modern presidential rhetoric, even for Bush himself. Admittedly, it came in a moment of profound shock and crisis, when the nation needed to be rallied; but it soon became routine.

In his 2002 State of the Union address, Bush stated that "History has called America" to "fight" and "lead" the campaign for liberty and justice, and he assured his fellow citizens that "God is near" to us amidst these difficult events.[22] On September 11, 2002, he reaffirmed that Americans had heard "history's call" and made clear that history was for him, as for Reagan, a providentialist history, saying "we do know that God has placed us together in this moment…to serve each other and our country. And the duty we have been given—defending America and our freedom—is also a privilege we share…This ideal of America is the hope of all mankind…That hope still lights our way." Using explicitly Biblical language, the President concluded, "And the light shines in the darkness. And the darkness will not overcome it."[23]

In his 2003 State of the Union Address, Bush asserted that "this call of history has come to the right country," and he added that though "we do not claim to know all the ways of Providence," yet we knew enough of them to "trust in them, placing our confidence in the loving God behind all of life and all of history" as we pursued the course the President had set.[24] Later that year, in his important and widely praised speech to the National Endowment for Democracy, Bush argued still more explicitly that "Liberty is both the plan of Heaven for humanity, and the best hope for progress here on Earth," and that as part of this plan, America had a "mission to promote liberty around the world." He concluded, "we can be certain that the author of freedom is not indifferent to the fate of freedom."[25] In his 2004 State of the Union speech, Bush argued, again like Reagan, that "God has planted in every human heart the desire to live in freedom," and he assured Americans that they would fulfill their "mission" to "lead the cause of freedom" because of "that greater power who guides the unfolding of the

years."[26] Then in his speech accepting his second presidential nomination, Bush returned to his motif of the "story of America," a "story of expanding liberty" in which "America is called to lead the cause of freedom" because freedom "is the Almighty God's gift to every man and woman in the world." He closed by assuring Americans that they "have a calling from beyond the stars to stand for freedom."[27]

Bush's Second Inaugural Address took as its central theme the argument that America must now make "the success of liberty in other lands" the centerpiece of national policy, for this task represented not only "the urgent requirement of our nation's security," but also "the calling of our time." The President was careful to acknowledge that liberty might take different forms around the world, that "when the soul of a nation finally speaks, the institutions that arise may reflect customs and traditions very different from our own." The speech also contained passages that seemed mindful of criticisms of Bush's earlier providentialist rhetoric, as well as the example of Lincoln's great Second Inaugural, which recognized the divine justice of American suffering but refused to claim divine sanction for the Union cause, saying only that "The Almighty has His own purposes."[28] Somewhat similarly, Bush stated that Americans had "complete confidence in the eventual triumph of freedom," but not because "history runs on the wheels of inevitability; it is human choices that move events." Nor did Americans "consider ourselves a chosen nation; God moves and chooses as He wills." Still, Bush insisted, "History has an ebb and flow of justice, but history also has a visible direction, set by liberty and the Author of Liberty."[29] In his 2005 State of the Union address, devoted largely to domestic matters, Bush reiterated that Americans would "add to that story" of

the "history of liberty," and that "The road of Providence is uneven and unpredictable—yet we know where it leads: It leads to freedom."[30]

This brief survey leaves little doubt, I think, that providentialist religious claims have long been central in George W. Bush's political discourse and show no signs of declining. This is not surprising in a President who was "born again" after mid-life struggles with alcohol, and whose staffers report that he reads the Bible each morning.[31] Yet unlike his two recent Democratic predecessors, who on the whole invoked religion less often, Bush often echoes biblical language and theological phrasing but rarely cites specific religious texts, though he did recite part of the 23d Psalm on the night of September 11, 2001.[32] Nonetheless, he stresses providentialist accounts of American history and destiny more than any predecessor. He does so more often in the context of speeches defending controversial particular policies, particularly his foreign policies. And he has repeatedly presented those policies as divine duties, as callings that cannot rightly be refused, while assuring Americans that they can be certain of divine support in those efforts because God sides with justice and freedom.

It is true that Bush has refrained from explicitly asserting that his measures are divinely authorized; his Second Inaugural eschews the claim that Americans are a chosen people; and he has more than once stressed that we cannot know all God's purposes and that our "calling is to align our hearts and action with God's plan, in so far as we can know it."[33] But his more restrained and qualified statements have come largely outside his major official speeches, or, as in the case of his Second Inaugural, after the most controversial steps have already been taken. I do not think it is possible to read through the quotations provided from the major speeches he has delivered when controversial

policies were being first advanced without concluding that President Bush has frequently suggested strongly that his "war on terrorism" policies, including the war with Iraq, are in accord with God's will. As Riswold's critique indicates, these claims are controversial among those who take guidance from scripture, many of whom are pacifistic. It is possible that the President prefers not to engage in scriptural justifications of his interpretations of divine Providence that might invite theological quarrels.

The Ethical Deficiencies of a President's Providentialism. Still, even if so, what exactly is wrong with that? Given that religious arguments are often politically divisive, perhaps it is better that Bush keeps his religious rhetoric rather lofty and generic and does not delve into theological disputation.

Obviously, that is not my view. I also think believe that the empirical account of why and how religious stories and other ethically constitutive stories are typically deployed in politics with which I began, as well as the normative case for robust democratic contestation that I sought to build upon it, can help us see why this particular form of religious discourse is ethically suspect. The empirical account enables us to identify traits that are likely to be found in civic stories that are being used more to bestow a spurious ethical legitimacy on policies than to make a serious case for a certain vision of the nation's proper identity and purposes.

I suggested that political leaders are likely to feature ethically constitutive stories, such as religious accounts, in three contexts: when their society is experiencing economic and political hard times; when they wish to confer ethical legitimacy on measures that otherwise appear questionable in light of their society's moral traditions; and when the institutions that embody their preferred ethically constitutive stories are endangered.

Which of these, if any, might account for President Bush's decision to highlight a religious civic narrative?

The first explanation has only limited plausibility. Though the United States today has some serious economic problems and suffered severe damage on September 11th, 2001, the country overall is far from weak economically or in terms of political power. It is true that President Bush is often accused of favoring the economic interests of the wealthy over those of poor and middle-class Americans, and so he may well wish to stress the religiosity he shares with the vast majority of Americans more than his vision of economic development or the economic aims of his foreign policies. But his main response to the charge that he serves the wealthy has clearly been to champion broad tax cuts; and the blow to American power struck by the terrorist hijackers has only reinforced his longstanding emphasis on strengthening American defenses. Neither tax cuts nor anti-terrorist military budgets require religious rationales. Thus it is not likely that President Bush stresses a providentialist civic story chiefly because he cannot find credible economic or political power themes.

Nor is the third explanation particularly persuasive. Though adherents of radical variants of Islam launched the September 11th attacks, their targets were institutions that embodied the nation's economic and military interests, not the religious traditions the President articulates in his version of the American story. There is no doubt that many Christian believers see a militant Islam as ultimately some sort of threat to their religious institutions and values, but it is nonetheless not credible to think that many fear that America is about to be conquered and made Islamic at the point of the sword. President Bush has also been careful to insist that the U.S. respects "the faith of Islam" and is not

warring on behalf of one religion or family of religions against another. He clearly does not invoke God because he thinks prevailing American conceptions of God or institutions of religious worship are in any special jeopardy in the current struggles.

If neither the first nor third circumstance for highlighting a religious ethically constitutive story seems applicable today, then we are compelled to consider his rhetoric in relation to the second scenario, in which leaders advance stories to confer moral legitimacy on policies that might otherwise seem ethically dubious. In this regard, the President's religious rhetoric has a number of alarming features.

First and foremost, the President has employed his providentialist discourse most often in speeches defending foreign policies that he knows to be questioned, if not condemned, in moral traditions that have long been powerful in the United States. Even before the Iraq war, the Bush administration announced a novel policy of "preemptive" or preventive warfare that runs contrary to venerable moral beliefs that nations should use force only when directly attacked. In response to those beliefs, the President initially justified the Iraq war in part by claiming a growing threat from weapons of mass destruction that ultimately proved to be non-existent; but he has continued to insist that the war was in keeping with the nation's higher calling nonetheless. The President then, has clearly adopted precisely the sorts of new, morally debatable measures that create the temptation to seek ersatz ethical validation.[34]

This fact makes it additionally disturbing that he has regularly chosen to stress that, even though our values are supposed to be democratic, ultimately we should believe that we are not only not the authors of freedom; we are not the authors of the American story itself. In the final reckoning, then, we need not feel responsible for the morally

controversial steps we are taking. What's more, there is little point in worrying about those steps. Despite occasional disclaimers, since his First Inaugural the President has repeatedly urged Americans to accept as a "certainty" that American policies will eventually succeed, because God is on America's side in the world's current struggles. But that point, in turn, implies that we not only lack ultimate responsibility for actions that are in any case predestined for success. It is also not really clear that we have any legitimate choice about what to do in regard to these issues. Though he usually prefers to put the point positively, Bush has frequently implied that if we do not do as he indicates that we should do, we will fail to respond to a divine calling, to do our duty to God. Nothing could indict the immorality of those who disagree with his policies more. Yet despite these sweeping religious justifications, the President has failed to provide any authority for these controversial arguments in specific religious traditions or texts.

Let me repeat that I believe that in making all these arguments, President Bush is speaking sincerely, and that I think it is right for him to make the religious convictions that inform his public policies clear. And for all that I know, he may in fact be right in all his contentions about foreign policy, the character of the American story, and God's will. Yet can it really be denied that his providentialist discourse has come to have all the hallmarks of a story used to confer a spurious, or at least unearned, moral legitimacy on highly questionable policies? His providential "story of peoplehood" is most pronounced in speeches defending measures that are suspect, even shocking, in light of well-established moral beliefs that for nations, like persons, violence should be the last resort, undertaken only when clearly needed for self-defense. Such measures require heightened scrutiny from, and heightened justification to, one's fellow democratic citizens. A

political leader ought to accept that scrutiny and do the best job possible of providing justifications that are as full and consistent as they can be.

But the President's providentialist rhetoric discourages such scrutiny by insisting that we are really witnesses to the unfolding of God's providential plan, and by telling us that we are called, not to question or even to decide, but simply to do our duty. Those arguments are "justifications" that do not appear consistent with the democratic ideals the President professes to espouse; and far from being fully defended on religious grounds, they are made without any reference to particular religious authorities or guides. When a leader's ethically constitutive story is structured to foreclose rather than to contribute to democratic deliberations about the moral propriety of controversial national enterprises, even as it purports to support democracy, then we have prima facie reasons to suspect that the story is being used, at least in part, to gain ethical credibility that might not emerge from such discussions. When that story is presented as delineating the "plan of Heaven," but no religious warrants for that claim are ever provided, we must wonder whether it chiefly serves to express a well-founded faith or to inspire a not-so-well-founded one.

I conclude, then, that we have good reasons to question the ethical propriety of President Bush's providentialist political discourse. Note, however, that in so arguing, I make no claim that this discourse is outside the pale of 'civility" or "public reason," nor am I even faulting it for failing to provide arguments that might persuade a non-believer. Rather I have argued that it is being used in ways that are inconsistent with the very ideals of democracy and fidelity to religious guidance that it professes to advance, and in ways that are characteristic of the political misuse of ethically constitutive stories of

peoplehood. Like the theological criticisms advanced by Riswold, these are arguments advanced on the plain of democratic contestation among competing moral and political views, without any claim that the morality of the critic is somehow of a different order than the morality of the views being criticized. Theorists like to reach for some sort of special status for their theories, but I doubt we are ever entitled to one. And that should not deter us—for we do not need claim privileged access to a vantage point above the fray of robustly democratic politics to be able to engage in that politics constructively.

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[1] There is, fortunately, an easily accessible online presidential speech archive at http://www.geocities.com/americanpresidencynet/archive.htm. The text discusses all the religious references in these texts of any length or substance, though it does not detail every "God Bless America."

[2] Last accessed on December 19, 2004 at http://www.geocities.com/rickmatlick/nomacarter76.htm and http://www.geocities.com/americanpresidencynet/39thinaugural.htm.

[3] Last accessed on December 19, 2004 at http://www.geocities.com/presidentialspeeches/1978.htm.

[4] Last accessed on December 19, 2004 at http://www.geocities.com/presidentialspeeches/1979.htm .

[5] Last accessed on December 19, 2004 at http://www.4president.org/speeches/billclinton1992acceptance.htm.

[6] Last accessed on December 19, 2004 at http://www.geocities.com/americanpresidencynet/43ndinaugural1.htm.

[7] Last accessed on December 19, 2004 at http://www.geocities.com/presidentialspeeches/1995.htm .

[8] Last accessed on December 19, 2004 at http://www.geocities.com/presidentialspeeches/1997.htm.

[9] Similarly, in his speech accepting the 2004 Democratic nomination, John Kerry invoked the "sons and daughters of liberty" who had given birth to "America's freedom" in Philadelphia as models for seeking "a new birth of freedom" today. He also professed his personal faith, but he disavowed any claim that "God is on our side," agreeing with Lincoln that we should pray to be on God's side. Last accessed on December 20, 2004 at http://www.johnkerry.com/pressroom/speeches/spc_2004_0729.html.

[10] Last accessed on December 18, 2004 at http://www.geocities.com/presidentialspeeches/announcereagan79.htm (Reagan's announcement speech); http://www.geocities.com/rickmatlick/nomareagan84htm (Reagan's nomination acceptance speech); http://www.geocities.com/presidentialspeeches/1988.htm (Reagan's last State of the Union address).

[11] Last accessed on December 19, 2004 at http://www.geocities.com/americanpresidencynet/40thinaugural1.htm (Reagan's First Inaugural); http://www.geocities.com/americanpresidencynet/40thinagural2.htm (Reagan's Second Inaugural).
[12] Last accessed on December 20, 2004 at http://www.reagan.utexas.edu/resource/speeches/1986/70386d.htm.
[13] Last accessed on December 19, 2004 at http://www.geocities.com/presidentialspeeches/1984.htm.
[14] E.g., Reagan's 1985 State of the Union Address, last accessed on December 19, 2004 at http://www.geocities.com/presidentialspeeches/1985.htm; 1986 State of the Union Address, last accessed on December 19, 2004 at http://www.geocities.com/presidentialspeeches/1986.htm
[15] E.g., Reagan, 1985 State of the Union Address; 1987 State of the Union Address, last accessed on December 19, 2004 at http://www.geocities.com/presidentialspeeches/1987.htm; 1988 State of the Union Address.
[16] Reagan, 1986 State of the Union Address; 1988 State of the Union Address.
[17] Last accessed on December 19, 2004 at http://www.geocities.com/americanpresidencynet/41stinaugural.htm.
[18] Last accessed on December 19, 2004 at http://www.geocities.com/presidentialspeeches/1990.htm; http://www.geocities.com/presidentialspeeches/1991.htm.
[19] Last accessed on December 19, 2004 at http://www.geocities.com/rickmatlick/nomawbush00.htm.
[20] Last accessed on December 19, 2004 at http://www.whitehouse.gov/news/inaugural-address.html.
[21] Last accessed on December 19, 2004 at http://www.whitehouse.gov/news/releases/2001/09/20010920-8.html.
[22] Last accessed on December 19, 2004 at http://www.geocities.com/presidentialspeeches/2002.htm.
[23] Last accessed on December 19, 2004 at http://www.bushcountry.org/bush_speeches/president-bush-speech-091202.htm.
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[28] Last accessed on March 2, 2005 at http://www.bartleby.com/124/pres32.html.
[29]Last accessed on March 2, 2005 at http://www.bartleby.com/124/pres67.html.
[30] Last accessed on March 2, 2005 at http://www.whitehouse.gov/news/releases/2005/02/print/20050202-11.html

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[31] Keen, Judy. "White House Staffers Gather for Bible Study," *USA Today*, Oct. 13, 2002, last accessed on December 19, 2004 at http://www.usatoday.com/news/washington/2002-10-12-bible-usat_x.htm.
[32] Last accessed on December 19, 2004 at http://www.geocities.com/presidentialspeeches/1985.htm (Reagan) and http:www.yourcongress.com/ViewArticle.asp?article_id=1758.
[33] George W. Bush, "2003 National Day of Prayer Remarks," last accessed on December 19, 2004 at http://www.christianitytoday.com/global/printer.html?/ct/2004/135/41.0.html.
[34] These commitments are expressed in Secs. III and V of the Bush administration's September 17, 2002 National Security Strategy document, obtainable at http://www.whitehouse.gov/nsc/nssall.html. International relations scholars refer to wars not triggered by perceptions of likely threat as "preventive," not "preemptive" wars, and such wars are usually thought to violate international law.

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