An Age of Miracles?¹

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It is easy to believe that we live in an age of miracles and a time of spiritual revitalization. In Britain in the 1990s, Ernest Saunders was convicted and sentenced to prison for false accounting, two counts of theft, and conspiracy to contravene the Prevention of Fraud Act 1958, for his part in the illegalities involved in the Distillers/Guinness takeover bid. But before completing his sentence, he was released because of the onset of Alzheimer’s disease. Yet, within months, his symptoms disappeared and he was communicating with the public on talkshows, and back in business. Moreover, he and convicted co-conspirators were blessed with enough money, even 12 years later, to pursue an ultimately unsuccessful appeal against their convictions. Then, in the year 2000, General Pinochet was judged by the then British Home Secretary, Jack Straw, to be unfit for reasons of ill-health to stand trial in Spain for his role in the disappearance and death of people in Chile after his overthrow of the democratically elected government of socialist President Salvador Allende in the early 1970s, when as many as 30,000 people are believed to have died as a result of this U.S.-backed and CIA-aided coup. Yet, on his return to Chile, this frail old man, seemingly confined to a wheelchair, was able to get up, walk, and warmly greet his supporters.² Miraculous indeed!

If these seem isolated incidents, it is worth noting that in many nations and internationally there appears to be less evidence than before of white-collar and corporate crimes. In the United States, for example, there has been a recent and dramatic drop in the numbers of prosecutions and convictions for monopolistic practices, financial crimes, and environmental and occupational safety and health offenses compared to the 1970s and the 1980s. At the same time, there has been a growth in the belief that when these “illegalities” do occur, they are errors on the part of good corporate citizens, and any damaging effects are the inevitable costs of progress: after all, a risk-free world is as unlikely as one free of all sin. The Enron scandal shows that even the best human beings and human institutions are occasionally fallible, but, as U.S. Treasury Secretary Patrick O’Neill said, Enron’s demise can also be read as part of the “genius of capitalism,”³ no doubt a “market correction.” So such events actually have as little relevance in understanding the fundamental dynamics of the modern world as did the savings and loan crisis of the 1980s.⁴ President Bush has noted that widespread stock ownership creates a moral responsibility for the executives to
run an honest company, and while, in fact, “the vast majority of businessmen and women are honest,” a small minority have created problems and this means that there is as need for deepening of the ethic of corporate responsibility: “In the long run,” Bush suggests, “there’s no capitalism without conscience; there is no wealth without character.”

But moral Western societies are by no means free of “evil.” Even with the development of the “compassionate conservatism” of Bush—which might in principle pay serious attention to discovering the factors that make criminal conduct more likely—there remains the focus on catching, punishing, and incapacitating those who are believed to commit a disproportionate number of what many criminologists call, or simply assume to be, “real crimes.” This is not too surprising since, as Peter Singer has shown, there is a continuous tension between Bush’s tax-cutting strategies and other promises he makes, such as ending “deep, persistent poverty.” There are also believed to be international problems linked with transnational organized crime. While President Ronald Reagan had successfully destroyed the “Evil Empire” of the Soviets, we are still living with aspects of its disordering aftermath. And there is a new and somewhat similar danger, namely, “terrorism.” Amalgamating these concerns, Bush claims that “Al Qaeda is to terror what the mafia is to crime.”

Since 9/11, it has seemed clear that in all “civilized” countries the state must now deal with infiltration by new insidious external enemies, only too often financed and sheltered by terrorist states. This was seen to justify the armed assault on Afghanistan against Al Qaeda and the Taliban, while, incidentally, accepting as a major ally Pakistan, itself ruled by a leader of a military coup. Paving the ideological ground for attack was the identification of an “axis of evil”—Communist North Korea, fundamentalist Iran, and Saddam Hussein’s Iraq. (On occasion, Cuba, for years battered by a U.S.-led ideological, military, and economic offensive, has been linked with this axis.) Of course, as is now clear, Iraq was illegally invaded, and with disastrous consequences. U.S.-led action, it is claimed, is justifiable, since other institutions, such as the emergent International Criminal Court, are likely to be used cynically against the United States by its enemies. Thus there are no non-American guarantors of international “justice.” Quite the opposite, in fact.

Why is there so much opposition to the United States? Why were the Pentagon and the World Trade Center targeted, and why do American citizens and establishments around the world see themselves as potential “targets” of marginalized peoples? Two related reasons emanate from the U.S. administration. First, America was attacked because its opponents were simply “evil”—but God was with America, and America had “stood down enemies before” and would “do so this time.” In the light of this “struggle of good and evil” the Bush administration launched “Operation Infinite Justice.” This seemed to be a new Christian “crusade” against Islam. The Bush administration soon changed its tone and claimed that its major target was a minority of Islamic fundamentalist terrorists and, indeed, it (“acknowledged” the importance of reasonable Muslims by changing the name of its “Operation” to “Operation Enduring Freedom.” After all, Saudi Arabia, home of Mecca, is one of America’s staunchest allies; at the same time, it is a corrupt and thoroughly anti-democratic country, known for both religious and political repression. Second, there is envy. As George Bush said in the immediate aftermath of 9/11, America was attacked because it was