

An Op-Ed “State of the Union Address” for the USA 2006

Colleagues,

I listened & watched President Bush give his “State of the Union” address Tuesday evening (January 31), even took notes. I read the printed text in the paper the next morning. Before long this Op Ed alternative began to percolate. Here’s what it looked like when it came off the stove. Peace & Joy!

Ed Schroeder

“FROM ABRAHAM–VIA AMOS AND AUGUSTINE–TO ABRAMOFF” (with citations from the official address of Jan. 31 indicated)

ABRAHAM

My fellow Americans. God is NOT blessing America. “The state of our union is” NOT “strong.” It is perilous. Precipitous. We are already near the cliff’s edge and we are still marching in a direction we call forward. Though some may say: “There is no honor in retreat,” if straight-ahead means suicide, then where is the honor in that? Retreat is absolutely right, the essence of honor, when you are going in the wrong direction. Not to retreat from suicide is surely dishonorable.

I’ve captioned this opening section ABRAHAM. The promise to Abraham was to be a “blessing to the nations.” God blessing our nation has been a mantra for ages among us. When a nation is

heading for a cliff-fall, retreat is honorable. The Abrahamic word for that is repentance. That word does not mean feel-sorry-for-what-you've-done—though there is honor in 'fessing up when you are simply wrong, and stupidity in not doing so. Its literal Biblical meaning is simply turn around. But if we are blind about the precipice just ahead, about the wrong direction we are going, then we will continue to hype “our greatness, our competitive edge . . . our compassion . . . the character of our country . . . our success of freedom,” in short, our standard list of self-congratulatory shibboleths, and in doing so we are going the way of Goliath. If that is the way in which “we accept the call of destiny,” then Goliath’s destiny is our destiny. It is the God-given destiny of every historical Goliath in human history.

We need help. BIG help. The sort Abraham got when he too was entangled in the Tigris and Euphrates kingdoms four millennia ago, the same place we are entangled today. Though he apparently thought that this was his place to be, God said: Not so. Abraham’s Ur of the Chaldees—the USA empire of that day—was very religious, with deities galore. But the TRUE God said: “Not my kind. Split. I’m taking you elsewhere. U of C is the wrong way to go.” America today is also very religious, something that makes other nations marvel, because we also are (and export) a super-secular culture. In some places it may be sheer schizophrenia (double-mindedness, the Bible calls it). In other places perhaps calculated camouflage. Until Muslims showed up in our land (now in the many millions outnumbering American Jews!) and so long as we overlooked American Judaism, we called ourselves a Christian nation. Some Americans—despite our patent religious pluralism today—still insist on that label. But apart from hyping allegedly Christian moral imperatives, few probe very deeply into what that might mean—if it were indeed true, if it were not an oxymoron.

What might it be if we strove first to be simply an "Abrahamic" nation? First off, no notions of empire. A pox on Ur of Chaldeanism. [And for that we could invoke another worthy whose name starts with A, namely, Augustine. See below.] His call was to be a blessing to the nations. Not empires, just nations. Therefore not any messianism to spread his ideology to the other nations. Or if there is an Abrahamic messianism, it was a messianism of the message, not of the military. Was it Stalin who hyped the validity of his message because it came from the barrel of a gun? Where is his empire now? Or was it Mao, whose empire is now morphing into our own global capitalist empire? If we are indeed inches from the edge in our own imperial march, what is China's some-day-to-be-manifest destiny? But I digress. This is the state-of-the-union address for America, not China.

America and Abraham. That already has promising overtones for Christians, Jews and Muslims in our nation. He is patriarch for them all. I am not proposing the "salvation" agenda that accompanied Abraham, but merely his "secular" calling to be a "blessing to the nations." God's blessings are what we invoke when we say God bless America. This is not a soteriological call. It focuses on the providing, the protecting, the preserving of daily life that substantively corresponds to our constitution. The blessing business is the essence of good government.

But now some reflection on the notion of empire. Abraham and offspring were called to be a non-empire. "Just" to be a people, nothing more. So what's an empire and why is that a no-no for the offspring of Abraham? Enter Augustine. [Crossings readers have heard this before in these postings. Here's a slice of a ThTh posting shortly after Sep. 11, 2001.]

A word about empire from Augustine. Why did the Roman Empire

fall? Rome went down the drain because of its own injustice. God doesn't tolerate injustice forever. He is indeed longsuffering—even for the empire's 1000 years (you know God's idiosyncratic calendar)—but he does “count trespasses.” When the trespasser refuses to turn around, God finally visits the iniquity of the fathers upon the current population of the empire. Empires are in a bind, Augustine says, for by definition they cannot “turn around” and still be an empire. Why not? Because injustice is built into the very structure of an empire. For an empire to repent would mean to cease to be an empire.

How so? Empires are one people subjugating one or more other peoples. Rome subjugated other peoples both militarily and economically [Sound familiar?] And that can never be done without injustice to the peoples under the thumb (or military boot) of the conquering ones in charge. So Rome may have called its imperial management of other peoples “pax romana,” but the pacified peoples themselves didn't experience it that way. Just look at the NT gospels for evidence of what one conquered people thought about Rome's control of their lives.

So it was not the Christians who brought about Rome's downfall, he claims. It was God, the ultimate critic, finally giving the empire its just deserts. “And what I say of this [Roman] people and of this republic I must be understood to think and say of the Athenians or any Greek state, of the Egyptians, or of the early Assyrian Babylon, and of every other nation great or small.... [They] are void of true justice.”

That, my fellow Americans, is THE question for our nation, infinitely (I chose that adverb knowingly) more serious than Iraq or Iran, social security or Medicare, our addiction to oil or our multiple other national addictions—and afflictions. Is Augustine's charge—“void of true justice”—true of us? We strut

our “justice” as the model for the world. We engineer regime-change to bring that justice to other nations. We can’t imagine that all other nations wouldn’t rejoice to get it. So we can’t imagine that Augustine is talking about us. It’s inconceivable. But might he nevertheless be right? That God weighs us too (not just Saddam Hussein, Kim Jong Il, Hamas) and finds us wanting? What did Augustine mean when he spoke of justice, the justice that empires never have? How so is that possibly true of us? I don’t know, and I sense that our entire nation doesn’t know. I’m confident that we’re all conditioned NOT to believe it. But what if it were indeed so? What if our confidence were part and parcel of the problem of injustice? We need to find out—and quickly.

Therefore, I am appointing an “Augustine Commission” of religious leaders and jurisprudence scholars—from both sides of the aisle and also from outside the USA—to run the Augustinian test on our own American nation, and to come up with recommendations. For if Augustine is right about us, then the most serious national threat we face is not the terrorists, dreadful as they are, but the God we acclaim on every dollar bill. That deity, despite our national mantra, is NOT blessing us at present. Many of you agree. Might Augustine’s diagnosis apply to us? What makes this urgent is that the opposite of God’s blessing is something terrifying, far more so than the terrorists. The ruins of Rome, Babylon, Ur of the Chaldees testify to it.

[There are doubtless more changes we might ring on our Abrahamic heritage. For now I’m struck by the supposed wisdom, God-given wisdom, of being nation, not empire. Should the Augustine Commission complete its work in good time, I’ll ask them to work on the Abrahamic item as well—messianism by message, not by military.]

AMOS

It is becoming increasingly clear that the prophet Amos can help us Americans see the larger picture of our nation today. As he saw in his day, so might we get beyond the surface, the superficial, in addressing our national problems.

Amos chapter 4:

“I gave you cleanness of teeth and lack of bread . . . yet you did not return to me.

I also withheld the rain from you . . . yet you did not return to me.

I smote you with blight and mildew . . .yet you did not return to me.

I sent among you a pestilence . . .yet you did not return to me.

I overthrew some of you [in a cataclysm] like Sodom and Gomorrah . . . yet you did not return to me.”

Remember, Amos is of the seed of Abraham. Consequently Muslims, Jews and Christians in America don't find him alien at the outset, though what he once said rattled chains—and still does. Yes, I know this may sound like violating the rubrics of church and state. But I'm not going to propose anything for anybody to “believe.” Remember my caveat above: no soteriology. Instead let's just reflect on whether his historical analysis, his “editorial” on precipice-problems of his day is not illuminating for us to get insight to the non-blessings we may be experiencing. You know the laundry list that's daily in the news. You are enacting one element of it right now as one side of the aisle rises to applaud some of my words, while the other side stays seated. We ARE a nation divided. To which Amos might say: “Did I not divide your nation . . . and yet....”

Amos would encourage us to add that divine “Did I not do it . . .” to every item on our list of un-blessings: Katrina, oil addiction, border crossing chaos, national budget insanely out of balance, body-bags coming back from Iraq, health care meltdown, drugs on the streets, 30 million (!) poverty people in the richest nation on earth, etc. Amos does not give us clues on how God might have engineered these natural or human-generated dilemmas. He doesn’t bother. That’s clearly trivial to him in view of his more urgent agenda. His point is don’t you notice not just “what all,” but “who all” you are facing? Facing is a good word here. Catastrophes are a face-to-face with God, he claims. Better might be the modern word interface, “the place where independent entities meet and act upon or communicate with each other.” [Webster 1997] Catastrophes, so Amos, are God-human interfaces. The rightful response from the human side is to ask: What’s the message in this catastrophe?

Old Adams and Old Eves regularly don’t even hear that they are being asked, and so they become the askers: “How can a good God ...?” But that’s ASKING a question, when, says Amos, we ought to be ANSWERING, answering the question addressed to us: “Why don’t you turn around? You’ll be 100% Humpty-Dumpty if you don’t.” No wonder blindness and deafness—even for folks with 20/20 clinical vision and equally healthy ears—is the standard Biblical diagnosis for folks facing catastrophes. They do not repent, turn around, but plow ahead toward the precipice. They just don’t see what’s going on. They just don’t hear the message. It is sheer folly to say “we can control our destiny,” as though we were the Lord of history, as though the divine-human interface didn’t exist. “The only way...the only way...the only way...is for the USA [to] continue to lead[the world].” That too is folly.

But we are a religious nation. In that sense our dollar bills do not lie. Granted, not all Americans have the same religion,

and some claim none. Yet the majority of us still concur about the divine-human interface of our personal and national histories. Therefore should the Augustine Commission [Lutherans take note. It's AC.] finish up both its Augustine and then its Abraham agendas, I'll ask them to address the one from Amos with its fundamental "turn around" verb, a.k.a. repentance. All three of these A's hang together.

There is a great historical precedent in our nation—from the presidential office—for attending to that. During our nation's Civil War, President Lincoln (also an Abraham!) called the nation to repentance as that cataclysm we inflicted upon ourselves unleashed its chaos. But Lincoln saw it with Amos-vision. It was not merely northern faces "meeting and acting upon" southern faces. It was a God-human interface with both blue and grey on every battlefield. God was "acting upon and communicating with" the entire nation. Lincoln, incidently the first ever Republican president, heard the message. It was just one vocable: Repent. I'll want the AC to have that on their agenda. Perhaps a separate commision is called for. Repentance is an item too dangerous to be pushed to the back-burner.

ABRAMOFF

The moral turpitude in our national government is an abomination. Why should we be surprised that God is not blessing us? We are prone to point "abroad [at] poverty, corruption, despair, organized crime, human trafficking and the drug trade." But the world points back at us saying "Physician, heal thysel." Investigative reporters dig out the facts.

Repentance begins at home. When just one repents, so say the Christian scriptures (and Hebrew and Muslim scriptures concur), "heaven rejoices." Confident of the truth of this, I am releasing immediately all the data on my own association with

Mr. Abramoff. His name nowadays signals the seamy side of capitalism in our nation with its invitation to greed. But that is just the tip of the iceberg, and the rest of us, the 6/7th of the iceberg beneath the surface, are all enmeshed in one way or the other. In the world's super-capitalist nation, there are 30 million of us who are in economic poverty. Abomination is the word for it. Yet our capitalist credo continues to whisper, even to capitalist millionaires of the past, billionaires now, that we all need "just a little bit more." The dollar bill we use daily is in constant conflict with God's name printed on it as the actual deity in whom we trust. The Abramoff attitude is everywhere. It's a huge non-blessing afflicting us.

I had intended to offer several paragraphs, seven of them, beginning with "keeping America competitive" in my first draft. But wiser counsel prevailed and "tonight I am setting out a better path." It is better because it goes deeper, a path more to the roots than what I had in those paragraphs, mainly, our national interface with God. Muslims, Christians and Jews all agree that from here our interface with one another unfolds. Foremost in our national story flowing from this primal interface is the blessing of freedom at the center of our national life. Ignoring the primal interface undermines human freedom. So yes, I am calling for "a revolution of conscience." That is the prerequisite to our growing as "a hopeful society" [cited 6x in the last page of the original address], the hallmark of which is "compassion and care for one another."

Lest you think again that I'm mixing church and state, I remind you that I am fulfilling an obligation, mandated by the US congress, reporting to you the "state of the union." The overall state of the union is not good. Deep down we all know that. Our dollar bill claims that we seek to be a "new order of the ages." In 1776 that was a feisty claim. Even religious. Most likely that common denominator of the national religion

was merely deist. It was lifted from the Christian scriptures, but read so broadly that it didn't rule out Jews. And wouldn't fence off citizens of other world religions. In fact, our nation's self-understanding at various junctures in our history has been replete with religious rhetoric. Manifest destiny, for example, from almost two centuries ago, is religious to the core. Manifest = epiphany. Destiny = eschatology.

It is not wrong for any nation to see God at work in its history. That's admitting the divine-human interface of all human history. Where it goes wrong is when a people claims their nation to be God, even to being the Savior, the "Heil" (as in "Heil Hitler") of the world. It goes wrong when it is the dollar that is almighty and people hang their hearts on that god. It is wrong when their surge for self-preservation, their paranoia for security, smothers their call to servanthood. Then the primal interface has been deserted—although it really can't be deserted, but can be ignored—and that's where nations go over the cliff. Amos would say that God is pushing even though they are fully exercising their own muscles with that last leap.

Abramoff is not the villain whose comeupance will redeem us all. He's our representative. Thoughtful post-World War II German theologians talked about "Gesamt-schuld," collective guilt carried by an entire nation, even by those who were resisters to Hitler all the way. Bonhoeffer (whose 100th birthday is this Saturday) said so too about himself. That is a thicker/deeper question than fits this occasion. But we will be a better nation when we address that Gesamtschuld issue and when we follow through on what such an admission, such a confession, calls for.

Abraham, Amos, Augustine are resources for healing the Abramoff-ism (= demonized Abrahamic), the manifold un-blessings

vexing our nation. That is the path I propose for my remaining years as your president. I shall aim to help us de-imperialize our nation. For me that means making you 300 million my primary care-agenda. It is not "isolationism" to see this as the president's main job, nor that of all Americans to "care" for all our people. It is folly to devise schemes to "keep America competitive" in the global economy and lose the souls (and bodies) of the people your government is called to care for. So "regime-change" also begins at home, "regime-change" in the way your lives are mis-ruled, in many cases terrorized and tyrannized, by the expanding set of un-blessings that afflict us. That means at the very outset affirmative action for all those 30 million whom your government and I your president are clearly failing. To signal realistically that shift to domestic policy, I intend to recall our troops from Iraq, if possible to have them all home by Passover and Easter.

To remove the fuse from Radical Islam, our sworn enemy, or to call its bluff, I am accepting with this action the challenge of Osama bin Laden. In real war any overture of the enemy must be considered. Either we will call his bluff, or he will indeed call off his armies. And if he does not, we are not without resources for whatever may follow. I have previously called such a withdrawal "defeatism," but it can also be repentance. Those who say "our nation has only one option—to stay in Iraq," are not listening to the message coming from our Abraham/Amos heritage. If you members of congress find that action to be a high crime and misdemeanor, you may impeach me.

Repentance, turning back from the precipice, is good government, fundamental to the new order of the ages that we claim as our own. I call on America to reclaim our Abraham/Amos heritage. Yes, it's always risky. But security in human history does NOT come from the barrel of a gun. Mao, Stalin, Hitler too, were mistaken. For me and many of you that Abraham/Amos

trajectory includes Augustine and Abraham Lincoln.

From the very beginning America has been a venture of faith. Though religiously tinted, it was fundamentally a political faith about the possibility of a new order of the ages in the secular world. The two interfaces—with God, with our fellow citizens—were the defining parameters. Because of the iffy-ness of the human side in those interfaces (even with the checks and balances built into our government) there never was any guarantee that this “new order of the ages” would survive the ages. No human institution is by definition immune to perversion. But for America’s founders it seemed plausible, seemed possible. Even after two centuries plus in our history, the jury is still out. The evidence today, at best, is still ambiguous. Yet it is from that AAAA heritage, focusing on the divine interface, that the venture continues to seem possible. That is whence security in human history comes, whence our nation’s security comes, as much or as little as there ever really is. So we believe, so we trust, when we say “In God we trust.”

Those are the grounds I reaffirm this evening and commend to you. They are the grounds for our becoming “a hopeful society.” We may also be hopeful that under these quadruple-A rubrics God will bless America. Good Night.

Op Ed