

A TASK FROM GOD: SARAH PALIN ON THE WAR IN IRAQ

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Most people have already heard about Governor Sarah Palin's address at her one-time church in Wasilla, where she referred to the war in Iraq as "a task from God." As a former Marine infantry officer and an Iraq War veteran, I find this troubling, particularly coming from a vice-presidential nominee. Aside from how many people across the U.S. that this statement inherently disenfranchises, there is the deeper concern about how religion plays into the process of declaring and waging war. Governor Palin is hardly the first to make the connection.

When I first drove up into Iraq from Kuwait in 2004, nearly every base in the country was named after a Christian saint—ours was dubbed *Saint Michael*. Our chaplains frequently suggested that the mission was not merely military, but one handed down by God. Commanders often made similar allusions; even the President did. It would have been difficult for a Soldier or Marine to avoid the impression that the war in Iraq, though politically motivated, was not propelled by religious fervor. It was difficult for me.

As a citizen, I paid close attention to the debate in Congress on the joint resolution to authorize the President to invade Iraq. As an infantry officer, I paid even closer attention to the directives and mission statements drafted as a result of that resolution being passed. As a man who would soon be deployed into harm's way, I listened very carefully to my orders. I understood the plan and I knew exactly how that plan came to be and where it came from. I could systematically follow it all the way up and back down the chain of command. So I felt comfortable in my



assumption that it was a plan from human beings, from representatives of the American people and from military leaders, not from God.

What made me *un*-comfortable was the incessant interjection of religion into this very rational process we call democracy. Even the subtlest suggestion that God has something to do with war undermines the method by which our country wages it, in that God cannot be negotiated or debated with, either because God is all-powerful or because He is simply not available for comment. This immediately implies that the debates in Congress were a charade. It implies that the president is not, if fact, the Commander-*in-Chief*. Suddenly my confidence in the chain of command was sundered, which, being a commander myself, was not a good thing. As a Marine who swore to support and defend the Constitution of the United States, not God, I found this nudge toward theocracy disconcerting.

On January 10, 2007, roughly two years after I came home, President Bush addressed the nation, in which he discussed U.S. progress in Iraq. He made it clear that there had been problems and he described his adjustments to the plan. His speech and his plan were collectively referred to as "The New Way Forward." Having heard so much talk of *Providence* throughout my time in Iraq, I couldn't help but wonder who the unlucky soul was who had to deliver the bad news to God. Who would have tell him His plan was no good, but that he needn't worry because George Bush was straightening it out.

So given the recent persistence from throughout our government that God is somehow involved in our wars, we are left to draw one of two conclusions: Either, if we are believers, God is fallible, or, if we are not believers, our elected officials are introducing irrational justifications for



armed conflict. Neither option is attractive; both leave some pretty substantial belief-systems shaken, if not destroyed.

From a military perspective, the mission statement—the plan—is at the heart of every operation. It's how we fight. It's where we fight, when, and against whom. It's why we fight. When Governor Palin stated very plainly that the war in Iraq was “God’s plan,” I’ll admit, I was left wondering exactly how that plan might have been briefed to the chain of command. I wondered if *God’s plan*, like our human plan, was based upon dubious intelligence. And I wondered if *God’s plan* included an explicit exit strategy for our troops or if that was simply not included in the Concept of Operations, leaving us humans to toil with each other over what to do next.

Even if Governor Palin’s notion (and those many like her) is that the whole human-struggle (not specifically the war in Iraq) is all part of God’s plan, then the rest of us are left with an eerie sense of fatalism in our war-planners. When the lives of so many are at stake, this is not a healthy attitude. How hard will one work on a plan, for example, and how conscientious will one be, if the outcome of war is regarded simply as a matter of destiny? Moreover, the mere phrase “God’s plan” exculpates leaders from their lethal decisions and discourages citizens from questioning them. This strikes me as distinctly un-democratic and very likely the reason our founding fathers made a priority of separating Church and State. As one who has seen the ugly face of war, I am disquieted by the thought of a vice-president (or president should mischance demand it), who seems to have strayed so far from that fundamental principle of America.