

# Political reaction and intellectual charlatanry: US academics issue statement in support of war

**David North****18 February 2002**

A group of 60 right-wing academics and public policy experts influential in government and media circles has issued a statement entitled “Why We’re Fighting: A Letter From America.”[1] Purporting to present a philosophical and moral defense of the Bush administration’s “war on terrorism,” the authors succeed only in providing a devastating self-exposure of their own hypocrisy, dishonesty and aversion to essential democratic principles.

The signatories include, among others, former US Senator Daniel Moynihan, who now teaches at Syracuse University; Francis Fukuyama of Johns Hopkins University; Samuel Huntington and Theda Skocpol of Harvard University; and Michael Walzer of Princeton.

These signatories and the others who affixed their names to this statement are described by the *Washington Post* as “leading intellectuals.” If this is what they are, then it demonstrates that intellectual life in the United States has fallen to an abysmal level. Among the most striking features of this letter is its slapdash and shoddy character.[2]

The questions that come to mind immediately as one reads this letter are, “Why has it been written?” and “For what audience is it really intended?” In these United States of America, where the political establishment is unanimous in its support for the government’s warmongering and where it is all but impossible to come across any criticism of American militarism in the media, what need is there for a special statement *in support of the war* by “high-powered academics”? Even the *Washington Post* is a bit confused, noting: “Because the letter’s main thrust—that America is justified in using military force after Sept. 11—is widely accepted in the United States, its intended audience and purpose is not quite clear.”

One is led to conclude that the signatories sense and fear—perhaps on the basis of their encounters with students in the university lecture halls—that public opinion is hardly as united and solid in support of war as the media claims. Despite the massive and unrelenting propaganda, the signatories apparently feel that the government and media have so far failed to provide a compelling argument in support of the Bush administration’s actions.

But the letter adds nothing of substance to the pro-war propaganda of the government. Rather, it accepts uncritically the position of the administration—that the war is being waged to defend America and civilization against terrorism. Violating the most basic requirement of serious argument, the letter makes no attempt whatever to test the legitimacy of this proposition. Rather, it resorts to moral posturing to sanctify the actions of the American military.

The title of the open letter, “Why We’re Fighting” suggests an attempt to evoke the famous propaganda documentary sponsored by the Roosevelt administration during World War II, *Why We Fight*. But the similarity between the two efforts does not extend beyond the titles. One need not be

a supporter of the Roosevelt administration, nor an apologist for the imperialist interests that determined America’s entry into World War II, to acknowledge that *Why We Fight* was a work of artistic and political substance. Directed by Frank Capra, this series of seven documentary films sought to alert the public to the dangers of fascism as a political movement.

*Why We Fight* took its audience seriously. Aware of the deep anti-war sentiments within the United States (both isolationist and anti-imperialist), its producers felt the need to make an intellectually credible case for the war as a struggle for democracy against totalitarianism that rose above the level of sensationalism and propaganda. Within the framework of New Deal liberalism, the film provided an account of the rise of fascism and the origins of the Second World War. It explained issues and events with a degree of political, historical and social concreteness of which the authors of the open letter appear incapable.

In contrast to Capra’s documentary film, the letter of the academics has nothing to say about the historical and political background of the war in Central Asia, let alone the economic interests that find expression in the policies of the Bush administration. The authors choose instead to base their defense of the war on “five fundamental truths that pertain to all people without distinction.”

Drawn from sources as diverse as the United Nations, Aristotle and Pope John Paul II, these truths are: (1) “All human beings are born free and equal in dignity and rights;” (2) “The basic subject of society is the human person, and the legitimate role of government is to protect and help to foster the conditions for human flourishing;” (3) “Human beings naturally desire to seek the truth about life’s purpose and ultimate ends;” (4) “Freedom of conscience and religious freedom are inviolable rights of the human person;” (5) “Killing in the name of God is contrary to faith in God and is the greatest betrayal of the universality of religious faith.” They then assert that the United States “fights to defend ourselves and to defend these principles.” Therefore, the United States is fighting a “just war.” How very simple!

Even if one were to accept the legitimacy of a “just war” debate based on such abstract, ahistorical and dubious moral propositions, it would not be difficult to illustrate that the United States, on a daily basis, in the conduct of international and domestic policies violates each one of these principles.

\* *All human beings are born free and equal in dignity and rights:* The actual social relations that prevail in the United States—in which immense wealth is concentrated in a small stratum of the population—make a mockery of this precept. The greatest factor in determining an individual’s social rights and quality of life in the United States is the income level of the family into which he or she is born. Beyond the borders of the United States, the interests defended by American

imperialism underlie the conditions of poverty and squalor in which hundreds of millions of people live.

\* *The basic subject of society is the human person, and the legitimate role of government is to protect and help to foster the conditions for human flourishing:* This is not a principle to which the US government subscribes. In practice and, to a great extent, in law, the “basic subject of society” is not the “human person” but the privately owned corporation. In the context of social relations within the United States, government fostering of “the conditions of human flourishing” means nothing other than maximizing the personal wealth of the gang of money-mad kleptomaniacs who control American corporations.

\* *Human beings naturally desire to seek the truth about life’s purpose and ultimate ends:* The Bush administration, in its contempt for science, promotion of religious prejudice, and crass manipulation of the mass media, does everything in its power to frustrate the desire for truth.

\* *Freedom of conscience and religious freedom are inviolable rights of the human person:* To the extent that one is dealing here with genuine respect for freedom of speech, the policies of the United States, at home and abroad, are more and more openly directed toward the suppression of democratic rights. “Religious freedom” is of interest to the US government and the leaders of both the Democratic and Republican parties only when it offers an opportunity to promote anti-science obscurantism and erode the Constitutionally-mandated separation of church and state.[3]

\* *Killing in the name of God is contrary to faith in God:* This is, as any serious study of the history of religion would demonstrate, an untenable proposition. Sectarian violence is, in the absence of powerful democratic safeguards, an all but inevitable byproduct of “faith in God.” But putting this small point aside, if the authors of the open letter were to be faithful to the policies of the Bush administration, they would have added the following codicil: “Except when it is a matter of shutting down abortion clinics in the United States or upholding the rule of right-wing dictatorships abroad.”

The letter then proceeds to discuss the “American values” in which the above-listed “fundamental truths” find expression. This, the authors suggest, is the key to uncovering the motivations of those who attacked the United States on September 11: They ask: “Why are we the targets of these hateful attacks? Why do those who would kill us, want to kill us?”

These are questions that are certainly worth examining. One might begin by examining the history of American meddling in Afghanistan over the last quarter-century—beginning with the decision of President Jimmy Carter and his national security adviser, Zbigniew Brzezinski, to incite and arm Islamic fundamentalists against the pro-Soviet regime—and its horrific consequences for the people of that country. One might then proceed to examine American policies throughout the Middle East during the last half-century, which have been centered on maintaining control of oil resources. A discussion of American policies and actions in the Middle East would rightfully require an examination of (1) the CIA-sponsored coup of 1953 in Iran that destroyed the left-nationalist regime of Mossadeq and restored the Shah’s dictatorship to power; (2) the US invasion of Lebanon in 1958; (3) the massive arming of the Israeli state and callous disregard for the democratic aspirations of the Palestinian people; (4) US economic, military and political support for the semi-feudal absolutist monarchy in Saudi Arabia; (5) the bombardment of Beirut by US warships in 1983; and (6) the launching of war against Iraq in 1991 and the subsequent imposition of a regime of sanctions that has cost the lives of several hundred thousand people. An honest inquiry into the source of hatred of the United States would deal with these and many other questions.

But such an exercise in political self-criticism is not exactly what the authors have in mind. While they are prepared to admit that America does have some faults, these are addressed only in the most vague and general

terms: “At times our nation has pursued misguided and unjust policies. Too often we as a nation have failed to live up to our ideals,” How? When? The letter does not say. The only flaws that the authors take note of are those which are frequent targets of the hypocritical moralizers of the Christian right: “Consumerism as a way of life ... The weakening of marriage and family life.”[4] At any rate, as far as the authors are concerned, the events of September 11 were not a response to “any one policy, or set of policies.” Rather, those who carried out this attack did so because of “*who we are*.”

This leads the authors to ask, “So who are we?” The answers, which are drawn from the brochures of the Christian Right, proceed from religion-based premises that are fundamentally inimical to the essential democratic principles of the US Constitution. It must be stressed that America does not consist of a “We” in the manner suggested by the authors of the open letter. The very conception that there exists a common American identity grounded on universally accepted *ethical standards* and *moral precepts*, based ultimately on religion, cannot be reconciled with the Constitution and the historical evolution of democratic rights. When the authors declare their rejection of “ideological secularism,” they really mean the constitutional doctrine of the separation of church and state. Their use of the term “ideological” as an adjective is meant to imply that secularism is merely an opinion, or perhaps only a fad. In reality, it is the foundation of all that is historically progressive in bourgeois democratic principles.

The advance in American democratic thought from the theocracy of the Massachusetts Bay Colony to the bourgeois democratic republic that emerged from the Revolutionary War found its legal expression in the breakdown of the conception that society should be based on ethical unity, a hallmark of religious thinking. As explained by one historian of American law:

What was beginning to occur after the Revolution was not significantly more immorality but an abandonment of the prerevolutionary notion that government should act to enforce morality. Over time, however, the abandonment by government of its enforcement role would impair the notion that there existed any one set of ethical standards that all men ought to obey.... The trend was away from having one set of ethical values laid down by a single institution, which all inhabitants of a community were compelled to join, toward having several sets of differing ethical values, each represented by different organizations that different individuals freely elected to join.[5]

The authors of the letter disregard this democratic evolution, asserting that “At its best, the United States seeks to be a society in which faith and freedom can go together, *each elevating the other*” (emphasis added). This is a basic misrepresentation of core constitutional principles. The United States is not a semi-theocracy, in which political freedom draws sustenance from religion. Political freedom is a democratic right that requires no further religious underpinning, whereas the right to practice the religion of one’s choice—if an individual happens to hold religious views—depends on definite democratic political foundations.[6]

The authors are not honest in their method of argumentation. They do not state openly their political outlook and agenda. What they are concerned with is not the defense of religious freedom within the context of a broader defense of democratic rights. The entire thrust of their assault on “secularism” is directed toward the expansion of religious influence within the United States and the curtailment of democratic rights.

Having distorted the relation between “faith” and “freedom,” the authors proceed to ask, “What will help reduce religiously based mistrust, hatred, and violence in the 21st century?” Because they oppose the

democratic secularism that finds expression in the rigid separation of church and state, the answer given by the open letter is profoundly reactionary: “Deepening and renewing our appreciation of religion by recognizing religious freedom as a fundamental right of all people in every nation.” This solution is absolutely wrong. Vast historical experience has demonstrated that the most effective means of opposing religion-based communal and sectarian violence is by upholding the democratic principles of secularism and striving to eliminate as far as possible the socially regressive influence of religion upon public political life.

The claim that the attack of September 11 was provoked not by opposition to specific US policies, but rather by hatred of the moral principles that are asserted by the authors to constitute the real foundation of American identity, leads logically to political conclusions that can be employed to justify internal repression. After all, if foreign enemies of “American values” are prepared to attack the United States, is the country not also threatened by those within its borders, citizens as well as non-citizens, who are believed to reject these values? Ideas have logic of their own, and those of the authors of the open letter lead inexorably toward justifying not only war, but domestic repression as well.

The last section of the letter attempts to make the case that the United States is engaged in a “just war.” The authors begin by conceding that “all war is terrible, representative finally of human failure.” But, on the other hand, “There are times when waging war is not only morally permitted, but morally necessary, as a response to calamitous acts of violence, hatred and injustice. This is one of those times.”

The attempt to justify imperialist wars on the basis of higher moral values is as old as imperialism itself. It is worth recalling that the United States has always invoked morality to legitimize its imperialist pursuits. As Professor William R. Keylor (not one of the signatories) observed in his outstanding history of *The Twentieth Century World*:

The pursuit of American strategic and economic interests in the Caribbean region in particular and in Latin America in general was justified, as has so often been the case in American foreign policy, by a high-sounding moral principle.[7]

The resort to abstract moralizing by the authors of the open letter is, in essence, the continuation of this longstanding modus operandi. Rather than deal with “the strategic and economic interests” that determine the foreign policy of the US government, the authors situate themselves on the lofty heights of what they refer to as “moral analysis.” They specifically deny the claim that “war is essentially a realm of self interest and necessity...”

But, unfortunately for the authors, their moral pretensions are badly undermined by what has actually been written by individuals who play critical roles in the formulation of the global strategy of the United States. Professor John Mearsheimer, an influential adviser of former presidents Reagan and Bush, has noted that “the pronouncements of the policy elites are heavily flavored with ... moralism” which “American academics are especially good at promoting...” He then adds,

Behind closed doors, however, the elites who make national security policy speak mostly in the language of power, not that of principle, and the United States acts in the international system according to the dictates of realist logic. In essence, a discernible gap separates public rhetoric from the actual conduct of American foreign policy.[8]

An example of the “language of power” and the “dictates of realist logic” is provided with commendable bluntness by the aforementioned Zbigniew Brzezinski, who nearly 25 years ago instigated the United States’ catastrophic intervention in Afghanistan, and set into motion the chain of events that culminated in the tragedy of September 11, 2001 and their even bloodier aftermath.

As Brzezinski admitted several years ago, the Carter administration lied to the American people and the world when it claimed that the US only became involved in Afghanistan after the Soviet invasion of December 1979. It should be recalled that Carter mounted a massive propaganda campaign to portray American meddling in Afghanistan as a defense of “human rights” against Soviet aggression. This campaign included the decision to boycott the 1980 summer Olympics, which were scheduled to be held in Moscow.

It now turns out that Carter signed a secret directive on July 3, 1979—nearly six months before Soviet troops entered Afghanistan—to provide covert support to radical Islamic opponents of the pro-Soviet regime in Kabul. In an interview conducted in January 1998 with the French newspaper *Le Nouvel Observateur*, Brzezinski stated he told Carter that the implementation of the directive was likely to provoke a violent Soviet response—which was exactly what the Carter administration wanted. When asked by *Le Nouvel Observateur* if, in the light of all that has happened in Afghanistan, he had any regrets, Brzezinski replied:

Regret what? The secret operation was an excellent idea. It had the effect of drawing the Russians into the Afghan trap and you want me to regret it? The day that the Soviets officially crossed the border, I wrote to President Carter: We now have the opportunity of giving the USSR its Vietnam War. Indeed, for almost 10 years, Moscow had to carry on a war unsupportable by the government, a conflict that brought about the demoralization and finally the breakup of the Soviet empire.

Aside from destabilizing the USSR, Brzezinski supported financial and military aid to the mujahedin as a means of achieving what he considered to be an essential long-term objective of the United States—establishing a dominant position in Eurasia. The collapse of the USSR transformed this long-term perspective into an immediate and urgent task. Its realization, Brzezinski has long insisted, is the key to securing American global domination. As he explains in his 1997 work, *The Grand Chessboard*, Eurasia is “the chessboard on which the struggle for global primacy continues to be played, and that struggle involves geostrategy—the strategic management of geopolitical interests.”[9] In language that leaves no doubt about the importance he attaches to US domination of that vast region, Brzezinski writes:

For America, the chief geopolitical prize is Eurasia. For half a millennium, world affairs were dominated by Eurasian powers and peoples who fought with one another for regional domination and reached out for global power. Now a non-Eurasian power is preeminent in Eurasia—and America’s global primacy is directly dependent on how long and how effectively its preponderance on the Eurasian continent is sustained.[10]

Brzezinski identifies one great obstacle to America’s realization of its imperial ambitions: the lack of popular support for a program of world conquest. America, he writes, “is too democratic at home to be autocratic abroad. This limits the use of America’s power, especially its capacity for

military intimidation. Never before has a populist democracy attained international supremacy.”[11] Only under exceptional circumstances would the rulers of the United States be able to arouse the “popular passions” required by the “pursuit of power.” Such circumstances would be, writes Brzezinski, “conditions of a sudden threat or challenge to the public’s sense of domestic well-being.”[12] For those who have entertained serious questions as to how it was possible that the entire, vast security-intelligence apparatus of the United States was asleep at the wheel on the morning of September 11, the deeper import of Brzezinski’s words is worth contemplating.

There is nothing particularly unusual about the writings of Brzezinski and Mearsheimer. There are countless documents produced by academic think tanks and government agencies—many of which are available on the Internet—in which the imperialist calculations and ambitions of the United States are spelled out in detail. The vast importance that the US government and substantial sections of the corporate elite attach to Caspian oil and gas reserves is hardly a secret. But all this is simply ignored by the authors of the open letter. They seek to dissolve all concrete issues of history, politics and economics into the ethereal mists of moral platitudes. What is involved here is not ignorance or innocence, but dishonesty and cynicism. They ignore or cynically rationalize the glaring contradictions between their moral injunctions and the role played by the United States in world affairs.

For example, they proclaim that “War may not legitimately be fought against dangers that are small, questionable, or of uncertain consequence, or against dangers that might plausibly be mitigated through negotiation, appeals to reason, persuasion from third parties, or other nonviolent means.” In the case of the ongoing war, the United States flatly rejected negotiation with the Afghan government. As it prepares for war against Iraq, the Bush administration has made it clear that it will not be restrained by the objections of even its closest international allies, let alone by the strictures of the United Nations. To get around the contradiction between their moral imperative and government policy, the authors resort to sophistry:

Some people suggest that the “last resort” requirement of just war theory—in essence, the requirement to explore all other reasonable and plausible alternatives to the use of force—is not satisfied until the resort to arms has been approved by a recognized international body, such as the United Nations. This proposition is problematic. First, it is novel; historically, approval by an international body has not been viewed by just war theorists as a just war requirement. Second, it is quite debatable whether an international body such as the UN is in a position to be the best final judge of when, and under what conditions, a particular resort to arms is justified; or whether the attempt by that body to make and enforce such judgments would inevitably compromise its primary mission of humanitarian work.

For all their pretentious references to *jus ad bellum* (justice in declaring war), *jus in bello* (justice in waging war) and *jus post bellum* (justice in settling war), the just war theory of the open letter dovetails nicely with the unilateralist policy of the Bush administration and the strategic missions designed by the Pentagon.

The authors’ entire discussion of just war is riddled with contradictions and inconsistencies that they seek to justify or resolve with face-saving formulae. They proclaim that “A just war can only be waged against persons who are combatants.” The authors are at pains to employ formulations that condemn unequivocally the actions of terrorists who kill American civilians, but still leave the US military sufficient freedom of

action. Thus, our modern-day Pontius Pilates devise a loophole that allows “in some circumstances, and within strict limits” for “military actions that may result in the unintended but foreseeable death or injury of some noncombatants.”

The wording is rather vague. What is meant by “strict limits?” How many civilian casualties are acceptable within the parameters of “some noncombatants?” The authors declare that “it is not morally acceptable to make the killing of noncombatants the operational objective of a military action.” What exactly is meant by “operational objective?” Does this term connote the subjective and self-serving claims of the mission planners, or the foreseeable objective consequences of a particular mission? The United States and Britain killed at least 100,000 people in the firebombing of Dresden in 1945. At least that many were killed by the United States three weeks later in the firebombing of Tokyo. In August 1945 the United States dropped atom bombs on Hiroshima and Nagasaki that killed approximately 200,000 people. In Vietnam, the total number of civilians killed by the United States in the course of 10 years of war was in the area of two to three million. The number of Iraqi and Serbian civilians killed by the United States during the past decade is still not known. Did the circumstances of any of the deaths caused by American military action violate the moral strictures that are defined so vaguely in the open letter? And if they did, what punishment would be appropriate for those responsible for these deaths? The authors of the open letter do not address these questions. When it comes to evaluating the actions of the United States, past and present, the moral compasses of the authors seem to jam.[13]

The letter testifies to the debased level of what passes for intellectual life in the United States. To a degree that is shameful, the vulgar and specious arguments of the political right and their academic apologists go unchallenged and unanswered. There are many highly-trained academics, specialists in various fields of the social sciences, who are perfectly aware that the pro-war propaganda of the Bush administration consists of a tissue of lies. Many of these people could easily, if they cared to, tear the arguments of Moynihan, Skocpol and their colleagues to shreds. But they keep their heads down and their mouths shut. In this way, they contribute to the prevailing climate of political reaction and general backwardness in the United States.

But this will pass. Events themselves will deliver—much sooner than many imagine—shocks to the body politic that will arouse its desire and capacity for serious thought.

## Notes

1. The statement is posted at: [http://www.propositionsonline.com/html/fighting\\_for.html](http://www.propositionsonline.com/html/fighting_for.html)

2. An indication of the letter’s general caliber is its reference to Abraham Lincoln as the “tenth” president of the United States. No, ladies and gentlemen of the academy, John Tyler was the tenth president, assuming office upon the death of William Henry Harrison in April 1841. Abraham Lincoln, as every school child was once supposed to know, was inaugurated as the *sixteenth* president in March 1861. Sixty “high-powered” intellectuals affixed their name to this document without even noticing this howler!

3. It should be recalled that the vice-presidential nominee of the Democratic Party in the 2000 election, Senator Joseph Lieberman, proclaimed that the US Constitution guaranteed only freedom of religion, not freedom from religion.

4. Significantly, the authors do not include in their enumeration of faults anything that pertains to the existing social structure of the United States,

i.e., the vast disparities in income levels, the extreme concentration of wealth, the extent of poverty, the disintegration of the social safety net, the unavailability of medical care for significant sections of the population and its mounting costs, the generally miserable treatment of the workforce by employers, the utter lack of democratic control over conditions of work, the widespread corruption of the corporate elite, etc. By virtue of their political outlook and class status, the authors of this letter are indifferent, if not blind, to the vast inequality that prevails in America.

5. William E. Nelson, *The Americanization of the Common Law: The Impact of Legal Change on Massachusetts Society, 1760-1830* (Cambridge, 1975), pp. 111-12.

6. The authors attempt to illustrate their theory of the mutual elevation of religion and politics by noting that “citizens recite a Pledge of Allegiance to ‘one nation under God’...” In fact, the wording of the Pledge demonstrates that the role of religion in political life assumes greater prominence in periods of political reaction and state repression. The pledge was initially conceived in the 1890s as an expression of democratic and egalitarian ideals by the Christian socialist, Francis Bellamy. In the years that followed, Bellamy unsuccessfully opposed changes that gave the pledge an overtly nationalistic form. As for the words “under God,” they were inserted into the pledge in 1954 during the height of the McCarthyite red-baiting hysteria. (For information on the pledge, see Dr. John W. Baer’s *Short History* at: <http://www.vineyard.net/vineyard/history/pledge.htm>

7. New York, 1992, p. 6.

8. *The Tragedy of Great Power Politics* (New York, 2001), p. 25.

9. New York, p. xiv.

10. Ibid, p. 30.

11. Ibid, p. 35-36.

12. Ibid, p. 36.

13. Many years ago, one of the authors of the open letter, Theda Skocpol, wrote *States and Social Revolutions*, the book that made her reputation. In its preface, she made reference to her own “vivid period of political engagement” as a graduate student at Harvard University in the early 1970s. “The United States was brutally at war against the Vietnamese Revolution, while at home movements calling for racial justice and an immediate end to the foreign military involvement challenged the capacities for good and evil of our national political system” (Cambridge, 1979, p. xii). These are words, we suspect, that Professor Skocpol would prefer not to be reminded of. But let us note that some of the key people who are directing the war policies of the US today—particularly Cheney and Rumsfeld—were involved in the prosecution of the “brutal war” against Vietnam.



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