

# Bible Prophecy Belief in American Culture and Its Political Implications

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Bible-prophecy belief is as American as apple pie. The *Left Behind* series, a fictional treatment of one system of prophecy interpretation, has sold some seventy million copies. Preached in churches nationwide, promulgated by paperbacks and TV evangelists, prophecy belief thrives across the land. President George W. Bush's most committed supporters have included such prophecy believers as the late Jerry Falwell; Pat Robertson; Richard Land, Washington lobbyist for the Southern Baptists; and James Hagee, pastor of a 16,000-member church in San Antonio.

This evening, after offering some historical context, I'll explore how prophecy popularizers have interpreted key events since World War II and, finally, offer some reflections on the civic implications and enduring appeal of this worldview.

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The Bible prophecy beliefs so pervasive today are rooted in ancient myths of cosmic struggles between order and chaos, light and darkness, good and evil. These myths, which date from the earliest civilizations of the Middle East, spawned a popular literary genre known as **Apocalyptic** that flourished in ancient Judaism and early Christianity. (This Greek word "apocalypse" simply means the unveiling of hidden knowledge.) Apocalyptic passages appear in Isaiah, Daniel, Ezekiel, and elsewhere in the Hebrew Scriptures, and in the New Testament Gospels; apostolic letters; and, of course, that mysterious final book, Revelation.

As Christianity gained power, its leaders downplayed the idea of Christ's imminent return, which had so gripped the first Christians. The Early Church's doctrine generally followed Saint Augustine's teaching that the prophecies deal with the whole of human history, not with a specific set of future events.

All the same, End Time belief flourished in medieval Europe, preached by wandering prophets and reform-minded priests, and portrayed in tapestries, stained-glass windows, mystery plays, and illuminated manuscripts. Many medieval cathedrals feature scenes of the Last Judgment carved in stone over the main doors.

The Protestant reformers rejected apocalyptic speculation as a remnant of medieval superstition and an incitement to uprisings such as the Peasants' Revolt of the 1520s. Martin Luther omitted Revelation from his German Bible, and John Calvin never wrote a commentary on it, claiming he couldn't understand it. Still, some Reformers portrayed the Pope as the Beast foretold in Revelation, and this theme pervades early Protestant propaganda. (Catholic polemicists responded by representing Luther as the Evil One!)

Seventeenth-century English Puritans, including the poet John Milton, were steeped in apocalyptic speculation, viewing not only Rome but the Church of England as the Antichrist. Sir Isaac Newton spent years studying Bible prophecy, to the chagrin of those who revere him as a founder of modern science.

Leading New England Puritans, meanwhile, saw America as the site of Christ's millennial kingdom, and viewed both the Indians and the French Catholics in Canada as agents of the Antichrist. Indeed, the belief in America's special prophetic destiny has an even longer history. Christopher Columbus himself wrote: "God made me the messenger of the new heaven and the new earth of which he spoke in the Apocalypse of St. John..., and he showed me ... where to find it." In the 1740s, Jonathan Edwards saw the revival fires of the Great Awakening as a prelude to the Millennium, Christ's thousand-year earthly reign foretold in Revelation.

Apocalyptic thought took a political turn in the 1770s. Thomas Paine's revolutionary tract *Common Sense* proclaimed: "A situation, similar to the present, hath not happened since the days of Noah. . . . The birth-day of a new world is at hand." Readers who knew their Bible easily grasped Paine's allusion to Jesus's words: "As the days of Noe were, so shall also the coming of the son of man be."

Millennial hopes inspired early nineteenth-century religious movements. The United Society of Believers in Christ's Second Coming, commonly called Shakers, saw their celibate communities as models of the coming Millennium. In the 1830s, William Miller of upstate New York began to preach that the Book of Daniel foretold Christ's return in 1843 or 1844. October

22, 1844 eventually emerged as the agreed-upon date. Sustained by revival meetings, broadsides, and colorful charts, the Millerites eagerly awaited the fateful day, only to be bitterly disappointed. From the ashes, however, arose the Seventh-day Adventist Church, whose followers still study the prophecies, though carefully avoiding date-setting.

Some abolitionists saw the anti-slavery struggle as a prelude to the Millennium. Indeed, The Civil War's great anthem, Julia Ward Howe's "The Battle Hymn of the Republic," is an apocalypse: "Mine eyes have seen the glory of the coming of the Lord, He is tramping out the vintage where the grapes of wrath are stored..."

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In the late nineteenth century a new interpretation arose, **premillennial dispensationalism**, formulated by the Anglo-Irish churchman John Darby. Many U.S. evangelicals embraced Darby's scheme, including Cyrus Scofield, whose 1909 Reference Bible, published by Oxford University Press, remains a bestseller. The early twentieth-century Fundamentalist movement, preaching biblical inerrancy and a literal reading of Scripture, proved receptive to Darby's system.

"Premillennial" means that Christ will return before the Millennium. (This word "Millennium," by the way, which doesn't appear in the Bible, is simply the Latin word for one thousand years.) For Darby, "dispensationalism" meant that God has dealt with his chosen people, the Jews, and with the Gentiles in seven epochs, or dispensations, each with its distinct means of salvation: from the "Age of Innocency" in the Garden of Eden to the "Church Age," where we are now. Like a person assembling a jigsaw puzzle, Darby patiently arranged his biblical proof texts in ways that he believed revealed God's great plan for humanity.

The Church Age will end, Darby taught, with the Rapture, when true believers will join Christ in the air. Those left behind will endure the seven-year Tribulation, when the Antichrist—called "the Beast" in Revelation--will arise in Europe and go on to rule the world.

Next will come the Battle of Armageddon, foretold in Revelation 16. As Antichrist's forces gather at Megiddo, an ancient battle site in Israel, another vast army marches from the East. At this moment, however, Christ returns with his raptured saints, annihilates the earthly armies, and launches his thousand year reign from a rebuilt Temple in Jerusalem. After a Last Judgment, the great drama of human history which began in the Garden of Eden finally ends.

Darby avoided date-setting, but his followers insisted that the Rapture is near, citing Jesus' own list of End Time signs as reported in the Gospels: wars, wickedness, persecution, natural disasters. Another key End-Time sign, Darby taught, would be the Jews' return to the Promised Land of Palestine.

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Millions of Americans embrace Darby's basic scheme. In a 1996 poll, 42 percent agreed with the statement: "The world will end in a battle in Armageddon between Jesus and the Antichrist." Major Protestant denominations as well as the fast-growing independent churches and suburban megachurches preach dispensationalism. Jehovah's Witnesses and Seventh-day Adventists, with millions of adherents worldwide, preach their versions of end-time belief. These beliefs also pervade Latin America, Africa, and parts of Asia thanks to U.S. missionaries, televangelists, and paperback prophecy books.

Hal Lindsey's 1970 bestseller *The Late Great Planet Earth*, a popularization of dispensationalism, sold millions of copies. Prophecy belief is purveyed by radio and TV evangelists, including Pat Robertson, head of CBN, the Christian Broadcasting Network. Robertson gained fame in 1985 when he prayed that a hurricane threatening his Virginia headquarters would change course. It did, and instead hit Fire Island, New York, a gay summer resort, destroying Calvin Klein's beach house.

Prophecy belief is spread, too, by schools like Dallas Theological Seminary and Moody Bible Institute; by paperbacks, magazines, tracts, and bumper stickers advising: "If the Rapture Occurs, this Car Will be Driverless." (An answering sticker says: "After the Rapture, Can I Have Your Car?") Apocalyptic belief entered the mass culture through such movies as *The Omen* (1976) and *The Rapture* (1991), and rock songs such as Barry Maguire's "Eve of Destruction" and Bob Dylan's "When He Returns" of 1979. Though somewhat more pervasive among the poor and less well educated, these beliefs are found among all educational and income levels, and in all regions of the country.

Particularly illustrative is the evolution of prophetic belief in the Southern Baptist Convention, America's largest Protestant denomination with more than sixteen million members and six thousand missionaries worldwide. Down to around 1920, most Southern Baptists were **post-millennial**, convinced that the era of righteousness could be achieved in the present age.

But the shocks of World War I, theological Modernism, and an increasingly secular culture blasted such optimism. By the 1970s, as Fundamentalists gained power in Southern Baptist circles, belief in biblical inerrancy became a test for ministers and seminary professors. By the mid-1990s, dispensationalism had become dominant among Southern Baptist ministers.

Underlying the prevalence of prophecy belief is America's pervasive religiosity and wide-open religious marketplace. The U.S. far outranks other Western nations in religious piety. And with no established church, charismatic religious innovators like William Miller, Mary Baker Eddy, and Aimee Semple McPherson have flourished. Prophecy popularizers like Hal Lindsey fit this pattern.

Dispensationalism's success is also rooted in the ambiguity of the biblical proof texts, which invite creative interpretation. New events are fit into the End Time scenario, while events that fail to fulfill their expected prophetic role quietly vanish. From the 1920s through 1945, for example, many prophecy writers saw Mussolini as the Antichrist. With his death in 1945, this theme simply dropped away.

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Prophecy belief merits attention not only because it is so widespread, but also because it shapes many Americans' view of current events. Let me illustrate with a few examples from the post-World War II era:

First, the coming of **the atomic bomb** in 1945 roused interest in prophecies of the earth's destruction. As II Peter 3:10 memorably puts it: "[T]he heavens shall pass away with a great noise, ... the elements shall melt with fervent heat."

Hal Lindsey and many other postwar prophecy writers found nuclear war foretold in such texts. Despite their claims to biblical literalism, they freely transformed the spears, bows and arrows, and beasts-from-the-sea of the apocalyptic scriptures into ICBMs, missile launchers, and nuclear-armed submarines.

These popularizers insisted that they were not advocating nuclear war, but simply viewing current events in the light of prophecy. But their interpretation encouraged passivity toward the threat. If nuclear war is inevitable, why try to prevent it —especially if the Rapture will probably come first?

**Russia**, too, preoccupied Cold War prophecy writers. Some interpreters had long

identified Russia as “Gog,” the mysterious northern kingdom whose doom is foretold in Ezekiel 38. This view gained ground after the 1917 Bolshevik Revolution, and it proved highly popular in the Cold War. Most prophecy writers held that Russia’s coming destruction would be by supernatural, not human, means. But, again, their message deepened Cold War tensions. If your enemy’s doom is foreordained, why resist the inevitable?

Postwar dispensationalists also focused on **the fate of the Jews**, viewing Israel’s founding in 1948 as a key prophetic fulfillment. In some ways, these writers saw the Jews’ destiny as glorious. Citing God’s grant to Abraham of all the land from the “river of Egypt” to the Euphrates River in present-day Iraq, Lindsey and others foresaw Israel’s vast future expansion. They also predicted a rebuilt Jewish Temple on Jerusalem’s Temple Mount, now occupied by sacred Islamic shrines, as the site of Christ’s millennial rule. The anti-Arab subtext here was clear. As one author put it in 1971: “When all the Jews return..., God ... will lay the land of the Arabs waste.”

But these same writers also portrayed the long history of anti-Semitic hatred and persecution as God’s “chastisement” of his wayward people. In 1991, at the Yad Vashem Holocaust memorial in Jerusalem, with its harrowing scenes of Nazi death camps, a fundamentalist prophecy believer whispered to me: “Surely when Jews see this, they must realize what a mistake they made in rejecting Christ.” During the coming Great Tribulation, many prophecy writers insist, Antichrist will slaughter two-thirds of all Jews. In short, anti-Jewish holocausts past and future, while deplorable, are foreordained by God himself.

Post-1945 prophecy writers also pointed to **global economic and political trends** as portents of Antichrist’s world order, foretold in Revelation 13: “And [the Beast] causeth all ... to receive a mark in their right hand, or in their foreheads. And ... no man might buy or sell, save he that hath the mark . . . of the beast..., Six hundred three score and six.” This number six-six-six exerts special fascination. The ancients often gave letters numerical values to find hidden meanings in words and names, and most Bible scholars view “six-six-six” as a coded allusion to the Emperor Nero.

Over the centuries, however, Antichrist hunters have fingered the Pope, George III, Napoleon, Mussolini, Hitler, Henry Kissinger, and many others. In the 1980s, some noted that Ronald Wilson Reagan’s three names each has six letters! Contemporary candidates include Bill

Gates, Al Gore, and Hillary Clinton.

But most postwar popularizers proved less interested in identifying the Antichrist than in finding portents of his global system, including the UN and the European Union. They also saw computers, credit cards, and communications satellites as technologies the Antichrist will use to impose his worldwide tyranny.

As with nuclear war and the Soviet threat, the anxieties exploited here were real, reflecting uneasiness about mass culture, globalization, and media-driven politics. Indeed, the prophecy writers' view of an emerging world system echoed 1960s' New Left rhetoric, which also saw international capitalism as all-powerful. The New Left called it "the Establishment"; prophecy believers called it "the Beast," but their analysis of world trends was remarkably similar.

As for **the United States**, postwar prophecy writers diverged sharply from earlier believers who saw America as enjoying God's special favor. Instead, many now pointed to America's growing wickedness as a sign of the End. The government, once viewed as serving God's purposes, became an agent of evil, legalizing abortion; banning school prayer; protecting homosexuality, pornography, and the teaching of evolution; and preparing for the Antichrist rule by collecting computerized data on citizens.

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Such was the shape of prophecy belief around 1990, when the Cold War ended, the Soviet Union collapsed, and fears of nuclear war eased. But the prophecy promoters adapted quickly, and this chameleon-like belief system not only survived, but burgeoned. Prophecy paperbacks proliferated, as did televangelists, prophecy conferences, and glossy magazines such as *Midnight Call*. So did Rapture Kitsch, from wristwatches proclaiming "One Hour Nearer the Lord's Return" to postcards and placemats featuring a Rapture painting, complete with crashing cars and airplanes.

*The Omega Code*, a 1999 prophecy film, earned 4.5 million dollars in three weeks. The Internet is awash in prophecy speculation. A website called "Rapture Index" correlates current events with Bible prophecies.

And then there is Tim LaHaye and Jerry Jenkins' "Left Behind" juggernaut, launched in 1995 and eventually reaching twelve volumes. Tie-in marketing includes a movie, DVDs;

comic books; T-shirts; a videogame; a junior edition, *Left Behind for Kids*; and a radio dramatization aired on 350 Christian stations.

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Using all these mass-media outlets, post-Cold War prophecy popularizers focused on four key End-Time signs: **America's wickedness**, the **Environment**, **Islam and Israel**, and **globalization**.

- The theme of America's wickedness, while hardly new, has become ever more central. Indeed, with the Cold War's end, the apocalyptic worldview that had seen Moscow as the focus of evil now sometimes cast Washington, D.C. in that role. In 2001, Jerry Falwell and Pat Robertson interpreted the 9/11 attacks as God's judgment on radical feminists, abortion-rights advocates, and the American Civil Liberties Union, among others.

- Contemporary prophecy popularizers also point to environmental trends such as global warming; air and water pollution; and solar-radiation hazards related to the thinning ozone layer as previews of the catastrophes described in Revelation: a darkened sun; rivers and lakes turning to blood; and horrible sores breaking out on people's bodies, as God disrupts the natural order itself in his wrath with wicked humanity.

As with nuclear war earlier, prophecy believers see little point in combating these hazards, since they simply show that God's End Time plan is on track. In 2005, Hal Lindsey saw Hurricane Katrina as a sign that the End is near. The New England Puritans viewed storms and earthquakes as supernatural omens, and today's prophecy writers echo this interpretation, with the ultimate judgment yet awaiting us.

- Post-Cold War dispensationalists also focused on Islam's role in prophecy. This is, in fact, an ancient theme. The medieval Crusaders battled to free Jerusalem from Muslim rule to prepare for Christ's millennial kingdom. Later interpreters linked the Islamic Ottoman Empire to the Antichrist.

This theme faded with the Ottoman Empire's collapse and the rise of the Soviet Union after World War I, but it roared back during the 1991 Persian Gulf War. The Jews for Jesus organization, for example, published full-page newspaper ads proclaiming: "[Saddam Hussein] represent[s] the spirit of Antichrist about which the Bible warns us."

Saddam's plans to rebuild ancient Babylon roused special interest, since Revelation



portrays Babylon as the epitome of evil and prophesies its fiery destruction. One prophecy writer called Saddam's project "thrilling proof that Bible prophecies are infallible," and went on: "If Babylon is destroyed in the end times, who will destroy it? . . . [The] United States is a major world power—how could it not play a major role?"

The attacks of September 11, 2001, and the administration's subsequent focus on Iraq raised this prophetic theme to a fever pitch. Hal Lindsey's Website featured a cartoon of a plane emblazoned with a U.S. flag and a Star of David and carrying a missile targeting "Saddam". The caption quoted Zechariah: "In that day I will . . . destroy all nations that come against Israel." In a November 2002 sermon beamed nationwide via the Trinity Broadcasting Network, televangelist John Hagee called the looming US invasion of Iraq "the beginning of the end," and a sign of Christ's Second Coming. As the sermon ended, House majority leader Tom DeLay rose to proclaim: "[W]hat has been spoken here tonight is the truth from God." The 2003 Iraq invasion thus found prophecy believers well primed, viewing the action as part of God's End Time plan.

The focus on Saddam reflected the larger demonization of Islam. Prophecy writer Michael Evans called Islam "a religion conceived in the pit of hell," and others agreed.

Most prophecy writers also support Israel's occupation of the West Bank and oppose a Palestinian state or shared governance of Jerusalem. The Bush administration's so-called roadmap to peace of 2003, calling for cutbacks in Israel's West Bank settlements, stirred alarm among prophecy believers and Christian Fundamentalists. The Christian Right leader Gary Bauer told AIPAC, the American-Israel Political Action Committee: "God owned the land; he gave it to the Jewish people, and neither the UN . . . nor any [nation] can give away land that does not belong to them, but belongs to you." Prophecy writer Michael Evans agreed: "God said the land of Israel belongs to the lineage of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob. The only road map for peace is the Bible. . . . God gave [the Jews] that land and forbade them to sell it."

The prophecy popularizers readily acknowledge that Israel's territorial expansion and claims to Temple Mount could lead to horrendous conflict. Indeed, their scenario assumes just such an apocalyptic showdown. They quote God's curse on Abraham's illegitimate son Ishmael and God's blessing on Abraham's legitimate son Isaac as proof of eternal conflict between Arabs and Jews. Like all apocalyptic struggles, this can end only in total victory for one side,

annihilation of the other.

In Hal Lindsey's 1996 prophecy novel *Blood Moon*, Israel responds to a threatened attack by launching a preemptive nuclear assault that destroys "every Arab and Muslim capital . . . , along with the infrastructure of their nation." Global genocide, from Morocco to Indonesia, finally fulfills God's End Time plan.

In his 1998 book *Final Dawn over Jerusalem*, televangelist John Hagee attacked any peace plan involving even partial withdrawal from the West Bank and shared governance of Jerusalem: "The man or nation that lifts a voice or hand against Israel invites the wrath of God. . . ." he wrote; "There can be no compromise regarding . . . Jerusalem, not now, not ever. . . . Israel is the only nation created by a sovereign act of God, and He has sworn . . . to defend His Holy City."

Early in 2006, Hagee formed a lobby, Christians United for Israel (acronym CUFI). The inaugural event in Washington, drew 3,500 supporters. Featured speakers included Tom DeLay, Republican senators Rick Santorum and Sam Brownback, and GOP national chairman Ken Mehlman. President Bush sent greetings. Proclaiming the Israeli-Arab conflict "a war of good versus evil," Hagee declared: "This is a religious war that Islam cannot—and must not--win . . . The end of the world is rapidly approaching." At CUFI's 2007 Washington conference, Senator Joseph Lieberman compared Hagee favorably to Moses, and Tom DeLay, asked by a reporter about his prophecy beliefs and how they relate to his support for Israel, responded: "[The Rapture] is what I live for . . . . And obviously we have to be connected to Israel . . . to enjoy the Second Coming of Christ."

Some Israeli leaders welcome this support. When Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu visited the U.S. in 1998, he met *first* with Jerry Falwell, *then* went to Washington to see President Clinton. On the same trip, Netanyahu told an audience of 3,000 prophecy-believing Christian conservatives: "We have no greater friends and allies than the people sitting in this room."

But the darker side of this support remains. Although Hagee and others downplay the theme, dispensationalist doctrine still holds that Antichrist will slaughter most Jews, and that only a few who turn to Christ will survive Armageddon. As the Southern Baptist leader Paige Patterson has said, describing the coming Tribulation: "The Jews will once again be driven out

into the wilderness by the Antichrist, almost to the point of extinction, [it will be] the worst wave of anti-semitism we've ever seen."

- Today's prophecy expositors also continue to point to global political and economic trends as a prelude to Antichrist's rule. Pat Robertson's *New World Order* of 1991 offered a deeply conspiratorial view of history, with the Masons, the Federal Reserve Board, the UN, the Beatles, the EU, and the World Bank all preparing the world for Antichrist's dictatorship. The vast conspiracy even includes the first U.S. Congress, which adopted the Great Seal of the United States with its motto from Virgil, "Novo Ordo Seclorum," which Robertson translates as "New World Order." The conspirators staged the entire Cold War, Robertson suggests, to conceal their larger aims. "A giant plan is unfolding," he says, "Everything is perfectly on cue."

Robertson is not alone. In the *Omega Code* movie, the Evil One is a Rupert-Murdoch-like media mogul who gains control of the European Union as a step toward world rule. In Lindsey's novel *Blood Moon*, the UN Secretary General is the Antichrist.

In this climate, politicians and right-wing media voices run little risk in bashing international organizations, since many citizens view these bodies as--quite literally--demonic. The more international leaders claim to be seeking peace, the more suspect they become, since Revelation says the Beast will first pose as a peacemaker. And, of course, the belief in an all-encompassing demonic world system also fuels suspicion of *America's* civic institutions, from public schools to the federal government.

This demonizing of the new world order is profoundly ironic, since it is precisely the global mass media, communications satellites, and multinational corporations that enable the prophecy popularizers to reach millions worldwide. The Internet extends their reach; mass marketers like Borders, WalMart and Amazon.com sell their books. The *Left Behind* series is available in thirty languages, from Afrikaans to Thai. Hal Lindsey's publisher, Zondervan, is now part of Rupert Murdoch's media empire. Mike Evans publisher, WarnerFaith, is a division of AOL Time-Warner. Tim LaHaye of *Left Behind* fame recently signed a four-million-dollar book deal with Bantam Books, a division of the German media giant Bertelsmann. In short, our end-time prophecy gurus are totally enmeshed in the same global system that they denounce as part of the Antichrist's emerging empire.

All these themes converge in the *Left Behind* books, in which all institutions are suspect--

the media; the government; most churches; and, of course, the UN. As the plot unfolds, the Antichrist, the charismatic Nicolai Carpathia, posing as a man of peace, becomes head of the UN, which he promptly moves to a rebuilt Babylon, so these twin embodiments of satanic power can be destroyed simultaneously, as the Bible prophesies.

Tim LaHaye is a veteran of right-wing causes, going back to the John Birch Society. The *Left Behind* franchise has vastly enlarged his audience and generated millions for his causes, including the Institute for Creation Research; the Council on Revival, dedicated to imposing “biblical law” on the nation; Concerned Women for America, headed by his wife Beverly; and the secretive Council for National Policy, which met with George W. Bush during the 2000 campaign.

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As many have noted, an aura of apocalyptic assurance pervades the current administration. After Bush’s 1986 religious conversion, the conviction that his policies mirror God’s will seemed to grip him. When still in Texas politics, he said: “I could not be governor if I did not believe in a divine plan that supersedes all human plans.” In a watershed speech after nine-eleven, he pledged not only to avenge the attacks, but to “rid the world of evil”—the classic goal of the apocalyptic mindset. Journalist Bob Woodward, interviewing Bush before the Iraq War, became convinced that he was “casting his mission and that of the country in the grand vision of God’s master plan.”

General William Boykin, deputy undersecretary of defense, offered a particularly explicit articulation of this theme. In sermons in evangelical churches in 2002-03, Boykin, in full-dress uniform, voiced his basic message: terrorists hate America “because we’re a Christian nation, . . . and the enemy is a guy named Satan.” Referring to a captured Muslim warlord in Somalia, he said: “I knew that my God was a real God, and his was an idol.”

President Bush distanced himself from Boykin’s remarks after Muslim protests, but the general remains in his post. In fact, Boykin simply echoed the pronouncements of Lindsey, Falwell, Hagee, Robertson, Evans, LaHaye, and other prophecy writers.

I am not arguing that U.S. foreign policy is shaped directly by prophecy belief, but these beliefs permeate the political culture within which today’s leaders operate, making it easier for them to pursue some policies, harder to pursue others. For prophecy believers, the Iraq War; the

Israeli-Palestinian conflict; Israel's geographic expansion; the administration's foot-dragging on environmental issues and suspicion of the UN and other international bodies all conform closely to the End Time scenario they believe is unfolding before our eyes.

All this impacts America's civic culture. On one hand, prophecy belief encourages passivity in the public sphere. *Individuals* determine their *personal destiny* by accepting or rejecting Christ, but since history's *overall* course lies beyond human control, civic engagement is pointless. Efforts to resolve international conflicts by compromise or negotiation are futile. Only Armageddon will bring resolution.

Yet our prophecy popularizers also betray an impulse to help along God's plan. While insisting that all is in God's hands, they boldly plunge into Middle East disputes and our domestic culture wars. Preaching a doctrine that encourages passivity, they simultaneously urge policies that they believe may yet, at the last moment, once again put America on God's side.

Despite the contradictions, the fundamental structure of the apocalyptic worldview remains a constant. In this worldview, all conflict—indeed, all human history—dissolves into a cosmic struggle between opposing forces. This mindset inevitably leads to absolutist, black-and-white thinking. Any talk of compromise, ambiguity, or shades of gray misses the underlying reality: the eternal conflict between supernatural forces in which we human beings are little more than pawns. On one side are massed the Antichrist's agents—Russia, Islam, secular America, the New World Order, or all of the above. On the other side stand the forces of righteousness, embattled, but ultimately victorious.

While our apocalyptic writers denounce the satanic forces seeking world domination, their own worldview is no less triumphalist, obsessively intent on ridding the world of evil. In the locked cage of apocalyptic belief, the opposing sides become, in reality, mirror images of each other.

Millions of our fellow citizens firmly believe that humanity's final crisis is near—a cosmic showdown that will end in the destruction of most of the human race. And they base political opinions on these beliefs—beliefs that are reinforced and amplified by government officials, influential religious figures, and all the technology of today's mass media.

Of course, the prophecy popularizers have every right to promulgate their ideas. But those who do *not* share their outlook have the same right, indeed the obligation, to subject these

beliefs to vigorous scrutiny and public debate.

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In conclusion, then, I would simply briefly note that to understand the apocalyptic worldview, one must try to understand its appeal.

First of all, this worldview gives meaning to history. History teachers and textbook writers generally avoid speculating about history's ultimate meaning or final outcome. Prophetic history, by contrast, is purposeful, advancing steadily toward its great consummation. Recognizing the popular longing for transcendent meaning in history, prophecy writers have stepped in to fill the void, explaining the great drama and its meaning, claiming the Bible itself as their authority.

Even more basic to the appeal of Bible prophecy is its utopian promise, evoked in Revelation's moving conclusion:

And I saw a new heaven and a new earth. . . , the holy city, new Jerusalem, coming down . . . out of heaven, prepared as a bride adorned for her husband. And I heard a great voice out of heaven saying, Behold, the tabernacle of God is with men, and he will dwell with them, and they shall be his people. . . . And God shall wipe away all tears from their eyes; and there shall be no more death, neither sorrow, nor crying, neither shall there be any more pain, for the former things are passed away.

This inspiring vision has inspired countless other writers, including Thomas More, who coined the word "Utopia" in 1516. Karl Marx's *Das Kapital* is a secular apocalypse, with the overthrow of capitalism as Armageddon, and the triumph of communism as the Millennium. All such visions, including John Darby's, speak to humanity's discontent with a tragically flawed world order, and our longings for a better one.

Finally, however one feels about the Falwells, LaHayes, and Hagees of our age, prophetic belief at the grassroots level helps bind together congregations of believers whose religious faith creates a sense of community and gives their lives purpose.

Sustained by such powerful longings and meeting such strong human needs, the prophetic beliefs surging through our culture merit not just our bemused indulgence, but our

close attention. To fail to understand their enduring appeal is to fail to understand contemporary America.