

The Speech That Was Never Given

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Early drafts of my most recent book, *Everything Must Change: Jesus, Global Crises, and a Revolution of Hope* (Thomas Nelson, October 2007), originally included this appendix. Later, for a variety of reasons, I decided to drop it from the book and offer it online for a broader audience. It was the imaginary transcript of a speech that President Bush could have given after September 11, 2001. It is hopelessly idealistic and will surely be dismissed as ridiculous, naïve, and sophomoric by people who consider themselves “realists.” But it is offered as an attempt to stimulate our imagination about possibilities that still remain to be considered, especially by people whose realism is augmented by faith. If the paths taken by so-called realists prove to be unacceptable and even suicidal, perhaps only paths guided by faith can be considered truly realistic.

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On October 1, 2001, President George W. Bush did not give the following speech to a special session of Congress. The speech did not interrupt regularly scheduled broadcasts on television and radio. It did not interrupt and change the current of history either. The unabridged transcript of this ungiven speech follows:

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My fellow Americans, and our neighbors around the world, twenty days ago, our nation

suffered a reprehensible act of aggression. Terrorists associated with a network called Al Qaeda murdered nearly three thousand innocent citizens of our nation. All of us are still reeling with shock and grief.

In the days since this tragedy, I have been meeting with the political leaders of our nation, and we have been in conversation with our counterparts from nations around the world. We have been in nearly unanimous agreement: our response to this attack should be direct, forceful, immediate, and far-reaching. We should declare a “war on terrorism,” and we should not be satisfied until terrorists have been rooted out of every nation that currently harbors them. Every nation should be forced to choose sides, either joining with us against the terrorists or joining with the terrorists against us. Not only that: it was agreed that we should launch a campaign of regime change around the world, and especially in the Middle East, bringing our values of freedom and democracy to nations that are currently ruled by extremist ideologies—first, Afghanistan, then Iraq, and then Iran and Syria.

We agreed that we should pursue this plan unilaterally if necessary, and with coalitions of the willing if possible, announcing a new doctrine of preemptive war, where we reserve the right of first strike on nations that harbor terrorists or anyone who plans to harm Americans or American interests, anywhere in the world. These first strikes would demonstrate the massive power of the American military to produce shock and awe and would lead to a spirit of cooperation and compliance with the interests of democracy and freedom. Following the initial strikes, we would be willing to use whatever means necessary – including the detainment of prisoners in secret camps and their torture when necessary – because the battle we would be engaging would be a battle of total war, of good versus evil.

Many of my top advisers had foreseen this kind of plan for many years. It was, they said,

the logical extension of the American leadership that had been achieved through the Cold War era. In recent days, we brought in a wide array of academic and religious leaders to review our war plan and offer their feedback and suggestions. Nearly all agreed that it was legitimate, wise, and morally justified.

However, as our nation's commander in chief, it is my responsibility to make the ultimate decision in matters like these. Having taken into account all the counsel at my disposal, I have decided to reject the initial guidance of my top advisers and propose to the American people and the people of the world a different plan, a different path, a different response to the attacks of September 11.

A war against terrorism would not be a fast war; it would stretch on for years, maybe decades, and would cost hundreds of billions of dollars, and likely trillions. Even worse, it would take uncounted lives, priceless lives—ours, and those of other nations. At the end of such a war, then, we would be resented by our neighbors, drained of morale, financially indebted to an unprecedented degree, and bereaved of sons and daughters, mothers and fathers, sisters and brothers. It is easy, too easy, for Washington's elite, working in air-conditioned offices, to tally such costs and pronounce them worthwhile, especially when their own sons and daughters attend the best universities and face no threat of being sent to the front lines. It is not so easy for a working-class father to say good-bye to his son or daughter, or for a single mother in a disadvantaged neighborhood to send her beloved child away on a long war with a hidden enemy and an uncertain outcome.

Not only that, but we all know the psychology of war. A nation at war begins to dehumanize its enemies, calling them evil, cruel, vicious, insane. Meanwhile, a nation at war exaggerates its own virtues, aggrandizing itself into a state of arrogant self-delusion. The result is

a kind of national insanity that leads nations at war to do the unthinkable and defend the indefensible, blinded by revenge and pride. Too often, a nation at war begins to resemble those it fights against as it must curtail the civil liberties of its citizens and engage in desperate practices towards its enemies. A nation calls its enemies evil while its own national character is first stained, then corrupted, and finally broken by illegal detainment, unconscionable torture, hypocritical rhetoric, and the careless killing of innocents as “collateral damage.” If we march in these ways to the primal drumbeat of war, in our efforts to save ourselves, we will lose our soul. That cost is too high.

Not only that, but practically speaking, we will in the end unite our currently divided enemies more fervently against us, and in the pursuit of short-term victory, we will create a long-term future for our children that neither we nor they could desire.

Since I hold to the ancient beliefs that vengeance is not a human prerogative and that pride goes before a fall, I have no desire to take our nation down that bitter road. I have become convinced that if we follow a course of war, the results will be undesirable at best and catastrophic at worst. But if we refuse to return violence for violence, if we decide on a response that is at once courageous and peaceful, we can seize this tragic moment as an opportunity not to return evil with evil, but rather to overcome evil with good.

Since September 11, America has experienced an outpouring of emotion from nations around the world. It has been said that on September 11, everyone became an American because all shared our grief and shock. And we Americans learned and felt what so many people in other nations experience on a daily basis: vulnerability, danger, and fear. So in a sense, the whole world has been caught up in a moment of global empathy since that tragic day. I would like to

seize upon this moment.

So I am today proposing a plan of peace and security, not through war and revenge, but through cooperation and justice. My plan could be called a plan of courage, character, and cooperation. This plan has four elements.

First, we have already begun planning and implementing a concerted police action to find and bring to justice those who planned this attack. It is inappropriate to go into additional details, but be assured, our plan will be focused, multi-dimensional, collaborative, and effective.

Second, I announce today the convening not of a war council but of an international peace council on terrorism, in partnership with the United Nations. Terrorism isn't our problem alone; many parts of the world have active terrorist movements, and all will suffer the escalating effects of escalating terrorism if it is not stopped. We could try to crush terrorism globally with brute military force, but that approach actually plays into the long-term strategy of terrorism. Terrorism is a diabolically effective strategy. A small group of terrorists can over time bankrupt powerful nations financially and morally by eliciting excessive, expensive responses to inexpensive, targeted, and symbolically-meaningful attacks.

If we launch a massive military response to terrorist attacks, we make ourselves appear aggressive and intrusive globally, which plays into the image of us terrorists want to paint, enabling them to recruit more terrorists, launch more attacks, and plunge us farther and farther into their vicious downward cycle. Instead, we must refuse to be drawn into their trap. We must defeat terrorism through broad and multi-faceted international cooperation, dealing collaboratively with its causes and reaching broad international consensus on how to respond when terrorist actions arise.

Kofi Annan and I have discussed this proposal, and he has wisely suggested that it

should include, along with political and academic leaders, religious leaders—and especially peace- and justice-loving leaders from the Muslim community—because in today’s world, we can no longer pretend that religion is a private matter. The problems that face us—whether terrorism or environmental destruction—demand the broadest coalitions possible, and we must acknowledge their profoundly spiritual dimensions.

I have asked former South African President Nelson Mandela and my father to lead this council as co-chairs. We have invited former presidents Jimmy Carter and Bill Clinton to serve on the council’s leadership team as well. Their first task will be to articulate, with honesty and frankness, an answer to two questions that many of us are asking: Why do people engage in and support horrific terrorist actions? And what can be done to achieve a world free of terrorism?

This council will help us to understand and fight the real enemy, the real disease—the conditions and beliefs and realities that give rise terrorism, instead of fighting the symptoms only. Our battle isn’t against a flesh-and-blood enemy; it is against a spirit of fear and revenge that spreads from person to person, even from generation to generation.

Some of the causes of terrorism, no doubt, will relate to the countries and cultures in which terrorism has taken route—including the corruption and ineffectiveness of governments which use America as a scapegoat for their own failures, or the deep divisions and struggles within the Islamic religion. But we must also courageously identify and face other causes that have to do with our own history, attitudes, and behavior. It is time for our nation to acknowledge our own blind spots, the ways we have interfered with other sovereign nations, violated signed agreements, and undermined our own ideals and principles - including through illegal assassinations and the secret and hypocritical resourcing of terrorism against our enemies. We will have to come to terms with ways which, whether militarily, economically, politically, or

culturally, we have dominated and undermined other nations and intensified the deep alienation and resentment in which terrorism festers and forms.

The first draft of this report will be completed in the next six months, and when I have approved it, I will make a speech to the United Nations at which I will present the results of the report and our plan of action in response to its findings. This process will be closely related to the third element of the plan, a change in the role of the United States in the world.

It is widely accepted that America is the world's sole remaining superpower. Believing as I do that from those who have been given much, much is expected, I believe that a superpower has enormous responsibility, and the sole superpower has unique responsibility. But how will that responsibility be expressed? Do we envision a century ahead—and a millennium ahead—where the United States follows in the predictable trajectory where superpower status morphs into empire and domination? From the ancient empires of Assyria and Babylonia, from the classical empires of Greece and Rome, to the more recent European empires of the colonial era, the life cycle of an empire has a predictable end. It begins in strength, vitality, victory, and prosperity, but then it faces a crossroads. One road leads to increasing arrogance and self-indulgence, dominating and exploiting other nations. When they resist, a nation on this road resorts to increasing brutality, leading to a bitter dead end of division, weaknesses, exhaustion, poverty, and defeat. The other road leads to a relinquishment of domination, and ends in a humbler role as a mature and responsible neighbor in the community of nations.

So, my fellow Americans, I urge you to join me in envisioning a different future for our nation: as a strong and good neighbor, and in the words of the former president whom I respect the most, a kinder and gentler neighbor in the global community.

As the third key element in our response to the attacks of September 11, then, I am calling on our nation to pioneer a new and unexplored trail. Recalling the great American poet, Robert Frost, I am asking us to reject well-worn paths and choose instead a less-traveled way. We must reject both the broad, arrogant highway of empire and domination and the cowardly, winding byway of retreat, appeasement, withdrawal, and isolation. Instead, I am asking the people of America—the leaders of our federal and state governments, the leaders of business and education, the leaders of our faith communities and civic associations—to follow a less-traveled road of bold leadership and charitable service in the building of a new global community.

In this great new vision, we will not struggle against armies and terrorists, but against poverty and ignorance and injustice. We will not be known for dropping bombs or invading and occupying nations; we will be known for supporting creative technological innovation and encouraging sustainable local economies. We will not be known for the shock and awe of crushing military defeat, but for courage and wisdom in leading the way to protect this precious planet earth and its peace, which we have been called to steward and nurture. Such a new vision will make terrorism a thing of the past in a way that no military response ever could.

This change in role must be accompanied by massive changes in policy and budget, and this is the fourth element of my plan. As we re-conceive of our mission and role as a nation, we must divert funds and energy from the manufacture of weapons and the industry of war to the exploration of new technology—including efforts to develop new sources of energy, reducing our dependence on foreign oil and reducing our production of environmentally destructive waste. In addition, we must embrace a new discipline, and turn our nation's creativity toward transforming every building and every vehicle from energy-inefficiency to environmental sustainability. We must develop a new vision for our military as well, always maintaining

necessary defenses, but also working to create a global crisis response team, ready to assist when natural tragedy strikes anywhere on our planet—whether that tragedy takes the form of hurricane, tsunami, flood, drought, or famine.

This four-part plan, then, is my response to the attacks of September 11 – a response of courage, character, and cooperation. First, we will treat the perpetrators of this crime against humanity as the lowest form of criminal, and we will pursue them with a concerted, coordinated, collaborative police action to bring them to justice. Second, we will partner with the United Nations in an unprecedented global terrorism council to understand and address the causes and conditions which give rise to terrorism. Third, we will abandon both extremes of empire and isolation, and instead we will seek as never before to be a mature, productive and collaborative neighbor in the global community of nations. And fourth, we will embark on a journey of radical and far-reaching changes in policy and budget to reflect this new vision. In so doing, we will change our way of life, and the change will be for the better.

In this way, we will step out of the normal course of history, a predictable and pathetic cycle of attack and counter-attack, offense and revenge, meeting violence with violence. Because it is an uncommon path, it is an unpredictable one, but it is to this path that I have dedicated the remainder of my presidency, and I humbly ask for your support.

The other night, before I had reached this decision, I was turning over in my mind the options that lie before us in responding to the brutal acts of violence that struck our nation twenty days ago. I prayed for guidance and insight. About midnight, Laura came into the Oval Office and I shared with her the burden I was feeling, the enormous weight of making the right decision, and the terrible danger of making the wrong one. She asked me, “What does your heart tell you?” And I told her, “My heart tells me to be a man of peace and to lead and unite our

nation in a path of peace.” Then I added, “But all my advisers, all these people whom I trust and respect . . . they’re calling for a war on terrorism. It will cost trillions of dollars and uncounted lives, and it will last for decades, if not for the rest of this new century.”

Laura replied, “If you follow your heart, I think the American people will follow you.”

The next day, when I shared my misgivings and alternative proposals with my top advisers, I expected bitter division and intense argument. And as expected, my ideas were not greeted with immediate approval. A few of my top advisers, as you will be hearing in the coming days, have decided to resign because they cannot support this plan. But most, after the initial shock, have told me, some of them with deep emotion, that they have never been more proud to be an American than now. I hope you, my fellow Americans, will feel the same way, although I respect your freedom to disagree.

This path will not be easy. The way of peace is often not a peaceful way. There may be more attacks, and the desire for violent revenge may grow very strong in our national psyche. But tonight, I’m asking the American people to go with me on a journey into new territory, and to be even more courageous on this path of peace than we would be if we were walking into a brutal war zone.

The greatest leader in American history, I believe, was not a president, nor was he a general, nor was he a political figure in the traditional sense. He was a man of faith, a Baptist minister, and his name was Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. He was a descendant of slaves who refused to let the horrible abuses and injustices suffered by his ancestors, his contemporaries, and himself turn him into a bitter or vengeful man. When Laura left the Oval Office the other night, I pulled a volume from my bookcase, and read these words by the man whose example, I believe, should inspire us today:

Peace is not merely a distant goal that we seek, but a means by which we arrive at that goal.”

Through violence you may murder a murderer, but you can’t murder murder.

Through violence you may murder a liar, but you can’t establish truth.

Through violence you may murder a hater, but you can’t murder hate.

Darkness cannot put out darkness. Only light can do that . . .

We will not build a peaceful world by following a negative path. It is not enough to say we must not wage war. It is necessary to love peace and sacrifice for it. We must concentrate not merely on the negative expulsion of war but the positive affirmation of peace. We must see that peace represents a sweeter music, a cosmic melody, that is far superior to the dis-chords of war.

I believe that unarmed truth and unconditional love will have the final word.

This morning, over breakfast, Laura read me a passage from the Bible. These are words that inspired Dr. King, and they inspire me as well. They were originally spoken by a poor Middle Eastern man who saw oppression and injustice all around him. He heard the cries of the poor and he could not be silent. He did not raise his fist and call for violence, but instead he envisioned a better world and invited us to live by a better story than the one followed by the nations of his day. He saw and experienced the same oppression and poverty that drive today’s terrorists to desperate violence, but he chose the less-traveled way, so that his good news could change the daily news from despair to hope. I have asked Laura to read this passage to you all to conclude my remarks this evening. Humbled and inspired and emboldened by these wise words,

I trust that all Americans, liberal and conservative, Republican and Democrat, from many religions and many regions and many races, can come together and stand as one nation, under God, indivisible, seeking liberty and justice for all. May God bless our nation, and all the nations of the world, to seek the way of peace so that tragedies like September 11 are remembered as the last gasps of a fading and dying way of death, by people seeking a new way of life.

[Laura Bush comes to the podium and opens a large leather-bound Bible.]

Blessed are the poor in spirit, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven.

Blessed are those who mourn, for they will be comforted.

Blessed are the meek, for they will inherit the earth.

Blessed are those who hunger and thirst for justice, for they will be filled.

Blessed are the merciful, for they will be shown mercy.

Blessed are the pure in heart, for they will see God.

Blessed are the peacemakers, for they will be called children of God.

Blessed are those who are persecuted because of justice, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven.

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Since this speech was not actually given, Congress did not sit in silence, without applause, for just over eighteen seconds when Laura Bush finished reading from a black, leather-bound Bible and then stood at the lectern, with head bowed, in silence. This awkward but somehow meaningful silence was not witnessed by the international television audience. Nor did

they see members of Congress, after this extended period of silence, rise to their feet in thunderous applause as the President and First Lady left the room. Because the speech never was given, applause did not continue for so long that it left news commentators speechless.

The United States pursued, rather than abandoned, an aggressive role in the world, and no substantive changes in policy were considered. This ungiven speech is offered to illustrate one possible way in which the example and teaching of Jesus could have potentially helped my nation address a global crisis in a hopeful way. No doubt, thousands of problems and weaknesses can be identified with this response and my articulation of it, but it should be noted that alternative responses have proven to have their share of problems too. The book which explores the ideas found in this speech is called *Everything Must Change: Jesus, Global Crises, and a Revolution of Hope*. It will be released October 2, 2007, by Thomas Nelson. Please check my website, brianmclaren.net, for more information.