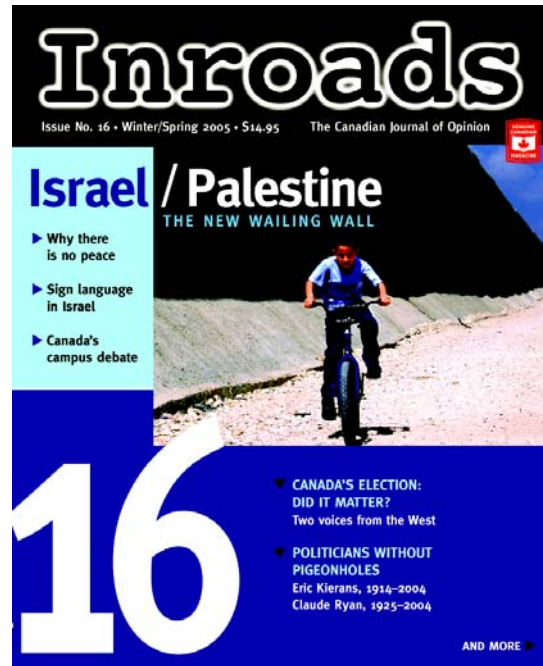


It is our pleasure to make this article from Inroads 16 available to you free of charge.

Please consider a subscription (or a small donation) to help us to continue to provide timely, thought-provoking articles in print – and often on-line – to readers across Canada and beyond.



On the last page, you will find information about subscribing. You can print it out or just send us an email or give us a call. Or you can subscribe on-line.

[www.inroadsjournal.ca](http://www.inroadsjournal.ca)

Check out our website to find out more about Inroads 16, and our back issues.

*Thanks.*

## The PD factor

Christian fundamentalists and U.S. policy in the Middle East

by Bob Chodos

ONE OFT-CITED OBSTACLE TO PEACE BETWEEN ISRAELIS AND Palestinians is the presence of two fundamentalisms on the territory claimed by both peoples. For Islamic fundamentalists, epitomized by the figure of the suicide bomber, Israel represents an alien intrusion on Islamic soil and no compromise with it is possible. For Jewish fundamentalists, epitomized by the West Bank settler, all of biblical Israel is the land God promised to the Jews and not one square millimetre of it can be given up without violating God's sacred intention.

Awareness of a third fundamentalism that also impinges on the conflict is only now beginning to surface. Unlike suicide bombers and West Bank settlers, few evangelical Christians actually live in the territory under dispute. But they do live in the United States, whose government's policy weighs heavily on the conflict. For theological reasons of their own, they are strong supporters of Israel and care passionately about it.

And they vote.

It needs to be made clear from the outset that we are not talking about all evangelicals here, let alone all Christians, but about a particular theological tendency within evangelical Christianity that, for reasons explained below, goes by the convoluted name of premillennial dispensationalism. In principle, one can be a Protestant fundamentalist without being a premillennial dispensationalist. However, premillennial dispensationalism, first formulated in its modern version by a nineteenth-century British preacher named John Nelson Darby, quickly took root in the United States, and

A WORD ABOUT PRINTING THIS ARTICLE: These pages are intended to print on legal (8.5 x 14 inch) paper, two pages per sheet, in a horizontal landscape. Pages can also be printed onto letter sized paper, vertically, at a reduced size.

PDs, as we will call them for the purposes of this article, have represented the dominant tendency in American Protestant fundamentalism since it emerged as a religious movement. Early in the 20th century the text that gave fundamentalism its name, a series of pamphlets entitled *The Fundamentals: A Testimony of Truth*, was sponsored by two wealthy California businessmen who were sympathetic to PD thinking, Milton and Lyman Stewart.<sup>1</sup> More recently, prominent American fundamentalists such as Jerry Falwell, Pat Robertson and Ralph Reed have all preached PD theology.

PDs see history as following a divine roadmap outlined in the Bible, and especially in the books of Daniel in the Old Testament and Revelation in the New. In this roadmap, history is divided into a number of eras or “dispensations,” eventually leading to the Second Coming of Christ followed by his Thousand-Year Reign on earth, the Millennium. PDs differ both from “postmillennialists,” who foresee Jesus’ return as the culmination of a gradual perfecting and Christianizing of the world, and from “amillennialists,” who interpret the Millennium figuratively.

PDs are always on the lookout for signs that history is nearing its destination. And, in their scheme, the most dramatic such sign in recent times has been the return of the Jews to their biblical homeland and the establishment there of a Jewish state. Not only does a Jewish state need to exist for the PD scenario to unfold, but it also needs to be at war with its neighbours. In fact, war, conflict and chaos are prominent features of the period preceding the Second Coming. These

Bob Chodos is managing editor of Inroads and a member of the steering committee of Across Boundaries Multifaith Institute.

conflicts will lead up to the final battle at Armageddon, where Jesus will triumph over the Antichrist and establish his reign. Once this happens, the remaining Jews will accept Jesus as their messiah.

In this respect, the ultimate aims of PDs are very much opposed to those of Jewish Zionists, whether religious or secular. The idea of being bit players in someone else’s cosmic drama makes some Jews uneasy, even Jews who are strong supporters of Israel. Yet, other Jews argue that Israel can use all the friends it can get – especially friends who don’t make inconvenient demands like giving up West Bank settlements. Short-term goals can converge even where long-term ones diverge.

In the last two decades Israeli leaders, especially when Likud has been in power, have been courting American PDs intensely. But PD support has been important to Zionism since the beginning. As early as the 1880s an American PD evangelist, William E. Blackstone, began promoting Jewish settlement in Palestine. Another group of Americans established the American Colony in the Old City of Jerusalem so that they could keep a close watch on the return of the Jews and the coming of the Messiah. When a group of impoverished Jews from Yemen arrived in Jerusalem in 1882, the colonists provided them with food and shelter, considering them part of the Lost Ten Tribes.<sup>2</sup> The founder of modern Zionism, Theodor Herzl, also received PD backing. When he published his book *The Jewish State* in 1896, he received a visit from a British PD, Rev. William H. Hechler, who became a strong Zionist supporter and helped Herzl gain access to European royalty.<sup>3</sup>

The establishment of the state of Israel in 1948 was greeted enthusiastically in the

American PD community. According to Louis Talbot of the Bible Institute of Los Angeles, this was “the greatest event, from a prophetic standpoint, that has taken place within the last one hundred years, perhaps even since 70 AD, when Jerusalem was destroyed.”<sup>4</sup>

But it was in the 1970s that the Israel-PD relationship really took root. In the years following the Six Day War Israel needed support to fend off growing demands for a Palestinian state, and evangelical Christians in the United States were gaining confidence as a politically potent community. By 1981 the relationship had become close enough that after Israel bombed Iraq’s nuclear reactor, Israeli Prime Minister Menachem Begin phoned Jerry Falwell to ask him to “explain to the Christian public the reasons for the bombing.” Only after that did he call President Reagan.

In a book published the next year, Nathan Perlmutter, national director of the Anti-Defamation League of B’nai B’rith, and his wife Ruth argued for a strong Jewish-evangelical alliance.<sup>5</sup> Israeli agencies and Zionist organizations gave friendship awards to Falwell and Pat Robertson. On a visit to Washington in 1998, Israel’s 50th-anniversary year, Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu addressed a primarily evangelical audience of 3,000 people at the Voices United for Israel Conference. “We have no greater friends and allies,” he said, “than the people sitting in this room.”<sup>6</sup> Ralph Reed was there; Falwell and Robertson endorsed the conference.

#### Bush’s base

This is a good place to pause to address a disconnect that some readers may be feeling. There is something surreal about this story. The community of people who read

and write for Inroads tend to think in secular terms; if religious, we look to scriptural texts for archetypes and paradigms rather than roadmaps of history. Apocalyptic books have little sway on our consciousness. In my traditional but not fundamentalist Jewish education, I was exposed to at least 30 of the 39 books of the Hebrew Bible; Daniel was not among them. And though many articles in the roughly 60 issues of the Jesuit magazine I edited in the 1980s and 1990s referred to the Hebrew and Christian scriptures, I can think of only one that dealt with Daniel and Revelation – and then as texts that could help empower the “victims of Empire.”<sup>7</sup> We are not used to taking people

**The idea of being bit players in someone else’s cosmic drama makes some Jews uneasy, even Jews who are strong supporters of Israel. Yet, other Jews argue that Israel can use all the friends it can get.**

who think like PDs seriously; we are more likely to regard them, in the words of a friend of mine who tends toward the left of the religious spectrum, as “lunatics with bad theology.” PDs couldn’t really be important players in the Palestine/Israel drama, could they?

With this in mind, we can consider the presidency of George W. Bush, who has outdone all his predecessors in his friendliness to the PD community. Bush has emerged as a PD hero, especially since September 11, 2001, when he began to position himself as global leader of the forces of good against the forces of evil. Stephen Mansfield, author of *The Faith of George W. Bush*, has suggested that Bush acts on

“promptings” from God.<sup>8</sup> Ralph Reed, one of the major architects of the religious right as a political force, has been a Bush campaign strategist in both 2000 and 2004. The Apostolic Congress, a pro-Israel PD lobby in Washington that opposes a Palestinian state, meets regularly with White House staff members. One such meeting preceded Bush’s announcement last spring of support for Israeli sovereignty over parts of the West Bank – a significant shift in American policy.<sup>9</sup>

While all U.S. administrations have supported Israel, some (including notably that of Bush’s father) have tempered that support with a concern for long-term stability and international law that has not been conspicuous in the last four years. Much has been

**We are not used to taking people who think like PDs seriously; we are more likely to regard them, in the words of a friend of mine who tends toward the left of the religious spectrum, as “lunatics with bad theology.”**

made of the influence of Jewish “Likudniks” in the Pentagon, such as Paul Wolfowitz and Douglas Feith, in bringing about this policy shift. But the concerns of Bush’s PD base have played their part as well. Bush himself does not bring PD theology into his politics. But other prominent Republicans, including Bush’s fellow Texan Tom DeLay, Majority Leader in the House of Representatives, do. DeLay, one of the – if not the – most powerful (and most conservative) members of Congress, sees himself as having been sent by God to “stand up for a biblical worldview in everything I do and everywhere I am”<sup>10</sup> – including Israel, where he addressed the Knesset in July 2003, describing himself as “an Israeli of the heart”

and declaring that “Israel’s fight is our fight.”

Simple political arithmetic explains Bush’s attentiveness to PD concerns. On the multifaith Beliefnet website, Professor John Green of the University of Akron and the site’s editor-in-chief, Steven Waldman, recently analyzed the “Twelve Tribes of American Politics.”<sup>11</sup> They found that the religious right (largely coincident with the PD community) and the religious left were almost exactly the same size, 12.6 per cent of the electorate, but that the religious right “has had a much greater impact for the past 25 years largely because of superior organization and drive.” The religious right “is a key part of Bush’s base. Concentrated in the South, they help secure a big chunk of the Electoral College for Bush. But they are also found in swing states, such as Florida, West Virginia, Ohio, and Missouri.” Among the key issues for this group, along with opposition to abortion and same-sex marriage, is support for Israel. Support for Israel is also crucial for another of the “tribes”: the Jews. But the Jews constitute only 1.9 per cent of the electorate, less than one sixth the size of the religious right.

Moreover, many American Jews are, at least in principle, open to a compromise solution to the Israeli-Palestinian conflict provided that it results in a secure Israel. PDs, by contrast, are in principle not open to such a solution, and in fact have no real interest in peace, since in their end times scenario war and conflict are part of the prelude to Armageddon. What Jews concerned about Israel have to fear from PDs is not so much that Jews will be lost to Christianity under the Thousand-Year Reign of Christ, but that PD influence is among the forces preventing reasonable compromises in Israel’s long-term interests.

## Beyond the rational

In the immediate aftermath of the U.S. election, much of the commentary on George W. Bush’s victory has focused on the role of the religious right. Organized, disciplined and deeply committed to their agenda, evangelical Christians turned out in record numbers to reelect their president. So Bush is in their debt, and PD influence will be part of the American, and Middle Eastern, political scene for some time to come. Those of us who think of PDs as “lunatics with bad theology” nevertheless need to try to understand them.

There is something else we need to understand. If at stake in the Israeli-Palestinian conflict were just the ordinary commodities of the political marketplace – land, resources, money, political power and influence, even dignity and recognition – it would probably be one of the easier international disputes to settle. As Arthur Milner pointed out in the last issue of *Inroads*, the basic elements of a settlement have been on the table since the early 1970s.<sup>12</sup>

But for PDs, as for the Jews and Muslims who are motivated by a sense of righteous possession of exclusive truth, the most important part of what is at stake is not subject to rational analysis or political bargaining. It is the symbolic aspects that are most pertinent – except that PDs don’t see them as symbolic. This is an example of what British writer Malise Ruthven, in his recent study of fundamentalism, calls “factualism,” or the treatment of scripture “as manuals for practical action as distinct from sources of personal inspiration or moral guidance.”

Ruthven regards Protestant fundamentalism as a “dangerous religion,” partly because of “its baleful role in the Middle East.” How-

ever, he is hopeful that its influence will be contained by the constitutional separation of church and state in the United States. He also sees a counterweight to fundamentalist influence in the reality of “pluralism and diversity of choice,” increasingly apparent through the power of modern communications.<sup>13</sup> Perhaps. But millions of PDs continue to be energized by the mess in the Middle East, since it shows that Christ is coming soon. The rest of us just see a mess. ■

## Notes

<sup>1</sup> See Malise Ruthven, *Fundamentalism: The Search for Meaning* (Oxford, UK: At the University Press, 2004), pp. 10–15.

<sup>2</sup> See Timothy P. Weber, “How Evangelicals Became Israel’s Best Friend,” *Christianity Today*, Vol. 42, No. 11 (October 5, 1998).

<sup>3</sup> See Daniel Levitas, “A Marriage Made for Heaven,” *Reform Judaism*, Vol. 31, No. 4 (Summer 2003), p. 38.

<sup>4</sup> Quoted in Weber, “How Evangelicals Became Israel’s Best Friend.”

<sup>5</sup> Levitas, “A Marriage Made for Heaven,” p. 40.

<sup>6</sup> Weber, “How Evangelicals Became Israel’s Best Friend.”

<sup>7</sup> Stephen Willey, “Apocalyptic Books Lay Bare the Beast,” *Compass: A Jesuit Journal*, Vol. 10, No. 6 (January/February 1993), p. 63.

<sup>8</sup> Frank Rich, “Now on DVD: The Passion of the Bush,” *New York Times*, October 3, 2004.

<sup>9</sup> Rick Perlstein, “The Jesus Landing Pad,” *Village Voice*, May 18, 2004.

<sup>10</sup> “Tom DeLay thinks he’s God’s man in Congress,” *Hightower Lowdown*, Vol. 5, No. 11 (November 2003).

<sup>11</sup> Retrieved October 3, 2004, from [http://www.beliefnet.com/story/153/story\\_15355\\_1.html](http://www.beliefnet.com/story/153/story_15355_1.html)

<sup>12</sup> Arthur Milner, “No More Negotiations: A Modest Proposal to Resolve the Israel-Palestine Impasse,” *Inroads*, No. 15 (Summer/Fall 2004), pp. 4–7.

<sup>13</sup> Ruthven, *Fundamentalism*, pp. 87, 217, 219.

# Inroads

now twice yearly

---

**subscriptions • 2 years (4 issues) • \$48**  
students \$36 • institutions \$60)

**Inroads**, Suite A, 3777 Kent Avenue,  
Montreal, Quebec H3S 1N4

subscription info: 514.731.2691  
or by email: [inroads@canada.com](mailto:inroads@canada.com)

On subscribe on-line at [www.inroadsjournal.ca](http://www.inroadsjournal.ca)

Prices include taxes.  
Foreign orders in U.S. funds. as quoted above.

Visa and Mastercard accepted.