

# QUAKER ECO-BULLETIN

Information and Action Addressing Public Policy  
for an Ecologically Sustainable World

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## **American Exceptionalism and Human Solidarity**

**Keith Helmuth**

*You make it clear that ultimately it falls to you to decide who lives, who dies, who prospers, who doesn't. To exhibit your capability you show off all that you can do, and how easily you can do it. ... How you can start a war, or sue for peace. ... You use caprice to fracture a people's faith in ancient things—earth, forest, water, air . ... [You] scramble the intelligence that connects eggs to chickens, milk to cows, food to forests, water to rivers, air to life, and the earth to human existence.*

Arundhati Roy, *The Cost of Living*

### **Human Solidarity and Its Opposition**

Gregory Baum, Dominican priest and cultural historian, asks the question; "What is the primary spiritual discovery of our time?" His answer is, "human solidarity." This discovery was prefigured in the founding of Quakerism, and the Religious Society of Friends has been a consistent agent of its development. Human solidarity offers us hope for a livable future. It has emerged as a moral commitment to the common good worldwide. It calls for the right sharing of world resources, the resolution of ethnic and cultural conflict, and the end of domination—military, economic, political, and cultural. It draws on the fact that economic and social life are domains of relationship and our spiritual traditions teach us that the Divine is experienced in relationships. It draws on the witness of science to the reality of interdependent relationships in all life and earth process.

This advance in moral understanding—an advance now framed by the ecological realities of the human-earth relationship—is a real cultural achievement. But it is an achievement that is now being challenged by "American exceptionalism" and the will to domination that flows from this world view. An alarming range of US government policies are now being set in opposition to human solidarity. The attitude of exceptionalism is not confined to American policy makers. It is also characteristic of those who control resources and finance, along with their political allies, in many other jurisdictions, and at an international level.

### **American Exceptionalism**

American exceptionalism, as popularly defined, is the belief that the United States exhibits a form of greatness that should draw all other nations into the orbit of its influence. Enlightened nations that understand where their true self-interest lies will voluntarily align themselves with this greatness and its economic and cultural benefits. It is imagined that a movement of American-led, capital-driven, economic culture into every region of earth will establish a "new world order" of prosperity and peace.

The advocates of American exceptionalism are absolutely confident there is no reasonable alternative. But what seems to many Americans like the natural evolution of progress worldwide often contributes to the increasing breakdown and disordering of social and ecological relationships.

The idea of American exceptionalism has been present within American political culture from its beginning. With the founding of the Republic, America became characterized as "the promised land", and Americans as "the chosen people" —biblical metaphors of enormous emotional resonance and political conviction. In the early days of US territorial expansion it was called "the right of eminent domain." In 1794 George Washington sent General Sullivan and the US Army on a raid into the Finger Lakes region to clear out the Iroquois people. Sullivan reports in glowing terms the burning of 40 villages and 160,000 bushels of stored corn. In 1864 Kit Carson, on instruction of the President, conducted a scorched earth campaign against the Navaho people that included the destruction of their beloved peach orchards in Canyon de Chelly—more than 5,000 trees.

In September of 2003, acting on behalf of President Bush, American soldiers bulldozed a five-acre plantation of ancient date palms in the village of Dhuluaya, Iraq, in order to punish the town's farmers for failing to supply information on resistance to the American occupation. From the origin of the Republic to the present day, American exceptionalism has not hesitated to exercise its right of domination. Large books are required to summarize the incidents just since 1945 (*see For Further Information*).

The concept of American exceptionalism has been in circulation among cultural historians for a long time, but recently has been brought into popular usage as a powerful argument for policy initiatives. Members of the Bush administration now speak openly about American exceptionalism as the basis for military and economic domination—including the use of preemptive war."

**Quaker Eco-Bulletin (QEB)** is published bi-monthly as an insert in *BeFriending Creation* by Quaker Eco-Witness-National Legislation (QEW-NL), a project of Quaker Earthcare Witness (formerly FCUN).

**QEW-NL** promotes government and corporate policies to help restore and protect Earth's biological integrity. It works within and through the Religious Society of Friends for policies that enable human communities to relate in mutually enhancing ways to the ecosystems of which they are a part. This witness seeks to be guided by the Spirit and grounded in reverence for God's creation.

**QEB's** purpose is to advance Friends' witness on government and corporate policy as it relates to the ecosystems that sustain us. Each issue is an article about timely legislative or corporate policy issues affecting our society's relationship to the earth.

Friends are invited to contact us about writing an article for **QEB**. Submissions are subject to editing and should:

- Provide background information that reflects the complexity of the issue and is respectful toward other points of view.
- Explain why the issue is a Friends' concern.
- Describe the positions of other faith-based and secular environmental groups on the issue.
- Relate the issue to legislation or corporate policy.
- List what Friends can do.
- Provide sources for additional information.

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## ***The Master Culture Unleashed***

The events of 9/11 introduced the opportunity to move American domination from *ad hoc* reaction to permanent, full force implementation. The latest bumper sticker says, "God Bless Empire." Arnold Schwarzenegger, the recently installed governor of California, and enthusiastic advocate of American exceptionalism, recently stated; "My relationship to power is that I am all for it. Ninety-five percent of the people in the world need to be told what to believe and how to behave." (Michael Blitz and Louise Krasniewicz, *Why Arnold Matters: The Rise of a Cultural Icon*)

In watching the progress of American policy formation in recent years and in watching the behavior that flows from these policies, it is easy to see that a "master culture" stance is emerging. This master culture stance confronts Friends with a challenge that goes to the foundation of the peace testimony; it goes to the heart of the question of what it means to be in relationship to the social, economic, moral and ecological realities of the human world: It goes to the heart of human solidarity within the integrity of Creation.

## ***Policy Trajectory and Solidarity Template***

Where will the US and the world end up as the result of policy stances that extend and enforce the domain of American superiority? This question engages faith at a fundamental level. In every religious tradition that has opened itself to world encounter, human solidarity has moved into the heart of its faith. For people of faith, public policy must be assessed in relation to human solidarity. At whatever level of jurisdiction or association public policy is directed, it should, in the light of faith, help advance human solidarity and reduce the tendencies to inequity, social violence and ecological destruction.

To think clearly about policies we must think about their trajectories. Where are they taking us? What outcome is implicit in their orientation? Because of the hugely disproportionate effect of US influence on economics and politics worldwide, it is especially important that American public policy be scrutinized in this way and be gauged against the template of human solidarity and the common good.

## ***Four Zones of Policy***

When we look at the way American exceptionalism is now being expressed by the US government, and consider the full range of interests reflected in its actions (and inactions), the following zones of policy come into view.

- 1. The institutionalization of war.** The war on terrorism has become an opportunity to make war an institution of American life in the way education and health care are institutions. Those who profit from war will be assured of continued contracts and increasing business. The business of war as a regular and acceptable feature of American life makes it possible for the policies of domination to be quickly implemented at any point in which American interests are threatened. Opposition to US military domination is now considered to be supporting terrorism. (Alex Callinicos, *The New Mandarins of American Power: The Bush Administration's Plans for the World*; Rahul Mahajan, *Full Spectrum Dominance: U.S. Power in Iraq and Beyond*)
- 2. Economic development as a triage process.** Because the US government and its associated interests have taken the view that there is no alternative to the political economy of the capital-driven market, a policy of writing off the impoverished, marginal and excluded people of the world has become a clear and logical necessity. This is made evident by the use of the expression "non-viable economies." Regions that cannot participate in and contribute to the capital driven market economy are not being assisted in becoming better subsistence

economies. Regions and populations that cannot “get with the program” of capital accumulation and market growth are being allowed to fail; they are being written off. The pitifully small aid programs of the G8 nations, even considering their recent face-saving pledges of increased assistance, are clear evidence of this triage policy. (Oswaldo de Rivero, *The Myth of Development: The Non-Viable Economies of the 21st Century*; Ha-Ja Chang, *Kicking Away the Ladder: Development Strategy in Historical Perspective*)

**3. Enclave strategy.** The Bush administration has finally admitted that global warming is an environmental problem. In just half a presidential term—two years—they went from denial to admission to saying “now it’s too late and we can’t do anything about it.” Their response to this, and to other evidence of ecological deterioration, is to just plunge ahead and tough it out from a position of strength. They seem to think that maximum use of fossil fuel and nuclear technology for as long as possible will put the US economy in as strong a position as possible for coping with the disruptive events that are bound to occur. There seems to be little place for risk reduction or preventive action in the governing policy framework.

This same attitude is clearly evident in the administration’s response to the terrorist problem—reinforce the fortress, create defensive and offensive enclaves around the world, equip them with the best technology, plan for war in perpetuity. There is no sense of systemic problem solving or risk reduction. Add to this the Bush administration’s refusal to sign the Kyoto protocol on global warming, its abrogation of the ABM treaty with Russia and its opposition to the development of international legal institutions, and the rapidly expanding dimensions of the enclave strategy come into view. (James Gustave Speth, *Red Sky at Morning: America and the Crisis of the Global Environment*)

**4. Human health and development advantage.** With the rise of biotechnology, wealthy Americans, and their peers around the world, now have a dramatically increasing health and human development advantage over poor and low-income people. Not only will the rich continue to enjoy superior medical attention, but, with biotech enhancement, they will increasingly realize a human development advantage with regard to learning, skill development, intelligence, emotional balance, quality controlled reproduction, physical strength, stamina and longevity. Since the technologies that make these kinds of enhancements possible have been developed within the political economy of the capital-driven market, their availability will naturally be restricted to those who can afford to pay for them.

As the benefits of biotech enhancement continues and the functional potential of affluent populations rises to extraordinary heights, the human world will become increasingly divided between a class of wealthy, objectively superior people,

and a class of impoverished people who, by comparison, can only be regarded as deficient and defective. Already the language of “enhancement” has begun to describe those left behind as “naturals.” The advance of market-driven biotechnology (once it is accepted as inevitable) leads directly to a further polarization of the superior rich and the deficient poor. The logic of eugenics, around which Germany’s National Socialist government formed many of its policies, is implicit in this polarization. Biotechnology, along with its eugenic implications, fits comfortably within the program of American exceptionalism. (Sheila Rothman & David Rothman, *The Pursuit of Perfection: The Promise and Perils of Medical Enhancement*; Troy Duster, *Back Door to Eugenics*, 2nd edition, Gregory Stock, *Redesigning Humans: Choosing our Genes, Changing our Future*)

### **Into a Polarizing World**

The questions must be asked: Are Friends comfortable with public policies that advance the interests of the rich, write off the poor and increasingly program a highly inequitable human world? How do Friends relate to a government and a political economy that ranges over the earth seeking to command and sequester resources for the benefit and aggrandizement of those already among the favored rich, while large populations want for basic goods and whole regions remain impoverished? What lies ahead for our children and grandchildren if our nation is in a continual state of war or preparation for war to maintain and enforce our privilege?

#### **US Exceptions:**

The following are a few of the international agreements the US has withdrawn from or refused to sign.

**Anti-Ballistic Missile Treaty**—was signed in 1972, but President Bush announced withdrawal from the treaty on December 13th, 2001. <[www.cnn.com/2001/ALLPOLITICS/12/13/rec.bush.abm](http://www.cnn.com/2001/ALLPOLITICS/12/13/rec.bush.abm)>

**Anti-Land Mine Treaty**—outlaws the stockpile of mines and requires each country to destroy its remaining mines within four years. On the February 27th, 2004, the current US administration announced they would not sign this treaty. <[www.unwire.org/UNWire/20040227/449\\_13544.asp](http://www.unwire.org/UNWire/20040227/449_13544.asp)>

**International Criminal Court (ICC)**—The current US administration withdrew the US signature and has worked diplomatically to obtain exemptions from ICC prosecution for US citizens. <[hrw.org/campaigns/icc/us.htm](http://hrw.org/campaigns/icc/us.htm)>

**Kyoto Protocol**—of the UN Framework Convention on Climate Change requires all parties to address greenhouse emissions and report on the progress. In March, 2001, President Bush announced that his administration opposes the Kyoto Protocol (Natural Resources Defense Council <[www.nrdc.org/globalWarming/akyoqa.asp](http://www.nrdc.org/globalWarming/akyoqa.asp)>)

**UN Convention on Biological Diversity**—The US refused to sign this convention when it went into effect in 1993 and has continued to oppose the Cartagena Protocol on Biosafety <[www.nyo.unep.org/pdfs/crtgprt.pdf](http://www.nyo.unep.org/pdfs/crtgprt.pdf)>

The four zones of political, economic and cultural life noted above all have a range of public policies that define and support them. These policies are rooted in the worldview of American exceptionalism and expressed in the natural right of domination. Taken together they add up to a denial of human solidarity.

### **Challenge for Friends**

The challenge for Friends in this situation is central to the identity of Quakerism. It is about whether Friends, in the context of American exceptionalism, can maintain and advance a universal and transcendent experience of faith that makes human solidarity a first-order reality. It is about whether, under the imprint of the Divine, human solidarity remains the pivot that centers and balances all our work for equity, peace, and ecological integrity.

Can we see what may come to pass if the trajectory of American exceptionalism is played out? In 10, 20 or 50 years will it be said: How did we get into a situation of such great troubles? Why didn't they foresee the trajectory that was unfolding? Why didn't they take the discovery of human solidarity to heart? Why didn't they make reasonable equity and ecological integrity the foundation of economic, political and intercultural life? Can Friends help intervene now and preempt these haunting questions? Can the United States lay down the notion of exceptionalism and become a citizen nation of a world community of nations, acting from a sense of human solidarity and for the common good?

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**Keith Helmuth** is a sojourning member of Central Philadelphia Monthly Meeting and remains in active association with New Brunswick Monthly Meeting and Canadian Yearly Meeting. In recent years his work has focused on the relationship among religion, worldviews, and economic behavior. He was active in the development of the Quaker Ecological Action Network of CYM, and helped to originate Quaker Eco-Witness for National Legislation. He is a founding board member of the newly established Quaker Institute for the Future and has served on the Quaker Earthcare Witness Publications Committee.

### **For Further Information**

#### **American exceptionalism - past and future:**

- Blum, William, *Killing Hope: US Military and CIA Intervention Since World War II*, Monroe, Maine, Common Courage Press, 2004
- Chua, Amy, *World on Fire: How Exporting Free Market Democracy Breeds Ethnic Hatred and Global Instability*, New York, Anchor Books, 2004
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- Johnson, Chalmers, *Blowback: The Costs and Consequences of American Empire*, New York, Henry Holt, 2000, 2004
- Schrecker, Ellen, *Cold War Triumphalism: The Misuse of History After the Fall of Communism*, New York, New Press, 2004

#### **Human solidarity - emergence and prospect:**

- Berry, Thomas, *The Great Work: Our Way Into the Future*, New York, Bell Tower/Crown, 1999
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- Edwards, Michael, *Future Positive: International Co-operation in the 21st Century*, London, Sterling VA, Earthscan, 1999, 2004
- Hutton, Will, *A Declaration of Interdependence: Why America Should Join the World*, New York, W.W. Norton, 2004
- Perlas, Nicanor, *Shaping Globalization: Civil Society, Cultural Power and Threefolding*, Saratoga Springs, NY, GlobeNet3, 2000
- Pirages, Dennis Clark, and DeGeest, Theresa Manley, *Ecological Security: An Evolutionary Perspective on Globalization*, Lanham, MD, Rowan & Littlefield, 2004

### **What Can Friends Do?**

1. Become knowledgeable about the interrelated contexts of the common good from the local to the global level. Become an advocate for the reality of the common good.
2. Distinguish between American exceptionalism as a dominating and self-serving worldview, and the potential for American leadership on equity, peace, and ecological integrity.
3. Work with your Peace and Social Concerns Committee to advance knowledge, concern and action in your Meeting around US policy issues and their implications for global equity and ecological integrity.
4. Become closely familiar with the work of Friends Committee on National Legislation. Promote an understanding of and support for FCNL in your meeting. Organize and conduct your meeting's participation in FCNL's priority setting process on national policy. <[www.fcnl.org](http://www.fcnl.org)>
5. Contact Quaker Earthcare Witness <[www.QuakerEarthcare.org](http://www.QuakerEarthcare.org)> and Right Sharing of World Resources <[www.rswr.org](http://www.rswr.org)> to learn what Friends are doing to advance human solidarity within a context of ecological integrity.
6. For a global perspective contact: World Watch Institute <[www.worldwatch.org](http://www.worldwatch.org)>, Earth Policy Institute <[www.earth-policy.org](http://www.earth-policy.org)>, and Earth Charter Commission <[www.earthcharter.org](http://www.earthcharter.org)>.