

over Jerusalem played exactly such a flashpoint role a thousand years ago.

The Crusades proved to have other destructive dynamics as well. The medieval war against Islam, having also targeted Europe's Jews, soon enough became a war against all forms of cultural and religious dissent, a war against heresy. As it had not been in hundreds of years, doctrine now became rigidly defined in the Latin West and those who did not affirm dominant interpretations — Cathars, Albigensians, Eastern Orthodox — were attacked. Doctrinal uniformity, too, could be enforced with sacred violence. When U.S. Attorney General John Ashcroft defines criticism of the Administration in wartime as treason, or when Congress enacts legislation that justifies erosion of civil liberties with appeals to patriotism, they are enacting a Crusades script.

All of this is implicit in the word that President Bush first used, which came to him as naturally as a baseball reference, to define the war on terrorism. That such a dark, seething religious history of sacred violence remains largely unspoken in our world does not defuse it as an explosive force in the human unconscious. In the world of Islam, of course, its meaning could not be more explicit, or closer to consciousness. The full historical and cultural significance of "crusade" is instantly obvious, which is why a howl of protest from the Middle East drove Bush into instant verbal retreat. Yet the very inadvertence of his use of the word is the revelation: Americans do not know what fire they are playing with. Osama bin Laden, however, knows all too well, and in his periodic pronouncements, he uses the word "crusade" to this day, as a flamethrower.

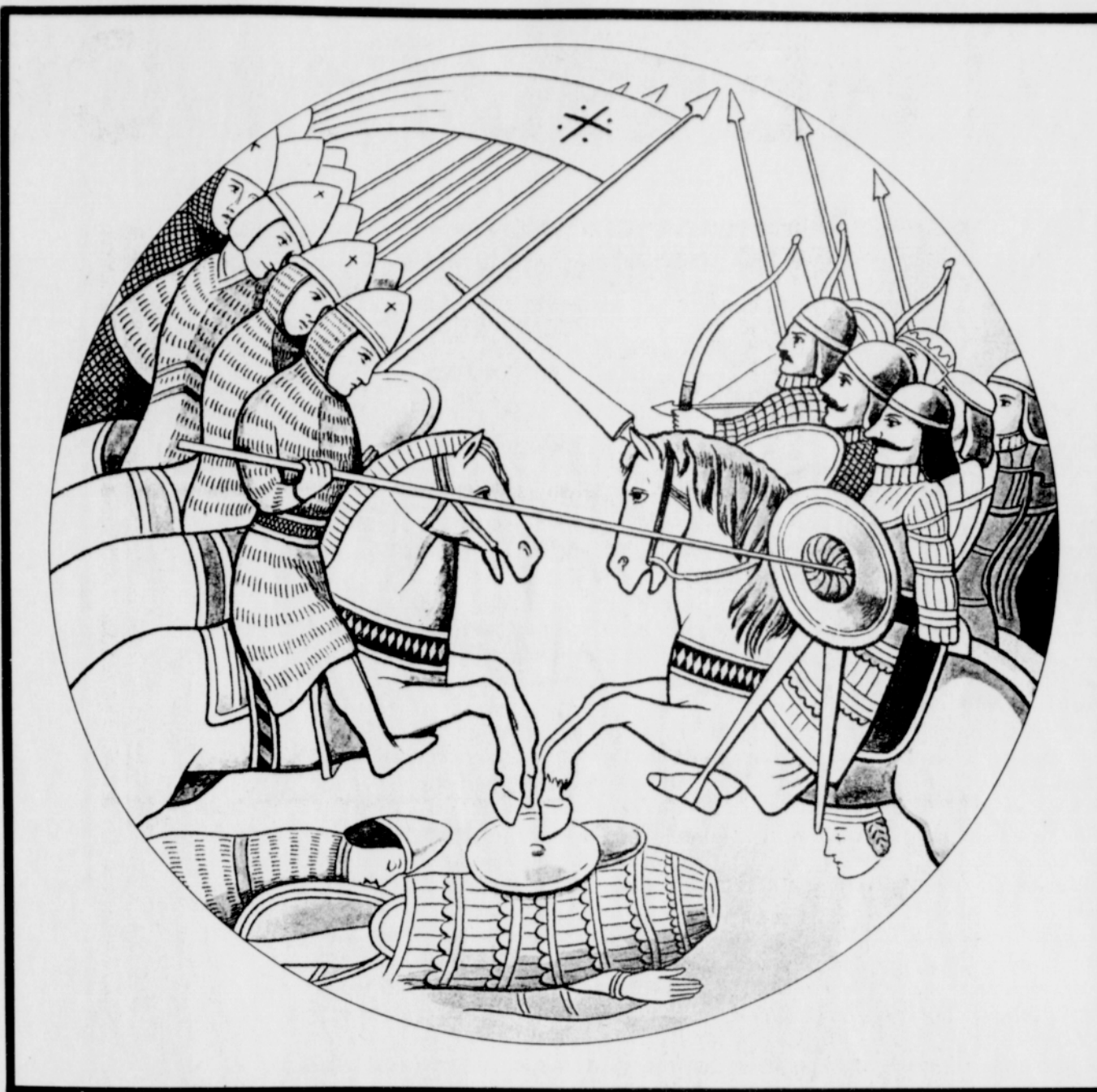
Religious war is the danger here, and it is a graver one than Americans think. Despite our much-vaunted separation of church and state, America has always had a quasi-religious understanding of itself, reflected in the messianism of Puritan founder John Winthrop, the Deist optimism of Thomas Jefferson, the embrace of redemptive suffering that marked Abraham Lincoln and, for that matter, the conviction of Eisenhower's Secretary of State, John Foster Dulles, that Communism had to be opposed on a global scale if only because of its atheism. But never before has America been brought deeper into a dynamite-wired holy of holies than in our President's war on terrorism. Despite the post-Iraq toning down of Washington's rhetoric of empire, and the rejection of further crusader references — although Secretary of State Colin Powell used the word this past March — Bush's war openly remains a cosmic battle between nothing less than the transcendent forces of good and evil. Such a battle is necessarily unlimited and open-ended, and so justifies radical actions — the abandonment, for example, of established notions of civic justice at home and of traditional alliances abroad.

A cosmic moral-religious battle justifies, equally, risks of world-historic proportioned disaster, since the ultimate outcome of such a conflict is to be measured not by actual consequences on this earth but by the earth-transcending will of God. Our war on terrorism, before it is anything else, is thus an imagined conflict, taking place primarily in a mythic realm beyond history.

In waging such a "war," the enemy is to be engaged everywhere and nowhere, not just because the actual nihilists who threaten the social order are faceless and deracinated but because each fanatical suicide-bomber is only an instance of the transcendent enemy — and so the other face of us. Each terrorist is, in effect, a sacrament of the larger reality which is "terrorism." Instead of perceiving unconnected centers of inhuman violence — tribal warlords, Mafia chieftains, nationalist fighters, xenophobic Luddites — President Bush projects the grandest and most interlocking strategies of conspiracy, belief and organization. By the canonization of the war on terrorism, petty nihilists are elevated to the status of world-historic warriors, exactly the fate they might have wished for. This is why the conflict readily bleeds from one locus to another — Afghanistan then, Iraq now, Iran or some other land of evil soon — and why, for that matter, the targeted enemies are entirely interchangeable — here Osama bin Laden, there Saddam Hussein, here the leader of Iran, there of North Korea. They are all essentially one enemy — one "axis" — despite their differences from one another, or even hatred of one another.

Hard-boiled men and women who may not share Bush's fervent spirituality can nonetheless support his purpose because undergirding the new ideology, there is an authentic global crisis that requires an urgent response. New technologies are now making it possible for small groups of nihilists, or even single individuals, to wreak havoc on a scale unprecedented in history. This is the ultimate "asymmetric threat." The attacks of 9/11, amplified by the murderous echo of the anthrax mailer, the as-yet-unapprehended psychopath who sent deadly letters to journalists and government officials in the weeks after 9/11, put that new condition on display for all the world to see. Innovations in physics, biology, chemistry and information technology — and soon, possibly, in nanotechnology and genetic engineering — have had the unforeseen effect of threatening to put in a few hands the destructive power that, in former times, could be exercised only by sizable armies. This is the real condition to which the Bush Administration is responding. The problem is actual, if not yet fully present.

So, to put the best face on the Bush agenda (leaving aside questions of oil, global market control and economic or military hegemony), a humane project of antiproliferation can be seen at its core. Yet a nation that was trying to promote the proliferation of weapons of mass destruction, especially nuclear weapons, would behave precisely as the Bush Administration has behaved over the past three years. The Pentagon's chest-thumping concept of "full spectrum dominance" itself motivates other nations to seek sources of countervailing power, and when the United States actually goes to war to impose its widely disputed notion of order on some states, but not others, nations — friendly as well as unfriendly — find themselves with an urgent reason to acquire some means of deterring such intervention.



12TH CENTURY DEPICTION OF BATTLE BETWEEN CRUSADERS AND MUSLIMS

The odd and tragic thing is that the world before Bush was actually nearing consensus on how to manage the problem of the proliferation of weapons of mass destruction, and had begun to put in place promising structures designed to prevent such spread. Centrally embodied in the Nuclear Nonproliferation Treaty of 1968, which had successfully and amazingly kept the number of nuclear powers (actual as well as admitted) relatively low, that consensus gave primacy to treaty obligations, international cooperation and a serious commitment by existing nuclear powers to move toward ultimate nuclear abolition. All of that has been trashed by Bush. "International law," he smirked in December 2003. "I better call my lawyer."

Now indications are that nations all over the globe — Japan, Saudi Arabia, Argentina, Brazil, Australia — have begun reevaluating their rejections of nukes, and some are positively rushing to acquire them. Iran and North Korea are likely to be only the tip of this radioactive iceberg. Nuclear-armed Pakistan and India are a grim forecast of the future on every continent. And the Bush Administration — by declaring its own nuclear arsenal permanent, by threatening nuclear first-strikes against other nations, by "warehousing" treaty-defused warheads rather than destroying them, by developing a new line of "usable" nukes, by moving to weaponize the "high frontier" of outer space, by doing little to help Russia get rid of its rotting stockpile, by embracing "preventive war" — enabling this trend instead of discouraging it. How can this be?

The problem has its roots in a long-term American forgetfulness, going back to the acid fog in which the United States ended World War 2. There was never a complete moral reckoning with the harsh momentum of that conflict's denouement — how American leaders embraced a strategy of terror bombing, slaughtering whole urban populations, and how finally, they ushered in the atomic age with the attacks on Hiroshima and Nagasaki. Scholars have debated those questions, but politicians have avoided them and most citizens have pretended they aren't really questions at all. America's enduring assumptions about its own moral supremacy, its own altruism, its own exceptionalism, have hardly been punctured by consideration of the possibility that we too are capable of grave mistakes, terrible crimes. Such awareness, drawn from a fuller reckoning with days gone by — with August 6 and 9, 1945, above all — would inhibit America's present claim to moral grandeur, which is simultaneously a claim, of course, to economic and political grandiosity. The indispensable nation must dispense with what went before.

"The past is never dead," William Faulkner said. "It isn't even past." How Americans remember their country's use of terror bombing affects how they think of terrorism; how they remember the first use of nuclear weapons has profound relevance for how the United States behaves in relation to nuclear weapons today. If the long American embrace of nuclear "mutual assured destruction" is unexamined; if the Pentagon's treaty-violating rejection of the ideal of eventual abolition is unquestioned — then the Bush Administration's embrace of nukes as normal, usable weapons will not seem offensive.

Memory is a political act. Forgetfulness is the handmaiden of tyranny. The Bush Administration is fully committed to maintaining what the historian Marc Trachtenberg calls our "nuclear amnesia" even as the Administration seeks to impose

a unilateral structure of control on the world. As it pursues a world-threatening campaign against other people's weapons of mass destruction, the Bush Administration refuses to confront the moral meaning of America's own weapons of mass destruction, not to mention their viral character, as other nations seek smaller versions of the American arsenal, if only to deter Bush's next "preventive" war. The United States' own arsenal, in other words, remains the primordial cause of the WMD plague.

"Memory," the novelist Paul Auster has written, is "the space in which a thing happens for the second time." No one wants the terrible events that came after the rising of the sun on September 11, 2001, to happen for a second time except in the realm of remembrance, leading to understanding and commitment. But all the ways George Bush exploited those events, betraying the memory of those who died in them, must be lifted up and examined again, so that the outrageousness of his political purpose can be felt in its fullness. Exactly how the war on terrorism unfolded; how it bled into the wars against Afghanistan, then Iraq; how American fears were exacerbated by Administration alarms; how civil rights were undermined, treaties broken, alliances abandoned, coarseness embraced — none of this should be forgotten.

Nor, given Bush's reference, should the most relevant fact about the Crusades be forgotten — that, on their own terms and notwithstanding the romance of history, they were, in the end, an overwhelming failure. The 1096 campaign, the "First Crusade," finally "succeeded" in 1099, when a remnant army fell on Jerusalem, slaughtering much of its population. But armies under Saladin reasserted Islamic control in 1187, and subsequent Crusades never succeeded in reestablishing Latin dominance in the Holy Land. The *reconquista* Crusades reclaimed Spain and Portugal for Christian Europe, but the process destroyed the glorious Iberian *convivencia*, a high civilization never to be matched below the Pyrenees again.

Meanwhile, intra-Christian Crusades, wars against heresy, only made permanent the East-West split between Latin Catholicism and "schismatic" Eastern Orthodoxy, and made inevitable the eventual break, in the Reformation, between a Protestant north and a Catholic south. The Crusades, one could argue, established basic structures of Western civilization, while undermining the possibility that their grandest ideals would ever be realized.

Will such consequences — new global structures of an American imperium, hollowed-out hopes for a humane and just internationalism — follow in the train of George W. Bush's crusade? This question will be answered in smaller part by anonymous, ad hoc armies of on-the-ground human beings in foreign lands, many of whom will resist Washington to the death. In larger part, the question will be answered by those privileged to be citizens of the United States. To us falls the ultimate power over the American moral and political agenda. As has never been true of any empire before, because this one is still a democracy, such power belongs to citizens absolutely. If the power is ours, so is the responsibility.

James Carroll is the author of *Crusade Chronicles of an Unjust War*, published this year by Metropolitan Books. This article is a shortened version of his introduction to the book.

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