

National interests: Moral strength

by [John Buchanan](#) in the [March 8, 2003](#) issue

What kind of country are we, and what kind of country do we wish to be? Robert Bellah has asked that question many times and in many ways over the years. In *Habits of the Heart* he explored the American culture of individualism, and he sought to revive a tradition of citizenship and concern for the public good. In *The Broken Covenant* he examined the civil religion that has shaped, positively and negatively, American values and public life.

In this issue, [Bellah considers](#) the emergence of an American empire. As some political leaders are consciously seeking to define a new, imperial role for this country, Bellah asks again: What kind of country are we, and what kind of country do we wish to be? Is the U.S. really ready to assume the tasks of empire? What cultural resources will we draw on to sustain an empire? What kind of influence do we want to have on the world?

Since September 11, we have also faced this question: what defensive measures are needed to protect ourselves and our children from people who wish to do harm to America? The immediate crisis facing the nation and the international community is over whether to launch a war with Iraq in an effort to disarm that country. Is such a war necessary to ensure our safety?

Those are important, unavoidable questions, and they relate directly, of course, to questions of empire. The articles in this issue by Bellah, Theodore Weber and Gary Dorrien direct us back to the larger set of questions which provide the context for dealing with the present crisis: What kind of nation do we want to be? How should our unquestioned military and economic dominance be used? Is a “unipolar” world, one in which the U.S. is the unchallenged power, really a more secure world? Is the vision of a Pax Americana, of a world remade through American force—a vision now touted in the highest circles of government—realistic or desirable? These have become decisive strategic and political questions, and they need to be debated.

At this point, I know I want my country to be as morally great as it is economically and militarily. And I want my country to be a responsible partner in the family of

nations and to support, not ignore and undermine, international agreements and the United Nations itself.

And as for the Iraq crisis: I don't want my nation to go to war unless it is absolutely necessary and only after we have exhausted every other possible solution. I don't think we are there yet.