

STATE OF THE COUNTRY

To Bishop Adam Jefferson Richardson, the presiding prelate of the Second Episcopal District of the African Methodist Episcopal Church, to Connie Speights Richardson, our beloved Episcopal Supervisor, Host Presiding Elder Chester W. Morris and Associate Presiding Elder William A. Dyson, Sr., to all the clergy and laypersons assembled, your Committee on the State of the Country presents the following report:

NATURE, SCOPE AND TASK

The task before our committee has challenged us to exercise the utmost caution to highlight the matters that demand the greatest attention from our republic, its leaders and citizens alike. The national election in November of 2008 was as significant a moment in the entire history of our country as any after the founding of the country in the late 18th century and its rebirth following the Civil War a little more than half a century later. For those of us who witnessed it that chilly but sun kissed day at Mid-January, the oath of office taken by our 44th President, Barack Hussein Obama, will often be recalled as a moment of singular civic ecstasy. From the Lincoln Memorial, throughout the whole length of the National Mall, even to the very steps of the Capitol building, the sense of common purpose and the feeling of universal joy saturated every living being. People smiled beatifically at one another in a shared and unspoken understanding that somehow we had managed to make our electoral process work on behalf of our tortured history and an alienated world. The day's celebrations concluded the difficulties of governing commenced with a near fever pitch as one interlinked national problem after another obsessed the new administration. Our report then is less about the fulfillment of our nation's political and spiritual principles in the election of the first African American President. We reference instead our nagging worries over health care, our worsening infrastructure, our depressed and ineffective

public schools, the prosecution of two interminable wars, the disenfranchisement of ex-convicts and the devastating international consequences of our debilitated economy. And yet, our major emphasis and focus lies beyond all of these. It is the emergent debate that threatens to swamp all other considerations because what is at stake in that debate and discourse is the very soul and conscience of the nation, a nation that prides itself on the rule of law and its obedience to the highest moral precepts regarding justice and liberty.

PROCESS AND DATA GATHERING

The deep irony of data gathering is that the very practices that have appeared to us most questionable are themselves the sources of the data we require for critique and the formulation of strategies for resolution. Contractors who utilized cheaper building materials for capitol projects in order to expand their profit margins are exposed by the premature collapse of those very materials in the bridges and highways they were used to construct. The failure of public schools is routinely reported by the school districts that bemoan falling graduation rates, declining scholastic achievement scores and the anomie of adolescents who commit school homicides from Columbine to Philadelphia. The graying of America has marched hand in hand with the ever-ballooning expense of health care. Every pastor in every church knows somebody whose life's savings is quickly expended for the slimmest cost of the care necessary to maintain a robustly healthy life at any age. Likewise, each of us has first hand experience counseling, praying and commiserating with those whose life chances have undergone critical reductions as jobs become scarcer and hopes of employment become dimmer because the current economic recession seems to reel in the direction of catastrophic depression. Added to this is the daily report only a fool would ignore to hear of the mounting cost of war on two fronts with an enemy too easily

concealed in a terrain and a culture we know too little about. From CNN to the BBC to the *Times* of New York and London to *Le Monde* of Paris and *Der Spiegel* in Berlin, an international network of journalists and opinion makers keeps us apprised of these events as they unfold. Historians, political scientists, sociologists, anthropologists, philosophers and theologians along with World Development organizations equip us for the more urgent analyses that free thinking men and women must perform if they would set right what has gone awry.

FINDINGS

We have become increasingly alarmed by recent memos that have been released by the government indicating the complicity of elected officials and operatives from the previous administration condoning “enhanced interrogation procedures,” a thinly veiled euphemism for torture. Indeed, the former Vice President of these United States, Dick Cheney, has not been able to curtail his boasts that approval of these “procedures” entailed the greater safety of the country following 9/11. In a logic nearly as tortured as the detainees who were inhumanely subjected to waterboarding, Cheney adheres to a position which an enlightened history and a searching moral reflection has condemned at least since the time of the Spanish Inquisition; the ends, however honorable, that employ such means are perversely bankrupted by those same means. Worse still is the convicting testimony of distinguished officers of our Armed Forces who have said that the order to sustain these methods continued to thread its way along the chain of command long after any such information conceived to be useful had been elicited from the detainees. In that case torture was not only the means but the end as well, torture for torture’s sake.

Meanwhile, the hearings that loom in order to discover the persons responsible for authorizing criminal acts of torture have precipitated disquiet and foreboding on the right. They

assert that should these hearings be permitted to proceed they would threaten to forestall important initiatives on every front. What they really intend to say is that they would seek reprisals against the Obama administration by blocking its aims to secure national health care provisions, to reinvigorate the economy, to secure the promise of a college education for our children and to reverse the enervating entropy of our infrastructure. Their remedy is to hold the public good hostage rather than suffer greater damage to the dwindling prestige of conservative policies, surprisingly and shockingly, policies that include apologies for torture. In a transparent fit of sophistry these folks argue that hearings aimed at uncovering the truth about torture, when, where and by whom and on whose authority, would unnecessarily embroil the Obama Presidency in a “distraction” as though torture was not a matter of illegality prosecutable under the law, a law that Obama swore as wielder of executive power to uphold on that cold January day when the capitol building, the temple for the legislation of just and equitable law, glistened in the inextinguishable light of the sun. We should know because some of us were there.

GOALS AND OBJECTIVES

Our committee would propose the following goals for our nation’s people of faith, only slightly amended from last year’s report.

- The recollection of religious duty as distinct from but critical for the proper exercise of civic duty
- The vigilant and thoughtful consideration of what our faith requires for the sake of God’s will
- The prescience of the prophets to alert the nation’s leaders to the all consuming disaster that is the consequence of ignoring moral duty

- The unstinting support of those government aims by which the nation's welfare is ameliorated
- The broadening of public discourse beyond the inane and counterproductive ranting of radio and television talk show hosts on either the right or the left
- To continue our aggressive pursuit of the restoration of voting rights to those whose release from prison in the Commonwealth of Virginia and elsewhere among the states should signify they had settled their debt to society
- To raise our faith above the vicious jingoism that pits one form of belief against the other in a manner that annihilates all faiths

RECOMMENDATIONS

Our committee recommends the church speak boldly to the license committed in the sanctioning of torture by our national leaders, whether past or present; to hold the present administration accountable for its moral lapse if it should decide that what is politically expedient is more important than what is right in the sight of God; that we lift the clarion call for righteousness above the din of unthinking patriotism; that the church founded by Jesus Christ and washed in his blood be the force for peace it was called to be; that we join with people and organizations of like mind to strengthen the voice for the cause of "the Kingdom."

The church has always had an ambivalent relationship with our polity but it can never pretend that its core beliefs and values should not frame the political decisions we reach for the sake of our children's prosperity and our interdependence with the welfare of other peoples of the world. From Pyongyang to Islamabad, from Rwanda to Venezuela, and from Afghanistan to Cuba

we should marshal all the power of our faith well lived to renew the better nature of our people as a promise for sustainable relations of mutual regard.

But first our prison houses must be undefiled. Our treatment of prisoners should insist upon the rules governing just nations everywhere and in accord with agreed upon principles of right conduct. Let us promote our nation's adherence to the United Nation's Universal Declaration of Human Rights.¹ Let us urge her to the solemn honoring of her commitment to act upon the accords expressed in the Geneva Convention.² Let us insist she bring her actions into agreement with the letter and spirit of her own Constitution.³ Finally, let the word of God call us from the heart of darkness and the pit of chaos to the uplands of his sublime and radiant realm. Then could we rightly sing, "Drop thy still dews of quietness, till all our strivings cease; take from our souls the strain and stress, and let our ordered lives confess the beauty of thy peace."

Respectfully submitted by the members of the Committee on the State of the Country to the One Hundred Forty-third Session of the Virginia Annual Conference in the year of our Lord, 2009.

Rev. Edward A. Scott

Rev. Ruby Brown

Rev. Debbie Bryant

Rev. Billy Hunter

Rev. Eboni B. Kearney

Rev. Gwendolyn Minor

Rev. Earl Morris

Rev. Glenn Orr

Rev. John Swann

Rev. Willie L. White

¹ Article 5: No one shall be subjected to torture or to cruel, inhuman or degrading treatment or punishment.

² Article 13: Likewise, prisoners of war must at all times be protected, particularly against acts of violence or intimidation and against insults and public curiosity.

³ Amendment 8: Excessive bail shall not be required, nor excessive fines imposed, nor cruel and unusual punishments inflicted.

D E L E G A T E S

John Burke

Barbara Hubbard

Shermita Jordan

Ebyeam Smith

Matilda Watson

Connie Whitfield