

#### FOUR HISTORICAL MISCONCEPTIONS OF THE PAST 16 MONTHS

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In the several years marching up to the Christian millennium in the year 2000, the United States was lost in its trivial debate over the Y2K bug. The discussion overwhelmed the larger religious and historical questions of the meaning of Christian millennium. Only the fundamentalist Christian right, it seemed, had the gumption (or the folly) to address the issues of the last book of the Bible, the Book of Revelation, and especially the question of the so called End Times, the prediction that a great battle called Armageddon between the forces of Good and Evil loomed. In this violent apocalypse, Good would eventually triumph, as Jesus Christ would come again "to judge the quick and the dead."

In evangelical churches, the passage in Revelation Chapter 6, Verse 9, was the text of the moment. It describes this apocalypse, in the Opening of the Six Seal:

*When I opened the seal, a great earthquake came to pass. The sun turned black ..and the moon turned red as blood. And the stars fell unto the earth And the sky shrank up upon itself like a scroll curling. And every mountain and island moved out of place. And the kings of the earth and the great, the commanders, the rich, and the mighty, and all slaves and free men hid themselves in the caves and crevices of the mountains.*

At the same time as most of the country was thinking about their computers, and the fundamentalists were predicting the end of the world, a small group of academics including the distinguished Harvard professor Stephen Jay Gould, were focusing on the new study of "calendrics." How did the Christian world arrive at the precise beginning of the Third Millennium: did the new millennium begin in the year 2000 or the year 2001? Gould and others were arguing that since there was no such a thing as the year zero in the Christian calender, the new millennium did not really begin until the year 2001. It could be argued that the Christian apocalypse, this violent clash of Good and Evil, would take place not in the year 2000, but in the year 2001. And that indeed, figuratively at least, the prophecy came true on September 11, 2001.

Since that dreadful, evil day, that American apocalypse, my country has been sunk in its victimhood. The American flag is plastered everywhere. We have had a constant diet of stirring poetry, soaring music, prayers. We have seen astonishing portraits of heroism on our televisions, a series of moving commemorations...and even a few noble silences. The icons have become the face of the New York policemen and firemen, the hero on the Pennsylvania plane that uttered the words, "Let's Roll," as he rushed the cockpit, and the faces of the innocent Americans who died in the trade towers and the Pentagon, as they were displayed and their lives briefly portrayed day after day for months in the New York Times.

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Of course in Manichean struggles, every hero must also have a villain, its reverse side, its counterpoint. And that of course is the face of the so called "Islamic radical". Such images have flashed across American television, and splashed across American newspapers so often in the past 16 months that it has become a cliché, a stereotype, and one that is so powerful, with almost no countervailing image of gentle Islam, or pacific Arab, that it has become a fixed idea in America.

American culture has been overtaken by anger, by fear, by frustration, and by confusion. Our revelation, in part, is that we are no longer invulnerable to attack. The enemy may be everywhere. Even after 17 months of maximum mobilization by its national and international police agencies, the U.S. still does not know the full extent of the threat to its people and interests, its buildings or treasured memorials. This has led to a muting of dissenting voices, as if to dissent from the policies of the Bush Administration is somehow unpatriotic. The job has not been completed. The culprits, especially Bin Laden and his high command, are still at large, and they are still menacing.

Without justice, without resolution, without dissent against its central government, and because patriotism has become intertwined with bluster of President Bush, leading to his enormous popularity, we are in a dangerous period of American history. A small cabal of policy makers feel they have a free hand to pursue whatever policy they deem to be correct, from the concept of preemptive strikes, and a unwise war with Iraq. At this point in our history, bellicose statements from the top is good politics.

Contributing to this peril of this period has been a dangerous imprecision of speech and thought.

#### **Four Historical Misconceptions.**

Four fundamental misconceptions have plagued both the American and the Arab sides in this colloquy between the two cultures in past year and a half. They are the misuse of the word, crusade; the misunderstanding in America of the true meaning of Jihad; the overuse of the concept of war, either in relation to Al Qaeda or to terrorism generally; and finally, the misapplication of historical icons, like Saladin, to promote violence and create mayhem in both the Middle East and in the United States.

First, **crusade**. The word, crusade, in the American political vocabulary has been used repeatedly (and loosely) through American history, from Thomas Jefferson to William Lloyd Garrison and John Brown at the time of the American Civil War, to Presidents Franklin Roosevelt and Dwight Eisenhower, in the presidential campaign of 2000 A.D. by Senator John McCain. In the American context, these political "crusades" meant no more than politics or campaigns with a fervent moral or righteous purpose.

Before September 11, there was very little appreciation in America of the very different resonance of the word, crusade, for the Arab world. And therefore, when on September 16, President Bush proclaimed a "crusade" against terrorism, his gaff was forgiven in the American context as simply the same old political rhetoric. In the world context, it was, of course, precisely the wrong image to use, and it was a great gift to Osama Bin Laden. It conjured up the image of European invaders and occupiers who were wealthy enslavers and

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slaughterers of Arab peoples. In Christian Holy War, crusaders were the ones who established a false state in the heart of Palestine and maintained it only through the wealth of Europe and the might of their castles and weapons. To the Arab world, crusades are an historical outrage. They invoke the image of a European enemy who has come to attack Arab peoples and to occupy their land. They are to Arabs what the Holocaust is to Jews: a historical abomination for which the Pope is asked centuries and decades later to apologize in the name of the Christian church.

No doubt, somewhere in a cave in Afghanistan, Bin Laden stood up and cheered when he heard Bush's statement. For he knew that in history crusades have always ended in failure and defeat. In a broader sense, Bush was helping bin Laden realize his grand vision, the clash of believers vs. infidels, Islam vs. Christianity, East vs. West, Civilization vs. secular corruption. Bin Laden vs. George Bush. This last personalization of the struggle conferred upon Bin Laden the stature almost of a state leader. To be raised to the stature of a world figure is the dream of every megalomaniac.

With the attack and then the response, the terms of the debate were, therefore, set in the early days of the aftermath of September 11. And bin Laden, having slaughtered 3,000 innocent Americans, acted as if he were the injured party, the defender rather than the aggressor.

"We ask God to make us defeat the infidels and the oppressors and to crush the new Jewish-Christian crusade," he said grandly to his followers.

Second, **Jihad**. If one were to do only the most cursory review of the American press in the past 16 months, it would be clear that Jihad has become an American concept. It seems to mean any Arab militant with a bomb or a missile or green band around his head who stands ready to commit criminal violence against Westerners or Jews. It means any Arab person who snarls at America or Israel, and says it is his religious duty to do so. It seems not to matter whether this person is acting on his own, or with only a few cohorts. When a group calling itself Islamic Jihad or Al Aksa brigade or the Saladin Brigades claims responsibility for violent acts in Israel, or a group calling itself Soldiers of Mohammed slits the throat of an innocent journalist named Daniel Pearl, it further confuses Americans. And it gives credence to the widespread opinion in America that Islam is a violent religion.

This is, of course, a gross distortion. And in history, we find the proper model: the Jihad of the great Arab sultan, Saladin, in the twelfth century. In that glorious campaign, which lives vibrantly in the Arab mind today, Saladin defeated the crusader forces in the Battle of Hattin in 1187, and then went on to triumph in the colossal struggle with Richard the Lionheart in the Third Crusade. From the historical viewpoint, this titanic struggle gives us the essence of the concept of Jihad.

In the twelfth century Christian Holy War preceded Jihad. In its original, its enduring, and its Koranic sense, Jihad is a defensive concept. Saladin's Jihad was the culmination of an 80 year process to recover Arab lands from the European occupiers, and most importantly, to recover Jerusalem.

"Jerusalem is ours as much as yours," Saladin wrote to Richard in the end stages of the Third Crusade during their negotiations. "Indeed, it is even more sacred to us than it is to you, for it is the place from which our Prophet accomplished his nocturnal journey and the place

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where our community will gather on the Day of Judgment. Do not imagine that we can renounce it or vacillate on this point. The land was originally ours, whereas you have only just arrive and have taken it over only because of the weakness of the Muslims living there at the time."

He proclaimed his Jihad as a head of state, and the history tells us clearly that it was no easy task for him to persuade all of the Arab world to join him in his challenge to the Kingdom of Jerusalem. His great movement garnered the support of established Islam throughout his empire, and garnering that support, was part of his greatness. Moreover, because of his sentimental, gentle, and devout side, he would never have knowingly killed Muslims in his Jihad, as Muslims were killed by several hundreds in the World Trade Tower attack. Saladin recoiled at the notion of the death of innocents, especially women and children. He would never have done anything to dishonor or profane Islam. And he respected his adversaries, Richard in particular. He respected Jesus as a prophet of Islam, and, in his capture of Jerusalem, respected Christian holy sites. He knew the shibboleth against aggression in the Koran.

"And fight in Allah's cause against those who wage war against you, but do not commit aggression—for verily Allah does not love aggressors." (2:190) Jihad therefore is defensive. It is the concept of *fatah* that is aggressive and refers to aggressive conquest. It is *fatah*, not *jihad*, that describes the military expansion of Islam across North Africa and into Spain after the life of the prophet Mohammed. Islamic radicals like bin Laden combine Jihad with *fatah*, and dream of a world conquered by Islam after an armed clash of civilizations and religions.

Still, the question hangs in the air today. Can it be that any Muslim, with a few followers, can walk into the street and proclaim a legitimate and authentic Jihad against the West or Israel? Is it possible that a group of few thousand fanatics can attack huge American buildings, kill 3000 unsuspecting innocents....and validly say that the act is justified by the Koran?

To Americans Jihad has become synonymous with fanaticism. "Jihadists" has become an American word. And who will give them a more correct view? In my audience with the Grand Imam of Al Azhar last March, I received some instruction on this point. After September 11, Dr. Mohammed Sayed Tantawi distinguished between Jihad and *irhab*. In contrast to the defensive and obligatory nature of Jihad, *irhab* is terrorism: unjust, aggressive violence against innocent and defenseless civilians that is expressed forbidden by Islamic law and Islamic principles. These rules, said the Grand Imam, forbid Muslims to kill innocent people...or a retreating enemy or those who surrender. They forbid harming captives and expressly forbid the destruction of buildings and civil centers. I had not heard these distinctions made before.

Dr. Tantawi instructed me on other points. About the references in the hijackers documents that they were martyrs and would achieve paradise, Dr. Tantawi said, "They are not martyrs but aggressors. They will not achieve paradise, but will receive severe punishments for their aggression." In Islam, he noted, there is an exact equivalent of Moses's commandment against killing "Whoever shall kill a man or a believer without right," the

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punishment is hell forever. Allah will be angry with him and give him a great punishment." Especially ugly, he said, is the criminal who murders by surprise "from the back" for that is "against all morality and good honor." And about bin Laden's fatwa to kill Americans wherever they are and plunder their money, Dr. Tantawi said, "Islamic law banishes anyone who issues an untrue fatwa."

Who knew? These were interesting distinctions. I had not read them before.

But if the Grand Imam clarified these important matters in mid March, he confused his message a few weeks later when he made statements that seemed to give religious sanction to the suicide bombings in Israel. The Israel question seems to confuse and madden and distort all matters in the Middle East.

Third, war. While President Bush was not to utter the word 'crusade' again after September 16--once was enough--he has proclaimed a "war" on terrorism almost daily in these 16 months. It is a war, he says, that will go into every corner of the world, a war that might go on for many years. It started in Afghanistan, spread to places like the Philippines and Indonesia, and now he links it to Iraq. And he says grandly, the United States means to "win" the war on terrorism.

Is this really a war? My prejudice comes from the Vietnam experience. I remember what it was like when the American nation was truly at war. It lasted 13 years. It took more than 50,000 American deaths. Body bags were a daily sight on television, and there were many weeks when 300 soldiers died. We had conscription then and draft evasion and desertion and a revolt of the young against the decisions of the old that sundered the American nation and changed it forever. And we lost the war in Vietnam.

For me Vietnam is the touchstone, especially for an unjust and immoral war. But I am criticized for being "one war too late." For many Americans, and apparently this including powerful decision makers in Washington, the Gulf War is the touchstone. This is the good war. It lasting only a few days. Whole Arab armies surrender immediately in the desert, or whole, evil regimes like the Taliban collapse precipitously. There are only a few American casualties.

The current situation bears no relation whatever to the Vietnam experience which defined my generation. The American people are inconvenienced, and they are afraid. But regardless of what the President and the American media might say, by any measure that a historian can apply, we are not yet a nation at war.

Rather the use of the term is a rhetorical flourish, and a dangerously imprecise one. To win a war on terrorism is to win a war on hate, since terrorism is hate turned to secret, violent action. If Bush can eliminate hate in the world, he will be more than a great man. He will be a saint and a prophet. We have had other figurative wars like this one in American public life: a war on poverty, a war on cancer, a war on drugs. But we hear very little about them nowadays, certainly nothing about victory.

The campaign against Al Qaeda and terrorism is not a war but an international police action. The attack on America did not come from a nation, but from an international criminal organization. For a nation to declare a war on a criminal organization like Al Qaeda or the Mafia is to trivialize its nationhood. What America needs after September 11 is justice not

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victory. The culprits need to be apprehended wherever they are, and then brought to justice. Only then can we have closure.

But the assassins of Al Qaeda are still at large. Not a single member from highest circles of criminal group is in custody. Americans are told that the threat now is as great as it was before September 11, and that we must be cautious and vigilant.

This is coded speech. The culprits, sleeping among us and taking advantage of our open way of life, and planning further horrendous acts, are inevitably "Arabic looking," and we are being taught to fear such individuals. As the frustration at not apprehending bin Laden and his top henchman deepens, hate crimes against Islamic believers and innocent people of Arab descent has increased 1500% since September. The FBI now cites close to 500 such hate crimes.

It is this collective frustration at being denied justice for September that has led to the broadening of the issue beyond bin Laden and Al Qaeda to all of Afghanistan, to the acquiescence in the Israeli oppression of the Palestinians, and soon perhaps to Iraq. We are seeing America realize its role as "the world's policeman," precisely the thing that George W. Bush campaigned against in the 2000 elections, and American politician, liberal and conservative, have argued against for years. And the climate is getting worse, I warn you. In the United States itself, civil rights are dropping away like autumn leaves. Not only is America pursuing a role as the world's policeman, but the United States itself is slouching toward becoming a police state.

Fourth, **the misuse of historical icons**. Once again the parallel of Saladin is useful. For many decades leaders in the Arab world have tried to claim the mantle of Saladin: Gamel Abdel Nasser, the late President Assad of Syria, Saddam Hussein, and even Yassar Arafat. After the collapse of the Camp David discussions in the summer of 2000, Arafat returned to the Gaza Strip to be greeted by banners proclaiming him to be the Palestinian Saladin. Last December there was a report that Osama bin Laden had said to his fellow assassins that, should he depart the scene, his cause would be turned over to his son, named Saladin.

In the summer of 2000, it was this very spectacle of Arafat returning to be proclaimed the Palestinian Saladin that led the Israeli peace activist-writer, Amos Oz, to write an op ed piece in the New York Times, entitled "The Specter of Saladin." To the Arab side, it appears, the power of Saladin myth lies in the dream of the liquidation of Israel. Oz wrote about the sticking point of the 'right of return' for Palestinian refugees, "We all know very well that around here 'right of return' is an Arab euphemism for the liquidation of Israel...the Palestinians must choose if they want a new Saladin, or to really work for peace."

Does Saladin represent a pipe dream or a specter? Is it not unhealthy for Arabs forever to seem to waiting for the new Saladin, almost in the same way that Christians wait for the second coming of Christ? And is it not equally unhealthy for Jews to see in Saladin the terror of an Arab elimination of Israel? The truth is that Saladin was a great friend of the Jews. It was the great Sultan who invited Jews back into Jerusalem, who had a Jew as his doctor, who had Jewish wise men like Maimonides at his side.

To Christian Americans, it would be inconceivable that a violent, political action group today, no matter how oppressed they felt themselves to be, could call itself the Soldiers of Jesus or St. Peter's brigades....although it is certainly true that in the Middle Ages, the

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apostle of Christ, St. James, became Santiago de Compostela in Spain, and was known as the Moorslayer...or the angel, Michael, the angel with the sword, the inspiration of all crusaders, of whom it is said in the Bible: "And there was war in heaven. Michael and his angels fought against the dragon...and the great dragon was cast out, that old serpent called the Devil and Satan which deceiveth the whole world....." or St. George, the patron saint of the Crusaders.

There is no event or movement in Islamic history that is as remotely as violent as the Crusades were in Christian history.

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The positive side of the American apocalypse of the past 16 months has been the craving of the American people to learn quickly as much as they could about Islam and Arab history. The popularity of my book on the Third Crusade is an example of this craving, for it was perceived that the epic conflict of Richard the Lionheart and Saladin was a kind of metaphor for today, and that we can learn from history. When Samuel Huntington remarks in his book on the clash of civilizations that the line of demarcation between world forces has shifted eastward since the end of the Cold War, and that is now the line between the realm of Western Christianity and the realm of Islam, I can only say, "so we have returned to the state of affairs in the 12<sup>th</sup> century."

Before American audiences I've been repeating the palliative of others, that the current conflict between Christianity and Islam is really not a clash, but a dialogue of civilizations. But as the possibility for war in Iraq has grown more and more ominous in the past few months, I have begun to wonder. Surely, if the U.S. attacks Iraq unilaterally, or with only a few reluctant partners, a clash of Crusade-like proportions will be the reality. If Saddam Hussein is able to deliver what he has threatened, "primordial combat" in the streets of Baghdad, with very significant American casualties this time, then it will be the Crusade meeting Vietnam. And if in the wake of an American invasion, Arab states fall in the chaos of destabilization, then it is the Crusade, meeting Vietnam, in witnessing the fall of dominos. And then there is the \$200 billion to consider that the American people will have to spend, on top of the \$1 billion that we are now spending every month in Afghanistan, part of which is B-52 strikes to keep our warlords apart. And the last nightmare is the aftermath, the Crusader kingdom of America, in the Arabian Desert. An occupation for decades, and resentment against America of a different magnitude that could go on for generations.

On this trip to the Middle East, a high American diplomat remarked to me, with a straight face, that perhaps a war in Iraq, with all its inevitable destabilization of the region, would be a good thing for America in the long run. It would be like throwing all the cards of the Middle East up in the air in a chaos of chance. Afterwards, he said, America and Israel would emerge even stronger. The only problem with this argument, not to mention the excruciating pain for the region, is that this is not the American way.

Who is then the enemy? It is the enemy within, both in the culture of Islam and in American culture. A furious struggle is on in both cultures. It is the struggle for the soul, the soul of Islam and the soul of America. In these two debates, neither of us can help the other. We cannot help in the debate about what image Islam wishes to present to the world, the enemy image of Al Qaeda, or a more correct image. And you cannot help in our debate over the warrior image that America now presents to the world.

For those like myself who see this course toward war as profoundly misguided, the enemy is more abstract than personal. It is more than President Bush and his cabal in the Defense Department, or Saddam Hussein and the tons of chemical weapons he might be hiding. It is more psychological than personal. The world's only superpower is frustrated. It lacks closure for September 11. A man in a cave mocks it. And since the U.S. can't find the Arab assassins who took down our buildings, the whole Arab

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World must pay. That is where the aftermath of September 11 went wrong. Our civilization is mocked, and its leaders are on the verge of lashing out. America is in a revenge mode. A war in Iraq has nothing to do with closure for September 11. Indeed, it is the reverse: it would make closure all the more difficult. And it would advance bin Laden's ultimate vision of the final battle between Islam and Christianity, between the Arab World and the West, between good and evil as he sees it.

The worst thought I have heard expressed in the past 16 months came from an Arab American who asked, "How many Arabs must die before we are even?" This is the notion of moral equivalency, or equivalent moral outrages. When that becomes the question, it is no longer a dialogue of civilizations.

Until about five weeks ago, the possibility of war with Iraq was really not much discussed outside of Washington. This dreadful possibility was almost nowhere an issue in this past congressional election. But the American people are starting to wake up from their long sleep. It is not natural for Americans to give their leaders carte blanche. We should have learned that lesson in the way the Vietnam War got out of hand. It's not natural for American politicians of both the left and right to wave a flag and tell the president to do whatever he wants. It is not natural for an American president to take his country to war against a Third World country without full debate and without clear evidence of impending disaster, without just cause. In our political culture, skepticism toward authority, rather than obedience to authority, is our natural way.

The support for this effort in Iraq is very thin within the country. The old peace coalitions of the 1960s are taking to the streets again. This is a hopeful thing. The debate is underway. The issue is finally being joined.

The only question is whether the debate began too late.