

The Secular Inaugural

In President Bush's historic Second Inaugural Address, he gave an inspiring re-statement of the Bush Doctrine. Some passages contain references to God. As atheists, we nevertheless wholeheartedly support those passages, such as this crucial one [emphasis ours]:

America's vital interests and our deepest beliefs are now one. From the day of our founding, we have proclaimed that every man and woman on this earth has rights, and dignity, and matchless value, **because they bear the image of the maker of heaven and earth**. Across the generations, we have proclaimed the imperative of self-government, because no one is fit to be a master, and no one deserves to be a slave. Advancing these ideals is the mission that created our nation. It is the honorable achievement of our fathers. Now it is the urgent requirement of our nation's security, and the calling of our time.

That is because the appeal to the supernatural there is purely formal: the substance of the argument is relentlessly rational. As a public service, we offer the following translation of the sentence in question:

From the day of our founding, we have proclaimed that every man and woman on this earth has rights, and dignity, and matchless value, because whenever any arguments to the contrary have been subjected to rational criticism, they have invariably turned out to rely on supernatural justifications, from King Charles' divine right of kings, to Hegel's divinity of the State, to Rousseau's '**infallibility of the general will**'. Of all the regulatory principles ever proposed for human affairs, only our doctrine of the rights and value of each individual passes that cold test of reason. Furthermore, only political programmes that give effect to that doctrine have ever created institutions and policies that allow themselves to be subjected to a test of reason at all. And only they have ever created a community of nations among whom war is unknown.

We modestly hope that our version is more precise. On the other

hand, it is longer and, we have to admit, less punchy. There is room for both.

God bless America.

Fri, 01/21/2005 - 11:15 | [permalink](#)

Devil in the Details

I would like to second **The World's** endorsement of the strategic vision outlined in the President's inaugural address. I also think appropriate the understanding shown in connection with the President's references to the supernatural. In this spirit, I want to point out that the "devil" is in the details. His strategic vision, however correct, will succeed more or less quickly and effectively, depending on the tactics that are adopted in connection with its implementation. As I mentioned in a **post** back on November 21, 2004, the problems to be faced are "complicated, the variables numerous, and there is a real difference between strategy and tactics." There is nothing wrong (in fact, everything is right) with a healthy debate regarding how we are to achieve our mutually agreed goals.

by **Michael Bacon** on Fri, 01/21/2005 - 15:29 | [reply](#)

justification not needed

I think you should just say: he says the image of maker thing is his reason. He is wrong. And it doesn't really matter. He does not need any 'because' statement at all. You can just delete the bold phrase and not replace it. Don't try to put justification in.

Nothing ever wins when you concede it needs some kind of justification, and try to give it. for example the version you give .. you used a partial list of rivals!! come on, that can't be a very solid argument. you can come to all sorts of conclusions by giving a partial list of opposing views that are bad, then concluding you are right. and you didn't even refute the ones you mentioned.

and not all the theories to the contrary are supernatural. for example my conjecture about the justified authority of people who like bright lamps.

Michael Bacon: uhh, yeah sure. as long as this isn't a bad excuse to go "oh my god, iraq is such a mess!!" (it's unclear what your point is, and that's the normal one.)

-- Elliot Temple
<http://www.curi.us/>

by **Elliot Temple** on Fri, 01/21/2005 - 16:37 | [reply](#)

My Point

My point, Elliot, is that too often the hard questions are avoided,

while emphasis is placed on the quick, grand theoretical (albeit correct) construct, particularly where there already is relative agreement with respect to philosophy and overall goals. Regarding Iraq, I partially addressed this in my November 21, 2004 **post**, which I won't repeat, other than to say (i) our strategic goal is replacing all political systems that perpetuate or collaborate with terrorism with systems that respect human rights; (ii) the main reason to choose to liberate Iraq in 2003 was tactical; and (iii) there were other tactical choices possible (made) that could (did) result in better (worse) outcomes -- although it is impossible (given our current level of knowledge) to know with what frequency. My conclusion was that in the world in which we now find ourselves " . . . choosing to cut and run in Iraq, does not seem to point to any favorable strategic outcome." Nothing has occurred in the interim to change my thinking in this regard.

by **Michael Bacon** on Fri, 01/21/2005 - 17:16 | [reply](#)

Sorry, No

I agree with Elliot that the statement would have been better with the bold text removed entirely. It's simply a false justification.

And although I agree with your "translation", I think it does not reflect what Bush meant to say. I suspect that if you asked him, he would agree with me on this point.

He meant to say what he said, and it's wrong. It serves some purposes, but truth and understanding aren't among them.

Gil

by **Gil** on Fri, 01/21/2005 - 17:48 | [reply](#)

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Good point. The "translation" is really just an alternative phrasing/argument to appeal to a different set of people.

-- Elliot Temple

<http://www.curi.us/>

by **Elliot Temple** on Fri, 01/21/2005 - 18:55 | [reply](#)

what kind of atheist are you?

what kind of atheist are you? do you really believe bush meant that in some kind of "supernatural" or spiritual way?

don't you think, just by example of his stated beliefs, he means it in some nasty christian way, where he wants to strip gays of their

rights, females of their abortion rights, and the world of their right

to research stem cells?

how can you think he has the rights of these people in his mind while he has completely disregarded the rights of those domestically?

by a reader on Fri, 01/21/2005 - 23:15 | [reply](#)

What Bush Intended

President Bush clearly believes, and intended to say, that he derives his justification for the Bush Doctrine at least in part from the passage in Genesis 1:26-7 in the Bible:

And God said, Let us make man in our image, after our likeness: and let them have dominion over the fish of the sea, and over the fowl of the air, and over the cattle, and over all the earth, and over every creeping thing that creepeth upon the earth.

So God created man in his own image, in the image of God created he him; male and female created he them.

However, equally clearly, he did not in fact derive it from there. For it does not, in fact, follow. Moreover, most people who claim to have derived their political principles from the Bible – including the Pope and the leaders and foremost theologians of most Christian sects as well as the great majority of professed Christians outside the US – oppose the Bush Doctrine. Bush himself vehemently opposed it before 9-11. Calling it a religious doctrine or attributing religious content to it is absolutely absurd, notwithstanding the shared opinion of Bush and most of his enemies such as 'a reader' above.

The actual justification of the Bush Doctrine, both in Bush's mind and in the minds of virtually all of its supporters, is that the existing world order has permitted a terrible and rapidly escalating danger to emerge – forced to our attention by 9-11 – and that the only available defence is the complete abolition of certain types of tyranny. Bush said that explicitly in his Second Inaugural Address, and in every one of his speeches on the subject.

by [Editor](#) on Sat, 01/22/2005 - 11:57 | [reply](#)

So, what's the point of this post?

Please help me understand.

On one hand you "wholeheartedly endorse" the passage, and even bolded the phrase that you now admit is an absurd justification even though it was worded as a justification.

So, why not say that that it was an unfortunate blemish on an otherwise good passage, rather than giving a completely different "translation"?

Gil

Re: So, what's the point of this post?

Suppose we need to build a bridge across the Great Chasm. We put the job out to tender. All but one of the engineers who apply say that there is no need for a bridge because one can get across just by flapping one's arms hard enough, taking a long enough running jump, and suchlike expedients. Where they mention their previous chasm-crossing failures at all, they attribute them to things like: not enough money was spent on research into flapping techniques; The Jews diluted the glue holding the feathers on the wings; building the bridge is all about oil; and there wouldn't be a chasm at all if we hadn't offended the Earth Goddess.

But one engineer delivers a different kind of report. It explains why previous chasm-crossing ideas will not work: they violate Newton's laws; they depend on impossibly strong materials; and so on. And at the end of the report, it says: "and so we have no option but to use a bridge, and to use our particular design. That it will work despite the fact that no bridge of this design has ever been attempted before, and that none of the rival proposals can possibly work, is implied by the laws of physics which are not only agreed by all rational people, but ordained by the Creator of Heaven and Earth".

There is no flaw that tender, nor with the justification that it gives for its proposal. That fact that it happens to mention that the authors hold a false metaphysical belief does not constitute such a flaw because it is no part of their argument. They say that it is, but they are mistaken, and the mistake – serious in some contexts – is completely harmless in this one.

by **David Deutsch** on Sun, 01/23/2005 - 14:13 | [reply](#)

yeah but

I think Editor and David Deutsch explain well in comments, but that the original post was less good.

-- Elliot Temple
<http://www.curi.us/>

by **Elliot Temple** on Sun, 01/23/2005 - 17:01 | [reply](#)

Secular?

Look, you wrote a post called "The Secular Inaugural".

You admit that it includes a mistaken non-secular phrase.

I think it's good that we can overlook the religious part and see that the rest contains a powerful, and valid statement. But we should

not go further and pretend that that makes the entire passage

secular.

I think it would have been an even better statement without that phrase; just as I think the Declaration of Independence would have been even better without "Nature's God", "Endowed by their Creator", "Divine Providence" and any such other theological references that I may have forgotten.

Bush and his speech writers make some excellent statements. But when they make mistakes I think it's better to recognize them than to pretend that every aspect of every message is perfect and worthy of adulation. Doing the latter is obviously wrong, and reduces the credibility of those who praise the genuinely good aspects of the message.

Gil

by **Gil** on Sun, 01/23/2005 - 22:12 | [reply](#)

Maybe the title, "The Secular

Maybe the title, "The Secular Inaugural", means the argument in the Inaugural was secular.

-- Elliot Temple

<http://www.curi.us/>

by **Elliot Temple** on Sun, 01/23/2005 - 22:49 | [reply](#)

Re: Secular

Well, the winning engineer in my example mentioned Newton's laws as well as God. Newton's laws are false: there is no such thing in reality as a 'gravitational force'. So the tender appealed for justification to at least two non-existent entities, not just one. Both are serious errors in some contexts. Both are harmless in the stated context. Why shouldn't we take the same attitude towards both?

by **David Deutsch** on Mon, 01/24/2005 - 00:15 | [reply](#)

harmless because

In the stated context the remarks are harmless. It might well have included some good words about the blessings of UFOs upon the land but then some might have thought that the President's speechwriter has a screw loose.

Remarks in inaugural addresses are always included for a reason, especially when a phrase includes the word, 'because'. Such remarks do not appear in inaugural addresses by accident and are intended to be heard. I do not know the reason for including the metaphysical reference in the inaugural address but there is one and it is likely more than the stating of a fond sentiment or an oath such as "by Jove's britches".

The larger context of meaning is often broader than the stated

context. It is worthwhile to note that point so I am.

by a reader on Mon, 01/24/2005 - 02:44 | [reply](#)

Against moral relativism

Well, to use David's example, suppose another set of rival plans for crossing the bridge was that over that particular chasm the fundamental laws of physics themselves are different from where we are standing, so that there if you just walk over it on air while doing some strange symbolic rituals with your fingers you won't fall down, but if you did the same thing around here you will fall. Then the remark about the "laws...ordained by the creator of heaven and earth" could be a poetic way of insisting on the fact that the laws of physics are by definition universal and shouldn't change from one chasm to the other. Seeing it this way the remark would have been there for a reason, despite the literal meta-physical nature of the allegory.

AIS

by a reader on Mon, 01/24/2005 - 07:00 | [reply](#)

Re: Against moral relativism

Yes, exactly.

by [David Deutsch](#) on Mon, 01/24/2005 - 11:21 | [reply](#)

OK

I agree that the statement could be interpreted to mean that human nature is universal enough that rights apply to all people; and that this would have been a reasonable thing to add, since it segues nicely into "no one is fit to be a master, and no one deserves to be a slave."

I still maintain that, even if that was the intent, it could have been conveyed much better.

I note, also, that [The World](#) did not seem to take that interpretation when it attempted to "translate" that sentence; so even the most generous listeners were likely to misinterpret the phrase.

[Gil](#)

by [Gil](#) on Mon, 01/24/2005 - 17:14 | [reply](#)

Re: OK

Gil said:

I note, also, that [The World](#) did not seem to take that interpretation when it attempted to "translate" that sentence; so even the most generous listeners were

likely to misinterpret the phrase

Touché.

by [Editor](#) on Mon, 01/24/2005 - 17:35 | [reply](#)

Why The Words Were There

The words were in the speech for at least two reasons: Bush believes them, but even if he didn't, these words or others like them would have been included to rally the many US citizens who generally believe in such things, in order to actually build the bridge across the great chasm. In the original post, [The World](#) asserted that "[s]ome passages contain references to God. As atheists, we nevertheless wholeheartedly support them". I agreed with that assertion, but not because I can establish a justification along the lines of the "laws of physics are by definition universal and shouldn't change form one chasm to the other," or that "human nature is universal enough that rights apply to all people." Each of the alternatives (including removing the offending language altogether) that have been suggested are more scientific and more correct – but none would have been better in the speech. The harm done (and I think that any deviation from the truth results in some harm), is outweighed by the good that flows from clarity regarding the overall strategic issue and the political acumen necessary to understand how to effectively wage the war on terror in the real world. It's a trade off that we will often need to accept as we work together with allies of various stripes to achieve our goals.

by [Michael Bacon](#) on Mon, 01/24/2005 - 21:10 | [reply](#)

Well...

I agree that the words were there both because Bush believes (and likes saying) things like that, and for strategic political reasons. But I think both of these could have been satisfied with more conventional stuff like "Our prayers are with them" and "God Bless America".

When famed Reagan speechwriter Peggy Noonan writes an [article](#) entitled "Way Too Much God", I think it's fair to conclude that it probably went too far.

Gil

by [Gil](#) on Tue, 01/25/2005 - 02:47 | [reply](#)

The Words

Gil,

I think your last post is a very fruitful way of approaching the issue. Is there a qualitative difference between the words used by Bush and "Our prayers are with them" or "God Bless America"? I don't believe so. Nevertheless, whether the words were optimal is another matter. I agree that Peggy Noonan's response is

informative in this regard. That Bush may have gone too far is a reasonable conclusion.

by **Michael Bacon** on Tue, 01/25/2005 - 15:03 | [reply](#)

Differences

Michael,

It's difficult to say with precision, but I think that listeners to speeches like this have grown accustomed to phrases such as the ones I mentioned, and have learned to accept that they are "purely formal" and "completely harmless".

But, it seems the Bush went further than this and injected many more references into the substance of his arguments. It seems that he was intentionally pushing the religious content so that it is made qualitatively different from conventional use. He seems to have wanted to make it difficult to overlook.

He succeeded. And it's a disappointment (to people like me).

Gil

by **Gil** on Tue, 01/25/2005 - 16:28 | [reply](#)

Perhaps

Gil,

Perhaps you're right. The very fact that people have become accustomed to such phrases might, in the mind of a speech writer, or Bush himself, argue for an escalation in rhetoric sufficient to impress those have become blasé. Perhaps Noonan's response is best understood as disappointment that the language wasn't in fact more conventional. However, I wasn't that disappointed, but perhaps that's because I had lower expectations regarding what he would say.

by **Michael Bacon** on Tue, 01/25/2005 - 17:04 | [reply](#)

abortion

whatever

by a reader on Fri, 04/22/2005 - 09:58 | [reply](#)