In this series (see Rachel's #792, #793, #794), I am trying to discover reasons why the U.S. is pursuing contradictory and seemingly self-destructive nuclear policies, including:

1) President Bush stresses again and again that the two greatest dangers facing the U.S. are the spread of nuclear materials and know-how into the hands of (a) terrorists and (b) erratic and belligerent countries.

2) Meanwhile Vice-President Cheney and the Commerce Department are promoting the sale of nuclear power plants around the world even though it is widely acknowledged that nuclear power provides a sure path to nuclear weapons for any country so inclined. Witness the recent experience of India, Pakistan, North Korea and Iran.

3) President Bush has initiated a "second nuclear age," ordering up a new generation of small atomic bombs which are needed because they are "more usable" than older, larger A-bombs. And Mr. Bush has announced provocative new war policies, including the threat of pre-emptive nuclear strikes against America's enemies, even enemies without nuclear arms.

4) Meanwhile the U.S. is deliberately dragging its feet in efforts to secure thousands of loose nuclear weapons in countries of the former Soviet Union, and is failing to retrieve tons of weapons-grade uranium and plutonium that were given or lent to 40 or more countries under the "atoms for peace" program begun by President Eisenhower.

It's as if U.S. leaders -- or the political supporters to whom they are beholden -- believe that the rogue detonation of a nuclear device in some key city like Jerusalem or even New York is inevitable and can't be stopped, or perhaps might even be beneficial in some way and therefore should be enabled.

In Rachel's #794, we examined half a dozen hypotheses that might explain the deep inconsistencies in U.S. policies toward rogue nuclear detonations. I don't think we can rule out any of these hypotheses. To one degree or another, all of them may be affecting President Bush's nuclear policies.

However, to me the most compelling hypothesis, the one with the broadest explanatory power, is this: certain fundamentalist Christian leaders within the U.S. say they believe that World War III is inevitable (some even say desirable) because it is part of God's plan, and that some Christian leaders control the political agenda of the Republican Party, which in turn controls the Congress and the Executive Branch.

These fundamentalist Christian leaders are, therefore, in the best position to promote the spread of nuclear technologies abroad, and to slow U.S. efforts to retrieve and secure weapons-grade nuclear materials. Many of them also preach that a fiery conflagration is required to defeat the armies of the Antichrist and thus usher in Christ's thousand-year reign of peace. This hypothesis, and its attendant theology, also may clarify some of President Bush's other policies, such as those on taxation, science, education, women's issues, Middle East policy, and the environment.

This is a complicated story and I must emphasize at the outset that it is not a story about Christianity or about fundamentalist Christians or about Republicans. This is a story about a few fundamentalist Christian leaders who decided 20 years ago to take "working control" of the Republican Party, and a few Republican political strategists who sought the support of fundamentalist Christians to increase the numerical strength of the Republican Party.[1]

By 1994, both groups had succeeded -- fundamentalist Christians had gained working control of the Republican Party, and the Republican Party had achieved electoral majorities that would have been impossible without the organized support of Christian fundamentalists and their evangelical followers.

Christian fundamentalists first appeared on the national political scene when the Reverend Jerry Falwell and the Reverend Tim LaHaye organized the Moral Majority in 1979-80. Ten years later the Reverend Pat Robertson formed the Christian Coalition for the purpose of influencing state and national elections. In 1992, he told the Denver Post, "We want as soon as possible to see a majority of the Republican Party in the hands of pro-family Christians."[2] By 1994, the Coalition had succeeded.

The Christian Coalition rates members of Congress according to their votes on issues, giving us a way to measure the influence of conservative Christians within the Republican Party. Here are the ratings of the 10 most powerful Republicans in the U.S. House of Representatives. (Following each person's Christian Coalition [CC] rating, I have added the person's rating by the League of Conservation Voters [LCV] to show how Republican Christian leaders vote on environmental matters.)

House Speaker Dennis Hastert (Ill.): CC: 100%, LCV: no data; Majority Leader Tom DeLay (Tex.): CC: 100%, LCV: 0%; Majority Whip Roy Blunt (Mo.): CC: 92%, LCV: 0%; Chief Deputy Whip Eric Cantor (Va.): CC: 100%, LCV: 0%; Republican Conference Chair Deborah Price (Ohio) CC: 58%, LCV: 4%; Republican Conference Vice-Chair Jack Kingston (Ga.): CC: 100%, LCV: 0%; Republican Conference Secretary John Doolittle (Calif.): CC: 100%, LCV: 0%; Republican Policy Committee Chair Christopher Cox (Calif.): CC: 100%, LCV: 14%; National Republican Congressional Committee Tom Reynolds (N.Y.): CC: 92%, LCV: 18%; Chairman of the Republican National Leadership Rob Portman (Ohio): CC: 100%, LCV: 18%.

And here are the Christian Coalition (CC) and League of Conservation Voters (LCV) ratings for the 7 most powerful Republicans in the U.S. Senate: Majority Leader Bill Frist (Tenn.): CC: 100%, LCV: 0%; Assistant Majority Leader Mitch McConnell (Ky.): CC: 100%, LCV: 4%; Republican...
Way: "A fundamentalist is an evangelical who is angry about understanding fundamentalism and evangelicalism, this religious historian George W. Marsden begins his book, what is fundamentalism?"[8] An estimated 15% of evangelicals are African-American theological beliefs among evangelicals -- at least 10% are one set of political and theological beliefs. This is another. Furthermore, the media assume that all evangelicals share referring to all fundamentalist Christians, as if all Christians were Bush's strongest backers and turning them out in even greater numbers is the top priority of the president's political adviser Karl Rove.][5]

The Republican Party, and the Bush family, discovered the importance of the evangelical vote in 1988 when George H.W. Bush (father of current President Bush) was running for president. According to Doug Weed, political advisor to both father and son, in the 1988 presidential election, "We lost as we always do the Jewish vote, the Hispanic vote and all those folks. We lost the Catholic vote. We were the first modern presidency to win an election -- and it was a landslide -- and not win the Catholic vote." Mr. Weed goes on, "[In 1988] the message did come home -- by God, you could win the White House with nothing but evangelicals, if you could get enough of 'em, if you could get 'em all."[6]

George W. Bush and the Republican Party have been wooing, relying on, and taking direction from, evangelical leaders ever since.[7] The mass media tend to use the label "evangelical" when referring to all fundamentalist Christians, as if all evangelicals were fundamentalists. They are not. Furthermore, the media assume that all evangelicals share one set of political and theological beliefs. This is another serious error. There is a very broad spectrum of political and theological beliefs among evangelicals -- at least 10% are liberals.[8] An estimated 15% of evangelicals are African-Americans and, of those, 75% are staunch Democrats.[9] However, among the fundamentalist Christians who have taken working control of the Republican Party, the spectrum of beliefs is much, much narrower and definitely not liberal. What is fundamentalism?

Religious historian George W. Marsden begins his book, Understanding Fundamentalism and Evangelicalism, this way: "A fundamentalist is an evangelical who is angry about something."[10] The Reverend Jerry Falwell has on occasion used Marsden's definition to describe himself and his millions of followers. Fundamentalists are pugnacious evangelicals who are willing to take a stand and fight against liberal theology, changing cultural values, and secular humanism. Fundamentalists are very clear about their goals. They see themselves as Christian soldiers engaged in a "culture war," a crusade against the dominant liberal culture, which they consider evil. Their stated goal is to win the culture war and to impose what they believe are Christian standards of behavior on everyone, in short, a theocracy.[11]

In sum, the goal of fundamentalist Christian leaders is to take dominion over American society -- a goal that the Reverend Pat Robertson stated explicitly as early as 1984.[12]

Christian fundamentalist leaders are much further along toward their goal of dominion than most people realize. They control the Congress and the White House, and they are now working methodically to take over the courts. Perhaps because religious beliefs are considered to be a private matter in the U.S., the mass media have largely ignored this, the most important political story of our time.

Evangelicals tend to hold a common set of core beliefs, including these:

1. The Bible is the infallible ("inerrant") word of God;
2. The salvation of lost and sinful people (which includes all humans at birth) is only possible through regeneration by the Holy Spirit -- a deeply personal experience of being "saved" that many liken to being "born again" at the moment when they accept Christ into their hearts;
3. All who do not accept Christ as their personal savior (including Muslims, Jews, atheists and agnostics, Hindus, Buddhists, and all other non-Christians) will be resurrected into damnation when they die and will spend eternity suffering unspeakable agonies in the fires of hell;
4. Because the stakes are so high, those who have been saved by accepting Christ into their hearts have an obligation to try to persuade others to accept Christ by spreading the "gospel," which is also called the "good news." (The word "evangelicism" comes from the Greek word evangelion, meaning "the good news.")
5. Christ will eventually return to Earth in power and glory.

Within the group of all evangelicals, there is a somewhat smaller group called "premillennial dispensationalists" or more commonly, "rapture Christians." They accept the five basic tenets described above, and more.

What Do Dispensationalist Leaders Believe? Dispensationalist leaders believe that before Christ returns to Earth he will physically transport to heaven ("rapture") all those who have been saved, whether they be dead or still living. As the Reverend Billy Graham wrote in 1984, "The day is fast approaching when Jesus Christ will come back to snatch away His followers from all the graveyards of the world, and those of us who are alive and remain will join them in the great escape!"[13]

The rapture entered U.S. evangelical theology in the 1860s and has been widely accepted since then.[14] Today dispensationalist views are taught at over 200 institutions of higher learning, such as the Dallas Theological Seminary, the Southern Baptist Theological Seminary, and the Moody Bible Institute. Dispensationalist views are also reflected in the notes accompanying popular study Bibles, such as the Scofield Reference Bible and the Ryrie Study Bible.
The vast majority (perhaps all) of the evangelical leaders visible on the political scene now are dispensationalists. The Reverend Jerry Falwell boasts that he can mobilize 70 million dispensationalists (36% of all U.S. adults); others say the true number of dispensationalists is no more than 40 million (20% of all adults).[15] Either number is politically significant because only 50.99 million people voted for Al Gore in 2000 and even fewer voted for George W. Bush.

Dispensationalist leaders believe the rapture will be followed by a seven-year period of "tribulation" during which those who are "left behind" (not raptured) will be afflicted with terrible calamities including earthquakes, locusts, scorpions and boils. During the tribulation, everyone left behind will have another chance to accept Jesus into their hearts. Dispensationalist leaders believe the tribulation years will see mounting chaos, crime, blasphemy, adultery, homosexuality and other evidence of moral decay. During this period, the Antichrist, a diabolical dictator, will appear, offering solutions to all the world's problems. The Antichrist will try to organize a one-world government something like the United Nations or perhaps the World Trade Organization.

At the end of the seven-year tribulation, Christ will lead his armies of compassion against the Antichrist's armies of evildoers in the cataclysmic battle of Armageddon, after which Christ will reign over the Earth during a thousand years of peace (the millenium).

Based on their reading of the Book of Revelation in the Bible, dispensationalist leaders believe that the "end times," leading to the millenium, must unfold in a particular sequence.

First, the Jews must return to, and take control of, the "covenant lands" -- lands given by God to the children of Abraham, as recorded in Genesis 15:18. Then a temple must be built on the Temple Mount in Jerusalem, which happens to be occupied today by the Al-Aqsa Mosque, a shrine that Muslims believe is among the two or three most sacred spots on Earth.[16, pg. 109] After the Mosque is removed, the temple will be built and animals will be sacrificed within it. Then the rest of the "end times" can unfold -- the rapture, the tribulation, the Antichrist, Armageddon, and the thousand years of peace.[17, pgs. 88-116]

Many dispensationalist leaders believe that the end times were set in motion by the creation of Israel in 1948 and were accelerated by the six-day Arab-Israeli war of 1967 in which Israel doubled the territory it controls by occupying Palestinian lands known as the West Bank and the Gaza Strip.

However, according to Genesis, the "covenant lands" stretch from the Euphrates River (in central Iraq) westward to "The River of Egypt" which dispensationalist leaders interpret to mean the Nile. If you look at a map, you can see that the existing state of Israel -- even if you include the occupied territories of the West Bank and Gaza -- does not presently encompass anywhere near all the "covenant lands." So some Christian fundamentalist leaders, such as Tom DeLay, the Republican majority leader in the U.S. House of Representatives, insist that Arabs and others should be forcibly removed from those lands to make way for Christ's return. A year ago, when President Bush proposed his "road map" plan that could eventually create an independent Palestinian state on a portion of the covenant lands, Mr. DeLay made a special trip to Israel to stir up opposition to the "road map."[18] Mr. Bush subsequently stopped promoting his peace plan.

Israeli occupation of the "covenant lands" is exceedingly important to Christian dispensationalist leaders. For example, the 1967 Arab-Israeli war was a turning point in the life of the Reverend Jerry Falwell. According to his biographers, prior to 1967 Mr. Falwell said he believed preachers had no business in politics. But Mr. Falwell saw the rapid victory of the Israelis in the "six day war" of 1967 as clear evidence of "the intervention of God Almighty."[17, pg. 72] Mr. Falwell soon visited Israel to meet Menachim Begin, then leader of the conservative Likud Party, and subsequently energized a powerful political movement in the U.S. known as "Christian Zionism" -- Christians eager to help Israel take and maintain control over the covenant lands, as a necessary step toward the second coming of Christ.

The Reverend Mr. Falwell is on record saying that Israel should seize portions of present-day Iraq, Syria, Turkey, Saudi Arabia, Egypt, and Sudan, plus all of Lebanon, Jordan and Kuwait.[17, pg. 141] An effort to forcibly remove tens of millions of Muslims from their homelands would almost certainly lead to World War III but there are many in the U.S. who might say, "Bring it on." Shortly after 9/11, neoconservative polemicist Ann Coulter wrote in the National Review, "We should invade their countries, kill their leaders and Christianize them."[19] The Reverend Mr. Falwell himself asserts that God favors war: "God is pro-war," he reportedly said earlier this year.[20] Other fundamentalist Christian leaders agree. The Reverend Charles Stanley, a former president of the Southern Baptist Convention -- the largest fundamentalist Christian sect in America, with 16 million members -- reportedly said last year, "God favors war for divine reasons and sometimes uses it to accomplish His will."[20]

For people holding such views, the present U.S. invasion of Iraq may hold special meaning because it can be seen as an essential step toward the second coming of Christ. Indeed, President Bush describes his own role in the Iraq war in deeply religious terms. When the President visited the Middle East a year ago, the Israeli newspaper Haaretz, which is owned by the New York Times, reported that the President said, "God told me to strike at al Qaeda and I struck them, and then he instructed me to strike at Saddam, which I did...."[21] [To be continued.]

--Peter Montague

[1] I am indebted to Joan Bokaer, director of Theocracy Watch (a project of the Center for Religion, Ethics and Social Policy (CRESPP) at Cornell University) whose work helped me make sense out of an amazingly large number of threads that make up the complex tapestry of this story. Her 20-web-page document, The Rise of the Religious Right in the Republican Party, is essential reading for anyone who wants to really understand the influence of the religious right on American culture and politics. See


