

**TWO AMERICAS
OPENING CEREMONY
OCTOBER 4, 2004**

This is my seventh opening ceremony at AUB. The realization of that fact has provoked in me a good deal of reflection, some looking back and some looking forward. Being the most recent occupant of Marquand House, one of the first buildings on this campus, makes it inevitable that I would reflect on the past and on my predecessors, particularly Daniel Bliss who alone could claim Marquand House to be his home. For the rest of us we have temporarily borrowed our residence from the University.

Daniel Bliss founded the Syrian Protestant College and served as its president for over four decades. Those were decades in which the United States was divided within itself and against itself as never before or since. The United States then had few interests in the Middle East. It was not a player in this region and would not become one until after the First World War. Daniel Bliss had many worries in establishing a new college in the Levant, but US-Arab relations were not among them.

In his published writings he does not comment directly on the civil war that raged in the United States between 1860 and 1865. We know that as a young theology student he spoke out against slavery so that we may presume that he supported the cause of Abraham Lincoln and the Union, or northern side, in that terrible conflict.

During the time Bliss was in Lebanon until he stepped down from the presidency, sixteen presidents served in the United States. During the time of his presidency of the SPC ten US presidents served, including Abraham Lincoln, Ulysses Grant, Grover Cleveland, and Teddy Roosevelt. What he thought about any of them is certainly not known to me, but could Bliss not have been keenly interested in the civil war and the long decades of trying to hold the union together and make it healthy? Sitting in the dining room of Marquand House one sees three photographs on the wall. One is of Howard Bliss, Daniel's son and the second president of the SPC, the second is of Teddy Roosevelt, twice president of the United States, and the third is of Mark Twain, probably the most famous of all American writers, the author of Tom Sawyer and Huckleberry Finn. Both Roosevelt and Twain visited the

SPC in the early 1900s. Their photographs in Marquand House are reminders that the United States was never far away.

Today, as at the time of AUB's founding, we often speak of two Americas that appear pitted against each other, no more so than in the election that will take place this November. I will have more to say about these two Americas later on. But surely there was no time in US history when the reality of two Americas was greater than during the US civil war and its aftermath. The country was divided geographically with the north against the south, families were divided in their loyalties, and Americans were divided by irreconcilable principles of belief and morality. The war was fought over the abolition of slavery, but, as social historians like Barrington Moore have argued, it was a war between the industrial and dynamic economy of the Northeast United States against the agrarian, un-evolving, slave-based economy of the south.

The bloodshed was horrendous. The world saw for the first time the style of warfare and the military technology that would engulf Europe and Asia during the carnage of the First World War. Trench warfare, heavy artillery exchanges, and the targeting of civilian centers and populations all became part of the civil war repertoire. In one battle, at Antietam in September 1862, and in one day, seven times as many Americans were killed as were killed in the destruction of the World Trade Towers, September 11, 2001. Around 22,000 soldiers of the Union and Confederate forces perished in that day's fighting. This was slaughter on a scale perhaps never witnessed before in the world and it was all among 'brothers'.

What did Daniel Bliss think of all this? What did he think about the subsequent reconstruction period in which the victorious north occupied the defeated south? What did he think of the rise of the Ku Klux Klan and the vicious attempts to take away the rights for which black Americans fought and died during the civil war? We don't know what Bliss thought, but he must have watched closely and thought deeply about the conflict and its aftermath. So here am I, and here is the United States 140 years later still wrestling in important ways with that aftermath, the legacy of slavery, civil war, and occupation.

Which brings me to my main concerns today. It is always risky to try to assess a situation when you are sitting in the middle of it. You all know, probably, the story about a journalist interviewing Chairman Mao Tse Tung some decades ago and asking him what he thought the

impact of the French Revolution had been upon the world. Mao replied "It's too early to tell".

With that wisdom in mind, I will nonetheless state what may seem obvious to most of you: never since the United States has been engaged with the Middle East, let us say since the First World War, has the level of mistrust, anger, and alienation of Middle Easterners toward the United States been so deep. I might add that to a much lesser extent the sentiments appear to be reciprocated.

While President Bush has certainly worsened the situation, he did not invent it. The current situation has been decades in the making and it has involved both major political parties in the US. It has also not been solely the fault of the US; Middle Eastern governments must also share equally in the blame for the current situation. I think the peoples of the Middle East are to some extent innocent because they rarely get to choose their political leaders, their opinion is seldom known, and when known, usually ignored.

What would Daniel Bliss have thought about AUB's new Center for American Studies and Research? Perhaps in the 1860s the United States and its civil war were so far away from this region that Bliss saw no need for American studies or for improved understanding of the United States in Syria and Lebanon. Would he see matters differently today with 140,000 American troops in Iraq? What would he make of Michael Moores' now famous film, *Fahrenheit 9/11*, which depicts the Saudi Arabian royal family as being a prominent player in the US political system and Saudi Arabia through its control of oil supply as holding the US economy hostage? This may seem ridiculous to some of you—the greatest power on earth being manipulated by Saudi Arabia, but many Americans believe it.

Prince al Waleed bin Talal, whose gift helped us establish the Center for American Studies and Research, knows how vital it is today that there be a mutual attempt for understanding between the United States and the Arab world. This does not mean that differences disappear or should disappear. That will not happen because many of the differences are based on real conflicts of interest. But the kind of negative, vicious circle in which we find ourselves today cannot be reversed unless we understand each other's interests, priorities, and deepest concerns. That is a challenge to which our Center for American Studies must address itself.

In what follows I want to speak to you in that spirit, as an American citizen, and how I see some of what is happening as we approach the presidential and congressional elections this November. I stress that I am no expert, and the fact of my birth gives me no particular insight into my country's affairs. But the United States, like the Arab world, is a far different place and a far different society than it was in the 1950s and 1960s when I became a voting citizen. Again, as in the Arab world, many of the changes are as disturbing as they have been unpredictable, at least for me.

Not too long ago I met with an Arab social scientist, well known to many of you but who will go unnamed, who commented on the resurgence of militant Islam saying "we thought we had won those battles". The "we" he had in mind was the intelligentsia of the socialist, nationalist period in the Middle East. He was part of that intelligentsia. It once thought hopefully of a democratic, socialist, secular Palestine in which Jews, Muslims, and Christians of all origins would live in harmony. That is only one of the Utopian visions that were born in that period and cherished by that intelligentsia.

Similarly, the 1960s in the United States produced progress toward racial integration, the institutionalization of the welfare state, and what President Lyndon Johnson called "the great society." Now, decades later, race divides Americans nearly as much as it has in the past, we speak of a nation of haves and have nots, 40 million Americans are without health insurance, and something like one third of adult Americans claim to be born again Christians. Like my Arab social scientist friend, as an American I too thought we had won those battles—battles for racial integration, economic equity, and the separation of church and state.

Today, however, the US is divided in ways I could not have imagined forty years ago. It is only partially a division along lines of wealth. The cleavages are moral and cultural. The two Americas are real, or so it seems to me, and their roots go back to the US civil war. Daniel Bliss would recognize their ancestry.

One America is conservative, deeply religious, isolationist, and, ironically, militaristic. Geographically it resides in the states of the south, parts of the mid-west and in the southwest and Rocky Mountain states. These states tend to be somewhat more rural and sparsely inhabited than the other America which dominates the east and west coasts, the big cities and the old industrial belt of the northeast and the upper mid west. Some states, like Florida or Pennsylvania, appear

to be evenly split. After the 2000 election, decided in favor of George Bush by less than 600 votes, the two Americas were mapped in red and blue: red America was where George Bush prevailed and blue America was where Al Gore prevailed

Red America sees itself as God-fearing, simple in its tastes and virtues, church-going, devoted to the family, self reliant and suspicious of government and of outsiders. It is somewhat macho—maybe red America is red as in red blood—proud to bear arms, addicted to American football and car racing, and anti intellectual. Some years ago there was a famous and funny book that came out in the US entitled "Real Men Don't Eat Quiche". That is a book of or for red America. Quiche is for blue America. Red America has many military bases and arms industries. It supports the troops and lives off them. But red America also has many retirees who go to the south and the southwest for the warmer temperatures and lower real estate prices. Retirees do not neatly follow the geography of red and blue America.

Red America has been emerging ever since the civil war. In the south, after 1865, it was openly racist, and because Lincoln and the abolitionists were mainly Republicans, the south became steadfastly Democratic. That is until John Kennedy and Lyndon Johnson committed the Democrat party firmly and aggressively on the path toward full political rights for all black Americans and towards full integration of the races in all aspects of our society. From the late 1960s on the white population of the south began to drift toward the Republican Party which, while still claiming to be the party of Lincoln, brought into its ranks white southerners whose racism was hardly concealed. Some of the more famous names in recent times are those of Republican Senators Jesse Helms and Strom Thurmond.

For me, the most surprising feature of red America is the incredible growth in evangelical Christianity. Frankly, in my thirties I had seen organized religion in the US as more a social habit than a question of true faith. In my mind's eye I saw church on Sunday as a photo opportunity for ambitious politicians or as a brief moment of piety before a big Sunday lunch and a couple of martinis. For most Americans, it seemed to me thirty years ago, the church claimed less of their time than television or sleep. How wrong could I have been? In red America the church was growing and becoming more militant. It was and is a church or churches that believe in the literal word of the scriptures, that believe literally in the prophecies, and that now have one of their own in the White House as well as one of their own serving as Attorney General. Red America has seized the commanding

heights of the US political system and aims to hold them. From the heights it will fight against gay marriage, fight against abortion, fight against the separation of church and state, and, when engaged abroad, fight against those whom the president describes not just as adversaries but as 'evil doers'. Red America is isolationist, deeply suspicious of the non American world, but like England a century and a half ago it would echo the old ditty, "We don't want to go to war, but, by jingo if we do, we've got the ships, we've got the men, we've got the money too".

Red America is basically Protestant. I wonder how that would make Daniel Bliss feel? Blue America is more urban, industrial, and socially liberal. It is blue blooded as embodied in John Kerry, but also blue collared as in Michael Moore from the dying industrial town of Flint, Michigan. Blue America has a place in its heart for Ralph Nader. Blue America was the source of the anti-war movement during the long conflict in Vietnam. It reads the New York Times or the Washington Post. It is proud of its great universities from Harvard to Berkeley. It endorses a woman's right to choose whether or not to have a baby; it tolerates homosexuality and lesbianism although maybe not to the extent of approving same-sex marriages. It believes in racial integration, affirmative action in admitting students of minority background to universities, in social safety nets to protect the poor, and in universal health coverage. It is somewhat suspicious of big corporations, it worries about how our market system tends to ruin the environment, and it is deeply suspicious of the military establishment and its links to corporate America. It is internationalist, endorses policies that seek cooperation with our allies, and condemns aggressive unilateral American interventions abroad. Blue America in 2000 was largely Democratic. If one had to choose any one book that captures the spirit of blue America it might be Robert Reich's book, *Reason: Why Liberals will Win the Battle for America*. Reich was secretary of labor under Bill Clinton and is now a professor of economics at Brandeis University in Boston.

Red and blue America are stereotypes, but in this election year useful stereotypes. They really do capture some of the warring passions loose in the American political system. But we must look carefully at what they miss. They miss thirty million Catholics who cannot feel altogether easy when faced with protestant evangelicals set on redeeming all the lost souls of Christianity. They miss black Americans whose simple presence as freed slaves was at the heart of the moral and cultural conflict that created red and blue America. These black Americans live and vote across both regions, red and blue, of the

United States. The stereotypes miss the millions of immigrants who have flooded into the US in the past twenty years from Southeast Asia, the Indian sub-continent, the Arab world, Mexico and Latin America. It is estimated that within a generation there will 100 million Americans of 'Latino' background, the largest single ethnic group in the United States.

Like most recent immigrants they are shy to play their full role in US politics, but it is difficult for me to imagine them being touched deeply by the Christian flavored chauvinism of red America or by the liberal rhetoric of the New York Times. Let us not forget that it may well have been the huge influx of immigrants from Italy, Poland, Germany, and elsewhere in the decades following the US civil war that to some extent swamped the bitter divisions that war created. Perhaps the latest waves will swamp red and blue America too. I, for one, hope so.

This presidential election is not likely to be as close as the Bush-Gore race in 2000. However in the battle for seats in the Senate and House of Representatives, and in contests for governorships of states, it could be closer than at the presidential level. Some months ago an economist at Yale who uses a simple mathematical model has predicted that Bush will win with 57% of the popular vote which would be a huge victory. The economist relies mainly on indicators of economic growth and inflation, and his predictions have been pretty good in the past. He claims his margin of error is only about two percent. If he is right then all the talk of the two Americas is wildly exaggerated; the old phrase coined during the Clinton campaign for the White House—"its the economy, stupid"—would seem to capture what drives the American voter more than patriotism, liberal values, belief in God, or fear of terrorism.

There is also some evidence that the passions I mentioned earlier are born only by the elites of the two camps, the totally committed supporters of the two candidates and the two agendas. Morris Fiorina of Stanford University has recently published a book entitled *Culture War? The Myth of a Polarized America*. Opinion polls, he argues, show that on key issues there is not much difference between responses in red and blue states.

At the same time all polls show higher levels of interest in this election as compared to any in recent history and higher levels of emotional commitment to the parties and candidates than at any time in recent history. Moreover the Democrat and Republican parties are both trying to rally their base constituents, those who say they will vote for one or

the other party, rather than focusing their campaign on undecided voters, those who are some blend of red and blue. This too is unusual in US politics where it is almost customary to compete over the center where the undecided voters live. This is what Bill Clinton did quite successfully, and so did Ronald Reagan.

If Bush is red and Kerry is blue, it is striking so far in this campaign what are not red and blue issues: first, Israel/Palestine and second, the erosion of US civil rights and some of the institutions that have historically protected them.

There is nothing separating Bush from Kerry with respect to the Israeli-Palestinian struggle, the second *intifada*, the leadership of Arafat and Sharon, the Israeli settlements, the security wall, and the absence of a US vision of a final negotiated settlement. Parts of red America are staunchly pro-Israel because the existence of Israel fulfills a biblical prophesy, but whether out of religious or any other kind of commitment both candidates and their constituents stand behind Israel almost unquestioningly. Neither candidate will question the wisdom of Israeli policies, at least not in public. Neither candidate will deal with Arafat nor criticize Sharon. Both candidates will state that there is no or very little connection between the Palestinian-Israeli conflict and the causes of terrorism in the Middle East. Whether the United States is led by George Bush or by John Kerry, it will not offer a US vision of a fair and lasting peace between Israel and its Arab neighbors including Palestine.

So far in the campaign John Kerry has not raised the issue of the erosion of fundamental rights that are enshrined in the US constitution, in US legal practice, and in US institutions. One would not expect George Bush to raise this issue because his administration has proposed and seen adopted many of the measures that have led to the erosion. It is more interesting that Kerry has so far remained silent.

The reason he has remained silent, I would guess, is that his advisors do not feel that the issue would gain him additional support. Put another way it appears that both red and blue America are not particularly disturbed at what is going on because it does not yet touch most Americans.

Speaking personally, as an American citizen, I can say that no issue touches me more deeply than this. In the wake of 9/11 we have witnessed a series of measures in the War on Terror that make me wonder about our commitment to the very institutions that make the

United States unique and great. These are the legal institutions that protect our constitutional rights to free speech, free movement, trial by jury, individual privacy, and the equal protection of the law for all US citizens. The Patriot Act, the profiling of male Muslims and male Arabs, the detention without charges of US citizens, the detention of foreign nationals at Guantanamo Bay in Cuba for nearly three years without charges or normal judicial proceedings, are evidence of this erosion.

During the Second World War Japanese Americans were interned under harsh conditions for the simple fact that they were of Japanese origin and therefore might actively sympathize with Japan. This was a form of collective guilt and collective punishment, actions that are not tolerated by our legal system. The surprise attack of Japan on Pearl Harbor in 1941 had a great deal to do with creating a mood in which Americans would be willing to deny Japanese American citizens their constitutional rights. After the war Americans were ashamed of what they had done to fellow citizens, most of whom were loyal. Remember who was in the White House when this happened, the great Democrat president, Franklin D. Roosevelt. Had we used the terms red and blue America in 1941, Roosevelt would certainly have been the champion of blue America. Yet blue America in 1941 cared little about the rights of Japanese Americans, and blue America today I am afraid cares little about the rights of Arab and Muslim Americans.

We now learn that in 2002 and early 2003 the US Census Bureau provided census data on Arab Americans to the Department of Homeland Security, a department that had been created as a direct result of 9/11. The same kind of information had been provided to Federal agencies during the Second World War to help them locate and round up Japanese Americans. A spokesperson for the Dept. of Homeland Security said that it wanted this information on Arab Americans in order to know in which airports to post signs in Arabic. She went on to say "The information is not in any way being used for law enforcement purposes...it is being used to educate the traveler. We're simply using basic demographic information to help us communicate US laws and regulations to the traveling public." I will not comment on this explanation.

Can our memories be so short? Can we forget the infamy of what we did to constitutionally-protected citizens during the Second World War? The answer, I am afraid, is yes. When fear invades our realm, we, Americans, appear to forget that our national experience is bound up with the strength of our legal institutions and procedures. If fear leads

us to push those procedures and institutions aside, the terrorists have truly won. It is disheartening for me to see my fellow citizens put their concerns for personal safety ahead of their concerns for the essence of what it is to be American. In one day in 1862 22,000 Americans died in the struggle to define what it is to be American. The war went on for another two years with horrendous losses of life. It did not end until the proponents of slavery had been defeated. It did not end until the notion that God had created some humans to be superior to others was expunged from our legal institutions and our legitimate values. It took a century for America to put fully into practice the principles that had been won on the field of battle. But the reaction of American citizens to Pearl Harbor and to the destruction of the World Trade Center make me wonder how well we will honor what our ancestors died for.

Many thinking Americans have begun to ask similar questions. Our press, after months and even years of conformity to the official positions of the administration in Washington and the imperatives of the War on Terror has begun to reawaken. And I think it was stories coming out of the Middle East that must have shaken many editors—the stories on the absence of weapons of mass destruction and the stories on Abu Ghuraib prison, neither of which came into public view because of journalistic investigations. The many private organizations that are concerned with civil rights are finally waking up as well. There may be a happy ending after all; that the American people and their institutions of civil society recognized the dangers before it was too late and restored our commitment to our national values. I pray for that happy ending.

Let me leave you with a thought, a kind of riddle, that I used to try out on my students in the United States. You may recall the assassination attempt on the life of President Ronald Reagan in 1982. As Reagan lay in hospital, then Secretary of State and former Army general, Alexander Haig appeared on television shouting in an almost deranged way "I'm in charge! I'm in charge!". I asked my students what if Haig had actually seized power and established a kind of emergency military rule in the US. All of you in this audience have witnessed such take-overs here and elsewhere. I asked my students what would that do to you as US citizens? It took awhile for many of them to realize that what it would do to them ultimately is strip them of their citizenship, even more profoundly, of their national identity. For to be an American is to be a participant in a system of rules, rights, and obligations that govern our political, economic, and private lives. Any one who supports and believes in those rules and the institutions,

primarily as embodied in our constitution, can be an American. Stripped of those rules and institutions; stripped of our democracy and civilian government, we would cease to be Americans. There are too many Americans today who are willing to say that "the ends justify the means", that in order to protect our physical safety we must use whatever means are necessary. What I think these Americans forget is that our means **are** our ends. What America is about is process, the legal and institutional ways in which we go about our business. There are no ends greater than the means. How ironic it is that in recent months one of the clearest endorsements of what I have just said has come not from John Kerry, not from prominent US politicians but rather from a former communist with a drinking problem. After the Beslan massacre in Russia, Boris Yeltsin stood up to his successor, Vladimir Putin, in these words:

"We should not allow ourselves to step away from the letter—or the spirit—of the constitution that the country adopted in a national referendum in 1993...the strangling of freedoms, the roll back of democratic rights—this can only mean that the terrorists won...only a democratic country can lead a fight against terrorism."

Put in these terms the stakes in the War on Terrorism are far higher than either al-Qaeda or the Bush administration appear to realize. They may be higher than John Kerry realizes. I have faith that the American people will not throw away their national identity out of fear. However, looking at the choice between Bush and Kerry, I vote for Yeltsin.