

# A Citizen's Response to the National Security Strategy of the United States of America

BY WENDELL BERRY

*America! America!  
God mend thine every flaw,  
Confirm thy soul in self control,  
Thy liberty in law.*

—Katharine Lee Bates, "America the Beautiful"

**i.** The new National Security Strategy published by the White House in September 2002, if carried out, would amount to a radical revision of the political character of our nation. Its central and most significant statement is this:

*While the United States will constantly strive to enlist the support of the international community, we will not hesitate to act alone, if necessary, to exercise our right of self-defense by acting preemptively against such terrorists... (p. 6)*

A democratic citizen must deal here first of all with the question, Who is this "we"? It is not the "we" of the Declaration of Independence, which referred to a small group of signatories bound by the conviction that "governments [derive] their just powers from the consent of the governed." And it is not the "we" of the Constitution, which refers to "the people [my emphasis] of the United States."

This "we" of the new strategy can refer only to the president. It is a royal "we." A head of state, preparing to act alone in starting a preemptive war, will need to justify his intention by secret information, and will need to plan in secret and execute his plan without forewarning. The idea of a government acting alone in preemptive war is inherently undemocratic, for it does not require or even permit the president to obtain the consent of the governed. As a policy, this new strategy depends on the acquiescence of a public kept fearful and ignorant, subject to manipulation by the executive power, and on the compliance of an intimidated and office-dependent legislature. To the extent that a government is secret, it cannot be democratic or its people free. By this new doctrine, the president alone may start a war against any nation at any time, and with no more forewarning than preceded the Japanese attack on Pearl Harbor.

Would-be participating citizens of a democratic nation, unwilling to have their consent coerced or taken for granted, therefore have no choice but to remove themselves from the illegitimate constraints of this "we" in as immediate and public a way as possible.

The alleged justification for this new strategy is the recent emergence in the United States of international terrorism. But why the events of September 11, 2001, horrifying as they were, should have called for a radical new investiture of power in the executive branch is not clear. The National Security Strategy defines terrorism as "premeditated, politically motivated violence perpetrated against innocents" (p. 5). This is truly a distinct kind of violence, but to imply by the word "terrorism" that this sort of terror is the work exclusively of "terrorists" is misleading. The "legitimate" warfare of technologically advanced nations likewise is premeditated, politically motivated violence perpetrated against innocents. The distinction between the *intention* to perpetrate violence against innocents, as in "terrorism," and the *willingness* to do so, as in "war," is not a source of comfort.

Supposedly, if a nation perpetrates violence officially—whether to bomb an enemy airfield or a hospital—it is not guilty of "terrorism." But there is no need to hesitate over the difference between "terrorism" and any violence or threat of violence that is terrifying. The National Security Strategy wishes to cause

"terrorism" to be seen "in the same light as slavery, piracy, or genocide" (p. 6)—but not in the same light as war. It accepts and affirms the legitimacy of war.

The war against terrorism is not, strictly speaking, a war against nations, even though it has already involved international war in Afghanistan and presidential threats against other nations. This is a war against "the embittered few"—"thousands of trained terrorists"—who are "at large" (p. 5) among many millions of others who are, in the language of this document, "innocents," and thus are deserving of our protection.

Unless we are willing to kill innocents in order to kill the guilty, the need to be lethal will be impeded constantly by the need to be careful. Because we must suppose a new supply of villains to be always in the making, we can expect the war on terrorism to be more or less endless, endlessly costly, and endlessly supportive of a thriving bureaucracy.

Unless, that is, we should become willing to ask why, and to do something about the causes. Why do people become terrorists? Such questions arise from the recognition that problems have causes. There is, however, no acknowledgement in The National Security Strategy that terrorism might have a cause that could possibly be discovered and possibly remedied. "The embittered few," it seems, are merely "evil."

**ii.** Much of the obscurity of our effort so far against terrorism originates in this now official idea that the enemy is evil and that we are (therefore) good, which is the precise mirror image of the official idea of the terrorists.

The epigraph of Part III of The National Security Strategy contains this sentence from President Bush's speech at the National Cathedral on September 14, 2001: "But our responsibility to history is already clear: to answer these attacks and rid the world of evil." A government, committing its nation to rid the world of evil, is assuming necessarily that it and its nation are good.

But the proposition that anything so multiple and large as a nation can be "good" is an insult to common sense. It is also dangerous, because it precludes any attempt at self-criticism or self-correction; it precludes public dialogue. It leads us far indeed from the traditions of religion and democracy that are intended to measure and so to sustain our efforts to be good. Christ said, "He that is without sin among you, let him first cast a stone at her." And Thomas Jefferson justified general education by the obligation of citizens to be critical of their government: "for nothing can keep it right but their own vigilant and distrustful [my emphasis] superintendence." An inescapable requirement of true patriotism, love for one's land, is a vigilant distrust of any determinative power, elected or unelected, that may preside over it.

And so it is not without reason or precedent that a citizen should point out that, in addition to evils originating abroad and supposedly correctable by catastrophic technologies in "legitimate" hands, we have an agenda of domestic evils, not only those that properly self-aware humans can find in their own hearts, but also several that are indigenous to our history as a nation: issues of

economic and social justice, and issues related to the continuing and worsening maladjustment between our economy and our land.

There are kinds of violence that have nothing directly to do with unofficial or official warfare. I mean such things as toxic pollution, land destruction, soil erosion, the destruction of biological diversity and of the ecological supports of agriculture. To anybody with a normal concern for health and sanity, these "externalized costs" are terrible and are terrifying.

I don't wish to make light of the threats and dangers that now confront us. But frightening as these are, they do not relieve us of the responsibility to be as intelligent, principled, and practical as we can be. To rouse the public's anxiety about foreign terror while ignoring domestic terror, and to fail to ask if these terrors are in any way related, is wrong.

It is understandable that we should have reacted to the attacks of September 11, 2001, by curtailment of civil rights, by defiance of laws, and by resort to overwhelming force, for those things are the ready products of fear and hasty thought. But they cannot protect us against the destruction of our own land by ourselves. They cannot protect us against the selfishness, wastefulness, and greed that we have legitimized here as economic virtues, and have taught to the world. They cannot protect us against our government's long-standing disdain for any form of self-sufficiency or thrift, or against the consequent dependence, which for the present at least

almost inconceivably naïve. The authors of the strategy seem now and then to be glimmeringly conscious of the difficulty. Their implicit definition of "rogue state," for example, is any nation pursuing national

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greatness by advanced military capabilities that can threaten its neighbors—except our nation.

If you think our displeasure with "rogue states" might have any underpinning in international law, then you will be disappointed to learn on page 31 that

*We will take the actions necessary to ensure that our efforts to meet our global security commitments and protect Americans are not impaired by the potential for investigations, inquiry, or prosecution by the International Criminal Court (ICC), whose jurisdiction does not extend to Americans and which we do not accept.*

The rule of law in the world, then, is to be upheld by a nation that has

threatening left and right, repudiating agreements, and angering friends. The problem of participating in the global economy for the benefit of Washington's corporate sponsors while maintaining a nationalist bel-

ligerence and an isolationist morality calls for superhuman intelligence in the secretary of commerce. The problem of "acting alone" in an international war while maintaining simultaneously our ability to import the foreign goods (for instance, oil) on which we have become dependent even militarily will call, likewise, for overtopping genius in the secretary of defense.

After World War II, we hoped the world might be united for the sake of peacemaking. Now the world is being "globalized" for the sake of trade and the so-called free market—for the sake, that is, of plundering the world for cheap labor, cheap energy, and cheap materials. How nations, let alone regions and communities, are to shape and protect themselves within this global economy is far from clear. Nor is it clear how the global economy can hope to survive the wars of nations.

For a nation to be, in the truest sense, patriotic, its citizens must love their land with a knowing, intelligent, sustaining, and protective love. They must not, for any price, destroy its health, its beauty, or its productivity. And they must not allow their patriotism to be degraded to a mere loyalty to symbols or any present set of officials.

One might reasonably assume, therefore, that a policy of national security would advocate from the start various practical measures to conserve and to use frugally the nation's resources, the objects of this husbandry being a reduction in the nation's dependence on imports and a reduction in the competition between nations for necessary goods.

Agriculture, which is the economic activity most clearly and directly related to national security—if one grants that we all must eat—receives such scant and superficial treatment as to amount to a dismissal. The document proposes only:

1. "a global effort to address new technology, science, and health regulations that needlessly impede farm exports and improved agriculture" (p. 19). This refers, without saying so, to the growing consumer resistance to genetically modified food. A global effort to overcome this resistance would help, not farmers and not consumers, but global agribusiness corporations.

2. "transitional safeguards which we have used in the agricultural sector" (p. 19). This refers to government subsidies, which ultimately help the agribusiness corporations, not farmers.

3. Promotion of "new technologies, including biotechnology, [which] have enormous potential to improve crop yields in developing countries while using fewer pesticides and less water" (p. 23). This is offered (as usual and questionably) as the solution to hunger, but its immediate benefit would be to the corporate suppliers.

This is not an agriculture policy, let alone a national security strategy. It has the blindness, arrogance, and foolishness that are characteristic of top-down thinking by politicians and academic experts, assuming that "improved agriculture" would in-

evitably be the result of catering to the agribusiness corporations, and that national food security can be achieved merely by going on as before. It does not address any agricultural problem as such, and it ignores the vulnerability of our present food system—dependent as it is on genetically impoverished monocultures, cheap petroleum, cheap long-distance transportation, and cheap farm labor—to many kinds of disruption by "the embittered few," who, in the event of such disruption, would quickly become the embittered many. On eroding, ecologically degraded, increasingly toxic landscapes, worked by failing or subsidy-dependent farmers and by the cheap labor of migrants, we have erected the tottering tower of "agribusiness," which prospers and "feeds the world" (incompletely and temporarily) by undermining its own foundations.

**iii.** Since the end of World War II, when the terrors of industrial warfare had been fully revealed, many people and, by fits and starts, many governments have recognized that peace is not just a desirable condition, as was thought before, but a practical necessity. But we have not yet learned to think of peace apart from war. We wait, still, until we face terrifying dangers and the necessity to choose among bad alternatives, and then we think again of peace, and again we fight a war to secure it.

At the end of the war, if we have won it, we declare peace; we congratulate ourselves on our victory; we marvel at the newly proved efficiency of our latest weapons; we ignore the cost in lives, materials, and property, in suffering and disease, in damage to the natural world; we ignore the inevitable residue of resentment and hatred; and we go on as before, having, as we think, successfully defended our way of life.

That is pretty much the story of our victory in the Gulf War of 1991. In the years between that victory and September 11, 2001, we did not alter our thinking about peace and war—that is, we thought much about war and little about peace; we continued to punish the defeated people of Iraq and their children; we made no effort to reduce our dependence on the oil we import from other, potentially belligerent countries; we made no improvement in our charity toward the rest of the world; we made no motion toward greater economic self-reliance; and we continued our extensive and often irreversible damages to our own land. We appear to have assumed merely that our victory confirmed our manifest destiny to be the richest, most powerful, most wasteful nation in the world. After the catastrophe of September 11, it again became clear to us how good it would be to be at peace, to have no enemies, to have no more needless deaths to mourn. And then, our need for war following with the customary swift and deadly logic our need for peace, we took up the customary obsession with the evil of other people.

It is useless to try to adjudicate a long-standing animosity by asking who started it or who is the most wrong. The only sufficient answer is to give up the animosity and try forgiveness, to try to love our enemies and to talk to them and (if we pray) to pray for them. If we can't do any of that, then we must begin again by trying to imagine our enemies' children who, like our children, are in mortal danger because of enmity that they did not cause.

We can no longer afford to confuse peaceability with passivity. Authentic peace is no more passive than war. Like war, it calls for discipline and intelligence and strength of character, though it calls also for higher principles and aims. If we are serious about peace, then we must work for it as ardently, seriously, continuously, carefully, and bravely as we now prepare for war.



Detail of *Untitled (Myself if I am Real)*, 2001, Robert Van Vranken  
Courtesy of O.K. Harris Works of Art, NYC

is inescapable, on foreign supplies, such as oil from the Middle East.

It is no wonder that the National Security Strategy, growing as it does out of unresolved contradictions in our domestic life, should attempt to compound a foreign policy out of contradictory principles.

There is, first of all, the contradiction of peace and war, or of war as the means of achieving and preserving peace. This document affirms peace; it also affirms peace as the justification of war and war as the means of peace—and thus perpetuates a halloved absurdity. But implicit in its assertion of this (and, by implication, any other) nation's right to act alone in its own interest is an acceptance of war as a permanent condition. Either way, it is cynical to invoke the ideas of cooperation, community, peace, freedom, justice, dignity, and the rule of law (as this document repeatedly does), and then proceed to assert one's intention to act alone in making war. One cannot reduce terror by holding over the world the threat of what it most fears.

This is a contradiction not reconcilable except by a self-righteousness

declared itself to be above the law. A childish hypocrisy here assumes the dignity of a nation's foreign policy.

**iii.** A further contradiction is that between war and commerce. This issue arises first of all in the war economy, which unsurprisingly regards war as a business and weapons as merchandise. However nationalistic may be the doctrine of the National Security Strategy, the fact is that the internationalization of the weapons trade is a result inherent in international trade itself. It is a part of globalization. Mr. Bush's addition of this Security Strategy to the previous bipartisan commitment to globalization exposes an American dementia that has not been so plainly displayed before.

The America Whose Business Is Business has been internationalizing its economy in haste (for bad reasons, and with little foresight), looking everywhere for "trading partners," cheap labor, and tax shelters. Meanwhile, the America Whose Business Is National Defense is withdrawing from the world in haste (for bad reasons, with little foresight),

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This essay, an abridged version of one appearing in the current issue of *Orion Magazine*, was made possible by contributions to The Orion Society's **Thoughts on America Fund**. The text can be obtained through *Orion's* website, and can easily be forwarded around the world via e-mail, something we encourage. A free print copy of the magazine containing the full article can also be obtained through the website.

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