

# AMERICAN POWER & THE WAYS THE WORLD ENDS

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Death on a Pale Horse, by Benjamin West, 1796. Detroit Institute of Arts. Source: Wikimedia Commons.

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When someone comes up to me and says that what this country needs is a Christian foreign policy, I find myself a bit perplexed: what's the recipe for Christian cherry pie, as opposed to simply cherry pie? You might say, well, Christian cherry pie is made with *love*. But if it's a bad cherry pie, as cherry pies go, it's not going to become good just because someone calls it Christian. And the same thing is true of foreign policy.



Nevertheless, there are ways in which theological understanding and reflection can make us smarter about foreign policy questions and about the choices that our government faces. They can also help us understand the thinking of the people who make those choices or who debate those questions in our political system.

And that is what I will discuss here. In particular, I want to look at what we might call America's war on the Islamic State (ISIL), and, in the context of that conflict, to look at some foundational moments of our national foreign policy and how ways we think about foreign policy affect almost everything we do and argue about. But you can really only understand these moments and ways of thinking if you're willing to look at their theological grounds.

## THE END OF DAYS

Ideas about the eschaton, the end of the world, are much more important in American foreign policy debates than most people understand. But we're not dealing with one uniform set of ideas, one way that all Americans who are influenced by Christian tradition have thought about the end of the world. Rather, we have two dueling traditions of eschatology in the United States. One of these is the pre-millennial tradition of eschatology. That school of interpretation says things are going to be in a terrible mess, the world is really going to go downhill, and that following this, the judgment of God will be unveiled, and then Jesus will come back.

The other tradition is, in secular terms, somewhat more optimistic. That's the post-millennial vision of the last times, which teaches that human effort, with the blessing of God, will gradually make the world a better place. This human effort includes the work of missionaries, of social reformers, of Christians in all walks of life, both high and low. Through their work, the world will get better and better and better, and then Jesus will return. His second coming, in this tradition, is sort of like the cherry on top of a sundae. It will be the completion of a wonderful work of human improvement and development.

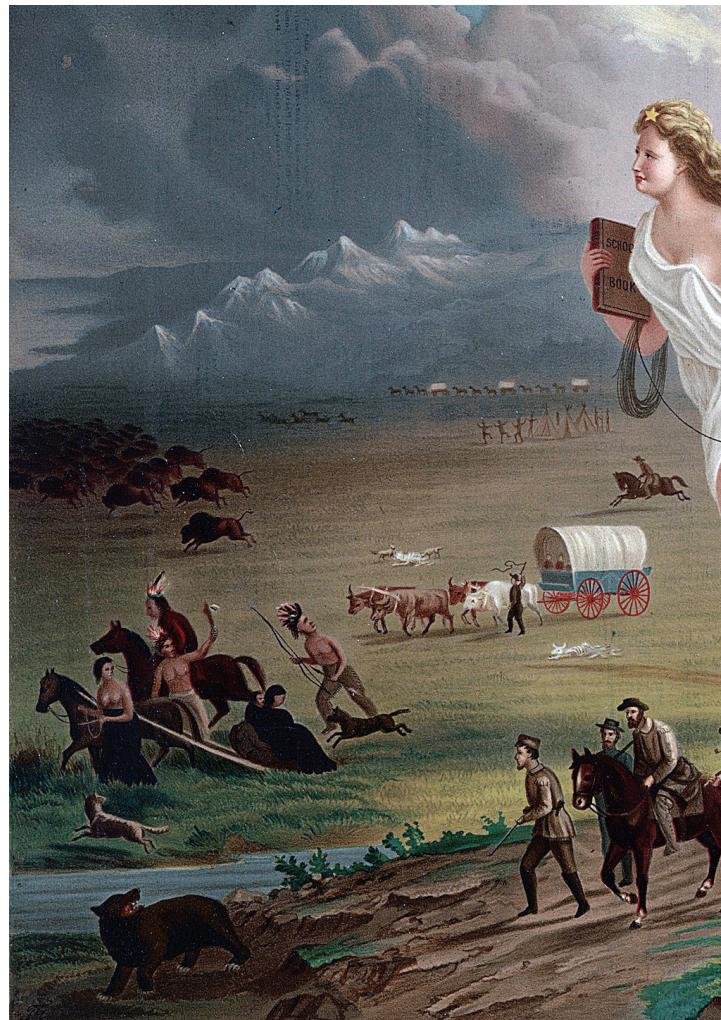
Both of these traditions are deeply woven into American politics and culture, and many people alternate between them without really being aware of where they stand on the question, or what the theological issues are.

I don't propose to tell you which of these interpretations is the correct one, but rather to help you understand how both of these traditions inform the way the United States goes about foreign policy. Sometimes they inform what we do in quite helpful ways. But sometimes when we school ourselves to think about these theological underpinnings a little more clearly, we might decide to pull back. Both of these traditions, though, are simultaneously at work in American politics and policy debates.

I'm going to look at the eschaton and its relevance to American foreign policy under three headings: The *eminence* of the eschaton, that is, its elevation; the *immanence* of the eschaton, or its immanent presence in our lives; and the *imminence* of the eschaton, how far away or close it may be. And I would argue that looking at all three of these dimensions will show us quite a lot about how American foreign policy is shaped.

## EMINENCE

First, the eminence, the elevation or prominence, of the eschaton. What do I mean by that? The schema of history that the eschaton fits into is a very basic element of all three



*American Progress*, by John Gast, 1872. Source: Library of Congress. A heavy-handed illustration of 19th-century post-millennial American optimism. Columbia brings technology and progress westward. In her wake comes the "light" to push out the darkness—as well as the bison and the Indians.

great Abrahamic monotheisms. And this vision of history, whether we know it or not, shapes the way most Americans, in fact virtually all Americans and many other people around the world, look at current events.

This is the Abrahamic scheme of history. Humanity starts in paradise, in right relationship with God. Then man falls, and something goes terribly wrong; humanity suffers in the mire. There's a long period of redemption when God engages with—and to—fallen humanity, which ultimately at the end will lead to the eschaton, the last days, the end of history, and the restoration of humanity to an even better relationship with God than the one that was lost at the beginning.



Islam, Judaism, and Christianity all in various ways share this analysis. And not just these religions, but in fact the secular or quasi-secular creations of Western culture since the Enlightenment also share this schema of history. So, Marxism has its Eden: the era of primitive communism. The fall of man is the arrival of the class system; the work of the Spirit in history becomes the process of class struggle and material advancement, which finally, in the end, will lead to the last days and the coming of the system of advanced communism, which is better than the primitive communism that Marx saw at the beginning of the human race.

But this pattern also holds true in liberal progressive thought, whether it's still influenced by theism or not. Liberalism sees, again, a primitive time of human equality, and then—a bit like Marxism—a fall into class

struggle. Then there is a gradual process of the enlightenment of ideas and of human feelings. Finally, ultimately, this will lead to the perfected world order or golden age that we see out there in the future. What we've got, then, are these five faiths of Abraham: Christianity, Islam, Judaism, liberalism and Marxism, all shaped by this schema.

One of the interesting things about twentieth-century history is that it is in the twentieth century that Abrahamic history conquered the world. That is, if you take into account Marxism in China, Christianity in much of the rest of the world, and Islam in sub-Saharan Africa by the end of the twentieth century, not only did a majority of the human race profess one of the Abrahamic religions, but an even larger majority of the human race had embraced an Abrahamic worldview, or at least a worldview of the historical process that's influenced by those religions. That worldview doesn't regard history as endless cycles repeating, or one meaningless thing happening after another in a never-ending but pointless story. Instead, it thinks of history as a story, something with a beginning, a middle, and an end; there's a point to it. In this worldview, too, there is an ethical, moral, or spiritual dimension to history—and that holds true even when people who hold to this view aren't theistic in their personal beliefs. There's this idea that the values of that hoped-for end, of which we see glimpses in the beginning, should affect our behavior now.

So, if you're a good communist, you're supposed to work for the advancement of the proletariat. If you're a good Muslim, you're supposed to advance the message of Islam to bring about the worldwide conversion to Islam. If you're liberal, you're supposed to do good, progressive, liberal things and vote for good, progressive, liberal candidates. And if you're a liberal country, you should follow good, progressive, liberal policies in order to build this end of history, this post-historical liberal world order.

These systems of belief, these historical expectations and ethical grounds, shape what we do and how we understand what

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we're doing. For the American nation, this Abrahamic schema is particularly important because the United States comes into being at a time in the history of the West when the historical and ethical outline, the schema, has come loose from a set of church doctrines and from the concrete Biblical narrative. If you went into a church in the Middle Ages, you would have seen, painted on the ceilings, pictures of the suffering of sinners and of the judgment of Christ at the end of time. But you wouldn't necessarily think, unless there was a plague or a papal schism going on, that the end of history or the end of days had a lot to do with the history you were living through, with you or what your king's tax policies were. The end of history was a doctrinal idea; it was not necessarily a historical or political idea.

Interpretation of current events in eschatological terms became more common during the Reformation and afterwards. By the time of the American Revolution, and even more during the French Revolution and the years which followed with the rise of Napoleon and the age of dramatic global change, people began more and more to experience world history as moving rapidly towards the end of days—but often a secularized version of this idea.

The American Founders subscribed to varying versions of this historical process. The more theologically orthodox among them believed in the fall of man, which led to God's long engagement with the Jews up through the coming of Christ. This was followed by what they perceived as a false dawn: the apostolic church, and the spread of Greco-Roman culture. But the Dark Ages, and the society presided over by the Medieval Church, saw the loss of all of that: liberty, classical knowledge, and pure Christianity. Then, beginning with the Renaissance and followed swiftly by the Reformation, society recovered principles of free government, which spread from England to the English colonies. In this story, the Founding generation saw, or thought they saw, the hand of God visibly pushing the historical process toward an end. And they saw the American Revolution as a step forward in this process. This perception was shared



even by those Founders who were Deists: that is, even when they were not Christian, these men were Protestant.

Interestingly, in the 1790s there was a huge surge of interest in Bible prophecy, a level of interest that had by and large faded away in the English-speaking world after the fall of the Puritan commonwealth. It never went away completely, but it wasn't a mainstream preoccupation: you can read a lot of John Wesley without running into much apocalyptic or prophetic speculation, compared with what you find in John Milton.

What had changed? In the 1790s the French Revolution came along, and the power of the papacy in France was broken; in Napoleon's conquests, the absolute monarchs of Europe who were in alliance with the Pope were broken. Napoleon went to Egypt, won victories



over the forces of what had for hundreds of years been the almost invulnerable Ottoman Empire: he just brushed them aside. He went to Palestine and invited the Jews to return. What people saw when they picked up the daily newspaper was, it seemed, the prophecies of the Bible coming true before their eyes, in their own time. Meanwhile, the French Revolution itself was anti-Christian. In November 1793, the radical revolutionaries held the first official national *Fête de la Raison*, with altars to the goddess of Reason set up in churches throughout France; they persecuted priests and ministers.

In other words, right around the time America was becoming independent, history began looking quasi-apocalyptic. And so, Americans in the nineteenth century had a sense of their country's destiny: this new nation was not just another step in the trudge of history, not just

one empire among 10,000 others that might rise and fall and someday be as forgotten as Mesopotamian dynasties that no one could remember. No: history, Americans believed, is moving towards a point, towards a climax. And it was their job to help it get there.

The main movement in the nineteenth century that sought to achieve post-millennial culmination of history was the missionary movement. In the West, this overlapped with domestic social reform movements. American and British anti-slavery activists also supported Christian missions in Hawaii, China, and the Middle East, working for the eradication of these social ills. But they didn't just work for these goals: they believed in them. It wasn't just a good thing to reduce social ills; it was also a step towards the permanent transformation of the world into something that would be in closer harmony with the will of God. They were working with God to make the world right again. American and British support for the return of the Jews to the Holy Land was very much a part of this optimistic movement of reform, this post-millennial Christian activism.

Let's leave theology aside for the moment. Consider how the habits of mind fostered by pre-millennial and post-millennial visions of the apocalypse affect how you think about society. If you're somebody who thinks that the structure of your society is pretty good, the talented people in society are taking the lead, and the good people are rising and making progress in your society, you'll find the idea of a post-millennial eschaton pretty appealing. The world is getting better and better. Society's institutions are working. Yes, there are problems. Yes, there are injustices. But the good people are working together to bring an end to them. And with the help of God, we're going to get to the place where Jesus can come back and complete the work.

On the other hand, if you're someone who's alienated from social elites and social institutions or if you're profoundly suspicious of the intentions of those who are running your society, you're going to find the vision of a pre-millennial apocalypse much more

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attractive. Nothing's working; it's all getting worse and worse. God's judgment, you might say to yourself, is the only thing that can cleanse this sink of iniquity that people call Congress. (How you might come to that conclusion, I can't imagine.)

So, you have throughout the nineteenth century these different visions of the historical process, and therefore of America's place in the historical process. Both visions were related in part not only to people's theological convictions and spiritual experiences, but also to the way they read the historical and social situation of their day.

Whether Americans were optimistic or pessimistic about where the world was headed, they consistently interpreted major events in the light of this grand historical overview. So, during the Civil War, people in the North saw the conflict as part of the struggle against tyranny in all its forms, of which slavery was one. Those in the South saw themselves resisting a movement of infidel, liberal Christians fighting against the biblically appointed institution of slavery. In either interpretation, the destiny of America was bound up with events of cosmic significance in the history of humanity: America's internal struggles were leading up one way or another to the culmination of history. Abraham Lincoln, in the Gettysburg Address—a purely secular context—says that the fight here, our Civil War, is going to determine whether government of the people, by the people, and for the people will perish from the earth. Things that happen here, things we do now, have a cosmic significance. This is the case not merely because God, the eternal Judge, sees every act, weighs right and wrong, and will judge justly, but because in the historical process the role of the American people is decisive for a whole range of important issues related to the coming of the Kingdom of God.

This perspective did not end with the nineteenth century. The Great War, after all, was the war to end war, the war to make the world safe for democracy, the war to create a league of nations, the war that would change the way international politics worked forever. The

Second World War was the struggle against Nazi tyranny, evil on a cosmic scale. The Cold War was the struggle against murderous and “Godless communism,” which sought to enslave the whole world and destroy the Christian church.

American history and Abrahamic history—biblical or eternal history—are fused together in the way we think about such things. The eschaton is not a remote set of theological ideas and disputes, fodder for half-crazed Bible interpreters to use for their best-selling books. The eschaton is, instead, an eminent feature in the way Americans understand global and domestic events.

## IMMANENCE

Let's turn now to the immanence of the eschaton in American life, the intimate presence of these seemingly abstract ideas. Speaking non-politically, the immanence of the eschaton is this: while no-one knows when the end of the world will come for the world as a whole, that end will certainly come for each of us in the not-too-distant future. For you, for me, death is going to come. The end of my world is not that far away. For me, the sun and the moon will fall from the skies. The rivers will turn to blood, and I will see the Son of God returning in glory to judge heaven and earth, and to judge me. That's real, and it doesn't go away. In our death-denying culture, a fixation on the final apocalypse, on the eschaton, is one of the ways that American Christians compensate for the absence of real teaching about death, for the absence of guidance in how your faith is one of the ways you prepare for this most personal of experiences.

But the imminence of the eschaton extends beyond this. While each of us feels the end of the world as a personal issue, it is also true that in American life today the eschaton in some ways feels like it's happening now.

What do I mean by that? The beginning of our current age was, arguably, 1945. In that year two things happened that changed the world forever. The first is that Soviet troops

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moved into Poland and began to liberate the Nazi death camps. From those camps, photographs were sent back to newspapers around the world: we saw those images and heard stories about the Holocaust.

Why is that a world-changing event? The hope of the Enlightenment was that the advancement of science and technology would bring with it a moral advance. This was the secular pre-millennial apocalypse on which so many had built their hopes: as humanity became more powerful, it would become better, more responsible. But this crime was committed not in some remote outback of the world where we could say they just hadn't experienced technology yet, where they didn't have the advantages of universal education and the proliferation of university professors and all these other wonderful, modern things. This crime was not committed in a place with inhabitants sadly deprived of economics textbooks. No, this happened in Germany, the most enlightened, the most developed, the most progressive, and even in some ways the most Protestant of the European powers. The images that came out of Auschwitz put an end to the Enlightenment hope that science and technology could rescue humanity from its night terrors. Well, we may be less afraid of the night. But we're more afraid of each other.

And, of course, there was something else that happened in 1945. At Hiroshima and Nagasaki, we saw the results of weapons that, as they were developed further, could end life on earth.

We therefore had two realizations at the same time: humanity is no better for all its scientific and technologic progress; it could even be worse. And humanity has now achieved such a level of scientific prowess that we increasingly hold the fate of our own species in our own evil hands. This is pretty powerful stuff.

Those of us who are old enough to remember the Cuban Missile Crisis can recall a moment when most adults around us thought there was an even chance that civilization wouldn't last the week. We had hoped that with the fall of the Soviet Union these fears would be left

behind us. That has not been the case. Not only nuclear weapons, but other threats to human life have been proliferating. Biological weapons are of course preeminent examples. But there are other fears as well about global warming, resource depletion, and so on. The list of ways people worry over how humanity may kill itself is growing.

And as this happens, politics, too, begins to take on an apocalyptic or eschatological quality. I think we've all encountered environmentalists who feel in their gut that a five-cent deposit on a plastic bottle can save the planet—or at least it's a step. Failing to endorse a piece of legislation, then, might kill the planet. There's an increased sense that political decisions are eschatological decisions: the fate of humanity rests on the outcome of the political process. That changes the nature of politics. That changes the stakes of politics. It changes what people are willing to do.

I've addressed this entirely from an American perspective, but it's a global phenomenon. The rise of jihadi violence and other forms of religious radicalism in the Islamic world is evidence of people who feel that politics has now become a place of eschatological action. Islam is in danger; Islam must defend itself; Islam must attack while it can.

And then we respond in the same terms: the question of whether we have the right policies in the war on terror becomes the question of whether Western civilization can survive. The eschaton, as I've said, is ever more immanent.

## IMMINENCE

Let me conclude by addressing the question of imminence of the eschaton: that is, the rapidity of its approach. To do that, I'm going to talk about the so-called "singularity." This is an idea that has arisen as some futurists reflected on the increasing speed of technological change. Let's begin in one million BC and plot the rate of technological progress. Up until a couple thousand years ago, that line does not move very fast. Someone figures

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out a hot new way to chip a flint, and that's all you get for the next few millennia. This is a slow process.

And then, as you approach the present, that rate of change picks up. Humans develop agriculture, ceramics, the wheel, and writing systems. And then things begin to pick up quite dramatically. Instead of looking like a line creeping upwards, our graph looks like that bane of algebra students, the hyperbola. The slope increases, the curve steepens, and at some point that curve approaches the rate of infinity. The concept of the singularity, as futurists posit it, is that as this rate of change moves towards infinity, there comes a point when the accumulation of technological change and the social change that goes with it are so great that this moment marks a complete break with everything that went before.

The first one who thought along these lines, as far as I can tell, is Henry Adams. In *The Education of Henry Adams* (1907), he considers the rise in the amount of horsepower human civilization can command, and in a 1909 essay called "The Rule of Phase as Applied to History," he even charts out something very much like what modern exponents of the singularity discuss today. That chart shows the same hyperbolic increase in the rate of change in technology, which is at the same time something like a change in the effectiveness of human thought. We're now in the electric age, he says. The next age that's coming—he gives the date of 1917—will be the ethereal age, and the limits of human thought will be reached at a brisk pace thereafter. By 1921 education will mean nothing because the past will no longer be meaningful.

Contemporary versions of this kind of prediction are being made by people like Ray Kurzweil, but unlike Henry Adams, these Silicon Valley prognosticators look to artificial intelligence as the spark which will launch this end of history. At some point, they say, computers will become so smart they'll start to program themselves. We human beings will be helpless before our robot overlords, or something like that: one way or another,



Embarkation of the Pilgrims, by Robert Walter Weir, 1844. U.S. Capitol Rotunda. Source: Architect of the Capitol.

they think, the technology genie is coming out of the bottle.

Or, in a more positive scenario, they say we may reach the point where we upload our memories, ourselves, to the ether and live immortally as software simulations. There are people in Silicon Valley who have claimed it as their mission to end death. Accelerating medical progress, our accelerating ability to deal with information that can be manipulated and managed, and the belief that human souls are reducible to information leads them to argue that we're moving towards an age where the rules of regular history no longer apply. This kind of expectation, then, is an American tradition: as Adams argued, we're headed for a new, higher, fundamentally different stage of history.



## FOREIGN POLICY UNTIL THE END OF DAYS

Let's bring this together. Since at least 1945, the traditional American preoccupation with the apocalypse and with the eschatological nature of American history has sharpened. Since 1945, our foreign policy elites have, with a lot of public support, been making foreign policy based on the idea that we must put an end to history before history puts an end to us. Wars between great powers with nuclear weapons are so dangerous and so destructive that humanity must find a way to end war, or war will end humanity.

How do you get rid of war? Well, that's the purpose of NATO and our support for the European Union. To eliminate war, we've thought, you have to eliminate the causes of war: all injustice, all conflict, even all cultural difference. And so, it becomes an object of American policy to end poverty in other countries, to end discrimination against

women across the world, and so on. The list proliferates with agenda items as varied as people's ideas about the causes of war. This is a very radical way of thinking about foreign policy. Louis XIV didn't think to himself, "How am I going to make the world behave?" Louis XIV contented himself with thinking about how he could make France the strongest country in Europe.

But in the United States, we have reached a point in our foreign policy where fundamental global transformation is the order of the day. This is a very smooth and natural transition for a country which has had these eschatological elements in its self-understanding since the beginning. There's dissent over this, certainly; our current president doesn't seem as enthusiastic about some of these ideas as our last president was, perhaps. Nevertheless, this belief remains very powerful: this idea that America's mission is to win the war against history, to kill history before history kills us, is a fundamental part of our national political covenant.

And this is something that many Americans, including Christians, have not thought about carefully. Is this really what we should be doing? Is this realistic? What is Christian about this? What is not Christian? Are we, in fact, seeking through foreign policy to protect ourselves from a pre-millennial apocalypse—or, perhaps, to bring about a post-millennial one? The intellectual and spiritual resources of Protestant Christianity have a great deal to add to this debate. But up until now, I haven't seen much evidence that these resources have yet been brought to bear on these questions. P

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