

Right's Messianic Dream May Tarnish

By Jay Merwin
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The Puritans who set sail for America on the Mayflower believed the Church of England to have been corrupted beyond hope to reform, and they sought to create a "New Jerusalem" on the shores of the seemingly unsullied and God-appointed new world.

"Now as the people of God in old time were called out of Babylon civil, the place of their bodily bondage, and were to come to Jerusalem, and there to build the Lord's temple," wrote Puritan leader John Robinson just before the trip. "... so are the people of God now to go out of Babylon spiritual to Jerusalem ... and build themselves as lively stones into a spiritual house, or temple, for the Lord to dwell in ..."



Ronald Reagan and many of his conservative Christian supporters believe Americans must still labor under that same divine commission. The religious pressure groups have vowed to hold the new president to party platform positions opposing abortion and the Equal Rights Amendment as well as those promising increased military spending and economic recovery. But they also expect a restoration of the Puritan belief that Americans, like the children of Israel, were a chosen people equipped with God's law and his revelation to the world.

The campaign rhetoric employed by most right wing activist religious leaders, and often by Reagan himself, resonated with the early American notion that God had singled out this country to fulfill his redemptive purpose for the world. "God has a plan for America," was used frequently as the emotive kicker to arguments for everything from getting tough with the Russians to cleaning up school textbooks.

However, some evangelical and fundamentalist voters may have longed for the world of Norman Rockwell more than they did for the unwavering moral precepts of their Puritan forebearers.

But on the whole, the conservative activist approach to American problems and responsibilities seemed to have its roots in the messianic calling the Puritans felt as they settled the Massachusetts Bay Colony in the 17th century.

The Puritans saw themselves as entering a new, God-given promised land. They interpreted their arrival in Massachusetts as a mandate to begin anew the church reformation which had disappointed them in England. And by God's grace, their foothold in the New World was supposed to usher in the Kingdom of God.

John Winthrop, the first governor of Massachusetts, deliberately used Jesus' metaphor for the Kingdom when he wrote in 1630: "For we must consider that we shall be as a city upon a hill, the eyes of all the people are upon us."

More than 100 years later, the influential Constitutional framer and future president, John Quincy Adams, described the settlement of America, "as the opening of a grand scene and design in Providence for the illumination of the ignorant, and the emancipation of the slavish part of mankind all over the earth."

Throughout the 1980 presidential election campaign Ronald Reagan indicated in several ways that he believed at least in the spirit of those words.

During his debate with third party challenger John Anderson, the Republican candidate declared: "I have always believed that this land was placed here between the two great oceans by some divine plan. It was placed here to be found by a special kind of people

Then, in concluding his remarks for the evening, Reagan proposed that "together we can begin the world over again." And almost as if to paraphrase Winthrop, Adams and others like them, he said: "We can meet our destiny and that destiny can build a land here that will be for all mankind a shining city on a hill."

Understandably, committed religious pluralists and



John F. Kennedy, Robert J. Kennedy and Martin Luther King Jr. Did the Supreme Court prayer decision cause their assassinations?

other church-state separatists may shudder at Reagan's concept of the national "destiny." But at the same time, fundamentalist and evangelical activists may end up hoping in vain that the new president can apply those views to the give and take of "hardball" politics.

Christian right-wingers will most likely push the new president to act upon those statements because they see both moral and economic disorder as coming from the same source — disobedience to God. Like the Old Testament Jews and the American Puritans emulating them, most conservative activists believe that God pours out his wrath when his chosen people disobey him but brings prosperity when they keep his laws.

During congressional hearings on prayer in public schools, Campus Crusade founder Bill Bright attributed most of the nation's woes to the U.S. Supreme Court decision to banish prayer from the classroom.

The court's 1963 decision, he said, was directly responsible for such national tragedies as the assassinations of John and Robert Kennedy, and Martin Luther King, Jr., the Vietnam War, the disintegration of the family, rampant crime, racial conflict, teenage pregnancy and venereal disease.

Earlier that year, a Moral Majority coalition in Alaska took control of the state Republican party organization, claiming to have acted on their fear that God was on the verge of visiting his judgment of destruction on the U.S., just as he had done to the biblical cities of Sodom and Gomorrah.

And aside from any political purposes they may have pursued, the evangelical and charismatic groups participating in the "Washington for Jesus" rally last spring said they had come to pray for God's mercy on the U.S. before it was too late.

Wracked by climatic disturbances, disease and occasional Indian raids, the Puritans drew a similar connection between their faithfulness to God and everyday events. And the sin of the individual was thought to affect the spiritual condition of the entire community.

Thus, a young woman arraigned on criminal charges before a Middlesex County court in 1656 confessed that "I have not only done what I can to pull judgment from the Lord on myself but also upon the place where I live."

The sponsors of "Washington for Jesus" say they hope to bring a similar downpour of moral righteousness upon the nation with a series of prayer rallies beginning this spring. With the backing of groups like Campus Crusade and the Christian Broadcasting Network, project leaders John Gimenez and John Gilman say they aim to bring born again Christians all over the country into repentance for the sins of the country.

"We are all responsible for much of what has happened in America," said Gilman.

What has happened, they say, is that the philosophy of atheistic "secular humanism" has displaced America's formative biblical values, and God will make the country pay for it.

This issue has produced a bumper crop of books and tracts charting the nation's moral drift. Many of the authors are fond of citing an 1892 U.S. Supreme Court study of the nation's philosophical heritage in which

the justices concluded that "this is a religious people ... a Christian nation."

Sixty years later, even one of the most liberal justices on the bench, William O. Douglas, was quoted as saying "we are a religious people and our institutions presuppose a Supreme Being."

The quote was cited by the Rev. Tim LaHaye, chairman of the California chapter of Moral Majority, in his new book "The Battle for the Mind" (Revell, 1980). The nationally known conservative pastor depicts a war between biblical and secular humanist forces for the soul of the nation. The life and death struggle, he exhorts his readers to "remove all humanists from public office and replace them with pro-moral political leaders." Not just to improve the moral climate, he says, but because God proclaimed in the Bible that "when the righteous are in authority, the people rejoice ..."

In their book "The Light and the Glory" (Revell, 1977), authors Peter Marshall and David Manuel outlined the biblical heritage of the nation's founders and posited a definite "point of no return" at which God would abandon the nation.

Marshall, the son of the late Senate chaplain and of best-selling author Catherine Marshall, compared the U.S. to the biblical city of Nineveh which repented of its waywardness at the last minute. "This country must follow that example, they said, or it will collapse into a hell very much of your own making."

However, the authors caution "It is the most dangerous kind of corporate self-deception to think that a president, regardless of how much he heeds God, can reverse the bent of the national will, once it is set in a certain direction."

By the middle of his term, when political realities will have frustrated many of his campaign promises, Reagan may find himself offering a similar explanation to those in his constituency who thought they had voted for another King David.

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