

# THE BUSH CRUSADE



BRUCE LITZ

BY JAMES CARROLL

*The massacre perpetrated by the Crusaders in Jerusalem (in 1099) has long been reckoned among the greatest crimes of history. There is no lack of psychological explanations for it, and all historians, those who favor the Crusade and those who do not, rightly blame the state of almost morbid excitement which gripped a rabble made fanatical by the preaching of the holy war.*

—ZOE OLDENBOURG ("The Crusades")

At the turn of the millennium, the world was braced for terrible things. Most "rational" worries were tied to an anticipated computer glitch, the Y2K problem, and even the most scientifically oriented of people seemed temporarily at the mercy of powerful mythic forces. Imagined hobgoblins leapt from hard drives directly into nightmares. Airlines canceled flights for the first day of the new year, citing fears that computers for the traffic-control system would not work. The calendar as such had not previously been a source of dread, but all at once, time itself held a new danger. As the year 2000 approached, I bought bottled water and extra cans of tuna fish. I even withdrew a large amount of cash from the bank. Friends mocked me, then admitted to having done similar things. There were no dances-of-death or outbreaks of flagellant cults, but a millennial fervor worthy of medieval superstition infected the most secular of cultures. Of course, the mystical date came and went, the computers did fine, airplanes flew and the world went back to normal.

Then came September 11, 2001, the millennial catastrophe — just a little late. Airplanes fell from the sky, thousands died and an entirely new kind of horror gripped the human imagination. Time, too, played its role, but time as warped by television, which created a global simultaneity, turning the whole human race into a witness, as the awful events were endlessly replayed, as if those bodies leaping from the Twin Towers would never hit the ground. Nightmare in broad daylight. New York's World Trade Center collapsed not just into the surrounding streets but into the hearts of every person with access to CNN. Hundreds of millions of people instinctively reached out to those they loved, grateful to be alive. Death had shown itself in a new way. But if a vast throng experienced the terrible events of 9/11 as one, only one man, the President of the United States, bore a unique responsibility for finding a way to respond to them.

George W. Bush plumbed the deepest place in himself, looking for a simple expression of what the assaults of 9/11 required. It was his role to lead the nation and the very world. The President, at a moment of crisis, defines the communal

response. A few days after the assault, George W. Bush did this. Speaking spontaneously, without the aid of advisors or speechwriters, he put a word on the new American purpose that both shaped it and gave it meaning. "This crusade," he said, "this war on terrorism."

*Crusade.* I remember a momentary feeling of vertigo at the President's use of that word, the outrageous ineptitude of it. The vertigo lifted, and what I felt then was fear, sensing not ineptitude but exactitude. My thoughts went to the elusive Osama bin Laden, how pleased he must have been, Bush already reading from his script. I am a Roman Catholic with a feeling for history, and strong regrets, therefore, over what went wrong in my own tradition once the Crusades were launched. Contrary to schoolboy romances, Hollywood fantasies and the nostalgia of royalty, the Crusades were a set of world-historic crimes. I hear the word with a third ear, alert to its dangers, and I see through its legends to its warnings. For example, in Iraq "insurgents" have lately shocked the world by decapitating hostages, turning the most taboo of acts into a military tactic. But a thousand years ago, Latin crusaders used the severed heads of Muslim fighters as missiles, catapulting them over the fortified walls of cities under siege. Taboos fall in total war, whether crusade or jihad.

For George Bush, 'crusade' was an offhand reference. But all the more powerfully for that, it was an accidental probing of unintended but nevertheless real meaning. That the President used the word inadvertently suggests how it expressed his exact truth, an unmasking of his most deeply felt purpose. Crusade, he said. Later, his embarrassed aides suggested that he had meant to use the word only as a synonym for struggle, but Bush's own syntax belied that. He defined crusade as war. Even offhandedly, he had said exactly what he meant.

Osama bin Laden was already understood to be trying to spark a "clash of civilizations" that would set the West against the whole House of Islam. After 9/11, agitated voices on all sides insisted that no such clash was inevitable. But crusade was a match for jihad, and such words threatened nothing less than apocalyptic conflict between irreconcilable cultures. Indeed, the President's reference flashed through the Arab news media. Its resonance went deeper, even, than the embarrassed aides expected — and not only among Muslims. After all, the word

refers to a long series of military campaigns, which taken together, were the defining event in the shaping of what we call Western civilization. A coherent set of political, economic, social and even mythological traditions of the Eurasian continent from the British Isles to the far side of Arabia, grew out of the transformations wrought by the Crusades. And it is far from incidental still, both that those campaigns were conducted by Christians against Muslims, and that they, too, were attached to the irrationalities of millennial fever.

If the American President was the person carrying the main burden of shaping a response to the catastrophe of 9/11, his predecessor in such a grave role nearly a thousand years earlier, was the Catholic Pope. Seeking to overcome the century-long dislocations of postmillennial Christendom, he rallied both its leaders and commoners with a rousing call to holy war. Muslims were the infidel people who had taken the Holy Land hundreds of years before. Now, that occupation was defined as an intolerable blasphemy. The Holy Land must be redeemed. Within months of the Pope's call, 100,000 people had "taken the Cross" to reclaim the Holy Land for Christ. As a proportion of the population of Europe, a comparable movement today would involve more than a million people, dropping everything to go to war.

In the name of Jesus and certain of God's blessing, crusaders launched what might be called "shock and awe" everywhere they went. In Jerusalem they savagely slaughtered Muslims and Jews alike — practically the whole city. Eventually, Latin crusaders would turn on Eastern Christians, and then on Christian heretics, as blood lust outran the initial "holy" impulse. That trail of violence scars the earth and human memory even to this day — especially in places where the crusaders wreaked their havoc. And the mental map of the Crusades, with Jerusalem at the center of the earth, still defines world politics. But the main point, in relation to Bush's instinctive response to 9/11, is that those religious invasions and wars of long ago established a cohesive Western identity precisely in opposition to Islam, an opposition that survives to this day.

With the Crusades, the violent theology of the killer God came into its own. To save the world, in this understanding, God willed the violent death of God's only beloved son. Here is the relevance of the mental map, for the crusaders were going to war to rescue the site of the salvic death of Jesus, and they displayed their devotion to the cross on which Jesus died by wearing it on their breasts. When Bush's remark was translated into Arabic for broadcast throughout the Middle East, the word "crusade" was rendered as "war of the Cross."

Before the Crusades, Christian theology had given central emphasis to the resurrection of Jesus, and to the idea of incarnation itself, but with the war of the Cross, the bloody crucifixion began to dominate the Latin Christian imagination. A theology narrowly focused on the brutal death of Jesus reinforced the primitive notion that violence can be a sacred act. The cult of martyrdom, even to the point of suicidal valor, was institutionalized in the Crusades, and it is not incidental to the events of 9/11 that a culture of sacred self-destruction took equally firm hold among Muslims. The suicide-murders of the World Trade Center, like the suicide-bombers from the West Bank and Gaza, exploit a perverse link between the willingness to die for a cause and the willingness to kill for it. Crusaders, thinking of heaven, honored that link too.

Here is the deeper significance of Bush's inadvertent reference to the Crusades: Instead of being a last recourse or a necessary evil, violence was established then as the perfectly appropriate, even chivalrous, first response to what is wrong in the world. George W. Bush is a Christian for whom this particular theology lives. While he identified Jesus as his favorite "political philosopher" when running for President in 2000, the Jesus of this evangelical President is not the "turn the other cheek" one. Bush's savior is the Jesus whose cross is wielded as a sword. George W. Bush, having cheerfully accepted responsibility for the executions of 152 death-row inmates in Texas, had already shown himself to be entirely at home with divinely sanctioned violence. After 9/11, no wonder it defined his deepest urge.

But sacred violence once unleashed in 1096, as in 2001, had a momentum of its own. The urgent purpose of war against the "enemy outside" — what some today call the "clash of civilizations" — led quickly to the discovery of an "enemy inside." The crusaders, enroute from northwestern Europe to attack the infidel far away, first fell upon, as they said, "the infidel near at hand." — Jews. A crucifixion-obsessed theology saw God as willing the death of Jesus, but in the bifurcated evangelical imagination, Jews could be blamed for it, and the offense the crusaders took was mortal.

The same dynamic — war against an enemy outside leading to war against an enemy inside — can be seen at work today. It is a more complex dynamic now, with immigrant Muslims and people of Arabic descent coming under heavy pressure in the West. In Europe, Muslims are routinely demonized. In America, they are "profiled," even to the point of being deprived of basic rights. But at the same time, once again, Jews are being targeted. The broad resurgence of anti-Semitism, and the tendency to scapegoat Israel as the primary source of the new discord, reflect an old tidal pull. This is true notwithstanding the harsh fact that Ariel Sharon's government took up the Bush "dead or alive" credo with enthusiasm and used the "war on terrorism" to fuel self-defeating overreactions to Palestinian provocations. But some of Israel's critics fall into the old pattern of measuring Jews against standards to which no one else is held, not even our President. That the war on terrorism is the context within which violence in Israel and Jerusalem has intensified should be no surprise. It wasn't "Israel" then, but conflict



**Bach'n Rock**

RECORD & TAPE SHOP  
POPULAR MUSIC FROM THE 17TH TO 21ST CENTURY  
& ALLEY CAT ESPRESSO  
389 12TH ST. ASTORIA 3338-6376  
MUSIC NON-PROFIT TO THE  
SPAY & NEUTER HUMANE ASSOCIATION

**THE COLUMBIAN CAFE**  
1114 MARINE DR.  
ASTORIA

**HOPE L. HARRIS**  
LICENSED  
MASSAGE  
THERAPIST  
503/325-2523