



Manifest Destiny and War

Adapted from Living in the Shadow of the Cross

By Paul Kivel

Manifest Destiny, the belief that the US has a special role in the unfolding of God's global plan, implicitly expresses a deeply held racism: people of color, even if Christian (and especially if they are not), are seen as fundamentally flawed. Derived from the Christian binary of good and evil, the racist division of people into categories of *white* and *non-white* perpetuates long-standing divisions between Christians and others. One might say that racism is a secularized version of Christian dominance with a patina of science to lend it credibility. Manifest Destiny extends this racism into US foreign policy.

Racism operates most obviously if the group labeled evil is Arab and/or Muslim. Christians know the biblical stories of the lands encompassing Israel and Palestine, and identify with the Israelis who occupy them. The State of Israel is often seen as a Western, civilized beachhead in the Middle East, a reclamation of what is rightfully Christendom's, just as the Christian occupation of Jerusalem was seen during the first Crusade. After over 900 years of declared war with Islam and Arab societies, and with a history of anti-Arab and Islamophobic racism reenacted daily in contemporary culture, it has been comparatively simple to elicit the US public's widespread support for invasions of Afghanistan, Iraq, Pakistan, Iran, Somalia and the Israeli occupation of Palestine. Combining this dualistic ideology with the legacy of the Inquisitions, it has also been easy to enlist acceptance, if not approval, of *extraordinary renditions*, torture, the racial profiling of anyone who looks like a terrorist and the curtailment of civil liberties for American Muslims, Arab Americans as well as the rest of us.

Perhaps the most visible and popular consolidation of this history is in the *Left Behind* book series. According to a May 2004 *Newsweek* article, the books were "favorite"





reading by US soldiers in Iraq.¹ In these novels, Arabs are depicted as unrelenting villains, both godless and enemies of God. They stand in the way of the completion of God's plan for the salvation of humankind. The only solution is to annihilate them all.²

What does it mean that books selling more than any blockbuster hits, read by tens of millions, glorify the annihilation of suspect peoples like Arabs, Muslims, and Jews? These novels sanction unrelenting war in Western Asia, absolute support for the expansion of the state of Israel as a precursor to the end times and callous disregard for the humanity and suffering of Arab, Muslim and Jewish people.

Polls continuously show that most people in the US, including most Christians, are reluctant to enter a war; some are isolationists and don't believe the US should become involved in international conflicts; others focus on their financial and human costs. However, as long as the belief in Manifest Destiny is unquestioned, it will be easy for political leaders and their media to promote war as the primary arm of US foreign policy.

Another Christian foundation for US foreign policy is the postmillennialist belief that in the cosmic battle between good and evil, one final victorious battle can make the world safe for democracy and usher in the millennium. However reluctant people in the US may be to go to war, the enticement that the next war will be "the war to end all wars" has proven remarkably effective.

This justification is not new. The colonists fighting for independence from England believed, as Congregational minister Samuel Sherwood put it, "The time is coming and hastening on, when Babylon the great shall fall to rise no more; when all wicked tyrants and oppressors shall be destroyed forever."³ The national seal created during that period has the Latin phrase *novus ordo saeculorum* (the new order of the ages), and above the pyramid is written *Annuit Coeptis* (He has ordered our way). These millennial statements are still prominent on US paper currency.

¹ David Gates. "The Pop Prophets." *Newsweek*, May 24, 2004, p. 46.

² Salaita, *Anti-Arab Racism in the USA*, pp. 171-3.

³ Quoted in Jewett, *Mission and Menace*, p. 74.





The US Civil War was also a millennial war in many people's eyes: a war to settle once and for all the issue of slavery. And both sides had an antichrist. Ironically, in the same week of 1863, the *Northern Christian Advocate* identified the Beast in the book of Revelation as Jefferson Davis, while the *Southern Christian Advocate* identified the Beast as Abraham Lincoln.⁴

World War I was described using the same millennial flavor. US President Theodore Roosevelt declared, "If there ever was a holy war, it is this war."⁵ World War II was no different. Using apocalyptic language, in 1941 President Franklin D. Roosevelt described the Nazi threat: "In place of the churches of our civilization, there is to be set up an international Nazi church. In place of the Bible, the word of *Mein Kampf* will be imposed and enforced as Holy Writ. And in place of the cross of Christ will be put two symbols - the swastika and the naked sword."⁶

There is no end of statements from our most powerful leaders confirming that manifest destiny, *American exceptionalism*⁷ and millennial beliefs are foundations of US foreign policy. In 2003, US General Boykin, who, while in uniform, gave talks at churches around the country, declared that in his battle with a Muslim warlord in Somalia, "I knew that my God was bigger than his God. I knew that my God was a real God and his was an idol," and that George Bush is "in the White House because God

⁴ Ibid., p. 125.

⁵ Minister Randolph H. McKim elaborated on Roosevelt's words: "It is God who has summoned us to this war. It is his war we are fighting ... This conflict is indeed a crusade." Both quotes from Jewett, *Mission and Menace*, p. 188.

⁶ Quoted in Jewett, *Mission and Menace*, p. 239. Roosevelt's Vice-president Henry Wallace was even more precisely biblical: "We shall cleanse the plague spot of Europe ... No compromise with Satan is possible." Ibid., p. 240.

⁷ Commonly paired with the phrase manifest destiny, American exceptionalism has been described as "a pervasive faith in the uniqueness, immutability, and superiority of the country's founding liberal principles, accompanied by a conviction that the United States has a special destiny among nations." Deepa Kumar. *Islamophobia and the Politics of Empire*. Haymarket, 2012, p. 114.





put him there."⁸

Other indications of a Christian crusader mentality within the ranks of the military itself include:

- * The January 2010 revelation of coded biblical inscriptions on rifle scopes used for nearly three decades by the US Army and Marines Corps.⁹
- * The behavior of US Soldiers in the Middle East caught urinating on Muslim bodies and burning Korans on the battlefield.¹⁰
- * The most popular inscription on t-shirts and hats of US soldiers is some version of the phrase "God Will Know His Own."¹¹

⁸ Richard T. Cooper. "General Casts War in Religious Terms." *Los Angeles Times*, October 16, 2003, p. A1, quoted in Stephen Shalom. "Phoenix Rising in Iraq?" ZNet Commentary, February 10, 2005.

⁹ Referred to sometimes by troops as "Jesus rifles," hundreds of thousands of these night scopes were in circulation and often used to train Afghani and other Muslim troops. A typical code was 2COR4:6, a reference to part of the second letter of Paul to the Corinthians. These guns were also sold to law enforcement agencies, gun enthusiasts and to the UK, Australia and New Zealand. See: Michael L. "Mikey" Weinstein and David Seay. *No Snowflake in an Avalanche*. Vireo/Rare Bird Press, 2012, pp. 144-151. As of fall, 2012, nearly two and a half years after they were publicly revealed, these biblical inscriptions are still prevalent on gun scopes in use by the military. See: Kari Huus. "No Fix for 'Jesus Rifles' deploying to Afghanistan." NBC News, September 26, 2012. [online]. [cited March 12, 2013]. usnews.nbcnews.com/_news/2012/09/26/14112808-no-fix-for-jesus-rifles-deploying-to-afghanistan?lite.

¹⁰ Daniel Bates and Lee Moran. "'Disgusting' video is 'recruitment tool for the Taliban': Outrage across the world after footage emerges showing U.S. troops 'urinating on dead Afghan bodies'." *The Daily Mail*, January 12, 2012. [online]. [cited March 18, 2012]. dailymail.co.uk/news/article-2085378/US-troops-urinating-dead-Afghan-bodies-video-used-Taliban-recruitment-tool.html#ixzz210DnkO3X; Kevin Sieff. "U.S. probe of Koran burning finds 5 troops responsible, officials say; Afghans demand trial." *Washington Post*, March 2, 2012. [online]. [cited March 18, 2012]. washingtonpost.com/world/us-probe-of-koran-burning-finds-5-soldiers-responsible-afghan-clerics-demand-public-trial/2012/03/02/gIQAwJqYmR_story.html.

¹¹ In the crusade against the Cathars, one Abbot/military leader, when asked by his troops how to tell a heretic from a true follower replied, "Kill them all. The Lord will recognize His own." T-shirts and caps with some version of this slogan are very popular with US soldiers such as the Marines, Army Rangers and Special Forces and are widely available on the Internet: Brock and Parker, *Saving Paradise*, p. 290 and footnote #36, p. 490.





* Public talks, comments and promotional videos by uniformed US military personnel extolling Christian values, organizations and statements such as “God is on our Side.”¹²

* Political and military leaders use the phrase *Axis of Evil* to describe US opponents in Iraq, Afghanistan and North Korea.

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¹² Extensively documented in Weinstein and Seay, *No Snowflake*.

