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Commentary — From the Margins The Veneer of Civilization

In an after-hours conversation at University of Alaska Fairbanks' Midnight Sun Writer Conference in 1981, Robert Stone, author of *Dog Soldiers* and former Vietnam War correspondent for the *Manchester Guardian*, said he was willing to let multinational corporations attempt to govern if they could maintain social stability. Liberal graduate students for whom the multinationals were the antithesis of fairness and social progress immediately took him to task. But Stone explained his reasoning by saying that the veneer of civilization was exceedingly thin, that savagery was not in humanity's distant past, but was ever present, lurking behind this thin veneer of social mores that separates civilized human beings from barbarians.

Campaigning for reelection, President Bush has noted that a fundamental difference separates the United States from religious fundamentalists who behead their prisoners. He cited this difference as the reason why the United States had to stay the course of action in Iraq that has been undertaken, why retreat was not possible, why responsibility for freedom could not be entrusted to old political alliances headed by a nation that surrendered to terrorism in Algeria forty years ago, surrendered when I was in high school and daily following the events that happened there and in Cuba, where nuclear-tipped missiles were installed. Kennedy faced down Krushchev, who was emboldened by perceived American foreign policy weaknesses. And for too many, perception becomes reality, but perception does not reveal the hearts of the people involved. The perception of Islamic fundamentalists has been that America is soft—indeed, the nation is as if it suffers through a bout of misused prosperity—that America is immoral.

A semen-stained blue dress in the White House suggests that Islamic fundamentalists are correct about America being immoral. If perceptions were realities, then these fundamentalists who advocate a return to barbarism to correct sexual immortality would have the moral high ground from which they cannot be dislodged. The battle against terrorism will be fought and won or lost on the mental topography of humanity, not on the geography of a region or of a nation. And this battle will be won by the Greco-Roman values embedded in democratic republics, by the values that varnish the veneer of civilization, but it will not be won by turning control of this mental battlefield over to those who support immorality in any form.

The bombings that daily occur in Israel, in Iraq, in other hot spots can occur anywhere. They can occur here as happened on September 11th. They probably will occur here again regardless of who wins the election Tuesday, for the war being fought isn't between nations or even between ethnic peoples. It is a religious war that doesn't merely pit Islam against secular Christianity, but pits fundamental morality received from a supreme deity against the false prophets of humanism, of the mindset that human beings are basically good if left to their own devices.

The perception in the United States is that Anglo-Europeans sit at the apex of civility, that we are somehow different than the barbarians. This difference has apparently developed since Henry had Sir Thomas More's head lopped off, and since Lady Jane Gray was burned at the stake, with a bag of gunpowder around her neck to ease her suffering when the flames were upon her. This difference developed since Joseph Smith was lynched, and since Hitler sent millions to their graves and Stalin sent millions more to the Gulag—since black men throughout the South were lynched, since Los Angeles' Watts riots, since Ruby Ridge and Waco and Wounded Knee. The timeline for American barbarism circles back upon itself to include smallpox inflected blankets given to peaceful tribes, and civilized nations marched over a trail of tears.

The veneer of civilization is, indeed, exceedingly thin—and might be more perception than reality. Regardless, the current presidential race is a measurement of this veneer, for a real difference separates Bush from Kerry. This difference is heard in their rhetoric, and understood by their respective political bases. This difference will determine how and where the on-going war between religious fundamentalists will be fought, not if such a war should be or will be fought. The war between Puritanism and Humanism has seen many truces, but was declared long before Henry VIII sought another wife. It was fought with pikes and dog-lock muskets a century after Lady Jane Gray perished—and won on the field by the Puritans, but lost in the hearts and in the minds of those Englishmen and Irishmen who preferred a Roman Catholic king to the son of Oliver Cromwell.

Now, almost a decade ago, the United States mentally underwent civil war that divided the nation into two peoples when the old social order empowered in the highest national offices refused to purge itself of immorality, refused even to assign a common meaning to the signifier *immorality*. This division was apparent for everyone to see in the red-blue maps of the 2000 presidential election. This division remains, and will further intensify as the two mental or spiritual nations that occupy the same geography solidify ideological borders.

The mental division of England between Puritans and Catholics in the 16th-Century erupted into a real civil war by the middle of the 17th-Century. This division immigrated to North America, where British Colonials temporarily papered over it with the writing of the Declaration of Independence. But it erupted into a real civil war here by the middle of the 19th-Century, when a new generation of social puritans fought against the old order of states' rights. And it will again erupt into a real civil war before the middle of the 21st-Century—if a common enemy doesn't divert the attention of both neo-puritans and the old social order—for the person who opposes abortion cannot compromise with the person who is pro-choice. The same for gay marriage, and any number of other issues that can be couched in religious rhetoric that flanks the static ideological Maginot Line of the old social order.

One candidate will, on Tuesday, represent the neo-puritans; one will represent the old social coalitions that foregrounded the liberal ideals that color the veneer of civility. Both will receive the votes of the candidates' base. Both will,

despite their rhetoric, make war against Islamic fundamentalists, but one will win that war because it will fight with ideas, with a language that promises purity. And one candidate will lose this war against barbarity, for he will end up resorting to barbarism to obtain peace in his time. One will fight for the mental topography of the region; the other will concede this mental topography to the fundamentalists for the promise of peace.

The mistake Islamic fundamentalists make is to believe Western nations will not unite in a crusade for political and economic reasons that are expressed in the rhetoric of a religious campaign against terrorism. Such a crusade will leave both sides losers—and the veneer of civilization as shards in the flotsam of history.

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