

16 Describe this painting in detail. What does it remind you of and what does it suggest? →S28



Daniel Boone escorting settlers through the Cumberland Gap (1851-52) by George Caleb Bingham

America is a religion

The United States is no longer just a nation. It is now a religion. Its soldiers have entered Iraq to liberate its people not only from their dictator, their oil and their sovereignty, but also from their darkness. As George Bush told his troops on the day he announced victory: "Wherever you go, you carry a message of hope – a message that is ancient and ever new. In the words of the prophet Isaiah, "To the captives, "come out," and to those in darkness, "be free"."

So American soldiers are no longer merely terrestrial combatants; they have become missionaries. They are no longer simply killing enemies; they are casting out demons. The people who reconstructed the faces of Uday and Qusay Hussein carelessly forgot to restore the pair of little horns on each brow, but the understanding that these were opponents from a different realm was transmitted nonetheless. Like all those who send missionaries abroad, the high priests of America cannot conceive that the infidels might resist through their own free will; if they refuse to convert, it is the work of the devil, in his current guise as the former dictator of Iraq.

As Clifford Longley shows in his fascinating book *Chosen People*, published last year, the founding fathers of the USA, though they sometimes professed otherwise, sensed that they were guided by a divine purpose. Thomas Jefferson argued that the Great Seal of the United States should depict the Israelites, "led by a cloud by day and a pillar of fire by night". George Washington claimed, in his inaugural address, that every step towards independence was "distinguished by some token of providential agency". Longley argues that the formation of the American identity was part of a process of "supersession". The Roman Catholic Church claimed that it had supplanted the Jews as the elect, as the Jews had been repudiated by God. The English Protestants accused the Catholics of breaking faith, and claimed that they had become the beloved of God. The American revolutionaries believed that the English, in turn, had broken their covenant: the Americans had now become the chosen people, with a divine

duty to deliver the world to God's dominion. Six weeks ago, as if to show that this belief persists, George Bush recalled a remark of Woodrow Wilson's. "America," he quoted, "has a spiritual energy in her which no other nation can contribute to the liberation of mankind."

Gradually this notion of election has been conflated with another, still more dangerous idea. It is not just that the Americans are God's chosen people; America itself is now perceived as a divine project. In his farewell presidential address, Ronald Reagan spoke of his country as a "shining city on a hill", a reference to the Sermon on the Mount. But what Jesus was describing was not a temporal Jerusalem, but the kingdom of heaven. Not only, in Reagan's account, was God's kingdom to be found in the United States of America, but the kingdom of hell could also now be located on earth: the "evil empire" of the Soviet Union, against which His holy warriors were pitched.

Since the attacks on New York, this notion of America the divine has been extended and refined. In December 2001, Rudy Giuliani, the mayor of that city, delivered his last mayoral speech in St Paul's Chapel, close to the site of the shattered twin towers. "All that matters," he claimed, "is that you embrace America and understand its ideals and what it's all about. Abraham Lincoln used to say that the test of your Americanism was ... how much you believed in America. Because we're like a religion really. A secular religion." The chapel in which he spoke had been consecrated not just by God, but by the fact that George Washington had once prayed there. It was, he said, now "sacred ground to people who feel what America is all about". The United States of America no longer needs to call upon God; it is God, and those who go abroad to spread the light do so in the name of a celestial domain. The flag has become as sacred as the Bible; the name of the nation as holy as the name of God. The presidency is turning into a priesthood.

So those who question George Bush's foreign policy are no longer merely critics; they are blasphemers, or "anti-Americans". Those foreign states which seek to change this policy are wasting their time: you can negotiate with politicians; you cannot negotiate with priests. The US has a divine mission, as Bush suggested in January: "to defend ... the hopes of all mankind", and woe betide those who hope for something other than the American way of life.

George Monbiot, *The Guardian*, July 29, 2003

- 17 Imagine George Monbiot wrote an outline of his comment before he wrote it. Write this outline.
- 18 a) What exactly does Monbiot reproach the US with?
b) Explain why you agree or disagree with him.
- 19 Write an analysis about the connection between this text and the picture of Daniel Boone escorting settlers through the Cumberland Gap. →S14
- 20 Presentation: Several US Presidents are named in this article. Choose one and find out what he is best known for in terms of foreign policy. Present your findings to the class and write a fact file for your peers.
- 21 Imagine you find the above article too critical of the US. Write a letter to the editor stating your opinion. →S18

²⁹dominion rule, power
³³to conflate to make one thing out of two things
³⁸temporal of this world
⁴¹to be pitched against sb/sth to be in opposition to
⁴³to refine to make pure
⁴⁵to shatter to destroy
⁴⁵to embrace here: to believe in sth wholeheartedly
⁴⁸secular opposite of religious
⁴⁹to consecrate to make holy
⁵⁷blasphemer a person who offends God
⁶⁰woe betide sb (lit) great sorrow will come over sb

- Iron Curtain (Russia)
- Iraq
- ISIS
- Al Qaeda

flag = Bible
presiden = priest
critics of US = blasphemers
soldiers = divine warriors

WORD BANK
Analysing the message to deal with the issue/ subject of ... • to raise the issue of ... • to satirise sth • to imply/ infer/suggest • to make fun of sth • to draw attention to • to point out • to put one's finger on ... • the humour lies in the misunderstanding between .../exaggeration of .../discrepancy between ...

⁶captive prisoner
⁷terrestrial living on earth
⁹to cast out demons to get rid of evil spirits by force
¹¹realm area, sphere
¹³to conceive to understand
¹³infidel unbeliever
¹⁵guise appearance
¹⁹to depict to show
²²token sign
²²providential fortunate
²³supersession replacement
²⁴to supplant to replace
²⁵to repudiate to reject
²⁸covenant a formal written promise