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Fundamentalism at the US's corps

By Brian M Downing

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The United States faces another embarrassment amid its difficult wars in the Islamic world. Following close on the heels of atrocities and miscues in Afghanistan, it has come to light that Colonel Matthew Dooley, an instructor at a military graduate school, taught his officers that the US is engaged in a global war, not with al-Qaeda, but with Islam itself.

Furthermore, the contest may have to be resolved by using nuclear weapons on sites such as Mecca and Medina in Saudi Arabia - an event that would surely trigger a cataclysmic war.

Dooley has been relieved of teaching duties at the Joint Forces Staff College in Norfolk, Virginia. His views are not official army doctrine by any means, and he has likely reached the end of his service career. However, Dooley's views are based on neo-conservative ideology and co-mingle with fundamentalist ire and apocalyptic yearning. This is troubling not only for the conduct of an already vexing war but also for political and constitutional reasons.

Neo-conservatism has a long connection to the US military. This may be initially puzzling, as most neo-conservatives skillfully avoided military service during the Vietnam War and their newer followers have only a somewhat closer connection to actual service.

Yet the neo-conservatives were important in revitalizing the military after Vietnam. They instilled philosophical grounding and charged the military with vital missions around the world, including ones that continue to this day. Many neo-conservatives today hold posts in military

schools and impart their strategic and philosophical vision to the officer corps, especially the more promising young officers chosen for the fast track to upper ranks.

Neo-conservatism saw the antiwar movement of the Vietnam era as bringing the twin evils of social decay and flagging resolve in the global contest with the Soviet Union. The post-war military was rent by disciplinary problems, abysmal morale, and a sense of purposelessness. Experienced officers and non-commissioned officers were heading for the exits in large numbers. Their outlooks shaped by the rise of Nazism, neo-conservatives saw the free world in danger and saw their mission: rebuilding the military as a beacon of morality at home and a raised sword abroad.

Neo-conservatism and fundamentalism were partners in rebuilding the military after Vietnam. The former provided the ideology and political support; the latter provided a good deal of the new officer corps and public support. Traditional values were extolled over the reigning permissiveness; global activism was advocated after Vietnam had damaged internationalism; and with the election of president Ronald Reagan in 1980, defense budgets were boosted. The military was restored to an honored place in American life, and officer corps knew well the intellectual voices that had helped with that. [1]

The fall of the Soviet Union in 1991 seemed to validate neoconservatism and military might, but it also raised the troubling matter of what to do now the Evil Empire was gone. The mission that lay immediately ahead was to maintain US global dominance, but in time the intellectual groundwork of another mission came into being: spreading democracy throughout the world.

The Middle East would be the region of chief concern. The 9/11 attacks brought ideas into practice. Some of them were think-tank dreams that would have been thought absurd ventures a year or two earlier, but 9/11 changed that.

Neo-conservatives conceptualized the new conflict in epochal terms. It was not simply a matter of fighting al-Qaeda in various parts of the world. The small terrorist group that had struck New York and Washington was depicted as a global threat determined to restore the Islamic caliphate and dominate the globe - a part of al-Qaeda's ideology to be sure, though a ludicrous one.

From the days when Mohammed's bands spread across the Arabian Peninsula and his successors launched into the Maghreb and Mesopotamia, Islam has sought conquest and empire. It is inherent in the culture and especially in the minds of leaders. The war today is only the most recent effort at global mastery. [2]

The message is put forth in scholarly articles, on talk radio, and even from the pulpit - the latter two being closely tied in the US - *sharia* law was said to be on the rise, even in rural America. (Several US states, mostly with large fundamentalist populations, are mulling over, or have passed, laws prohibiting the use of *sharia*.) The West must defend Judeo-Christian civilization and the US must provide the vanguard, main force, and finance, all at once. The template of good and evil had been formed in the public mind during World War II, if not earlier, and an updated enemy simply had to be entered.

The US could not shrink from this new epochal conflict, nor could it refrain from using its most potent weapons. Since the days of mutually assured destruction, nuclear war has been tied to the prospect of the end of the world - a concept fraught with religious significance. Dooley was likely drawing from this apocalyptic tradition, which brings energy and passion to neo-conservatist thought. Total war, rebuilding Solomon's Temple, and the end of the world all run together in this tradition.

One can live a devout Christian life without encountering much of this millenarian strand, but it is there, especially in militant fundamentalism, which sees the world entering a new stage - a final one. An impending war will bring the End Times. This cataclysm is something that the faithful can and must encourage because it is part of the divine plan as revealed in scripture, though imaginative interpretations are needed to see it.

War with Islam fits into this plan along with restoring ancient Israel's boundaries and rebuilding the Temple, which of course entails destroying the present structure there - the al-Aqsa mosque. This in turn will lead to total war between Islam and Christianity. [3]

Neo-conservatism has substantial influence in US foreign policy as recent and mostly regrettable events have shown. Apocalyptic thinking, the neo-cons' junior and heretofore relatively silent partner, is not as uncommon as may be thought. It is heard often enough on religious broadcasts, radio and television in many parts of the US, and its tracts have their own sections in major bookstores.

It is not clear how extensive apocalyptic thinking is in the officer corps, which is charged to act for no higher authority than the American people and for no greater end than their security.

Notes

1. Andrew Bacevich, *The New American Militarism: How Americans are Seduced by War* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2005), pp. 69-107.
2. See for example Efraim Karsh, *Islamic Imperialism: A History* (New Haven, Conn: Yale University Press, 2006).
3. Gershom Gorenberg, *The End of Days: Fundamentalism and the Struggle for the Temple Mount* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2000), pp 105-10.