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**Reagan, Armageddon & the 1984 Presidential Debate:
On the Overlap of Political and Apocalyptic Discourses in
America**



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Reagan, Armageddon and the 1984

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**On the overlap of political and
apocalyptic discourses in America**

Introduction

The political mobilisation of religious conservatives in the 1970s and 1980s focused national attention on the ‘New Christian Right’ that had emerged, and the possible links between their beliefs and their behaviour. Such questions became pertinent not only in more general debates about the separation of Church and State, but also with regards to the practical implications of the apocalyptic beliefs held and advanced by some of the movement’s most high-profile figures. The post-war paperback explosion, combined with the rise of television and radio evangelism, had provided a new forum for the dissemination of various evangelical ideas, including the apocalyptic scheme of premillennial dispensationalism. This branch of eschatology dictates that in the end times the world will become increasingly and irreversibly corrupt, and its vision of the end includes such events as the formation of a one-world religion under Antichrist, the ‘rapture’ of born-again Christians, and the seven-year ‘tribulation’.¹ This belief system had become steadily more popular, particularly in the 1970s; works such as Hal Lindsey’s *The Late Great Planet Earth* found enormous success, undergoing 36 printings between 1970 and 1981, while the individuals with the highest visibility, ‘televangelists’ such as Pat Robertson, Jimmy Swaggart and Jerry Falwell, made bible prophecy a central tenet of their extremely popular television shows.² At the same time, such shows increasingly emphasised social and political issues: one study showed that a third of viewers of Pat Robertson’s ‘700 Club’ checked “to learn about politics and what’s right and wrong in America today” as a very important reason for viewing.³

The importance and relevance of such apocalyptic beliefs are largely dismissed by the general public and the media: barring the occurrence of exceptional events, such as the violent conflict between the apocalyptic Branch Davidian sect and the government in the 1990s, or the pre-emptive expulsion of American premillennialist Christians from

¹ C. Wilcox, S. Linzey and T. G. Jelen, ‘Reluctant Warriors: Premillennialism and Politics in the Moral Majority’, *Journal for the Scientific Study of Religion*, p. 245

² P. Boyer, ‘The growth of fundamentalist apocalyptic’, in *The Encyclopedia of Apocalypticism* (New York, 1999) vol. 3, p. 168

³ R. Wuthnow, ‘The political rebirth of American Evangelicals’, in *The New Christian Right* (New York, 1983), p. 173

Israel shortly before the millennium,⁴ the issue is largely disregarded in the secular sphere as a solely spiritual matter. However, in the run up to the 1984 presidential election, concerns were raised over Ronald Reagan's well-documented links to the fundamentalist community, the apocalyptic language he and his administration deployed, and the practical ramifications this might hold for diplomatic relations with Israel and the prospect of nuclear war with Russia. The controversy built slowly for over a year, culminating in an hour-long radio documentary broadcast on National Public Radio, a press conference held by one hundred 'concerned' liberal churchmen, and a question on the issue in a televised presidential debate.⁵ In the event Reagan's response was carefully prepared, acknowledging his "philosophical" interest in the subject but directly refuting the idea that it had ever shaped his policies.⁶ This cautious response largely caused the issue to die down; Reagan won a second term, and his preoccupation with the eschatological significance of nuclear war did not stop him from cultivating increasingly amiable relations with Russia as his term proceeded.

However, this episode represents a key moment in the convergence between apocalyptic and political discourses. Although the issue quickly faded from the public mind, this was a period when the implications of dispensationalist prophecy belief, particularly where those beliefs intersected with politics, were a matter of public scrutiny and concern. Leading fundamentalists with an eschatological bent, such as Jerry Falwell and Pat Robertson, found their more fiery sermons being provided by the media as 'context' for Reagan's beliefs.⁷ At the same time, comments made by members of the Reagan administration about their apocalyptic beliefs in the previous four years in office were dragged up and subjected to close analysis. The episode illustrates a number of overlapping historiographical and sociological debates; particularly the question of whether born-again Christians politically mobilized in the 1980s because of their millennial vision, and the broader issue of whether apocalyptic beliefs such as premillennialism can have significant political ramifications. The prevailing answer to

⁴ *New York Times*, Oct. 26, 1999

⁵ S. D. O'Leary, *Arguing the Apocalypse: A Theory of Millennial Rhetoric* (Oxford, 1994) p. 182

⁶ O'Leary, *Arguing the Apocalypse*, p. 183

⁷ A. Lang, 'The Politics of Armageddon', *Convergence*,
<<http://www.prop1.org/inaugur/85reagan/85rrarm.htm>>, 12 Dec. 2008

both questions is negative; Timothy Weber, a leading historian of premillennial dispensationalism, concluded that:

American premillennialism was and is primarily a *religious* movement. Although it has some social and political consequences, premillennialism's paramount appeal is to personal and religious sentiments.⁸

Weber is led to this conclusion in part by the difficulty of reconciling the pessimistic interpretation of humanity's future at the core of dispensationalism with the optimistic advocacy of conservative social, fiscal and military policies; he sees the two facts as either contradictory or largely irrelevant to one another. This position of separation between belief and behaviour is supported by many scholars and journalists, not to mention dispensationalist preachers and authors themselves. Falwell and Robertson were asked by a sociologist if eschatology was "a significant variable in explaining the political engagement of the New Christian Right." They said no, and this repudiation was cited as evidence in various scholarly arguments.⁹ Further to this, many have observed that the popularisers of dispensationalism saw humanity's role as essentially passive, and never suggested a war with the Soviet Union, for example, as they ultimately saw divine intervention and superhuman forces as the means of Russia's prophesied destruction.¹⁰

However, such approaches are by no means uniform; a number of scholars of modern American fundamentalism and of apocalypticism have sought to demonstrate "how all religious discourses, including dispensationalism, are political and efficacious."¹¹ For instance, a counter to the previous example argues that even if war were not advocated by dispensationalist preachers, the message that Russia's destruction was imminent and inevitable lent a theological and apocalyptic dimension to the Cold War, and would impact any long-term view of the peace process.¹² Similarly, Weber's assertion above could be interpreted differently: although premillennialism is primarily a religious movement, it was one several symbolic resources upon which the movement of

⁸ T. Weber, *Living in the Shadow of the Second Coming: American Premillennialism 1875-1982* (Zondervan, 1983), p. 237-8

⁹ S. Harding, 'Imagining the Last Days: The Politics of Apocalyptic Language', in *Bulletin of the American Academy of Arts and Sciences*, Vol. 48. No. 3 (Dec., 1994), p. 18

¹⁰ P. Boyer, 'Fundamentalist Apocalyptic', *The Encyclopedia of Apocalypticism*, vol. 3, p. 170

¹¹ Harding, 'Imagining the Last Days' in *Bulletin of the American Academy*, p. 18

¹² Boyer, 'Fundamentalist Apocalyptic', *The Encyclopedia of Apocalypticism*, vol. 3, p. 171

activist fundamentalism drew.¹³ As it was employed by a politically efficacious group, its political ramifications cannot be disregarded, even if the leaders of that movement insist that there is no connection between belief and behaviour.

This investigation will focus on two key areas: firstly examining the political aspects incorporated into apocalyptic discourse of the time among premillennial dispensationalists, and then, taking the ‘Armageddon’ controversy with Reagan as a case study, examining the extent to which political discourse incorporated apocalyptic elements. ‘Apocalypticism’ here denotes the premillennial dispensationalist interpretation of Biblical prophecy, represented in this paper by two best-selling books by the author Hal Lindsey: *The Late Great Planet Earth* (1970), and *The 1980’s: Countdown to Armageddon* (1981). It will seek to show how proponents of premillennial thinking in this period incorporated a distinct political note in their apocalyptic discourses, contrary to previous practice in the dispensationalist tradition. The extent to which the texts are grounded in current events will be used to examine how far the apocalyptic narratives described could be understood to take place in the contemporary, geopolitical world, most notably in the context of U.S. foreign policy. It will be shown that this was part of a broader stylistic effort throughout Lindsey’s work to make his apocalyptic discourse as relatable, accessible and relevant as possible to a wide audience: in effect, to normalise prophecy belief. These efforts adapted to the changing political circumstances of fundamentalist conservatives: by choosing texts from both before and after the rise of the New Christian Right, a comparative perspective may be taken of how far the fundamentally pessimistic message of premillennialism was reconciled to allow for the optimism of political action. Further to this the tension that remained between the two contradictory impulses will be examined; it will be argued that although this apocalyptic discourse encompassed substantive political aspects, as these grew more pronounced fissures began to emerge in Lindsey’s apocalyptic schematic, and that this dilemma was reflected in other premillennialist thinkers of the time.

The second key area of investigation is the political discourse surrounding the controversy of the 1984 election, which will be divided into three main categories: firstly the efforts of activist fundamentalist groups to portray him as a candidate representative

¹³ O’Leary, *Arguing the Apocalypse*, p. 173

of their movement, incorporating some emphasis on his interest in prophecy belief. Secondly, the public denunciation of these beliefs, based on concerns about the effect they might have on Reagan's personal attitudes to certain aspects of foreign policy, most notably with regards to Israel and the possibility of nuclear war with Russia. These anxieties were expressed in a series of 'exposés' in the liberal media, and the discussions that ensued after a press conference held shortly before the second presidential debate, at which one hundred liberal churchmen attempted to draw attention to the issue of whether 'Ronald Reagan, who controls our nuclear weapons, really *believes* these things'.¹⁴ Although the response given in the presidential debate rapidly caused the issue to all but disappear as a matter of public concern, sparring continued between journalists and fundamentalists over the issue for few more years, resulting in the publishing in 1986 of a sensationalist book by journalist Grace Halsell, *Prophecy and Politics: The Secret Alliance between Israel and the U.S. Christian Right*. This text, which was written with enough hindsight to provide an overview of the conflict, is interesting for the methodology it employs to discredit the 'Christian Right', ultimately resorting to apocalyptic warnings of dire consequences. The precise techniques used to convey and imply an overlap between Reagan's political views and his alleged apocalyptic beliefs will be closely examined. Interestingly, this text draws on the same facts and phenomena of the Reagan administration as the New Christian Right had done to emphasise the importance of this doctrine, although for Halsell the apocalypse is the destruction of no less that rational, secular government in the United States.

This wide variety of different sources has one key aspect in common: any attempt to demonstrate or imply overlap between Reagan's alleged beliefs and his role as a politician was grounded first and foremost in his personality and character, with consideration of his policies and how they might be affected taking on a secondary and speculative role. This was well suited to the character of politics at the time: several scholars have pointed out that Reagan's first presidential election in 1980 was to a great

¹⁴ 'Armageddon Theology and Presidential Decision-Making: Religious Leaders' Concern', transcript of a press conference for *Religious Issues '84*, <<http://www.rumormillnews.com/ARMAGEDDON%20THEOLOGY.htm>> 10 Mar. 2009

extent reduced to the question ‘who is more capable of governing?’¹⁵ This is substantiated by a number of studies by *Public Opinion*, which found far higher approval ratings for Reagan’s personality and effectiveness than for any of his policies throughout his time in the White House.¹⁶ However, the extent to which concerns about the political significance of his beliefs were confined to Reagan’s personality serves as a significant limitation to the overlap between political and apocalyptic discourse. Although the controversy played out against the backdrop of broader issues in the election involving the conflation of religion and politics, there was a significant difference between the overlap that occurred in general and the specific issue of apocalypticism in politics. While the issue of ‘God and Politics’ provoked a Newsweek cover story and a fervent debate that continued in similar terms for at least the rest of the decade, the issue of ‘Ronald Reagan and the Prophecy of Armageddon’ received sporadic attention for some months, and after building to a peak was succinctly extinguished as a political issue by a single public response from Reagan himself.¹⁷ The lobbying efforts of the New Christian Right to return government to the “Judeo-Christian values” on which they perceived the nation had been founded, driving legislation on issues such as abortion and pornography, created a palpable sense of overlap between religion and politics.¹⁸ The issue of apocalypticism, by contrast, was for the most part limited to its application to Reagan’s personal views: this distinction provides a structural framework for examining the extent of its overlap with politics.

However, there were aspects of Reagan’s public and political rhetoric that lubricated concerns about the conflation between apocalyptic beliefs and politics, particularly on the subject of Russia and the Communist threat. Examining extracts from speeches, particularly those delivered in the run-up to the 1984 election, will constitute the third category. It will be investigated how far those elements that caused concern existed separately from the ‘Armageddon’ controversy, and what the relationship between the two can illustrate about the link between belief and behaviour in this

¹⁵ C. F. Alford, ‘Mastery and Retreat: Psychological sources on the Appeal of Ronald Reagan’, *Political Psychology*, Vol. 9, No. 4 (Dec., 1988), p. 580

¹⁶ Alford, ‘Mastery and Retreat’, p. 581

¹⁷ *Newsweek*, Sept. 17, 1984; Joe Cuomo, ‘Ronald Reagan and the Prophecy of Armageddon’, produced at WBAI Radio, NYC, 1984.

¹⁸ R. S. Appleby, ‘Fundamentalism’, in *The Encyclopedia of Politics and Religion*, ed. Robert Wuthnow, Vol. 1 (Washington, 1998) p. 283

instance. Reagan's two terms in power will broadly serve as a chronological limitation to the second section of this paper. This maintains focus both on the controversy itself, and the period when the New Christian Right came to real prominence in American political life.¹⁹

Halsell's exposé will be a central feature of the second section, and as a historical text it has distinct advantages and disadvantages. Its journalistic style brandishes anecdotal evidence frequently, but is thoroughly rooted in the controversy itself and the perceived issues of the moment. It seeks to cultivate an apocalyptic image of its own, in the form of a deranged army of fundamentalists with powerful political connections "provoking a holy war"²⁰ in Israel. The evidence it assembles in support of this can only be taken so far by the historian: the agenda of the text is clearly laid out in its alarmist tone, and the anecdotal evidence it provides is hard to substantiate. However, as a discourse, the scheme she elaborates is a good example of the fears and arguments employed in response to the perceived conflation of apocalypticism and politics. By treating it as such, it can usefully be deployed as a text, particularly in its examination of the 'evidence' of the threat of nuclear Armageddon posed by Reagan. Its relatively recent publication also means that it interacts directly with some other sources in the second section, providing a useful overview of one side of the controversy.

The problems and advantages offered by Lindsey's works are not dissimilar to those encountered with Halsell's. While prophetic speculation involves a quite different deployment and manipulation of evidence to journalism, the appeals it does make to evidence from the secular world are often hard to verify. For example, the first chapter of his later book is dedicated to anecdotal accounts of influential and important people, many holding high-up positions in the pentagon, enthusing about the relevance of his first book's findings to their lives and jobs.²¹ Claims that certain Pentagon officials had reached the same conclusions as him regarding the future of the Middle East are hard to authenticate,²² but can nevertheless serve as evidence for how this scheme of apocalypticism perceived itself. Similarly, the graphs and other visual data provided to

¹⁹ O'Leary, *Arguing the Apocalypse*, p. 172

²⁰ Grace Halsell, *Prophecy and Politics: The Secret Alliance between Israel and the U.S. Christian Right* (Chicago:, 1989) p. 96

²¹ Hal Lindsey, *1980's: Countdown to Armageddon* (Bantam, 1981), p. 5

²² Lindsey, *The 1980's: Countdown to Armageddon*, p. 6

show the loss of U.S. arms superiority to Russia will not be used as evidence for the veracity or otherwise of the claim itself, but instead as evidence of the rhetorical link the text establishes between political matters, such as the antinuclear movement, and eschatology.²³ By treating the text as representative of a discourse, and not searching for direct evidence of, for example, its impact on Reagan, one can disengage from its bias and tap into its strengths as a source. These strengths are clear: Lindsey's works were runaway bestsellers, *The Late Great Planet Earth* both the most successful and setting the template for countless other popularisers of apocalypticism seeking to reach a mass audience in this period.²⁴ Further to this, the fact that Lindsey was read by various members of Reagan's administration was often cited during the controversy itself, demonstrating its relevance to both sides of the debate.²⁵ Jerry Falwell and Pat Robertson, to be considered in the second section, also make good ambassadors for the scheme of apocalypticism they preached due to their combination of extremely large audiences and active political involvement. Indeed, the particular skills they employed to reach large audiences were rooted in the fluent interweaving of 'patriotism, political conservatism, and cultural fundamentalism with their specifically religious message'.²⁶

The overall tone of the media response, characterised in part by the misunderstanding and puzzlement of liberal journalists, and in part by sensationalist outrage, will be considered in the light of more recent debates about the separation between belief and behaviour. Circumstances have changed since the end of Reagan's time in office: the slew of sexual and financial scandals that plagued prominent figures of the New Christian Right in the late 1980s, coupled with the floundering of Robertson's presidential bid, and the dissolution of the Soviet Union, have reduced the feeling of threat from most secular discussions of the matter.²⁷ However, the perceived threat of nuclear war resulting from apocalypticism during the controversy in 1984 provides access to a quite different discourse than that of today. The tone and key aspects of the debate that occurred between the media and certain religious figures will be situated in the context of more recent debates about the political dimensions of apocalypticism.

²³ Lindsey, *The 1980's: Countdown to Armageddon*, pp. 70-71

²⁴ Boyer, 'Fundamentalist Apocalyptic', in *The Encyclopedia of Apocalypticism*, p. 168

²⁵ Halsell, *Prophecy and Politics*, p. 43

²⁶ G. Hodgson, *The World Turned Right Side Up* (New York, 1996), p. 173

²⁷ O'Leary, *Arguing the Apocalypse*, p. 174

Historians of premillennialism have examined the issue of the controversy surrounding Reagan before, most notably Stephen O'Leary and Paul Boyer, who have both considered the controversy itself and the works of Lindsey as part of broader studies of American apocalypticism. Both studies have put forward nuanced proposals about the link between the 'grassroots prophecy belief' of premillennialism and political prospect of nuclear war: Boyer labels it

subterranean and indirect. Few post-1945 prophecy believers consciously sought to bring on Armageddon as quickly as possible. Rather, convinced that the Bible foretells the end and secure in the knowledge that believers will be spared, they tend towards passive acquiescence in the nuclear arms race and Cold War confrontation.²⁸

However, the agency afforded to ordinary prophecy believers in nuclear strategy is considerably different to that of the head of state. With its closer focus on premillennialism's role in the attitudes of a single politician, rather than the movement as a whole, this paper will attempt to establish the progression of the overlap between belief and behaviour in a particular case, studying its extent and limitations, and providing a specific context to these debates. As the overlap will be explored not just from the perspective of premillennialism's effect on politics, but the political response, some reflections may be made on how far each discourse was able to accommodate the overlap, and which more actively drew the limitations.

This represents the body of the rhetorical, theoretical and historical issues this investigation seeks to engage with. In this essay I will firstly examine Lindsey's works as an example of how premillennialism incorporated politics into its apocalyptic discourse, and secondly analysing both the secular and fundamentalist portrayals of Reagan's apocalyptic personality, probing each for what they tell us about contemporary society's attitude to this high-profile movement. The conclusion will draw the first two sections together, examining the nature of the interaction between the two discourses and how far the trends discerned correlated, defining the extent and limits of the overlap, and considering the findings in the light of broader historiographical debates about the political character of fundamentalist apocalypticism.

²⁸ Boyer, *When Time Shall Be No More* (Cambridge, Mass., 1992) p. 146

Chapter 1

Hal Lindsey's works serve as an exemplary demonstration of the type of apocalyptic belief at the heart of the controversy; he was the most influential interpreter and populariser of dispensationalist prophecy, often referred to as 'the father of the modern prophecy movement' by his peers.²⁹ However, while his prominence as an ambassador of the modern movement, and one who crucially situated his apocalyptic discourse in the political sphere, renders him an ideal representative, the dispensationalist scheme he employed dated back to nineteenth-century England, and must be briefly examined before any close consideration of Lindsey himself. The term 'premillennial dispensationalism' denotes two key aspects of its eschatology. Christian millennialism is the belief that there will be a period of one thousand years of righteousness; premillennialism dictates that Christ will return before the millennium, after the state of the world decays, to establish it by his might.³⁰ 'Dispensationalism' divides history into seven different epochs, or dispensations, in each of which God tests and communicates with mankind in different ways. The present is located near the end of the sixth dispensation; the final of these begins with the 'rapture', in which Christians will be physically lifted from the face of the earth to meet Christ in the air, whose precise timing remains hidden.³¹ In this sense it has also been labelled a 'futurist' system of interpretation, as it maintains that all of the prophecies of the last days have yet to be fulfilled.³² Although the moment of the final dispensation cannot be predicted, it may be discerned by observing "signs of the times" as the decay of the world becomes overwhelming, thus underscoring the fundamentally pessimistic message of premillennialism.³³

This system was brought to America by John Nelson Darby in the mid-nineteenth century. Ordained in the protestant Church of Ireland in 1825, he shortly withdrew in

²⁹ D. Wojcik, 'Embracing Doomsday: Faith, Fatalism, and Apocalyptic Beliefs in the Nuclear Age', *Western Folklore*, Vol. 55, No. 4 (Autumn, 1996), p. 305

³⁰ C. Wilcox, S. Linzey and T. G. Jelen, 'Reluctant Warriors: Premillennialism and Politics in the Moral Majority', *Journal for the Scientific Study of Religion*, p. 245

³¹ Boyer, *When Time Shall Be No More*, p. 88

³² Weber, *Living in the Shadow of The Second Coming*, p. 10

³³ Lindsey, *The 1980's*, p. 20

opposition to its links to the crown.³⁴ He went on to join the Plymouth Brethren, which rejected state ties, and brought to America a solid tradition of apocalyptic beliefs that express a desire for salvation outside of established institutions, which he viewed as inherently corrupt.³⁵ Darby rejected the historicist approach to prophetic interpretation favoured by the Millerites and other premillennial groups of the time, whereby world events since Jesus' time were matched to specific prophecies, and a specific date for the Second Coming could thus be set. This had led to the 'Great Disappointment' of the Millerites' failed prediction in 1845, rendered premillennialism the laughing stock of the religious community, and established a dire warning about the perils of date setting; Darby himself was a firm believer in the dangers of specific predictions.³⁶ Darbyism grew in popularity from the turn of the twentieth century, the system being codified in America by the immense success of the annotated Scofield Reference Bible, published in 1909, which provided notes expounding the dispensationalist scheme by the relevant verses.³⁷

The scheme itself provides a distinct framework for the end-time scenario, or final dispensation, and although some details are disagreed upon, a coherent picture remains. As the world becomes increasingly evil, the false prophet Antichrist will rise to power and form a one-world religion, wreaking havoc on the world for a seven-year period known as the Tribulation. A second figure, 'the beast', will be a political leader who will create a new Roman Empire, and work in allegiance with Antichrist. However, true Christians will be whisked away in the 'rapture', passing straight into heaven without dying, based on the description in Thessalonians of the 'catching away' of the church to meet Christ in the air; whether this occurs before or after the Tribulation is a matter of interpretation. The Jewish people will also play a central role in this scenario: in the final dispensation they will flood back to Israel to rebuild the Temple upon Mount Moriah. Finally, at the end of the Tribulation, Israel will be besieged by the forces of evil, causing the conversion to Christianity of a 'remnant' of Jews in Jerusalem. Christ himself will

³⁴ Boyer, *When Time Shall Be No More*, p. 87

³⁵ Wojcik, 'Embracing Doomsday', *Western Folklore*, p. 300

³⁶ Boyer, 'The Growth of Fundamentalist Apocalypticism', p. 166

³⁷ D. H. Watt, 'The Private Hopes of American Fundamentalists and Evangelicals, 1925-1975', *Religion and American Culture*, Vol. 1, No. 2 (Summer, 1991), p. 156

then return and utterly destroy the forces of evil in the Battle of Armageddon, thus establishing his millennial reign.³⁸

In many ways, *The Late Great Planet Earth* was a very traditional book; the constituent elements of its prophetic scheme were derived from premillennialist precedent, from the central preoccupation with the role of Israel to the identification of Russia as Gog, ‘the great Northern enemy.’³⁹ However, being published after decades of Cold War hostility, and with images of Israel’s Six-Day War in 1967 still fresh in the public mind, this scheme held a relevance to international politics and world events that previous generations of dispensationalists could only have dreamt of. Lindsey took advantage of this overlap, writing the best-selling book of the decade, and quickly becoming the most widely read interpreter of prophecy in history.⁴⁰ A close examination of the text will focus on how he self-consciously achieved this accessible, ‘best-seller’ aspect, and the methods employed in conjunction with this to integrate contemporary U.S. foreign policy concerns into his apocalyptic discourse.

³⁸ Weber, *Living in the Shadow*, pp. 10-12; Boyer, *When Time Shall Be No More*, pp. 88-90; Wocjik, ‘Embracing Doomsday’, pp. 303-5; Watt, ‘The Private Hopes’, pp. 156-7, all provide useful summaries

³⁹ Lindsey, *The Late Great Planet Earth*, p. 62

⁴⁰ Weber, *Living in the Shadow of the Second Coming*, p. 21

(i)

The Late Great Planet Earth is a book written with a popular audience in mind. It not only achieved unprecedented sales for a prophetic interpretation, but significantly broke out of the traditional market for the genre:

Previously, books on prophecy were only found in Christian (i.e. evangelical) or Bible bookstores. *The Late Great Planet Earth* started showing up in drugstores, supermarkets, and “secular” bookstores, right alongside gothic romances, cheap westerns, and books on the latest... fads.⁴¹

Couched in remarkably colloquial terms for a scriptural interpretation, presented in a slim volume with a dramatic, eye-catching cover, and comprised of easily-digestible chapters of about fifteen pages in length, it is easy to discern how this came to be. However, the book’s techniques for ensuring its accessibility, and thereby its popularity, surpass its presentation. Lindsey was aware of the potentially alienating and exclusive nature of premillennial apocalyptic discourse, which could appear hostile to non-believers, and strives throughout the book to present as inclusive a scheme as possible, relevant to a broad spectrum of readers, particularly in the opening chapters.

The introduction establishes all of these themes right from the outset: Lindsey asserts that ‘the interest in this aspect of Bible study has been amazing, particularly in the past few years,’ relaying evidence of the ‘thousands of people,’ ‘of every age group,’ who have already embraced these ideas. Having established that this is an area of burgeoning interest, Lindsey promises that, ‘This is not a complex theological treatise, but a direct account of the most thrilling, optimistic view of what the future could hold for any individual... I believe in a hope for the future.’⁴² The fundamentally pessimistic message of premillennialism – that of a world so utterly decayed that only supernatural and apocalyptic forces may rejuvenate it and establish the millennium – is a revelation postponed for later in the book. At the close of the introduction, Lindsey goes so far as to tentatively cast prophecy belief as part of a broader framework of ‘places men search for answers’, alongside ‘philosophy, meditation, [and] science.’ By setting prophecy in this

⁴¹ Weber, *Living in the Shadow of the Second Coming*, p. 5

⁴² Lindsey, *The Late Great Planet Earth*, p. 8

context and by conceding that ‘all of these are good if used properly’⁴³, Lindsey helps to rationalize prophecy belief to the uninitiated reader and render it less alien, indeed setting it in the familiar habitat of drugstores and supermarkets, right alongside gothic romances and books on the latest fads.

Lindsey elaborates on this agenda of presenting an inclusive and relatable framework in the opening chapters: he links prophecy to astrology, asserting its importance through the ages and its popularity in contemporary popular culture. References to popular culture are scattered liberally throughout the first two chapters: from the staff astrologer hired by ‘the hippy musical, *Hair*,’ to the popularity of the song ‘Aquarius’, to the link drawn between prophetic interest and the popularity of science fiction comic books and television programmes, Lindsey firmly grounds his topic in the milieu of the familiar, comforting, and inclusive.⁴⁴ Further to this, the language deployed by the book is accessible and colloquial, particularly in the face of new or foreign concepts: thus the Antichrist is rendered ‘The Future Fuehrer’, and the Rapture becomes ‘The Ultimate Trip’.⁴⁵ As the book progresses, and the monolithic view of society, and indeed all history, espoused by premillennialism unfolds, the attempts to reconcile these two contradictory impulses become more strained. The tenth chapter, entitled “Revival of Mystery Babylon” is the site of the greatest contradiction: the premillennialist scheme involves society steadily collapsing, and the willingness of that society to embrace a false one-world religion, ‘Babylon’. However, Lindsey strives not to alienate or condemn his readers, and feels compelled to begin by asserting that ‘It is not our purpose to be shocking or offensive.’⁴⁶ Nevertheless, he is obliged to reveal that there is an insurmountable qualitative difference between Christianity and other religions and belief systems:

We should be careful to note at this point that we are using the term “religion”, not Christianity. Christianity is not a religion. Religion is the process of man trying to achieve goodness, perfection, and acceptance with God by his own efforts. Christianity, on the other hand, is God taking the initiative and reaching for man.⁴⁷

⁴³ Lindsey, *The Late Great Planet Earth*, p. 9

⁴⁴ Lindsey, *The Late Great Planet Earth*, pp. 13, 17

⁴⁵ Lindsey, *The Late Great Planet Earth*, pp. 98, 135

⁴⁶ Lindsey, *The Late Great Planet Earth*, p. 114

⁴⁷ Lindsey, *The Late Great Planet Earth*, p. 115

This concept of spiritual ‘haves’ and ‘have-nots’ lies at the centre of the dispensational premillennialist scheme that Lindsey employs, with those who accept God being whisked away in the Rapture, while the rest of the world suffers the agonies of seven years of tribulation. However, it takes Lindsey 115 pages to establish this, in sharp contradistinction to the broad, accessible framework of places to ‘search for answers’ acknowledged in the book’s introduction.

The Late Great Planet Earth may become more pessimistic as the book progresses, but this mostly serves as a testament to the buoyant, upbeat and inclusive character adopted in strength in its earlier sections. Despite the exclusiveness of its salvation, premillennialism is, in the hands of Lindsey and those like him, a popular movement with the capacity to reach large numbers, and with a potent ideological message. As we shall see later, this populism is a crucial reason for its appearance in the politics of the Reagan era. On the other hand, its exclusiveness and extremism were just as crucial a limiting factor on its application to real policy issues.

(ii)

Throughout the book, Lindsey provides modern context for old or unfamiliar concepts or examples, and consistently casts them in a modern political framework. In demonstrating Julius Caesar's reliance on prophecies, he explains that 'In ancient Rome there was an official high-ranking government group, probably similar to our State Department, which was called the "Board of Augurs."'”⁴⁸ In order to convey the concept of Antichrist in relatable terms, he not only terms him 'the Future Fuehrer', but constructs a lengthy comparison with Hitler's rise to power and the 'chaos in society' at present.⁴⁹ Lindsey also creates more direct allusions, asserting that 'some of the future events that were predicted hundreds of years ago read like today's newspaper.'⁵⁰ As a part of this underlying tendency to provide a modern, secular and relatable context, Lindsey's work engenders a sense of overlap between apocalyptic and political spheres in two ways: by explicitly rendering biblical prophecies in terms of contemporary nation states and scenarios reflected by international politics, and by simultaneously casting the concerns of U.S. foreign policy in apocalyptic terms.

Several of the chapters in *The Late Great Planet Earth* are actually structured around the different modern nations that the ancient prophecies allegedly refer to; the book moves from a chapter on Israel, to an investigation of Russia's role in the end times ('Russia is a Gog'), to the part played by the Arab nations in the Middle East ('Sheikh to Sheikh'), to the role of Communist China ('The Yellow Peril'). This structural decision is a crucial one, as it undermines any sense of scriptural coherency throughout the book. Prophecies are selected piecemeal and in no clear order: rather than structure the book around the prophecies, and then trying to match the world's political orientation to what he finds, Lindsey does the reverse: he takes scope of the international situation and the ratifies it with relevant biblical passages. Further to this structural evidence of the relevance of international politics to Lindsey's apocalyptic discourse, he frequently asserts 'how definite the Bible is about who the nations will be that play the major roles

⁴⁸ Lindsey, *The Late Great Planet Earth*, p. 12

⁴⁹ Lindsey, *The Late Great Planet Earth*, pp. 98-99

⁵⁰ Lindsey, *The Late Great Planet Earth*, p. 20

in the last drama.⁵¹ By consistently mapping his apocalyptic scenario through political events, Lindsey makes premillennialism a naturally political creed; indeed, one could say it is a fundamentally political fundamentalism, and a natural bedfellow of the American political right-wing.

Lindsey's exposition of Russia's role in the end times serves as a good example of the techniques he employs to conflate his apocalyptic schematic and world politics. The chapter opens with two juxtaposed quotations: one from the Israeli General Moshe Dayan in 1968, a mere two years before the book was published, asserting that 'the next war will not be with the Arabs, but with the Russians; the second quote is from Ezekiel 38, corroborating the contemporary statement with prophetic insight.⁵² The ordering of these quotes provides a miniature parallel with the broader structure of the book, and the reminder of the recent Six Day War and turmoil in the Middle East emphasises the relevance of the quote from Ezekiel, which holds that led by 'Gog', 'a mighty army... will come up against my people Israel, like a cloud covering the land.' Lindsey conducts close analysis of the relevant passages in Ezekiel, and establishes that 'Gog' refers to Russia, based both on his own interpretation and the precedent of other scholars.⁵³ As Lindsey asserts, the identification of Russia as Gog had been around since the nineteenth century, and was codified in the dispensational premillennialist scheme by its inclusion in the Scofield Reference Bible.⁵⁴ However, the emphasis he places on Russia's role is inexplicable from the perspective of the dispensationalist schematic of the end: as he later acknowledges in the book, the Russian force will be utterly destroyed by the forces of the new Roman Empire.⁵⁵ This latter army, led by Antichrist, will then go on to fight in the Battle of Armageddon; Gog perhaps serves as a useful prophetic indicator, but plays a relatively small part in Lindsey's own end-time scenario. However, the role of Gog and its allies (representing other Communist countries) is heavily emphasised from early on in the book, and Lindsey declares that 'it is this "Northern Confederacy" that is destined to plunge the world into its final great war which Christ will return to end.'⁵⁶ Thus the

⁵¹ Lindsey, *The Late Great Planet Earth*, p. 60

⁵² Lindsey, *The Late Great Planet Earth*, p. 59

⁵³ Lindsey, *The Late Great Planet Earth*, pp. 63-5

⁵⁴ Boyer, *When Time Shall Be No More*, p. 158

⁵⁵ Lindsey, p. 159

⁵⁶ Lindsey, p. 59

incorporation of political aspects into Lindsey's apocalyptic discourse may be considered part of what has been termed the 'best-seller' factor of his populist appeal: the significance accorded to the roles of modern nations is based primarily on their importance to his audience's political worldview.

Having established the role of Russia and her allies in the end times, Lindsey situates this apocalyptic scenario directly in the context of Cold War concerns:

If you have doubts about all that has been said in this chapter, isn't it a bit unnerving to note that almost all of the countries predicted as part of this great army are already armed with weapons created and manufactured in Russia?⁵⁷

By appealing to Cold War anxieties, such as the 'domino effect' that had preoccupied American foreign policy since World War II, he reinforces his dispensationalist scheme by casting it in the light of secular apocalyptic discourse. Thus Lindsey takes care to emphasise that neither Russia nor China, despite any appearances of peaceful interaction, 'have disembarked from their goal of total world conquest for Communism. This is an integral part of the Communist doctrine,' that cannot proceed 'Without the total destruction of the capitalist system.'⁵⁸ Such a mentality of 'total destruction' is steadily emphasised throughout the book, and the process of conflating modern apocalyptic concerns based in Cold War politics with biblical prophecies achieves its zenith when Lindsey reveals that indications of nuclear war may be found in the book of Revelation.⁵⁹ He even declares that it will be the mechanism of 'the Red Army's destruction', observing that 'this could be a direct judgement from God, or God could allow the various countries to launch a nuclear exchange of ballistic missiles upon each other.'⁶⁰ Thus he creates a system whereby secular and dispensational apocalyptic preoccupations serve to mutually support and reinforce each other. Relatively little comparison has been provided thus far between Lindsey and the multitude of premillennialist authors who followed in the wake of his 'bestseller' success, many of whom later featured prominently in the New Christian Right. However, while various details may have changed from one interpretation to another, particularly to reflect shifting world politics,

⁵⁷ Lindsey, p. 71

⁵⁸ Lindsey, p. 85

⁵⁹ Lindsey, p. 82

⁶⁰ Lindsey, p. 161

a preoccupation with the inevitability of nuclear warfare has consistently shaped the dispensationalist subculture.⁶¹

This is perhaps the most direct link to the ‘Armageddon’ controversy surrounding Reagan; it can be seen that Lindsey established a definite connection between the political issues of Cold War tensions and thermonuclear warfare, and his apocalyptic discourse based on ‘complete agreement of all parts of Biblical prophecy’.⁶² This conflation is reflected, albeit in an opaque and indirect manner, by Reagan’s ambiguous views about the role of religion in government. However, there are limits to the overlap; no agency in these dramas is accorded to true believers; and a theme Lindsey frequently returns to is that ‘Man’s fate is controlled by God alone.’⁶³ Further to this, contemporary concerns of foreign policy are just one of several resources Lindsey appeals to in shaping his book as a ‘best-seller’: fears that America is suffering a ‘moral decay’, as well as general anxieties about modernity and the dangers of ‘our computerized society’ are all fluently interwoven.⁶⁴ However, Lindsey’s apocalyptic discourse began to situate itself more concertededly in the political sphere as conservative fundamentalists (including himself) became more politically active over the next decade, and a comparative study will be taken of his earlier and later work.

⁶¹ Wojcik, ‘Embracing Doomsday’, p. 303

⁶² Lindsey, *The Late Great Planet Earth*, p. 119

⁶³ Lindsey, p. 122

⁶⁴ Lindsey, pp. 93, 113

(iii)

The remarkable success of *The Late Great Planet Earth* set the template for a new generation of premillennial dispensationalist discourse, characterised by a simple, accessible writing style, and saturation in world politics and current events. Hal Lindsey himself continued to produce regular sequels and revisions, writing four more successful books in the next decade. Between the publication of *The Late Great Planet Earth* in 1970 and *The 1980s: Countdown to Armageddon* in 1981, significant shifts occurred, both at home and abroad. Premillennialist authors quickly moved to keep their works ‘current’: as America became further embroiled in conflicts in the Middle East, triggering such major events as the taking of hostages in the American embassy in Iran, “oil” became a watchword for Armageddon as the decade progressed.⁶⁵ Perhaps more significant to premillennialist discourse were the shifts that occurred in domestic politics in this time: evangelical groups had politically mobilised to striking effect. After the formation of Jerry Falwell’s Moral Majority, an evangelical lobbying group, and several similar organizations, premillennialists suddenly found their role of modern-day Micaiah supplanted, not least when they threw themselves behind a successful campaign on behalf of Ronald Reagan’s presidential bid in 1980.⁶⁶ Major premillennialist figures such as Pat Robertson and Hal Lindsey himself were involved in this process, as members of the religious ‘Roundtable’, a group created to coordinate efforts of those fundamentalists fighting for ‘pro-God, pro-family, and pro-American causes’, and more directly as financial backers of campaigns for the man Robertson described as ‘probably the most evangelical president we have had since the Founding Fathers.’⁶⁷

This change in affairs caused some slight kinks in the premillennialist discourse, which were fluently incorporated by its proponents. By conducting a comparative analysis of *The Late Great Planet Earth* and *The 1980s: Countdown to Armageddon*, one may investigate how the discourse adapted to these changing circumstances. In particular, it will be demonstrated how the fundamentally pessimistic message of premillennialism

⁶⁵ See J. F. Walvoord, *Armageddon, Oil, and the Middle East Crisis* (Zondervan, 1973)

⁶⁶ R. Pierard, ‘Religion and the 1984 Election Campaign’, *Review of Religious Research*, Vol. 27, No. 2 (Dec., 1985), pp. 99-100

⁶⁷ Pierard, ‘Religion and the 1984 Election Campaign’, p. 100

was further modified to allow for the optimism of political advocacy, and the increased prevalence of U.S. foreign policy concerns in the text, allowing reflections on how far these shifts in emphasis undermined the thematic consistency of its apocalyptic discourse.

Premillennialism is traditionally steeped in an anti-establishment mentality, being highly suspicious both of major religious and government institutions, which are often viewed as inherently corrupt; as discussed above, this dates back at least as far as Darby. While *The Late Great Planet Earth* is undoubtedly a patriotic book – Lindsey’s love of his country is palpable, not least in the overwhelmingly American perspective he brings to issues of complex international politics – he nevertheless makes it clear that the world’s decay is beyond political solutions. In the introduction, he casts a wry look at the dependably unreliable nature of politicians, and the limitations of political action:

What do the politicians say? ‘We have the solutions to the problems. Elect us and we’ll prove it to you.’

I am not downgrading the importance of electing honest, intelligent men... but are they able to provide the answers to the basic and visceral questions of man?...

Governments change, men falter and fall... Are we able to say that the answer is in the realm of political action?⁶⁸

This approach fits not only with premillennialist precedent, but also its core tenets, which hold that mankind’s problems are irreversible, and only supernatural intervention will affect the course of history.⁶⁹ As such, Lindsey further emphasises the fallacy of political action, later asserting that ‘any person who hasn’t come to see that his most basic problem is an inner spiritual one prefers a political deliverer to a spiritual one.’⁷⁰ However, one encounters a distinct contrast from the very outset of his latter book, as the opening chapter glowingly reports an invitation to speak at the Pentagon, where ‘a great number of officers and non-military personnel alike had read *Late Great* and wanted to hear more’ with ‘hundreds of people jamming the room.’⁷¹ The implication that his previous book had made a significant impact on the government denotes a serious change in Lindsey’s schematic, not least in the role it accords institutions of state.

⁶⁸ Lindsey, *The Late Great Planet Earth*, p. 9

⁶⁹ Harding, ‘Imagining the Last Days’, p. 22

⁷⁰ Lindsey, *The Late Great Planet Earth*, p. 31

⁷¹ Lindsey, *The 1980s*, pp. 5-6

The 1980s: Countdown to Armageddon follows a similar interpretative scheme to Lindsey's first book. Chapters are still structured around the roles of different nations in the end times, updated to take account of new events and fit them into the schematic outlined in his previous books, such as the Russian invasion of Afghanistan. These roles remain largely the same for the nations involved; however, the passive role assigned to the United States (due to its absence from the scriptures) has been significantly modified. In a lengthy chapter entitled 'What About The U.S.?' Lindsey sketches out a number of dire apocalyptic scenarios for America, such as a takeover by the communists or destruction by a surprise Soviet nuclear attack. These are mitigated only by the prospect of a single 'ray of hope' and possible salvation for America: 'electing officials who will not only reflect the Bible's morality in government but will shape domestic and foreign policies to protect our country and our way of life.'⁷² The rise to prominence of conservative evangelical political groups provided a new agenda that is accommodated for throughout the chapter. In a sub-section entitled 'The Crisis of Internal Decay', Lindsey sketches the nation's problems along overt partisan lines, railing against 'The Threat of the 'Welfare State', which he denounces with Biblical principles of work ethic, and the dangers of big government, both of which are labelled as 'socialist thinking'.⁷³ In doing so, and by arguing that 'the Bible supports building a powerful military force,' (echoing Reagan's policies), Lindsey shifts the focus of his book further away from the dispensationalist interpretation of the end, and further into the modern political sphere.

Most significantly, Lindsey creates space in his apocalyptic discourse for political advocacy (asserting 'I'm not trying to be a political writer'⁷⁴) by describing spiritual action as a mechanism for affecting political reality. Having outlined the ominous state of affairs both in America and abroad, he declares that the reasons 'why the U.S. has been preserved as a free country' thus far involves the occurrence of a 'spiritual awakening... over the past few years.' He explains how 'God has spared many nations in the past because they had experienced spiritual awakenings,' and proclaims that 'We must keep evangelism moving.'⁷⁵ Besides openly endorsing the political movement he is a part of,

⁷² Lindsey, *The 1980s*, pp. 132, 157

⁷³ Lindsey, *The 1980s*, pp. 141-3

⁷⁴ Lindsey, *The 1980s*, p. 133

⁷⁵ Lindsey, *The 1980s*, p. 157

Lindsey performs a significant reversal here. From *The Late Great Planet Earth*, whose only offer of sanctuary was the promise of true Christians being ‘raptured’ before the Tribulation, he progresses in *The 1980s* to a system whereby a resurgence of faith and pursuing a ‘righteous’ course (such as protecting Israel in times of need) can affect the outcome of the apocalyptic scenario. Ultimately Lindsey concedes that whatever hope he holds out for America keeping its ‘sovereignty and freedom’ exists in the short term:

I believe that America will survive this perilous situation and endure until the Lord comes to evacuate His people. But this will only be because God’s people have humbled themselves, turned from their sins in repentance and sought God’s face in prayer.⁷⁶

Although *The 1980’s: Countdown to Armageddon* consistently presents a sense of imminence, from the title itself to the near-hysterical warnings of ‘international revolution’, the quote above suggests the apocalypse is being delayed. This creates space for positive action, and underplays the prevailing negative dispensationalist framework. As the Rapture occurs before the Tribulation, and indeed marks the beginning of the final dispensation, the situations Lindsey describes must, by his own system, be a prelude to the actual apocalyptic drama involving the revived Roman Empire. In fact, both the Rapture and this latter drama are significantly downplayed in the book, in favour of heavily emphasising apocalyptic descriptions of Cold War relations. In reducing the significance of the clear cut-off point represented by the Rapture, Lindsey further blurs the line between the eschatological drama of the apocalypse and the contemporary issue of foreign affairs.

These changes provide a context for examining the controversy surrounding Reagan’s views; we have seen that the dispensationalist schematic was marginalised in Lindsey’s later works to account for the rise of activist fundamentalism in American politics. In *The Late Great Planet Earth*, political overlap served as a useful vehicle for illustrating the immediacy and relevance of premillennialism, whereas in the latter book premillennialism often comes across as a framework in which to preach political action and progress. However, less clear is the extent to which this change in the nature of the overlap may be applied to Reagan’s personal beliefs; having examined the conflation

⁷⁶ Lindsey, *The 1980s*, p. 158

between politics and apocalyptic discourse, a close investigation must be made of how closely these trends match the political discourse of the 1984 controversy.

Chapter 2

Having examined the overlap and inclusion of politics into dispensationalist discourse, this section will seek to investigate the reverse, examining how Reagan became associated with apocalyptic discourse, the limits of this association, and whether it was based primarily on an assessment of his character as a person, or in his policies as a statesman. Queries over the relationship between prophecy belief and nuclear policy began not just as a result of Reagan's views, although the controversy came to focus squarely on him. After the 1980 election, members of his administration began to publicly express their interest in eschatology. When asked about the subject in 1982, Secretary of Defence Caspar Weinberger told students at Harvard University, 'I have read the Book of Revelation and yes, I believe the world is going to end – by an act of God, I hope – but every day I think that time is running out.'⁷⁷ Interior Secretary James Watt, discussing his environmental policy, declared that 'I do not know how many future generations we can count on before the lord returns,' and therefore how many generations the environment need be preserved for.⁷⁸

Concerns about the significance of these public statements were reinforced by Reagan himself, who argued emphatically about the role of religion in politics, most notably at the Republican convention in August 1984, where he spoke before an ecumenical prayer breakfast to 17,000 Christian laymen and church leaders. Launching a blunt attack on opponents to the proposed constitutional amendment to allow voluntary school prayer, Reagan declared them 'intolerant of religion', asserting that 'religion and politics are necessarily related... this has worked to the benefit of the nation'.⁷⁹ This prompted national media debate about the role of religion in politics, and overlapped with concerns about dispensationalist belief within his administration. The importance of candidates' personalities in determining their fitness to govern is central to the controversy surrounding Reagan's premillennialist views, which established only a tenuous overlap with his advertised policies, but raised voluble concerns about its

⁷⁷ 'Armageddon Theology' press conference,
<<http://www.rumormillnews.com/ARMAGEDDON%20THEOLOGY.htm>>

⁷⁸ Boyer, *When Time Shall Be No More*, p. 141

⁷⁹ J. L. Reinsch, *Getting Elected* (Random House, 1998), p. 275

significance to his personal view of nuclear war with Russia, or the Middle East peace process. The fact that the issue was mostly based in perceptions of Reagan's own personal beliefs will be considered as an example of the limitations of the overlap between the two discourses.

Another key aspect in exploring the controversy involves how far it was based in Reagan's own political rhetoric, and the extent to which was it imposed on him by others. Those who highlighted Reagan's premillennialist beliefs fell into two distinct categories: members of the activist fundamentalist movement who furiously campaigned on his behalf for both presidential elections, and liberal figures in the secular media and clergy, issuing dire proclamations of the potential dangers of a premillennialist president. Both groups sought to catalogue evidence of Reagan's status as a 'born-again' Christian, including (or particularly) his prophecy belief, in order to demonstrate the fitness (or unfitness) of his character to govern the nation. This 'imposition' of beliefs by others is also crucial in delineating the limits of the overlap: as his next term proceeded his policies undermined the notion that his decision-making process was governed by premillennialist doctrine. Indeed, when Reagan labelled his alleged views as "the recall of just some philosophical discussions with people who are interested in the same things" in the presidential debate, he was being broadly accurate.⁸⁰ Most of his comments at the centre of the media controversy had been extracted from private conversations, and he was unwilling even to provide a straightforward answer to the question: are you a 'born-again Christian?'⁸¹ However, as noted above, his public behaviour had led to concerns about his attitude to the role of religion in politics, coupled with his public association with high-profile members of the New Christian Right, who emphatically insisted on the political relevance of 'Bible-based morality'.⁸²

Concerns about this broader overlap between religion and politics were further reinforced in the Armageddon controversy by aspects of Reagan's political rhetoric that could be termed secular apocalyptic in their symbolism, mostly linked to his vivid descriptions of Communist threat. The massive increase in defence spending he presided

⁸⁰ The Second Reagan-Mondale Presidential Debate, Oct. 21, 1984, <<http://www.debates.org/pages/trans84c.html>> 01 Apr. 2009

⁸¹ The First Reagan-Mondale Presidential Debate, Oct. 7, 1984, <<http://www.debates.org/pages/trans84a.html>> 01 Apr. 2009

⁸² Appleby, 'Fundamentalism', p. 283

over, replete with casual talk of nuclear “demonstration shots” and “bombing [the USSR] in five minutes,” fuelled anxieties about his aggressive foreign policy.⁸³ These concerns were connected to, but existed separately from, concerns with his apparent premillennialist preoccupation (which also encompassed hostility towards Russia). This distinction lies at the core of this analysis; the premillennialist controversy was in part a manifestation of broader concerns about these issues, although possessing a separate identity. Firstly examining the overlap engendered by an enthusiastic activist evangelical movement, and secondly that imposed by concerned members of the liberal press, this section will then move on to consider the way Reagan’s political discourse coincided symbolically with these representations, but without the full ideological ramifications which evangelists and the liberal media were so quick to emphasise. This chapter will examine the limitations of the overlap between political and apocalyptic discourse, and attempt to explain why the issue largely disappeared from public concern almost as quickly as it appeared.

⁸³ T. L. Deibel, ‘Reagan’s Mixed Legacy’, *Foreign Policy*, No. 75 (Summer, 1989), p. 34

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The late 1970s and early 1980s saw the political mobilisation of the New Christian Right, centred on the formation of political organizations and lobbying groups by conservative fundamentalists, such as Christian Voice and Jerry Falwell's Moral Majority. Distinguished premillennialists featured heavily in the upper ranks of these organizations: the latter group was financed by Pat Robertson, who hosted a popular dispensationalist show on the Christian Broadcasting Network (CBN) he founded, as well as Hal Lindsey himself, among others.⁸⁴ The former group, meanwhile, enlisted the support of right-wing personalities such as Tim LaHaye, a dispensationalist author who went on to write the popular *Left Behind* series of novels, which are set in the premillennialist imagining of the seventh dispensation.⁸⁵ These groups threw themselves behind a campaign on behalf of Ronald Reagan, in both 1980 and again in 1984. This chiefly involved constructing an image of Reagan, often perceived as the star of Western movies and an indifferent churchman, as the man Robertson could declare was "probably the most evangelical president we have had since the Founding Fathers".⁸⁶ This was then funnelled into efforts to register voters who would support candidates who represented traditional, 'pro-moral' values, namely Reagan. These efforts culminated in wide distribution of presidential biblical scorecards, which showed Mondale and Reagan's voting record on a variety of 'pro-moral' values, such as abortion.⁸⁷

This was not a one-way process, and Reagan made significant contributions to the conflation of conservative politics and religious belief through specific appeals to evangelicals. Throughout his first term, he had supported important Moral Majority causes, including constitutional amendments against anti-abortion and in favour of school prayer, as well as tax credits for the parents of children in church schools.⁸⁸ In the run up to the 1984 election, he began soliciting support early in the year from the groups that

⁸⁴ S. Bruce, *The Rise and Fall of the New Christian Right* (Oxford, 1990), pp. 56-64; Pierard, 'Religion and the 1984 Election Campaign', p. 99

⁸⁵ Pierard, p. 99

⁸⁶ Pierard, p. 100

⁸⁷ S. Johnson and J. Tamney, 'The Christian Right and the 1984 Presidential Election', *Review of Religious Research*, Vol. 27, No. 2 (Dec., 1985), p. 125

⁸⁸ Johnson and Tamney, 'The Christian Right', p. 125

comprised the New Right, delivering rousing speeches to the National Religious Broadcasters and the National Association of Evangelicals at their major conclaves, as well as at Jerry Falwell's major Baptist Fundamentalism convention.⁸⁹ He undoubtedly acknowledged their support, and it follows that in turn he would be expected to represent them on some level; this is significant in light of the fact that the media controversy was characterised by emphasis on his association with figures such as Falwell. The Reagan campaign and the evangelical groups who supported him worked in tandem in other ways; in the same year, three religious publishing houses produced books on or by Reagan with White House support.⁹⁰ One of these was written by Bob Slosser, an associate of Pat Robertson from CBN, whose biography *Reagan Inside Out* sought to portray Reagan, contrary to scepticism in some quarters, as a devout, born-again Christian. This involved demonstrating, amongst other things, Reagan's belief and interest in bible prophecy and the apocalypse. The text serves as a good example of efforts taken by evangelical conservative groups to introduce apocalypticism to the political discourse surrounding Reagan.

Slosser's book opens with a chapter entitled "A Prophecy", the essential task of which is, like the book itself, to marshal evidence of Reagan's religious conviction in support of his personal qualifications to lead the nation. The chapter is based on Slosser's recollection of a social occasion at Reagan's home in 1970, when he was Governor of California. The guests at this social event were all prominent figures in the Christian Right, including country singer Pat Boone, Harald Bredesen ('minister to world leaders') and preacher George Otis, not to mention Slosser himself.⁹¹ Reagan's interest and knowledge of the prophecies is thoroughly demonstrated as one of many techniques to establish his good character. Thus Reagan is shown to be a man of principle, stating that he is unfazed by the pressures of his campaign for re-election as Governor because, "I determined very early in my political career that I would never make decisions on the basis of votes gained or lost, but whether it was right or wrong."⁹² Further to these principles of policy, Slosser implies his moral and pious nature, describing how:

⁸⁹ Pierard, p. 101

⁹⁰ Pierard, p. 101

⁹¹ B. Slosser, *Reagan Inside Out* (W Pub Group, 1984) p. 13

⁹² Slosser, *Reagan Inside Out*, pp. 15-16

Reagan quickly went into an alcove and returned with soft drinks for everyone. “There was not a question as to anything stronger,” Otis recalled. “He simply brought soft drinks.”⁹³

In line with these demonstrations of Reagan’s good character, his awareness of current prophetic trends is demonstrated:

Much of the conversation dealt with spiritual matters... Reagan began to discuss the biblical prophecies that had been fulfilled, mostly those pertaining to the Jews... He especially noted the words of Jesus in Luke’s Gospel that many conservative scholars believe point to the Six-Day War in 1967.⁹⁴

This illustration of Reagan’s sophisticated knowledge of eschatology is part of a broad tableau of techniques employed throughout the book to shape his image into that of a devout fundamentalist Christian. However, these were mirrored in the liberal media’s attempts to cast aspersions on his fitness to govern; his personal beliefs and a focus on his associations with the evangelical community were similarly emphasised for this contradictory purpose.

⁹³ Slosser, *Reagan Inside Out*, p. 16

⁹⁴ Slosser, p. 16

(ii)

The attempt to render Reagan's apocalyptic beliefs into a salient issue for the election was principally the result of dogged investigations by individual members of liberal media: Ronnie Dugger published a lengthy article entitled 'Does Reagan Expect A Nuclear Armageddon?' for the *Washington Post* in April 1984; and he and Joe Cuomo collated their research for the latter's sensationalist public radio programme entitled 'Ronald Reagan and the Prophecy of Armageddon', broadcast a few months later. Dugger's article seeks to catalogue Reagan's public and private utterances of his beliefs, asserting at the outset that 'on at least five occasions in the last four years, Ronald Reagan has referred to his belief that Armageddon may well occur during the present generation and could come in the Middle East.'⁹⁵ The article also emphasises Reagan's 'evangelism' and 'religious determinism', and quotes Falwell at length, stressing Reagan's association with such a figure. The press conference held by the Christic Institute, which adopted similar techniques, was coordinated by Andrew Lang, who has continued to stress the threat of Armageddon theology long after the 1984 controversy died down.⁹⁶ However, by investigating Halsell's *Prophecy and Politics*, written some five years after the election controversy, one can examine the most fully fleshed-out sensationalist secular arguments, and gain the best perspective on how much their attempts to denigrate Reagan's character coincided with the New Christian Right's efforts to sanctify it.

Halsell's book strives to construct a schematic of premillennialism that shows how its vision of nuclear Armageddon shaped the Christian Right's alleged agenda for U.S. foreign policy. The book takes a firm stance on the debate about the influence between belief and behaviour, and seeks to conflate them at every turn. However, it will be shown that even with this agenda in mind, Halsell's sensationalist recounting of Reagan's beliefs is limited to a consideration of his image, as promoted by his language and his associates, largely bypassing his actual political record. This further evidences the limits of the overlap between Reagan and apocalyptic discourse, even in the hands of such a fervent advocate as Halsell. Attending a Falwell-sponsored tour of the Holy Land,

⁹⁵ R. Dugger, 'Does Reagan Expect a Nuclear Armageddon?', *Washington Post*, Apr. 8, 1984

⁹⁶ Andrew Lang, 'The Politics of Armageddon', *Convergence*

she evokes the reality of the battle of Armageddon for the evangelicals who attended. When she debates with one man on the tour about the feasibility of the situation described in the book of Revelation, he overrules her query by asserting the “the leaders have geopolitical goals, but they are motivated by ‘demonic spirits’.”⁹⁷ Throughout the book, similar statements are cited by evangelical preachers and believers, repeatedly demonstrating how they equate “the biblical land of Zion and the Zionist state of Israel” as one and the same, and therefore the palpable link between the focus on Israel both in their belief structure and, allegedly, their political agenda.⁹⁸ Chapters entitled “Provoking a Holy War” and “JerUSAlem: Mixing Politics and Religion” are further designed to create an image of an “army” of “militant, muscular Christians who preach about an inevitable nuclear war” following the “cult of Israel” that should terrify “all peace-minded people”.⁹⁹

In doing so, Halsell creates an apocalyptic scenario of her own, which draws on the same basic, underlying concerns as those that prompted the controversy surrounding Reagan in 1984. In Halsell’s work, however, these anxieties are both more fully fleshed out and more aggressively asserted than the contemporary responses to the issue, which, in contrast to her focused and sustained attack on apocalypticism, were couched in the context of the broader issue of religion and politics. In a chapter devoted to the issue of Reagan, however, she follows largely the same pattern of investigation as that found in 1984: emphasising his close association with well-known dispensationalist figures (from the allegedly dangerous ‘cult of Israel’), and citing anecdotal evidence of his interest in the subject, expressed in private, both before and during his presidency. Halsell quotes Andrew Lang of the Christic Institute, in producing an effective sound bite about the dangers of Reagan’s association with dispensationalists:

Dispensationalists such as Jerry Falwell, Hal Lindsey, Pat Robertson and other leaders of the New Christian Right believe that the Bible predicts the imminent Second Coming of Jesus Christ after a period of global nuclear warfare, natural disasters, economic collapse and social chaos. They believe these events have to

⁹⁷ Halsell, *Prophecy and Politics*, p. 24

⁹⁸ Halsell, pp.9-10

⁹⁹ Halsell, pp. 95, 185, 16-17

happen before the Second Coming and they believe they are clearly outlined in the Bible.¹⁰⁰

The presentation of this information leaves significant ambiguity about the implications of the belief that these events ‘have to happen’; does it infer human or supernatural agency, and would proponents of dispensationalism be motivated to bring these events about themselves? Lang supplies a potential answer to this question by describing the relevance of the Rapture to dispensationalists, where they will be ‘physically lifted from the face of the earth and reunited with Christ in the air. From that vantage point they will safely watch the nuclear wars and economic crisis of the tribulation.’¹⁰¹ In citing this evidence, Halsell attempts to transfer the same worrying implications about motivation to Reagan himself, although she is unable to support this with direct evidence from his policy decisions.

The fact that Halsell quotes passages verbatim from the first chapter of Slosser’s *Reagan Inside Out* to establish concerns about his fitness to rule is revealing of the attitude of the secular journalistic stance on this matter. The evangelical movement endeavoured to highlight Reagan’s fundamentalism in order to demonstrate the validity of their worldview; Halsell adopts this representation wholesale in order to deplore this asserted dominance of evangelism in American politics. This highlights the equivalence of their distortion of the representation of Reagan, to illustrate spirituality on the one hand, and irrationality on the other; the key to the political discourse surrounding Reagan lay more in the ideological battle for his character than in the realm of his policy decisions. What the premillennialists emphasised to validate their beliefs, Halsell emphasised to stress the growing irrationality of American politics; and neither in itself can be taken to provide an accurate reflection of real politics of the situation. An analysis of the apocalyptic rhetoric that Reagan employed can elaborate the point; it will be shown that although he was willing to incorporate apocalyptic ideas into his speeches, these did not transfer into effective policy.

¹⁰⁰ Halsell, pp. 40-41

¹⁰¹ Halsell, p. 41

(iii)

Reagan's portrayal of Soviet communism was both the source of his most dramatic and apocalyptic language, and the central area of liberal concern about where his dispensationalist beliefs and his politics might intersect. Anti-Sovietism has been described as the 'organizing principle of Ronald Reagan's defence and foreign policy', his depiction of it unchanged from the 1950s as a ruthless, power-mad movement bent on the creation of a 'one-world Communist state'.¹⁰² Certainly, his infamous speech to the National Association of Evangelicals in 1983 carried various echoes of dispensationalist thought in his argument against a nuclear freeze. He employed apocalyptic language in his portrayal of Soviet foreign policy as 'the aggressive impulses of an evil empire', and the Cold War as a 'struggle between right and wrong and good and evil'.¹⁰³ Further to this, in denouncing appeasement he warns against the risks of being tricked by 'quiet men who do not raise their voices, because they speak in soothing tones of brotherhood and peace', echoing Lindsey's warnings that Antichrist 'will be swept in at a time when people are so tired of war, so anxious for peace at any price, that they willingly give their allegiance' to the man 'who will promise them peace'.¹⁰⁴ Similarly, Reagan also traces a link between the issue of nuclear conflict and spiritual revival, asserting that:

While America's military strength is important... The crisis we face today is a spiritual one; at root, it is a test of moral will and faith... I believe that Communism is another sad, bizarre chapter in human history whose last pages even now are being written. I believe this because the source of our strength in the quest for human freedom is not material, but spiritual.¹⁰⁵

This was not an isolated occurrence, and similar themes may be found in his other speeches on the subject, particularly, but not exclusively, to evangelicals: addressing West Point cadets, he told them that they were part of 'a chain holding back an evil force that would extinguish the light we've been tending for 6,000 years,' and again linked

¹⁰² R. Dallek, *Ronald Reagan: The Politics of Symbolism* (Harvard, 1999), p. 130

¹⁰³ 'Reagan's Speech to the National Association of Evangelicals, Orlando, Florida, March 8 1983', <<http://www.hbci.com/~tgort/empire.htm>> 3 Apr. 2009

¹⁰⁴ Lindsey, *Late Great Planet Earth*, p. 109

¹⁰⁵ 'Speech to National Association of Evangelicals', <<http://www.hbci.com/~tgort/empire.htm>>

America's military strength to the 'spiritual revival going on in this country, a hunger on the part of the people to once again be proud of America.'¹⁰⁶

These trends in Reagan's rhetoric have been labelled 'cold war fundamentalism', comprising an emotional patriotism and portrayal of the conflict in absolute terms.¹⁰⁷ They yielded apocalyptic language, and parallels to dispensationalist discourse about foreign policy. However, the symbolic language he deployed did not limit or irrevocably define his political behaviour; neither direct military conflict nor a nuclear apocalypse ever came, regardless of the attitude his rhetoric suggested. Indeed, his policies were unsurprisingly more nuanced than his rousing speeches accounted for; although Reagan did pursue a military build-up in his first term, he later went on to cultivate more amiable relations with Russia than had existed for decades, including steps towards nuclear disarmament. Similarly, his Strategic Defense Initiative, dubbed 'Star Wars' by the press, promised a space-borne system of lasers to neutralise incoming Soviet warheads. This expensive project (still yet to come to fruition today) was a move towards total independence from outside forces; Reagan declared it a chance to 'free the world from the threat on nuclear war', in distinct contradiction to dispensationalist ideas about the inevitability of nuclear war with Russia.¹⁰⁸ He was willing to adopt the language and symbolism of apocalyptic discourses like dispensationalism, but nevertheless his policies were not shaped by their agenda; this suggests the need to distinguish between Reagan the candidate, stirring up support, and Reagan the statesman, forming policy.

¹⁰⁶ Dallek, *Politics of Symbolism*, pp. 132-3

¹⁰⁷ Dallek, *Politics of Symbolism*, p. 133

¹⁰⁸ 'Address to the Nation on National Security by President Ronald Reagan, March 23, 1983', <<http://www.fas.org/spp/starwars/offdocs/rrspch.htm>> 15 Apr. 2009

Conclusion

Reagan's political rhetoric frequently overlapped with apocalyptic ideas, and he also had some personal interest in the correlation between modern politics and the dispensationalist scheme of prophecy interpretation, as figures such as Dugger and Halsell went to such lengths to demonstrate. However, neither of these equated to effective politics; the rhetoric he employed to generate appeal as a political candidate and his behaviour as head of state were quite different, albeit indirectly related. He was willing to incorporate a number of symbolic strands in his political rhetoric, promoting the importance of 'spirituality' in all areas of government, including foreign policy, in generating his appeal to his support base. This was what provoked debates over the cultural identity of America; the 'Armageddon' controversy may be viewed as a subset of this ideological battle.¹⁰⁹ The reason for its rapid disappearance as a political issue was that Reagan's politics had never been shaped by apocalyptic thought, unlike more general ideas about the role of religion in politics, which were directly reflected by his domestic policies and the legislation he supported. Once he directly addressed the issue of apocalypticism in the presidential debate and subsequently mollified his rhetoric, there was no remaining dominance of premillennialism in his policies to excite liberal agitation. Indeed, the only liberal critics who continued to emphasise the issue were those, like Halsell, who took on the battle for America's cultural identity as a cause worthy of apocalyptic rhetoric itself.

This limited application of dispensationalism is reflected by the findings of the first section of this paper, which observed the fundamental tension in Lindsey's works between the populist nature of the rhetoric, and the exclusive, extremist dimensions of its beliefs. This tension is further borne out not just by evidence of how Reagan later restrained his language in pursuing effective policy, but in the difficulties faced by other premillennialists in the realm of politics, particularly the misadventures of the Reverend Pat Robertson's 1988 bid for the Republican presidential nomination. His

¹⁰⁹ This partisan conflict is perhaps best substantiated by the Christic Institute press conference itself; those presenting the issue were 'confronted by leaders of the Moral Majority' who produced a statement they had signed declaring that 'religious freedom and the right to hold unpopular religious convictions' were being threatened by the press conference; a theological fracas ensued. *New York Times*, Oct. 24, 1984, pp. A1, A25

dispensationalist views were far less ambiguous than Reagan's, as his wealth and fame were based on his lengthy career as a demagogical television preacher. He was identified as the standard bearer for the New Christian Right, despite attempts to rewrite his biography to that of 'a successful conservative businessman whose business just happened to be religious television.'¹¹⁰ Coupled with this, he performed a significant reversal in his end-time theology: having declared in 1980 that 'by the fall of 1982 there is going to be a judgement on the world', in 1985 he told the *Wall Street Journal* that he no longer anticipated nuclear war or the imminent end of history.¹¹¹ His books and preaching had similarly started to reflect these tensions; they both embraced the standard premillennialist position and advocated a remarkably optimistic postmillennialism (the idea that Christ will return when the millennium has been achieved on earth by the reforming efforts of the Church).¹¹² His tone became increasingly confused and contradictory in his efforts to distance himself from the extremism underlying his eschatology, to no avail: he fared dismally in the Republican primary elections. A *Time* poll in September 1987 found that out of six candidates, Robertson came in last both in questions about who they 'would be proud to have as president', and tellingly in 'ability to deal with the Soviet Union'.¹¹³

This provides further context for Reagan's willingness to adopt the form of premillennialism in his political discourse, but not the substance. Just as its populism made it a natural discourse for mobilising his conservative support base, its inherent extremism rendered it a paradoxically negligent force for the shaping of high policy, and as Robertson discovered, a potentially corrosive political association. Returning to the historiographical debates outlined at the outset, it may be seen that much as the link between 'grassroots prophecy belief' and the political prospect of nuclear war was 'subterranean and indirect', the impact of premillennialism in setting Reagan's political policies was limited and partial. Applying the liberal discourse in light of more recent debates about how far premillennialism was a politically efficacious creed, the findings reflect Weber's assertion that it was 'primarily a *religious* movement'. As Halsell's book

¹¹⁰ Steve Bruce, *The Rise and Fall of the New Christian Right* (Oxford, 1990), p. vii

¹¹¹ Boyer, *When Time Shall Be No More*, p. 138

¹¹² Boyer, *When Time Shall Be No More*, pp. 138-9

¹¹³ Bruce, p. viii

was published in 1989, after the conclusion of Reagan's second term, her emphasis on the dangers of Reagan's close association with members of the dispensationalist community, and the associated implications of the link between belief and behaviour, seem curiously retroactive, and even self-defeating. She connects Reagan's increase in defence spending to the fact that 'Armageddon, as foreseen in the books of Ezekiel and Revelation, cannot take place in a world that has been disarmed,' and labels 'the implementation of the return of Christ to the earth' as a policy goal.¹¹⁴ However, the dispensationalist scheme that Reagan allegedly ascribed to also places heavy emphasis on the role of Russia, with whom in his second term he oversaw the Intermediate-Range Nuclear Forces Treaty and other moves towards disarmament. The implication is not that Reagan did not therefore hold dispensationalist beliefs, but rather that the impact they had on his worldview and on his behaviour as President was partial and restricted.

The sensationalist portrayal of the nuclear dangers of premillennialist belief by the media was propelled as much by the nature of journalism as by any heightened sense of danger or imminence relative to that found in scholarly debates on the matter today, as a letter written to the *Washington Post* in the wake of Dugger's 'Armageddon' article drily confirms:

Evidence that President Reagan's association with fundamentalists disposes him to accept nuclear Armageddon is roughly as strong as the evidence that President Kennedy was controlled by the pope... But exploration of that issue would require some understanding of religion, a subject the mass media treat badly when they treat it at all.

For all that the 'Armageddon' controversy sparked a serious debate about the link between personal belief and political behaviour, many of the concerns were ultimately misplaced. The reasons for this go back to the inherent paradoxes at the heart of premillennialism that made it at once so effective for representing politics, yet not in shaping policy. This rendered it an important issue both for those who supported it and those who did not, but more as a displacement of partisan conflict over the cultural identity of America than as an issue of political salience.

¹¹⁴ Halsell, pp. 49-50

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