

George Bush, Apocalypse Sometime Soon, and the American Imperium

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Under the sign of the Stars and Stripes, the war against terrorism unchains the attack dogs of the New World Order in defense of civilization. In the process, the United States has crossed the threshold of militant authoritarianism and goose-stepped onto the global balcony of neofascism, befouling the Constitution along the way. As long as the nation keeps cheering, and Bush's impish jaw juts ever forward, the stench goes unnoticed.

Among the Bush administration, there is a concerted effort to meld political rhetoric and apocalyptic discourse as part of a larger politics of fear and paranoia. Like a priest of the black arts, Bush has successfully disinterred the remnants of Ronald Reagan's millennial rhetoric from the graveyard of chiliastic fantasies, appropriated it for his own interests, and played it in public like a charm. Self-fashioning one's image through the use of messianic and millennial tropes works best on the intended audience (in this case, the American public) when the performance is disabused of shrillness, appears uncompromising, and remains unrestrained, confident, anagogic, and sometimes allegorical. Fascist plain speak is a discursive rendering that is straightforward and unapologetic and, like an iceberg, does most of the damage beneath the surface. Bush's handlers are masters of the fascist spin, and Bush is a perfect candidate because he hardly needs any ideological persuasion to get on board the fascist bandwagon. He is the perfect host for collapsing the distinction between religious authoritarianism and politics. Bush's defense of the war on terrorism works largely through archetypal association and operates in the crucible of the structural unconscious. Bush may believe that Providence has assigned him the arduous yet glorious task of rescuing America from the satanic forces of evil, as if he, himself, were the embodiment of the generalized will and the unalloyed spirit of the American people. Evoking the role of the divine prophet who identifies with the sword arm of divine retribution, Bush reveals the eschatological undertow to the war on terrorism, perhaps most evident in his totalizing and Manichean pronouncements where he likens bin Laden and his al Qaeda chthonic warriors to absolute evil and the United States to the apogee of freedom and goodness.

One could be tempted by an easy Babylonian vengeance—the Code of Hammurabi, *Lex talionis*; an eye for an eye, a tooth for a tooth. It's the easy way out. It is the useless way out. It is retaliation that provokes more retaliation, an uncontrollable spiral of violence that could engulf us all. It's the U.S. retaliation against a faceless enemy that encourages and justifies Russian retaliation against Chechnya and Chinese repression against its northern ethnic groups. It's the retaliation that, like MacBeth's spot of blood, expands until it drowns all, even our sleep. (Fuentes, 2001, p. 33)

Placing a veil of righteousness over the exercise of mass destruction and the quest for geopolitical dominance (the United States is only protecting the world from those who hate freedom and who wish to destroy democracy), Bush has been accorded nearly sacerdotal status by the vast majority of the American people (that is, if we are to believe the opinion polls). I do believe that Bush is seen as offering some kind of metaphysical hope for the rebirth of the American spirit that has wasted away in a morally comatose state within what is perceived by many conservatives as the debauched interregnum of the Clinton years. Ever since the myth of America as God's chosen nation ingressed into the collective unconscious of the American people, U.S. politics has been primed for the appearance of national saviors and sinners. Without skipping an opportunistic beat, Bush has assumed the mantle of *jefe* global warlord, taken up the hammer of Thor, and is continuing to wield it recklessly, in blatant disregard for the court of world opinion. Bush appears to believe that God's elect—the American *ubermenschen*—in their potent attempt to realize Bush *padre's* vision of making America the iron-fisted steward of a New World Order—must not be compromised by the liberal ideas of militarily (and, by association, morally) weaker allied nations. It is not as though Bush *hijo* is trying to remake the United States into a New Jerusalem. It is more likely that Bush believes unabashedly that the United States is already the New Jerusalem and must be protected by leaders ordained by the Almighty. Of course, the civilization versus chaos myth is a rewrite of the myth of White racial superiority over people of color. Instead of the echoes of Wagner, we have the music of Rocky; instead of Wotan serving as our favorite media action hero, we have Conan the American chasing Marxists through the jungles of Colombia; instead of *Triumph of the Will*, we have Fox news shots of Geraldo in Afghanistan fudging locations where certain events were supposed to have occurred (Hess, 2002, p. 4).

We need to ask ourselves how, exactly, the rhetoric of fascism works, assuming that the infrastructure for a transition to a fascist state is already in place—we have the U.S.A. Patriot Act, we have the military tribunals, we have the Office of Homeland Security, we have the necessary scapegoats, we have the Office of Strategic Influence working hand in hand with the U.S. Army's Psychological Operations Command (PSYOPS) operating domestically (actually, its operating domestically is against the law, but we know that during the Reagan administration PSYOPS staffed the Office of Public Diplomacy and planted stories in the media supporting the Contras, a move made possible by

Otto Reich, now the assistant secretary of state for Western Hemisphere Affairs, and we know that a few years ago PSYOPS interns were discovered working as interns in the news division of CNN's Atlanta headquarters), we have the strongest military in the world, we have the military hawks in control of the Pentagon, and we have pummeled an evil nation into prehistory and shown that we can kill mercilessly and control the media reporting in the theater of operations, as major newspapers regularly buried stories of U.S. air strikes on civilians, such as in the case of Niazi Kala (sometimes called Qalaye Niaze), where the United Nations reported that 52 civilians were killed by the U.S. attack, including 25 children. According to the UN report, unarmed women and children were pursued and killed by American helicopters, even as they fled to shelter or tried to rescue survivors (Coen, 2002, p. 3). And we have a leader who is little more than a glorified servant of the military industrial complex, one who is able to admit this publicly and arouse little opposition. In fact, such an admission wins him the glowing admiration of the American people.

We can recall the blindness, bordering on oligophrenia, of the U.S. government when it fed milk to vipers who responded with venom. Saddam Hussein is a product of U.S. policy to limit and fence in the triumphant and intolerant Ayatollahs of Iran. Osama bin Laden is a product of forceful U.S. diplomacy to counter the Soviet presence in Afghanistan. From Castillo Armas in Guatemala to Pinochet in Chile, it was U.S. diplomacy that imposed the bloodiest dictatorships in Latin America. In Vietnam, even though armies faced armies, the civilians were the greatest tragedies, transforming yesterday's exceptions—Guernica, Coventry, Dresden—to today's rules: the main and sometimes only victims of modern conflicts are innocent civilians. (Fuentes, 2001, p. 33)

Although Bush rhapsodizes about our “freedom and democracy” at home, the truth is that freedom and democracy have effectively been put on hold, with our Commander-in-Chief demanding: “Secure the hatch!” The Office of Homeland Security is dedicated to ensuring domestic safety; yet, at the same time, it is designed to promote what conservative scholar James M. Rhodes has called (in the context of his discussion of the Hitler movement) “ontological hysteria,” summarized by Michael Grosso (1995) as follows: “Ontological hysteria consists of a prolonged fear of imminent annihilation, panic over the insecurity of existence. People experience it in disastrous, disorienting times” (p. 197). A key tactic of the Bush administration is to take advantage of this ontological terrorism, to keep the public disoriented and in a sustained feeling of dependence on Bush the Crusader to protect them. Whenever the public seems ready to let down its guard, we receive an announcement from the CIA that a terrorist attack is expected soon, perhaps in a matter of days.

The terrorist attacks—real and anticipated—have given Bush a cloak of Teflon; criticism cannot stick. All Bush has to do is make bold proclamations, bereft of complexity. The shallower the proclamations, the more profound they

appear as long as they are seeped in hagiography and Biblical prophecy—well, maybe not direct Biblical prophecy but the illusion of Biblical prophecy. Apocalyptic overkill is the prophylactic gel that kills criticism on contact. The point is that it is profoundly more effective to hide complex geopolitics in the simplistic, infantilizing language of religious apocalypse and millennialist logic. Here, Manichean dualisms abound uncontested: good versus evil, civilized values versus tribal barbarism, warlords versus elected officials, and so forth. Within such a scenario, the act of critique itself is seen as intemperate. Critique is tolerated in the opinion pages of newspapers but not as editorial commentary. It can appear in local television venues with relatively small viewing audiences, but it cannot be tolerated on major televised news shows. Those who would critique a president in the midst of directing a global war against terrorism could only be seen by the public-at-large as self-interested, as a “spoiler” at best and a traitor at worst. We saw what happened to Bill Maher and Susan Sontag. And while the Pledge of Allegiance has rarely been more popular than now, I have always wondered how many U.S. citizens know that it was written in 1892 by Francis Bellamy, who was fired from his Boston ministry for his socialist beliefs and for proclaiming in his sermon that Jesus was a socialist.

Seemingly, all that Bush has to do is to remain militantly forthright: The United States has now geographically ordained a new global partnership bent on mass destruction (and therefore in need of destruction), a new axis of evil—North Korea, Iran, and Iraq—that must be terminated. You cannot name something as “evil” and then work out a compromise without you, yourself, being implicated in the very evil you ostensibly oppose. You cannot say, “America will not permit the world’s most dangerous regimes to threaten us with the world’s most destructive weapons” (as cited in Umansky, 2002) without backing up the threat—which is why the special operations AC-130 Spectre gunship, whose conventional weaponry since the time of the Vietnam War has been used to pulverize any and every opponent of civilization that has dared stand in its path, is now to be fitted with a laser that can bring down missiles, melt holes in aircraft, and eliminate ground radar stations. A key factor here is that it might take years to defeat an evil regime but decades to defeat an axis of evil—even with laser-equipped gunships (*Media Advisory*, 2002).

In effect, what Bush was able to do in his State of the Union Address was formalize in both temporal and spacial terms the new cold war. Of course, when you talk about an axis, there is always room for more players. For this reason, we shouldn’t count China or Russia out. For the moment, they are not part of the axis, but in the arena of geopolitics, scenarios change rapidly. While Bush was touring South Korea, a U.S. soldier pointed out that an axe used to kill two American soldiers in the 1970s was now ensconced in a North Korean museum just across the border in the North. Bush responded, “No wonder I think they’re evil” (Umansky, 2002). This remark was quite telling.

The fascism that is slowly settling into place is generously assisted by Attorney General John Ashcroft. Consider his recent remarks on the struggle against

terrorism: “Civilized people—Muslims, Christians and Jews—all understand that the source of freedom and human dignity is the Creator” (Umansky, 2002). Ashcroft made these remarks in front of a group of Christian broadcasters. At the same event, he proclaimed, “Civilized people of all religious faiths are called to the defense of His creation. We are a nation called to defend freedom—a freedom that is not the grant of any government or document, but is our endowment from God” (Umansky, 2002). Lewis H. Lapham writes that “the country’s war-making powers serve at the pleasure of people who seem more sympathetic to the religious enthusiasms of John Ashcroft than to the secular concerns of the United Nations—true believers, secure in the knowledge of their own virtue, quick to issue the writs of moral censure and to add another 40,000 names to the list of the world’s evildoers” (2002, p.9). And while our attorney general exiles Orpheus into the political hinterland by covering up the breasts of the statues located in the lobby of his workplace, he offers the wrath of Jehovah as a libidinal replacement to Christian fundamentalists embarking on their torchlit rallies and declaring that “united we stand.” Recently, Vice President Dick Cheney told Orange County Republicans gathered at the Richard Nixon Library & Birthplace in Yorba Linda, California, that “the United States must accept the place of leadership given to us by history” (Pasco, 2002, p. B6). Clearly, his peace through strength message was a secular rewrite of a divine mandate to destroy the infidel. Reverend Jerry Falwell, who in the 1980s was told by President Ronald Reagan that Armageddon was fast approaching, invoked a God of vengeance and destruction when he blamed feminists, civil libertarians, abortion rights advocates, and gays and lesbians for the terrorist attacks of September 11. He echoed a belief shared by other evangelicals that divine protection is summarily withdrawn from nations who have followed in the footsteps of the inhabitants of Sodom and Gomorrah and have irredeemably become steeped in sin. To remain free of sin, the poor must remain in their natural state of acquiescence and channel dissent along non-threatening reformist paths.

Essentially, George Bush, Cheney, Ashcroft, and Falwell express similar sentiments, but Falwell has failed where the others have succeeded because their attack demonizes “them” rather than splitting “us” into an “us and them” (good Americans vs. bad Americans). Lynne Cheney can spearhead a report designed to demonize professors who speak out against civilization (read as speak out against Bush’s war on terrorism), but it is unlikely that there will be serious repercussions for professors unless further terrorist attacks within the United States provoke the general population to feel more comfortable with the idea of eating their own children. If attacks recur, then clearly the stage is set to go after with more vigilance dissenters in the universities. At the present moment, because there is no mass opposition to Bush and his warlords as there was, say, to Nixon during the Vietnam War, most people are not interested in rooting out internal enemies (unless, of course, they fit the right ethnic profile). At the present time, the American public is not seeking internal scapegoats, even if

some of the candidates are what the “moral majority” would regard as “perverts.” For the time being, the public wants an enemy that remains “out there,” one that is easily outsourced, like sweatshop labor by transnational corporations, conveniently externalized and seen as wholly Other to the values of mainstream U.S. society. We want to fight the detritus of global humanity. And anyone not willing to submit to the law of the marketplace, and the desires of its global curate in the White House, is an automatic contender for the dregs of the New World Order. Bush *hijo* believes that by challenging the interminable evil engulfing the globe, he can transform the maleficent violence of the terrorists into the sacred beneficence of America the Beautiful, promoting unanimity and the redemption of secular culture and its vile moral incohesion. Bush’s behavior can be seen in the light of mimetic desire, as a reaffirmation of the spirit of the traditional values of civilization that emerges from the faultline separating the barbarians from the saved during moments of volcanic political upheaval. Bush’s bombastic odes dedicated to the military machine, defining war as a way of cleansing the world of evil—an evil projected onto others, so we can have our sins expiated—are helping to prepare the cultural cornerstone for our new surrogate victim: the Muslim. Muslims have become ritual vehicles for catharsis, purification, purgation, and exorcism. René Girard notes that “the working basis of human thought, the process of ‘symbolization,’ is rooted in the surrogate victim” (1977, p. 306). And while the act of generative unanimity vomited up immediately after September 11—symbolized in the phrase “United We Stand”—does not appear to be backed with the same resolve now that we have had time to engage with more digested reactions to the horror and bring to it a more critical stance (i.e., what did Bush know and when did he know it), Bush is still crafty enough to serve his potential voters what they want so much to hear: We are the world’s only superpower, and that gives us the right to rewrite the rules of the game. At the helm of just states must be leaders who exemplify a religiously motivated patriotism that positions income redistribution, multilateralism, and any restraint on individual liberty as mortal enemies of the development of democracy. They must defend global capitalism as the source of freedom, even to the extent of justifying bankruptcies of corporations such as Enron as part of the survival of the fittest (even religious pundits will draw on Darwin-inspired theories if it suits their purposes). Bush and his administration are defeating democracy in their vainglorious attempt to defend it.

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