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**Autor:** Pease, Donald E.  
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# American Apocalypse: The End of Exceptionalism and the Return of Alexis de Tocqueville

Donald E. Pease

## I. The End of US Exceptionalism

America has been linked to the Apocalypse since its “discovery,” when, upon landing on its shores, Christopher Columbus recorded in his journal the belief that God had made him “the messenger of the new heaven and the new earth of which he spoke in the Apocalypse of St. John” (Strozier 168). “America,” as is evident from this journal entry, provided Columbus with worldly referents for the mysteries that preoccupied John of Patmos. John’s apocalyptic images in turn provided Columbus with a metaphysical warrant for exploiting the native occupants of “the new heaven and the new earth.”

Columbus believed that he had found in America the utopian origins for a new millennium. Thus, upon encountering native peoples with alternative mappings of America’s geography, he invoked the images of the new world order and the millennium as moral justification for the acts of violence that would secure the new world’s spatial and temporal borders. But the myth of the Apocalypse also enabled him to believe that his violence was metaphysically distinct from the force mounted by the indigenous cultures in resistance. In the succeeding five centuries, belief in America’s correspondence with typological elements from the book of the Apocalypse would grant official representatives of America’s historical destiny biblical warrant to accomplish the “new world order” by whatever means necessary.<sup>1</sup>

Geoffrey Hartman has described the intersection of sacred with secular events as a quintessential aspect of what he calls the apocalyptic imagination. The “apocalyptic imagination,” Hartman explains, refers to “the Apocalypse

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<sup>1</sup> In a work that has influenced my understanding of American Apocalypse, the Girardian critic Gil Bailie has defined the Apocalypse as a myth that “camouflages the (state’s) violence in ways that make it seem valiant and divinely ordained for those who have benefited from it”(27).

of St. John (the Book of Revelation) and more generally [to] the kind of imagination that is concerned with the supernatural and especially the Last Things." The term also describes a mind "which actively desires the inauguration of a totally new epoch, whether preceding or following the end of days. And since," Hartman concludes, "what stands between us and the end of the (old) world is the world," "apocalyptic" might also be said "to characterize any strong desire to cast out nature and to achieve an unmediated contact with the principle of things" (x).

Whereas Hartman understands the desire to cast out nature and achieve an unmediated relation with the origins of things as a common feature of the apocalyptic imagination, Douglas Robinson has described the historical accomplishment of this aspiration as a quality specific to an American Apocalypse. In *American Apocalypses*, Robinson claims, "the image of the end of the world is made to mediate between this world and the next by standing between and embracing both . . . without subsuming or supplanting them" (8). Discerning this operation at the core of a tradition that extends from the Puritan fathers to Thomas Pynchon, Robinson includes Emerson, Poe, and Faulkner in this visionary line. While each of these writers differs in his articulation of it, they share what Robinson calls a "dream of historical Apocalypse – a dream of a transformation *of* history *in* history that would consummate and so give meaning *to* history" (2).

Hartman and Robinson have restricted the exercise of this imagination to a literary tradition of visionary authors each of whom aspired to replenish biblical typology through the reactivation of the apocalyptic imagination responsible for its production. But Lee Quinby has refused its confinement to the literary sphere and recharacterized apocalyptic discourse as the driving force for the entirety of American history. From the time of the Puritan settlement and the nation's founding and throughout the cold war, America and the Apocalypse would remain mutually constituting, virtually inextricable discourses. "Within US apocalypticism," Lee Quinby explains, "anxieties about and hope for the end of the world as we know it and a new order of existence are commonly represented through the signifier 'America.'" Characterizing the name "America" as a synecdoche for a form of governmental rule that derived its juridical authority from an "apocalyptic truth regime," Quinby detects the persistence of this discourse throughout United States history (xvi). After the Puritan settlers associated the apocalyptic imagination with their power to repudiate English rule, they redirected its wrath against American indigenes. The Puritans' capacity to shift the target of divine judgment from the representatives of old world persecution to the inhabitants

of the new world provided later practitioners of American Apocalypticism with an ideal operational model.

Robert Bellah has deployed the phrase "civil religion" to describe the ways in which the political order could subsume religious themes and rules to support a range of statements that would accomplish this sacred event in secular time (1-3). The nation's civil religion supervised the transformation of the Puritans' theocratic form of governance into democratic rule. In shifting the citizenry's primary loyalty to the nation-state, architects of the civil religion designed their rituals, symbolic events and sacred scriptures in the mold of those of the Church religions.<sup>2</sup> The secular version of an American Apocalypse also extracted from the religious variant a moral perspective on American experience. Official exponents of the civil religion have emulated the Puritan magistrates, who had invoked the biblical typology to legitimate the rule of law. Interpreters of the civil religion turned to the Books of Genesis and Apocalypse for tropes that would explain the nation's origins and end. The state thereafter appealed to its citizenry's apocalyptic anxieties to justify its powers to declare war, pass judgment and execute criminals as evidence of its service to a "higher law." It required the apocalyptic imagination to represent its sovereignty and legitimate its monopoly on such official acts of force. Likening the United States to the Israel of the Old Testament, state officials have drawn on figures borrowed from biblical Apocalypse to justify policy decisions. Indeed, according to Quinby, "it was the convergence of apocalyptic beliefs concerning the end of time with utopian fantasies representing the United States as the perfection of universal history that culminated in the phrase 'American Apocalypse'" (xvii).

But if an American Apocalypse provided US civil religion with an overarching framework for the moral order that commanded the ultimate loyalty of US citizens, it also evoked a cultural response of its own. After its having been projected onto the national landscape, the myth of the Apocalypse inscribed a disjunct temporality on what happened there. Events which took place in historical time simultaneously intimated the end of time. One outcome of this disjunct temporality was a belief, destined to become canonical, in the United States' unprecedented relationship to history. Such a belief in the apocalyptic aspect of the nation's historical progress has provided US citizens with a religious justification for the violence the state exerted to accomplish it. Americans who invoked the authority of an American Apoca-

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<sup>2</sup> Bellah observes that the emergence of a US civil religion coincided with the rise of a religiously neutral nationalism that precipitated the decline of religion as the primary focus for a citizen's loyalty.



lypse have, depending upon the course of action they wished to recommend, emphasized one or another of the elements that this phrase conflates: the end of time, day of judgment, great beast of the Apocalypse, Armageddon, new world order, millennium. Each of these terms predicts the correlation of an historical event with the sacred catastrophe that it would also provoke. Declaring it metaphysically superior to their opponents', the Apocalypse has animated a culture founded and maintained in violence with a quasi-religious aura.

When construed as a motive for historical action, however, the desire to cast out the natural world in the name of "unmediated contact with the principle of things" can precipitate truly horrific events. When the operation that the apocalyptic imagination describes as "man casting out nature" takes place as a historical fact, the nature of which he disposes often includes native populations. In the colonial period, to mention but one instance of this imagination's historical work, leaders of the Bay Colony designated the Pequots as belonging to the nature that stood between them and uncontested ownership of the New World. In their sermons, the Puritan ministry found in John's Apocalypse figures of speech which recommended genocide as one way for their parishioners to accomplish "unmediated contact with the principle of things."

John's Apocalypse provided the Puritans' state-founding acts of violence with a mystical foundation; it transmuted the actual into the symbolic, an unveiling of the mysteries hidden at the foundation of the world. Proposing that particular events only appeared to occur within secular history, Puritan divines could resituate them within the dimension of sacred time concerned with first and last things. Because it absolutely discriminated the elect (Puritan subjects) from the damned (non-assimilable Pequot others) – the Pequot massacre, according to the Puritans' eschatology, will (have) only *actually* take(n) place at the end of time.

On such momentous occasions Puritan divines claimed the power to foresee God's providential design and to transpose this knowledge into an historical theology. But the figure Walter Benjamin has named the "angel of history" pictures the intersection of these non-equivalent temporalities – the end of time, historical progress – in decidedly less progressive images or terms. Whereas the Puritans described their access to the Divine order of things as the basis for their historical advancement, Benjamin recharacterizes such revelations as acts of barbarism. The face of Benjamin's angel is turned away from the historical future fashioned out of such apocalyptic imaginings.

It is turned towards the Paradise from which such acts of violence have forcibly expelled him:

His face is turned toward the past. Where we perceive a chain of events, he sees one single catastrophe which keeps piling wreckage upon wreckage and hurls it in front of his feet. The angel that would like to stay, awaken the dead, and make whole what has been smashed. . . . But a storm is blowing from Paradise . . . it irresistibly propels him into the future to which his back is turned, while the pile of debris grows skyward. The storm is what is called Progress. (259-60)

In associating the apocalyptic imagination with the storm that blew the angel of history out of Paradise, Benjamin exposes as false any nation's invocation of Apocalypse as an ultimate historical justification, and he reveals naked aggression as the force that holds the place of an "unmediated contact with the principle of things."

Leaving aside the question as to whether or not Benjamin's visionary exposure of the apocalyptic imagination constitutes still another instance of it, I want to turn to a related one. How did the apocalyptic imagination enable its American practitioners to disavow catastrophic outcomes of its exercise – like the Pequot massacre, or slavery, or the forcible dispossession of entire populations? Adequate responses to this question might require another volume of essays. I nevertheless want to suggest here a relationship between the Americanness of the apocalyptic imagination and a correlative expression of American uniqueness. The Americanization of the Apocalypse promoted the belief in US Exceptionalism. Sustained by the myth of Exceptionalism that it also reproduced, the nation's civil religion declared the nation exempt from the violent disruptions that had plagued European history. Projecting apocalyptic themes onto the map of the world, the US cast its unique historic destiny in its messianic role as the world's savior.

US Exceptionalism was a political doctrine as well as a regulatory ideal assigned responsibility for defining, supporting, and developing the national identity. The power of the doctrine to solicit the belief that the United States was unencumbered by Europe's historical traditions, as Douglas Robinson has observed, resulted from the projection onto the New World of European travelers' fantasies of being exempt from Europe's historical traditions. "The American dream as European Dream was fundamentally a Protestant dream of historical Apocalypse" (2). Informing this convergence of inequivalent temporalities was a belief in the United States' unprecedented relationship to history. What the doctrine of Exceptionalism declared exceptional in the US political economy referred to European political institutions – such as impe-

rial aggression and colonial rule – that were reputedly absent from US history.

When invoked by the state, the Apocalypse has subsequently legitimated the state's construction of exceptions to the secular dispensation of historical time. The American Apocalypse provided it with the power to represent excessively violent practices as irruptions within the secular history of eschatological events. An eschatological event compresses the space-time of events that would otherwise succeed one another chronologically; it produces a punctum, a traumatic rupture in the flow of temporal events. Representing their confrontation with the Pequots as just such an eschatological moment, the Puritans assimilated the members of their community to a collective identity that was predicated on the Pequots' collective death. The authority that the Puritan state had invoked as the basis for the legal use of force had excepted the Pequots from the Puritans' ethical collective (Drinnon 42-45).

When unfavorable reaction to historical events, like the Pequot massacre, threatened citizens' belief in the doctrine, the belief provided such policies of exterminism with a sacred warrant. The apocalyptic imagination redescribed the collision of endtime with events in US history as the quintessential sign of US Exceptionalism. After discerning it as such a sign, the Puritan clergy designated the last judgment as the agency responsible for the extermination of the Pequots. Invoking a divine injunction as the legal basis for their exertions, the Puritans excepted the state's power to carry out this injunction from communal evaluation. As an apocalyptic event that took place within Puritan history, the Pequot massacre constituted an exception that legitimated the state's monopoly on legal violence and that validated the Puritans' belief in Exceptionalism. The doctrine of Exceptionalism regulated how Puritans responded to events like the Pequot massacre which constituted exceptions to their rule-preserving norms. It redescribed them as apocalyptic exceptions to historical progress, as "transformation(s) of history that took place in history."

The state presupposed this doctrinal belief when it declared that its coercive power to make and preserve laws constituted an exception to the laws it enforced. In recasting Indian removal and slavery as eschatological "exceptions" to its norms, for example, state historians also removed these troubling events from the orderly temporal succession organizing the nation's official history. The assignment of ultimate responsibility for such eschatological events to divine judgment revealed the state's repressive apparatus as the actual beneficiary of its citizens' belief in an American Apocalypse. By way of this "law-preserving measure," the state established a boundary separating

what counted as legally binding within the national community from what lay outside it. Like God's apocalyptic judgments, the state's power to make and uphold the law could not be subject to the norms it enforced without submitting itself to those norms.

Max Weber has famously described such a monopoly over legitimate violence in a society as the core definition of a state. A nation's sovereignty inheres in the fact that the state and the state alone possesses the power to kill legitimately. The US has represented its exercise of this sovereign power as restricted to the purposes of military defense, police protection, and capital punishment. Within these limitations, the state's authority to govern the social order derives from this fundamental power.

By associating the state's monopoly on the legal use of violence with the intervention in human time of a higher law, the doctrine of Exceptionalism provided the state's sovereignty with a metaphysical supplement. It enjoined the belief that the official violence through which the United States upheld its laws was metaphysically superior to that of other nation-states. Although the apocalyptic register of this higher law established the US claim to historical uniqueness, this supplement to the rule of law could not be sorted within the US legal code without producing a lack of distinction between physical violence and the official rule of law, or between US violence and that of its enemies. In the light of these paradoxes, the relations between US citizens' belief in US Exceptionalism and the state's exceptions are best described in psychological terms as structures of denial. By enabling US citizens to disavow state's exceptions that threatened their beliefs, the doctrine of Exceptionalism regulated their responses to historical events.

While the doctrine installed US Exceptionalism as a transhistorical model, specifications of the doctrine's content have changed with historical circumstances. Exponents of exceptionality have substantiated various descriptions of the nation's world historical role. Candidates have included the "redeemer nation," "nation of nations," "leader of the free world," "conqueror of the world's markets." Yet each of these variations on the nation's exceptional place in the world order is derivable from the conviction in the US messianic role in world history.

But if the doctrine of Exceptionalism produced beliefs to which the state has regularly taken exception, the state has nevertheless required the doctrine to solicit its citizenry's assent to its monopoly on violence. Exceptionalism and the state's exceptions to it at once require one another's operations, yet they are also set in opposition. The power of the state's exceptions becomes evident in what the discourse of Exceptionalism is compelled to disavow. By



excluding historical facts that might disconfirm that belief, the processes of disavowal and derecognition that Exceptionalism facilitated have reconstituted citizens' adherence to US exceptionality.

Stated in these abstract terms, the paradoxical relations pertaining among US Exceptionalism, American Apocalypse, and the law's status as an exception sound quite obscure. Throughout the cold war epoch, however, their dynamic interarticulation became the organizing matrix for the construction and interpretation of historical events. On the one hand, the state fashioned exceptions to the norms of democratic inclusiveness by recasting "subversives," communists and other "unAmericans" as exceptions in turn. On the other, the cold war enlisted the apocalyptic imagination to establish the moral basis for the nation's half-century of antagonism with the USSR. If Columbus and the Puritans invoked apocalyptic scripture as a cover story for their imperial aggression, after the second world war the development of weapons of mass destruction maintained the Americanness of this apocalyptic discourse. The exploding of atomic bombs over Hiroshima and Nagasaki permitted world events to be interpreted in the themes and images – Armageddon, the day of judgment – from the biblical Apocalypse.

The state based its ultimate authority for its use of force as metaphysically superior to that of the Russians on the authority of an American Apocalypse. Cold war eschatology recast the US in the role of the world's messiah. In a related scenario the theme of Armageddon from the American Apocalypse provided the state with the all-encompassing rationale for the destruction and incorporation of entire cultures. Ronald Reagan explicitly invoked biblical typology to explain cold war eschatology. "We are about to undergo a dreadful period of suffering," Reagan confided to visiting theologians, "in connection with the extraordinarily violent struggle between the forces of good and evil that is to precede the return of Jesus and the millennium of his rule" (Boyer 142).

But in place of the global nuclear Armageddon that Reagan, along with many other authorities, had foreordained, the "evil empire" collapsed from within. This terminal event dismantled the narrative of US Exceptionalism. Among several other consequences, this ending posed a problem of closure. The nation's subsequent entry into a global economic order displaced the grounding assumptions that had constituted its coherence. It did not conclusively sum up the historical purpose of the preceding fifty years; rather, the events that had taken place during the cold war simply ceased happening, and the narratives that had endowed historical events with their intelligibility

simply broke off.<sup>3</sup> At the end of the cold war, the provision of an appropriate formal closure would have performed the essential political function of providing a model of order capable of bringing its end into concordance with its beginning.<sup>4</sup> The absence of an ending consonant with the nation's official account of its beginning has animated the fear of a disintegrating state. US citizens have responded variously to the disappearance of the symbolic structures in which they had constituted their national identities.<sup>5</sup>

In "The Value of Narrativity in the Representation of Reality," Hayden White has argued a correlation between the formal closure of narrative structures and legitimating the authority of the modern state that is pertinent to this discussion. "It is not just that the questions of law and authority appear in narrative as important themes; it is that narratives are implicated formally in the emergence and maintenance of authority. The structure of narrative gives a shape, a moral coherence to the events that have led up to the establishment of the current order" (Clayton 41). It is only insofar as "historical stories can be completed," White concludes, "can be given narrative closure, can be shown to have had a plot all along that their authority can be acknowledged" (White 24). It is in the process of making events which might otherwise seem contingent or arbitrary – as we might paraphrase White's argument – seem to possess coherence and closure that narrativity makes the real seem desirable. With White's observations as warrant, I want to claim that the palpable absence of closure to the cold war and specifically the lack of a conclusion to the narrative of American Apocalypse have contributed to the crises in the state's legitimate use of force, to which I now turn.

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<sup>3</sup> Recent deconstruction of the myth of Apocalypse has awakened a concern for victims of Columbus whom one recent commentator has described as "Hitler in a caravel landing like a virus among the innocent people of the new world." (Bailie 23)

<sup>4</sup> The Australian critic Jon Stratton has described the cold war deployment of the mythos of the American Apocalypse to incorporate "developing" third world countries within US providential history as a national fantasy. Stratton diagnoses US imperialism as itself a symptom of a national identity crisis. The Anglo-Irish inhabitants of this former settler colony in the Anglo-American empire compulsively reenacted – Stratton explains US symptomatology – imperialist adventures in order to work through their shared condition of displacement. This transference enabled the US to "transpose the experience of its identity crisis as a settler colony of displaced people from a relation with the indigenous people of the country – that it aggressively mis-named as Indians – with the diversity of the non-western world" (39). The loss of this myth unsettles the identity of a former settler state that had used it to establish its place in the world.

<sup>5</sup> The global economy has transformed the world into a single, interconnected place. But the global processes that bind together nations and locales with different histories resist any effort to subsume them under the American way of life. When US Exceptionalism as a political logic came unhinged from globalization as an economic logic, the US lost its rationale for performing the ideological work of propagating American hegemony throughout the world system. The two logics became incommensurable rather than mutually corroborative.



## II. Legitimation Crises

Thus far I have argued that an inextricable relationship obtained between the narratives of US Exceptionalism and the American Apocalypse; that the state deployed the nonconvergent temporalities intrinsic to their narrative logics to produce exceptions to its Exceptionalist norms; that the state based the metaphysical authority for its usage of official violence on a correlation between law and the moral authority of an American Apocalypse; and that the breakdown, in the wake of the cold war, of the citizenry's conjoined beliefs in Exceptionalism and the American Apocalypse has precipitated a legitimation crisis in the state's monopoly over official as well as symbolic violence.

With the breakup of the enmity that had legitimated its manichean representation of national morality, the state lost the power to ground its metaphysical authority in the American Apocalypse. A species of religious nationalism has emerged in the United States, whose leaders have claimed the moral authority to evaluate when a state's violence is moral and when it is not. In the following, I shall examine an example of such a challenge to the state's legitimate use of force in a confrontation between the Bureau of Alcohol, Tobacco and Firearms (BATF) and an apocalyptic sect in Waco, Texas in 1993. Before doing so, however, I want to eliminate any possible misunderstanding by clarifying two of the claims central to my remarks thus far.

When I propose that the narrative of an American Apocalypse provided the state with the moral authority for its use of official force throughout the cold war, I do not intend by that proposition to claim that everyone in America harbored apocalyptic beliefs – or for that matter that every US citizen believed in the doctrine of US Exceptionalism. Throughout US history demystifications of both of these national mythologies have played crucial parts in resisting and in some cases overturning oppressive state policies. When I argue that apocalypticism has provided the state with a cover story for its use of excessive force, I would not disconfirm the efficacy of critiques of US Exceptionalism and the apocalyptic imagination. Numerous science fiction films, and television programs like the *Terminator* series, *Star Trek*, *X-Files*, to name but three recent examples of this genre, have appropriated cold war mythologies to construct alternative relationships with the state. Moreover, novelists of the standing of Leslie Silko, Ishmael Reed, Thomas Pynchon, Don DeLillo, and Ursula Leguin have exposed the historical collaboration between the apocalyptic imagination and genocidal violence. The playwrights Tony Kushner and David Rabe and the poet Adrienne Rich have

discerned misogyny and homophobia as deeply embedded assumptions of the apocalyptic mentality and have produced symbolic forms designed to undermine that mentality.

While I would not vouch for the unanimous appeal of Exceptionalism and Apocalypse, however, neither would I want to underestimate their continued influence. I would refer anyone inclined to believe that apocalyptic imaginings are a thing of the past to a poll taken in the December 19, 1994 issue of *US News and World Report*. It reported that 53% of those polled believed that some events in the twentieth century fulfilled biblical prophecy. Sixty percent believed that the Bible should be taken literally when it speaks of judgment day; 44% when it speaks of Armageddon; 49% of the antichrist; and 44% of the rapture (*US News and World Report*, December 19, 1994: 64). Since its publication in 1972, Hal Lindsey's *The Late Great Planet Earth* has sold 7.5 million copies in the United States and more than twenty-five million copies in the fifty-two languages into which it has been translated. During the Gulf war, John Walvoord's 1974 book *Armageddon, Oil and the Middle East Crisis* was upgraded and sold more than 600,000 copies from December 1990 to February 1991. In March of 1992, after Billy Graham discussed the book with President Bush, another 300,000 copies were sold. Walvoord thereafter became a regular commentator on radio and television discussions of the war's significance (Wojcik 8).

Religious nationalist movements that have emerged throughout the US since the cold war have grounded their moral authority in the discourse of the American Apocalypse that the state had abandoned (Juergensmeyer 11-45). These movements have derived their populist appeal out of the beliefs evident in the statistics just cited. In 1993, the state encountered in Waco, Texas, a religious sect, a version of whose apocalypticism had previously provided the state's justification for the legal use of deadly force. When Koresh's religious millennarians openly contradicted the state's monopoly over the legitimate use of force, they occasioned a confrontation that would decide who possessed moral authority over the symbolic (as well as actual) use of force. The clash involved a contest over the legality of the state's use of deadly force. The stand-off between the BATF and the Branch Davidians at Ranch Apocalypse brought face to face two aspects of the law – the law as a form of actual and the law as a form of symbolic violence – that could not be resolved into a unity. The interpretations that crystallized around this event turned on the question of the agency – the nation-state or the apocalypticism in which it had been founded – empowered to exercise violence in the name of the law.

The Branch Davidians appropriated two of the nation's foundational fictions – of the Puritans' flight from the state's religious persecution and the patriots' defense against a tyrannical power. David Koresh, the leader of the Branch Davidians, believed that he was an incarnation of the seventh angel of the Apocalypse, the messenger at the end-time who had been foretold in the Revelation of John the Divine. Among the visions to which Koresh had been granted access was the Armageddon that he prophesied would begin when agents of United States Army would attack his compound in the Texas desert. When one hundred heavily armed BATF operatives arrived at Ranch Apocalypse with a warrant to search for contraband arms, the six Davidians and four federal agents who died in that day's fire-fight seemed to the Branch Davidians a fulfillment of their leader's prophecies. Federal agents, on the other hand, constructed two overlapping but incompatible accounts of their attitude toward the sect. Throughout their negotiations with the leader of the Branch Davidians, they accepted representations of the events that informed the Koresh interpretation of John's Apocalypse. And yet they simultaneously referred unfolding events to a public narrative that invalidated Koresh's apocalyptic scenario as a form of fanatical religious nationalism.

The exchanges between this millennialist group and the state reflected the government's refusal of the American Apocalypse to legitimate state violence. These negotiations also represented a more pervasive shift in the state's orientation toward sectarian groups. The BATF agents repudiated as fanatical the discourse of the Apocalypse that the Branch Davidians had invoked to authorize their use of arms. In suspending the ethos of tolerance usually extended to religious communities, the state constructed this event as an exception to its stated policy concerning religious sects. Thus, instead of representing their singular belief system as a healthy curb on majoritarian opinion, the government recast the Branch Davidian sect within an "anti-cult" frame narrative that the media had fashioned after the "mass suicide" in Jonestown. It substituted lurid descriptions of sedition, sexual perversity, and child abuse for accurate descriptions of the Davidians' beliefs and deployed the moral panic these images aroused to justify its actions.

On April 19, 1993 seventy-four more persons died in the fiery explosion concluding the stalemate between the apocalyptic religious cult and the police force from the BATF that had begun fifty days earlier. In an article about the encounter that she published for *Time* magazine, Nancy Gibbs juxtaposed the government's injunctions with the contradictory instructions David Koresh received from the *Book of Apocalypse*:

The pounding began a few minutes after 6 a.m. when an armored combat engineer vehicle started prodding a corner of the building. Shots rang out from the windows the moment agents began pumping in tear gas. A second CEV joined in, buckling walls, breaking windows, nudging, nudging, as though moving the building would move those inside. "This is not an assault!" agent Byron Sage cried over the loudspeakers. "Do not shoot. We are not entering your compound." Ambulances waited a mile back; the local hospital, Hillcrest Baptist Medical Center, was on alert. But no one was supposed to get hurt. "You are responsible for your own actions," agents called out. "Come out now and you will not be harmed." *Do not fear what you are about to suffer. . . . Be faithful unto death, and I will give you the crown of life.* (30)

The narrative's shifting focus – from the state's injunctions to the biblical passages through which the Davidians interpreted them – reflects a correlative oscillation in Gibbs's attitude between sympathy and aggression. As it cites the *Book of Apocalypse* to mediate the Branch Davidians' interpretation of the government's actions, the narrative represents the sect as compelled to actualize the Armageddon that the state agents simultaneously at once caused and abnegated. Gibbs's juxtaposition of Byron Sage's reassuring instruction "You will not be harmed" with the biblical injunction "Do not fear what you are about to suffer" renders it impossible for the reader to decide between alternative assignments of responsibility for the disaster that followed. Was the cataclysm the result of the Davidians' compulsion to accomplish their leader's prophecy, as the US government contended? Or did the state agents collaborate in the production of this apocalyptic event as the basis for their use of deadly force?<sup>6</sup>

The controversy over the government's militarized response to the apocalyptic sect has triggered conflicting interpretations. An internal department of Justice report prepared for Attorney General Janet Reno concluded: "The events of April 19 were the result of David Koresh's determined efforts to choreograph his own death and his followers' in a confrontation with government authority to fulfill Koresh's apocalyptic prophecies" (Wright 353). In the press conference that followed the event, President Clinton emphasized this uncertainty over the agency responsible for the event. He wondered aloud how Janet Reno could be held responsible for an event wherein the Branch Davidians "had murdered themselves?" (Wright 351).

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<sup>6</sup> While the script of the text was fixed, the interpretation varied with changes in sociohistorical context. In his essay "Religious Discourse and Failed Negotiations" the biblical scholar James Tabore has observed that "the government largely controlled the context or outside situation. Given this dynamic, this means that the FBI actually held within its control the ability to influence Koresh's interpretations and hence his actions" (Wright 271).

On the other hand, one can say that the Branch Davidians' invocation of the American Apocalypse rendered it out of bounds for the government in its efforts to legitimate this exception to the policy of religious tolerance, that its apocalypticism deprived the state of the metaphysical warrant for its actions against the sect. When deprived of this justification, however, the state also lost the moral authority for its violence. Rather than ending the illegal violence attributed to the sect, the violence that federal agents mounted to establish physical control of the compound undermined the legality of the state's authority.

This disparity in moral power was not lost on the socially disenfranchised groups, who, instead of adopting the official representation of events, found their own anti-government sentiments expressed in those of the Branch Davidians. The government's illegal use of deadly force became an excuse for paramilitary groups to invoke the Branch Davidians as the moral authority for their aggressive response. The ensuing cycle of revenge and resentment, which culminated in the Oklahoma City bombing, eliminated any meaningful distinction between the state's official and the vigilante militia's unofficial violence. Timothy McVeigh numbered himself among the paramilitary who held the government responsible. In a reciprocal act of violence, McVeigh blew up the Federal Building in Oklahoma City. In response, the state asked for and was given the death penalty.<sup>7</sup>

### III. The Return of Alexis de Tocqueville

On May 9, 1997, C-Span, the Cable Satellite Public Affairs Network, launched a project they called *Traveling Tocqueville's America*. It involved retracing the nine months' journey throughout the United States that Alexis de Tocqueville had undertaken in 1831. After a year of planning, C-Span turned a forty-five foot long yellow bus into a high-tech network production vehicle, from which they transmitted live C-Span's fifty-five-stop tour through seventeen states. In addition to the sixty-five hours of programming, C-Span operatives distributed annotated road maps and set up an interactive

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<sup>7</sup> In 1993, Attorney Linda Thompson of the American Justice Foundation suggested a link between Waco and the Oklahoma City bombing when she produced and distributed a video entitled *WACO: The Big Lie*. This document's footage supported several troubling allegations about the government's responsibility for the catastrophe. But her subsequent claims that Waco was only one element in a vast UN conspiracy that included tanks and various unmarked military vehicles nationwide as well as her charge that the BATF killed its own agents, several of whom had been Secret Service bodyguards for President Bill Clinton, have been thoroughly discredited.



web site. They organized local town hall meetings, classroom teach-ins of the series, as well as scholarly conferences, week-long symposia, and a national essay contest on the subject of Tocqueville's *Democracy in America*. The tour guide C-Span distributed along with the series included synopses of Tocqueville's and Beaumont's recorded impressions, sketches and folklore about the places and people Tocqueville visited, photographs and brief descriptions of famous local sights, as well as information about dining and accommodation.

But the guide introduced readers to a geographical past that may have existed nowhere but in Tocqueville's imagination. The C-Span Tocqueville tour visualized the places to which Tocqueville had traveled in the image of a village tradition and a settlement ideal that matched the fictional spaces that Tocqueville had brought with him from France. Tocqueville believed that the state was the village writ large. In his travels this belief became a conviction that initially molded and subsequently took the place of what he saw. Like Tocqueville, C-Span was less interested in factual accuracy than in reconstituting his belief in the tradition of covenanted communities at the core of democratic governance. It was reading James Fenimore Cooper's *The Last of the Mohicans*, the guide book remarks pertinent to this confusion of factual with fictional spaces, that led Tocqueville and Beaumont to mistake Utica, New York, for Glens Falls, the setting for Cooper's novel located six miles to the north of it.

Restricted to such a description, C-Span's retracing of Tocqueville's itinerary would render his impressions of America almost indistinguishable from those of a contemporary French traveler, Jean Baudrillard. Baudrillard's conceptualization of America as the place in which the end of the world has already taken place resituates its historical events within an imaginary Apocalypse. But Baudrillard's America is lacking a myth of Exceptionalism that would legitimate their Americanness. In the aftermath of the cold war, the shared terror of nuclear Apocalypse materialized in a collective viewpoint, which, according to Baudrillard, was shaped in the understanding that America had already been vaporized. For him the very reproducibility of an American Apocalypse means "that the world has already ended, the explosion has already occurred and the bomb is only a metaphor now" (Dellamora. *Postmodern Apocalypse* 171).

The sense of radical dissociation that has emerged after the cold war would certainly corroborate an aspect of Baudrillard's post-apocalyptic image of America. When citizens who were habituated to a cold war frame of intelligibility confronted a cultural terrain in need of utterly different con-



cepts, the perceived loss of distinction between the real and the imaginary might have indeed rendered all spaces open to simulation. But in closing I want to suggest another reason for C-Span's reinventing America out of Tocqueville's themes. In a splendid essay entitled "Narrating Space," the cultural geographer Patricia Yaeger has associated the desire to inhabit themed space, as evidenced in projects like *Traveling Tocqueville's America*, with the loss of any sense of place altogether. Yaeger describes Americans' loss of credible (or what she calls persuasive) space as the outcome of the sense of placelessness that she believes was one of many consequences of the 1995 Oklahoma City bombing. She asked a range of Oklahomans why they reacted to the tragedy that eventuated in the wake of Apocalypse by expressing an obsessive concern over whether the space they inhabited was real. Upon interpreting their responses, Yaeger discovered that one by one they answered with some variation of the statement: "This does not happen here – in Oklahoma City. It happens in other countries. Maybe it happens in New York City" (20-21). Yaeger cites this field sample to conclude that places only become persuasive enough to incorporate people in them because, as does the C-Span retracing of Tocqueville's local communities, they are constantly reinvented, made up, again and again out of the stories, rumors, and themes that repeatedly produce a sense of locatability. The citizens who comprised Yaeger's sample claimed that they recovered a sense of reiterable space through their sublimation of catastrophes like Oklahoma City, Waco, and other disasters expressive of the apocalyptic end of American Exceptionalism.

I began my remarks with some rather grim pronouncements about America's loss of a future as well as a past. In the course of my remarks, I correlated those losses with the end of the cold war, the extinction of American Exceptionalism and the discrediting of the belief in American Apocalypse. I intend the conclusion of my remarks to associate the return of Tocqueville's themed spaces with other forms of ecstatic vagrancy that might replace the need for an American Apocalypse.

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