

Growing pains: Bush, God and Iraq

From the Editors in the [March 8, 2003](#) issue

To hear President Bush speak of late, you might think he was mounting a pulpit, not a podium. With war on the horizon, the Providence of God is especially on his mind. “Events aren’t moved by blind change and chance,” he said at the Presidential Prayer Breakfast, echoing similar sentiments expressed in his State of the Union address. “Behind all of life and all of history, there’s a dedication and a purpose, set by the hand of a just and faithful God.”

American presidents have long used scripture in addressing the nation, but the religious rhetoric of the current president is unprecedented, some argue. Some members of his own staff have felt compelled to assure the nation that the president really is a secular leader, and that his decisions on Iraq are based on his judgments about national security, not on faith.

There seems little doubt, however, that the president’s faith is shaping his public policies, especially on stem cell research but also on possible war with Iraq. We don’t believe the president is cynical about his use of faith language—that it is merely a ploy to keep conservative Christians in his court or to mask his “real” motivations for taking on Saddam Hussein’s weapons of mass destruction.

What is alarming is that Bush seems to have no reservations about the notion that God and the good are squarely on the American side. As Joe Klein put it in *Time*, the President’s “faith offers no speed bumps on the road to Baghdad; it does not give him pause or force him to reflect. It is a source of comfort and strength but not of wisdom.”

Bush’s actions, if not his words, seem also to be in line with end-times scenarios imagined by some conservative Christians and fictionalized in the “Left Behind” series that has sold over 50 million volumes since 1995. Up to 40 percent of Americans believe that we are living in the last days, says historian Paul S. Boyer, and that history is racing toward an apocalyptic clash between the forces of good and evil. Millions of Americans believe that the Bible foretells regime change in Iraq, that God established Israel’s boundaries millennia ago, and that the United Nations

is a forerunner of a satanic world order (*The Chronicle Review*, February 14). Bush is giving tacit support to such a perspective with his hands-off policy on the Israeli-Palestinian conflict, his antipathy toward international cooperation and agreements, and his near apocalyptic discourse of good contending with evil.

Does the President believe we are living in the last days of history and does he see his own actions as leading toward a divinely ordained, cataclysmic conflict with the forces of evil? If it is not a literal reading of biblical prophecy that is informing his policies, then what does he mean by his talk of providence?

The American people have a right to know how the President's faith is informing his public policies, not least his design on Iraq.