

Theocracy Alert

The harvest of messianic foreign policy: Anti-U.S. radical Islam

By Ivan Eland

Online Journal Guest Writer

May 27, 2005—([Independent Institute](#))—An interventionist U.S. foreign policy, fueled by the Bush administration's messianic zeal to make the world more democratic, has contributed to a dramatic rise in radical political Islam around the world.

In fact, the current administration's campaign is even more ambitious than Woodrow Wilson's naïve policy of "making the world safe for democracy." Provided that the Bush administration is actually sincere about its rhetoric (which is questionable given its mild criticism of despotic allies, such as the governments of Egypt and Uzbekistan, which have recently cracked down on dissidents or simply shot them en masse), both the Wilson and Bush policies derive from a virulent strain of American "exceptionalism," the idea that the United States is special among the nations of the world.

Some evangelical Christians (during Wilson's time and now), seem to think that the United States was founded as a "Christian nation" and that the world would be better off if more foreign governments resembled the U.S. government. This idea goes far beyond the proven empirical fact that most of the U.S. population are self-described Christians. Questioning orthodox views of American history, many such evangelicals believe that the nation's founders imbued the new government as a theocracy with Christian principles.

In fact, some of the nation's key founders were not really Christian, but Deists, and the U.S. Constitution does not mention the word "God"—on purpose. For example, Thomas Jefferson had bitter disputes with the organized church and was a vociferous advocate of the separation of church and state. Jefferson, James Madison, and other founders correctly believed that state involvement in religion corrupts both government *and* faith. More important, if the government does not endorse or support any one religion or denomination, citizens can freely practice any form of faith without fear of government suppression or oppression.

Unfortunately, the messianic zeal of some evangelical Christians to convert others began being misdirected to infuse official U.S. foreign policy beginning in the aftermath of the Spanish-American War at the turn of the last century. President William McKinley wanted to use armed force to convert Filipinos to "Christianity"—even though most of them were already Catholics. Today, the idea that Americans are the "chosen people" who need to use force to make others more like themselves has morphed into the more secularly appealing notion of spreading U.S.-style democracy around the Middle East and the world. Instead of "saving" foreign peoples with "fire and brimstone" religion, the U.S. government is now "saving" them with democracy.

Even many liberals, not realizing the "evangelical" roots of Wilsonianism, have embraced the idealistic policy. This bi-partisan consensus on spreading democracy at gunpoint would have mortified the nation's founders. First, almost all of the founders—including even Alexander Hamilton, an advocate of government activism—believed that meddling in other countries' business through wars and military interventions would ultimately destroy our own unique experiment with liberty here at home. Second, the founders were more concerned, correctly, about individual rights and liberty and would view the modern focus on the majoritarian rule of pure democracy as tyrannical and hence dangerous to those liberties.

Democracy alone does not guarantee individual liberties. Ironically, any legitimate election in Egypt or Saudi Arabia—as urged by the Bush administration—could very well elect undemocratic fundamentalist Islamic parties that could usurp individual liberties by instituting strict Islamic law. But then perhaps this would be only an Islamic version of the ultimate vision that some misguided evangelical Christians have for religion in American governance.

It is the interventionist U.S. foreign policy that has contributed to the rise of radical political Islam in the first place. Despite its idealistic and messianic Wilsonian rhetoric throughout the years, the U.S. government has routinely propped up despots in the Islamic world that were perceived as friendly to U.S. interests. The only dissent allowed by these local autocrats was in the mosques. Thus, radical Islamists gained public legitimacy in these countries as the only force opposing the corrupt U.S.-backed regimes. Thus, the United States now faces anti-U.S. radical Islamic movements around the world that spawn terrorists. In 1978, one such anti-U.S. movement got control of the levers of power in Iran and created a theocratic Islamic state. In the 1990s, another, the Taliban, got control of the Afghan government—both examples of the blowback from messianic U.S. foreign policy.

The United States has made a great error in conducting a messianic, albeit often hypocritical, campaign to convert the world to “democratic” government using an interventionist foreign policy. Instead, U.S. policy makers should spend more time defending liberty at home and becoming a peaceful refuge of human rights for the world to emulate—the kind of American exceptionalism that the founders originally intended.

Ivan Eland is a Senior Fellow at The Independent Institute, Director of the Institute's [Center on Peace & Liberty](#), and author of the books [The Empire Has No Clothes](#), and [Putting “Defense” Back into U.S. Defense Policy](#).

Copyright © 1998–2005 Online Journal™. All rights reserved.