

From time to time, one hears the assertion that America is an empire.

The evidence given for this statement is that, because America possesses overwhelming cultural, economic, and, above all, military might, it wields overwhelming power over the rest of the world. What is more, the war of terrorism has given America the occasion and justification to wield this power. "America is like a new Rome or London," they say, "and while those capitals claimed to promote world tranquility, recall their injustices, the fragility of their peace, and the final fate of their empires." We are to look on their fallen works and despair and chasten our ambitions. I don't know enough history to discern if such claims are true. I do know enough to be suspicious of such sweeping claims.

Nevertheless, by speaking of the nature of America's character and the use of its power at home and abroad, and especially by casting these statements in explicitly theological language, Bush's State of the Union Address implicitly responded to such criticisms.

The telling moment came toward the very end of his speech. "*The liberty we prize is not America's gift to the world, it is God's gift to humanity,*" he said. This merits attention. The Roman and British Empires, the critics say, thought they possessed the epitome of civilization and, therefore, it was their duty to bring this civilization to the world— by force, if necessary. In the same way, these critics continue, America strives to bring freedom to the world.

Not so, says Bush. By insisting that liberty is God's, not America's, gift to the world, he is saying that freedom is not something America possesses and, so, can dispense as it pleases but, rather, something that all human persons, by virtue of their created nature, already possess by right. America does not "bring" freedom to the peoples of the world but strives to actualize the freedom they hold in potential.

In other words, when "*we exercise power without conquest*" and "*sacrifice for the liberty of strangers*" (two more telling phrases), we do so because it is the right thing to do. America acts on behalf of freedom not because it is benevolent (though it often is), nor because it wields its power prudently (though it often does), but because defending freedom is the right thing to do. God created people for freedom. America and all other nations are called, by divine mandate, to recognize this freedom. It is a justice instituted by God; so, when we fight, we fight on God's side. Such divine sanction of American power also makes people nervous. Generally, it ought, for much mischief has been caused in the name of God.

But, again, Bush's speech addresses this unease. In the theologically lively, final paragraph, Bush says, "*We do not claim to know all the ways of Providence, yet we can trust in them, placing our confidence in the loving God behind all of life and of history.*" The implication is that any divine favor America possesses is the result not of its intrinsic merit but of God's gift. Such a gift may be taken from us; Scripture teaches that nations rise and fall by God's command. We do not know if any favor we have will be taken from us, though we do know what God requires of us. To be a nation "under God" is to be, among other things, under his judgment— to be held accountable to his standards of justice. Liberty, for America, is not a divine birthright but a divine challenge. So we strive to be just. And we pray.

The most remarkable moment of Bush's speech is his closing: not "*God bless America,*" as he often says, but the more explicit "*May he guide us now, and may God continue to bless the United States of America.*" This should not be missed: he closes with a prayer. As we strive to be just, we need guidance, so we humbly ask God for it. And we remember that the phrase "God bless America" is not a statement or a command but a supplication. Liberty may be our right, but divine favor is not. So we humbly ask for it. Our situation is precarious. (It always is.) So we pray.