

Patrick Lawrence

## **Trump's Crusade.**

It is quite remarkable—and there are other, stronger words for this—how Americans swoon into states of religious fervor in times of crisis, or when their character or national identity, or their conduct toward others, is questioned. The best-known of these in history are called Great Awakenings, of which there have been three since the first in the 1730s—four if we count what Americans call the Jesus Movement of the 1960s and 1970s. By then the United States' imperial aggressions in Southeast Asia threatened many Americans with the thought that their republic was not so providentially ordained as they had believed.

“America is a nation with the soul of a church,” G.K. Chesterton famously observed in *What I Saw in America*, his 1922 account of his trans-Atlantic travels. This is the thought. And always at the pulpit in the American church we find evangelical Christians. This has been so since Jonathan Edwards, a leader of the First Awakening, who, addressing the incipient dangers of the Enlightenment, assured his congregants that America would ever be holier than it would be enlightened.

Religious revivals of this kind are essentially exercises in collective psychology and give those who take them up various sorts of reassurance. They impart a sense of conviction at just those moments when the convictions of believers are flagging.

They foster faith in the possibility of redemption when sinners suspect that they may be in need of redeeming.

I dwell very seldom on these matters. I find the religious nature of the American consciousness regrettable in the extreme, given how much trouble it has caused over the centuries. But it is a fact of history and seems indelible, as the face of a dollar bill suggests plainly.

And so to the Iran crisis. And to the spectacle of three– and four-star generals and admirals telling their rank-and-file soldiers and sailors they are on “God’s divine mission.” What are we to make of this—the thought that the evangelicals have returned once again to explain America to Americans—this time that the nation with a church’s soul is waging a religious war?

The Trump regime has offered Americans and the rest of the world so many explanations of the war the United States and Israel have launched against the Islamic Republic of Iran it is difficult to keep track of them. It is to support protesters, to keep Iran from developing nuclear weapons, to destroy the nation’s ballistic missiles, to change the regime, or it is because Iran is a direct threat to America’s national security.

The official explanations change day to day and, as others have remarked, none of them bears scrutiny. This reflects a prevalent anxiety in Washington now that the

United States is once again at war, and it grows daily more evident. Not for the first time, America does not know what it is doing.

The uncertainty prevailing in high places since the U.S.–Israeli aggression began early on Saturday, 28 February, grows daily more evident. No one can say why the Trump regime started this latest war because no one can say, as is perfectly obvious, that Trump authorized this campaign because the Zionist regime told him to do so. Now the doubts creep in as to how long the Pentagon can sustain these assaults and whether victory is possible however long it can. It has been difficult to see into the corridors of power in Washington since this operation began, but uncertainty now tilts toward desperation so far as one can make out. “The mood inside the Pentagon, *The Washington Post* reported midweek, “is intense and paranoid.”

The absence of a narrative, as we Americans say, a coherent story explaining this war, could not be more obvious. And the need for such an account grows more acute as all the opinion polls indicate that the majority of Americans oppose this adventure, as it becomes more evident it will not be the short war Trump insisted it would be, and—very important, this—no earthly, graspable justification for it so far advanced makes any sense. Americans have already begun to die in this war. If the casualty count rises, as is likely, for what will these Americans die?

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Several days into the U.S.–Israeli assault, a non-commissioned officer serving in a combat unit reported that his commander had this to say in a daily briefing:

“President Trump has been anointed by Jesus to light the signal fire in Iran to cause Armageddon and mark his return to Earth.” This remark was [first reported by Jonathan Larsen](#), an independent journalist, and [carried in \*The Cradle\*](#), a Beirut news site that covers West Asia.

The N.C.O. related this incident to the Military Religious Freedom Foundation, a nongovernmental organization that defends the constitutional rights of those in uniform. It is not the story of one true-believing officer or an isolated incident. The Foundation fielded 110 such complaints within the first 48 hours after the war began—these reported from more than 40 military units serving at more than 30 separate installations.

“This is coming from all over the military in all ranks, from flag officers [generals and admirals] down to enlisted men,” Lawrence Wilkerson, a retired colonel who serves on the Foundation’s board, remarked in a podcast the other night. Wilkerson cites repeated references to *Revelations* and the imminent return of Jesus Christ in these presentations. “Personnel are being told not to fear what is to come,” he concludes.

There is in the background the case of Mike Huckabee, Trump’s ambassador to Israel. As was widely reported a couple of weeks ago, Huckabee, a limitlessly deluded Christian fundamentalist, told Tucker Carlson, the prominent independent

webcaster, that Israel has a “biblical right” to lands from the Nile to the Euphrates—territory the Zionists refer to as *Eretz Israel*, “Greater Israel.”

And in the foreground there is Pete Hegseth, Trump’s defense secretary, who often appears lost in nostalgic fantasies of past military glory. In *American Crusade* (Center Street, 2020), written while he was still a Fox News presenter, Hegseth referenced the 12<sup>th</sup> century adventures of European armies and wrote, “Today’s American Crusaders will need to muster the same courage against the Islamists.” Hegseth has lately taken to holding prayer sessions at the Pentagon with decidedly Old Testament themes of merciless revenge.

What am I, shocked by this drift into Christian messianism, or not surprised at all? Both, I think: It is a dangerous madness that the Trump regime and much of its military command seem to dispense with all reason as they wage what they cast as a religious war, but on the other hand there is precedent. For this we need go back no further than 11 September 2001 and Bush II regime’s invasion of Iraq two years later. .

“The great purpose of our great land is to rid this world of evil and terror,” the younger Bush had said after the events of 11 September. “The evil ones have roused a mighty nation, a mighty land.”

The evil ones. Are you listening carefully?

Later, as Bush sought the support of the Europeans amid preparations for the Iraq invasion, he telephoned Jacques Chirac—twice by reliable French accounts—and in his (failed) attempt to recruit the French president made reference to Gog and Magog, the satanic figures found in *Revelations*, who appear when the “end time” is near and the great war between good and evil was at last to be fought. Accounts of these exchanges—Chirac privately scoffed in amazement—were published in France in 2009; they were unpublished in America until William Pfaff, my late colleague and friend, brought out *The Irony of Manifest Destiny* (Walker, 2010). It was Bill’s last book.

What do we hear when senior members of America’s political elite take to casting geopolitical events as biblical prophecies? In the immediate case, there are 30,000 to 50,000 Christian Zionists in the United States, and they must remain loyal to Trump and its “Make America Great Again” cause, which by many accounts is suffering a lapse of conviction. These people must be told a story that enables them to embrace a war that would otherwise make no sense to them: Yes, “God’s divine will.”

More profoundly, this is the sound of an imperium that is deeply uncertain of itself. This is what I hear—a nation that has ever sought “the end of history” and cannot find it. Confronted with 21<sup>st</sup> century realities—notably but not only the emergence of the non–West as a pole of power—the Trump regime, and Bush II before it, are no more comprehending or confident of themselves than Jonathan Edwards as he sought to counter the arriving Age of Reason three centuries ago.

Power in combination with uncertainty, desperation, an assiduously submerged fear: These are not promising in combination.

At writing President Trump has just sent out the latest account of his policy toward Iran. “There will be no deal with Iran except UNCONDITIONAL SURRENDER,” he wrote on his social media site, “and after selection of a great and acceptable leader.” These are precisely the words of a powerful regime, but also one that is in some measure uncertain, desperate, and fearful of what will come of what it has begun.

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