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The Pope's Geopolitical Agenda - Pope Benedict Catholic Pedophiles Sex Abuse

There are no speeches or writings, no public records to tell us what Cardinal Joseph Ratzinger — the future Pope Benedict XVI — thought of the U.S.-led invasion of Iraq. But the influential prelate, then head of the Vatican's office for internal doctrinal matters, clearly had a forceful opinion. Soon after the bombs fell on Baghdad, the topic came up in April 2003 as Ratzinger talked with fellow Cardinals Carlo Maria Martini of Italy and Paul Poupard of France at an intimate Vatican diplomatic reception. A Church official present that evening remembers the typically soft-spoken German shaking his fists, and blurting out in Italian: "Basta! Basta!" Enough! Enough!

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Ratzinger did not elaborate then, nor since becoming Pope, about his opposition to the American military campaign, though he has spoken out about the Iraqi people's suffering. The intellectually rigorous Pope rarely sounds off on subjects that are not in his purview, say those close to him. "He's not an armchair politician," says one German scholar who's known Ratzinger for years. "He's not an armchair anything." Still, being Pope, especially the successor of the diplomatically adroit John Paul II, means Benedict is expected to make his mark on world politics.

As he arrives for his first papal visit to the world's lone Superpower, geopolitics remains the great open question in Benedict's three-year reign. The six-day visit to the United States — which includes a White House visit, an address at the United Nations and a prayer at Ground Zero — may be the best opportunity for the theologian pontiff to define his leadership in international relations. "The Pope per se is simply the custodian of the Catholic tradition," says a senior Vatican official. "He can become a global leader if he manages to embody a battle of ideals that is present in the world."

It is almost certain that the Pope will not chide Bush for his decision to invade Iraq, but rather focus — as he did in their Vatican meeting last year — on how to improve the lives of Iraqis, notably the increasingly persecuted Christian minorities. A resolution of the Palestinian-Israeli conflict also remains a priority of the Pope, who wants to see sustained American involvement in negotiations.

Benedict's theological background provides good tools to face what may be the most pressing 21st century global challenge: the rise of religious conflict and violence. He will have two key opportunities in New York — with words, then with gestures — to transmit his basic message of faith and reason in a world inching toward a clash of civilizations. In his speech at the U.N., he will reiterate his predecessors' commitment to peace and diplomacy as the best way to tackle world problems. But he will likely challenge political leaders to defend religious liberty as the first priority for building a peaceful future. Two days later, this singular religious figure, leader of 1 billion faithful, will travel downtown to witness the remains of what happens when faith is instead the most efficient weapon for sowing hatred and destruction.

Still, in the three years since his election, Benedict has suffered from a mix of diplomatic stumbles and a tendency to shy away from sweeping symbolic gestures that his predecessor utilized to connect with a worldwide audience. His biggest impact on the world stage came the day after the five-year anniversary of 9/11. Benedict gave a riveting lecture at his former university in Regensburg, Germany, outlining what he sees as the pivotal duality of reason and faith. The Sep. 12, 2006 speech questioned whether Islam's notion of God transcends, and could even defy, reason. If it did, he suggested, it could help explain the spread of Islamist violence in the name of God. The Pope's speech was provocative, and perhaps a necessary dose of high-level theology in the post-9/11 world. But it also provided evidence of his political naivete: Benedict cited an insulting statement by a 14th century Byzantine emperor about the prophet Muhammed. He later clarified that it did not reflect his thinking, but by then it had already sparked outrage.

The speech, and the violence it provoked from some corners of the Muslim world, became a watershed moment in Benedict's papacy. And though the Pope clearly wanted to speak out about Islamic-inspired violence, Vatican officials pointed out that the Pope's other aim in the Regensburg speech was to challenge the West to rediscover its own religious roots. This twin clarion call — to Christians who have lost their religious passion and Muslims who may have too much — was supposed to create a "more frank" dialogue among the world's two leading faiths. After the uproar quieted, there has indeed been progress. Top Muslim scholars have written two open letters to the Pope, which has led to the first in a series of high-level Catholic-Muslim meetings scheduled for November 2008 at the Vatican.

Central to its new approach to Islam, the Church, after years of diplomatic niceties, has made clear that freedom of religion is non-negotiable — for example, that Christians should be free to practice their faith in an unhindered manner in Islamic states. Still, missteps have continued on this and other fronts, including the Pope's high-profile conversion baptism on Easter eve of a controversial Egyptian-born Italian Muslim. The point the Pope wanted to make — that all should be free to change their religion — was again overshadowed by polemic.

It is inevitable that Benedict's movements on the international stage will be compared with his predecessor's. John Paul had a finely tuned sense of how to shape world opinion through the mechanism of politics. Benedict is hoping that his broader philosophical themes will be applied to the politics of the day. Andrea Riccardi, founder of the *Comunita' di San Egidio*, a leading Catholic diplomatic and inter-faith group, called Benedict "one of the keenest observers of modern religious life," whose expertise extends beyond his own Church. "John Paul had a specific geopolitical design from the start of his papacy: the fall of communism. Benedict has more of a 'geo-cultural' design, wanting to challenge contemporary society. Foremost, he wants to provoke a crisis of conscience in a West that has grown closed to faith."