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## **ONWARD CHRISTIAN SOLDIERS: AMERICAN DISPENSATIONALISTS, GEORGE W. BUSH AND THE MIDDLE EAST**

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### **ABSTRACT**

The goal of this paper is twofold. First, it attempts to explain why dispensationalist Christians were successful at influencing American foreign policy during the administration of George W. Bush, particularly towards the Middle East. Specifically, I connect this success to their ties to Washington neo-conservatives, the personal faith of Bush himself and his links to conservative Christians, and their broad cultural appeal and grassroots strength. Second, it will present two brief case studies on the influence that dispensationalism has had on US policy towards Israel and Iraq during the administration of George W. Bush.

### **Introduction**

For many reasons, the Middle East remains a primary focal point for those in the American foreign policy establishment. Because the world's economies are dependent on Middle Eastern oil, it is central to global economic stability. The conflicts that take place in the Middle East, therefore, draw in the rest of the world's major powers like a magnet. The volatility of the region renders it perhaps the most likely location for the instigation of World War III, leading many policy makers in the West to propose numerous peace treaties and long-term security arrangements. The attacks of September 11, 2001 highlighted the issues of terrorism, the Israeli-Palestinian conflict, and the dearth of civil rights and liberties in the Middle East, calling into question the trajectory of American Middle East

policy since the end of the cold war. The ‘Arab Spring’ ten years later has raised similar issues about the dangers of illiberal religious political parties and the future of traditional American alliances in the region.

Many evangelicals, however, spotlight the Middle East for entirely different reasons: they equate regional conflicts and chaos with the fulfillment of Bible prophecy signaling the onset of Armageddon. Some contemporary Bible scholars consider the apocalyptic language of the Bible to be a polemic against events that took place during the lives of its authors. Unlike many in the Roman Catholic and mainstream churches, however, dispensationalist Christians are likely to see the final book of the Bible—the Revelation of John—less as spiritual allegory or metaphorical allusions to the Christian struggle against the Roman occupation of Jerusalem in the days of the early church, and more of a coded timeline and script leading to the Second Coming of Christ. They equate hurricanes, earthquakes, tsunamis, pandemics, floods, crime, secularism, sexual immorality, wars, terrorism, and famines as the beginning of the ‘birth pains’ spoken of in Jesus’ Olivet Discourse (Matthew 24: 8). Particularly after the demise of the Soviet Union and the attacks of September 11, dispensationalist attention has once again turned toward the Middle East.

According to the Pew Research Center, evangelicals are the most likely active group in American politics to view the politics of the Middle East through a Biblical prism.<sup>1</sup> A 2002 *Time/CNN* poll revealed that 59 percent of Americans believe that the ‘end of the world’ as depicted in the Book of Revelation will come to pass, and 17 percent believe it will happen in their lifetimes (Gibbs 2002). A Gallup poll taken during the Persian Gulf War of 1990–1991 showed that 15 percent of American respondents believed that conflict to be the beginning of Armageddon (Bezilla 1996: 26). A 1999 *Newsweek* poll found that 71 percent of evangelicals believed the world would end at the culmination of Armageddon (Baumgartner *et al.* 2008: 173). Another *Newsweek* poll, which gauged Americans’ opinions on the Book of Revelation and ‘the end times’, discovered that 36 percent of all Americans believe that the Book of Revelation contains ‘true prophecy’; 55 percent adhere to the doctrine of the ‘rapture of the church’ (Gates *et al.* 2004).

For too long secularists and academics have scoffed at the role that theology plays in the foreign policy desires of Christian dispensationalists, despite the fact that the Christian Right is not only a base of support for the Republican Party but also an established presence itself in foreign

1 Pew Research Center for the People and Press, ‘Religion and Politics: Contention and Consensus Growing Number Says Islam Encourages Violence Among Followers’, available at <http://people-press.org/reports/display.php3?ReportID=189> (accessed 12 March, 2008).

affairs. Because these individuals are vocal about what animates their views toward the Middle East, those who dismiss their views as fringe ‘right-wing’ beliefs risk missing an important component in American foreign policy, especially towards the Middle East. Unlike other groups involved in foreign policy lobbying, dispensational Christianity is not solely a political movement, but a theo-political one that uses the Bible to understand current events. For instance, many Christians believe that the Bible foresaw the Persian Gulf Wars of 1990–1991 and 2003 and the demise of Saddam Hussein, the formation of the European Union from which the antichrist is believed to come to power, and the rise of Islamic extremism as a threat to Western civilisation. Truly to understand the domestic determinants of US Middle East policy, therefore, it is important to highlight the importance of scripture and prophecy in dispensationalist thinking.

The goal of this paper is twofold. First, it attempts to explain why dispensationalist Christians were so successful at influencing American foreign policy in the administration of George W. Bush. Specifically, I connect this success to their ties to Washington neo-conservatives, the personal faith of George W. Bush and his links to conservative Christians, and the broad cultural appeal and grassroots strength of dispensationalist theology. Second, it will present two brief case studies on the influence that dispensationalism had on US policy towards Israel and Iraq during the administration of George W. Bush.

### **Premillennial Dispensationalism**

Each of the world’s three great monotheistic religions—Judaism, Christianity, and Islam—depicts a distinct vision for the future broadly known as the ‘end times’ or eschatology. In all three faith traditions, the end times culminate with the return of a Messiah (or Mahdi in Shi’a Islam) who ushers in a reign of peace after a prolonged struggle or tribulation period. More importantly, the eschatology in all three religions is in some way tied to the land of Israel-Palestine and the city of Jerusalem, making it impossible to segregate religion from politics in the Holy Land. For Christians, Israel—more specifically Jerusalem and the Temple Mount—is where it is believed Christ will return and begin his millennial reign from the rebuilt temple of King Solomon.

End times beliefs in Christianity vary greatly, and are held by groups as diverse as evangelicals, Jehovah’s Witnesses and Adventists. Evangelicals themselves dispute end times scenarios, and some hold no set eschatology at all. I deal here with a narrative that is unique to a large segment of evangelical Christians known as pre-millennial or ‘progressive’

dispensationalism (Whalen 2000: 128; Dewitt 2002: 18–20).<sup>2</sup> They are called ‘pre-millennial’ in that they consider the current age as immediately preceding the thousand-year (millennial) kingdom of Christ. In contrast, Christians holding post-millennial, amillennial, or preterist eschatology see the kingdom of Christ as either presently established or metaphorical in nature. Post-millennialists aver that God’s kingdom must rule on earth for 1000 years *before* Christ can return. Conversely, dispensationalists read prophetic passages of scripture literally rather than metaphorically, and believe that humankind currently lives in the end times and that scripture foretells a specific chain of events that will culminate in the historic Battle of Armageddon. For those believing that scripture directly corresponds to contemporary world politics, entities such as the United Nations, the European Union, Russia, various Muslim states, and, most importantly Israel, all have a precise role in the unfolding of Bible prophecy.<sup>3</sup>

Utilising a literalist and complex interpretation of prophetic scripture found in the books of the Major and Minor Hebrew prophets, the apocalyptic New Testament book of Revelation, and the writings of John Nelson Darby and Cyrus Scofield, many conservative Christians believe that God has divided the course of human history into seven pre-determined eras or dispensations. Darby, a Calvinist theologian and founder of the Plymouth Brethren religious group, utilised a system of Biblical interpretation that allowed him to divide human history into different periods, each marking a different covenantal relationship between God and humankind. Darby’s system pieced together passages of scripture in both Old and New Testaments, thus creating a seamless prophetic timeline whereby Christians could discern future events by revealing secrets imbedded within scripture.<sup>4</sup> This hermeneutic stood in opposition to the ideals of the Enlightenment era—that humankind could create for itself a better world through rationality and intuition. Darby’s dispensationalism first gained popularity in the United States with the dissemination of the *Scofield Reference Bible*—considered by many to be the most popular study Bible of all time—Lewis Sperry Chafer’s *Systematic Theology*, and more recently through publications by

2 From here on, I use the terms ‘evangelical’ and ‘dispensationalist’ synonymously with the understanding that not all evangelicals hold a pre-millennial or dispensationalist theology.

3 The end-times narrative common to dispensationalism has been rejected by Catholics, Orthodox Christians, mainline Protestants, and many evangelical groups as well.

4 An earlier version of dispensationalism called ‘historical dispensationalism’ existed during the three centuries following the execution of Christ. Adherents of this system held that John’s Revelation revealed that Christ would quickly return to earth to rescue ‘biblical Israel’ from the Roman persecution. With Constantine’s establishment of Christianity as the Roman state religion and the consequent subsiding of Christian persecution, dispensationalism lost its appeal until revived by Darby in the nineteenth century.

dispensationalist authors like Hal Lindsey, Jerry Jenkins, Tim LaHaye, and Joel C. Rosenberg. Not surprisingly, the dispensationalist eschatology contained in this widespread literature is the most widely held form of dispensationalism among conservative Christians (Haija 2006: 82).

In the dispensationalist timeline, most evangelicals agree that humankind currently lives in the sixth dispensation – commonly referred to as the ‘church age’ or the dispensation of grace – which will end with the rapture of the church; the seventh dispensation will consist of the return of Christ and his millennial reign. Diametrically opposed to the optimistic post-millennialism, dispensationalism tends to be more pessimistic in nature, emphasising the ever-increasing corruption and chaos present in the world today. For believers in Bible prophecy, current events coincide with end-time prophecies predicting wars, famines, natural disasters, the reconstitution of Israel, and the inchoate formation of a one-world government. Therefore, as believers look for the millennial reign of Christ, American stances towards the Israelis and Palestinians, Iraq, Iran, Russia, the European Union and Afghanistan are not only a matter of national interest but of revealed prophecy (see Boyer 1992; O’Leary 1994). Thus dispensationalism, by shaping the political postures held by many evangelical and fundamentalist Christians, serves a cohesive function by bringing together issues as disparate as support for Israel, the role of the US in the latter days, and the growing presence of the United Nations.

## **I. Explaining the Rise of Dispensationalism in Foreign Affairs**

### ***A. The Evangelical-Neoconservative Alliance***

The foreign policy of the administration of George W. Bush was most consistent with the objectives of two potent, powerful and relatively new power players in American society – neoconservatives and evangelical Christians – and these two groups, in wake of the events of September 11, 2001, forged curious, informal yet powerful bonds in influencing US foreign policy toward the Middle East. The attacks afforded the neoconservatives the opportunity to affix imperialist objectives and American predominance to intense nationalism and religious fervor. Both groups exerted influence over the administration’s formulation of international policy through both the neocon presence in the administration and the Christian Right’s electoral and grassroots strength. The intersection of various phenomena – a religious president who saw the world in Manichean terms, the conservative takeover of all three branches of government, the need for a proactive response to the attacks of September 11, and the unquestioned superiority of the American military – presented these groups with auspicious

conditions—foreign and domestic—to enact a neo-Reganite approach towards international relations. The neoconservative-evangelical alliance has at its core the following four principles: (1) a strong preference for American unilateralism and cynicism of international/transnational bodies and treaties; (2) a vigorous defense of the state of Israel; (3) the overthrow of regimes hostile to the US; and (4) support for the American military and the war against terror.<sup>5</sup>

Although the neoconservatives and Christian Right movements originated from very different points on the political, theological, and cultural spectrums, the two disparate movements began progressing in the same direction during the Vietnam War. Like neo-conservatism, the Christian Right arose from liberalising tendencies in American culture throughout the 1960s and 1970s. Tying together the two movements, Stefan Halper and Jonathan Clarke assert that ‘Just as neoconservative intellectuals reacted to the counterculture and its effect on American society in the latter 1960s and early 1970s, so the evangelicals considered that the cultural revolution flew in the face of important American values’

5 Though this alliance is very real and important, it is necessary to state at the outset that it was not preordained and had to overcome numerous obstacles before becoming reality. First, individuals and organisations within the Christian Right have been prone to anti-Semitism despite their vehement support for Israel. Examples include the head of the Southern Baptist Convention (SBC) declaring that God did not hear the prayers of Jews; Pat Robertson’s conspiracy theories about Jews and the New World Order; Jerry Falwell’s comments that the anti-Christ was a Romanian Jew alive today; and apocalyptic scenarios envisaging the mass slaughter of Jews in the end times. Furthermore, American Jews (both on the Right and Left) tend to view the proselytising tendencies of the Christian Right with suspicion. Second, the backgrounds of both groups are vastly different. With their origins in anti-Soviet leftist ideology, the neoconservatives are primarily a small band of intellectuals with roots in prestigious universities; especially in the administrations of Ronald Reagan and George W. Bush, they were, or had access to, influential policy makers at the highest levels of government. Conservative evangelicals, in contrast, tend to have lower levels of education and income than do neoconservatives. They influence politics from the ‘bottom-up’ through their electoral and mobilising prowess. Third, the groups differ in their use of religion. Many conservative Christians espouse the concept of a ‘Christian nation’ – a nation that recognises divine law as superior to human written codes. Many neoconservatives are less likely to adopt religious stances because of their belief that morality can be attained through secular creeds manifested in nationalism, traditionalism, and history. This understanding can be traced to the writings of Leo Strauss who contended that the state should separate itself from religious dogma. The difference is evident in considering the philosophical basis for the American founding. Both groups maintain that the U.S. holds a special place in world history but for differing reasons. Fourth, the alliance had to overcome the rival pull of the paleo-conservatives upon evangelicals. Unlike neoconservatives, paleo-conservatives see American values arising from its history, Anglo-Saxon legal tradition, and religious heritage; they view with incredulity attempts to transfer or impose Western systems of governance on countries where these characteristics are not found. There still persists a strong paleo-conservative current within the Christian Right on issues such as trade, globalisation, immigration, and nation-building.

(Halper and Clarke 2005: 196). For evangelicals and neoconservatives, the war epitomised the nadir of American societal degradation and international decline. During this period, many conservative Christians, reacting to the perceived decline of the US, looked to the military as a restorer of both international predominance and domestic order – the very values championed by neoconservatives (Bacevich 2005: 123–126). As the rest of the country began to view the entanglement with suspicion, the fierce anticommunism of fundamentalist and evangelical Christians and neoconservatives necessarily meant lending their unconditional support to the military (Wittkopf 1990: 43–44; Hurwitz *et al.* 1993). Thus the ‘counter-counter-culture’ reacted internationally to the growing strength of communism and domestically to the women’s liberation movement, the pro-homosexual movement, the *Roe v. Wade* court decision legalising abortion, and the war weariness of the general public. Their solution called for an unequivocal resurrection of ‘American values’ and support for the defense establishment. As various elements of the ‘counter-counter-culture’ moved closer together in the following decades, an embryonic partnership formed between neoconservatives and evangelicals during the Reagan years (during which the ‘evil empire’ became both a theological and ideological rival) and reached fruition during the latter stages of the Clinton presidency – chastised by neoconservatives and conservative Christians for its contribution to the internal moral decay and external pusillanimity – and cemented during the presidency of George W. Bush.

The neoconservative movement began moving closer ideologically to the evangelicals as it separated itself from the realist school of thought during the cold war. Whereas realists supported authoritarian governments and the stability they provided, neoconservatives espoused the proliferation of democracy and the induction of values in the conduct of foreign policy. After witnessing the political and economic liberalisation in East Asia and the success it brought, neoconservatives now advocate similar liberalisation processes in the Middle East. For them, the conclusion of the cold war essentially meant that the state in the position of the world’s sole military hegemon no longer had to support authoritarian regimes in the Third World in the name of containing the Soviet threat. The global issues important to neoconservatives – support for Israel, patriotic nationalism, containment of China, and Islamic militancy – also resonate deeply in the conservative Christian community.

Evangelical stances on foreign policy issues engendered praise from neoconservatives even to the point of the formation of a loose alliance between both groups. Whether it be opposition to the Kyoto Treaty; rejection of the Anti-Ballistic Missile Treaty with the Soviet Union; disdain for the International Criminal Court; suspicion of the IMF,

UN, EU and other transnational organisations; skepticism of China and other nations with poor human rights records; expansion of democracy; support for Israel; or the preference for unilateralism in prosecuting the war against terror, the convergence of such foreign policy stances led to a coalition between neoconservatives and conservative Christians on many international fronts. While neoconservatives exercised power within presidential administrations, conservative Christians exerted influence not from seats within the defense department, but through their grassroots organisations and its sizable electoral constituency.

Speaking to the unique emergence of an alliance between neoconservatives and religious conservatives in the 1990s, father of neoconservatism Irving Kristol writes:

The steady decline in our democratic culture, sinking to new levels of vulgarity, does unite neoconservatives with traditional conservatives. . . . The upshot is a quite unexpected alliance between neoconservatives, who include a fair proportion of secular intellectuals, and religious traditionalists. They are united on issues concerning the quality of education, the relations of church and state, the regulation of pornography, and the like, all of which they regard as proper candidates for the government's attention. And since the Republican Party now has a substantial base among the religious, this gives neoconservatives a certain influence and even power. (Kristol 2003)

In 1995, Kristol exhorted American conservatives to recognise the importance of the Christian Right in politics in terms of the 'three pillars of modern conservatism . . . religion, nationalism, and economic growth'. Citing religion's power to 'shape people's characters and regulate their motivation', he believed it to be the most important of the three (Kristol 1995: 365). Thus Kristol encouraged the formation of alliances with religious conservatives to combat the downward spiral of moral decay associated with the Clinton administration. Referring specifically to conservative Christians, Kristol wrote that 'if the Republican Party is to survive, it must work on accommodating these people' (Kristol 1995: 380) Yet he touts the neoconservatives as being the only conservatives that 'can really speak to [conservative Christians]', presumably because they speak the same language and see the world through similar lenses, though they may disagree on religious doctrine (Kristol 1995: 380). Bottum (2004: 46) suggests that the 'new fusionism between social conservatives and neoconservatives' arises from a 'cynical bargain' which amalgamates a 'moralist foreign policy' with 'the pro-life fight'.

Regarding international relations, both groups fervently stress the position of the United States as the world's sole superpower and believe its role in international affairs should be tantamount to this status. Neoconservatives and evangelicals, therefore, condone American unilateralism and oppose the mediation of international institutions,

especially when they stand diametrically opposed to US objectives. They hesitate to relinquish power to multilateral bodies that could potentially veto a US action. Multinational organisations such as the United Nations, they argue, threaten American sovereignty and its role in policing the world. Many American Christians view the UN as an institution inherently anti-American in nature.

Given their mutual admiration for American power, fear of cultural degradation, support for Israel and disdain for the United Nations, it is not surprising that the partnership is more than just theoretical in nature. The year 1997 witnessed the political amalgamation of neoconservatives and the Christian Right with the birth of the Project for the New American Century (PNAC). This initiative urged the Clinton administration to adopt a more hard-line foreign policy, especially with regard to Saddam Hussein. According to its Statement of Principles, PNAC is an organisation 'dedicated to a few fundamental propositions: that American leadership is good both for America and for the world; and that such leadership requires military strength, diplomatic energy and commitment to moral principle'. It also identified four broad objectives in American foreign policy: (1) increase defense spending significantly to uphold global responsibilities; (2) strengthen democratic allies and confront regimes hostile to American interests abroad; (3) promote political and economic freedom globally; and (4) construct an international environment 'friendly to our security, our prosperity, and our principles'.<sup>6</sup>

During the same time, American Jews and Christians, as part of a broader coalition concerned about the plight of Jews and Christians abroad, came together once again, this time in support of worldwide religious freedom (Green 1999; Hertzke 2006). In response, the Clinton administration established the Advisory Committee on Religious Freedom Abroad in 1996, and in 1998, signed the Religious Freedom Act (IRFA). The late Harvard scholar Samuel Huntington attributed the passage of the law to a 'small group of activists. . . who put together a coalition encompassing some traditional human rights liberals, Jewish neoconservatives, Sinophobes, Christian evangelicals, and right-wing Republicans' (Huntington 2001: 56). Conservative Christians have used the act as a basis for demanding countries with poor human rights records accord religious freedoms to their citizens. The Office of International

6 Project for a New American Century, 'Statement of Principles', available at [www.newamericancentury.org](http://www.newamericancentury.org). Signatories to its Statement of Principles included Elliott Abrams, Francis Fukuyama, Zalmay Khalilzad, Dick Cheney, Frank Gaffney, Donald Rumsfeld, Paul Wolfowitz, Gary Bauer, and William Bennett. Additionally, key neoconservative figures like Elliott Abrams (who himself has a profound interest in the religious determinants of foreign policy) met regularly with members of the Christian Right.

Religious Freedom publishes annually an *International Religious Freedom Report* which identifies countries with particularly egregious violations of religious freedoms. Not coincidentally, many of the countries that fare poorest are the very ones in which neoconservatives and Christian conservatives desire regime change.

Ideologically, both neoconservatism and Christian conservatism are morally driven movements emphasising a struggle between good and evil; evil must be rooted out and destroyed. During the cold war 'evil' took form in the shape of the Soviet state. For fundamentalists and conservative evangelicals, the Soviet Union embraced a policy of projecting 'godless communism' that was seen as a threat to international Christianity (see Lowry 1952; Noorbergen and Hood 1980; and Evans and Singer 1982). Furthermore, they identified the Soviet state with Biblical prophecy, especially regarding its 'backing' of the Arab states in their 1967 war with Israel. After the demise of the Soviet Union, the new enemy became China in the 1990s, and after the attacks of September 11, radical Islam (Gifford *et al.* 1996: 19). The attacks provided Irving Kristol with his wish for 'an obvious ideological and threatening enemy... one that can unite us in opposition' (Kristol 1996). It is in this third battle where one finds the strengthening of an alliance between neoconservatives and evangelical Christians; the rise of radical Islam has provided these two faces of American conservatism with a common enemy, in which tactical and strategic alliances have formed in defense of the state of Israel (McMahon 2004: 80–81). This supports historian Leo Ribuffo's analysis that religious groups are most effective when they have 'found allies outside their own communities and invoked widely shared American values' (Ribuffo 2001: 21).

The neoconservative-evangelical alliance emerged in the person of George W. Bush who functioned as a liaison between both groups (see Bush 1999; Mansfield 2003; Aikman 2004; Kessler 2004; Kaplan 2005). He proved capable of not only winning the Christian Right vote in both the 2000 and 2004 general election—a crucial segment of the Republican base—but also persuading evangelicals and fundamentalists of the wisdom of the neoconservative agenda abroad after September 11 by deliberately invoking 'double-coded' language with overtly religious overtones (Lincoln 2003: 30–31). It is a partnership that attends to the dual concerns of geo-strategic interests and national security on one hand, and domestic cultural interests on the other.

### ***B. Presidential Faith***

Evangelicals played a crucial part in the 2000 and 2004 elections, overwhelmingly supporting the candidacies of Bush Jr. In 2000, Bush

captured 68 percent of the evangelical vote, despite the fact that he ran against self-identified Southern Baptist Al Gore. In the latter election, the 78 percent of white evangelicals who voted for Bush comprised 40 percent of the president's overall vote.<sup>7</sup> Ever since his father appointed him a liaison to the conservative Christian community during the 1988 election, Bush has remained close to the Christian Right, and, upon his first election, appointed a number of evangelicals to key posts in his administration. Running on a platform of 'compassionate conservatism' during the 2000 presidential race, Bush endeared himself to conservative evangelicals who shared his beliefs. His political advisor Karl Rove made it a point aggressively to reach out to religious conservatives, partly accomplished through the deliberate use of evangelical rhetoric directly targeted at the evangelical community, from quoting scripture to referencing gospel hymns (Wallis 2003: 298–300). Referring to his conversion from an alcoholic to a 'born again' Christian, much of the world learned of Bush's religious convictions when, in a Republican primary debate in 1999, he cited Christ as his favorite philosopher because he 'changed my life'. The need to retain the support of his 'base' allowed evangelical thinking to play a more important role in presidential politics than it had in the twelve preceding years.

After the attacks of September 11<sup>th</sup>, 2001, the president resorted to the pattern of many of his predecessors by using religious rhetoric in defense of his foreign policies, from the war on terror to the war in Iraq. Since the attacks, the president consistently utilised a strategy of religious dichotomisation in painting the war on terror as a conflict between 'us and them' or 'good versus evil', and even a 'crusade' (Mirra 2002). This was most clearly evidenced in Bush's second inaugural address, which invoked Woodrow Wilson's early twentieth century agenda to democratise the world. The president's policy of transforming the world (beginning in the Middle East) awakened a sense of American 'mission' of extending freedom, 'God's gift to the world' (Bush 2004; 2005). Casting the conflict between the US and the Islamic terrorists as a cosmic moral struggle between 'good and evil' allowed Bush to frame his vision for the world in a way that would appeal to religious conservatives. According to one author, the muscular foreign policy preferences of evangelicals served to promote a sense of 'messianic militarism' within the administration (Rothschild 2003: 8–10). Bush himself began to cast the war against terror in apocalyptic terms, often referring to it as a battle of 'good versus evil'. Indeed, 'evil' became a catchword for the president and his evangelical speech writers as they consistently used it to define the enemies of the

7 The Pew Forum on Religion and Public Life, Event Transcript, 'God's Country? Evangelicals and U.S. Foreign Policy', September 26, 2006, Pew Research Center, Washington DC, available at <http://pewforum.org/events/?EventID=127>.

United States from al Qaeda to Iraq. Undoubtedly, Bush's faith and sense of divine appointment brought a moral dimension to his foreign policy. Although Bush himself may not be a believer in dispensationalism, his worldview of a 'monumental struggle' against 'evil' suggests his role as leader in the war against terror, like his presidency, was pre-ordained – the literal fulfillment of his 'charge to keep'.<sup>8</sup>

### ***C. Prophecy and Popular Culture***

The influence of dispensational pre-millennialism has grown so large that it has also entered the realm of American popular culture. An understanding of dispensationalist literature elucidates how significant portions of the movement understand current events. In 1970, author Hal Lindsey's *The Late Great Planet Earth*, the best-selling nonfiction book of the 1970s, promulgated a scenario for the end of the world by illustrating how current events embodied the fulfillment of Biblical prophecy. In his view, international politics represented not only a collision of self-interested nation-states and transnational organisations, but a transcendent cosmic struggle between God and Satan. Lindsey's work proved instrumental in introducing evangelicals to the prophetic importance of Israel, the Middle East, Russia, and Europe. The book's publication was an important forerunner to the formation of the Moral Majority, which implicitly endorsed the book's end time theology by advocating a staunch Christian Zionist platform. According to North Park University Professor of Religion and Middle East Studies Donald Wagner, after publication of *The Late Great Planet Earth*, Lindsey went on to start a consulting business, which included sessions with the Department of Defense, the Central Intelligence Agency, and the Congress (Lampman 2004: 15).

In 1991, Pat Robertson, founder of the Christian Coalition, penned his own apocalyptic work, this time from a fictional perspective. Robertson's best-selling novel *The New World Order* describes an elaborate conspiracy leading to the ascension of the antichrist to world power. The narrative, based on prophetic passages found in both the Old and New Testaments, presents a 200-year-old plot to destroy the Christian faith. Individuals and organisations involved (whether knowingly or unknowingly) are as diverse as the Freemasons, the Illuminati, the United Nations, Karl Marx, Adolf Hitler, the Trilateral Commission, Henry Kissinger, and even the Council

<sup>8</sup> While it is true that some aspects of Bush's foreign and domestic policy were at odds with the preferences of dispensationalists – for instance his stalwart support of the USA Patriot Act and backing of a two-state solution between the Israelis and Palestinians – his unilateralist approach to international relations, hostility to the United Nations, and mission-driven foreign policy were, for many evangelicals, part of unfolding prophetic scenario delineated in the Bible.

on Foreign Relations. As in the *Left Behind* novels discussed below, the backdrop for the ascent of the antichrist is the United Nations.

Written more recently, Tim LaHaye's and Jerry Jenkins' *Left Behind* series—epitomising global events from the dispensationalist perspective, especially with respect to the Middle East—represents an evangelical interpretation of end times prophecy found in the book of Revelation cast in the setting of current world politics. The novels depict a literalist Biblical rendering of the end times and prophecy interpretation including the rise of the antichrist, the Great Tribulation, and the battle of Armageddon. Written in an action-adventure/thriller genre, *Left Behind* chronicles the narrative of a band of Christians who become 'saved' after the rapture has taken place. Known as the Tribulation Force, this group of believers brave the hardships associated with the Great Tribulation: a vicious military campaign against Israel, the rise of the antichrist, the great persecution, and the trials inflicted by Revelation's 'four horsemen of the apocalypse', eerily similar to the plagues visited upon Egypt prior the exodus of the Israelites in the Old Testament. The authors depict a modern unit prepared to do battle against the forces of darkness (see Shuck 2005; Frykholm 2007).

This prospect for evangelicals exemplifies not only apocalyptic fiction but also a genuine commentary on current world affairs and 'provided an extraordinary context for a president with a religious mission' by integrating the 'terrorism of September 11, the oil politics of the Persian Gulf... and the invasion of Iraq-cum-Babylon' (Phillips 2006: 261). The twelve-volume series has generated interest in the apocalypse in both Christian and non-Christian subcultures, demonstrating the cultural strength of American evangelicalism as sales, to date, have reportedly topped 60 million.<sup>9</sup> Thus a particular belief in end-times theology presented in *Left Behind* animates the underlying motivations of many evangelical activists. LaHaye and Jenkins manage to incorporate a great deal of domestic and international politics into the novels as well. For example, the authors' stance on abortion is clear in their featuring the 'rapture' of unborn fetuses from the wombs of their mothers. Similarly, their attitudes toward the UN and the Catholic Church are evident as well in that they make the antichrist arise as leader of the UN, and the 'beast', the Secretary-General's (antichrist's) key helper, a future Pope.<sup>10</sup>

9 The popularity of the series allowed for Tyndale, the books' publisher, even to sponsor a NASCAR racer whose car displays the logo 'Left Behind'.

10 The integrating of politics into the novels should not be surprising given the political background of one of the authors. Rev. Tim LaHaye (cofounder of the Moral Majority whose wife, Beverly LaHaye, runs the influential conservative Christian organisation Concerned Women for America) has emerged as one of the preeminent leaders of the Christian Right, joining the ranks of the late Jerry Falwell, Pat Robertson

In addition, Joel C. Rosenberg, an evangelical Christian born into an Orthodox Jewish family, has also written several best-selling novels predicated upon a dispensationalist interpretation of the Bible including *The Last Jihad*, *The Last Days*, *The Ezekiel Option*, *The Copper Scroll*, and *Dead Heat*. His non-fictional *Epicenter: Why Current Rumbblings in the Middle East will Change your Future* examines real world news stories from Russia, Iran, Iraq, and Israel from the perspective of Biblical prophecy. Rosenberg has been dubbed by *U.S. News and World Report* and *New York Daily News* as a 'modern Nostradamus' and 'eerily prophetic' for the degree to which his novels have played themselves out in actual world politics.<sup>11</sup>

Rosenberg's influence, like the authors mentioned above, also reaches millions of Americans, both secular and religious, through both his written works and hundreds of media appearances from the mainstream *CNN* and *MSNBC* to the conservative *Sean Hannity Show* and *Fox News Network* to the overtly religious *The 700 Club*. He also has extensive political experience serving as senior advisor to several American and Israeli political figures including Steve Forbes, Rush Limbaugh, Natan Sharanski, and Benjamin Netanyahu.<sup>12</sup> During the 2006 crisis between Israel and Hezbollah, *CNN* featured a series of programs dedicated to

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and Billy Graham. He even has a school of prophecy named after him at Falwell's Liberty University. In the 1980s LaHaye was an important figure in the Christian Right in his roles as leader of Californians for Biblical Morality, an organisation instrumental in electing Ronald Reagan as that state's governor, and co-founder of the burgeoning Moral Majority. Later, he was named a co-chair of Jack Kemp's presidential campaign in 1988. Recently, he has established a Pre-Tribulation Research Center, which exists as 'a 'think tank' committed to the study, proclamation, teaching and defending of the Pre-tribulation Rapture (pre-70th week of Daniel) and related end-time prophecy'. Some speculated a connection between the apocalyptic writings of LaHaye and the Manichean dualism and controversial Middle East policies of George W. Bush. See Howard Fineman, 'Apocalyptic Politics', *Newsweek*, 2 May 2004, p. 55; and 'Mission Statement', Pre-Tribulation Research Center', available at [www.timlahaye.com](http://www.timlahaye.com).

11 Joel C. Rosenberg, 'Russia, Iran, and the Bomb: What Should the Bush Administration Do?' Speech Delivered to the Heritage Foundation, June 27, 2005. Rosenberg's first novel, *The Last Jihad*, written before the 2003 invasion of Iraq (and purportedly before the 11 September 2001 attacks) features a terrorist hijacking of a commercial airliner with the intent to kill the President of the United States. The act of terrorism, in turn, leads to a war between the United States and Iraq over weapons of mass destruction. *The Last Days* opens with the ambushing of a U.S. diplomatic convoy in Gaza and the death of Yasir Arafat—two events that coincided with the publication of the novel. The rest of the book details an ascendant dictatorship in Russia and a subsequent Russian-Iranian alliance against the United States and Israel based on the author's interpretation of the Great War of Ezekiel 39–39. *The Copper Scroll* and *Dead Heat* continue the series by applying prophetic, pre-millennialist underpinnings to the novels. Against the backdrop of 9/11, Rosenberg's novels continue to call attention to the dispensationalist account of the last days.

12 Joel C. Rosenberg, 'Biography', available at [www.joelrosenberg.com/about.asp](http://www.joelrosenberg.com/about.asp) (accessed 20 December 2007).

the topic of the intersection between Bible prophecy and the end of the world featuring commentary from Rosenberg on the last days. Rosenberg professed to have extraordinary clout with the White House and Capitol Hill as he claimed to have accepted invitations to address members of Congress on the parallels of Bible prophecy and current Middle East politics.<sup>13</sup>

Like the *Scofield Reference Bible* in the early 1900s, modern dispensationalist fiction has brought the end-times eschatology of many Christian evangelicals to untold millions of individuals worldwide. Coinciding roughly with the attacks of September 11, 2001, the publication of the most recent wave of apocalyptic novels generated interest in prophetic literature in Bible prophecy and the end times among its secular readers—the very purpose of the books—and renewed interest among dispensationalist Christians. The series even spawned movies, soundtracks, and video games that hold wide appeal. George Washington University Professor of American Studies Melani McAlister refers to this phenomenon as the ‘mainstreaming of evangelical pop culture . . . in which non-evangelicals seem to be willing to read overtly proselytizing messages, as long as they are delivered in a readable genre’ (McAlister 2003: 774).

Though the books written by Lindsey, Robertson, LaHaye, Jenkins and Rosenberg have had an immeasurable impact in introducing Christian eschatology to the masses, they are only one vehicle whereby evangelicals have proven efficient in proselytising their message. Another development suggesting the importance of dispensationalism in cultivating mass public attitudes involves the vocal participation of religious leaders and groups in addressing foreign policy issues. Lindsey and Robertson, for example, have also disseminated their beliefs via Christian television programs like the *700 Club* and the *Hal Lindsey Report*. Joining them are televangelists like Jack van Impe, Irving Baxter Jr. and Grant Jeffrey, whose weekly programs *Jack van Impe Presents*, *The End of the Age* and *Bible Prophecy Revealed* address world events in light of prophetic scripture. John Hagee, best-selling author, pastor of Cornerstone Church in San Antonio, Texas, and founder of the Zionist organisation Christians United for Israel (CUFI) regularly airs sermons on Islam, the Middle East, Israel, terrorism, and prophecy and American foreign policy. These shows air routinely on the *Trinity Broadcasting Network*, *Daystar*, and *Word TV*. Apocalyptic viewpoints can also be found in a host of evangelical magazines like *Endtimes*, *Midnight Call*, *Charisma*, and *Israel My Glory*. Finally, evangelicals like Janet Parshall, James Dobson and Irving Baxter are able to carry their message across the radio airwaves via the over 1,000 radio stations that are part of the

13 Joel C. Rosenberg, Speech given at Calvary Chapel, Costa Mesa, California, September 16, 2006.

National Religious Broadcasters Association. Research suggests that cues by religious elites such as those mentioned above may fashion distinctive attitudes among religious constituencies on questions of foreign policy (Mayer 2004).

## **II. Dispensationalism and Foreign Policy**

Though the influence of dispensationalism on popular culture has been vast, it would be incorrect to assume that its impact has been relegated to the private sector. Dispensationalism, albeit in subtle manner, informs the international vision of many in the Christian Right; some policy makers themselves subscribe to these beliefs (Boyer 1992: 141–144). The question is not if, but to what degree, pre-millennialism has influenced US foreign policy. While it is true that politicians are less likely to be explicit about their belief in dispensationalism – assuming they believe in it at all – than religious leaders, the fact that apocalyptic belief plays such an important role in evangelical milieux from which they draw their support does mean it will have an indirect impact on foreign policy. It has played a visible role (either indirect or direct) in many administrations, especially the presidencies of Ronald Reagan and George W. Bush. Apocalyptic belief by itself does not influence foreign policy, but rather co-mingles with other factors influencing the Middle East policy of the United States, including control of oil and geo-strategic dynamics. The following shows how dispensationalist thinking influenced American foreign policy towards Israel and Iraq during the administration of George W. Bush.

### **A. Israel**

As the ‘birth pains’ spoken of by Jesus increase in both intensity and rapidity, dispensationalists turn their attention to the Middle East where they believe the climax of world history is set to unfold. Millennial eschatology revolves around the state of Israel and has given rise to its political outgrowth known as ‘Christian Zionism’ (see Ariel 2006; Mittleman *et al.* 2007; Clark 2007; Spector 2009). Dispensationalist evangelicals believe that ancient Hebrew prophecies speak to the restoration of Israel as the preeminent sign regarding the return of the Messiah.<sup>14</sup> They also believe that a series of events must transpire before Christ can establish his millennial kingdom, most important of which is the founding of the Israeli state, its conquering of the Biblical lands of Judea and Samaria (Gaza and the West Bank), and the re-building of the temple (Campolo 2005: 19–20; Rock 2011: 117). Evidence points to the

<sup>14</sup> Jesus’ parable of the leafing fig tree found in Mark 13:28 and Matthew 24:32–24 is taken by dispensationalists to refer to the ingathering of Jews in the Holy Land before the Messiah’s Second Coming.

fact that evangelicals are the foremost supporters of Israel in American politics, with perhaps the exception of American Jews (Guth *et al.* 1996; Mayer 2004: 694; Weber 2004; Guth 2004). According to one poll conducted by the Pew Center in 2003, evangelicals supported Israel over the Palestinians by a ratio of 9 to 1; 63 percent of evangelicals believed that its reestablishment fulfilled prophecies regarding Christ's return to earth.<sup>15</sup> Ten percent of all American voters—upwards of 20 million of all Americans—classify themselves as either 'Zionist' or 'dispensationalist', and this figure does not account for the many other Christians who have a pro-Israel disposition for historical/non-dispensationalist reasons (Haija 2006: 75–76).

The post-September 11 world witnessed a host of new evangelical groups taking up pro-Israel causes in addition to the dozens that already existed.<sup>16</sup> A number of conservative American Jews quickly embraced collaboration with their evangelical counterparts. In 2002 former presidential candidate Gary Bauer and Rabbi Daniel Lapin founded the American Alliance of Jews and Christians. Yechiel Eckstein, director of the International Fellowship of Christians and Jews and the official Israeli goodwill ambassador to evangelicals, and former executive director of the Christian Coalition Ralph Reed teamed up to form Stand for Israel in that same year. In 2006, Rev. John Hagee, with the assistance of Jewish attorney David Brog, established the most influential Zionist Christian organisation to date, Christians United for Israel (CUFI).<sup>17</sup>

15 Pew Forum on Religion and Public Life 'American Evangelicals and Israel', available at <http://pewforum.org/uploadedfiles/Topics/Religious Affiliation/Christian/Evangelical Protestant Churches/EvangelicalsIsrael.pdf> (accessed 2 December 2008).

16 A few such organisations include the National Christian Leadership Conference for Israel, the Unity Coalition for Israel, Christian Friends of Israel Communities, and the International Christian Embassy in Jerusalem.

17 Hagee's umbrella organisation consists of churches, para-church organisations, and Christian Zionist ministries supporting Israel's right to the Holy Land by Biblical mandate. Five months after its naissance, the group introduced itself to lawmakers in its first Washington summit. Its commencement banquet included comments from Chair of the Republican National Committee Ken Mehlman, Senators Rick Santorum (R-PA) and Sam Brownback (R-KS), Israeli Ambassador Daniel Ayalon, and a pre-recorded statement from President Bush. CUFI's 2007 convention featured appearances by House Minority Leader Roy Blunt (R-MO), presidential hopeful John McCain (R-AZ), and Senator Joseph Lieberman (I-CT), who called Hagee's organisation 'miraculous' and Hagee himself a 'man of God'. According to its website, CUFI exists to (1) 'Educate and build Christian support for Israel throughout America... through the distribution of literature, DVDs, Middle East Briefing speakers and, most importantly, holding annual Nights to Honor Israel in communities throughout the country', and (2) to 'convene Washington... to enable CUFI members to personally speak with their elected representatives on behalf of Israel'.

For its part, AIPAC has established its own liaison office to cooperate with evangelicals in support of Israel.

The influence of Christian Zionists on foreign policy results from their ability to shape or reinforce the attitudes of lawmakers concerning Israel, while simultaneously using their grassroots strength to mobilise congregations and individuals in support of Israel. They seek to deter both the governments of Israel and the United States from pursuing diplomatic efforts for peace with the Palestinians. To be sure, the prevalence of conservative Christian doctrine in the Republican Party exerted influence over the foreign policy pursued by the George W. Bush administration. Though the administration verbally committed itself to a 'Roadmap to Peace', evangelicals played a significant role in inhibiting efforts by the U.S. to serve as a broker between the Israelis and Palestinians, denouncing the plan as a 'Roadmap to hell'.<sup>18</sup> When, in 2002, the Israeli Defense Forces, in response to a Palestinian suicide attack, proceeded to attack several towns in the West Bank, President Bush attempted several times to pressure Ariel Sharon into ending the incursions. The Christian Right, together with numerous other pro-Israel organisations, answered by organising a mass grassroots effort in defense of Israel including over 100,000 emails, phone calls, and visits to Washington. Bush quickly backed down and the Israeli retaliations continued (Clark 2007: 217). A very similar incident occurred in 2003 when the Israeli government attempted to assassinate Hamas leader Dr Abdel Aziz Rantisi, after which evangelicals decried Bush's condemnation of the attempted assassination. Bush again backed down.<sup>19</sup> Israel's subsequent killings in 2004 of Hamas spiritual leader Shaykh Ahmad Yassin and Dr Rantisi met with virtually no condemnation from the American government. After Bush announced in 2003 that the US, in conjunction with Russia, the European Union, and the United Nations, would support a 'Roadmap to Peace', which would eventually lead to the creation of a viable Palestinian state, evangelicals mobilised once again, this time sending over 50,000 postcards and letters to the White House in opposition to the 'Roadmap' (Wagner 2003: 22; Zunes 2005: 75). The administration consequently placed the peace proposal on hold until after the 2004 presidential election, allegedly because it feared electoral reprisal from conservative Christian voters. The success of these grassroots efforts lent credence to Jerry Falwell's comment

18 Howard Fineman and Tamara Lipper, 'A Very Mixed Marriage', *Newsweek*, 2 June 2003.

19 Michael Duffy and Romesh Ratnesar, 'Trapped by His Own Instincts', *Time*, 6 May 2002; Herb Keinon, 'U.S. Christian Leader Bauer: Israel a Priority for Evangelicals', *Jerusalem Post*, 2 July 2002.

in a 2003 interview that ‘the Bible belt in America is Israel’s only safety belt right now’.<sup>20</sup>

If Christian Zionists were successful at applying pressure on the executive branch, they were equally successful at lobbying congress. One important reason is that Christian Zionist theology holds sway over some congressional Republicans. Possessing Christian beliefs that support for, and protection of, Israel are central Biblical mandates given by God himself, it is not surprising that some Republicans in Congress substitute God’s law for international law when casting votes on resolutions dealing with the Arab-Israeli conflict. In a 2002 interview, former Representative Dick Armeý explicitly endorsed the expulsion of Palestinians from Israeli-controlled territory.<sup>21</sup> Armeý asserted that East Jerusalem, the West Bank and Gaza should all be considered as part of Israel proper. The former House majority leader declared that there are ‘many Arab nations that have many hundreds of thousands of acres of soil and property and opportunity to create a Palestinian state. I happen to believe the Palestinians should leave’.

Armeý’s replacement, Tom DeLay (R-TX) another Israeli hardliner and self-proclaimed ‘Israeli at heart’, saw the joining of the US and Israel as both a religious and political phenomenon.<sup>22</sup> He is quoted as saying, ‘God is using me all the time, everywhere, to stand up for a biblical world view in everything that I do and everywhere I am. He is training me’ (quoted in Philips 2006: 216). In a 2002 address to AIPAC’s annual policy conference, DeLay commented on a trip to Israel saying, ‘I didn’t see occupied territory. I saw Israel’ (quoted in Burbach 2004: 100; Mearsheimer and Walt 2007: 135). Similarly, during a debate on the House floor, DeLay stated ‘Let every terrorist know, the American people will never abandon freedom, democracy or Israel. All free people must recognize that Israel’s fight is our fight’.<sup>23</sup> The House majority leader and evangelical Christian piloted resolutions supporting an Israeli hard line against the Palestinians, which were passed overwhelmingly in both houses. In 2002, Congress approved a mandate recognising Jerusalem as the official capital of Israel. In a speech before the Israeli Knesset, DeLay spoke to ‘the common destiny of the United States and Israel’ (quoted in Norton 2004: 206). In a 2007 interview, DeLay acknowledged the importance of dispensationalist

20 Jerry Falwell, Interview with *CBS News*, 8 June 2003.

21 *CNBC* Transcript of ‘Hardball with Chris Matthews’ interview with Dick Armeý, 1 May 2002.

22 James Bennet, ‘DeLay Says Palestinians Bear Burden for Achieving Peace’, *New York Times*, 30 July 2003.

23 *Congressional Record*, Volume 148. ‘Expressing Solidarity with Israel in its Fight Against Terrorism’, 820H9.

eschatology on his views toward Israel saying ‘. . . we have to be connected to Israel in order to enjoy the Second Coming of Christ’.<sup>24</sup>

With an almost sermon-esque tenor, Senator James Inhofe (R-OK), a self-professed ‘born-again Christian’, made similar comments from the Senate floor giving his interpretation of Genesis 13:14–17:

That is God talking. The Bible says that Abram removed his tent, and came and dwelt in the plain of Mamre, which is in Hebron, and built there an altar before the Lord. . . Hebron is in the West Bank. It is at this place where God appeared to Abram and said, ‘I am giving you this land’, the West Bank. This is not a political battle at all. It is a contest over whether or not the word of God is true.<sup>25</sup>

Similarly, in a speech before the Israeli Knesset, Senator Sam Brownback (R-KS) addressed the special bond that many American Christians share with Israel:

Since my earliest memories growing up on a farm in Kansas in the heartland of America, I have read and studied and been taught about you, the people of Israel. I was raised and steeped in the Bible while growing up. Ancient Israel was, and is, a living reality in my home. Its spirituality, wisdom, poetry, its majesty inspired and encouraged me all my life. You have helped form my soul and I thank you for it. The bedrock of support for Israel in America today is comprised of Christians, like myself, who were raised on the Bible, and who see in the Jews of Israel today the inheritors of the tradition of ancient Israel.<sup>26</sup>

Members of Congress are also frequent attendees at pro-Israel rallies: witness the 1998 National Unity Coalition conference, the 2002 Stand for Israel rally, which included political leaders like Trent Lott, Sam Brownback, Dick Armey, Tom DeLay, Dick Gephardt, among others, and the annual Christians United for Israel rallies in Washington D.C., which included a similar slate of influential religious and political leaders at the culmination ceremony, ‘A Night to Honor Israel’. The Stand for Israel rally sought to ‘tell the world that Christians stand firmly behind the Jewish State and are unalterably opposed to trading land for paper peace’ (Burbach 2004: 96). Speakers at the rally included such prominent figures as Pat Robertson, Tom Delay, and renowned Israeli politicians.

24 Max Blumenthal interview with Tom DeLay, ‘Rapture Ready: The Unauthorized Christians United for Israel Tour’, video recording 2007.

25 Congressional Record: March 4, 2002 (Senate) S1427-S1430. Inhofe was commenting on this passage: ‘The Lord said to Abram after Lot had parted from him, ‘Lift up your eyes from where you are and look north and south, east and west. All the land that you see I will give to you and your offspring forever. I will make your offspring like the dust of the earth so that if anyone could count the dust, then your offspring could be counted. Go, walk through the length and breadth of the land, for I am giving it to you’.

26 Sam Brownback, Speech to the Israeli Knesset, 19 July 2004.

Benny Elon – a member of the Knesset – used Biblical passages to endorse a policy of Palestinian expulsion.

Their unflinching support for Israel also helps explain their views towards Israel's enemies. In 2006, evangelicals came to the defense of Israel once again during its summer conflict with Hezbollah. At the first annual Christians United for Israel Conference, John Hagee pleaded with the American government to 'let Israel do their job', calling support for Israel 'God's foreign policy'. In addition to public statements by evangelical leaders supporting Israel, television commercials promoted on the *Fox News Channel* by Rabbi Yechiel Eckstein were met with a 'groundswell of grassroots evangelical support for the battle', which 'burned out the call center'.<sup>27</sup> Similarly, organisations like CUFI lobby Washington to make a pre-emptive strike against Iran's nuclear facilities, which are believed to pose an immediate threat to Israel.

Though Bush by and large pursued a policy toward the Israeli-Palestinian conflict very much in alignment with the preferences of dispensationalist Christians, it is important to underscore that the president himself has also drawn heavy fire from many conservative Christians for his verbal commitment to help negotiate a final peace in the Holy Land, particularly in the lead-up and after the 2007 Annapolis Conference. Dispensationalists were also not able to keep the president from pressuring the Sharon government to withdraw from the Gaza Strip in 2005. These incidents demonstrate that religion, while important, is not the only factor affecting the US-Israeli alliance; geopolitical, security and economic dynamics must be taken into account. Nevertheless, Bush's comments to the Knesset at the 60<sup>th</sup> anniversary of Israel's founding make clear his biblical devotion to Israel, saying 'Masada will not fall again', and calling America 'Israel's closest ally and best friend'.<sup>28</sup>

In sum, through their financial support of Israeli settlements, mobilisation of American congregations in support of Israel, and congressional influence, Zionist Christians have made pursuing a Middle East peace agreement more difficult. These Gentile voices provide an additional bastion of support for Israel in American politics in addition to American Jewry. As dispensationalists continue to cultivate their organisational capacity to lobby Congress, analyse national security issues, and form ties with both American and Israeli Jews, the dispensationalist faction of the Christian Right will undoubtedly continue to be an important player on issues pertaining to the Israeli-Palestinian conflict.

27 David D. Kirkpatrick, 'A Question of Theology or Policy', *International Herald Tribune*, 14 November 2006.

28 'Bush to Knesset: U.S. Stands with Israel: Masada Will Not Fall Again', *Haaretz News*, 15 May 2008, available at [www.haaretz.com/hasen/spages/983716.html](http://www.haaretz.com/hasen/spages/983716.html) (accessed 3 January 2010).

### B. Iraq

As is the case with their support for Israel, evangelical positions toward Iraq reflected both religious and secular underpinnings. For example, like much of the rest of the general population, concerns over Saddam Hussein's ongoing weapons of mass destruction program, support for terrorist activities in the Holy Land, perceived ties to the al Qaeda network and believed collaboration with Osama bin Laden, tyrannical oppression of religious and ethnic minorities, and history of regional aggression all played a role in leading evangelicals vociferously to support the 2003 toppling of the Ba'athist regime.<sup>29</sup>

Other evangelicals believed that Saddam Hussein was attempting to rebuild the ancient city of Babylon.<sup>30</sup> According to the *Left Behind* series, the antichrist will arise from this 'New Babylon' and proceed to assert his dominion over the entire world. Dispensationalists contend that Saddam Hussein considered himself Nebuchadnezzar II, the leader of a revived political Babylon. As recounted by the Hebrew Scriptures, ancient Babylon destroyed Jerusalem and took captives back to modern day Iraq. Just as in the Bible, God was now punishing Iraq for its abuse of Israel. Some literalists even believe that passages in Jeremiah predict a nuclear holocaust in the region of ancient Babylon.<sup>31</sup> Some Bible scholars contend that 'revived Babylon', a great city built on top of ancient Babylon consisting of a great religious, cultural, and commercial metropolis, will be destroyed in one hour. Dispensationalist Christians point to the fact that Saddam Hussein did attempt to rebuild the ancient city (though it was far from complete at the time of his ouster). As with the case of Israel, for many evangelicals these secular and theological reasons co-mingled

29 The National Association of Evangelicals (NAE), for example, signed a letter to President Bush in 2003 endorsing the view that it was 'essential to bring Saddam Hussein's dictatorship in Iraq to an early end'. Among other charges, the letter decried the regime's record on human rights and its unconcern for the plight of the people of Iraq, calling Saddam Hussein 'among the most oppressive and vicious [leaders] of our time'. The NAE advised the president to maintain substantial military forces in Iraq; insist on genuine procedural and civil democracy; recognise the concern of ethnic and religious minorities; pledge that Iraqi oil revenues be used for the benefit of the Iraqi people; and provide adequate resources to go it alone if necessary. The letter's signatories included Mark Falcoff, Joshua Muravchik, Michael Novak, and Ben Wattenberg of the neoconservative American Enterprise Institute.

30 The September 11 attacks coupled with the invasion and occupation of Iraq spurred a plethora of dispensationalist literature dealing with the prophetic significance of current events taking place in that country. Such titles included *The Second Coming of Babylon, From Iraq to Armageddon: The Final Showdown Approaches, Iraq—Babylon of the End-Times? The Rise of Babylon: Sign of the End Times, Beyond Iraq: The Next Move—Ancient Prophecy and Modern Day Conspiracy Collide, What's Next: God, Israel, and the Future of Iraq*, and *The Final Move Beyond Iraq: The Final Solution While the World Sleeps*.

31 Jeremiah 50:1–3, 51:47–48; Revelation 18:9–10.

to make dispensationalist and conservative Christians the most fervent supporters of the invasion and occupation of Iraq, even after the tide of public opinion began to turn against the war (Guth 2004; Jacobson 2005).<sup>32</sup>

Also underpinning dispensationalist support for the Iraq war was a strong opposition to the United Nations. Many evangelicals describe the interconnected, globalised world in which the antichrist rises to power as a 'new world order' (Boyer 1992). Predicated upon the seemingly noble goal of achieving world peace, the new world order actually masks the true agenda of the antichrist of forging global economic and military centralisation leading to the demise of the modern state system (Herman 2001: 60). For many, the United Nations—an organisation empowered by member states willingly surrendering to it a degree of national sovereignty—fits into this role perfectly. If the 'antichrist' is literally the antithesis of Jesus Christ, then it logically follows that the order he heads will espouse anti-Christian values like feminism, socialism, secularism and homosexuality—the very morals American evangelicals accuse the UN of attempting to spread worldwide. In other words, the new world order is being established as a satanic rival to the coming kingdom of God. It is precisely for this reason that many in the Christian Right view with suspicion any surrendering of American military power to the UN, insofar as a UN military force could potentially morph into the future army of the antichrist that will wage war against Christians and 'Christian values'. Through the new world order, the antichrist will proceed to take over control of the world's economic markets and impose a singular economy for the entire world. Dispensationalists tend to believe that multi-national economic organisations such as the General Agreement on Trade and Tariffs, its successor the World Trade Organisation, the World Bank, and the International Monetary Fund serve as a blueprint that will lead to a worldwide economy in the near future. The antichrist will also impose a world religion and a one-world government, destroying those refusing to pledge their allegiance to him.<sup>33</sup> This worldview might partially explain

32 A survey conducted in 2002 found that conservative Christians were the biggest supporters of the planned war: 69 percent of the constituency favored military action against Iraq in contrast to approximately 59 percent of the U.S. adult population as a whole.

33 Dispensationalist fiction partially explains why evangelicals see in the United Nations and other transnational bodies the nascent formation of this one-world government. 'The real danger', suggests Pat Robertson, 'is that a revived one-world system, springing forth from the murky past of mankind's evil beginnings, will set spiritual forces into motion which no human being will be strong enough to contain'. Apocalyptic literature leads many evangelicals and fundamentalists to believe that the multi-headed dragon spoken of in Revelation represents an unholy international alliance, namely the UN and/or EU. In the *Left Behind* series, similar to Hal Lindsey's 1996 novel *Blue Moon*,

evangelical hostility towards the UN leading up to the 2003 invasion of Iraq.

Thus, perhaps unsurprisingly, evangelicals rapidly became the most fervent proponents of the Bush Doctrine of preemption, a strategic posture emphasising the right of the US to act unilaterally to advance freedom and protect American interests around the world, regardless of consensus reached in international organisations. Though it is impossible to suggest the degree to which theology played a role in Bush's decision to invade Iraq, when asked if his father would support the war, Bush responded, 'You know, he is the wrong father to appeal to in terms of strength. There is a higher father I appeal to' (quoted in Woodward 2004: 421). The Israeli newspaper *Haaretz* reported that in a conversation with Palestinian Prime Minister Mahmoud Abbas, Bush defended his Middle East policy by declaring 'God told me to strike al Qaeda and I struck them, and then he instructed me to strike at Saddam, which I did'.<sup>34</sup> It later became known that the president used a dispensationalist logic in order to persuade French President Jacques Chirac to join the Coalition of the Willing in the 2003 invasion of Iraq by appealing to their 'common faith'.<sup>35</sup> According to the former French leader, Bush articulated his belief that the apocalyptic forces known as 'Gog' and 'Magog' had been unleashed in the Middle East by Satan and that time had come for them to be defeated. 'This confrontation is willed by God, who wants to use this conflict to erase his people's enemies before a New Age begins', Bush told Chirac.<sup>36</sup>

It was perhaps this understanding that led former Secretary of Defense, Donald Rumsfeld, to attach Biblical quotations to top-secret wartime memos in order to convince Bush of the wisdom of a war with Iraq (Draper 2009). Each of the 'Worldwide Intelligence Update' memos features a patriotic photograph with a scriptural quotation expressing the righteousness of the cause in Iraq. One photograph features American troops bowing in prayer with the inscription above them taken from the

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the anti-Christ emerges as the secretary-general of the United Nations in the form of Russian Nicolae Carpathia, who proceeds to assume domination over the entire world by taking over the global economic system and establishing a one-world government called the Global Community headquartered in New Babylon (modern Iraq). In Pat Robertson's 1995 fictional account, Mark Beaulieu, a US president of French origin, utilises a 'Union for Peace' to assert worldwide domination.

34 Arnon Regular, "'Road map is a life saver for us", PM Abbas tells Hamas', *Haaretz*, 26 June 2003.

35 Ezekiel chapters 38 and 39 describe Gog and Magog as Satanic forces who threaten the Jewish people with extinction. Gog and Magog re-emerge in the book of Revelation as part of the preparation for the Battle of Armageddon.

36 Mitch Potter, 'Was Bush on a Mission from God?', *The Toronto Star*, May 29, 2009, available at <http://www.thestar.com/news/world/article/642352> (accessed 1 December 2009). This exchange has since been confirmed by Chirac. See Maurice (2009).

book of Isaiah: 'Whom shall I send, and who will go for us? Here I am Lord, send me'. Another picture shows a tank at sunset with Ephesians 6:13 attached to the top: 'Therefore put on the full armor of God, so that when the day of evil comes, you may be able to stand your ground, and after you have done everything, to stand'. Other photographs feature fighter jets, armored vehicles, and Saddam Hussein, all containing similar Bible verses, suggesting that God was on America's side in the war against Iraq.<sup>37</sup> While the memos are not overtly dispensationalist in their messages, they do show the power of religion to affect and justify the policies adopted by the Bush administration. The passages of scripture chosen by Rumsfeld almost certainly provided the president with a sort of divine comfort during a difficult time while also giving the invasion the aura of a holy war. Taken together, then, both the dispensationalist fervor evident within many parts of the American public coupled with the religious sense of mission held by the president himself worked together in helping carry the country to war in 2003.

### Conclusion

Prophecy and politics are inseparable for pre-millennialist Christians. The study of dispensationalism helps elucidate the activist interest of many evangelicals concerning American foreign policy and the Middle East. The dispensationalist system appeals to many individuals insofar as it provides explanations for cataclysmic world events (like 9/11) and comfort to those who believe that Christians will be granted an escape from the horrors soon to be visited upon the world. Put simply, dispensationalists claim to know what the future holds and how believers ought to respond to international crises, and this has led many evangelicals to become involved in international affairs both politically and financially in unprecedented ways. Should conditions in the Middle East grow increasingly more volatile in the coming years, it can reasonably be expected that the allure of dispensationalist theology will grow ever stronger among evangelical Christians, who see regional chaos as one of the 'signs of the times' indicating the imminent rapture of the church and the return of the Christ.<sup>38</sup> The end-times belief system held by these

37 Too see the complete file of memos, visit <http://www.gq.com/news-politics/newsmakers/donald-rumsfeld-pentagon-papers>.

38 See, for example, [www.raptureready.com](http://www.raptureready.com), a dispensationalist website, which features a 'rapture index' indicating how close the rapture might be. Designed to measure the type of activity that could precede the rapture, the index utilises a meticulous rating system by coalescing forty-five different end time components (i.e., Satanism, inflation, unemployment, oil supply, financial stability, moral standards, crime rate, anti-Semitism, arms proliferation, natural disasters, food supply, etc.) into a single cohesive factor. The website describes the system as a 'prophetic speedometer' in which higher ratings indicate

individuals is inextricably linked to their pro-Israel activism, support for the Bush Doctrine, and skepticism of any multi-state organisation which could potentially morph into the 'new world order' from which the antichrist will come to power. The Middle East remains of paramount importance to dispensationalist Christians not only because of its sacred history but also because it is the region where the 'last days' will unfold.

For these reasons, there exists a strong fit between those holding dispensationalist beliefs and the natural disposition of many conservatives in government. Just as it did during the cold war, the presence of grassroots prophetic thinking adds impetus to those advocating a hawkish foreign policy in the Middle East. On the other hand, apocalyptic rhetoric used by political figures reinforce the propensity of millions of American dispensationalists to view world affairs through a prophetic prism which in turn, shapes the wellspring of support from which evangelical foreign policy is derived. Moreover, simple electoral politics may lead one to conclude that even those Republicans who do not believe in the apocalypse may represent sizable electoral constituencies that do, leading them to cast votes in a manner consistent with the preferences of premillennialists.

Christian dispensationalism will remain a powerful force shaping American foreign policy due to the sheer number of prophecy believers in the United States and the electoral clout they have in the Republican Party. While it is true that the first term of the Obama administration was not hospitable to the preferences of premillennialists, one must remember that conservative evangelicals and fundamentalists have been able to rebound from similar periods of setback during the Carter and Clinton administrations, especially during times of national upheaval and international crisis. Indeed, the dispensationalist narrative provides an alluring lens through which many to understand the recent developments in the Middle East, including the 'Arab Spring'. As the turmoil in Libya, Egypt, and Syria continues, many evangelicals will interpret Jesus' words in Matthew 24:33 in light of these developments: 'when you see all these things, you know it is near, right at the door'.

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a faster rate of end times activity leading to a pre-tribulation rapture. At the time of this writing, the index hovers at approximately 181—only three points lower than its all-time high of 184—reflecting the ongoing turmoil in the Middle East. According to the website, scores of 100 or below indicate 'slow prophetic activity'; scores of 100–130 signal 'moderate prophetic activity'; scores of 130–160 designate 'high prophetic activity'; and scores topping 160 are simply phrased 'fasten your seatbelts'.

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