

Preface:

Captain America and the Crusade Against Evil

The title of our book comes from a comic book character who combines explosive strength with perfect moral intuitions. In his public life Captain America serves as Private Rogers, but when the level of danger becomes unbearable, he takes on a masked identity and rids the world of evil. Having grown up with Captain America during World War II, we met him again as our students helped us untangle America's sense of mission—and its affinity for violent crusading. Our book explains the religious roots and historical development of this crusading tendency.

The “Captain America complex” that we describe in the following pages is the uneasy fusion between two kinds of roles. Should America be the “city set upon a hill” that promotes the rule of law even when faced with difficult adversaries? Or should it crusade on the military plane of battle, letting no law or institution impede its effort to destroy evil?

As we completed this manuscript in the fall and winter of 2001-2002, we were concerned about the tendency toward military crusading. Sadly, our premonitions are being confirmed. As we write this preface, events suggest that the increasingly strident crusade has undermined the global consensus that formed so quickly after the crimes of September 11. But we also find new signs of hope. In either case we suggest that an understanding of the Captain America complex as a contradictory form of civil religion throws light on current developments and suggests a more promising path for the future.

In the international arena, we were heartened at the expressions of unity and sympathy for the tragedies of September 11. We hoped that America might follow through on an earlier commitment to the International Criminal Court, a venue that seemed promising for the likes of Osama bin Laden and Saddam

Hussein. Such hopes were quickly dashed, and our analysis of the links between American civil religion and popular entertainments explains their sudden eclipse.

As our nation's leaders contemplated their crusade in the post-9/11 world, they decided not to risk accountability to any form of international law. In July of 2002, the United States wrangled a one year exemption from any criminal prosecution by the ICC. The Bush administration began to secure permanent exemptions through bi-lateral agreements—with Israel, Romania, and several other small nations as the first trophies. The world was puzzled. Why would a nation engaged in a global campaign against terrorism seem so obsessively opposed to an institution so well suited to its prosecution, and risk alienating allies? Why would it opt out of shaping ICC statutes and procedures in directions that meet its sense of justice? Why abandon the commitment to international law that had transformed the second half of the 20th century? Foreign commentators complained of unilateralism and hegemony, but such charges seem insufficient to account for the self-righteous passions of American policymakers.

Our explanation for this seemingly illogical behavior points to our national fascination with stories of selfless crusaders who, like Captain America, must take on a secret identity and circumvent the law to rescue the innocent. Translated as an impulse for the world stage, the mythic imperative requires shielding American warriors in the war against terrorism, no matter how many rules they break or how unpopular they may become.

Our book also throws light on the idea of an "axis of evil" and the doctrine of preventive military strikes. Echoing the conspiracy theory that justified so many hostilities in earlier times, these developments warrant attacks based on suspicions rather than overt acts. They are typical expressions of the crusading mentality that our book seeks to explain. Although the world has much to fear from Saddam Hussein, Captain America's crusade has evoked fears among our closest allies. Every country that had initially

shown solidarity after September 11 now gives evidence of serious alienation.

In Israel, the setting for much that we have to say about the collision of Christian, Islamic and Jewish crusading, the scene has sadly degenerated beyond our pessimism at the time we wrote on the rebirth of millennial zealotry (chapter 8) and the globalization of zeal and militant jihad (chapter 9). Israel is the country whose ancient spiritual legacies of redemptive wrath and redemptive love energize both strands of America's divided consciousness. Now it is an arena of intensified conflict that conveys more and more the rhetoric and deadly flavor of holy war. Nevertheless, there are a few hopeful voices among Muslim leaders denouncing suicidal jihad and among Israeli activists who are determined to find fairness in dealing with the occupied territories.

One of our book's most important goals is to sustain the ideals of constitutional democracy that always suffer strain during crisis. The USA Patriot Act of 2001 authorized intrusive restrictions of democratic rights, the long term consequences of which could be extremely serious. Another trend that gives us a special concern is the rise of a zealous cult of the nation. In the Ninth Circuit Court in California, an atheistic father challenged the "under God" component of the flag pledge as a violation of his daughter's rights. The court ruled in his favor on the basis of the "Establishment Clause" of the First Amendment and a firestorm of piety followed. There were many calls for new legislation, even a constitutional amendment, to place "under God" beyond any kind of judicial review. Such sentiments are coalescing with other efforts to sacralize the flag that would establish a theocratic foundation for the American nation. As we argue in chapter 14, the success of such measures would turn the United States into a mirror image of the theocratic Islam it now opposes.

In view of these dangerous developments, we take comfort in the fact that debate about the crusade against evil is beginning to emerge within American religious organizations. We do not know whether moderate voices can steer the nation away from the

precipice. As we show in the pages that follow, the tradition of zealous warfare has religious roots shared by Christians, Jews, and Muslims. It will not suffice merely to complain about the folly of our present course, for the sources of idealistic crusading must be exposed to light and replaced by healthier strands of faith and ethics that lie at the heart of every great religion. In the chapters below we invite our readers to join us in this soul wrenching task.

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