

Reversing the Move Toward Empire

The Election is Over: Now What?

This is a talk I gave in November 2004 (right after the presidential elections) to a group of mothers of small children who met once a month to discuss topics of importance to them. In it I identify some of the issues of American Empire and begin to think about how we might find hope.

I feel very privileged to be with you this morning. From what little Katharine has told me about you as a group, I'm humbled by your choices to take time out from careers in order to be better parents yet still keep yourself informed by these meetings regularly. I long for the day when all parents will have the opportunities to make such choices.

I also feel a bit intimidated to speak to you about the topic we've chosen. Much of what I say will be depressing and provocative, and I'm uncertain of its propriety here ... especially the day before Thanksgiving. I should warn you: I'm not going to tie all of this up on an optimistic note. I would ask only that you try to stay with me and *understand* what I'm saying (even if you disagree strongly). I expect a lively exchange after I've finished my prepared remarks.

Let's begin this morning with a quote from Walter Brueggemann, a Hebrew Bible scholar. Brueggemann wrote this well over twenty years ago, but its relevance still seems fresh.

"Something happens to a society when its wealth is reckoned in commodities, and it is stashed away for some to have and some not to have. *Some can pay and some can't.*

"Something happens to a society when its 'know how' becomes sophisticated and mystifying and technical, and it is possessed by some and not possessed by others. *Some know and some don't.*

"Something happens to a society when a sense of solidarity among persons yields to a kind of individuality, when a sense of belonging with each other is diminished and a sense of being apart from each other takes its place. *Some belong and some don't.*

“Whatever it is that happens is happening to us. And there is the new, powerful emergence of those who *can pay* and those who *know* and those who *belong*. Very often the paying ones and the knowing ones and the belonging ones are the same ones—or at least they talk only with one another and trust one another.

They

are content to be left to their own resources, which are ample. And so the others—the ones who can’t pay and don’t know and don’t belong—are left to their own resource-lessness.”

For the past twenty years my wife and I have lived and worked in Washington’s inner city among people who can’t pay, and don’t know, and don’t belong. It’s been an extraordinary experience that has changed us profoundly. I practiced for ten years in Community of Hope Health Services, a small, church-sponsored neighborhood clinic. While I continued to practice there, Marja and I and our three kids lived for five years in Christ House, a 34-bed medical recovery shelter for homeless men, after which we founded Joseph’s House—a home and community for eleven homeless men with AIDS—and lived there for three years. I’ve continued to work at Joseph’s House in various capacities since our family moved out.

Before coming to Washington, I’d practiced for seven years as a country doctor in rural Minnesota. The comparison between the two practices was brutal. I was immediately struck by how severely society had abandoned my inner-city patients.

- I was shocked to discover that people could be utterly destitute and still not be eligible for Medicaid or any other form of health coverage.

- Homeless families began pouring into the clinic. According to one interview study we did, over seventy percent of the mothers had suffered physical or sexual abuse as children, yet there were no therapy services available for them as adults. Many of the mothers were addicted, yet, for practical purposes, there was no substance abuse treatment available for them, either.

- Basic education was unbelievably poor. One of my patients graduated from high school without knowing her multiplication tables. Others were functionally illiterate. And half didn’t even graduate from school.

- I hadn’t realized the stinginess of Welfare. DC had good benefits compared to most states. Yet a family of three received less than \$500 a month, *considerably less than half* the poverty level, while welfare regulations forbade them from working to earn more. So it was quite literally impossible to live on welfare without “cheating.” Most welfare mothers, in fact, did work.

The picture of lazy people feeding at the public trough was a cruel joke.

I was deeply troubled by what I was seeing. What kind of a society, I began to ask myself, would abandon these folks to destitution while so many of us lived in relative opulence? And what would the consequences be for our society? This was the Eighties, a time when the market was being unfettered, greed was good, and the reigning picture of the poor was the “Welfare Queen.”

The late Seventies and Eighties marked a cultural turning point in our attitudes toward poverty in general. I can’t prove this with any studies, but it seems to me that before, say, 1980 the mood of the country was that we *as a nation* had some responsibility toward the poor.

But with the individualism of the 1980s and the swing toward unregulated free-market capitalism, that changed. The cities and the poor themselves were now on their own, and social programs began dwindling. While it was not much remarked upon, this was an extraordinary moral change. President Franklin Roosevelt had said, “The test of our progress is not whether we add more to the abundance of those who have too much; it’s whether we provide enough to those who have too little.”

One can measure the character of a nation by how it treats its poor, and we were waging war on them.

In every major spiritual tradition, care for the poor is a core value. The prophets of the Hebrew Bible make it abundantly clear that the nations will be judged on their treatment of the marginalized. For Jeremiah, for instance, the failure to care for the poor was one of the primary reasons for Judah’s exile to Babylon. (We’ll return to Jeremiah and the exile.) If we were going to be judged by how we treated the poor, I got to thinking back then as I worked with my patients at Community of Hope, we were in trouble.

At the time, however, the mechanism by which we would get into trouble wasn’t at all clear. Such a judgment on the United States seemed fundamentalist and apocalyptic, not to mention unlikely at a time when we seemed to be at the height of our power. The Soviet Union was crumbling, our primary economic competitor Japan was stumbling, and we’d become the world’s sole superpower. Our military was unrivaled; an unprecedented economic boom was

underway; we even started paying down our national debt.

Today, you don't need to scratch the surface very deeply, however, to find a different reality.

- Environmental devastation—with the loss of much life—surely awaits us, even if we were to decide today to reverse field (which, it seems clear, we won't): Global warming, thinning of the ozone layer, destruction of the rain forests, pollution of air and water, the loss of an entire species every hour. These come with devastating consequences. Scientists at the World Health Organization estimate that global warming alone is already causing some 160,000 excess deaths a year, mostly of children from developing countries. The United States, with its consumer society and political unwillingness to confront the issues, is the world's major offender.

- Competition for scarce resources will increasingly pit the rich against the poor. The earth can't support its entire population consuming as we do in the West. Natural resources are too limited and the environmental devastation would be incalculable. The result will be ecological destruction as the poor countries seek in vain to catch up *and* military conflict as we fight over the remaining resources. Iraq is just the first example.

- Chemical and biological weapons have become increasingly available to virtually any committed group of people. Advances over the next few decades will refine all these weapons and make them more available and portable. New weapons of mass destruction are surely in our future. Nanotechnology, for instance, is likely to create cheap, easily available, virus-like, self-reproducing machines that will make today's biological weapons look puny. We've developed tools that we're not, as a species, capable of handling. We seem incapable of regulating ourselves.

- After the collapse of the Soviet Union, nuclear weapons moved into the black market, and we still haven't taken the relatively simple steps to secure those weapons.

- The gap between the rich and the poor is increasing worldwide. The crushing poverty so many now experience is the perfect breeding ground for hopeless people willing to use any means to strike back at those they consider responsible for their plight. Unfortunately, the US has too often used its economic power against the poor rather than for them. Take the example of the important AIDS drugs developed by pharmaceutical companies over the last decade. If they were available worldwide, millions of lives could be saved. The retail cost of a year's treatment, however, is well over \$10,000 per patient, well beyond the reach of all but the most affluent. The cost of this treatment, however, could be reduced to less than \$300 per year if trade agreements were modified to allow for generic production in other countries. Yet the rest of the world has had to drag us kicking and screaming to change things even minimally. Even as we speak US trade negotiators are trying to roll back recent World Trade Organization provisions allowing some generic production. We've become so accustomed to our curious brand of raw capitalism that it seems "normal" for companies to put their profits over the lives of millions of people. And the rest of the world is not blind to our preoccupation with our self-interest.

I'd like to suggest to you that we've entered one of those times in history when the blindness of the society becomes so pervasive that later generations look back, scratch their heads, and wonder, "How could *all those people* have been unable to see what was going on? Didn't they recognize the evil in their society? Didn't they care?" One thinks of Apartheid in South Africa, segregation in the United States, or Nazism in Germany. Why didn't people *see* what was happening and do something about it?

During such times very few *inside* the society can see what's obvious to *everyone* outside. Until the veil is lifted, even great evil can seem quite "normal" to an entire society.

I know it's inflammatory to mention Nazi Germany. Obviously, there are crucial differences between Germany in the Thirties and the United States now. What's not different, however, is the blindness within the culture to what's happening and our inability to change course. The current death and destruction—which will only increase with time—will be on the same scale as the death of six million Jews. And, like the good Germans, most Americans refuse to let themselves even recognize it.

I also know that there's lately been too much loose talk about the "evil" in the world, but I'm not sure what other word will suffice for these destructive arcs.

But what's behind them? What warrants the label of "evil"?

One place we *could* start is our affluence and consumerism. As is well known, the US has about 4% of the world's population but consumes somewhere between a quarter and a half of its resources, depending on what one measures. We've become addicted to our affluence and to consumption—despite the obvious and irreversible damage to the environment.

Most of us are now able at least to acknowledge the environmental problems created by our consumption. We're less able to see the *injustice inherent* in our affluence. Not only would it be impossible for everyone to rise to our level of affluence before depleting resources and despoiling the earth, but our wealth also

depends upon

economic and political structures that impoverish others. We tend to see free-market capitalism, for instance, as a neutral process everyone can take advantage of. Besides, it's so ubiquitous there hardly seems any alternative. We pay little attention to the brutality of this economic system in expropriating the natural resources and labor of third world countries for our benefit.

But it's important we not stop at naming individual affluence and consumerism. At least as pernicious is the power invested, ultimately, in the hands of a few. Large corporations—dominating advertising, the media, and politics and accountable to no one except themselves—are now more powerful than nation states.

In creating such corporations, we've literally created monsters. In the 19th century, the Supreme Court defined the corporation as a "person" with all the rights of a person—such as freedom of speech or the right of due process. So, for instance, advertisements for Nike shoes are protected as "speech." Then in the 20

th

century, the courts ruled that the corporation's

primary

responsibility was to its stockholders, that is, to maximize profits. Stockholders can even sue management for decisions—made, for instance, out of environmental concern—that reduce profits. Isn't this literally a monster: an entity of unlimited size and power with all the rights and protections of a person whose only legal purpose is to maximize monetary gain?

In order to maintain our affluence, the society has committed itself to an extreme, free-market economics as if it were one of the Ten Commandments. Contrary to popular assumptions, this subjection of all values to the market is a new phenomenon, less than thirty years old. The founders of our nation, even the founders of capitalism, wouldn't recognize it, much less ascribe to it, yet we've made the "free market" sacrosanct. It should be clear by now, however, that capitalism—if it's not well-regulated by government—leads *inexorably* to injustice and to ecological destruction, yet our commitment to the affluence this free market brings blinds us: we don't recognize that our affluence is built upon the backs of both the world's poor and our own children and grandchildren.

Our commitment to such a death-dealing system requires media for justification and military power for protection from the blowback from those who lose out. Over the last twenty years there's been an increasing concentration of media so that we get our information from fewer and fewer sources. Five large corporations now own 75% of all media, and further

consolidations pop up regularly. There's well documented bias in the way the news is presented, especially news that would threaten the system. Several weeks ago, for instance, *Lancet*, the prestigious British medical journal, published a sophisticated study estimating that the Iraq war and occupation have killed approximately 98,000 Iraqis. This study, which made headlines in Europe, made barely a ripple in our media.

The media also bring us advertising, that highly refined science that spends billions of dollars a year to encourage us to consume more. On average, each of us is exposed to over 2000 media images a day, virtually all of which have the same message: "Consume more," linked carefully with our desires for sex, companionship, family, security, power, and so on. There's simply no escaping these images. They're in your children's schools and on the sides of our busses. They're in our heads!

Our economic power, and the resultant injustice, can't ultimately be maintained without military force. And so the United States has lately found itself on the wrong side of almost every conflict in the developing world as we've militarily supported non-democratic governments that align with our economic interests.

The exact number of US military bases in foreign countries is uncertain, but according to the Defense Department, the US owns or rents at least 700 military bases in 130 countries, and those numbers don't seem to include known bases in Kosovo, Israel, Iraq, Afghanistan, Kuwait, Kyrgyzstan, Qatar, and Uzbekistan. [\[1\]](#)

The current administration has arrogated to itself the right to intervene militarily anywhere on the globe against any country for any reason if the president perceives it to be in the national interest. Our combined military and international intelligence budgets easily top half a trillion dollars a year. And, of course, since 9/11 we've invaded two countries and attempted to build "friendly" governments in both.

The list of international treaties the United States has sabotaged in the last several years is long. These have been agreements by virtually all the other countries in the world to deal with international problems that threaten our common safety. The Kyoto accords, a treaty to ban land mines, the ABM treaty with Russia, an agreement to reduce international "small arms" sales, the International Court of Justice. We've undercut the UN at almost every turn. Against the rest of the world we've financed and supported almost without constraint Israel's use of

military force against the Palestinians. Our plans to develop new tactical nuclear weapons and our refusal to rule out the “first use” of our nuclear arsenal have been important causes of nuclear proliferation. The current administration’s preventive war doctrine and jettisoning of the Geneva Protocols on treatment of prisoners jeopardize the very foundations of the way nations relate to one another. The list goes on.

With the fall of the Soviet Union, the United States had an unprecedented opportunity as the sole superpower to abolish nuclear weapons, decrease world military spending, and, in the process, end hunger and homelessness, and provide essential education and health care ... not just in our country but in the entire world. These were easily do-able. We declined.

Let me emphasize that these are not isolated political actions nor the result of some reactionary conspiracy. While I’m very critical of the Bush Administration’s decisions in these areas, the crisis we’re heading toward has been the result of thoroughly bi-partisan decisions over at least decades. Had John Kerry been elected, our fundamental struggle—to transform our society in order to save our children—would have been little different.

The consumerism, the power of corporations, the sophistication of advertising, the extent and bias of the media, the resort to military force and the increasingly nationalistic political decisions aren’t separate elements but integrated components of a system. The whole is far more powerful than the sum of its parts. Is democracy even possible, for instance, when the sophisticated power of advertising is held almost exclusively by the wealthy and powerful?

Now, in one way, none of this is really new. It’s called Empire. The wealthy few *always* have the power—by using the military and the media—to exploit the many who are poor. What *is* different in our time is the level of technological development and our capacity to destroy the environment. Since 1945, we’ve had for the first time *in human history* the capacity to wipe ourselves out, and that capacity grows every year. Given the scale of the coming ecological damage and the inevitability of small groups acquiring weapons of mass destruction, human beings have only a short time to grow up spiritually. We really do. You might say there’s a race on between our technological growth and our spiritual growth. It doesn’t look good. For some things it’s already too late.

If I were speaking to you in the Eighties or even the Nineties, talk about “American Empire”

would almost certainly have been dismissed as out-of-touch, left-wing, radical rant. But in the last few years, the forbidden word “empire” has been spoken aloud and written about frequently, often approvingly ... by people from both the right and the left. It is now mainstream.

A shorthand definition of Empire, is the coming together of economic, cultural, political and military power to constitute a system of domination led by powerful nations to protect and defend their own interests.

The problem is that, historically, Empires tend not to do very well. One of the tell-tale signs of an Empire in decline is the gradual erosion of civil liberties: Think PATRIOT Act.

I'd like to suggest that the story of the prophet Jeremiah is helpful in understanding where we are. Jeremiah lived in Judah just before the nation was smashed and the remaining Hebrew people sent into exile in Babylon. He understood well that there were consequences:

- To abandoning the poor,
- To taking on other military and economic powers as one's gods,
- To forgetting that love and forgiveness, not self-aggrandizement, are the purpose of life, and
- To creating security through military power rather than the protection of God.

Jeremiah saw that his nation was no longer *capable* of returning to God. What he saw was the coming Exile! This was not some kind of crystal-ball-gazing, magical future-telling. Long before anyone else even seemed to realize there was a problem in the country, Jeremiah saw the inevitable consequences of his society's actions. While it's always theoretically possible to repent and turn, Jeremiah could see that was not going to happen. Things had gone too far. His message was, “It's over, folks. Prepare for exile.”

Jeremiah saw the economic, military and political crisis as a spiritual crisis, the result of disobedience and sin. And so, I'm afraid, must we. I'm convinced that we'll only have the resources to respond appropriately to this crisis if we understand that the coming judgment *is*, in fact, spiritual judgment.

If we're thinking about the fate of our society, there's little ground for optimism. Despite the economic, political, and military power we see around us, America is in that stage of inevitable decline that happens to any Empire that neglects justice for the poor and care of the marginalized.

Not to speak out now, not to do what we can, is to put ourselves in the same position as the "good Germans" in the 1930s.

Well, that's pretty depressing.

I think our hope has to come from our capacity to respond, not from any likelihood of particular success. Let me identify five areas in which we might begin to respond to this move toward Empire.

First, we can educate ourselves about what's happening, recognizing that, despite appearances, the likelihood of exile—whatever its particulars—is very high. I'm not so foolish as to try to predict the future with any certainty; history is full of too many surprises. But we're heading in a very dangerous direction, and those of us who can see this clearly must begin to speak a harsh, prophetic word to the larger community. We must be ready to interpret to the wider community the coming exile as a result of our inability to put the needs of the entire world above our own shortsighted goals. As the exile proceeds, we must be able to name it for what it is.

Second, we must work to convince ourselves (and others) that the love and forgiveness of our spiritual traditions have become *practical political necessities*, not just spiritual niceties. The world has changed forever, and we don't anymore have the luxury of leaving anyone out. Without justice, without love and forgiveness for *everyone*, the likelihood of our culture's survival is small. This means, at the least, some kind of guaranteed economic equity around the world. We can no longer think just in terms of the United States.

The real hope that I have comes not so much from our country but from the ability of peoples around the world to throw off Empire over the last century. The collapse of the Soviet Union,

the emergence of Eastern Europe, the end of Apartheid in South Africa reveal a great deal about the power of the people in search of peace and justice.

Third, we must begin to recognize how thoroughly the Empire contaminates each of us. American consumerism necessitates American imperialism. We maintain our affluence only by the continued expropriation of resources from others, so we have a deeply vested interest in the political, economic, and social system as it is. The resultant cognitive dissonance makes it very difficult for us to see the disastrous consequences.

Fourth, how do we remain in opposition to Empire? I think it's possible only from within community. Trying to do so as an individual or single family is extraordinarily difficult. Earlier in world history, if one placed oneself in opposition to the culture, one became an enemy of the culture and was persecuted. Remaining in opposition to the culture may have been difficult, may have led, in fact, to death, but there was no question about *how* to remain in opposition. One announced one's opposition and, perhaps, did some form of action, and things rolled from there.

But our culture has refined co-optation to an art form. My favorite prophet, Walter Brueggemann, has suggested that if Moses were alive today, Pharaoh would make him into a talk-show host. His alternative voice would become one among many in the din, an example of the society's tolerance of dissent. The powerful seduction of the culture continues, indefinitely, however, and the individual is usually lured back or finds herself suddenly back in without knowing quite what happened. How do we remain in opposition? For me the answer has been a community of faith. It's difficult without community.

Finally, we must find ways to act, even little ways. One of the perverse effects of the torrent of media images that washes over us every day is to make our little efforts feel meaningless. But there's no such thing as objective powerlessness. Our belief that we're powerless is a sure sign that we've been duped by Empire. We don't need to do big, important things, but we must do *something* ...if for no other reason than to defy the propaganda of the system. Simplify our lives, join the Children's Defense Fund, contribute to save the children of Darfur, become active in politics ... something. Our individual religious and political persuasion will determine *how* we act, but we must act.

We are parents ... in my case a grandparent. Parenthood—at its best—gives us a deep desire to build a just and peaceful future; we understand the joy in sacrificing for the sake of another. We long for our children's peaceful future, which will only come through a profound justice. At some level we understand that the consumerist trinkets we might accumulate for them mean far less to our children than the kind of world we leave them. Parenthood gives us the courage to struggle for a better world, for our children's future. There's much work to be done.

[1] Johnson, Chalmers, *America's Empire of Bases*, <http://www.tomdispatch.com/indexprint.mhtml?pid=1181> (orDownloadsMi
litarismUS Foreign Military Bases - Chalmers Johnson.doc