Demurring to Doom: A Geopolitics of Prevailing

> Evil is unspectacular and always human,
> And shares our bed and eats at our own table,
> And we are introduced to Goodness every day,
> Even in drawing rooms among a crowd of faults;
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> W.H. Auden, "Herman Melville"[1]

PART ONE

Can people learn to live non-apocalyptically in a society given to apocalyptic diatribes against evil enemies and impending doom? Is the apocalyptic use of evil, itself evil? In this paper, I focus on two contrasting discourses of evil found within American culture, one in which evil is perceived as a destructive, cosmic force against humanity and another in which evil is the name given to designate harmful human actions. These are hardly exhaustive of the uses of evil in American culture. One need only think of the vast array of horror films that excite our imagination about being eaten alive by the living dead or by the deadly alive Hannibal Lector. Evil doings are also the brunt of much humor these days, from the cartoon boys of "South Park" to the cartoonish cleverness of Jon Stewart's "Daily Show." But the two modes I want to discuss here have the most entrenched and longest history within American culture and tell us most about prospects for the future.

I should say at the outset that my own stance gravitates toward the second take, but, even so, I am wary of using the concept of evil because it so often falls on the well- fertilized and watered soil of an apocalyptic-ready and highly-armed nation. Rather than adding fuel to already inflamed forms of moral rectitude, it is possible, and more importantly, desirable, to foster thought that is at home in complexity, change, ambiguity, and artifice. This attitude, mindset, standpoint, pose—as a nexus of ethics, politics, and aesthetics it's something of all of these—are vital for cultivating what I call a "geopolitics of prevailing." And that stance, I want to argue, encapsulates both a vision and a means for U.S. citizens to think of themselves as global citizens. In order for that to occur, it is necessary to reject the apocalyptic view that cosmic evil lurks throughout the world, seeking to wreak havoc on humanity by tapping certain groups who doom themselves in the process of carrying out venomous deeds.

Evil for the Puritans was a kind of cosmic force ...

What I am designating as the apocalyptic view is readily in evidence in the so-called War on Terror declared by the Bush administration. A White House Fact Sheet provides an outline of President Bush's "Remarks on the War on Terror" from October 6, 2005 which I quote

here because it twice appeals to a concept of evil which is saturated with apocalyptic zeal. In the President's words:

> The evil that came to our shores on September 11th has reappeared on other days and in other places. In cities across the world, we have seen images of destruction and suffering that can seem like random acts of madness but are part of a larger terrorist threat. To combat this evil, we must remember the calling of September 11th - we will confront this mortal danger to all humanity and not tire or rest until the war on terror is won.[2]

Several features of apocalyptic belief play a role in this brief characterization of evil. As I have argued in both Anti-Apocalypse and Millennial Seduction, apocalypse is most narrowly understood as a doomsday narrative, one that foretells the end of the world at the hands of God, as a punishment for sin and corruption of those who have followed forces of evil.

In this sense, apocalyptic evil is an ontologized force, capital E Evil, dualistically opposed to the Good. With this metaphysical dualism of Good versus Evil comes a stance of absolute Truth, moral certainty, and justified violence against the enemy.

But as I have also shown, apocalyptic discourse is highly elastic. It stretches from belief in a divine reckoning to technological destruction. It extends from belief in a literal Endtime to signaling the end of the world as we have known it. Despite this elasticity, certain features recur. As in evidence in President's Bush remarks, apocalyptic fear-mongering typically traffics in a desire for revenge against a declared enemy and a promise for the enemy's defeat. This trajectory from fear to defeat enables the demonization, scapegoating, and stereotyping of the perceived enemy.[4] For President Bush, the "calling of September 11th" is a calling to arms against the conspiracy of terror. Given such a dire enemy, goodness automatically adheres to the enemy's enemy. In other words, America becomes the chosen nation, or, as apocalyptic rhetoric would have, the Elect.

President Bush is hardly alone in marshalling apocalyptic responses. The media often lodges us between panic and hope over global viruses, rapidly changing norms around gender and sexuality, arctic meltdowns, and economic decline. As I mentioned earlier, the entertainment industry knows that fright sells, especially when the demonically evil force can be roundly defeated. The political Left is no stranger to apocalyptic belief either. Demonization and scapegoating render the Bush administration an easy target: Bush, Cheney, Rumsfeld, and Rice cast as hell-spawn gleefully plotting the take- over of the world. The critics of malicious folks must surely offer salvation.

All of this is hardly new in the United States, though it is more pronounced in the U.S. than in other predominantly Christian nations. Polls repeatedly show that the majority of Americans today self-identify as church-going believers in God, Satan, heaven and hell and that at least a third of the population accepts the fundamentalist view of a coming apocalypse. In part this is due to the legacy of the colonial period. Strains of apocalyptic good versus evil resounded mightily as the Puritan colonialists established a theocratic government using the Old Testament as a guide for their laws. Evil for the Puritans was the kind of cosmic force that President Bush now sees as terrorist threat. Their specific enemies included the indigenous population, as well as other colonists like the hedonistic Thomas Morton of Merry Mount notoriety, who rejected their laws and way of life outright. These

blatant sinners were inevitably seen as pawns of Satan who sought nothing short of world destruction.

The Apocalypse of John, or Revelation, the final book in the New Testament, has for millennia served as the key text of this belief system; it was vital for the Puritans and remains so today for fundamentalist and evangelical Christians who believe it foretells the actual end of the world. Its fantastic imagery is a rich source for popular culture, from heavy metal music to film to Celestial Tea ads. In its simplest form, it is a story of Revenge and Rescue. A man named John has an elaborate vision of world destruction, which deserves to be crushed because Satan's evil has endured in it. In his prophetic vision, tribulations like plagues, boils, rivers of blood, and famine abound. A number of key figures appear, including the whore of Babylon and the antichrist who wears the mark of the beast, the number 666, and gains control of the earth. He and his forces must be destroyed. The revenge is thus against them. The Virginal Woman Clothed with the Sun is rescued and gives birth to the messiah. The final battle of Armageddon is fought and won by the Messianic Warrior, Jesus who rides a white horse. A millennium of harmony follows. Then a resurrection of the dead and the final judgment occur, with the majority of people being sent to eternal agony. The final rescue is for the chosen, who are rewarded by being ushered into the New Jerusalem, a heaven on earth, where death and illness are forever banished.

This narrative of overcoming evil through revenge and rescue took hold as an institutionalized form of religious power but also merged with secular forms of government and nationalism. It has held sway over the centuries, being renewed at times of crisis, especially around wars, from the Revolutionary break with America's first evil empire, Britain, to the Civil War, in which both sides designated theirs as the divinely ordained one, throughout the Cold War, and right into the current War on Terror and President Bush's condemnation of North Korea, Iran, and Iraq as an "Axis of Evil."

> Roosevelt and Truman linked evil to social issues such as poverty, economic inequality, and the unchecked pursuit of profit.

In an astute analysis of Bush's characterization, political theorist Jodi Dean has demonstrated a crucial shift in the use of evil in 20th century presidential speeches. She shows that Presidents Roosevelt and Truman explicitly linked evil with social issues such as "poverty, economic inequality, and the unchecked pursuit of profit."[5] With President Eisenhower, a gradual shift toward religious categories of good versus evil begins, continues to take hold as the Cold War escalates, though Presidents Kennedy and Johnson also maintain the notions of poverty and inequality as social evils. Dean points to the most significant shift as occurring within President Reagan's speeches in which she identifies a fusion of the "moral and the ontological" (16). This is not surprising, given Reagan's fundamentalist acceptance of the Book of Revelation foretelling a final world battle at Armageddon. The current President Bush, she points out, assumes Reagan's approach but adds to it a dimension of his own special role as God's emissary. In his speeches he portrays himself as an embodiment of God's will and America as God's chosen nation.

As Dean's treatment of Bush's presidential predecessors indicates, there is more than one way to look at evil. I want to turn now to a second discourse of evil that is also part of an American legacy, one that is inflected in what Dean points to in President Roosevelt's portrayal of poverty and other social ills as human-made and socially alterable evil. It too has a long legacy in the United States. As I have shown in previous work, the writings of Thomas Jefferson, Margaret Fuller, Henry David Thoreau, Maxine Hong Kingston, and June Jordan forge an ethical tradition that emphasizes that evil is a result of social injustice.[6] But the particular example I want to highlight here has special merit because it not only depicts the social view of evil, it also provides a stunning critique of the ontological or apocalyptic view of evil. No where in American culture are these two contending portrayals of evil more fully and dramatically developed than in Herman Melville's novel Moby-Dick.

Captain Ahab has long been regarded as one of, if not the most, memorable figures of evil in American literature. According to Ahab's view, however, it is the white whale that embodies evil, the incorporation of a cosmic force that seeks to destroy him and thus must be destroyed first. Melville's portrait of Ahab is so compelling that it risks readers' mesmerized allegiance to him, as does happen with the ship's crew, including Ishmael, as they vow to follow him to their death if necessary. I recall as a child being so caught up in Gregory Peck's performance of Ahab in the film version, that for weeks I practiced walking on my own rigged-up whale-bone stump, which I made with belts and a broom stick attached to my bent and bound-up leg. Had I been aboard the Pequod, I too would have raised my flask and drunk to Ahab's cause. As Auden's poem about Melville suggests, evil may be unspectacular but the character Melville created is all about spectacle.

These days, though, I find the novel's most profound insight to be its rejection of evil as a metaphysical, Manichean force precisely of the kind Ahab embraces. This is not the same thing as rejecting the existence of evil, however. Throughout the novel, Melville has his narrator Ishmael point to the injustices and inequalities of the social world with scathing observations about corrupt and self-aggrandizing leaders. Indeed, as Melville shows, one of the most virulent forms of social evil occurs when a leader's personal moral conviction becomes so rigidly absolute that it forecloses on ambiguity and complexity and substitutes for the well-being of those he or she leads. The destructiveness of the monomaniacal Ahab, which brings down his ship down and his entire crew, except for Ishmael who lives to tell the tale, attests to the dangers of accepting apocalyptic evil as one's enemy.

PART II

As powerful as it was, within the United States today, Melville's critique remains as isolated as Ishmael afloat in a vast ocean of apocalyptic belief. I return, therefore, to

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the question with which I began this presentation: Can people learn to live non-apocalyptically in a society given to apocalyptic diatribes against evil enemies and impending

doom? And if so, how do we encourage others to reject the belief that we are doomed unless, as a nation, some of us fight to the death on behalf of the Good?

The tenor of these questions takes its cue from another American author, William Faulkner, and, more specifically, his Nobel Prize Acceptance speech from December, 1950. Addressing his remarks to aspiring writers, Faulkner states that, "Our tragedy today is a general and universal physical fear so long sustained by now that we can even bear it." This overriding sense of fear, he explains, stems from the nuclear threat deemed paramount in his day. He laments that "There is only the question: When will I be blown up?" and advises young writers to teach themselves that the "basest of all things is to be afraid." For himself he takes a decidedly non-apocalyptic stand. As he puts it, "I decline to accept the end of man," reiterating, "I refuse to accept this." Faulkner concludes his speech on a note of duty and privilege by declaring that the "poet's voice need not merely be the record of man, it can be one of the props, the pillars to help him endure and prevail."[7]

There are several ideas I want to draw on from this speech, which, though explicitly posed to writers, tacitly addresses readers as well. In other words, Faulkner's insights are suited to extend from writers to readers in general and to American citizens in particular. His insistence that we must strive to think beyond what he calls the "last ding-dong of doom" applies to our own Time of Terror as much as it did to his Cold War Era. For me, his message gets to the heart of what I mean by a geopolitics of prevailing. By this I mean an outlook that, as Faulkner puts it, "declines to accept the end of man" as its starting premise. When doom is neither cast as the primary threat of an enemy writ large, nor the beginning of a final Endtime, when one, in short, demurs to doom, a new space is opened up for human agency. So too, the interconnections between individuals, groups, and nations become more visible, the necessities of cooperation more clear. This is evident from the record of the non-apocalyptic writers I mentioned earlier, from Thomas Jefferson to June Jordan. All were influential voices in the leading civil rights advances of their time. They, as well as Faulkner and Melville, provide the pillars we need to help us rethink the geopolitics of our time.

My re-appropriation of the term geopolitics is meant to draw attention to the current policy of the United States, which follows a geopolitics of empire that uses the threat of doom as a means to justify world control. In its most basic sense, geopolitics is a theory seeking to explain world developments in light of geographic space and resources.[8] In historical practice, however, it was ideologically instrumental in expanding the British empire in the early 20th century and was adapted for similar territorial take-over by the Nazis during the build up of their powers. As a term, it reemerged in the U.S. during the Cold War, especially through use by Henry Kissinger in the 1960s and 70s, and was further popularized as a foreign policy strategy for the United States during Reagan's administration. Within the more recent American context, empire has become less a matter of annexing territory and more a matter of extending control over other nations and their resources. Under the first President Bush, through the Clinton administration, and now with the current President Bush, geopolitical control by the United States has been justified in the name of democracy for others and routed through proclamations that Terror is evil incarnate and God is on America's side.

A geopolitics of prevailing seeks to counter the geopolitics of empire. But it cannot do so through mimetic denunciation, which propels the energy of apocalyptic fear, vengeance, and moral certitude. That is the way of Ahab. Worse, it is a way that remains as self-hobbled as I was as a child with my belts and broomstick. Rather, it is worth bearing in mind Faulkner's evocation of immortality understood as the physical act of humankind prevailing. Faulkner was surely correct in appreciating that literary forms of writing more often sanction a world in which ambiguity is a foundational condition, complexity of causes a given, fluidity of perception a virtue, and aesthetic creativity a means by which we may envision many possible futures. These modes of thought and acting comprise the foundation of a geopolitics of prevailing.

As I have wanted to indicate, the foundation is, at least partially, laid. And while there is never a "right time" within a non-apocalyptic view, there are ripe times for breaking through the edifice of apocalyptic belief.

Footnotes

[1] W. H. Auden, "Herman Melville," The Collected Works of W. H. Auden (New York: Kingport Press, 1945), 146-7.

[2] Fact Sheet Outline from the Official Web Site of the White House: http://www.whitehouse.gov/news/releases/2005/10/20051006-2.html

[3] Lee Quinby, Anti-Apocalypse (Minneapolis: U of Minnesota Press, 1994) and Millennial Seduction (Ithaca: Cornell UP, 1999).

[4] Chip Berlet, http://www.public eye.org

[5] Jodi Dean, "Evil's Political Habitats," manuscript version, pp. 8-10. Online version:

[6] Lee Quinby, Freedom, Foucault, and the Subject of America (Boston: Northeastern UP, 1991.

[7] William Faulkner, Nobel Prize Acceptance Speech, December 10, 1950.

[8] The term Geopolitics was coined in 1899 by a Swedish geographer, Rudolf Kjellen. But the concept behind it starts 5 years later. That story begins in 1904 with Sir Halford Mackinder, the British geographer who was instrumental in making geography a discipline to be studied in schools. Mackinder's most important contribution is an essay called "The Geographical Pivot of History." In it he suggested that the control of Eastern Europe was vital to control of the world. He formulated his hypothesis as follows:

"Who rules East Europe commands the Heartland
Who rules the Heartland commands the World-Island Who rules the World-Island commands the world"

Mackinder's Heartland (also known as the Pivot Area) is the core area of Eurasia, and the World-Island is all of Eurasia (both Europe and Asia and some of Africa, thus including the oil rich Middle-East). Essentially oriented toward building and maintaining Empire, this way of thinking about world politics overtly emphasized control and expansion. In Mackinder's case, this was on behalf of the British Empire, but in the early twentieth century in the United States, it specifically guided Theodore Roosevelt's foreign policy in conducting the Spanish American War, taking over Panama, and occupying the Philippines. See Gearoid O Tuathail (Gerard Toal), Critical Geopolitics: The Politics of Writing Global Space (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1996).