Abstract

Has the Iraq War hastened a theological crisis for the United States? Almost every major war in American history has provoked a period of soul searching about whether the moral purpose of the United States is either helped or hurt by war. This essay investigates the public’s moral response to the Iraq War through an irony at the heart of American Exceptionalism—that because many Americans believe there is something exceptional about their nation and its history, they also expect it to act morally. While we know that the public gave the Bush administration moral support from 9/11 through the first year of the Iraq War, public opinion polls from this period through to the present also suggest that Americans judged the actions of the government in light a moral code. This essay explores whether the Iraq War revealed the contours of an operational American public morality.

In April 2007, in a speech before the Chicago Council of World Affairs, Barack Obama scored the Bush Administration for bungling foreign relations. “We have seen the consequences of a foreign policy based on a flawed ideology and a belief that tough talk can replace real strength and vision.” But he strongly endorsed another ideology: “I reject the notion that the American moment has passed. I dismiss the cynics who say that this new century cannot be another when, in the words of President Franklin Roosevelt, we lead the world in battling immediate evils and promoting the ultimate good.” “I still believe,” Obama declared, “that America is the last, best hope of Earth. We just have to show the world why this is so.”

In his farewell address delivered a few days before Barack Obama’s inauguration, George W. Bush admitted that he suffered setbacks and made unpopular decisions, yet he
defended his wars on terrorism and Iraq by declaring that he spoke from a deep and abiding American tradition: ‘President Thomas Jefferson once wrote, ‘I like the dreams of the future better than the history of the past.’ As I leave the house he occupied two centuries ago, I share that optimism. America is a young country, full of vitality, constantly growing and renewing itself. And even in the toughest times, we lift our eyes to the broad horizon ahead.” \(^2\)

Two presidents, one liberal, the other conservative, both elected to lead the nation in wartime, one led the United States into war, the other has vowed to lead it out. While they disagree on the war in Iraq, they don’t necessarily disagree on a grander point—that the United States is special and therefore continues to be a moral nation.

Why? Essayist David Rieff contends that for both political parties and for most of the American public, ‘the argument goes undisputed that the world ‘needs’ (that extraordinarily loaded word being the one most commonly employed) American leadership and that, for its part, the U.S. has a ‘special’ (also a loaded word) role to play on the international scene. The American consensus has always been and remains that we are not an empire in any traditional sense, but rather the last best hope of humanity—which, coincidentally or not, also happens to be the most powerful nation in the world.’ \(^3\)

Rieff observes that if the Iraq War had gone better, the liberals now opposing it would still be championing it as they had in the beginning. ‘The reason for this, in [Rieff’s] view, is not bad faith or (out-of-the-ordinary) hypocrisy on the part of Democrats, but rather that, again, a consensus about the U.S. role in the world unites most of the right and most of the liberal-left in this country, and that this view is
grounded in, and would collapse in ruins absent of, the theology of American
Exceptionalism.”

Rieff’s critique echoes a common interpretation that Americans are afflicted with
a form of moral chauvinism. As Andrew Kohut and Bruce Stokes wrote recently,
“Nothing is more vexing to foreigners than Americans’ belief that America is a shining
city on a hill.” Near the beginning of the last American foreign policy disaster, the
Vietnam War, U.S. senator J. William Fulbright launched a scathing indictment of
American Exceptionalism in his book The Arrogance of Power. Like Rieff, Fulbright
also believed that there was religious dimension to American delusions of grandeur.
Unlike Rieff who characterized this religiosity as more a weakness for moralizing,
Fulbright connected it directly to a dangerous strand of divine intervention. “Power tends
to confuse itself with virtue and a great nation is peculiarly susceptible to the idea that its
power is a sign of God’s favor, conferring upon it a special responsibility for other
nations—to make them richer and happier and wiser, to remake them, that is, in its own
shining image. Power confuses itself with virtue and tends also to take itself for
omnipotence. Once imbued with the idea of a mission, a great nation easily assumes that
it has the means as well as the duty to do God’s work. The Lord, after all, surely would
not choose you as His agent and then deny you the sword with which to work His will.”

Indeed, in this era of secularization with its consequential decline in deference to
secular as well as religious authority, Americans seem uniquely susceptible to a kind of
pious patriotism. When faced with the war in Iraq one is tempted to ask, have
Americans learned anything since Fulbright wrote his prophetic book?
Thus, Rieff suggests that if there has been God-talk in the United States, the most important discussion might not be between the American people and their national creed. Despite the inevitable wrangling over the “lessons” of the war, Rieff argues that this basic continuity between liberals and conservatives reflects a deeper American faith that transcends tragedies like Iraq. I find it significant that he calls this a theology, not least because I think he employs the term to suggest a system of beliefs that are ostensibly moral but stand apart from any particular religion and, perhaps beyond any independent form of judgment. However, a theology refers to a discussion among people about the god they pledge their allegiance to. Therefore, a theology of American Exceptionalism might also be understood as a discussion among the American people about how best to interpret their shared national experience. Rather than seeing a theology of American Exceptionalism as leading inevitably toward a national form of moral chauvinism, we might also imagine that it describes the way Americans apply their experience as a way to judge the actions of the nation and its leaders—the exercise of a public morality.

Using the Iraq War as the focal point, I would like to explore whether the American public’s reaction to the war illustrated that even if the public believes the nation is exceptional that belief does not necessarily lead to blind patriotism. American exceptionalism might also provide the foundation for moral judgment. My question is this: If we can agree that war is a moral crisis and therefore wars provoke expressions of public morality, then what can we conclude about expressions of public morality provoked by the Iraq War?

In addressing this question, I want to engage an argument made by Richard Bernstein in his 2005 book entitled The Abuse of Evil. Bernstein contended that the Bush
administration and its neo-conservative supporters peddled an “uncritical or unreflective appeal to objective certainty, absolutes, and rigid dualisms” perpetrating a “dangerous abuse of evil.” Rather than a vigorous discussion worthy of “complex and precarious world,” Bernstein contends that public discourse “stifled thinking” about the morality of the war. Bernstein ended his essay with a plea: he wanted “ordinary citizens…to oppose the political abuse of evil, challenge the misuse of absolutes, expose false and misleading claims to moral certainty, and argue that we cannot deal with the complexity of the issues we confront by appealing to—or imposing—simplistic dichotomies.”

Did the American public rise to the occasion? In searching for an answer, I relied on the historiographical debate on American civil religion. I am well aware that there has never been a scholarly consensus about what civil religion is or how it functions. However, it seems to me that the utility of this idea lies in the way it suggests the construction and operation of public morality through the interplay of religion and politics, faith and experience. Even though conflicting interpretations of civil religion can obscure an easy understanding of public morality—we have yet to move to Rousseau’s idea of a civic religion—I think part of civil religion’s potential lies in the way it explicates how a diverse population can feel a sense of communion with each other and their nation. Historian William H. McNeil argues: “In human society…belief matters most. Evidence supporting belief is largely generated by actions undertaken in accordance with the belief. This is a principle long familiar to students of religion. In Christian terms, faith comes first, works follow. The primacy of faith is equally real for the various civil religions that since the eighteenth century have come to provide the practical basis for nearly all of the world’s governments.”

Therefore I use civil religion as a foundation for this essay because it both hints at and questions the way an American public morality functions. I will first establish a general working model for civil religion and how it relates to a notion of American Exceptionalism. I will then use this model to investigate the initial debate over the morality of the Iraq War. Finally, I will use data from polls on American identity, foreign policy, and American perceptions of the nation, its institutions, and its history, to suggest that in this instance the American public might have illustrated a capacity not merely to bestow moral authority on the state but also the ability to evaluate how that moral authority was exercised. In short, the Iraq War revealed the contours of an operational American public morality.

AN EXCEPTIONAL NATION?

In a classic essay from Arthur Schlesinger, Jr. entitled, “America: Experiment or Destiny?” the great historian smartly addressed how American Exceptionalism took shape amidst an understanding that Americans had of their own grave moral failings. From the start of settlements in the New World, and especially among the Puritans, two traditions defined the American experience: one saw humanity as inherently depraved; a second saw the new world as an opportunity for redemption. Thus, with his characteristically wry style, Schlesinger noted that “the New Englanders felt they had been called from hearth and home to endure unimaginable rigor and ordeal in a dangerous land; so they supposed someone of importance had called them, and for important reasons.”11 This view gained credence through experience. The American Revolution cut the U.S. loose from the old world thus affirming that this improbable experiment just might have providential design. The Civil War greatly encouraged this
interpretation by clearing away the greatest of all national sins, slavery. And by the late
nineteenth and early twentieth century, Americans had already begun to distinguish
themselves as the most religious of the technologically advanced societies in the world.

While never claiming to be innocent in the pursuit of political ends, Americans
had come to believe during the twentieth century that considering the other options
available, their experiment seemed to offer the last best hope for the world. It was moral.
This was not, though, simply a normative conclusion but, as Schlesinger explained, a
motivation to do better, to be more moral. “[The Founding Fathers] bequeathed to us
standards by which to set our course and judge our performance—and, since they were
exceptional men, the standards have not been rendered obsolescent even by the second
law of thermodynamics. The Declaration of Independence and the Constitution establish
goals, imply commitments, and measure failures…The conflict between creed and reality
has been a powerful motive in the quest for justice.”

However, this creed had to be made operational, not merely sound good. As
intellectual historian Wilfred McClay explains: “a living creed is a distillation and
codification of beliefs that are grounded elsewhere—embodied in the habits and mores
and institutions of the people. The words have to be made flesh and dwell among us.
Without such quickening, a creed soon becomes a dead letter.” So, for example, even
though the Vietnam War resembled the kind of military disaster and political
embarrassment that had befallen other empires, many Americans saw it as another test
the United States had to endure because the nation was “exceptional.” Yet what did this
test reveal? What did this particular experience mean?
The moral crisis provoked by Vietnam reinvigorated a debate over American civil religion. The most popular and enduring legacy of that debate was captured in a 1967 essay by sociologist Robert Bellah. In the midst of the war, Bellah attempted to identify the positive traditions in American thought that he hoped might remind the nation of its “better angels.” He explained that for generations, Americans had come to accept a common moral purpose of their nation. He described this collective faith as “an understanding of the American experience in the light of ultimate and universal reality…[and] at its best [it] is a genuine apprehension of universal and transcendent religious reality as seen in or one could almost say, as revealed through the experience of the American people.” While not the first person to note that America had a civil religion, he was especially astute at illustrating how it functioned in American life. His argument was fairly straightforward: civil religion was and could continue to be a tangible source for judgment as well as inspiration based on historical experience. Such experiences were not random, but widely considered by generations of Americans to be foundational—they included the Puritan covenant in the new world, the writing of the Declaration of Independence and the Constitution, Abraham Lincoln’s magnanimity during the Civil War, and the sacrifices made in World War II. Thus, the collective power of such experiences provided a moral standard by which to measure the actions of the United States.

Thus, what civil religion provides, as Bellah made clear, was metaphorical power. Civil religion captures and reduces to forms that are accessible to the public a way to view political truths through their history and experience. Moral crises, especially wars,
become opportunities to reaffirm national truths—as Richard Hughes say, these are the
myths America lives by.  

In his original essay, Bellah suggested that the United States had engaged in three
“times of trial,” the first being the struggle for independence, the second the struggle
against slavery, and the third acting responsibly in a “revolutionary world.” Each trial
represented a period of moral reckoning; such moral reckoning had often sparked
theological crises. However because religious denominations are too different to come to
terms with each other over such large moral crises, the significance of civil religion
becomes apparent in such moments. Civil religion provides a way for Americans to
imagine they are engaged in profound moral debates over good and evil, and right and
wrong, though without necessarily having to contend with what those terms mean in any
specific theological sense.  

Civil religion can undoubtedly function too easily as a way to appease an anxious
people who crave solutions to immediate problems and aspire to create legacies that
transcend the their own historical conditions. As diplomatic historian Walter Hixson
asserts: “Masses of citizens consciously and unconsciously consent to Myth of America
identity as they repeatedly engage in such rituals as pledging allegiance to the flag,
singing the national anthem…[Thus] by affirming the Myth of America, the wars, even
unpopular wars, paved the way for the next wave of pathological violence.” In short,
civil religion can provide a way from Americans to believe they are soldiers and saints.  

Moreover, civil religion has long been a useful idea in the United States because it
feeds off a particular kind of American religiosity. Such religiosity undoubtedly
influences both the construction moral values and their use in the evaluation of the state.
Therefore, when we say that we know Americans are religious, that statement has implications for the construction of civil religion. According to a PEW research poll published in 2006, 67% of Americans agree that the United States is a Christian nation; 78% believe the Bible is the word of God; and a vast majority either agree or completely agree that with the statement, “I never doubt the existence of God.” Since the 1980s, polls have consistently shown that most Americans believe that religious influence is waning and that this trend is a bad thing for the nation. Why? Judging from poll data, Americans use churches to work through questions as diverse as the Second Coming of Jesus to the war in Iraq. Moreover, a clear majority of Americans--around 60%--report that religion is very important in their lives. If we can conclude that Americans are religious and believe that religion should play a role in public life, because it matters to them personally and because it serves as a way to make sense of contemporary events, then we might suggest that Americans bring religion to bear in their national experience. It’s not that their political faith is religious or that they see the nation as a god, but that because they are religious they evaluate whether the actions of the nation are moral with a language that sounds religious. As Bellah suggested: “The will of the people is not itself the criterion of right and wrong. There is a higher criterion in terms of which this will can be judged.”

Robert Wuthnow, a scholar in the sociology of religion, remarks that we shouldn’t be surprised that people who seek personal purpose and existential understanding through religion, also ask similar questions about their community and their nation. In other words, considering the high level of religious faith among Americans, it is no wonder that public religiosity in the U.S. can appear so pronounced. Wuthnow notes: “America’s
civil religion portrays its people, often in comparison with people in other countries, as
God-fearing souls, as champions of religious liberty, and in many instances as a nation
that God has consciously chosen to carry out a special mission in the world.”

Indeed, one manifestation of American civil religion is global meliorism. Diplomatic historian Norman Graebner explains, “Meliorism presumes that the world is not hopelessly corrupt, but rather that it can, through proper leadership and motivation, advance morally, politically, and economically. This optimistic view of the world became endemic to this country's early presumptions of human progress and the concomitant conviction that the United States, because of the universal validity of its institutions, was ideally constituted to lead the world toward an ever-improving future.” While this description might sound like a neat summary of George W. Bush’s idealism, Graebner wrote this in 2000 to describe a view among foreign policy elites who sought to capitalize on the end of the Cold War. As neo-conservative Joshua Murcahvik declared in the early 1990s: “The place to start is with the assertion that democracy is our creed; that we believe all human beings are entitled to its blessings; and that we are prepared to do what we can to help others achieve it.”

In his book Promised Land, Crusader State, Walter McDougall notes that in the post-cold war world, meliorism could seem reasonable for “it assumes that the United States alone possesses the power, prestige, technology, wealth, and altruism needed to reform whole nations. It assumes that the U.S. government, having tamed its frontier and helped its people achieve unprecedented wealth and freedom, having democratized Germany and Japan and rebuilt Europe, having led the free world to victory over fascism and Communism, knows how to deploy its assets to lift up the poor and oppressed.
Finally, it assumes that Americans want their government to dedicate their lives, fortunes, and sacred honor to the purpose.” Thus the belief echoed by both Obama and Bush that America is the world’s last best hope might appear idealistic, but it is an idealism understood in light of the American experience as a moral experiment. McDougall is also quick to add: “however well meant, Global Meliorism is the least effective and in some ways the most arrogant of all our diplomatic traditions.”

Anatol Lieven echoes this last point in a book provocatively entitled, *America Right or Wrong*. Lieven’s reasoning rests on two assumptions: first, that the United States, through its economic and military capacity, is the rightful heir to other great empires (Rome and China); and second, that the United States, through its national “creed,” could be a force for almost universal good in the world. However, Lieven also believes that a kind of theology of American Exceptionalism blinds Americans to real enemies and instead creates a kind of universalized notion of evil lurking everywhere--except, of course, within American system of beliefs. “The ideas of American civic nationalism are, happily, much more positive and valuable ones than those of Soviet communism--but that does not change the fact that they cannot be seriously questioned without endangering the stability of the entire structure. Their absolutist character influences in turn the underlying ideology of American foreign policy, making it more difficult for even highly educated and informed Americans to form a detached and objective view of that policy; for to do so would also risk undermining the bonds uniting diverse Americans at home.” In short, America, like communism, could become a god that cannot fail—an American form of ideological maximalism. Lieven believed his characterization described the foreign policy of George W. Bush.
IRAQ AND AMERICAN CIVIL RELIGION

Accounts of how the Bush administration and the neocons reacted to 9/11 have become legendary. Jim Wallis, the editor of the leftwing religious magazine *Sojourners* recalled how neocon William Kristol told him “that Europe was now unfit to lead because it was ‘corrupted by secularism,’ as was the developing world, which was ‘corrupted by poverty.’ Only the United States could provide the ‘moral framework to govern a new world order.’” Of course, the Iraq War became part of that order. And many people in and outside of Washington believed it was moral. However, to understand how public morality operated during this period, we might consider the two sides of civil religion—on one side is the moral authority the public grants the president and other agents of civil religion; a second side is the way the public can judge the actions of these agents within civil religion. From September 2001 through the winter of 2003-2004, the public invested faith in their president.

On September 14, 2001, President Bush transformed into the “minister-in-chief” as he gave an address from the pulpit of the National Cathedral that was both reverent and resolute. Here was a moment central to how this “trial,” as the president referred to it, would develop. Within the first few sentences of remarks on this National Day of Prayer and Remembrance, Bush said, “We come before God to pray for the missing and then dead, and for those who love them.” Any action taken by the government following the attacks three days earlier would be to redeem Americans lost and those wounded by their loss. With echoes of Abraham Lincoln’s most famous addresses—at Gettysburg and the Second Inaugural—Bush intoned: “God’s signs are not always the ones we look for. We learn in tragedy that his purposes are not always our own. Yet the prayers of
suffering, whether in our homes or in this great cathedral, are known and heard, and understood….This world He created is of moral design. Grief and tragedy and hatred are only for a time. Goodness, remembrance, and love have no end. And the Lord of life holds all who die, and all who mourn.”

We might wonder what the president of a political rather than a theocratic nation was doing speaking about God and country in a cathedral. Of course, Bush simply participated in a very long tradition of American presidents assuming the role of a national “priest” at a time of crisis. He ministered to the nation. As religious historian Martin Marty suggests: “Presidents could not be presidents if their main function was to call God down in judgment on his nation’s policies.”

Wilfred McClay contends that Bush’s speech at the National Cathedral “touched, with remarkable grace and poise, all the classic civil-religious bases.” One passage in particular summoned what McClay offers as the primary purpose of civil religion—to elucidate why we might be called to sacrifice for our country. Noting that Bush invoked Paul’s Epistle to the Romans, McClay quoted the president’s conclusion:

As we have been assured, neither death nor life, nor angels nor principalities nor power, nor things present nor things to come, nor height nor depth, can separate us from God’s love. May He bless the souls of the departed. May He comfort our own. And may He always guide our country. God bless America.

Indeed, McClay observes something would have been amiss if Bush had not justified the nation’s response to the attack by calling upon a moral understanding of the nation’s purpose. Thousands of Americans had just perished and thousands more would be called upon to sacrifice their lives to redeem those deaths. Under such an imperative, a president has to call on resources that go beyond the temporal and even the political. After all, McClay argues, “The state is something more than a secular institution. Because it must sometimes call upon its citizens for acts of sacrifice and self-overcoming,
and not only in times of war, it must be able to draw on spiritual resources, deep attachments, reverent memories of the past, and visions of the direction of history to do its appropriate work. Without such feelings, no nation can long endure, let alone wage a long and difficult struggle.\textsuperscript{31}

Religious historian William J. Abraham points out it was not Bush’s Christian faith but his faith in America that best characterized his motivation between 9/11 and the Iraq War. In an essay entitled, “The Political Theology of President George W. Bush” Abraham writes: “President Bush is a moderate, even liberal, evangelical shaped by the spiritual warmth, the ad hoc social activism, the reserved moralism, the friendly fellowship, the wariness of alcohol, and the theological fuzziness of United Methodism in Texas.”\textsuperscript{32} Abraham suggests that what helped Bush embrace the neocon mission to spread democracy was not his faith in God but his faith in American civil religion. “The crucial point to observe here,” Abraham contends, “is that the sharp distinction between good and evil fits with the prophetic, transformationist side of civil religion…This is the liberationist, emancipator side of his theology in full song.”\textsuperscript{33}

So while there was little evidence linking the crisis sparked by 9/11 to the war waged in Iraq, civil religion could explain the blurring lines between moral imperatives—the public believed the president in a moral sense when he framed the entire period as fight against forces of “evil” that threatened a force for “good,” the United States. In his farewell address, President Bush reiterated his moral argument: “I have often spoken to you about good and evil. This has made some uncomfortable. But good and evil are present in this world, and between the two there can be no compromise. Murdering the innocent to advance an ideology is wrong every time, everywhere. Freeing people from
oppression and despair is eternally right. This Nation must continue to speak out for justice and truth. We must always be willing to act in their defense and to advance the cause of peace.”

Ira Chernus argues that Americans accepted Bush’s moral argument because it addressed an anxiety that has persisted since the Vietnam War. Americans, Chernus contends, “could act out their sense of internal coherence by proving that they were not weak, that they had not spiritually surrendered, that the Vietnam War had not robbed Americans of their moral strength, spiritual discipline, and will to sacrifice.” As a religious scholar, Chernus directs particular attention to the way the neo-conservative philosophy of the Bush administration developed “in a sphere many would call religious.” Thus if this period came to resemble a religious crusade, it did so in the name of the American creed, rather than any particular church. And therefore Iraq became “a crucial test case of Americans’ patriotic dedication to country.”

Indeed, American public morality developed at this time not merely outside American churches but in conflict with many of them. The *Christian Century* reported in May 2003 that “opinion polls showed that the spiritual movement opposing the U.S.-led invasion of Iraq had little impact on churchgoers, much less on the American public—both overwhelmingly support both the war and President Bush.” Mark O’Keefe cited a Gallup poll that recorded two out of every three Americans who attend church at least weekly supported the war. A PEW study registered 62% of Catholics and an equal number of Protestants supporting the war, and 77% of evangelical Christians behind the war effort. The O’Keefe noted that while “leaders of mainline Protestant denominations, included the Episcopal, Evangelical, Lutheran, and United Methodist churches, opposed
war, and Pope John Paul II worked passionately against it...the flocks disagreed with their shepherds.”

Two recent statistical studies support the notion that religion was an important factor in support for the war. Corwin E. Smidt identified “religious salience” as a variable that helped explain who would support key initiatives in the war. Smidt defined this term as “composite variable incorporating whether the respondent reports being a member of a church, whether he/she attended church in the last seven days, the extent to which the respondent reported religion was important in his/her life, and whether the respondent believed that religion can answer today’s problems.” He concluded that “respondents who exhibited a high level of religious salience were more likely than those for whom religion was not important to state that removing Saddam [Hussein] was necessary to achieve disarmament.” Religious salience also useful in identifying those respondents who favored an invasion of Iraq and who believed that Islam strongly encourages violence. Smidt suggested that in his study “religious variables generally rivaled political variables and generally exceeded social-demographic variables in explaining differences on such issues [as discussed above].” However, Smidt does not explain why a person’s religious salience would be predictive of the kind of world view that would lead him or her to these foreign policy positions.

A more recent study might clarify the connection. Paul Froese and F. Carson Mencken argue that such support for the Iraq War came in part from the effect of a “sacralization ideology.” They define the term as “the extent to which individuals feel that their religion should influence and be a part of public policy debates.” And therefore, Froese and Mencken hypothesized that “those who support stronger ties
between faith and public policy are those who are most sympathetic to religious arguments used to justify the use of military force in a proactive foreign policy, particularly in the Middle East.” They examined data collected in the Baylor Religion Survey from 2005 and tested for religious effects on war attitudes. What they discovered reflected the basic operation of civil religion. They concluded that “President Bush’s framing of the Iraq War as a struggle of good versus evil appealed to a certain segment of the population that is not fully identified as Republican or conservative. Instead, Americans who feel that their religious faith should be more influential in political matters have placed their trust in President Bush and, in turn, lend their support to the Iraq War.”

Taken together, the combination of religious salience and sacralization ideology offer insight into how public morality can be expressed in terms that are not solely religious or political, but both. That combination is best understood through the idea of civil religion. Thus it was not surprising that at least a few religious leaders attacked the existence of civil religion as much as Bush’s use of it. Evangelical minister and editor of the leftwing progressive journal Sojourners Magazine Jim Wallis illustrated this in an article entitled, “Dangerous Religion: George W. Bush’s theology of empire.” While Wallis devoted considerable space to critiquing what he saw as Bush’s abuse of Christianity, he focused his editorial wrath on the American faith: “Bush seems to make this mistake over and over again—confusing nation, church, and God. The resulting theology is,” Wallis emphasized, “more American civil religion than Christian faith.” Wallis largely confirmed studies suggesting a willingness among Christians to buy their president’s moral argument. He ended with a warning: “American Christians will have to
make some difficult choices. Will we stand in solidarity with the worldwide church, the international body of Christ—or with our own American government?” Such a choice, it seems to me, was ultimately proven to be a false one. Americans did not need to find the “right” kind of judgment within their churches or from their government, instead they found it within their nation. 39

PUBLIC MORALITY AND PUBLIC JUDGMENT

In mid-March 2003, U.S. combat operations in Iraq began. On May 1, President Bush flew aboard the aircraft carrier the Abraham Lincoln to make his ill-fated declaration “mission accomplished.” A few months later, in August 2003, the war grew increasingly sectarian and began to appear unmanageable for U.S. troops and their leaders. Not surprisingly, as the images and reports of the war darkened, public perceptions of the war darkened too. And so by the winter of 2003-2004 when opinion polls began to suggest growing dissatisfaction and then outright opposition to the war among the American people, we might ask whether this reaction simply reflected the fickleness of a public that had once been as convinced as its president that the war would be easy and fast? In light of the moral support the public initially gave the president and his mission, could the public demonstrate moral evaluation of the government without undermining the legitimacy of its moral code?

In reviewing polls about national identity as well as polls regarding the war in Iraq, I was interested in the following questions: did American responses to questions about their nation indicate a level of moral awareness that was not merely a product of cynicism about the war? Could these polls suggest that Americans hold themselves and
their nation up to a moral standard? Is there something we might identify as public morality?

The first two tables below reflect a narrative review of the ISSP 2003 National Identity Survey. I grouped American responses into two tables: the first table lists categories in which American responses ranked the United States at the top or near to the top relative to other nations; the second table lists those categories in which American responses placed the United States in an undistinguished position relative to other nations.

The results indicate that Americans have a great deal of pride about those features of their nation that are most abstract. For example, table 1 suggests that Americans like being American and that this reaction is a reflection of what Arthur Schlesinger referred to as the American creed. Americans have high opinion of their nation’s democracy, its institutions, and achievements. However, do such responses reveal a patriotism that slides toward national chauvinism?

Table 2 suggest that the admiration Americans have for their country has limits. While Americans are proud to claim their national identity, there was a good deal of ambiguity about what it means to be American. Americans like living in the United States but do not necessarily feel close to their nation nor do they think it impossible for people who do not share U.S. customs and traditions to become fully American. Further, Americans claim that they can feel as ashamed of their nation as any other nation, and they rejected the idea that they would support their country even when it is wrong. Perhaps the key category for the purposes of testing whether a public morality exists is whether Americans think the U.S. should follow its own interests even if this leads to
conflicts with other nations. Americans said no. As Andrew Kohut and Bruce Stokes of PEW have noted, “contrary to widespread misconceptions, America’s pride in their country is not evangelistic…In reality, [Americans] are far more likely to say ‘We think the American way is great; we assume you want to be like us, but, if you don’t, that’s not really our concern.’”40
Table 1: Categories that suggest American pride

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Question</th>
<th>Very/Agree Strongly</th>
<th>Rank For ‘Very’ out of 35</th>
<th>Fairly/Agree</th>
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<tr>
<td>How proud are you of U.S. history</td>
<td>61.4</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>30.8</td>
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<tr>
<td>How proud are you of U.S. fair and equal treatment of all groups in society</td>
<td>25.2</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>49.4</td>
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<td>How important is it to have U.S. citizenship</td>
<td>82.8</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>13.2</td>
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<tr>
<td>How proud are you to be American</td>
<td>79.8</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>17.9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>How important is it to respect political institutions and laws</td>
<td>72.2</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>23.9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>I would rather be a citizen of the US than of any other country</td>
<td>74.7</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>15.3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Generally speaking the U.S. is better than most other countries</td>
<td>40.7</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>38.1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>How proud are you of the way democracy works in the U.S.</td>
<td>33.0</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>55.7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>How proud are you of U.S. influence in the world</td>
<td>22.8</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>54.9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>How proud are you of U.S. economic achievements</td>
<td>39.1</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>47.6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>How proud are you of U.S. scientific and technological achievements</td>
<td>58.8</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>36.8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>How proud are you of the U.S. armed forces</td>
<td>75.8</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>18.1</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Table 2: Categories that suggest a lack of hubris

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Question</th>
<th>Very/Agree Strongly</th>
<th>Rank For ‘Very’ out of 35</th>
<th>Fairly/Agree</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>How important is it to have lived in the US for most of one’s life</td>
<td>58.6</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>22.5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>How important is it to feel American</td>
<td>68.2</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>23.8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>How close do you feel to your country</td>
<td>52.4</td>
<td>12</td>
<td>37.1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>How important is it to be born in the U.S.</td>
<td>57</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>20.5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>There are some things about the U.S. that make me ashamed of the U.S.</td>
<td>18.2</td>
<td>14</td>
<td>37.9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The world would be a better place if people from other countries were more like the U.S.</td>
<td>15.9</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>24.7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>People should support their country even if the country is wrong</td>
<td>11.3</td>
<td>12</td>
<td>25.1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>I am often less proud of the U.S. than I would like to be</td>
<td>5.9</td>
<td>10</td>
<td>26.1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>How proud are you of the U.S. social security system</td>
<td>12.9</td>
<td>14</td>
<td>41.8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>For certain problems, like environment pollution, international bodies should have the right to enforce solutions</td>
<td>19.3</td>
<td>24</td>
<td>42.9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The U.S. should follow its own interests, even if this leads to conflicts with other nations</td>
<td>12.9</td>
<td>20</td>
<td>34.1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>It is impossible for people who do not share U.S. customs and traditions to become fully American</td>
<td>9.2</td>
<td>33</td>
<td>23.6</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

1 Thirty-five nations in the total sample.
2 For this category, the United States ranked 16th.
3 For this category, 32% of Americans responded that they “disagree” that people should support their country even if it is wrong, ranking it 15th in this category.
4 There is a three way tie for 14th place in this category.
5 For this category, Americans did not overwhelmingly reject this choice, with 12.1% disagreeing and 4.8% disagreeing strongly.
6 For this category, 36.8 Americans disagreed, ranking the U.S. 4th.
I considered the results from the ISSP National Identity Survey in combination with a PEW study that asked Americans more specifically about U.S. foreign policy. The PEW data suggested that from the end of the Cold War to the middle of the Iraq War, American support for a tough military posture had declined, as had feeling of patriotism and national confidence. Taken together, the PEW categories portray a people who lent support to their leaders but also removed that support when the actions of those leaders ran counter to a set of moral expectations.

PEW Trends in Political Values and Core Attitudes, 1987-2007

Table 3: Its best for the future of our country to be active in world affairs

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Option</th>
<th>End of Cold War</th>
<th>2003</th>
<th>2007</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Agree</td>
<td>90</td>
<td>90</td>
<td>86</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Completely agree</td>
<td>50</td>
<td>50</td>
<td>42</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Table 4: The best way to ensure peace is through military strength

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Option</th>
<th>End of Cold War</th>
<th>2003</th>
<th>2007</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Agree</td>
<td>61</td>
<td>53</td>
<td>49</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Disagree</td>
<td>36</td>
<td>45</td>
<td>47</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Table 5: We should get even with any country that tries to take advantage of the U.S.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Option</th>
<th>End of Cold War</th>
<th>2001</th>
<th>2007</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Agree</td>
<td>53</td>
<td>61</td>
<td>40</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Disagree</td>
<td>40</td>
<td>32</td>
<td>54</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Table 6: We should be willing to fight for our country…right or wrong

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Option</th>
<th>Republicans</th>
<th>Democrats</th>
<th>Veteran Household</th>
<th>Non-Veteran Household</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Agree</td>
<td>63</td>
<td>44</td>
<td>60</td>
<td>48</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Disagree</td>
<td>32</td>
<td>52</td>
<td>34</td>
<td>47</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Table 7: Patriotism and Self-Confidence

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Statement</th>
<th>2002</th>
<th>2003</th>
<th>2007</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>I am very patriotic</td>
<td>54</td>
<td>56</td>
<td>49</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Agree: As Americans we can always find a way to solve our problems</td>
<td>74</td>
<td>66</td>
<td>58</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Table 8: Preemptive Force can be justified

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Option</th>
<th>May 2003</th>
<th>December 2004</th>
<th>January 2007</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Often</td>
<td>22</td>
<td>14</td>
<td>16</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sometimes</td>
<td>45</td>
<td>46</td>
<td>39</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Rarely</td>
<td>17</td>
<td>21</td>
<td>24</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Never</td>
<td>13</td>
<td>14</td>
<td>17</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

The combined results of the surveys from ISSP and the PEW create a composite portrait that seems to suggest a people able to distinguish between, as Schlesinger pointed out, reality and their creed. For when Iraq began to go badly, Americans seemed at least to begin to wonder if the nation’s actions were not undermining the moral arguments made for being in Iraq in the first place.

Daniel Yankovich points out in 2006 essay in Foreign Affairs, Americans have the self-awareness to acknowledge “that the rest of the world sees the United States in a negative light.” Many Americans believe that the United States is seen as “arrogant” (74 percent), “pampered and spoiled” (73 percent), a “bully” (63 percent), and a “country to be feared” (63 percent). However, this understanding does not undermine American opinion the meaning of the nation itself, which many continue to see in a positive light as a “free and democratic country” (81 percent), a “country of opportunity for everyone” (80 percent), and country generous to other people (72 percent) and a strong leader (69 percent).43
LESSONS OF IRAQ?

Perhaps most importantly for the function of public morality, as the initial reasons for the war in Iraq began to fall apart—from the failure to find “weapons of mass destruction” (WMDs) to the notion of Saddam Hussein as threat to American security—Americans rejected every moral reason made by the Bush Administration for the war. Americans seemed able to distinguish a valid moral argument from an invalid one. For example, Yankelovich explains that since 2003 the “public’s support for promotion democracy abroad has…seriously eroded.” According to two public opinion surveys conducted in mid-2005 and early 2006, pessimism about such a lofty goals is a product of a wholesale defection of support for the government’s handling of Iraq. The Bush administration not only lost liberals and moderates, but also suffered serious losses among Republicans and its most religious supporters. Only 20 percent of respondents thought that the goal of spreading democracy to other countries was “very important.” Only 22 percent said that they felt the United States had the ability to create a democracy in Iraq.  

In the many polls taken recently, it is clear that Americans regard Iraq as a great accident. In May 2003, 74 percent of Americans believed that the Iraq war was the right decision and 67 percent supported the idea of pre-emptive war. By January 2007, 40 percent viewed the war as the right thing to do, while 55 percent still supported the right of the U.S. to use pre-emption. We might consider continued support for the war to be less a moral argument for the war than a moral obligation to support the troops—in 2007, 84 percent have very favorable and favorable views on the military—and rebuild a country the United States has destroyed.
By 2005, then, Americans had begun to create a moral evaluation of the Iraq War. When asked about the idea of democratization, 74 percent said they now reject that as a viable rationale for war and 72 percent said they felt worse about democratization in light of the lessons of the Iraq war. Americans did not mind democratization as a foreign policy goal, with 49 percent saying it was somewhat important, but only 38 percent agreed that the “as a rule, U.S. foreign policy should encourage governments to be more democratic.” They rejected the use of military force to overthrow a dictator—55 percent to 35 percent—and also rejected the idea that the U.S. should threaten military intervention if a foreign government doesn’t enact democratic reforms, with 66 percent saying such as strategy does more harm than good. An almost equal number said that the accusation that the U.S. is too quick to resort to war had been either totally or partially justified.46

More generally, Americans showed concerns about the image of the United States in the era of the Iraq war. Americans worry that there is growing hatred of the U.S. in Muslim countries; they worry about losing the trust and friendship of other countries; and they agree that showing more respect for views and needs of other countries would enhance U.S. security. They worry that their national preoccupation with national security can end up damaging the liberty the government is acting to protect. And over 60 percent said the worry either a lot or somewhat that documented acts of torture may damage the reputation of their nation. Tellingly Americans gave their grades of “C” and worse in the category of living up to American ideals of human rights and justice in the conduct of foreign policy. The nation fared slightly better in helping to create democracy in the rest of the world, scoring 50 percent in the grades of “A” and “B.”47
These numbers suggest that Americans may have so sort of moral code by which to evaluate crises like Iraq. What is it? Consider the collective memory of Americans as a basic foundation. When Americans were asked to name the greatest achievements and failures of their nation and its government, their answers revealed a structure of historical references that suggests the utility of a national creed. The nation and the government received their highest marks on achievements in science and technology. However, the second most referenced achievement was winning peace in World War II and the Cold War. That choice becomes more significant when compared with the greatest failure for the nation and the government—Vietnam. In the category of “our greatest failures” Americans cited “war/the use of force” in Vietnam, and other “policing” efforts, and the “use of power/influence on the world” as the single greatest failure of the nation. For the government, “war/foreign policy” topped the list, with Vietnam being the clearest manifestation of a failed foreign policy. One might see these answers as confirmation that Americans like only those wars they can win. However, I think the picture this poll in particular offers in more complicated. Americans are most proud of those achievements that highlight what they think best reflects their overwhelming affection for the nation’s ideals. When asked what were the major reasons for America’s success over 80 percent named the Constitution, free elections, and the free enterprise system. Between 65 and 70 percent cited cultural diversity, a free press, the character of the American people, and God’s will. An even percentage of people (41 percent) credited American success on the separation of church and state and the Judeo-Christian beliefs. In other words, the American experience has become a moral standard of some utility to its people.
Perhaps a vital question to ask in light of popular dissatisfaction with Iraq is whether these polls illustrate that the public thinks that resorting to war is wrong or that there is something fundamentally wrong with their nation when it goes to war. In other words, a theology of American Exceptionalism suggests a discourse about how best to enact the creed that makes America exceptional. The creed that Americans seem to believe is the core of the moral values that they use to evaluate state actions. While the Iraq War failed morally when measured against the American creed, the war did not undermine the morality of the creed itself. Thus we need to consider whether the religious dimension of civil religion works against a rigorous evaluation of the nation and its agents.

We know that the government and especially the president serve as agents for civil religion; when they fail the public responds. In surveys on the trust in government and satisfaction with the United States, Americans revealed a willingness to give the nation and its leaders a great deal of support, especially in a time of crisis, but were also willing to judge both harshly. Just following 9/11, Americans overwhelming voiced faith in the government and the president. In October 2001, 83 percent said that had a great deal and a fair amount of trust and confidence in the federal government. In September 2002, 72 percent said they had a great deal and a fair amount of trust and confidence in the president. And not surprisingly, in December 2002, satisfaction with the United States reached a high of 70 percent. At the start of the Iraq War, in March 2003, 60 percent said they were satisfied with the U.S. and a year later, the president still enjoyed a popular swell of approval as close to 60 percent of the public said that they a great deal and a fair amount of trust and confidence in the him.
2005 was the turning point. In the last month of 2004, 53 percent responded that they were dissatisfied with the United States. By September 2005, trust and confidence in the president was almost even, with 52 percent on the positive side and 48 percent on the negative side. A year later, 52 percent say that in regard to truth and confidence in the president, they had not very much and none at all. By 2008 that figure would increase to 58 percent; trust and confidence in the federal government would decline to 43 percent; and dissatisfaction with the United States would reach an all time high of 90 percent. As a point of comparison, at what seemed to be the nadir of America’s self-image, the moment when then President Jimmy Carter gave his “Crisis of Confidence” speech, popular dissatisfaction with the U.S. was 84 percent.49

In regard to the present crisis of confidence, Froese and Mencken ended their report on an ominous note. They state: “the importance and impact of sacralization ideology in the United States may ultimately be determined by the outcome of the Iraq War, at least for the immediate future. For if God’s supposed emissary in the White House turns out to be misguided, many Americans who wanted to sacralize politics might come to feel that President Bush’s politics have tarnished their conception of the sacred.”50 This conclusion seems reasonable, but I think it frames the central issue backwards. Neither the theory of civil religion (which I have argued illustrates sacralization of politics) nor the poll data suggest that Americans viewed the president as the sole representative of the political “sacred.” The nation’s creed as mediated through its civil religion and discussed in a theology of American exceptionalism provides the context for the sacralization of politics. Thus it is possible and necessary for Americans to evaluate the president’s performance in light of civil religion. The president can fail,
the nation can fail, and the public can work through such failings without losing hope in the transcendent character of the American experience.

That doesn’t mean this process will work smoothly or forestall another “Iraq” in the future. But I do see a different kind of reaction emerging from the Iraq War than that which arose following Vietnam. In some ways the Vietnam experience is instructive: that war produced profound dissatisfaction with the president, the government and what was left of the American creed. But this reaction also sharply polarized American interpretations of the civil religion. Through the late 1970s and the 1980s, there developed, in Robert Wuthnow’s interpretation, two civil religions competing for primacy, represented by two phrases in the Pledge of Allegiance, with the conservatives promoting “one nation under god” and liberals offering “with liberty and justice for all.” Not until 9/11 did the intense acrimony between these competing civil religions seem to fade. One might conclude that in the coming years this Manichean struggle will resume.

Yet, I think Barack Obama spoke for many when he pledged to move beyond an era of revanchist politics. In the first few minutes of his inaugural address, he declared: “On this day, we come to proclaim an end to the petty grievances and false promises, the recriminations and worn-out dogmas that for far too long have strangled our politics.” While he undoubtedly intended this statement for the Bush administration, Obama also directed his public’s attention to a new question: “not whether our government is too big or too small, but whether it works, whether it helps families find jobs at a decent wage, care they can afford, a retirement that is dignified.” That doesn’t mean Americans will join together in an era of “can-do” optimism, but I think there is something encouraging
in American dissatisfaction. For such a mood is not, according to the most recent polls, a reflection of hopelessness, but perhaps a measure of self-reflection. After all, the new president has remarkably high approval ratings, 61% as of the March 29, 2009\textsuperscript{53}, and in a PEW poll that combined responses to two different questions from two different sources\textsuperscript{vii} there has been a significant upward trend in the sense that the nation is moving in the “right direction” even if people remain dissatisfied with the state of the nation. See the graph below.\textsuperscript{54}

![Graph showing Right Direction vs. Satisfaction](image)

And while we should note that Republicans have responded negatively to both questions, and the opinions of Democrats and Independents have headed in the opposite direction, the difference between the two categories has significance. It reflects the moral evaluation of the nation. The public might still be dissatisfied with the results of recent

\textsuperscript{vii} The PEW poll combined data from an NBC/Wall St. Journal poll that asked Americans to respond to the question, “Is the United States headed in the right direction,” with data from a Gallup poll that asked Americans “Are you satisfied with the nation at this moment?”
moral failings but finds hope in the sense that the newly elected agent of civil religion will do a better job at abiding by the nation’s creed.
NOTES

1 Barack Obama, Address, Chicago Council on Global Affairs, April 24, 2007.
3 David Rieff, “Without Exception: The Same Old Song,” World Affairs, 170 (Winter 2008), 102
4 Ibid., 103.
11 Arthur Schlesinger, Jr., “America: Experiment or Destiny?” American Historical Review 82 (June 1977), 514.
12 Schlesinger, “America: Experiment or Destiny?” 521.
13 Wilfred M. McClay, “American--idea or nation?” National Interest (Fall 2001), 57.
26 Ibid., 209.
30 Marty, “Two Kinds of Two Kinds of Civil Religion,” 147.
33 Ibid., 11, 12.
34 President George W. Bush, Farewell Address, January 19, 2009.
40 Andrew Kohut and Bruce Stokes, “The Problem of American Exceptionalism.”
44 Ibid.
45 I used polls compiled at PollingReport.com to create this composite assessment of public opinion about the war. See http://www.pollingreport.com/iraq.htm