

# *Letters from the Dharma Realm*

## *Letter to President Bush: A Critique of the Inauguration*

Dear Mr. President,

Upon returning from the Inaugural Celebrations in Washington, D.C. this January, we felt it important that we communicate directly with you. Seven members of Dharma Realm Buddhist University, including the Venerable Master Hsuan Hua, Chancellors Ronald Epstein, Douglas Powers, Ho Bai-cho, Professor Men Yi-ping, Bhikshu (Buddhist monk) Heng Gung, and Bhikshuni (Buddhist nun) Heng Tao, made this trip to the capital to offer our prayers and best wishes as the nation is ushered into a new era.

We had gone expecting to participate in a solemn and meaningful occasion. We were disappointed, however, by what we encountered. The bicentennial extravaganza was, for the most part, glitter without substance, and totally ineffective. The Opening Celebration at the Lincoln Memorial on January 18 set the mood for the rest of the festivities. Throughout a two-hour long ceremony, you yourself spoke for only the last ten minutes. The rest of the show was monopolized by pop stars whose shallow and sentimental songs neither reflected the strength of America nor inspired any of the noble spirit and lofty expectations of this nation. Worthy leaders should guide their people like a beacon, showing the way out of darkness. A dozen pop stars crooning emotional gibberish incited tens of thousands to mindless excitement, but how does such hollow fanfare do justice to the dignity of the occasion? How must the leaders of other nations look upon this kind of shallow razzle-dazzle?

You spoke about the "thousand points of light" and arranged for participants each to turn on his or her little flashlight towards the end of the ceremony. For the participants to have truly taken the depth of this message to heart you would have made them realize that genuine "light" does not issue from outside in lavish firework displays. Rather, this light of selflessness and public service comes from within. The little flashlights gimmick might be suitable for appealing to little kids, but is meaningless and even insulting to the mature people who so thoughtfully entrusted you with their mandate. Further, how can your thousand points of light shine forth if they are eclipsed by ballroom glamor, sequined gowns, fur coats and limousines? If that is the tone surrounding the Presidential inauguration, isn't your administration, Mr. President, setting a trend which will encourage the people to pursue similar material excesses to the detriment and neglect of their own inner light? Did not you yourself ask the people of this country during your inaugural speech: "Are we enthralled with material things, less appreciative of the nobility of work and sacrifice? My friends, we are not the sum of our possessions...."

During the course of the five-day celebration, if the fanfare had been toned down, there would have been numerous occasions for talks by lucid and dynamic speakers. That would have generated strong patriotic fervor and a will to goodness in the people's hearts. The major cabinet appointees could also have been introduced, since they are "hands" who will implement your new program. Most of them, however, stood silently in the shadows as a precious opportunity for national inspiration was lost to flashiness and empty pageantry. It is estimated that several tens of millions were spent on those celebrations. Even if it came from private donations, that money ultimately came from the blood and sweat of the American people. How can we rest with a peaceful conscience after such indulgence when the national deficit stands at an astounding three trillion dollars? What will this do for the public image of America, when we are already the laughing stock of other nations because of our reckless and

unwise fiscal behavior? Wouldn't moderation and sensible allocation of those funds be ultimately more beneficial to the public?

Despite his accomplishments, we had in President Reagan someone who deceived the people outright. During the past eight years, the credibility of the American President, visibly the man with the most important job in the world, has eroded. Even young children knew that they had a President who deceived them. That lack of candor in high office has created disastrous moral reverberations below. Most parents in this country no longer believe in their leaders. Children increasingly lack faith in their parents. The result is a heart-breaking bankruptcy of trust and good will. An ancient philosopher once said that, during times of trial, a nation could survive without arms, even without food, but that a nation cannot stand once it runs out of good faith. We hope that you will stand by the promise you made when you said, "Great nations, like great men, must keep their word. When America says something, America means it, whether a treaty or an agreement or a vow made on marble steps."

When the Venerable Master Hua gave his welcoming address during your visit to San Francisco's Chinatown on September 6, 1988, this was the point he emphasized: "The kind of President we now need is someone who has far-reaching intelligence and keen moral discernment, someone who is unbiased and public-minded. He must be able to not fight, not be greedy, not pursue his own gratification, not act selfishly, not strive for his personal advantage and profit, and not lie." The Venerable Master has also been a forthright spokesman against drug abuse, legalized homosexuality and abortion. He has said, "Homosexuality is the fundamental cause which will lead to the demise of the nation and destruction of the human species. Any nation that legalizes homosexual practice is not far from extinction." He has also repeatedly made the following suggestion, "In order to truly exert a wholesome influence on the citizens, government officials must voluntarily reduce their salaries, or work for no pay. They must not take bribes and cheat the people."

Throughout each day of the Inaugural Celebrations, as many people cheered or screamed to the twangs of electric guitars, the Venerable Master Hua stood quietly in the midst of the large gatherings and gave you his blessings. The gesture was solemn, reverent and silent, but within it was conveyed the highest compassionate concern from someone with a sincere heart. He has faith that you can serve the people with wisdom, humility and righteousness. We hope that you don't disappoint those high expectations.

In your inaugural speech you said, "America is never wholly herself unless she is engaged in high moral principles." You yourself realize the importance of awakening a large nation to its roots of goodness and inspiring the citizens to morality and virtue. However, to make "kinder the face of the nation and gentler the face of the world" takes more than rhetoric or pretty promises. It means relinquishing the pomp and excess with which all too many world leaders have allowed themselves to be pampered, thereby losing the respect of the people. It means, instead, returning to a no-nonsense life of frugality, modesty and service. It was the humility and selflessness of the Founding Fathers that won them lasting fame and honor. Slick public relations, fancy press write-ups, and a retinue of secret service agents cannot help a President establish genuine contact with the people. Rather, a heart of sacrifice, a willingness to pare down to the basics, a spirit of devotion and truthfulness, can move the people to goodness. This is the meaning behind the ancient saying, "Virtue is the root. Wealth is the branchtips."

You have mentioned repeatedly that you want to be remembered as "the Education President." It is encouraging that the Bush clan is devoted to harmonious family life. Mrs. Bush won the admiration of the American people. Her candor and unpretentiousness are creating a new image for American women: capable, straightforward, and not phony. You and your family can act as personal examples in leading the people back to a regard for propriety and mutual respect in family and society. That can be the first

step, but in order for the message to go deep, there must be a comprehensive system of education, implemented from the earliest stages of childhood and reaching all the way through adulthood, of educating the people in basic ethical values: loving respect for parents, teachers and elders, service in government, honesty among friends, incorruptibility in both private and public life (including not taking bribes), righteousness, proper conduct based on mutual respect between the sexes, and a sense of shame. If these ethical imperatives are awry, then in spite of all the billions of dollars expended on national defense, America will still not succeed in building a strong nation. What is our true national defense? It is the youth of this country. Young people who cherish their own purity, who do not abuse themselves with drugs or promiscuity, will naturally cherish their families, society, the nation, and the world. Every month our schools receive a long list of teachers whose credentials have been revoked due to sexual transgressions with their students. Just as the educational system has reached a low ebb, our national defense has also become weakened at the very roots. Therefore, wise rulers of the past realized that the foremost item on the national budget should be education, not missiles or nuclear reactors.

You said that a new breeze is blowing, and a nation refreshed by freedom stands ready to push on. Yes, Americans pride themselves on being a free nation. But we have to be clear about the responsibilities of freedom. Freedom without sound moral direction turns to license. License enslaves; it does not liberate. Only if our leaders provide the nation with sensible moral guidelines can Americans enjoy true freedom. True freedom also means respect for the freedom of others. We lose our own freedom by infringing upon the rights of other countries and their peoples.

Some of us attended the National Prayer Service at Washington Cathedral on January 22. Although it was called an interfaith meeting, Venerable Master Hsuan Hua was almost the only Asian-American and the only Buddhist representative in the entire congregation. Aside from one representative each from the Jewish and Greek Orthodox Religions, all the other religious leaders came from Christian traditions. That hardly seems to do justice to the rich ethnic, cultural and religious tapestry so unique to America. Besides, speeches for such an auspicious occasion should have been truly inspiring in order to encourage the President, new officials and the people to do their best as they enter a new era. Mouthing platitudes without concrete plans does little to help the new administration get off to a good start.

Even though your cabinet members advise you on the affairs of state, as President you are the spiritual and moral leader of the country. Your every thought meshes with the heartbeat of the American people in an inseparable bond. We suggest that you establish an advisory board composed of all the great leaders of the major world religions. It would be best to observe which ones are truly unselfish, open-minded and dedicated to public service. They can support you in discussing what is good and what is unwholesome, so that from the beginning, bigotry and stubborn clinging to biases can be avoided.

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To recapitulate, we would like to make the following recommendations to the new administration:

- 1) That it establish an ethics curriculum for elementary and junior high school levels, ranging from one to three hours per week, to instill in children fundamental ethical concepts such as loving respect for parents, teachers and elders; responsible citizenship; humaneness; and righteousness. The program should aim at building character and fostering self-esteem in children, so they have the inner conviction to say no to drugs, homosexuality and promiscuity.

Drugs are the arch-enemy of this nation and all of mankind. If not rooted out, drug abuse will bring about the downfall of our youth. Pervasive drug abuse stems from a basic failure in education. Because

teachers have not provided moral guidelines, the pressures and enticements of the modern world have thrown students into a state of anxiety and alienation. Out of curiosity, low self-esteem and a wish for quick highs, students give in to drugs. It does not suffice to have the police discipline drug abusers or drug peddlers. Effective law enforcement has to issue from the highest levels of government. As the leaders of many countries are themselves major supporters of huge drug operations, effective drug control must start with all levels of government. Public officials themselves have to be completely above suspicion of any aspect of drug traffic. If not, they should be disciplined and dismissed.

2) That it establish a religious advisory board composed of the religious leaders of this country. The board will convene regular meetings to discuss key social and moral issues affecting the country and make recommendations in an advisory capacity to the President for constructive handling of these matters.

We believe that if you can become a President who has far-reaching wisdom and moral discernment, then your virtue will move heaven and earth, and this nation, under your guidance, will indeed become a kind, gentle, and even greater nation.

Most truly yours,

