NUCLEAR WAR IN THE WRITINGS OF BIBLE-PROPHECY POPULARIZERS

In the early 1980s, as I researched the cultural impact of the atomic bomb, I encountered a vast and neglected lode of source material: scores of popular paperbacks that purported to interpret Revelation and other apocalyptic portions of the Bible. After August 1945, these pious popularizers, long accustomed to finding current events foretold in the Bible, lost no time in incorporating images of atomic destruction into their scenarios, where they remained firmly implanted for half a century.

I was able to include only a few brief references to this material in By the Bomb's Early Light, but in 1987, after the publication of that book, I decided to explore this specific part of the nuclear culture more fully. My research quickly expanded, however, to include not only the nuclear-war-in-prophecy theme, but the much larger panorama of apocalyptic belief in contemporary America. My 1992 book, When Time Shall Be No More: Prophecy Belief in Modern American Culture, was the result. This chapter is based on a fully documented chapter in that book that explores prophecy popularizers' view of the atomic bomb and the nuclear threat.

Bible popularizers seem to have been immune to the cycle of America's nuclear awareness discussed in chapter 8. Even during the "Big Sleep"—the period of diminished attention to nuclear issues that extended from 1963 to the later 1970s—the topic of nuclear war remained vividly alive for the nation's millions of Bible-prophecy believers.
Instructed by television evangelists and by paperback popularizers, these millions remained convinced, despite arms-control treaties, diminished antinuclear activism, and the secular media’s neglect of the topic, not only that the Bible foretells a world-destroying thermonuclear holocaust, but that the holocaust would probably erupt in their lifetimes. Despite the end of the Cold War, many still believe this today.

FROM CHRISTIANITY’S EARLIEST DAYS, biblical images of the earth’s convulsive final cataclysm both awed and challenged prophetic interpreters. “This our city will be burned with fire from heaven,” Christian warns his family in John Bunyan’s Pilgrim’s Progress (1678). A nineteenth-century American prophecy work, D. T. Taylor’s The Coming Earthquake (1870), vividly pictured a planet trembling on the brink of disintegration:

Modern science . . . teaches that this globe is an enormous “terrestrial bombshell” . . . , its hidden interior . . . an intensely heated mass in a condition of molten fluidity, agitated, restless, and rolling its fiery waves hither and thither age after age, incessantly seeking with a terrible expressive power an outlet to diffuse its igneous elements over the surface and into the atmosphere. On this thin, rocky film, or outer surface, dwells a fallen, sinful, and dying race of mortals . . . . Is it any wonder that thinking, sober people have from the earliest ages looked for a final, awful convulsion and burning day?

Down to 1945, interpreters of prophecy typically envisioned this “burning day” in naturalistic terms—earthquakes, comets, volcanic eruptions—or as an eschatological event beyond human understanding. One writer, for example, simply attributed the destruction at Armageddon to “the all-consuming ‘breath of God’” and did not speculate further.

With the coming of the atomic bomb, all this changed. Man himself, it now seemed, had in the throes of war stumbled on the very means
of his own prophesied doom. Beginning in autumn 1945, a chorus of preachers, Bible scholars, and paperback writers insisted that the Scriptures not only foretold atomic weapons, but also their eventual cataclysmic use.

**FIRST ASSESSMENTS**

President Truman's August 1945 announcements of the atomic destruction of Hiroshima and Nagasaki triggered a torrent of apocalyptic pronouncements, many of them explicitly biblical. "Atomic Energy for War: New Beast of Apocalypse," headlined the *Philadelphia Inquirer*. William Laurence of the *New York Times* titled the final section of his history of the Manhattan Project "Armageddon." Countless commentators quoted 2 Peter 3:10: "The heavens shall pass away with a great noise, and the elements shall melt with fervent heat, the earth also and the works that are therein shall be burned up."

A popular culture steeped in prophecy quickly enveloped the bomb in an aura of biblical imagery. Fred Kirby's 1945 country-music hit "Atomic Power," which imagined brimstone fire raining down from heaven and described atomic energy as "given by the mighty hand of God," tapped directly into this reservoir of grassroots end-time belief. In the privacy of his diary, even President Truman, as we have seen, responded in biblical terms to the first A-bomb test in New Mexico as possibly the means of "the fire destruction prophesied in the Euphrates Valley Era, after Noah and his fabulous Ark." Truman, who knew his Bible, doubtless had in mind such Old Testament passages as Deuteronomy 32:22: "For a fire is kindled in mine anger, and shall burn unto the lowest hell, and shall consume the earth with her increase, and set on fire the foundations of the mountains."

At the level of popular religious belief, the bomb's impact was immediate and dramatic. In contrast to the secular press, where relief at its apparent role in ending the war counterbalanced fears about the future, prophecy writers from the first adopted an unrelievedly somber tone. "It is the devil who caused man to devote his highest and most successful potencies to the discovery of those things by which man destroys his fellows," commented E. Schuyler English, associate editor of *Our Hope*, a
magazine of prophecy exposition, late in 1945, “and no greater weapon has ever been devised than this one, the A-bomb.” The ultimate cataclysm foretold in the Bible, English went on, sounded “singularly similar in its effects to those of the atom bomb.” *Moody Monthly,* the publication of Chicago’s Moody Bible Institute, agreed: “The Bible is ahead of science again,” it said; an atomic blast offered an “exact picture” of the burning and melting of 2 Peter 3:10.

Philadelphia’s Donald Grey Barnhouse, prophecy writer and radio preacher, explored the bomb’s prophetic significance in his *Eternity* magazine in December 1945. Commenting on those who were expressing hope that global holocaust might yet be avoided, Barnhouse declared somberly: “It is already too late. The threads of inevitability have been caught in the mesh of the hidden gears of history and the divine plan moves toward the inexorable fulfillment.” Weighing the prospects of atomic war, Barnhouse diverged sharply from the self-congratulatory mood of a nation flushed with victory. The bomb, he said, had given fresh plausibility to a speculation he had long entertained: that New York City was the Babylon whose obliteration in one hour is foretold in Revelation. With atomic power, not only New York but all the nation’s great cities could be instantly wiped out. “The destruction of the United States . . . is certainly consistent with the nature of God,” Barnhouse declared implacably: The nation had sinned and faced “terrible judgment.” Barnhouse’s calm in contemplating mass slaughter reflected his conviction that believers faced a happier destiny. “If atomic bombs fall upon our cities,” he wrote a few weeks into the nuclear age, “we shall be in heaven the next second.”

Of postwar prophecy writers who combed not only the Bible but also the interpretive literature of the past for anticipations of the atomic bomb, the most indefatigable was surely Wilbur M. Smith (1894–1976). The son of a prosperous Midwest apple grower, Smith in 1913 enrolled at Moody Bible Institute, where his father served on the board. A 1914 prophecy conference awakened Smith’s lifelong interest in this subject. In 1938, after service as a Presbyterian minister, Smith returned to Moody to teach. In 1947, he joined the newly founded Fuller Theological Seminary in Pasadena. A prolific writer and conference speaker,
Smith was America's best-known and most erudite prophecy expounder of the early postwar era.

The atomic bomb immediately riveted Smith's attention. Like many others, he preached on 2 Peter 3:10—"the passage that was in everyone's mind"—after Hiroshima, and in November 1945 produced a booklet, "This Atomic Age and the Word of God," that sold fifty thousand copies and was condensed in the January 1946 Reader's Digest. His much expanded book of the same title appeared in 1948.

God may have destroyed Sodom and Gomorrah with nuclear power, Smith speculated, foreshadowing the judgment now confronting all humanity. Smith scoured the press for doomsday pronouncements by scientists. "The very phrases [foretelling the earth's destruction] that were formerly . . . laughed at by the world," he observed, "are now being used by our outstanding thinkers without any reference to the Scriptures and without any knowledge of prophetic truth." He cited the clock of the Bulletin of the Atomic Scientists, poised a few minutes before midnight, and Harold Urey's Collier's article, "I'm a Frightened Man." Never in history, asserted Smith, had Jesus' prophecy of men's hearts failing them for fear been more clearly fulfilled.

While activist scientists evoked the horrors of atomic war to rally support for world government or the Acheson-Lilienthal plan, prophecy writers like Smith marshaled the rhetoric of terror to underscore the hopelessness of humanity's situation as the end approached. The bomb, said Smith, forced unbelievers to consider the truth claims of Bible prophecy seriously. The fear aroused by the prospect of atomic annihilation, he asserted, had focused attention on teachings about the Second Coming and end-time events. Like Barnhouse, Smith rejected the idea of world government as a solution. Without God's blessing, he warned, world government would lead only to global tyranny under the Antichrist. The international atomic-energy control agency envisioned by the Acheson-Lilienthal plan would be the perfect vehicle for the rise of the demonic end-time ruler.

Smith gleefully quoted numerous fatuous comments by pre-1914 liberal theologians hailing the imminent advent of the Kingdom of God through human effort. The atomic bomb, he said, should finally quash
all such “foolish dreams.” Far more on target, he suggested, was Bishop John Ryle, the Anglican evangelical, who as early as 1883 had written: “The last days of the earth shall be its worst days. The last war shall be the most fearful and terrible war that ever desolated the earth.” Smith reflected on the contrast between the world of 1948 and the “bright, warm, unclouded days” of his youth, when “a sort of general conviction [prevailed] that we were on the verge of a millennium,” and “the idea of atoms was only a theory in our textbook of physics.” The bomb, he insisted, radically challenged not only the notion of inevitable progress, but also the cyclical theories of history in which renewal follows degeneration and collapse. History’s “great, awful climax” was at hand, he proclaimed, “and every act and plan and invention of godless men can only hasten that day.”

One of the more interesting early efforts to link the atomic bomb to the tradition of prophetic interpretation came not from the evangelical ranks, but from Harvard’s Perry Miller, the intellectual historian of American Puritanism. In his 1950 essay “The End of the World,” Miller noted the similarities between post-Hiroshima doomsday rhetoric and the work of late seventeenth-century prophecy writers whose end-time scenarios had incorporated current scientific thinking. But the intimations of doom in contemporary secular discourse, Miller suggested, differed radically from those of earlier writers, for whom the coming cataclysm had profound eschatological meaning. The nuclear end that seemed all too possible after 1945 lacked such a framework. In an era when “the very concept of a future becomes meaningless,” Miller suggested, the sense that history had meaning—and that America had a special role in history—might finally atrophy and die.

Miller’s distinction between a theologically rooted apocalypticism and a merely rhetorical one grafted on an essentially secular worldview was important, but for many evangelical ministers, revivalists, and prophecy popularizers, not to mention millions of believers, the intellectual distance between 1650 and 1950 was narrower than Miller might have imagined. Numerous early postwar prophecy writers viewed atomic war as apocalyptic not in a metaphorical but in a literal sense. For them, the bomb and the global holocaust it portended brought infinitely closer the fulfillment of a divine plan formulated before the dawn of time.
Many writers echoed Smith in dismissing proposals for the international control of atomic energy, and indeed all efforts to reduce the risk of atomic war, as further manifestations of the vain hope that humanity could avoid catastrophe through its own efforts. All plans for controlling the atom would fail, one proclaimed in November 1945, “and the nations will be destroyed, because God’s word declares it.” The United Nations was “doomed to failure,” asserted Barnhouse in 1951. The stark marble monolith rising in New York might well serve as the smoldering city’s tombstone.

Even those who deplored the post-Hiroshima surge of interest in prophecy could not ignore its intensity. In 1949, Henry Sloan Coffin of Union Theological Seminary (a bastion of liberalism) lamented that mainstream Protestantism’s neglect of eschatology had left the field to “sensational propagandists” and “mushrooming cultists” who found blueprints of the future in Daniel and Revelation and promised their followers easy escape from the coming cataclysm. The liberal Baptist Courier lashed out at “cults that preach the doom of the present evil order by a sudden intervention of God.” Like Communism, the Courier said, “This doctrine thrives on darkness and distress.”

In response, the Fundamentalist Sunday School Times pointed out that the heightened receptivity of the “plain people” to an eschatology that taught a convulsive end to human history ought not be surprising, since the experience of recent decades had so utterly discredited “the dream of a better world” long preached by theological liberals. In a world shadowed by nuclear fear, premillennialism (belief in the Christ’s imminent return to earth after a terrible interval of wickedness, violence, and war) had taken a vigorous new lease on life.


Reflecting a broader trend in U.S. culture, prophecy writers devoted somewhat less attention to the bomb in these years. But this lull was relative. Wilbur Smith commented in 1953 on the prophecy books “pouring from the presses,” and many of them dealt with the atomic bomb. Despite Washington’s efforts to allay nuclear fear, prophecy
writers could find no silver lining to the mushroom cloud. “Today the whole world lives in fear of annihilation,” declared the manifesto of a 1952 prophecy conference in New York City, and several speakers elaborated the point. Implicitly dismissing government propaganda touting the atom’s peacetime uses, one speaker insisted on “the dreadful implications of modern atomic science.” Another cited the environmental damage inflicted by U.S. atomic tests in the Pacific, described in David Bradley’s No Place to Hide, as a sign of the approaching end.

From the mid-1950s to 1963, as we have seen, fears of radioactive fallout triggered a second wave of nuclear fear and political activism. Mirroring this trend, prophecy writers’ attention to the bomb picked up sharply. “At no time in past history has the universal situation of the human race been so desperate as it is today,” wrote the author of a 1955 prophecy work. “Dread of a third world war hangs heavily on the hearts of men.” A 1960 Moody Monthly article cited “the piling up of nuclear weapons” as a major contributor to a climate of terror comparable to the biblical accounts of the last days. Given the world situation, wrote J. Dwight Pentecost of Dallas Theological Seminary in 1961, the cataclysmic war prophesied in Ezekiel could break out at any time.

These authors interlaced their discussions of the nuclear threat with a stock set of proof texts: the vision of a melting earth in 2 Peter; the crescendo of catastrophes in John’s Apocalypse; the all-consuming conflagration and terrifying astronomical events woven through the Book of Joel’s three short chapters (“O Lord, to thee will I cry; for the fire hath devoured the pastures of the wilderness, and the flame hath burned all the trees of the field” [1:19]. “The sun shall be turned into darkness, and the moon into blood, before the great and the terrible day of the Lord comes” [2:31]); and the prophet Zechariah’s terrifying description of Jehovah’s judgment on Israel’s enemies—a description strikingly similar to John Hersey’s account of Japanese atomic-bomb victims in Hiroshima: “And this shall be the plague wherewith the Lord will smite all the people that have fought against Jerusalem; their flesh shall consume away while they stand upon their feet, and their eyes shall consume away in their holes, and their tongue shall consume away in their mouth” (14:12).

One of the most influential prophecy interpreters of this period was M. R. DeHaan of Grand Rapids, whose “Radio Bible Class” aired on five
hundred stations, including the Mutual and ABC networks. In broadcasts and books of the early 1960s, DeHaan often discussed the nuclear threat. "Hanging over the heads of the nations," he wrote in 1962, "is the dire, horrible fear that at any moment some trigger-happy despot will . . . drop a missile that would set the world on fire." Demonstrating the skill of prophecy writers at incorporating new developments into their scenarios, DeHaan discussed the neutron bomb, "technology's deadliest weapon," designed to destroy life without harming physical structures. Elaborating a passage from Jesus' "Little Apocalypse," recorded in the Gospel of Mark, DeHaan proclaimed: "This present age will close with a time of peril and war and destruction so great, what with our atomic weapons and supersonic missiles, that God must halt the holocaust, or man would utterly destroy himself."

Prophecy conferences helped believers place the deepening nuclear threat in biblical context. A speaker at a 1956 gathering in New York City quoted Zechariah's account of human flesh "consuming away," and asked: "Did you ever wonder how it could be fulfilled? Well, the atomic bomb, the hydrogen bomb, and the cobalt bomb have made real this passage of Scripture." The arms race, he went on, was "the training ground for Armageddon." Added John Walvoord, a prophecy writer based at the Dallas Theological Seminary, at a 1961 Los Angeles prophecy conference: "The Bible plainly forecasts the coming of yet another great war . . . eclipsing anything that the world has ever seen before."

Given this conviction, prophecy writers dismissed Washington's message of peace through strength, survival through civil defense, and utopia through peacetime uses of atomic energy. Whatever the soothing rhetoric, they insisted, the nuclear arms race obviously represented a giant step toward Armageddon. "No shelter . . . can protect us from the bombs being perfected today," declared DeHaan in 1962. "The only way out is up." The rosy talk of "converting atomic energy into useful industrial purposes," he went on, "is completely overshadowed . . . by the threat of wholesale annihilation."

As they updated the premillennial scenario with images of nuclear war, prophecy writers maintained a tone of calm assurance. All is foretold; if the prophetic plan is understood, one need feel no alarm. As one interpreter wrote in 1957, amid deepening anxiety about radioactive
fallout: “Wars and disasters may come and go; atom bombs may pose their threat of universal annihilation. . . . But these things are recognized as part of the great design of the God of Israel.”

The narratives of horror ended formulaically: The Christian would escape it all. One writer, after a particularly gruesome recital of the disasters facing humankind, went on, “But let us turn our face from that dreadful scene, and be reminded that the redeemed of God . . . shall not be on the earth at that time.” Despite the ubiquitous fear of nuclear war, observed Dwight Pentecost in 1961, “the child of God who is acquainted with the prophetic Scriptures rests in assurance because he has before him God’s own blueprint.” And what did this blueprint tell the believer? Before the final crisis, “You and I . . . will have been translated into the presence of our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ.” DeHaan agreed: “One of these days [the Rapture] is really, actually going to happen. . . . The darker the days become, the more glorious this blessed hope shines in our lives.”

The world’s doom was sealed, but individuals might still be snatched as brands from the burning. After describing the grim nuclear prospect and the Christian’s blessed hope, the prophecy writers always concluded with the ancient, yet ever urgent theme: Accept Christ today, and escape the horror that could engulf the earth at any moment. As one reminded his readers, updating Jonathan Edwards’s spider dangling over a flame: “Only the touch of a button stands between you and eternity at every moment of every day.”

THE 1970S AND BEYOND: HAL LINDSEY AND HIS SUCCESSORS

In 1970, a newcomer among Bible-prophecy popularizers, a young campus evangelist named Hal Lindsey Jr., published what became a multi-million-copy best-seller: The Late Great Planet Earth. The phenomenal success of this book (it sold more copies than any other nonfiction work of the 1970s) makes plain that despite reduced attention in the mass media and the reassurance offered by the test ban treaty and the ongoing arms-control process, nuclear fear lurked just below the surface of the American consciousness. In this paperback and a stream of sequels, all of which offered a colloquial and highly accessible version of the premillen-
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nalist prophetic system, Lindsey skillfully wove the biblical apocalypses into a narrative of the coming holocaust, which he labeled "World War III" and explicitly portrayed as a global thermonuclear war.

Assuming that all scriptural allusions to fiery destruction and mass suffering foreshadowed nuclear war, Lindsey (usually with qualifying phrases like "quite possibly" or "may very well be") relentlessly turned the Bible into a manual of atomic-age combat. Zechariah's image of human flesh consuming away portrays "exactly what happens to those who are in a thermonuclear blast"; "fire and brimstone" means tactical nuclear weapons; the falling stars and stinging locusts of Revelation are warheads fired from space platforms and Cobra helicopters spraying nerve gas; the scorching heat and awful sores mentioned in Revelation describe the effects of radiation as observed at Hiroshima and Nagasaki. For page after mind-numbing page, Lindsey systematically enumerated the apocalyptic scriptures, mechanically transcribing every phrase and image into the vocabulary of Pentagon strategists.

Biblical writers, said Lindsey patronizingly, had been unable to decipher their own visions. "After all," he wrote, "how could God transmit the thought of a nuclear catastrophe to someone living in the year A.D. 90!" The "hail and fire mingled with blood" of Revelation 8, he says, are clearly missiles as they appeared "to John's eyes, unsophisticated as to ICBM's." Similarly, John's image of horses with lionlike heads and fire pouring from their mouths was his feeble effort to describe "some kind of mobilized ballistic missile launcher."

Lindsey paraded his insider's knowledge of current events and scientific developments. "Recently as I was studying about nuclear weapons," begins a typical passage, "I discovered that science has perfected a cobalt bomb—one of the most lethal weapons known to man... By placing a shield of cobalt metal around a hydrogen bomb... the destructive capacity... is doubled. More significantly, however, the radioactive contamination... is tremendous. Scientists have dubbed it "the dirty bomb" because of its fallout. This is what I believe may be pictured in Revelation 6:12."

Lindsey described the end-time holocaust with unholy zest, hypnotically piling catastrophe on catastrophe: "Multiplied millions" of soldiers are incinerated; civilian casualties mount into the billions amid nuclear
horrors including a “quadrillion megaton explosion”; mass poisoning re­sults as water turns to blood (“There’s going to be a big run on Coca-Cola, but even this will give out after a while!”). Reflecting on all this, the political scientist Michael Barkun has perceptively observed: “As the exclamation points march forward, it becomes clear that Lindsey finds these prospects enormously attractive. His prose pants on with scarcely a word of sympathy for the hundreds of millions killed or maimed. For him, the tribulation is grand, cosmic theatre, the ultimate Hollywood spectacle.”

Not only secular critics, but many from the religious world, even evangelicals, dealt harshly with Lindsey’s imaginative flights. One dismissed his “science fiction fantasy” as “a farrago of nonsense.” A seminary student called him “the Geraldo Rivera of the Christian world.” Nevertheless, in embedding nuclear war in a framework of foreordained mean­ing, Lindsey struck a note that resonated with millions of Americans.

A torrent of prophecy books in the 1970s and 1980s imitated Lindsey in making nuclear war a centerpiece of their scenarios. “Billions will perish in the coming cataclysm,” wrote Merrill Unger of Dallas Theological Seminary in *Beyond the Crystal Ball* (1973), adding that while the approaching judgment would ultimately be God’s doing, “on the natural plane, H-bombs and the latest thermonuclear weapons will play a large part.” John Phillips, in *Only the Bible Can Foretell the Future* (1975), after describing the effects of a thermonuclear attack on the eastern United States (“The entire East Coast, from Portland, Maine, to Norfolk, Virginia, and up to 150 miles inland, would become a lake of fire”), con­cluded somberly: “Truly, the dawning of the atomic age is of great prophetic significance.”

Among the post-1970 prophecy popularizers who proclaimed a coming nuclear war, few reached a larger audience than evangelist Jack Van Impe of Royal Oak, Michigan, whose weekly broadcasts appeared on more than ninety television channels, the Trinity Broadcasting religious network, forty-three U.S. radio stations, and internationally on Trans-World Radio. Van Impe also promulgated his end-time interpretations in short, easy-to-read paperbacks with titles like *The Signs of the Times, The Coming War with Russia*, and *11:59 and Counting*. Describing a visit to Hiroshima, he foresaw much worse in “the near future” as “a
holocaust of fire” unleashed “atomic devastation beyond comprehension.” Biblical quotations studded Van Impe’s apocalyptic predictions, including not only the familiar ones from Revelation, Zechariah, and 2 Peter (“as clear a definition of atomic warfare as is contained in any library”), but also more obscure selections from Joel, Zephaniah, Malachi, and this from Ezekiel: “The flaming flame shall not be quenched, and all faces from the south to the north shall be burned therein. And all flesh shall see that I the Lord have kindled it: it shall not be quenched” (20:47-48).

Striving to outdo one another, the post-Lindsey popularizers produced ever more sensational prose and tortuous interpretations. Jeremiah’s phrase “make bright the arrows” (51:11), suggested one, described the launching of a nuclear missile. Another triumphantly unearthed a cryptic phrase from Habakkuk—“for they shall heap dust and take it” (1:10)—as an obvious prophecy of radioactive fallout. Expounding Ezekiel 39, in which the armies of a northern kingdom called Gog are wiped out after invading the land of Israel, another popularizer hypothesized that the seven-months’ delay in burying the dead would be a “cooling off period” because of the corpses’ radioactive contamination.

To keep their apocalyptic scenarios timely (and perhaps gain an edge in a highly competitive field), these writers also followed Lindsey in citing the latest developments in nuclear technology. “An entire country’s targets could be hit simultaneously by releasing a SWARM of . . . cruise missiles,” wrote a breathless Leon Bates; “This is a major development in modern warfare, just in time for the TRIBULATION!” A writer of the 1980s, discussing Antichrist’s feat of calling down fire from the skies (Rev. 13:13), described a satellite device allegedly under development by the Soviets that could “at any given moment . . . trigger the release of a laser beam flame which could descend in an apocalyptic flash on a pre-determined target.”

This decades-long effort to find prophetic intimations of mankind’s nuclear fate helps one understand the excitement set off by Edgar Whisenant’s two-million-copy best-seller, *Eighty-Eight Reasons Why the Rapture Will Be in 1988*. Marshaling elaborate and highly ingenious prophetic evidence, Whisenant foresaw a final global cataclysm that would begin with Russia’s invasion of Israel at sunset on October 3, 1988, and
end one hour later with Russia's annihilation. This divinely ordained ho­locaust, he predicted, echoing many other prophecy writers, would pro­duce nuclear winter, mass starvation, radioactive water, and mountains of unburied bodies.

Few prophecy writers followed Whisenant's venture into precise date-setting, but many did go beyond general predictions of global ther­monuclear war to speculate about the form it would take and the nations that would be involved in it.

**Scenarios of Nuclear War**

As prophecy writers reflected on the end-time cataclysm foretold in the Scriptures, some tried to work out the precise details. Although, as two 1974 authors admitted in a rare confession of uncertainty, it is often "not quite clear who fights with whom about what," innumerable writers' at­tempts at interpretation, while puzzling to the uninitiated, illuminate the complex ways in which prophetic belief influenced perceptions of humankind's nuclear future.

One troublesome issue was whether the cataclysm prophesied in the Bible would in fact be a nuclear war as conventionally understood, or a divine intervention in which God punishes mankind, possibly by nuclear means. In contrast to Lindsey's detailed nuclear scenarios for World War III, other writers stressed the transcendence of eschatological fulfillment. Merrill Unger, for example, while not excluding nuclear conflict from his end-time scheme, emphasized that the devastation portrayed in Reve­lation might well be a direct "outpouring of God's wrath" on humanity. Even Jack Van Impe, ever ready to find atomic war foretold in biblical prophecy, conceded that "God does not need man's modern inventions" to achieve His purposes.

Some resolved the dilemma by positing two nuclear-related end-time events: first World War III, and then God's destruction of the earth. In 11:59 and Counting (1983), for example, Van Impe hypothesized a ther­monuclear conflict during the seven-year interval known as the Great Tribulation, followed, after the Millennium, by God's nuclear annihila­tion of the world in preparation for the new heaven and the new earth foretold in the Book of Revelation. Proponents stressed this theory's
hopeful aspect: Although World War III will be devastating, many will survive. Even if a billion people die, one writer pointed out, “there would be a couple billion others left.”

Those who sought nuclear allusions in the prophecies faced another problem. Biblical writers’ visions involved weapons of their own day—spears, bows and arrows, mounted warriors, and the like. Some prophecy writers, faithful in their literalism, argued that precisely these weapons would be used in the final battle. But most, for all their insistence on scriptural inerrancy, freely followed Hal Lindsey in transmuting swords and chariots into modern-day nuclear weaponry. As S. Maxwell Coder explained in *The Final Chapter* (1984), elucidating a passage from Ezekiel:

> Hebrew is a language of word pictures. . . . The word for “arrow” means a piercing missile, and the word for “bow” means a launching device for such a missile. . . .
> If we use the word pictures instead of what was meant in ancient times, the verse [Ezek. 39:3] translates, “And I will smite thy launcher out of thy left hand, and will cause thy missiles to fall out of thy right hand.” . . . The word pictures can describe modern weapons just as accurately as they described those in use twenty-five hundred years ago.

What nations would be involved in the coming holocaust? While many Cold War prophecy writers, drawing on the allusions to a mysterious northern foe in Ezekiel 38–39, tied their nuclear-war predictions to forecasts of Russia’s destruction following an invasion of Israel, most proceeded cautiously in discussing the precise nature and source of that destruction. Writing of the Ezekiel passage in *What’s This World Coming To?* (1970), Ray Stedman said: “It is apparent from this description that God himself will assume the prerogative in dealing with the Russian threat. Whether it will involve nuclear warfare, or be purely a natural disaster, is difficult to determine.” Doug Clark, in *Shockwaves of Armageddon* (1982), perhaps came closest to identifying the fire that incinerates the invading nation in Ezekiel: “Could this . . . be European and
American nuclear power destroying the Soviet Union? Certainly it could. God uses earthly as well as heavenly powers to do his will.

But nuclear war did not figure in these prophecy popularizations solely in an anti-Soviet context. Whatever its specific cause, the final conflict would soon engulf the globe. As a speaker at a 1970 prophecy conference put it, “The very idea of a coming cataclysmic judgment that will destroy the nations seems preposterous; yet for those... acquainted with the prophetic word, there resides the conviction that the dissolution of the present world order must be near.” James Boice, a Philadelphia Presbyterian minister and leader of a popular religious radio program called the Bible Study Hour, explicating Ezekiel 38–39 in 1984, foresaw “a general exchange of nuclear missiles” in a “horribly destructive war” overcoming every nation, including “the United States, Great Britain, Japan, China, and other world powers.”

The most precise list of the nations facing nuclear destruction appeared in Jack Van Impe’s Signs of the Times (1979). Noting the prophecy in Revelation that a third of the world would be consumed by fire, Van Impe, citing Life’s Pictorial Atlas of the World, calculated one-third of the earth’s land mass as 18,963,194 square miles. He next listed the area of the nations he believed destined for annihilation: Israel, the “Persian Empire (including West Pakistan),” Ethiopia, Libya, the Soviet Union, the Warsaw Pact nations, the ten nations of Western Europe ruled by Anti-christ, and the United States. The total? Precisely 18,963,194 square miles! “How much more proof is needed... that Christ’s return is very near?” he concluded triumphantly.

As Van Impe’s calculations suggest, the United States fared poorly in most narratives of nuclear destruction. Late twentieth-century prophecy writers, after chronicling America’s decline into wickedness and apostasy, usually concluded that it would share the judgment foretold for the nations as a whole. For many, this meant nuclear destruction. The United States will either ally with Antichrist, declared Thomas S. McCall and Zola Levitt in The Coming Russian Invasion of Israel (1974), and face direct annihilation, or be a “helpless casualty of global thermonuclear effects.” A 1985 author expressed the prevailing view with particular starkness. America, the latter-day Babylon whose doom is foretold in Revelation, “is going to be destroyed by fire! Sudden destruction is
coming and few will escape. . . [A] hydrogen holocaust will engulf America—and this nation will be no more.” Some popularizers foresaw America’s nuclear judgment coming directly from God, others from human intermediaries—usually the Soviet Union. “Russia possesses enough hydrogen bombs . . . to devastate America,” wrote Roy Hicks, a Pentecostal prophecy writer and speaker, in 1982. “Of course, this must be in the knowledge and timing of the Lord, but her threats to bury us cannot be ignored.”

These prophetic visions of nuclear war share certain common themes. First is the pervasive sense of inevitability. God’s plan for mankind, established before the world began, is unalterable. As a chapter title in one book put it, the drift toward nuclear Armageddon is “A TREND THAT CANNOT BE REVERSED.” These works abound with fatalistic pronouncements: “It is only a matter of time. . . [a] nuclear holocaust is coming”; “Our world is in a death-dive. We have peaked and now we’re plunging rapidly to the end”; and so on and on.

Second, nuclear war, while horrendous, will also be the means to a beneficent and even glorious outcome. “If God permits men to use atomic warfare,” Merrill Unger wrote, “it will be to accomplish His purpose and to glorify His name.” Robert Gromacki, an Idaho Baptist minister and church-college professor, observed in 1970: “Although Armageddon will be an awesome and terrifying experience for the world, it should be welcomed by the child of God as the day of vindication of our holy and sovereign Creator. Many beneficial results will be produced by this great battle. . . . What then should be the believer’s attitude to the destruction of the world by fire? First of all, he should welcome it and pray for its nearness.”

David Wilkerson, an Assemblies of God minister and Pentecostal leader, elaborated the point in Set the Trumpet to Thy Mouth (1985):

Are we so blind, so earthbound, that we want God to keep us alive physically, only to live in a contaminated, hostile environment? Why can’t we see that a holocaust can only dissolve this earthly body; but that very dissolving brings us into a celestial one. It will be instant glory. How can we who are already dead to the world be
adversely affected by a holocaust? As for me, I died to the world—its pleasures, its pains, its destruction—so that a meltdown simply brings me into the fullness of an inheritance I already possess in measure. . . . To me, going home to Jesus in a sudden fiery holocaust is an escape from God's wrath. How can it be wrath when He takes me by the hand and leads me to paradise? God's chosen can look at every disaster right in its fury and declare: "Nothing can move me; I am safe in the palm of his hand."

Finally, as we have seen, this hopefulness found further grounding in the assurance that Christians will escape earth's ultimate crisis by way of the Rapture. (Citing a passage in 2 Thessalonians, Rapture believers hold that before the Great Tribulation, all true believers will be bodily taken from the earth to join Jesus Christ in the air, whence they will return at the Battle of Armageddon to share in Christ's millennial reign.) As the Fundamentalist leader Carl McIntire put it exuberantly in 1965: "Thank God, I will get a view of the Battle of Armageddon from the grandstand seats of the heavens. All who are born again will see the Battle of Armageddon, but it will be from the skies." Added the California prophecy expositor Chuck Smith in What the World Is Coming To (1977): "The world has one great war yet to endure. . . . The slaughter that will take place is too frightening to imagine. Just be thankful that you're not going to be around!"

Clearly, then, prophecy writers viewed nuclear holocaust from a unique vantage point. They described its horror as graphically as any antinuclear activist, but did not see it as a possible historical outcome to be avoided at all costs, but as the probable form of earth's divinely ordained end. For these authors, escape had an individual meaning, not a corporate, social meaning. Hope lay only in accepting Christ and holding oneself in readiness for the Rapture. In the secular world, the possibility of thermonuclear war tended to be either psychologically numbing or politically energizing, as people transformed anxiety into action. For prophecy writers, it served different functions: spurring
missionary effort, promising future judgment, and validating the premil-
ennial belief system and the Bible itself.

**Falwell, Robertson, Graham: Three Nuclear-Age Prophecy Interpreters**

Politics penetrated even the hermetically sealed world of prophecy popularizers, causing subtle shifts in the treatment of nuclear war. Such shifts occurred in particularly interesting ways in the pronouncements of three politically active late twentieth-century evangelical leaders: Jerry Falwell, Pat Robertson, and Billy Graham.

Falwell, prince of the electronic church, New Right leader, and confidant of President Reagan, offered a succession of prophetic pronouncements on nuclear war in the 1970s and 1980s. Most of these echoed the familiar post-1945 premillennialist theme: Nuclear destruction is prophesied and inevitable. In a 1980 pamphlet, “Armageddon and the Coming War with Russia,” complete with mushroom-cloud cover, Falwell described the “final holocaust” to follow Russia’s invasion of Israel. “All hell will break out” at this time, he told an interviewer in 1981, paraphrasing Ezekiel 39; “blood shall flow in the streets up to the bridles of the horses.” “The Tribulation will result in such bloodshed and destruction that any war up to that time will seem insignificant,” he told his Old-Time Gospel Hour audience in 1983. Falwell’s grim descriptions of Armageddon took on special resonance when, on tours of Israel, he preached from the actual prophesied site of the battle at Megiddo, near Haifa. “God only knows how many human beings will be wiped out in that battle,” he reiterated in his Fundamentalist Journal in 1988, “but they will be wiped out.” Believers, however, will escape the approaching horror: “If you are saved, you will never go through one hour, not one moment of the Tribulation.”

But with Falwell’s growing political involvement, he periodically qualified the view that nuclear war was inevitable and (for most human beings) inescapable. In 1983, for example, he endorsed the position that the final holocaust will come only after the Millennium, as God uses nuclear power “to destroy the present universe” and make way for the
new heaven and the new earth. Therefore, he said reassuringly, "We don't need to go to bed at night wondering if someone's going to push the button and destroy the planet between now and sunrise." The 1983 Falwell even suggested that Americans could influence their nuclear destiny, not only individually through conversion, but collectively through diplomacy. Washington had a duty "to negotiate for peace with the Soviet Union and other nations." "We have a human responsibility to do all we can to seek sensible arms controls." In finding earth's nuclear annihilation foretold in the Bible while simultaneously hinting that the end might be long delayed—and even that politics could make a difference—Falwell hewed to a central post-Hiroshima premillennial theme while at the same time preserving the role in Reagan-era conservative politics that he so clearly valued.

The words of Pat Robertson, a U.S. senator's son who experienced a religious conversion in 1956 and went on to found the Christian Broadcasting Network, reveal a similar tension between the stark premillennial view of nuclear war and the lure of politics. In the late 1970s and early 1980s he, like Falwell, often foretold a nuclear war triggered by Russia's invasion of Israel. Israel's 1967 capture of Jerusalem's Old City, he wrote in 1980, had set the stage for Antichrist's reign and Armageddon. Venturing into date-setting, he predicted the ultimate holocaust by 1982 and became increasingly apocalyptic as that year wore on. "The onrush of events toward the end of the year may see the world in flames," he wrote in February. "I guarantee you by the fall of 1982 there is going to be a judgment on the world," he added in a May broadcast.

But when 1982 passed—and as presidential hopes beckoned—Robertson backpedaled from his doomsday predictions. In 1985 he told the Wall Street Journal that he no longer anticipated nuclear war or history's end in the near future. "There is no way I feel I'm going to help the Lord bring the world to an end," he added elsewhere; "God doesn't want to incinerate the world. . . . [Armageddon] is an act of God Almighty that has nothing to do with human abilities whatsoever." In fact, already in his book The Secret Kingdom (1982), deep fissures had emerged in Robertson's eschatology, as he both embraced the standard premillennial position and espoused a breathtakingly optimistic postmillennialism, which holds that conditions on earth will grow progressively better
through human effort. Through Christ, he proclaimed, we can enjoy the
Millennium here and now: "There can be peace; there can be plenty;
there can be freedom." Citing God's grant of dominion to his human
creations in Genesis, Robertson urged Christians to "assume the author­
ity, power, and dominion that God intends for men to exercise over the
rest of creation." Although this "dominion theology" eased Robertson's
transition to a more politically viable stance, his 1988 presidential cam­
paign collapsed, as voters remained leery. He returned for a time to the
more comfortable precincts of television evangelism only to re-emerge
on the national scene as founder of the Christian Coalition, a conserva­
tive force in Republican Party politics in the 1990s.

Even more interesting, because less obviously motivated by political
ambition, was the eschatological evolution of Billy Graham, who burst
on the revivalist scene in 1949 and remained influential into the 1990s.
While his sermons and books did not heavily emphasize prophecy, Gra­
ham clearly embraced premillennialism. Christ's kingdom would arise
from the ruins of earthly institutions, he proclaimed in World Aflame
(1965): "Secular history... is doomed. . . . The whole world is hurtling
toward a war greater than anything known before." Acknowledging his
debt to Wilbur Smith, Graham speculated that the melting elements and
"fervent heat" of 2 Peter referred to atomic fission, as God used nuclear
means for earth's "purification."

In the early 1980s, however, social issues loomed larger in Graham's
sermons. In Moscow in 1982, he called the nuclear arms race "a moral
and spiritual issue that must concern us all" and offered a five-point dis­
armament program culminating in a ban on all nuclear, biochemical,
and laser weapons. To evangelicals unsettled by this new activist empha­
sis, he described himself as a man "in process" still exploring "the deeper
offers a fascinating picture of this evolution, as it alternates between so­
cial meliorism and classic premillennial fatalism. The hoofbeats of the
title were those of the four horses of the Apocalypse, conventionally
taken to represent famine, pestilence, war, and death. Discussing each
horse in the allegorical fashion favored by theological liberals, Graham
addressed such issues as Third World poverty, public-health problems,
and overpopulation; drought and famine; environmental hazards; and
the arms race. Vividly evoking the horrors of modern war, he insisted that one cannot “sit silently by” in the face of the threat; the red horse symbolizing war “rides in warning to effect positive change.” Jesus blessed the peacemakers, and Christians must work to slow the arms race and avoid nuclear holocaust. Graham even confessed that he should have done more over the years to promote peace and social justice.

Yet the classic premillennial outlook shaped *Approaching Hoofbeats* as well. History’s final moments (“perhaps just ahead”), Graham wrote, will see “nuclear conflagrations, biological holocausts and chemical apocalypses rolling over the earth, bringing man to the edge of the precipice. History will ‘bottom out’ in the battle of Armageddon.” Struggling to resolve the book’s eschatological schizophrenia, he argued that while prophecy is sure, God may delay foreordained events in response to human effort. Therefore, we must never lapse into passivity in the face of such issues as the nuclear threat. Still, *whatever* we do, “ultimate peace” will come only when Christ reigns on earth.

In a nationally televised sermon in 1990, Graham, now in his early seventies, still vacillated between a premillennial orthodoxy and his newly awakened social conscience. Addressing the question “Are the Last Days Almost Here?” Graham insisted that they were: “We’ve become so technological and so wicked at the same time, that we have been on the verge of destroying our world. But... God is going to step in and not allow us to have an atomic war.” How will God accomplish this purpose? He will “cleanse the earth by fire,” just as he cleansed it by flood in Noah’s day. The implication was not reassuring: Like the American troops who burned the Vietnam village in order to save it, God will destroy the earth to prevent wicked mankind from blowing it up. (Or, as one critic put it: “God so loved the world that he sent it World War III.”)

At the same time, echoes of Graham’s early-1980s flirtation with social activism survived, at least vestigially, in this 1990 sermon. The arms race was “a spiritual and moral problem,” he declared, and whatever humanity’s ultimate destiny, Christians must speak out against it. The confusing message reflected the ambivalence of a man of conscience deeply rooted in one intellectual and theological tradition seeking to accommodate himself to another, very different one. Graham went perhaps as far
as one could in adapting premillennialism to an ethic of social engage­ment with the nuclear threat and other issues of global import.

**PROPHETIC BELIEF AND NUCLEAR POLICY**

What influence, if any, did all these pronouncements by preachers and prophecy writers actually have on U.S. nuclear policy? The question is difficult, the evidence sketchy. Hal Lindsey insisted that the impact was direct and dramatic. He described earnest prophecy discussions with newspaper publishers, government officials, and military strategists. When he spoke at the American Air War College, "virtually the entire school turned out, including many officers accompanied by their wives." At the Pentagon, "hundreds . . . jamm[ed] the room" with more crowding outside. If we move beyond such self-serving anecdotal evidence, two lines of analysis suggest themselves: (1) the direct influence of premillennialist dogma on policymakers and (2) the more amorphous role of end-time belief in shaping public attitudes on issues of war and peace.

The direct influence of prophecy belief on nuclear decision-making surfaced as an issue in the 1980s, when the eschatological interests of several Reagan-administration officials became known. Secretary of Defense Caspar Weinberger, asked about the subject in 1982, replied: "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." Secretary of the Interior-designate James Watt, questioned at his confirmation hearing about preserving the environment for future generations, forthrightly replied: "I do not know how many future generations we can count on before the Lord returns." Reagan’s surgeon general, C. Everett Koop, attended a 1971 prophecy conference in Jerusalem and reported on it for a leading premillennial journal.

The most sensational scenario, of course, was the election of a president who believed nuclear war inevitable and set out to help God bring it about. In *Kingdoms in Conflict* (1987), the former Nixon adviser turned born-again Christian Charles Colson offered a fictional account of just such a situation. Colson’s “President Hopkins,” an amalgam of Robertson and Falwell, spends his spare moments in the Oval Office
reading Ezekiel and phoning premillennialist faculty members at “Mid-South Seminary.” “I ran my campaign on the Bible, and I intend to run this nation on the Bible,” he defiantly tells critics. Hopkins arranges the clandestine demolition of the Dome of the Rock, a Muslim sacred shrine on Jerusalem’s Temple Mount, to make way for the prophesied rebuilding of the Jewish Temple, despite (or because of) his theological advisers’ warnings that this will set the stage for Armageddon. As Colson’s account ends, the Christian Broadcasting Network is playing “The Battle Hymn of the Republic,” while the Dome of the Rock crumbles into ruin.

For a time in the 1980s, such a scenario seemed eerily plausible. Ronald Reagan’s abiding interest in prophecy, dating from his youthful immersion in the theology of the Christian (Campbellite) Church, deepened in the 1960s and 1970s through contacts with Billy Graham, the Hollywood minister Donn Moomaw, the born-again entertainer Pat Boone, and other prophecy believers. “Apparently never in history,” then-governor Reagan told Christian Life magazine in 1968, “have so many of the prophecies come true in such a relatively short time.” The Late Great Planet Earth strengthened Reagan’s beliefs, and at a 1971 political dinner in Sacramento shortly after a leftist coup in Libya (a nation mentioned in Ezekiel as one of Israel’s invaders), he observed somberly: “That’s a sign that the day of Armageddon isn’t far off. . . . Everything is falling into place. It can’t be long now. Ezekiel says that fire and brimstone will be rained upon the enemies of God’s people. That must mean that they’ll be destroyed by nuclear weapons.”

During his White House years, while his wife, Nancy, communed with a San Francisco astrologer, Reagan’s interests in prophecy continued. In 1983 he told a lobbyist for Israel: “You know, I turn back to your ancient prophets in the Old Testament and the signs foretelling Armageddon, and I find myself wondering if we’re the generation that’s going to see that come about. I don’t know if you’ve noted any of those prophecies lately, but believe me, they certainly describe the times we’re going through.”

Asked about the subject by newsmen Marvin Kalb in one of the 1984 presidential debates with Walter Mondale (as Nancy groaned “Oh, no” off camera), Reagan acknowledged a “philosophical” interest in Armageddon and noted that “a number of theologians” believed “the
prophecies are coming together that portend that.” But no one knew, he insisted (echoing Falwell and others), whether “Armageddon is 1000 years away or the day after tomorrow.” In any event, Reagan concluded, he had “never seriously warned and said we must plan according to Armageddon.” The issue faded in the late 1980s, as improved East-West relations eased fears of nuclear war. Reagan’s successor, George Bush, while proclaiming himself a born-again Christian (“I’m a clear-cut affirmative to that”), did not, so far as one could tell, interest himself deeply in the arcana of Bible prophecy.

But for a time in the mid-1980s, the politics of prophecy elicited intense public discussion. The New York Times worried that “Armageddonist” advisers might subtly influence nuclear policy, and one hundred prominent religious leaders urged Reagan to disavow the dogma that nuclear holocaust is foreordained in the Bible. Such beliefs could lead to “historical fatalism,” they cautioned, and prove self-fulfilling. People for the American Way, a liberal lobbying group, warned of the “disdain for peace” implicit in a belief in Armageddon. The columnist Hunter S. Thompson wrote in 1987, “The president is very keen on the Book of Revelation. I love it for the sharp and terrible power of the language, but [Reagan] really believes it.” After quoting a particularly lurid passage from Revelation, Hunter went on: “A lot of acid freaks have been taken away in white jackets with extremely long sleeves for seeing things like that, but the visions normally don’t last for more than 72 hours. Reagan, though, has believed in the coming of these hideous ‘four beasts with six wings and full of eyes within’ for something like 72 years.”

Even some evangelicals expressed uneasiness about having a premillennialist in the Oval Office. An editor of Sojourners, the voice of a small but articulate band of evangelicals espousing the liberal-activist social agenda, warned of the politicization of prophecy: “The popular link between nuclear weapons and portions of apocalyptic scripture began as an innocent, if biblically shaky, attempt by simple people of faith to make some sense out of a new and horrifying evil. . . . But the linking of ‘our’ weapons and ‘God’s’ plan became a part of presidential rhetoric, and frighteningly it has provided the one thing our military planners have always lacked—a religious justification for nuclear weapons.”

On the other hand, evangelicals active in New Right politics denied
that premillennial belief implied advocacy of nuclear war. Only a “small minority” of evangelicals, contended Harold Lindsell, a former editor of the evangelical journal *Christianity Today*, in 1984, opposed efforts to prevent nuclear holocaust as contrary to God’s prophetic plan. Two of Falwell’s associates, Ed Dobson and Ed Hindson, writing in the conservative journal *Policy Review* in 1986, insisted on God’s sole responsibility for prophetic fulfillment. “A lot of talk about speeding up the apocalypse would be stopped,” they complained, “if more people understood that prophecy cannot be altered.” But despite such reassurances, nagging worries persisted that apocalyptic belief might inspire some future president or military leader to try, in Michael Barkun’s fine phrase, “to make the inevitable, paradoxically, even more certain.”

And how did nearly half a century’s worth of books, articles, cassettes, films, and sermons (on national television and in local churches) that found nuclear war foreshadowed in prophecy shape the larger climate of public opinion within which politicians and policymakers operated? Few studies of nuclear attitudes include religious belief as a variable, but the limited data available do pinpoint prophetic belief as an important, and neglected, factor. In a 1984 Yankelovich poll, for example, 39 percent of the respondents said that biblical prophecies of earth’s destruction by fire referred to nuclear war, with 25 percent convinced that God would spare them personally from the coming holocaust. Danny Collum, the *Sojourners* editor mentioned above, recalled the large urban Southern Baptist church he attended as a youth in the late 1960s and early 1970s as full of “lay, self-taught ‘prophecy experts’ who regularly turned Sunday School classes into seminars on the ‘signs’ of our apocalyptic nuclear times.” The pastor of a Dallas-area Baptist church observed in 1989 that many of his parishioners professed little concern about the nuclear threat, either because they believed that God would never permit it, or that if it did come, it would be as “part of God’s sovereign plan which cannot be altered.”

Although Falwell’s spokesmen Dobson and Hindson, writing in *Policy Review*, found no nuclear policy significance in premillennialism, the insistence of countless postwar prophecy writers on the futility of efforts to limit the arms race or to ease Cold War tensions had obvious policy implications. As Robert Glenn Gromacki declared flatly in *Are These the
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Bible-Prophecy Popularizers


With the politicization of Fundamentalism in the 1980s, such pronouncements increased. Through television and mass-market paperbacks, prophecy writers commented on nuclear policy issues from a conservative, promilitary perspective. Earlier writers had rejected official propaganda portraying the nation’s growing nuclear arsenal as a guarantor of peace and had stressed that America would not escape the end-time holocaust. These themes did not wholly disappear in the 1980s, but many writers, increasingly mobilized into the ranks of the New Right, now treated God’s prophetic plan and Reagan’s military buildup as indistinguishable. Lindsey’s 1981 best-seller, *The 1980s: Countdown to Armageddon*, was even more blatantly political than his earlier works. Rabidly nationalistic and virulently anti-Soviet (with charts showing the Russians’ alleged nuclear superiority), *Countdown* insisted that the Bible “supports building a powerful military force,” including more nuclear missiles, and urged readers to make themselves heard politically. A book more in tune with the beefed-up military spending and anti-Soviet rhetoric of the early Reagan presidency would be hard to imagine.

A strident chorus of 1980s writers—characterized by one critic as “the court prophets”—supported the weapons buildup and dismissed peace activism as at best “superficial window dressing” masking history’s inexorable march to Armageddon. Falwell in 1983 lashed out at the nuclear-weapons freeze campaign movement as a “suicidal effort to force our country into . . . unilateral disarmament” and assure Communism’s triumph. James Robison, the premillennialist television preacher who delivered an invocation at the 1984 Republican National Convention, proclaimed: “Any teaching of peace prior to [Christ’s] return is
heresy. . . . It’s against the Word of God; it’s Antichrist.” In a 1985 novel about the end times, Antichrist wins a world following by espousing nuclear disarmament.

Even prophecy writer Harold Lindsell, the former editor of Christianity Today, while denying in his 1984 book that prophecy believers pined for nuclear war and further insisting that all “reasonable men, including Christians, should try to prevent any use of nuclear bombs . . . and wars of any kind,” undercut this apparently forthright statement by insisting on the inevitability of end-time wars as “part of God’s plan.” Belying his conciliatory tone, Lindsell denounced peace activists for “helping the enemy,” attacked the freeze campaign as KGB-inspired, implicitly endorsed Reagan’s “Star Wars” proposal, and approvingly cited Edward Teller’s debunking of the “myths” about the devastating effects of nuclear war.

Unquestionably this wave of blatantly political commentary on nuclear issues by prophecy popularizers helped shape the political culture, as millions of Americans absorbed supposedly Bible-based teachings proclaiming history’s imminent and catastrophic end. As Robert Jewett of Garrett Theological Seminary observed in 1984, Reagan’s musings on prophecy, like his reflections on other matters, were “uncannily close to the public pulse.” Despite some interpreters’ efforts to distinguish nuclear war from the end-time events foretold in Revelation, such subtleties escaped many believers, who, as the 1984 Yankelovich survey revealed, found “Armageddon” and “World War III” essentially indistinguishable. Many cultural observers outside the premillennial camp expressed fears that Armageddon theology would hasten the holocaust its proponents saw as preordained. As a British churchman put it, “One rather frightening by-product of this process of [prophetic] interpretation is that it is so easy to create the very situation which is being described, so that the interpretation . . . brings about its own fulfillment.”

My own sense is that the connection between grassroots prophecy belief and nuclear-weapons policy, while real, was subterranean and indirect. Few post-1945 believers in prophecy 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 tended toward passive acquiescence in the nuclear arms race
and the Cold War. As Stephen O’Leary, a specialist in apocalyptic rhetoric at the University of Southern California, has argued, “The real issue is not . . . whether some born-again believer is going to get his hands on the button that could destroy all of us, but on the way this interpretation of end-time prophecy conditions all our expectations . . . , [making nuclear war seem] a perverse fulfillment of divine destiny.” The assimilation of nuclear holocaust into the comfortably familiar premillennial scenario, agreed Eddie F. Carder, a young Southern Baptist minister critical of the prophetic views prevalent in his denomination, “encourage[s] social and political complacency.” It “may lead to exciting preaching, attract a large following, and even pad the prophet’s pocketbook,” he concluded in 1989, but it “falls far short of responsible biblical interpretation.”

One might argue that the prophecy popularizers, in compelling some readers who were not overtly political to confront the reality of nuclear war, unwittingly served the antinuclear cause. But this effect seems to have been at best minor and peripheral. Indeed, not only premillennialism’s theology, but also its vocabulary, was more anesthetizing than energizing. In contrast to the rhetorical strategies of antinuclear activists, who translated the abstract calculus of nuclear war into gripping accounts of emotional trauma, radiation’s medical effects, and the devastation a missile attack would bring to specific cities, the “nuclear war” of the prophecy writers had, with rare exceptions, little tangible reality or affective power. Although such writers spoke of billions killed, of cities obliterated, of oceans poisoned, of “a bloodbath of astounding proportions,” their prose remained curiously inert. One reacts to it much as one responds to King Saul’s smiting of the Amalekites recorded in 1 Samuel. Did the Amalekites bleed and moan? Did Amalekite children cry for their mothers?

The seventeenth-century biblical language retained by many prophecy writers—armies “perish”; God “slays” or “chastises” his enemies—further emasculated the prose. The distancing from reality built into the language of nuclear strategists, noted by Robert Jay Lifton and others, has its counterpart in the prophetic literature. The writers’ theology may insist on the terrible literalness of these “inerrant” prophecies, but the rhetoric is mythic, a fairy tale domesticated through many tellings. The
“billions of dead” are not flesh-and-blood human beings with families, hopes, and aspirations; they are eschatological zombies, signposts marking another stage in a sequence of familiar events.

Premillennialism’s conceptual structure, as well as its rhetoric, encouraged skepticism toward efforts to reduce U.S.-Soviet nuclear competition. Nations are central to biblical prophecy. Of the Bible’s more than 480 references to “nation” and “nations,” some 70 occur in the books of Daniel, Ezekiel, and Revelation. During the Tribulation, Antichrist rules “all . . . nations.” At Armageddon, where “the kings of the earth and of the whole world” gather, Jesus Christ returns “to smite the nations; and . . . rule them with a rod of iron.” In the Millennium, Christ governs “all people, nations, and languages.” In the prophecies, in short, nations remain intact to the end of history—and beyond.

Discussion of “the nations” pervaded the writings of John Darby, the nineteenth-century English evangelist and biblical scholar who formulated the scheme of prophetic interpretation embraced by many contemporary American prophecy believers. The fate of the nations also looms large in the work of the American Cyrus Scofield, who popularized Darby’s scheme in his preaching and writings, including the popular Scofield Reference Bible, first published in 1909.

Post-1945 prophecy popularizers followed the nationalistic lead of Darby and Scofield. Doug Clark, in Shockwaves of Armageddon, citing such scriptures as Romans 13:1 (“the powers that be are ordained of God”), argued that nations—and the wars between them—are destined to survive to the end of history. And in the grammar of premillennialism, all forms of political organization beyond the national level are associated with Antichrist, and thus are deeply suspect. The evangelist Hilton Sutton drew laughter and applause in a 1988 appearance in Madison, Wisconsin, when he jeered at “the United Nothing in New York.” Premillennial belief emphasizes the centrality of national power calculations in discussions of nuclear policy; encourages the view that nuclear-weapons competition among nations is a natural expression of the divine order of things; and deepens suspicions of any individual, organization, or movement seeking to address the issue from a supranational or global perspective.

How many U.S. premillennialists accepted the long series of govern-
mental decisions that pushed the nuclear arms race to new levels of menace, in the belief that the entire process was inevitable? How many did not become involved in the late-1940s effort for international atomic-energy control, the test ban movement of the 1950s, or the nuclear-weapons freeze campaign of the early 1980s, in the conviction that such efforts were doomed to failure and even ran counter to God’s plan for mankind? If national conflicts must go on to the end of time, and if nuclear cataclysm awaits us at the last turning of history’s long path, then are not efforts to deviate from that course pointless and perhaps even impious? Believers’ energies, the logic of premillennialism makes clear, are better spent in winning souls for Christ than in trying to shape world events.

Certainly it would be unwise to offer sweeping generalizations about all premillennialists, or to posit a simple cause-and-effect relationship between this belief system and an automatic acceptance of the inevitability of “wars and rumors of wars”—up to and including nuclear holocaust. Explaining premillennialism to *Policy Review* readers in 1986, Falwell’s aides argued that only a “relatively small group” of “extreme fundamentalists” had “given up on the world” because of their eschatology and become “complacent about evils such as nuclear proliferation.” How could Falwell support Reagan’s Strategic Defense Initiative, they asked, if he thought no human effort could influence our nuclear fate? Yet the implications of premillennial doctrine, as well as the empirical evidence of public-opinion data and a mass of popular writing, suggests that the links between premillennialism and nuclear attitudes were stronger, and more unsettling, than these polemicists wished to concede.

Gordon Kaufman of Harvard Divinity School spoke to this issue in his 1982 presidential address to the American Academy of Religion. To find in prophecy the message that nuclear holocaust represents “the ultimate expression of God’s sovereignty over history,” he said, “is not only an ultimate evasion of our responsibility as human beings; it is demonically to invoke the divine will as a justification for that very evasion.” To teach that nuclear cataclysm is inevitable (or, conversely, impossible because God would not permit it), he went on, means “cutting the nerve of human responsibility.” In an age of a nuclear menace and of environmental hazards that almost defy comprehension, he
concluded, "traditional images of divine providential care have become not only outmoded, they have become misleading and dangerous, and must be thoroughly reworked."

A similar perspective informed Blessed Assurance, A. G. Mojtabai’s 1986 report on nuclear attitudes in Amarillo, home of the Pantex Corporation, a hydrogen-bomb assembly plant. Mojtabai quickly discovered that the worldview of Pantex workers and Amarillans generally was inseparable from their Fundamentalist religious beliefs—an interpenetration of the mundane and the sacred summed up in an Amarillo sign:

JESUS CHRIST IS KING OF KINGS
ALTERNATORS STARTED

Time and again in her interviews she found variations on a single core belief: God controls history; nuclear war, if it occurs, will not result from human action or inaction, but from God’s prophetic plan. And, of course, whatever terrors lie ahead, believers will be spared. As one resident put it, "There’s a possibility of nuclear war, but if it comes, it’s because God allowed it. I believe as a Christian I’m ready to go home at any time—the world stinks.” The Rev. Charles Jones, pastor of Amarillo’s 2,600-member Second Baptist Church, echoed the point: “Some day we may blow ourselves up with all the bombs... But I still believe God’s going to be in control... If He chooses to use nuclear war, then who am I to argue with that?” In complex and subtle ways, Mojtabai came to realize, premillennial doctrine enabled men and women abetting the nuclear arms race in the most direct way imaginable to distance themselves emotionally from the implications of their work. In this respect, Amarillo represented in microcosm vast stretches of the American religious and cultural landscape. As Mojtabai concluded: “The danger is not limited to possible actions by individuals in government or foreign policy positions, or working in nuclear weapons plants and launch sites, who might consider themselves instruments of Providence and decide to help the millennium along. It lurks everywhere, and deeply, in the habits of mind and heart of innumerable ordinary citizens who vote for those who help make policy.”
Passivity, whatever its theological underpinnings, is also a political stance. Insofar as prophecy belief influenced citizens to avoid confronting nuclear issues in the Cold War era, it had direct political implications—implications that became explicit in the 1980s. "As the Fundamentalists moved into the partisan political arena," Danny Collum of Sojourners magazine noted in 1986, "they brought their theories about nuclear war and the endtime along with them"—theories that saw a certain inevitability to the military buildup and heightening of Cold War tension in the early Reagan era. In these years the premillennial eschatology that had saturated American religious culture for decades converged with a larger rightward thrust in the national political life in a synergistic process that, for a time at least, transformed the political landscape.

But has not Armageddon become passé? With the apparent end of the Cold War as the 1990s began, global nuclear conflict seemed a nightmare from which the world had blessedly awakened. Certainly the convulsive changes in the Soviet Union and Eastern Europe in these years had profound implications for prophecy belief. But given its durability and its exponents' resourcefulness in adapting their dramas to shifting events—not to mention the continued risk of nuclear confrontations, particularly in the volatile (and prophetically significant) Middle East—this theme seemed likely to continue to figure prominently among those invoked by prophecy writers in documenting humankind's bleak prospects. Like frugal homemakers, they had learned over the centuries to recycle their basic themes. The genre grows by accretion, rarely abandoning a theme, but simply adding new ones as world conditions change. Certainly a motif as powerful as the melting of the earth with fervent heat is unlikely to vanish entirely from the repertoire of prophetic themes. Should history take a more menacing turn (and who would confidently predict that it will not?), premillennialist images of a prophesied cataclysm will be available to make sense of events and offer reassurance to the redeemed, as men and women peer into the mists of an opaque and frightening future.