

America, Left Behind

Bush, the Neoconservatives, and Evangelical Christian Fiction

Hugh B. Urban, Ohio State University

Abstract

This paper examines the striking intersections between the Christian Right and the Neoconservative movement in contemporary U.S. foreign policy. Using as my specific example the wildly popular series of evangelical fiction, *Left Behind*, I suggest that there is an important “fit” or “elective affinity” between the aggressive foreign policies of the Neoconservatives and the millenarian vision of the *Left Behind* series. The former seeks a “New American Century” and a “benevolent hegemony” of the globe by U.S. power, ushered in by the pre-emptive invasion of Iraq; the latter seeks a “New Millennium” of divine rule ushered in by Christ’s imminent return and by apocalyptic war in the Middle East, first in Babylon and then in Jerusalem. Mr. Bush, I suggest, serves as the key structural link that helps tie together the Neoconservative ideologues and their most powerful base of popular support in the Christian Right.

Introduction

“Is [Jesus] gonna kill a bunch of people here, like He is over there?”
“I’m afraid He is. If they’re working for the Antichrist, they’re in serious trouble.”

Tim LaHaye and Jerry B. Jenkins (2004: 158)

I see things this way: The people who did this act on America . . . are evil people . . . As a nation of good folk, we’re going to hunt them down . . . and we will bring them to justice.

George W. Bush, September 25, 2001 (2003: 22)

[1] As a professor of comparative religion and cultural studies, I have long been fascinated by the strange intersections between religion, politics, and popular culture. One of the most striking such intersections occurred to me last summer as I sat down to read the twelfth and last volume of the wildly popular *Left Behind* series by evangelical preacher Tim LaHaye and novelist Jerry Jenkins (1995-2004). For those who have not yet had a chance to read any of LaHaye and Jenkin’s series, the story is basically an evangelical interpretation of the Book of Revelation set in the context of contemporary global politics: the Rapture has taken place, the Antichrist has taken control of the U.N. and created a single global economy, while a small group of American-led believers battles the forces of evil in a showdown in Jerusalem.

[2] At the same time that I was immersed in this entertaining mixture of Stephen King-esque thrills and evangelical rhetoric, I had also been reading much of the recent literature on the Neoconservative movement and its powerful role in the Bush administration. As Stefan Halper and Jonathan Clarke have persuasively argued in their recent study, *America Alone* (2004), the election of George W. Bush and the confusion following 9/11 allowed a small but radical group of intellectuals to seize the reins of U.S. foreign policy. Led by figures like Paul Wolfowitz, Dick Cheney, Donald Rumsfeld, and the members of the Project for the New American Century, the Neoconservatives

have been able to put into effect a long-held plan for asserting a U.S. global hegemony, in large part by dominating the Middle East and its oil resources (see also Harvey; Johnson; Mann: 252).

[3] The two narratives that I was reading here – the Neoconservatives’ aggressive foreign policy, centered around the Middle East, and the evangelical story of the imminent return of Christ in the Holy Land – struck me as weirdly similar and disturbingly parallel. The former openly advocates a “New American Century” and a “benevolent hegemony” of the globe by U.S. power, inaugurated by the invasion of Iraq, while the latter predicts a New Millennium of divine rule ushered in by apocalyptic war, first in Babylon and then in Jerusalem.

[4] I was tempted to dismiss the similarity as an amusing but insignificant coincidence. Yet the more I began to examine the Neoconservatives’ strategies and the ties between George W. Bush and the Christian Right, the less this link seemed to be either coincidental or unimportant. I am not, of course, suggesting that there is some kind of conspiratorial plot at work between Neoconservative strategists and evangelical writers like LaHaye, or that the two are somehow working secretly together behind the scenes. Rather, I am suggesting that there is a subtle but powerful “fit,” or what sociologist Max Weber calls an “elective affinity,” between the two that has helped them to reinforce one another in very effective ways. The figure of George W. Bush represents a crucial link or structural pivot between these two powerful factions, helping to tie them together: Bush presents the Neoconservatives’ radical foreign policy in a guise that is acceptable to his large base of support in the Christian Right, even as he reassures his Christian base that their moral agendas (anti-abortion, anti-gay marriage, faith-based initiatives, etc.) will be given powerful political support. In Bush, America as the benevolent hegemon of the Neocons and the American-led “Tribulation Force” of LaHaye’s novels come together in a disturbing, yet surprisingly successful way.

Glorious Appearing, End of Days: LaHaye and The Council for National Policy

We’re in a religious war and we need to aggressively oppose secular humanism; these people are as religiously motivated as we are, and they are filled with the devil.

Tim LaHaye on Jerry Falwell’s show, *Listen America* (Lampman: 14)

[5] In the last two decades, Tim LaHaye has emerged as not only the theological brains behind the best-selling *Left Behind* series, but also as one of the most influential figures in the American Christian Right. Indeed, when the Institute for the Study of American Evangelicals decided to name the most influential evangelical leader of the past 25 years, they chose not Billy Graham, Pat Robertson, or Jerry Falwell, but Tim LaHaye, in large part because of his work in evangelical politics (Lampman: 14). For LaHaye, Christians today are engaged in a religious war, a war of Good versus the Evil of secular humanism that is progressively taking over the world and evacuating society of true Christian teaching: “His religious war includes antigay, antiabortion, and antipornography campaigns, as well as campaigns for prayer and creationism in schools. He believes the secularists are in a quest for world domination and that Christians have no choice but to fight back . . . Rhetoric like LaHaye’s divides the nation into two groups – the good and the evil” (Frykholm: 175; see LaHaye and Noebel).

[6] Not only is LaHaye an influential preacher and interpreter of prophecy and revelation, he has also become a remarkably powerful force in domestic and now even international politics through the highly secretive Council for National Policy, founded in 1981. Called by some “the most powerful conservative group you’ve never heard of,” the CNP includes among its members Reverends Jerry Falwell and Pat Robertson, Ralph Reed, Jesse Helms, Tom DeLay, Oliver North, Christian Reconstructionist R. J. Rushdoony, and, formerly, John Ashcroft (himself a Pentecostal

Christian) (see Ambider). Recent speakers at the Council's highly private meetings have included Supreme Court Justice Clarence Thomas, White House counsel Alberto Gonzales, and Timothy Goeglein, deputy director of the White House Office of Public Liaison. Although the group initially focused primarily on domestic agendas like abortion and homosexuality, LaHaye's Council has recently begun to turn to larger international issues such as U.S. policy in the Middle East and the state of Israel.

[7] Published from 1995-2004, the *Left Behind* series has provided a key outlet for spreading LaHaye's political agendas to a massive audience of American readers. The twelve-volume story is not simply an evangelical reading of the Apocalypse, but also a Christian Right perspective on contemporary global politics. LaHaye's interpretation of the final days is "pre-millennialist" (as opposed to post-millennialist or a-millennialist): Christ must return to defeat the Antichrist before the great Millennium of divine rule and peace can be established.

[8] LaHaye's narrative takes as its starting point the moment of the Rapture, when a small group of true believers is spontaneously taken up out of this world into heaven and is thereby spared the terrible tribulation of the earth's final days. [We should note, however, that the idea of the Rapture is not in fact a very old one at all. It occurs nowhere in the Old or New Testaments and is a rather recent concept developed primarily by the Irish preacher John Darby in the early nineteenth century. It was really Darby who propagated the Rapture idea by creatively interpreting certain passages of Revelation and the Latin vulgate translation of Paul's first letter to the Thessalonians.¹ LaHaye essentially translates the Darbyite idea into a fictional narrative, in which the Rapture has just taken place, the chosen souls have been taken directly to heaven, and the rest of those "left behind" must struggle against the rising power of the Antichrist. A small group of former sinners-turned-believers forms a "Tribulation Force" to fight this divine war, led by pilot Rayford Steele, his daughter Chloe, journalist Buck Williams, and pastor Bruce Barnes.

[9] As Melani McAlister (2003a) observes, evangelical narratives about the End Times are by no means anything new – indeed, they can be traced back at least to the early 1970s with Hal Lindsay's *Late Great Planet Earth*. Many of these popular narratives had also centered around the pivotal role of the Middle East – and specifically the state of Israel – as the key geographic and political locus for the unfolding of God's action in history (even as the Palestinian people tend to be wiped off the Evangelical map) (McAlister 2003b: 776). In fact, one of the founding principles of the Moral Majority was to support the state of Israel everywhere. As Jerry Falwell put in 1978: "I believe that if we fail to protect Israel we will cease to be important to God . . . we can and must be involved in guiding America towards a biblical position regarding her stand on Israel" (Strober and Tomczak: 167).

[10] The *Left Behind* series is by far the most successful – and also well-timed – apocalyptic narrative to date. Its publisher, Tyndale House, has grown from a \$40 million a year enterprise to one worth more than \$160 million (Frykholm: 22). Above all, *Left Behind's* vivid portrayal of an apocalyptic

¹ John Nelson Darby was an Irish lawyer-turned preacher who traveled in the U.S. and Canada between 1862 and 1877. Darby built on earlier ideas of dispensationalism (the belief that history is divided into eras or dispensations that would culminate in the thousand-year reign of Christ), by adding the idea of the Rapture. According to Darby, all true believers will be taken up to heaven in a secret Rapture before the world is plunged into chaos during the period of Tribulation under the rule of the Antichrist.

The scriptural basis for the "Rapture" idea comes primarily from a Latin Vulgate translation of 1 Thessalonians 4:16-17; the Lord will descend from Heaven, and his true believers will be "caught up" (*rapiemur*, from the verb *rapio*, noun *raptura*) in the clouds to meet the Lord in the air (see Marsden; Sandeen: 62-70; Frykholm: 15-18).

showdown in the Middle East achieved a striking new kind of popular power in the wake of the 9/11 terrorist attacks; suddenly in the post 9/11 world, these apocalyptic narratives seemed to have a frightening new relevance, and their sales jumped by 60% (Gibbs 2002: 43; McAlister 2003a).

[11] Much of the narrative of *Left Behind* is clearly a commentary on the processes of globalization and America's role in a transnational era (Frykholm: 181; McAlister 2003a).² The Antichrist, in the person of a sinister Romanian named Nicolae Carpathia, has progressively taken over the United Nations and the world's economic system, unifying all political states ("Global Community"), media ("Global Community Network,"), and religions ("Enigma Babylon One World Faith") under a Nicolae-appointed supreme pontiff.³ The millions of the Antichrist's followers are branded with a loyalty mark and even "vaccinated" with a bio-chip embedded with their personal information. Eventually, the Antichrist establishes "New Babylon" – i.e., Iraq – as the epicenter of the world's political and financial networks, spreading its digital tentacles into every aspect of life and commerce in the new global order. (As McAlister notes, the choice of Iraq as the center of the Antichrist's global empire pre-dated the current Iraq war, though it does connect impressively with the U.S.'s current military action [2003c].) As leader of the new Global Community, the Antichrist promises to build a united world of peace, cooperation, and prosperity for all humankind: "we have worked to draw this Global Community together under a banner of peace and harmony . . . I am, always have been, a pacifist. I do not believe in war. I do not believe in weaponry . . . I feel responsible for you, my brother or my sister in this global village" (LaHaye and Jenkins 1997: ix). Meanwhile, the Tribulation Force is led by (mostly white male) Americans, who see through the Antichrist's lies and manage to persuade a few converts from other countries and religious faiths to join their brave coalition against this global menace.

[12] In the penultimate volume of the series, *Armageddon*, "New Babylon" is destroyed by the Lord's ongoing series of apocalyptic dispensations, throwing the world's entire economic structure into chaos (LaHaye and Jenkins 2003). This leads the way for Christ's return in the last volume, *Glorious Appearing*, in which the Tribulation Force and the armies of the Antichrist gather around Jerusalem for the final conflict. As the apocalypse unfolds, the Jews at long last begin to return to Christ and accept him as the true Messiah (though the millions of those branded by the Beast refuse to do so, God having "hardened their hearts"). In the spectacularly violent final battle, the returning Christ mows down the Antichrist's massive armies in the most gory fashion, splitting bodies apart and spilling entrails across the earth with the sharp two-edged sword of his Word. Indeed, as theologian Harvey Cox observes, it is impossible to read the series without getting the impression that a "lip-licking anticipation of all the blood" is involved (Cloud 2002).⁴ Thus, the returning Christ proclaims,

² "Schooled in dispensationalist premillennialism, rapture believers tend to think that the world is descending into evil. Social change, especially that which affects the structure and function of the family, is frightening. Readers . . . find 'signs' of the end of the world in areas of social transformation – the changing role of women, the globalization of the economy, the increasing openness of homosexuality" (Frykholm: 181).

³ "The one-world government of the Antichrist . . . has its origins in a shadowy conspiracy between a group of Trilateral Commission-like financiers and the fearful members of the UN, who are so desperate for "peace" that they allow themselves to be taken over by a dictator. And that totalitarian rule embodies every conceivable form of liberal tyranny. It is simultaneously economic (the Antichrist introduces a single currency), cultural (he has a monopoly on world media) and political (his police state employs 'Morale Monitors' who patrol the streets, hunting down and executing any dissidents)" (McAlister: 2003c).

⁴ "In their detailed and exciting descriptions of the invading demons and seas that turn to blood, or the starvation and suffering of those caught in the final battle, LaHaye and Jenkins join a chorus of fundamentalist commentators who . . . have expressed a perverse enthusiasm for the spilled blood and millions of dead that will signal the Second Coming" (McAlister: 2003a).

“Come near, you nations, to hear; and heed, you people! Let the earth hear, and all that is in it, the world and all things that come forth from it. For the indignation of the Lord is against all nations, and His fury against all their armies; He has utterly destroyed them, He has given them over to the slaughter” (2004: 189).

And this proclamation is followed by a stunningly graphic account of Christ’s divine destruction:

Men and women, soldiers and horses seemed to explode where they stood. It was as if the very words of the Lord has super-heated their blood, causing it to burst through their veins and skin . . . Tens of thousands of foot soldiers dropped their weapons, grabbed their heads or their chests, fell to their knees and writhed as they were invisibly sliced asunder. Their innards and entrails gushed to the desert floor, and as those around them turned to run, they too were slain, their blood pooling and rising in the unforgiving brightness of the glory of Christ (2004: 189-90).

In the end, only a small remnant of true believers survives to “populate the Millennium” and inhabit the New Jerusalem (2004: 320).

[13] As Amy Frykholm has argued in her study of the series, *Rapture Culture*, the *Left Behind* books contain a strong political message and a “conservative, patriarchal, even racist agenda that mirrors the agenda of the Christ Right” (178). On the domestic front, LaHaye’s books advance a strong pro-life message, while targeting feminism and homosexuality as instruments of the Antichrist. On the international front, the books contain a deep message of “racially charged American chauvinism” (ibid.). The leaders of the Tribulation force are white American men, such as Rayford Steele and Buck Williams, while all “others” – women, African Americans, Arabs, Asians, and non-Americans – either submit dutifully to their leadership or are destroyed. The entire series, moreover, contains a disturbing kind of anti-Semitism, portraying Israel as too stubborn to recognize Jesus as the Messiah, while making heroes of Jewish converts to Christianity (ibid.; see LaHaye and Jenkins 1999: 110-13; 2000: 24-28).

[14] Finally, as Melani McAlister observes, the *Left Behind* series also tells us that catastrophic war in the Middle East is not only unavoidable, but is in fact a necessary part of God’s plan and the cosmic triumph of ultimate Good versus ultimate Evil: “What they say is sobering: that war is not proof of the failure of politics, but the necessary sign of God’s action in history and the path to world redemption” (2003a: B03).

Benevolent Hegemony: The Neoconservatives’ Middle East and Geopolitical Strategy

Religious people always create problems since their ardor tends to outrun the limits of politics in a constitutional democracy. But if the Republican Party is to survive, it must work on accommodating these people.

Irving Kristol (1995: 368)

[15] Going a step further, however, it is difficult not to see striking reflections of the Neoconservative agenda in the *Left Behind* narrative. Indeed, these novels provide a striking kind of fictional, evangelical, and astonishingly popular counterpart to the Neoconservatives’ rather elite and intellectual geo-political vision.

[16] According to Irving Kristol (2003, 1983), who first used the term in a positive sense, Neoconservatism does not represent so much a coherent movement or party as a kind of “persuasion,” or a moral and political attitude. As Halper and Clarke suggest, the Neoconservative persuasion can perhaps best be characterized by three features: first, “a belief deriving from religious

conviction that the human condition is defined as a choice between good and evil and that the true measure of political character is found in the willingness by the former to confront the latter;” second, “an assertion that the fundamental determinant of the relationship between states rests on military power and the willingness to use it;” and third, a “focus on the Middle East and global Islam as the principal theater for American overseas power” (11). Working through powerful think-tanks, such as the American Enterprise Institute (AEI) and the Project for the New American Century (PNAC), the Neoconservative “persuasion” has attracted a wide range of powerful figures, from Bush cabinet members like Paul Wolfowitz, Donald Rumsfeld, and Dick Cheney, to intellectuals like Francis Fukuyama. Indeed, one of the most important texts for Neoconservative ideology is Fukuyama’s widely-read work, *The End of History and the Last Man*, which posits that American government and free market capitalism represent the final stage of human development with few flaws (cf. Burbach and Tarbell: 83).

[17] One aspect of Neoconservative thinking that is often overlooked, however, is the centrality of religion in much of their agenda. As Kristol argues, strong religious faith and a belief in the transcendent basis of moral law is crucial to the health of the country and the strength of the economy: “The three pillars of modern conservatism are religion, nationalism, and economic growth. Of these religion is easily the most important, because it is the only power that . . . can shape people’s characters and regulate their motivation” (1995: 365). The loss of a strong moral and religious compass, in turn, has led to the intense crisis that modern liberal America faces, which he described as a “steady decline in our democratic values, sinking to new levels of vulgarity” (2003). Thus, in 1995 Kristol argued that the Republican Party needed to reach out and embrace the strong religious core of the American population – despite its tendency toward un-democratic attitudes – if it was to triumph over the liberal malaise of Clinton’s America: “conservatives and the Republican Party must embrace the religious if they are to survive. Religious people always create problems since their ardor tends to outrun the limits of politics in a constitutional democracy. But if the Republican Party is to survive, it must work on accommodating these people” (1995: 368).

[18] One of the more striking examples of this Neoconservative outreach to the Christian Right is Michael Ledeen, an influential Fellow at the Neocon think-tank, American Enterprise Institute. Not only was Ledeen one of the most vocal proponents of the Iraq War, but since the 1980s, he has also appeared frequently on Pat Robertson’s *700 Club* promoting an aggressive Neocon political vision. In a 2004 interview with Robertson, Ledeen argued that Iraq is only the first step in the restructuring of the Middle East and should be followed by use of military force against Iran, as well. As he put it, “Iraq is just one battle in a larger war, bringing down the regime in Iran is the central act, because Iran is the world’s most dangerous terrorist country” (BBC News; see Robertson; Urban).

[19] By now, the Neoconservatives’ role in the preemptive invasion of Iraq is fairly well known. (Indeed, most of their plans for Iraq and its oil resources can be easily read in articles going back to the early 1990s available on the Project for the New American Century web page.) Already in 1992, toward the end of the first Bush White House, then Undersecretary of Defense Wolfowitz and Secretary of Defense Cheney came up with a bold new plan to rethink U.S. military policy, which was circulated in the top-secret Defense Policy Guidance report. So disturbing was this report that a Pentagon official, who believed this strategy debate should be carried out in the public domain, leaked it. Indeed, it was described by some as nothing less than a plan for the U.S. to “rule the world,” without acting through the U.N. and by using pre-emptive attacks on potential threats (Armstrong; cf. Johnson: 20-25).

[20] Although this plan was quickly rejected after its leak, it resurfaced in a new form in 1997, with the founding of the Project for a New American Century by Irving Kristol's son, William. As William Kristol and Robert Kagan had already argued in *Foreign Affairs* in 1996, America now has an opportunity to exercise a "benevolent hegemony" over the world while promoting democracy and free markets – an opportunity it would be foolish to let slip away (Kristol and Kagan). Kristol and Kagan's PNAC soon emerged as the leading think-tank and a who's who of the Neocon establishment, advocating a powerful new vision of America's role as global leader through its military strength and moral principles.

[21] The ousting of Saddam Hussein and the rebuilding of Iraq (and by implication, the Middle East) was a key part of this program for American leadership. In the words of Raymond Tanter – a member of Reagan's National Security Council and now a visiting fellow at the Washington Institute for Near East Policy – "the road to Jerusalem goes through Baghdad. The road to Tehran goes through Baghdad. The road to Damascus goes through Baghdad . . . [I]f you change the regime through force in Baghdad, American military power will cast a long diplomatic shadow, and it will be America's decade in the Middle East" (Donovan 2002). This became the mantra of the Necon's foreign policy. In 1998 eighteen associates of the PNAC, including Richard Armitage, William Bennet, Francis Fukuyama, Robert Kagan, William Kristol, Richard Perle, Donald Rumsfeld, and Paul Wolfowitz, wrote a letter to President Clinton. In it they warned of the need to secure the "significant portion of the world's oil supply" in Iraq, advising the President that the only acceptable strategy is to "undertake military action" and remove "Saddam Hussein and his regime from power" (PNAC: 1998).

[22] Although Clinton chose not to take their advice, the PNAC did not give up its bold vision for America's benevolent global hegemony. In September 2000, the PNAC issued a report entitled "Rebuilding America's Defenses: Strategy, Forces, and Resources for a New Century." Its authors lament the lack of effort to "preserve American military preeminence in the coming decades" and criticize Clinton for squandering his opportunity to make the U.S. the sole, indomitable Superpower. The removal of Saddam Hussein and the U.S. occupation of Iraq would provide both the crucial justification and the ideal precondition for this larger global agenda. Achieving this goal of undeniable U.S. power, the authors suggest, would require a radical transformation in public opinion and government policy. But they also caution that "the process of transformation, even if it brings revolutionary change, is likely to be a long one, absent some catastrophic and catalyzing event – like a New Pearl Harbor" (PNAC: 2000).

From Prodigal Son to Christian Crusader: George W. Bush as the Link Between the Neoconservatives and the Christian Right

I feel like God wants me to run for President. I can't explain it, but I sense my country is going to need me . . . God wants me to do it.

George W. Bush (Harris)

[23] Not long after the publication of the PNAC document, two things occurred that handed the Neocons their "catastrophic and catalyzing events" on a silver platter. The first was the election of George W. Bush to the White House. The second was the terrorist attack of 9/11.

[24] As Halper and Clarke argue, the relatively naïve and unformed Bush allowed a small group of Neocon thinkers like Wolfowitz, Rumsfeld, Perle, Cheney, and others suddenly to have a much more central and active role in shaping American foreign policy. Kristol himself observed that Bush was something of a fortuitous gift to those of the Neocon persuasion: "by one of those accidents

historians ponder, our current president and his administration turn out to be quite at home in this new political environment, although it is clear they did not anticipate this role any more than their party as a whole did” (2003). Among other things, Bush provided the perfect liaison to the Christian Right that the Neocons needed in order to win popular support and promote their vision of American power both at home and abroad.

[25] The narrative that Bush and his biographers tell is clearly modeled on the parable of the prodigal son – the young man who fritters away his early life on alcohol and sin, only to find God and return to his rightful place in his father’s former occupation. As he recounts his own redemption narrative, Bush had been mired in the world of business and overuse of alcohol, and so turned in his darker hours to the study of scripture. The beginning of his conversion occurred during a summer weekend in 1985, when evangelist Billy Graham visited George and Laura at the Bush summerhouse in Maine. The reverend, with his magnetic presence and warmth, planted a “seed of salvation” in George’s soul that soon blossomed into a new birth and helped him “recommit [his] heart to Jesus Christ” (1999: 136).

[26] This recommitment to Christ proved to be not only a spiritual awakening within George W. himself but an important part of the Republican party’s own re-connection with the Christian Right. The senior Bush had actually had a great deal of trouble reaching out to the religious right, which regarded his Episcopalian, aristocratic airs with some suspicion. In his 1988 campaign, therefore, the elder Bush gave his newly-reborn son the task of working with the campaign’s liaison to the Christian right, Assemblies of God evangelist Doug Wead (who also wrote the senior Bush’s campaign narrative *Man of Integrity*). The younger Bush was far more successful in connecting with the Religious Right; as Craig Unger put it, he was “deeply attuned to the nuances of the evangelical subcultures” and “replaced his father’s visionless pragmatism with the Manichaean certitudes of Good and Evil” (Unger: 192-93).

[27] George W.’s religiosity became even more explicit, however, once he decided to run for president in the 2000 election. As he confided to James Robinson, he believed that he in fact had been called by God himself to lead the United States: “I feel like God wants me to run for President. I can’t explain it, but I sense my country is going to need me . . . God wants me to do it” (Harris). As he considered the prospect of his candidacy, Bush met frequently with evangelical leaders. In October 1999, he addressed LaHaye’s Council for National Policy – though there is much difference of opinion as to what he actually said in that particular address, which was recorded but has never been publicly released (Ambider).

[28] Yet it was the attacks of 9/11 that really brought out the most powerful use of religious rhetoric by Bush and his speechwriters. After the attacks, Bush began to cast the global situation as a vast war between Good and Evil, the forces of liberty and democracy against the forces of tyranny and terror: “Our responsibility to history”, he declared on September 14, 2001, is “to answer these attacks and rid the world of evil.” As he put it in on September 25, 2002, in ruggedly down-home, no-nonsense, black and white terms, “I see things this way: The people who did this act on America . . . are evil people. They don’t; represent an ideology . . . They’re flat evil. That’s all they can think about, is evil. As a nation of good folks, we’re going to hunt them down . . . and we will bring them to justice” (2003: 220).

[29] So impressive was Bush’s powerful religious rhetoric that he soon came to be recognized as the new leader of the Christian Right in America. On the day before Christmas, 2001, the *Washington Post* reported that “Pat Robertson’s resignation this month as President of the Christian Coalition confirmed the ascendance of a new leader of the religious right in America: George W. Bush.” In the

words of Ralph Reed, the Christian Coalition's former President, "God knew something we didn't . . . He had a knowledge nobody else had: He knew George Bush had the ability to lead in this compelling way" (*Washington Post*: A-02).

[30] However, if Bush's intense religiosity could be used to rouse the American people to respond to a devastating terrorist attack, it would also soon be used to persuade Americans to accept, largely without criticism, the Neocon's long-held plan to invade Iraq – one of the key links in the "Axis of Evil." As he explained to Bob Woodward, the decision to invade Iraq did not come from his political advisors or even from former President George H.W. Bush, but from a much higher authority: "He could . . . not consult his Secretary of State about going to war and not need to look for strength to his father, the former President, because he was consulting a 'higher father.'" (Gibbs 2004: 30). In his January 2003 State of the Union Address, in which he made the strongest case for war against Iraq, Bush made an explicit appeal to God, Divine Will and Providence to justify the sacrifice of American lives; for they will be dying not just for the American people, but for freedom that is "God's gift to humanity" (2003: 220-21).

[31] Whether or not George W. Bush's decision to invade Iraq was divinely inspired, it does seem to have fulfilled the Neoconservatives' long-held plans on both the domestic and the international fronts. As David Harvey argues in his recent book, *The New Imperialism*, the attacks of 9/11 and Bush's evangelical response to it have provided the ideal rationale for imposing the Neocon's larger agendas of "establishment of and respect for order, both at home and upon the world stage" (190). On the domestic front, 9/11 has provided the excuse to impose an extremely invasive new measure like the USA Patriot Act, championed by conservative Christian Attorney General John Ashcroft. On the international front, it has also provided the ideal motivation – and spiritual justification – for the Neocon's plans for Iraq, dating back to the early 1990s. As Harvey observes, the Neocon strategy for occupying Iraq has behind it a much larger and more disturbing global agenda. With Iraq as its base of operation, and Saudi Arabia, Syria, and Iran close at hand, the U.S. will be uniquely placed to dominate the flow of oil from the Middle East and, by extension, the flow of capital throughout the world in an age still fuelled by oil and petro-dollars: "The U.S. will be in a military and geo-strategic position to control the whole globe militarily and, through oil, economically . . . The neo-conservatives are, it seems, committed to nothing short of a plan for total domination of the globe" (198-99).

Left Behind: Elective Affinities and Double Ironies

One of these days, the American people are going to awaken to the fact that we have become an imperial nation, even though the public and all our institutions are hostile to the idea.

Irving Kristol (1999: 27)

Roman imperial sorrows mounted up over hundreds of years. Ours are likely to arrive with the speed of FedEx.

Chalmers Johnson (285)

[32] So what are we to make of the strange parallels between this popular series of evangelical fiction and this aggressive Neoconservative strategy for American hegemony? On the one hand, we have the wondrous vision of a New Millennium established after a small American-led group fights against the global forces of the Antichrist in the Holy Land; on the other, we have the bold vision of a New American Century established after the American military force unilaterally defeats the Axis of Evil and asserts its benevolent hegemony in the Middle East. But how are these two narratives

related? Is it a plot hatched secretly in one of LaHaye's Council for National Policy meetings? A coded message woven subliminally into the *Left Behind* books themselves?

[33] Probably not. Instead, I think this connection is not so much an explicit or even necessarily intentional link, but rather a subtle yet powerful kind of "elective affinity," in Weber's sense of the phrase. As Weber argued in his classic work, *The Protestant Ethic and the Spirit of Capitalism*, it is not simply the case that Protestant Christianity *caused* the rise of early modern capitalism, or vice-versa. Rather, the two shared an affinity that was mutually beneficial and reinforcing. The Protestant ethics of hard-work, thrift, restraint in consumption and asceticism fit well with an early capitalist system based on labor and accumulation of profit and allowed the latter to flourish in ways that no other religious worldview could.

[34] So too, I would suggest, there is a fit or affinity between the evangelical vision of the New Millennium and the Neoconservative ideal of a New American Century. Updating Weber somewhat, we might call this affinity "the Evangelical Ethic and the Spirit of Neo-Imperialism." The Neoconservatives and the Christian Right may not be conspiring together secretly behind the scenes, but they *do need each other* to promote their respective agendas, and they overlap on certain key issues, such as their focus on the Middle East, and specifically Israel, as the epicenter of the coming New Millennium/ New American Century (McAlister 2003b).⁵ In fact, in the first volume of his new fictional series, *Babylon Rising*, LaHaye makes this link between Christian apocalypticism and Neoconservative ideology quite directly. In his preface, he dedicates the book to "THE HEBREW PROPHETS, who saw, under divine inspiration, forecasts of world events so necessary to know for those living in what they call 'the time of the end,' or what some modern historians call 'the end of history,' which could occur in the early part of the twenty-first century" (LaHaye and Dinallo 2003: viii). The imminent "end of history" predicted here is, of course, a direct reference to one of the pillars of Neoconservative ideology, Fukuyama's *The End of History and the Last Man*.

[35] And finally, the Neoconservatives and the leaders of the Christ Right do have enough similar interests to find common ground in the Prodigal Son, George W. Bush. As a relatively empty, unformed "floating signifier," Bush serves as the key link in this elective affinity, the point at which the otherwise conflicting interests of the Neocons and the Evangelicals come together in a disturbingly powerful way (see Lincoln 2004).

[36] In all of this, however, there is a disturbing kind of double irony. As David Harvey has argued, the aggressive foreign and domestic strategies of the Neoconservatives carry with them a twofold danger. First, the extremely invasive and intrusive domestic policies put into place after 9/11 – of which the USA Patriot Act is the most obvious example – risk turning the United States into the same sort of oppressive regime that we so despised in the former Soviet Union (Harvey: 80-81; see also Scarry).⁶ Second, this intense militarism and reckless pattern of deficit spending threatens to bankrupt the United States in much the same way that the Soviet Union was destroyed by its massive military expenditure during the Cold War: "If the Soviet Empire was really brought down by excessive strain on its economy through the arms race, then will the U.S., in its blind pursuit of

⁵ "The link between political ideology and cultural consumption is of course never simple or direct, but in the past five years, especially since September 11, the power of *Left Behind* as a major cultural phenomenon has an undeniable link with the resurgence of pro-Israel activism on the Christian right and the extraordinarily dangerous directions taken by the U.S. 'war on terrorism' in the Middle East" (McAlister 2003b: 775-76).

⁶ As Scarry observes, the Patriot Act "inverts the constitutional requirement that people's lives be private and the work of government officials be public. It instead crafts a set of conditions in which our inner lives become transparent and the workings of the government become opaque" (see Leone and Anrig).

military dominance, undermine the economic foundations of its own power?” (80-81). Others are even more somber in their analysis of the future of the American empire, which threatens to undermine not only its economic basis but its own democratic principles and civil liberties. As Chalmers Johnson observes, “Roman imperial sorrows mounted up over hundreds of years. Ours are likely to arrive with the speed of FedEx . . . Their cumulative impact guarantees that the United States will cease to bear any resemblance to the country once outlined in our Constitution” (285).⁷

[37] But perhaps the final and most distressing irony is that of building an empire upon a dwindling and violently contested resource such as oil. By the time we finally secure the oil wealth in the Middle East and proclaim our “benevolent hegemony,” is it possible that most of the world will have already realized the finitude of the earth’s oil supplies and moved on to alternative energy sources? While we squander thousands of human lives and billions of dollars in the Iraqi quagmire, Europe and Japan are well aware of both the economic and the environmental consequences of remaining tied to a carbon-based economy, and they are moving far ahead of us in the development of alternative energy technologies such as hydrogen, wind, solar, and bio-mass (see Roberts; Klare: 180-202).

[38] Yet such a prospect hardly seems to bother Mr. Bush. As he put it during the build up to the invasion of Iraq, the U.S. may well have to go it alone in its new war on terror: “At some point, we may be the only ones left. But that’s OK with me. We are America” (Woodward: 65).

[39] Mr. Bush, however, does not seem to grasp the full import of his own words. The most likely scenario is not that America will be the “only one left” in some sort of apocalyptic show-down between the cosmic powers of Good and Evil or the American-led Tribulation Force and the Antichrist’s United Nations. Rather, if we continue to cling to an outdated Cold War mentality based on military might and an unsustainable petroleum economy, it seems increasingly probable that America really will be “left behind” in the new global order.

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⁷ Johnson outlines four “sorrows” likely to visit the U.S. if current trends continue: “First, there will be a state of perpetual war, leading to more terrorism against Americans wherever they may be and a growing reliance on weapons of mass destruction among smaller nations as they try to ward off the imperial juggernaut. Second, there will be a loss of democracy and constitutional rights as the presidency fully eclipses Congress and is itself transformed from an executive branch of government into something more like a Pentagonized presidency. Third, an already well-shredded principle of truthfulness will be increasingly replaced by a system of propaganda, disinformation, and glorification of war, power and the military legions. Lastly, there will be bankruptcy, as we pour our economic resources into ever more grandiose military projects and shortchange the education, health and safety of our fellow citizens” (285).

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