

Jonathan Aitken



Faith in Foreign Affairs

IS THE UNITED STATES DEVELOPING a faith-based foreign policy? The question is being increasingly debated around the world, usually by liberal commentators who regard the concept with the sort of horror reserved for something the cat has brought in. Inevitably President George W. Bush's evangelical friends get blamed for their sinister influence over this development. Even when they lobby the Foggy Bottom policymakers for the most admirable and least controversial of causes such as seeking peace in Darfur or halting the AIDS epidemic in Africa, the reporting of such campaigns by evangelical leaders is usually handled by publications like the *New York Times*, the *Economist*, or *Le Figaro* with distaste or at least a touch of praising with faint damn.

So it came as a pleasant surprise to read in September-October's *Foreign Affairs* magazine an impeccably balanced lead article, "God's Country?" by Walter Russell Mead of the Council on Foreign Relations. The essence of Mead's favorable analysis of the evangelical impact on U.S. foreign policy is captured on the *Foreign Affairs* website summary of the article:

Religion has always been a major force in U.S. politics, but the recent surge in the number and the power of evangelicals is recasting the country's political scene—with dramatic implications for foreign policy. This should not be cause for panic: evangelicals are passionately devoted to justice and improving the world, and eager to reach out across sectarian lines.

Now it's jolly decent of those condescending editors in the Manhattan offices of *Foreign Affairs* to tell their readership of foreign policy wonks that there's no need to panic because a handful of Christians "passionately devoted to justice and improving the world" are starting to trespass on the sacred turf of geopolit-

ical influence. The magazine's reaction reminds me of the cry: "*Pro bono publico, no bloody panico*," a phrase coined by Admiral Morgan Giles MP, one of Margaret Thatcher's most loyal backbench members of Parliament, when he was trying to calm his colleagues' jitters at the time of the Falklands war. But to give Mr. Mead his due, he was not suffering from any jitters about a faith-based foreign policy. Indeed, it seems he had come to praise the foreign policy aware evangelicals, not to bury them. For he concluded his 5,000 word piece in *Foreign Affairs*:

[E]vangelical power is here to stay for the foreseeable future, and those concerned about U.S. foreign policy would do well to reach out. As more evangelical leaders acquire firsthand experience in foreign policy, they are likely to provide something now sadly lacking in the world of U.S. foreign policy: a trusted group of experts, well versed in the nuances and dilemmas of the international situation, who are able to persuade large numbers of Americans to support the complex and counterintuitive policies that are sometimes necessary in this wicked and frustrating—or dare one say it, fallen—world.

Now these words had a particularly encouraging resonance for me, because I have just re-entered the world of trying to influence foreign affairs—this time from a Christian viewpoint. I have become president of Christian Solidarity Worldwide (CSW) in succession to the redoubtable Baroness Caroline Cox, who has been well known for many years in the corridors of power of Washington, Moscow, Brussels, Westminster, and other centers of government for her tireless lobbying on behalf of Christians who are being persecuted for their faith. CSW is an advocacy organization that strives to be "a voice for the voiceless," speaking up for Christians

around the world who are suffering from persecution by repressive regimes, by Islamic extremists, or by any other hostile pressure groups.

Amazingly the number of those being persecuted for their faith is rising in the 21st century. CSW's team of experts produces regular reports on the harassment, imprisonment, torture, and occasional deaths of persecuted Christians in countries like North Korea, Burma, Indonesia, Iran, and Laos. We give regular briefings to interested legislators such as Rep. Frank Wolf and we highlight special situations of persecution suffered by Christians in largely unnoticed places like the Dalit communities of India, upcountry Muslim Malaysia, or the remoter Chinese provinces. CSW is backed by all church denominations, but many of our most energetic supporters are evangelicals. So we get our share of the brickbats and occasional bouquets that go with the territory of Christian pressure groups that believe that a faith-based foreign policy, or at least a faith-influenced foreign policy, is in many respects a desirable ideal.

EVER SINCE THE GREAT 19TH-CENTURY Parliamentary battles fought and won by the evangelical William Wilberforce to secure the abolition of the slave trade, it has been part of the evangelical culture to campaign for humanitarian and human rights policies on a global basis. This culture has received a boost during the presidency of George W. Bush, who for both personal and political reasons listens with attention to the voices of Christian America that seek to influence foreign policy. Under Bush, U.S. aid to Africa has risen by 67 percent, including \$15 billion in new spending to combat HIV and AIDS. Diplomatic pressure from Washington has influenced China to ease its harassment of certain Christian groups and to permit unrestricted imports of Bibles. Other successful results of evangelical lobbying include the State Department's giving a far higher priority to ending the Muslim vs. Christian wars in the Sudan, and to halting the human trafficking in sexually enslaved women in certain countries. The new evangelical interest in foreign policy keeps dubious regimes under much more careful watch for breaches of human rights or atrocities that may be the harbingers of genocide. The Clinton administration's disastrous mistakes in handling the war in Rwanda would be unlikely to be repeated elsewhere by the Bush team because of its greater vigilance in areas of the world

where faith-based foreign policy concerns are focused.

Although all these new foreign policy priorities are to be welcomed, there is greater controversy about the influence of the Christian right on U.S. policy

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towards Israel. Yet for all the fulminations in the European press about how wicked it is of evangelicals to regard support for Israel as a divine cause, the realpolitik of U.S. foreign policy is that successive administrations have regarded such support as being in America's national interest for the past 60 years. So nothing has been changed in U.S.-Israel relations except perhaps an evangelical-led growth in popular support for the same policy.

Probably the greatest impact of the tendency towards a faith-based foreign policy lies in the way it influences Americans to look at the world. There has long been a view, at least in Middle America, that the international scene is an ongoing struggle between the forces of good and evil and that Uncle Sam should be on the side of the good guys. This has understandably sharpened since 9/11. Indeed the National Security Strategy of the United States has stated in its annual publications since 2002: "Our responsibility to history is already clear: to answer these attacks and rid the world of evil."

As Iraq has shown, ridding the world of evil is a more difficult and complex business than those who talk in these terms from pulpits have recognized. This obvious caveat notwithstanding, the broad moral imperatives of a faith-influenced foreign policy are right and so are the policy's detailed applications to individual situations around the world where human rights violations and other unacceptable practices are taking place. For *Foreign Affairs* magazine to have recognized these welcome realities deserves not just a reaction of "no panic," but a cheer. ☼

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