



San Jorge y el Dragón by Peter Paul Rubens, 1606 – 1608. Museo del Prado, Madrid. Source: Wikimedia Commons.  
“...If nothing has any meaning and if we can affirm no values whatsoever, then everything is possible and nothing has any importance. There is no pro or con: the murderer is neither right nor wrong. We are free to stoke the crematory fires or to devote ourselves to the care of lepers. Evil and virtue are mere chance or caprice.” Albert Camus, *The Rebel*

# A CHRISTIAN DECLARATION ON AMERICAN FOREIGN POLICY

THE EDITORS

Since the end of the Cold War, the United States has struggled to define its role in the world. Americans' ambivalence about their place in the world in the 1990s was punctuated by the deadliest terrorist attack in history and succeeded by troubled wars in Afghanistan and Iraq. More recently, the United States has moved away from its historic post-World War II role as the guarantor of international peace and security, even as the world and its dangers continue to press in. In reaction to all this, some Americans have embraced a reactive, populist approach to world affairs that emphasizes a peculiar, paradoxical combination of American toughness towards her enemies and withdrawal from world leadership.

Thoughtful Christians who take seriously the roles assigned by God to the church and the state, and who value the equal importance of justice and ordered liberty, should not be silent in the face of this shift. While we are advocates of American leadership, we are also in favor of American prudence and virtue in the exercise of power abroad.

We are Christians who have studied, practiced, or carefully observed American foreign policy. We believe it is our responsibility to speak out at this time in order to provide a much-needed corrective to the current foreign policy debate. We offer this joint declaration that articulates a simple yet serious framework for thinking about American power



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and world order. While this declaration is about American foreign policy, we believe these are principles Christians around the world—Americans and others—can affirm.

This declaration has been titled “A Christian Declaration” and not “*The* Christian Declaration” because we do not presume to speak for all Christians. Our purpose here is to attempt to apply biblical principles to American foreign policy, an exercise that necessarily involves calculations of wisdom and reasoned judgment. We hope that our arguments are both clear and persuasive to fellow Christians as well as to non-Christians.

This declaration comes at a needful time. The 2016 presidential election has presented a clarion moment for a statement of principles. We invite those who agree with us to endorse our vision, and those who disagree, whether Christians or non-Christians, to engage in a thoughtful and sustained dialogue with us.

## WORLD ORDER

When Christians think about foreign policy, they often gravitate to specific moral issues: advocating for religious freedom, alleviating the plight of refugees, fighting human trafficking, and more. While these causes are individually worthy and we affirm each of them, we are concerned that single-issue activism is easily manipulated by policy-makers. Worse, limiting our engagement to single-issue causes risks devolving into moralism, with all the attendant problems of self-righteousness and utopianism.

We urge our fellow citizens to embrace a broader framework for thinking about American power. Most of the daily craft of foreign and defense policy involves the regular management and implementation of policies to preserve order, maintain stable borders, manage alliances, and protect the international flow of trade and communications. This is the kind of work, often unseen, that enables the vast majority of American citizens to go about their daily lives rarely worrying or even thinking about foreign policy.

In this sense the routine work of foreign policy and maintenance of the international system might be considered a contemporary version of the creation mandate to cultivate the Garden (Genesis 2:15). The “garden” in question is the international social system—or, more concisely, world order. Cultivating the garden of world order means tending to the tasks that uphold public safety, execute justice, and promote human flourishing. This is a mandate shared by all peoples, but those of us who live in a powerful country have special stewardship responsibilities. Put another way, we believe in the prudent use of American power to encourage, grow, and defend the institutions and culture of ordered liberty among the community of responsible sovereign nations.

There is no perfect human political system, but we believe the liberal order is the least flawed of all presently available options and constitutes the best means for accomplishing the ends for which government was ordained. Politically, liberal order comprises accountable self-government, the rule of law, civil liberties, and religious freedom. Economically, liberal order means relatively open markets, freedom of the seas, the sanctity of contract, and peaceful rule-based dispute adjudication. Internationally, liberal order means nonaggression, mutual security, territorial inviolability—with limited exceptions for humanitarian intervention—and favors intergovernmental cooperation on issues of global concern. Liberal order is especially powerful where these overlap—as it does among the community of economically open liberal democracies that participate in mutual defense and cooperative security arrangements. Other goals at which governments aim—including providing for the poor and disadvantaged, and promoting the flourishing of all citizens—are most effectively pursued within the framework of liberal order.

## AMERICA'S ROLE

We believe the United States should continue to lead the world towards these goals—as it has done since the end of World War II—for

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two reasons. First, it is in America's own best interest because liberal order is the outer perimeter of American security. The American government is morally responsible for the safety of the American people, rightly prioritizes their security, and rightly maintains an effective military to deter and defeat those who would attack the United States. But the United States' safety and prosperity is most strongly assured in a world shaped by liberal norms of accountable governance, open economies, and cooperative security—a world in which military force is less likely to be called upon in the first place.

Second, the United States is still the leading power in the world, especially in partnership with its democratic partners and allies: No other nation or alliance has the economic, military, or political resources required to provide the organization, administration, and coordination required for global leadership. Without American and allied leadership, much of the garden of world order would go untended—evidence of which we have seen in recent years as actors with scant regard for the responsible use of power have stepped into the vacuum created by American passivity. While America's leadership is imperfect, we do not see a plausible alternative and are concerned about what kind of world would grow under different leadership. American leadership should not be taken as an excuse for other states to abdicate their own responsibilities. But the past century has amply demonstrated that if the United States does not do its part, other states will not do theirs. When the United States does step up, that increases the likelihood that others will do the same.

To accomplish this, the United States must use its power responsibly. This has been a source of considerable confusion. Americans have often erred in applying ethical principles to their national life. Some Christians tend to equate the United States with ancient Israel and argue the former shares the latter's unique providential tasks, a tendency which blurs the special status of Old Testament Israel and blinds Americans to the sins and errors in their own history and their own government's policies. Other Christians have

erred by holding the state to the same standard as the church or the individual, resulting in pacifism and, we believe, an abdication of government's rightful responsibilities.

Yet others excuse the state from ethical considerations altogether in the belief that morality does not apply to politics. No nation is excused from the obligation to act justly. We do not believe that *raison d'état* is a self-justifying principle or that the pursuit of power at other's expense is the sole guiding principle in statecraft. The Old Testament prophets regularly held the pagan nations to account for their acts of oppression and violence. The book of Proverbs clearly expects rulers to govern justly: "It is an abomination to kings to do evil, for the throne is established by righteousness," (16:12), and "Like a roaring lion or a charging bear is a wicked ruler over a poor people. A ruler who lacks understanding is a cruel oppressor, but he who hates unjust gain will prolong his days," (28:15-16). The United States, like every nation, should pursue justice and order.

Uniquely among nations, Americans have been given unprecedented power, wealth, and political rights—and thus have an unprecedented responsibility to use them well. Reinhold Niebuhr rightly warned against exercising power without consideration "of the interests and views of those upon whom it impinges." As the most powerful nation in history, American power impinges on the interests and views of peoples and nations around the world. American statesmen should be sensitive to the effects of American power on those outside American borders—both to avoid unintended harm and to recognize opportunities to serve others. Like the man who hid his talent in the ground, refusing to invest it for fear of failure, the United States would be irresponsible if it stood idly by, abdicated its global responsibilities, and refused to put our power in the service of the common good.

We leave open the question as to *how*, *when*, and *where* the United States should most prudently exercise its leadership and advocate for a culture of ordered liberty abroad. Such





*In military imagery, a horse can represent the passions or power of its rider under the control of martial discipline. This accords with the dominical use of the term “meek” in the Sermon on the Mount. In the root meaning of the biblical image, “meek” describes a war horse whose power is under appropriate submission. In providing both goads and limits, this is precisely what the just war tradition seeks to accomplish: the submission of martial power under proper command.*

decisions involve difficult trade-offs under considerable time pressure with imperfect information and are best evaluated on a case-by-case basis. A world of ordered liberty is an aspiration: policymakers are often compelled to compromise such aspirations because of the limitations imposed on them. Pursuing ideals heedless of limitations is foolish and, often, dangerous.

We recognize the United States’ inescapable leadership role presents a temptation to hubris and selfishness—a temptation to which it has sometimes succumbed. American policymakers can guard against these temptations in four ways. They should heed the counsel of voices outside government, especially in America’s religious communities. They should cultivate an awareness of history, replete with the folly of self-aggrandizing power. They

should respect the checks and balances of our system of government, explicitly designed to make “ambition counteract ambition.” Finally, when possible, they should expose American policy to the iron-sharpening-iron accountability of multilateralism, especially with allies that share our aspirations for liberal order. We do not believe unilateralism is wrong in principle, but we believe that acting in concert with others is a powerful check on the temptation to strategic and moral myopia.

Our approach to American foreign policy rests on a biblical understanding of human nature, the purposes of government, and the use of force. And here we stand in the tradition of centuries of Christian reflection on the role of the state and the just use of force, from Augustine to Aquinas, from Luther and Calvin to Niebuhr and Elshtain.

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## HUMAN NATURE

Human beings are made in the image of God (Genesis 1:26-27). As God uses his moral agency for creativity and human flourishing, so we are to wield the authority and influence he has entrusted to us in the same way. Using authority as God intended is necessary and productive. Teachers have power over students, and help them become educated adults. Parents have power over children, and help them become disciplined and mature human beings. Governments have power over their citizens, and create the possibility of justice and ordered liberty. The ability of human beings to wield power in creative and beautiful ways accounts for all the accomplishments of human civilization—the arts and sciences, the works of literature, the great cities, and the acts of saints and statesmen.

But we also hold to the doctrine of original sin—which Reinhold Niebuhr famously described as “the only empirically verifiable doctrine of the Christian faith.” The biblical authors understood that we who are made in God’s image have defaced that image. “The Lord saw that the wickedness of man was great in the earth, and that every intention of the thoughts of his heart was only evil continually,” (Genesis 6:8). As the prophet Jeremiah wailed, “The heart is deceitful above all things and desperately sick; who can understand it?” (Jeremiah 17:9).

The human race is the race of Saint Theresa and Adolf Hitler alike. Human beings produced Beethoven’s Ninth Symphony—and built the gas chambers of the Holocaust. The biblical view of human nature is that we are made in God’s image but fallen, marked by dignity and depravity, capable of beauty and cruelty. This is the cornerstone of Christian political thought.

## THE STATE & THE CHURCH

Government reflects both aspects of human nature. Oftentimes, government is the greatest product of human sin—wickedness amassed and expressed collectively on an epic scale, among the greatest curses to afflict

this fallen world. Some of the fiercest denunciations in the Old Testament are political, directed towards cities, kingdoms, empires, and their rulers. The prophets thundered against the rulers of Egypt, Babylon, and Assyria for their violence, oppression, and barbarism.

Simultaneously, government is a divine ordinance, created by God to be a blessing to all people, a check against the worst abuses of human sin and evil. Jesus commanded his followers to “render to Caesar the things that are Caesar’s,” (Matthew 22:21). Jeremiah pled with Israel to “seek the welfare of the city where I have sent you into exile,” (Jeremiah 29:7). Peter ordered the early church to obey the governing authorities and to “fear God, honor the king,” (1 Peter 2:17). The apostle Paul described government as “God’s servant” who works “for your good” and acts as “an avenger who carries out God’s wrath on the wrongdoer,” (Romans 13:1-7).

Government has a unique mandate separate and distinct from the church—another issue American Christians have sometimes confused. The church is the gathering of God’s people, an instrument for displaying his glory, the messenger of his Word, and the embassy of the coming Kingdom of God. Jesus gave his church the authority to preach, baptize, and make disciples in his name. Just as the church is not authorized to wield the sword or exercise coercion, the state is not authorized to proselytize or compel belief. In that sense, even though a majority of Americans profess Christianity, the United States Government is rightly “secular” in that it should not favor or propagate Christianity. A just government strives to uphold religious liberty and conscience rights for all. The United States has an historically unique role in modeling and advocating essential human rights.

## THE USE OF FORCE

In some hands, government is a tool of immense and satanic power. But exercised rightly according to God’s creation design, the same power is a tool of blessing, justice,



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and order. Government can err by oppressing others; but it can also err by failing to uphold order or pursue justice. Policymakers must avoid both the sins of omission and commission. Today, we are concerned that some policymakers have openly advocated oppression; simultaneously, others have over-corrected from past mistakes and are now at risk of being derelict in their duties.

As Christians, we believe the United States must not oppress the innocent. We wish such obvious truths did not need to be stated. But in an age when some elected officials and candidates for office openly advocate torture and the deliberate killings of civilians, including women and children, we must plainly state that these things are wrong. The rightful authority of government is no license for murder or vengeance.

That does not mean the United States must refrain from the exercise of force; to do so would be an abdication of other rightful responsibilities of government. We believe in the tenets of the just war tradition—and, in fact, believe the just war framework can be applied broadly to the work of statecraft.

The United States possesses the rightful authority to use force to maintain and secure justice—including for self-defense, the defense of the innocent, and the defense of liberal order. In war, we must seek to preserve noncombatant immunity and use a degree of force proportionate to the goal we seek to achieve. Above all, policymakers must understand that the goal of war is the creation of a better peace, which must permeate the planning for war and its aftermath.

These imperatives flow from what should be the overarching motivation for the use of force: to uphold order and pursue justice when other means have failed. We pursue order and justice out of love for our neighbors and a desire to protect them from evil. But when we are compelled to fight, our efforts should be tempered with love for our enemies, fighting in such a way as to minimize unnecessary harm and to promote “a just and lasting peace among nations.”

## CONCLUSION

The United States is the most powerful nation in the history of human civilization. Our Christian faith gives us a deep sense of responsibility to see such power used well and caution because of how such immensity of power can be misused. That is why we believe the United States should continue to encourage a culture of liberal order around the world.

Investing in liberal order is, partly, a justifiably selfish act of seeking security at the lowest cost. We are unembarrassed about the pursuit of American security because upholding order is the first function of government.

However, we believe much more than American security is at stake. Free nations are more secure in a world of ordered liberty. All nations can and should join in the collective effort to foster accountable governance, free entrepreneurship, and mutual security. The United States and its allies have, for much of the last century, helped foster these ideals around the world—and we believe they should continue to do so for the foreseeable future. P

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