

Reclaiming the City on the Hill

By Col. Daniel Smith, U.S. Army (Ret.) | February 20, 2006

The nation's—and the world's—final farewells to Coretta Scott King were celebrated in Atlanta on February 7. Three former presidents attended Mrs. King's funeral, as did President Bush.

The day before, he had submitted to Congress a \$2.77 trillion budget request for fiscal year 2007, a request whose entire tenor runs counter to the life and work of Mrs. King and her husband, Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr.

The budget request gives the Defense Department (DoD) a 4.8 percent—\$28.5 billion—increase over the amount appropriated for the current fiscal year, excluding supplemental appropriations for the wars in Iraq and Afghanistan. This increase for DoD actually exceeds by \$1.1 billion the total difference (\$27.4 billion) between discretionary spending (what Congress enacts every year) for fiscal 2006 (\$843.3 billion) and what the president requested for 2007 (\$870.7 billion).

Misplaced Priorities

Among the other 23 agency discretionary accounts, only International Relations and Veterans Affairs saw increases exceeding one billion dollars. Eight agencies edged up between \$100,000 and \$600,000, with the other 13 losing \$10.8 billion. The biggest loser is Education (-\$3.5 billion). The budget terminated vocational education and drug-free school grants to states, arts in education, gifted and talented education, and teacher quality enhancement programs. Community Service Grants under Health and Human Services are terminated as part of the \$866 million cut in discretionary spending—with another \$3.2 billion cut from mandatory spending (chiefly Medicare) for 2007.

In fact, in presenting the State of the Union to Congress and the public on January 31, Bush proudly announced that his 2007 budget would eliminate completely or reduce funding substantially for 141 “non-security” discretionary programs. When 16 other “reform” proposals are added to the original 141, the president is asking for \$20.4 billion less than Congress approved for 2006 non-security spending.

What does it say about a nation that allows its government to spend \$480.9 billion attempting to secure the homeland while it undermines community building and community assistance efforts that are essential to millions of today's most vulnerable and expand tomorrow's opportunities by broadening the scope of training for today's youth?

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costs—\$480.9 billion attempting to secure the homeland (DoD plus \$41.6 billion for all non-DoD federal spending) while it undermines community building and community assistance efforts that (1) are essential to millions of today’s most vulnerable and (2) expand tomorrow’s opportunities by broadening the scope of training for today’s youth?

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The City on a Hill

It clearly says that the United States no longer cherishes the spiritual vision articulated by one of the earliest colonial “Founding Fathers”—the Puritan leader, John Winthrop—while still aboard the *Arbella* in 1630. In a discourse titled “A Model of Christian Charity,” Winthrop wrote one of the enduring images associated with the early Puritan settlers: “For we must consider that we shall be as a city upon a hill. The eyes of all people are upon us.” As his title suggests, Winthrop’s message to his fellow seekers is one of inclusiveness. Noting that their religious quest for freedom of conscience had a parallel secular quest for moral self-governance,

he cautions the company that “the care of the public must overshadow all private respects ...”

He is even more explicit elsewhere in the sermon:

“We must be willing to abridge ourselves of our superfluities, for the supply of others’ necessities. We must uphold a familiar commerce together in all meekness, gentleness, patience, and liberality. We must delight in each other; make others’ conditions our own; rejoice together, mourn together, labor and suffer together, always having before our eyes our commission and community in the work, as members of the same body.”

Winthrop’s “city on the hill” radiates the ideal of service to others. Because all are of the same community, they share equal rights and incur commensurate shared responsibilities for contributing to the community’s well-being. Should rights conflict with responsibilities, the spirit of community gives priority to the latter in recognition that all are equal in the light of the deity within regardless of their station and condition in this life.

Being human, even Winthrop was not immune to temptations to indulge individual rights over the community’s welfare. But neither the historical failings of the Bay Colony nor centuries of slavery, racism, and extermination of Native peoples could extinguish Winthrop’s spirit of community. In modern times, that spirit flickered in the mid-20th century as the single-minded pursuit of personal privilege began to replace the collective responsibility of individual caring—that is, spending not just money but time in community.

This change in attitude might be regarded as a backlash against the artificial “community” created by the massive conscription of men and women (15 million) for World War II. Ironically tagged military “service,” its primary purpose had nothing to do with Winthrop’s “supply of others’ necessity.” So when this “community” dissolved at war’s end, individuals raced to make up for four lost years. In the ensuing scramble, the ethos of voluntary service faded as one facet or organizing principle of daily life and experience. The communal invitation that had served as the welcoming beacon to the city on the hill morphed into a cold reflective beam warning all who approached that the city was now a gated community, a closed bastion, “a mighty fortress.”

The 2007 budget request reinforces this shift from commitment to the inclusive community to assertion of personal privilege as the guiding tenet of the administration. Yes, there is community—if one is privileged, that is. And there is “service,” but not in its moral sense of a giving relationship between equals.

In fact, this budget, together with this year’s \$70 billion supplemental for DoD, is another extension of the administration’s drive to create a fortress based on privilege within a fortress based on military might. The president and other administration officials, as well as many in Congress, constantly claim that the world changed on September 11, 2001, that there are only two realities, pre- and post-9/11. This is as specious as it is shallow.

What changed was our awareness of a group of extremists who were committed to suicidal violence as a statement of their rejection of the spread of

western materialistic individualism (privilege) and western militarism. However, their violence was no less an anti-communitarian assertion of privileged individualism in that they decided that the lives and contributions of 3,000 individuals were of less worth than their extremist ideology.

It is time for the public to look within and rediscover—if necessary, rekindle—that communal light. For only through the commingling of these lights will community be rekindled, morality restored, and the city reclaimed.

Today, Winthrop’s city stands as a foreboding darkness. It awaits a people whose only fear is failing to serve that of the light in each individual. It is time for the public to look within and rediscover—if necessary, rekindle—that communal light. For only through the commingling of these lights will community be rekindled, morality restored, and the city reclaimed.

Hubert Humphrey laid out the challenge to be met when he said: “The moral test of a society is how that society treats those who are in the dawn of life—the children; those who are in the twilight of life—the elderly; and those who are in the shadow of life—the sick, the needy, and the handicapped.”

By this measure, the current administration fails.

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