

THE MOOR'S LAST SIGH<sup>1</sup>  
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**Introduction: 1492**

I am grateful to Professor Toyin Falola for inviting me to speak this evening. Toyin is taking quite a risk, because he has agreed to let me talk about history, a subject that is far from my usual realm. I am a policy wonk, and we policy wonks tend to be a-historical. Our time horizon stretches from the present to the near future. For this lecture, however, I am going to venture far back in time, more than half a millennium.

I do so because events that transpired 500 years ago may provide a perspective on the challenges that our country is confronting today in the Middle East. The lesson of this excursion is that those who wish to change the course of history ought to be familiar with history.

What happened 500 years ago was a big deal, a clash of civilizations whose resolution had profound ramifications for Europe, for the Middle East and for the Americas. The time was 1492. The place was Granada, Spain. The apocalyptic moment occurred when the Caliph Boabdil surrendered the Alhambra to Queen Isabella and King Ferdinand, ending 700 years of Muslim dominance in Southern Spain.

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<sup>1</sup> My primary published sources for this talk are Maria Rosa Moncal, [The Ornament of the World: How Muslims, Jews and Christians Created a Culture of Tolerance in Medieval Spain](#) (Boston, Back Bay Books, 2002) and James Reston, Jr., [Dogs of God: Columbus, the Inquisition, and the Defeat of the Moors](#) (New York: Doubleday, 2005). I owe special thanks to the scholars who shared their knowledge of Moorish Spain with me during a meeting in Granada in November 2005.

At that time in history, the Crusades had come and gone. From the 11<sup>th</sup> through the 13<sup>th</sup> centuries, Christian forces had overthrown Muslim rule in Constantinople and other regions farther to the east; but the Moors were still presiding over a vibrant civilization in Al Andalus (Andalusia).

### **Scene: The Alhambra, January 1492**

A few photos will set the scene.

Slide 1, panorama. This is a photograph of the Alhambra today. It is a huge fortress, perhaps 50 acres, on a hillside overlooking the city of Granada. On the far left in this photo is the spire of a cathedral, the most obvious of the alterations that the Catholic monarchs made.

Slide 2, red fortress. The fortress is constructed of light-colored stone. At night, however, lighted by torches, it takes on an orange glow. Thus the name: Alhambra – the red fortress.

Slides 3 through 8. Inside, one can appreciate the architectural genius and craftsmanship of Moorish culture at its zenith. The climate of southern Spain is like that of central Texas: hot in summer, chilly in winter. The rooms and courtyards of the Alhambra were designed to moderate the temperatures. Even on the hottest days, the high ceilings and thick walls would keep the rooms comfortable, while outside, the fountains and pools in the Alhambra's many courtyards conveyed beauty and order.

Slide 9. On January 1, 1492, Queen Isabella of Castille and Ferdinand of Aragon, rode up the long, sloping road from the city of Granada to the fortress. They entered through the Justice Gate. They were wearing “their finest Moorish garb” out of deference to the still dominant Arab culture of the region.

Just before Isabella and Ferdinand arrived, the last caliph of Spain, Boabdil, led his large retinue of family members, guards and servants – hundreds of people – out of the Alhambra and into ignominy.

This was a big deal. Muslims had been in Spain since the early part of the eighth century – more than 700 years. They had sailed from Morocco, just 20 miles across the Strait of Gibraltar from Spain. The Catholics referred to these invaders as Moors. Over the next several centuries, Moorish art, science and literature would make Spain the most advanced society in Europe.

The Moors helped to propagate the base 10 number system. (We don't call them Arabic numerals for nothing.) They made advances in astronomy and navigation; and they gave Southern Spain a common language, Arabic, for commerce, science and literature – this before the Spanish language was standardized.

Further, Islam was a relatively tolerant religion. For hundreds of years, Muslims, Jews and Christians lived together in relative harmony in Al-Andalus, which we now call Andalusia. The Moors did not expel non-believers and they did not burn heretics at the stake.

### **The Moor's Last Sigh**

When Isabella and Ferdinand entered the Alhambra, they ended a struggle that had gone on for 500 years. Driven by religious fervor, the Catholics conquered town after town. Cordoba, which for a while had been the seat of the Western Caliphate of Islam, had been taken over by the Catholics 200 years earlier. The Western Caliphate then moved to Granada. And where was the Eastern Caliphate of Islam was during much of this period? Baghdad, Iraq.

The Catholics were victorious partly because the Moors, after centuries of rule, had grown complacent, lazy, corrupt, spoiled. The last caliph, Abu Abdullah Muhammad – better known as Boabdil -- was an example of the rot that had set in. Boabdil was the spoiled, self-indulgent son of an ineffectual father and a domineering mother.

As the Catholic forces laid siege to Granada, Boabdil decided to cut a deal. He agreed to give up the Alhambra in exchange for protection, the right to keep his wealth, and assurance that Muslims and Jews would be able to continue to practice their religions freely. Isabella agreed to these terms.<sup>2</sup>

There is a famous story about Boabdil's departure. According to legend, Boabdil looked back after he had left the Alhambra and, recognizing the historic significance of the moment, began to cry. His mother, ever the shrew, looked at him derisively and said, "You weep like a woman for a kingdom that you could not defend like a man." In the Arab world, that scene is known as "The Moor's Last Sigh."

### **Conversion, Expulsion, Inquisition**

The Moor's last sigh was an apocalyptic moment – single event that symbolized the end of one epoch and the beginning of another. Isabella had promised to respect all three religions. She did not keep that promise. In

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<sup>2</sup> In our high school history books, they are usually referred to as "Ferdinand and Isabella." But in fact, Isabella was the dominant member of the family. When they were betrothed, hers was the superior bloodline; Ferdinand was a relatively poor prince from Aragon, a small principality. She was Queen of Castille, a title she had won after a protracted conflict with her brother. Ferdinand was dashing, a good swordsman, and the two made a handsome couple. But Isabella was the dominant partner. In the agreement that preceded the marriage – an early version of today's "pre-nuptial agreement", called the "Capitulations of Cervera", Ferdinand agreed to defer to Isabella in matters of state and to relinquish any claims to the crown. Upon Isabella's death, the crown would pass to their children, not to Ferdinand.

March of 1492, Isabella issued an edict of expulsion to the Jews. Either they had to convert to Catholicism, or leave the country. A few years later, the Muslims were given the same ultimatum: convert or leave. Families that had lived in Spain for centuries were given just a matter of months to decide. If they left, they would leave most of their worldly possessions behind; and many of them were very, very wealthy.

Indeed, it is likely many who converted did so primarily to protect their economic interests. It was important that these false converts be identified and weeded out. Thus: the Inquisition.

Inquisitions had been occurring for centuries, but the one set in motion by Isabella was especially vicious. She designated Tomas de Torquemada to serve as her Grand Inquisitor, and Torquemada went about the task with ruthless efficiency. He produced a guide for carrying out interrogations. The process included star-chamber proceedings in which the accused were not able to see the evidence against them, followed by a series of increasingly stressful interrogations, culminating in the exquisitely painful and terrifying water torture<sup>3</sup> Those who remained unrepentant were disposed of in a fiery final rite, the *auto-da-fe*, or act of faith.<sup>4</sup>

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<sup>3</sup> As described by James Reston, Jr. in *Dogs of God*, the water torture of 1492 seems very similar to the procedures allegedly used today to interrogate suspected terrorists: “[T]he prisoner was tied to a ladder that was sloped downward, so that the head was lower than the feet. The head was held fast in position by a metal band, twigs were placed in the nostrils, and ropes winched tightly around his appendages. The mouth was forced open with a piece of metal and a cloth forced over the mouth. Then a pitcher of water was brought, and water poured over the cloth. With each swallow, the cloth was drawn deeper into the throat, until in gagging and choking the victim nearly asphyxiated. The terror of suffocation was extreme, and the process was repeated endlessly, bloating the body grotesquely until the victim was ready to confess...From the inquisitor’s standpoint...the treatment was easy to administer and left no telltale signs.”

<sup>4</sup> The Prado Museum in Madrid contains gruesome paintings depicting these events.

The Inquisition was driven by a combination of religious fervor and greed. The property of heretics was seized and divided among the informants, the church and the crown. The Inquisition was a means of redistributing wealth from Muslims and Jews to Catholics.

### **So What?**

Well, this is all very interesting, you may say, but what do water torture and the tears of the last caliph have to do with American policy toward the Middle East today? The connection is in the words we use. There is no question that 1492 was a big year. It marked the end of a Muslim-dominated civilization and the beginning of a Catholic-dominated civilization. Also, freed of the costs of war, Isabella could afford to finance Christopher Columbus's voyage to find a new route to India.

Today, voices from the Arab world and from the West are telling us that we are confronting another "clash of civilizations." We are engaged, some claim, in "the defining conflict of the 21<sup>st</sup> century", a millennial struggle between freedom and tyranny, between the forces of darkness and light. The United States and its allies, we are told, must turn back the relentless, murderous forces of something called "Islamofascism."

### **What Are The Stakes?**

Are the stakes that high? Do Muslims and Arabs view themselves as engaged in some kind of millennial conflict with the West?

This is not a question about whether terrorism is a problem; of course it is. It is not new on these shores, but in recent decades the face of terrorism on these shores has changed. Historically, most terrorists in the US were homegrown; they were more likely to resemble Timothy McVeigh than

Mohammad Atta. In recent decades, however, terrorism has become an international phenomenon and has become associated, fairly or unfairly, with a particular religion and culture. Terrorists are out there, and as President Bush has said repeatedly, they want to kill Americans and destroy this country's critical infrastructure.

So the question is not whether terrorism is a threat; it is about the nature and extent of the threat. Are we dealing with small cells of people inspired by the hate-filled fulminations of religious fanatics, or are we involved in an apocalyptic struggle?

I recently put this question to a group of about 30 people who know Islam and the Arab world very well. This group, which has been engaged in a sustained dialogue about political and social change in the Arab world, includes a half-dozen Americans, a half-dozen Europeans, and about 16 people from several Middle Eastern countries – Egypt, Jordan, Iraq, Lebanon, Palestine and Syria. The Arab participants are scholars, journalists and political activists who have struggled long and hard for democratic reform in their countries; some of them have been imprisoned and exiled for their efforts.<sup>5</sup>

The meetings have occurred at several places in Europe and the Middle East – Marrakesh, The Hague, Istanbul, Budapest, Prague, Granada and Athens. The Arab members of the group seemed especially keen on meeting in Granada. As we toured the Alhambra last November, I wondered what my Arab associates were thinking. Did they see a connection between

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<sup>5</sup> The meetings have occurred under the auspices of the International Institute for Sustained Dialogue. IISD was founded by Hal Saunders, a former State Department official, who played a major role in the “shuttle diplomacy” that led to the Egyptian-Israeli peace accords.

the 500-year Christian campaign that ended Moorish rule in Southern Spain, and President Bush's stated goal of reshaping the Middle East?

When we met in Greece in September 2006, I put the question to them: did they believe that the West and the Muslim world are engaged in a clash of civilizations? To a person, they answered no, as did the Europeans and Americans. Arab members of the group were bothered by President Bush's use of the word "crusade" to describe the American invasion of Iraq, and they were offended by his recent use of the term "Islamofascist." However, they believed that his provocative language was intended largely for domestic political purposes. In order to regain political support, they felt, the President needed to tie the invasion and occupation of Iraq to the war on terror.

According to President Bush, the terrorists who staged 9/11, the Hezbollah militiamen who captured two Israeli soldiers, the people who use IEDs to kill American soldiers in Iraq – they are all of a piece. They have the same objective: "to turn back the advance of freedom and impose a dark vision of tyranny and terror across the world." In a recent speech, he went on to say that they are part of a "worldwide network of radicals that use terror to kill those who stand in the way of their totalitarian ideology."

My Arab associates felt that such language was greatly overblown. Yes, they believe that the United States is biased against Palestine and in favor of Israel. Yes, they believe that the invasion and occupation of Iraq were awful mistakes. Further, they insist that their own efforts to advance democracy have been set back by the Bush administration's actions in the region. But ultimately, they believe the current disagreements are about American policies and not about a millennial conflict between good and evil. Their responses echoed the title of a recent article that seeks to explain

strong anti-Bush feelings among the general public in the Arab world: The title of the article is, “It’s The Policy, Stupid.”<sup>6</sup>

Frankly, I was surprised by the response of my Arab associates. In fact, when I started working on this lecture several weeks ago, the title that I gave it was intended to convey the message that Arabs and Muslims see the American occupation of Iraq as the resumption of a conflict between the Christian and Islamic worlds that began with the Crusades, a thousand years ago. That was not the response that I got from my Arab associates, so I had to alter the lecture to reflect new information.

However, my Arab sources were very worried about verbal excesses on both sides. There are 250 million Arabs and 1.2 billion Muslims. Most of them are not nearly as sophisticated as the scholars and political activists with whom I have been engaged in dialogue. My Arab associates are committed to democratic reforms. A few of them have lived in and developed an affection of the United States. Until the United States invaded Iraq, many of them had been able to use our country as an example to be admired and even emulated.

This is how my Arab associates describe the problem: On one side is President Bush, who insists that “You’re either with us, or you’re with the terrorists.” On the other side are Osama Bin Laden and other extremists, who insist that “You’re either with us, or you’re with the infidels.” The strong, relentless squeeze from both sides leaves less and less middle ground for reasoned debate and subtle distinctions.

By the language that they use, the antagonists may be creating an environment in which the stakes are higher than they need to be. I use the

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<sup>6</sup> John L. Esposito, “It’s the Policy, Stupid: Political Islam and US Foreign Policy”, Harvard International Review, <http://hir.harvard.edu>

word “may”, because the stakes, the issues, and even the definition of the antagonists are far from clear.<sup>7</sup> Over time, the Bush administration has given the conflict several definitions and given our adversaries several names. If you don’t like the term, “Islamofascist”, be patient: in a matter of weeks, another term is likely to replace it.

### **The Serious Questions**

To be fair, we should not attribute the Bush administration’s repeated “re-messaging” solely to politics. The reality is that these things are difficult to figure out. Our intelligence services can identify dozens or perhaps hundreds of groups that have in common a hatred of the United States, a desire to do it harm, and an ideological or religious basis for their beliefs. Figuring out the capabilities of those groups and the relationships among them is extraordinarily difficult. This is the President’s justification for the aggressive intelligence measures that he insists are needed – to figure out who is talking to whom. The fact that a damaging attack can be conducted by a small group of people, using relatively primitive methods, makes the challenge especially difficult.

All presidential administrations confront situations in which they are under great pressure to operate on the fly, to shoot first and ask questions later. The public wants answers now; it certainly wants security now. Given the possibility of a threat to our welfare or security, very few Americans would retain confidence in a President who said that he wanted to spend several few months studying the problem before coming up with an answer.

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<sup>7</sup> Former National Security Advisor Zbigniew Brzezinski made a similar point about the President’s attempt to equate the current situation to the Cold War. In a May 31 speech to the Atlantic Council, Brzezinski said, “[Bush’s] definition of the challenge is too vague, and his definition of the threat is too sweeping.

Virtually all of us who have worked in government have experienced this tension: we want the right answer, but often we must act before we get it. This is not an excuse for the errors that the Bush administration has committed, but it is a fact of political life.

This highly uncertain environment cries out for thoughtful people, detached from the pressures of politics and military operations, to help the American public understand what really is going on. That understanding probably will not come from the work of a single scholar, but from the combined efforts of people who can pull together knowledge from a range of disciplines – history, sociology, policy, military strategy, philosophy and theology. This effort needs to begin by addressing the following questions:

First, who is our adversary? Are we at war with terrorists, with Islamo-Fascists, with Islamic extremists, or with extremists in all three Abrahamic faiths -- Islam, Christianity and Judaism? This is not just a matter of clever labeling; it is a matter that deserves serious analysis

Second, what is the nature of the conflict? Are we engaged in a struggle over fundamental values and institutions (freedom versus slavery, democracy versus dictatorship); or, are we dealing with small groups of extremists who hide their venal pursuit of power behind veils of religious piety? It would not be the first time that religion has been misused.

Third, what is terrorism? There is no single, authoritative definition of it, not even in our federal government. The Department of Defense and the Department of Homeland Security, for example, use slightly different definitions. However, there are certain common elements: generally speaking, terrorism is the unlawful and premeditated use of violence against civilians to achieve a political end. Of course, that definition could apply to

a very wide range of activities, some of which may lie outside the image of terrorism that is seared into our minds.

What images flash to mind when we think about terrorism? For many of us, it is a picture of planes crashing into the World Trade Center towers. For others, it is the carnage in a crowded marketplace following a suicide bombing. When I think of terrorism, I see Picasso's painting "Guernica." It is impossible to stand before that massive work, filled with horrible images of severed limbs and screaming faces, without sensing the terror that the innocent, unsuspecting residents of that small Spanish town must have felt. But that act of terror came from the skies – from German warplanes that bombed Guernica to support Franco's forces during the Spanish Civil War.<sup>8</sup>

Therein lies a fundamental question: what is the moral difference between a car bomb that a fanatic detonates in a market filled with innocent civilians, and a bomb that a pilot drops from 20,000 feet onto a market filled with innocent civilians? This is a question about which philosophers and theologians need to engage military strategists and diplomats.

Fourth, what ought to be our goals and methods? Should our emphasis be on "winning" in Iraq, whatever that means, and on destroying terrorists, real or suspected, using whatever methods we wish? Or should our emphasis be on winning hearts and minds, using methods that reflect essential American values such as the right to fair trials? There is a strong tension between those two approaches, and in recent years we have emphasized the former.

In order to address these questions, we must be prepared to deal with complexity, ambiguity and nuance. Since the establishment of the Fatah

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<sup>8</sup> Picasso painted "Guernica" in 1937, shortly after the attack occurred. The painting, huge and ghastly, is on display at the Sophia Museum in Madrid.

Movement in 1964, international terrorist organizations have grown greatly in number. They also are very different from one another in their ambitions, capabilities, organizational sophistication and funding sources. Al Qaeda, for example, is funded almost entirely by private sources, while Hezbollah receives much of its funding from the governments of Syria and Iran. Hamas has a military wing, but it also participates – quite successfully – in electoral politics. Further, the popularity of Hamas and Hezbollah is as much due to their ability to deliver needed social services as to their ability to stage terrorist attacks. An effective war on terrorism needs to take these complexities into account. Military force may be effective against some, but counterproductive against others.<sup>9</sup>

## **Conclusion**

In conclusion, what insight can we derive from knowing about the Moor's Last Sigh? It is that Americans tend to make two mistakes about history. One is to forget the lessons of the past; the other is to exaggerate the significance of current events.

What happened at the Alhambra some 500 years ago really did change the world. If Boabdil had held out for even a few more months, Columbus might not have sailed the ocean blue – certainly not in 1492, and probably not for Spain. (He also had been trying to sell his idea to the king of Portugal.) If Isabella had been less extreme in her religious fervor, she would not have seen the Jews and the Muslims as implacable enemies of Christianity, and Southern Europe and the Middle East would have developed differently.

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<sup>9</sup> Thanks to my LBJ School colleague Bob Inman for his insights.

In terms of their potential historic significance, are Iraq and the war on terror analogous to the events that were set in motion in 1492? President Bush suggests that they are, and he is not alone: after all, he did not coin the phrase “clash of civilizations”; he borrowed it from a prominent American scholar, Samuel P. Huntington.

I challenge other scholars to weigh in on this issue. We are spending a great deal of blood, treasure and national prestige to support our current policies. The federal government is spending more than \$50 billion a year on the Iraq occupation and more than \$40 billion a year on homeland security. The toll in Iraq is frighteningly high – tens of thousands of fatalities and decimated physical infrastructure. Iraq also is on the verge of, or perhaps already in the midst of, a breakdown of civil order that would threaten the security of her six neighbors: Turkey, Iran, Syria, Kuwait, Saudi Arabia and Jordan. So the stakes in the region are high.

However, the stakes may not be as high as some of the apocalyptic thinkers want us to believe. If we really were involved in a millennial conflict between the forces of darkness and the forces of light, we would need to be prepared to make much bigger sacrifices. We would pay for it by increasing our taxes rather than by borrowing money from foreign countries; and we would need to have a robust public debate about the tradeoff between security and personal liberty.

Yes, terrorism is a problem. How we confront it – in its many complex manifestations – depends on what we perceive to be its sources, objectives and magnitude. So the big questions remain: whom are we fighting against, and more importantly, what are we fighting for?