

GOP and Vatican divided by Iraq war: Strained relations

News in the [November 16, 2004](#) issue

The Vatican and the United States were close allies during the 1980s phase of the cold war. Republican President Ronald Reagan and Pope John Paul II seemed to campaign shoulder to shoulder to oppose Soviet communism, especially in the pontiff's homeland of Poland, and to combat abortion.

Republicans thought they still had the inside track on good relations with Catholic leaders in Rome during the era of Bill Clinton, whom conservatives assaulted for not standing up for family values.

But, according to best-selling American author John Allen, arguably the world's leading commentator on the relationship between the Vatican and the U.S., the close-knit days have ended, to the surprise and unease of the Republican administration and its supporters.

It's because of Iraq.

President George W. Bush and his advisers nearly ignored the Vatican when it pulled out all the diplomatic stops to convince the U.S. to avoid invading oil-rich Iraq. The resulting occupation of the country has opened up a big gulf between the pope and Washington, says Allen.

"I believe that if a secret ballot were to be held in the Vatican, Kerry would beat Bush 60-40," Allen said in a preelection interview from Rome where he files regular reports to 50,000 online readers, the *National Catholic Reporter* and a host of English-language media, including National Public Radio and CNN.

"This is hard for a lot of American Catholics to believe, but around here what is perceived as the negative impact of Bush's foreign policy tends to outweigh his pro-life stance," Allen said from his office near the Vatican.

The U.S.-led invasion of Iraq not only revealed a schism between the Vatican and Washington over the definition of a “just war,” Allen says, it also highlighted longstanding tension between differing values advanced by Rome and America. While the Catholic Church attempts to stand up for the common good, Allen says, more Vatican officials are becoming wary of the way U.S. culture stresses “exaggerated individualism,” “hyperconsumption” and “narcissism.”

The final chapter of Allen’s new book, *All the Pope’s Men: The Inside Story of How the Vatican Really Thinks* (Doubleday), details how the Vatican and Bush, an evangelical Christian, came to philosophical blows over Iraq.

It didn’t have to be this way, Allen says. Along with much of the Western world, the Vatican sympathized with Americans after the terrorist attacks of September 11, 2001. It also supported the U.S. when it waged war on terrorists in Afghanistan.

But solidarity began to crumble when the U.S. jailed 600 Taliban prisoners at Guantánamo Bay in Cuba without recognizing them as prisoners of war. A 2003 editorial in *Civiltà Cattolica*, approved by the Vatican, denounced the incarcerations. The editorial also questioned U.S. and British motivations for taking out Saddam Hussein. “Western countries seem more interested in exploiting Iraqi oil,” it said, “than in the reconstruction of the country.”

The pope’s right-hand man, Secretary of State Cardinal Angelo Sodano, later said the invasion was foolhardy even on pragmatic grounds, because most Muslims see it as a battle between the Christian West and the Muslim East. “Is it really a good idea,” Sodano said, “to irritate a billion Muslims?”

Allen says National Security Adviser Condoleezza Rice is one who genuinely doesn’t seem to get it. Asked why she thought the leader of 1 billion Catholics wouldn’t support a war against a predominantly Muslim region, Rice recently said she “didn’t understand” the Vatican’s arguments.

John Paul’s Vatican strongly disagrees with Bush on four key foreign policy fronts, writes Allen. He cites, on the one hand, the current U.S. defense of preemptive military attacks and its self-absorption as the lone superpower in the world, and on the other hand, the Bush administration’s disdain of international law as represented by the court in The Hague, Netherlands, and its reluctance to grant any power to the UN.

The Vatican-Washington divide has theological ramifications, with more than a few Vatican officials accusing American leaders of harboring a Calvinist streak. They are worried, Allen said, about the influence of the theology of 16th-century Reformer John Calvin, which they believe has led to the idea of a purely good people chosen by God to combat people who are perfectly evil.

Cardinal Pio Laghi, whom the pope sent to Washington to dissuade Bush from attacking Iraq, is among those who worry that Calvinism fuels the subconscious of many Americans, including Catholics, who make up the richest national arm of the global church.

Senior Vatican leaders believe that “Calvinist concepts of the total depravity of the damned, the unconditional election of God’s favored, and the manifestation of election through earthly success all seem to play a powerful role in shaping American psychology,” Allen writes.

“The Iraq episode confirmed Vatican officials in these convictions. When Vatican officials hear Bush talk about the evil of terrorism and the American mission to destroy that evil,” they sometimes perceive a disturbing dualism. “The language can suggest a sense of election, combined with the perversity of America’s enemies, that appears to justify unrelenting conflict.”

Yet, even while the Vatican refuses to give the Bush administration the moral legitimacy it sought regarding Iraq, Allen concedes that if the pope had to choose between a world run from Washington and one led by Islamabad, Pakistan, or Beijing, China, he would opt for Washington. The Vatican’s key hope is that the international community gains the clout to impose more moral limits on the world’s remaining superpower. *-Douglas Todd, Religion News Service*