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## **Did Bush Say God Told Him To Go To War?**

by Ira Chernus

Did God tell George W. Bush to strike at Al-Qaeda and Iraq? God only knows. Did Bush SAY that God told him to strike? We don't know yet, for sure. But we damn well better find out. Because if George W. said it, he-and all of us-could be in for some big trouble.

Here is what we know for sure, so far. Journalist Arnon Regular [wrote, in the June 26 edition of Ha'aretz](#) (Israel's most reputable newspaper), that he has minutes of a meeting among top-level Palestinian leaders, including Prime Minister Mahmoud Abbas. The minutes are apparently quite detailed, because Regular wrote a long article recounting very specific conversations. The last paragraph of the article reads:

"According to Abbas, Bush said: 'God told me to strike at al Qaida and I struck them, and then he instructed me to strike at Saddam, which I did, and now I am determined to solve the problem in the Middle East. If you help me I will act, and if not, the elections will come and I will have to focus on them.'"

Before you jump to any conclusions, remember that you are reading a translation of a translation of a translation. Mahmoud Abbas does not speak English. Bush does not speak Arabic. If Bush said these words, or something like them, Abbas heard them from a translator. Then Abbas repeated them, as he remembered them a couple of weeks later, in Arabic. Some unknown person wrote down what he thought he heard Abbas say. Then Regular, or someone at Ha'aretz, translated them back into English-or perhaps first into Hebrew and then into English.

Clearly, we don't yet know what Bush said, or why. Just as clearly, the man has some explaining to do. And whatever the truth of the matter, he has serious problems.

First, let's give him some benefit of the doubt. Maybe he never said it. The quote could be fabricated-though it is hard to see who would gain by making it up. Maybe he did say God told him to make war, but he doesn't really believe it. He might have made it up for effect, trying to score some political points in the Middle East.

Whatever benefit he got should be far outweighed by the price he has to pay here at home. This is no little incident that can slip away and be forgotten. Once Bush is called to account, his problems will really begin.

If he confirms the Ha'aretz report, those of us who say God has no place in the Oval Office had better ring the alarm, as loud and long as we can. If he truly believes that he hears the voice of God, there is no telling what God might say tomorrow. This is a man who can launch the world's biggest arsenal of weapons of mass destruction-biological, chemical, and nuclear-at any moment.

We should certainly make it a big issue in next year's election. If the quote is accurate, Bush cares more about getting re-elected than bringing peace to the Middle East. If he admits he lets God design our foreign policy, that might make it easier for us to deny him what he wants most.

But not necessarily. Bush got to be president only because a lot of people think he is an upright, devout, spiritual man. In the 2000 election, the crucial swing voters were those who agreed with Al Gore on the issues, but voted for Bush anyway. They wanted a leader with absolute moral standards, not the "feel good" immorality that Bill Clinton represented to them. They assumed that moral standards come from religious belief. They voted for the man they thought would be more Godly. If we do indeed have a president who lets God tell him to go to war, these voters must share a big chunk of the responsibility.

They also pose a big problem for Bush. Suppose he denies that the quote is accurate, or admits he said it but claims it was a mistake? Can he apologize for letting God's will determine his most important decisions. How will that go down with his political base, the Christian right? They want him to proudly confirm the controversial remark. Of course he should consult God, they will say, before he decides to go to war. Of course he should be guided by the will of the Lord. Can Bush afford,

politically, to distance himself from God? Even his political genius, Karl Rove, might lose sleep figuring out that one.

This incident can do more than befuddle the Bush administration and slow down its war machine. It can also make some of his religiously-minded supporters stop and think. When they voted for him because he was more Godly, did they realize what they were getting? Did they understand where the connection of religion and politics can lead? If Bush admits the quote is accurate, now they know where it can lead. Some will not be surprised or upset. But some will-perhaps enough to make a difference in our nation's political life.

It is up to us to help those folks think through the issue. If we view our religiously-minded, pro-Bush fellow-citizens as enemies to be defeated, they will only stiffen their backs and rally round the president. But if we view them as our partners in a shared political life, people we have to talk with constructively, they might just listen. They might just understand that it is not only dangerous to let God tell the president when and where to strike. It is just plain un-American.

When the president lets God tell him what to do, it violates the spirit of democracy. In a democracy, it is the people, not God, who make the decisions. The president is supposed to represent the will of the people. Yes, he must seek the best advice he can get and use his own best judgment. That means relying on facts, intelligent analysis, and rational thought-not divine inspiration. Once the president lets God's voice replace the human mind, we are back in the Middle Ages, back in the very situation our revolution was supposed to get us out of.

If Bush lets God make foreign policy decisions, is he violating not just the spirit but the letter of the law? The Constitution gives him the right to make foreign policy. It does not say what should or should not go through his mind in the process. It certainly does not forbid him from consulting God. But it does protect us from having any religious belief determine our laws and policies. Did Bush violate the First Amendment's separation of church and state? The answer is not totally clear.

It is crystal clear, though, that another part of the Constitution has been violated. It is absolutely unconstitutional for the president to let God tell him to take the country to war-not because the president is forbidden to consult God, but because the president is forbidden to take the country to war. Only Congress can declare war.

If Bush's conversations with God led to war, it is Congress that bears the greatest blame. Congress gave Bush a blank check. Bush never asked for a declaration of war against Al-Qaeda or Iraq. Congress ducked its responsibility, rolled over eagerly, and gave away its Constitutional duty to make those decisions.

So let's demand that Bush tell us what he said to Mahmoud Abas. If he really did say that God tells him when and where to strike, let's spread our outrage around. Let's hold Congress as well as the president responsible for dereliction of their democratic duty. At the same time, let's face the fact that many of our fellow citizens won't be outraged, and learn how to persuade them they should be.

And while we focus, quite rightly, on Bush and God, let's not forget to ask the president another question: Do you really plan to forget about Middle East peace next year, because you will be too busy trying to get re-elected. Is that the kind of president we want?

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