The Theology of Foreign Policy

Michael Doran writes inMoby-Dick, appeared some seventy-five years before Bryan began his campaign against evolution, it celebrates popular democracy in similar terms. Ishmael, the narrator, sings the nobility of mankind:

> *Men may seem detestable as joint stock-companies and nations; knaves, fools, and murderers there may be; men may have mean and meagre faces; but man, in the ideal, is so noble and so sparkling, such a grand and glowing creature, that over any ignominious blemish in him all his fellows should run to throw their costliest robes.*

God made man in his image, and that fact gives even the lowliest of humans a great dignity. The narrator continues:

> *But this august dignity I treat of, is not the dignity of kings and robes, but that abounding dignity which has no robed investiture. Thou shalt see it shining in the arm that wields a pick or drives a spike; that democratic dignity which, on all hands, radiates without end from God; Himself! The great God absolute! The center and circumference of all democracy! His omnipresence, our divine equality!*

Popular democracy has a divine halo around it; the will of the people is sacred. Ishmael turns to God and asks him to affirm the narrator's attribution of quasi-divine qualities to lowly whalers:

> *If, then, to meanest mariners, and renegades and castaways, I shall hereafter ascribe high qualities . . . then against all mortal critics bear me out in it, thou Just Spirit of Equality, which hast spread one royal mantle of humanity over*

> *all my kind! Bear me out in it, thou great democratic God!*

Ishmael’s God is a populist. Like William Jennings Bryan, the Almighty does not approve of a religion that appeals only to college graduates. Melville concludes by citing the earthly progenitor of the political and religious tradition Bryan represents. Still beseeching God to affirm his populism, Ishmael says:

> *Thou who didst pick up Andrew Jackson from the pebbles; who didst hurl him upon a war-horse; who didst thunder him higher than a throne! Thou who, in all Thy mighty, earthly marchings, ever cullest Thy selectest champions from the kingly commons; bear me out in it, O God!*

According to *Moby-Dick*’s narrator, when a man as great as Andrew Jackson arises from the common people, we are witnessing the hand of the Lord in human affairs—and we see the role of popular democracy, which sets the stage for divine intervention.

When Bryan railed against the oligarchy of scientists, he was following self-consciously in the footsteps of Andrew Jackson, who fought against a “monopoly” of government by elites—and who won everlasting glory in that fight by destroying the Second Bank of the United States. Jacksonian democracy enjoins the popularly elected president to use the power of the presidency to protect, as Truman put it, “the common, everyday fellow” from unaccountable and unrepresentative concentrations of political and economic power. Jacksonian democracy places trust in the wisdom of the common man, which it favors over rule by experts.

During the Jacksonian era, this preference—and many related sentiments—dominated American politics. To denote this temper, the historian Marvin Meyers coined the term “Jacksonian persuasion.” Meyers defines a persuasion as a

set of attitudes, beliefs, projected actions: a half-formulated moral perspective involving emotional commitment. The community shares many values; at a given social moment some of these acquire a compelling importance. The political expression given to such values forms a persuasion.

Historians have paid too little attention to the influence of the Jacksonian persuasion after the end of the Jacksonian era, which traditionally runs from 1828 to 1848. Following my colleague Walter Russell Mead, however, I argue that the Jacksonian persuasion has continued to influence American politics long after that date. It is still working on our politics today.

Seen in this light, the Scopes trial takes on a new significance. It was certainly a fundamentalist outburst against Darwinism and, more broadly, against the Protestant modernism and secularism that were sweeping the urban elite. But it was also something more: a revolt of Jacksonian populism against centralized power. If we approach the Scopes trial as a Jacksonian eruption, it appears part of a much longer and more consequential dynamic. My goal is to tease out the implications for American foreign policy of the competition between the Jacksonian persuasion and its rival, to which I will attach a name in a moment.

Jackson believed that Americans were a chosen people in a promised land—chosen by God for a mission to the whole human race. He described that mission in his farewell address in 1837:

Providence has showered on this favored land blessings without number, and has chosen you [fellow citizens] as the guardians of freedom, to preserve it for the benefit of the human race. May [the Almighty] who holds in His hands the destinies of nations make you worthy of the favors He has bestowed, and enable you, with pure hearts and pure hands and

> *sleepless vigilance, to guard and defend to the end of all time the great and mighty charge which He has committed to your keeping.*

In Jackson’s view, God intervenes directly in the affairs of men, and the American people influence history by honoring the covenant between God and our democracy. Jackson envisions the United States lasting until the end of days. Our mission is to guard and defend our freedom.

This is surprisingly restrained, coming from a man renowned for his lack of restraint. From boyhood, Jackson spent much of his life in military campaigns. For most of adulthood, he carried a bullet in his lungs from a duel he had impetuously initiated. Yet he imagines an America that is rather aloof, a shining city on a hill, not the headquarters of a global democratic revolution. Judgment Day is coming, he implies, but America will be judged on its success in keeping the torch of freedom alight, rather than in spreading the fire around the globe.