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Danger lurks in the fringes

By Zachary Karabell
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The literary landscape of the United States is dotted with familiar landmarks: the New York Times Book Review and the New York Review of Books anchor the East Coast; the paper you have in your hand does the same for the West. People magazine supplies capsule reviews of popular fiction and history, while the Today show touts a few fortunate authors each week. The Book of the Month Club sends its selections to hundreds of thousands. Local papers publish reviews and carry the few ads that publishers still subsidize, and the bestseller list of USA Today shows the dominance of books that seek to entertain by publishers who care less about the judgment of the literati than about the verdict of the marketplace.

And yet, this landscape, as diverse as it is, has an uncharted quadrant. Ask people who they think are the most popular authors in the United States, and they will come up with a variety of responses ranging from Stephen King to Anne Rice to James Patterson. Very few will come up with the Rev. Tim LaHaye and his co-author, Jerry B. Jenkins, whose books have sold at least 50 million copies. There are now 10 titles in the "Left Behind" series (12 are planned), and another two dozen books in a related series called "Left Behind: The Kids." There is also a privately produced movie version of the story, available by mail order, and several nonfiction books published by LaHaye ministries.

The "Left Behind" series is a dramatization of the Book of Revelation as the story might play out in the near future. The first book, "Left Behind," was published in 1995, and its success went unnoticed by mainstream culture. Whatever the literary merits of the novels, the story exerts a powerful pull on millions of Americans. Sales have accelerated since Sept. 11, and the most recent book, "The Remnant," published last year, had a first printing of nearly 3 million copies. The next book, "Armageddon," scheduled for April, will probably exceed that.

The series is part of a larger trend of Christian publishing but, unlike the simple, slightly treacly novels of Jan Karon, the "Left Behind" books are dark and disturbing. They fuse the apocalyptic nightmare of Revelations with the conspiratorial, nativist underbelly of American society. And their wild success raises two rather unsettling questions: How many Americans embrace the story not as fiction but as prophecy? And how much is the public policy of the country driven by a stark conviction that a final battle between good and evil is fast approaching?

The series begins with Capt. Rayford Steele piloting a commercial transatlantic flight and contemplating having an affair with an attractive young flight attendant named Hattie. Suddenly, she bursts into the cockpit, hysterical. A number of the passengers have disappeared, though their clothing remains crumpled in their seats. Steele soon realizes that the problem is not limited to his flight: All over the world, millions of people have spontaneously disappeared, including all young children and newborns.

Global panic ensues, but Steele quickly realizes what has happened. When he finally makes his way home to find his wife and young son gone, he has a dark night of the soul and sees the truth. The Rapture has begun, and God has called the pure souls in preparation for the coming of the Antichrist.

Halfway through the first book, LaHaye and Jenkins reveal the full dimensions of what has transpired. Steele goes to his

wife's church, where the entire congregation, save one assistant pastor, has disappeared. But the former pastor has left a videotape that explains the Rapture and prepares those left behind for what lies ahead: "Anyone

By the end of the first book, the core characters are in place. Rayford is joined by his daughter Chloe, who also places herself in God's hands. Together with a former journalist named Buck Williams and others, they form the Tribulation Force, dedicated to saving as many souls as possible before it is too late. The subsequent books chart the successive cataclysms that afflict the planet, from a global earthquake to the agonizing death of untold millions at the hands of demons.

In Milton's "Paradise Lost," Satan was by far the most interesting character, especially compared to the milquetoast innocence of Adam and Eve. Tortured, self-conscious evil is a literary delight. While nothing in the "Left Behind" books compares to even the least artful line of Milton, the Antichrist stands out. For someone so inhuman, he is the only one interesting enough to carry the story. Nicolae Carpathia, the 33-year-old charismatic president of Romania, appears soon after the Rapture and addresses the grieving nations of the world from the podium of the United Nations in New York: "He spoke earnestly, with passion, and with a frequent smile, and with occasional, appropriate humor." His speech seduces and entralls the audience, including the cynical not-yet-converted Williams. Soon, Carpathia establishes a world government and, over the course of several books, he takes advantage of each new catastrophe to consolidate his hold. He governs the world from his headquarters in New Babylon, near Baghdad, and after he is assassinated in "Assassins," he is resurrected and revealed as the Antichrist.

Carpathia is like an eerie echo of **Bill Clinton**. Erudite, charming, committed to multilateralism, Carpathia is highly educated, relativistically embraces all creeds and is at home in the U.N. He is also the devil. In the later books, as "potentate of the Global Community," he becomes stereotypically evil. The more powerful he becomes, the more Carpathia is revealed as the monster he is. The Tribulation Force, of course, knows that all along, and because they have surrendered to Christ, its members are able to pierce the veil of illusion and recognize world government and relativism as ruses masking the force that will destroy the world.

Then there are the Jews. The Tribulation period includes the mass conversion of 144,000 Jews in Israel who then act as evangelists for Christ. One of the leaders of the Tribulation Force is Dr. Tzion Ben-Judah, a convert who then beams out his sermons from various secret locations. The conversion of the Jews is a necessary prerequisite to the end of days and to the eventual return of the Messiah to vanquish the Antichrist. Though mankind will go through immense suffering during the seven years, in the end, the faithful will be rewarded with 1,000 years of God's kingdom on Earth. For that to happen, however, the Jews must assemble in Jerusalem to confront their great error. They must recognize that their rejection of Christ the first time was a profound mistake, and they must ask forgiveness.

Had these books simply found a small niche audience, we could ignore them as cultural flotsam, no more or less disturbing than Guns & Ammo magazine, militia survival guides and the Heaven's Gate suicide cult. But the "Left Behind" series is not a fringe phenomenon, and the story is not treated as fiction by many of its readers. LaHaye has established a ministry that preaches exactly what the pastor of Book 1 says in his videotape. The official "Left Behind" Web site features other author-ministers who are trying to spread the word and prepare their congregants for the Rapture. This site also features discussion guides, or click on the link to the Left Behind Prophecy Club, and you will find more reading questions. Instead of queries like "Do Tom and Huck really have racist attitudes toward the slaves?" there are questions like "Is the U.N. a precursor of One World Government prophesied in the Bible?" "Are ATMs and other revolutions in global banking a foretelling of the Mark of the Beast?" and "Could the Antichrist be alive now and how is he deceiving us?" There are also TimLaHaye.com and the Tim LaHaye School of Prophecy, which offer more of the same.

We live in a big country, with 290 million people, and the lunatic fringe may be numerically large. The majority might find the books absurd, and even most evangelicals have registered objections to the dark, violent, unforgiving story. But the message of "Left Behind" as applied to current affairs isn't fringe. It is, in fact, quite similar to some of the messages emanating from Washington. The response of some in the U.S. government to the crises of the last year and a half feels ripped from the pages of the "Left Behind" books. The intense animus toward the United Nations, the suspicion that multilateral action is a path on the road to perdition, the conviction that Israel must be supported no matter what it does and the fear that secret forces are gathering in preparation for a final confrontation are not marginal views. They are,

in fact, close to being dominant ones.

The theology of "Left Behind" has been part of American Protestantism for more than a century, and some of the attitudes described above have been held dear by groups as far back as the 19th century Know Nothing Party and as recent as Pat Buchanan's presidential bid. But only in the last 20 years have these groups become so politically powerful. They have found candidates sympathetic to their views, and they continue to press for policies that emerge from the theology of the end of days.

Yet there is no open debate about the virtue of these ideas as drivers of public policy and national security. Is a belief in the necessity of the ingathering of the Jews in Israel a good justification for U.S. foreign policy toward Israel and the Middle East? Are we more or less secure as a nation as a result of policy that may stem from that belief? Is the conviction that the U.N. is a prophesied prelude to the coming of an Antichrist-led world government a sound reason for bypassing the U.N.? And does the belief that world conflagration is inevitable lead to policies that make it so?

The "Left Behind" phenomenon should be a case of literature (and I use the word reluctantly) acting as a warning. The books can be ignored, as they have been, by a literary establishment that is geared toward assessing books as books, but they should not be left behind. They are danger signs. They are an expression of aspects of our culture that have the power to undo us. That doesn't mean that they will, but these ideas ferment best in the dark. It is time to expose them to the light.



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