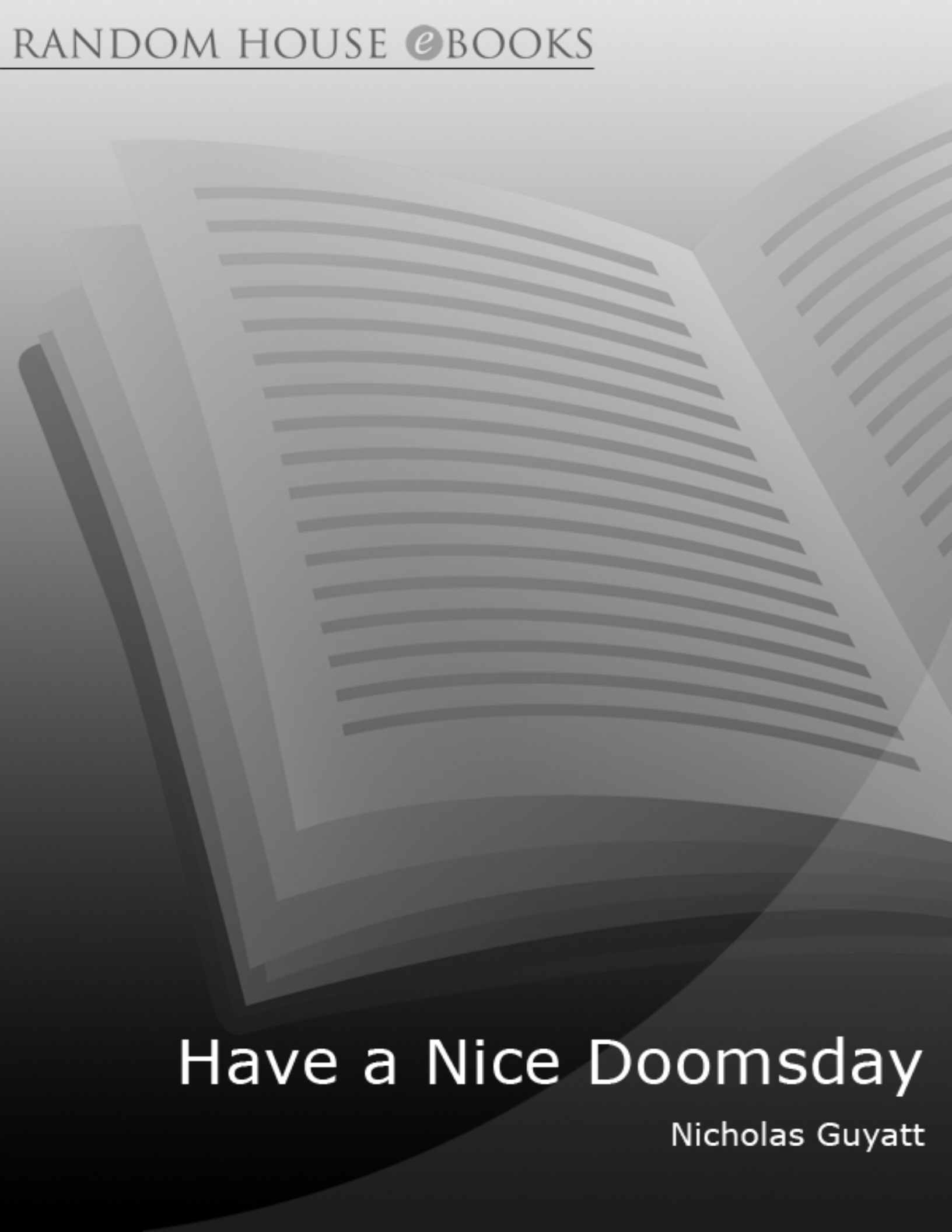


RANDOM HOUSE  BOOKS



Have a Nice Doomsday

Nicholas Guyatt

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ABOUT THE BOOK

Journeying into the heartland of America's Bible Belt, Nicholas Guyatt goes in search of the truth behind a startling statistic: 50 million Americans believe the apocalypse will take place in their lifetime.

They're convinced that, any day now, Jesus will snatch up his followers and spirit them to heaven. For the rest of us, things are going to get very nasty indeed: massive earthquakes, devastating wars, not to mention the terrifying rise of the Antichrist.

But true believers aren't just sitting around waiting for the Rapture. They're getting involved in debates over abortion, gay rights and even foreign policy. Are they devout or deranged? And, given the disturbing involvement of a leading presidential candidate, does their influence stretch beyond the Bible Belt ... perhaps even to the White House?

HAVE A NICE DOOMSDAY

Why Millions of Americans are Looking
Forward to the End of the World

NICHOLAS GUYATT



EBURY
PRESS

For in such an hour as ye think not, the Son of man cometh

Jesus Christ, Matthew 24:44

PROLOGUE: THE BEGINNING OF THE END

IT'S JUNE 6, 2006 - 6/6/06 - and I'm standing in Mardel's, a Christian superstore in Littleton, Colorado, waiting for the arrival of Tim LaHaye and Jerry Jenkins. LaHaye and Jenkins are the biggest stars in the Christian publishing industry, the authors of blockbuster books about the end of the world - the *Left Behind* series - which have sold more than sixty million copies since 1995. Today, they've come to this suburb on the southwestern side of Denver to plug their new book, *The Rapture*. Littleton is a place you already know about - three miles down the road is Columbine High School, where twelve students and one teacher lost their lives in a notorious school massacre back in 1999. But there's no trace of that tragedy in the gathering crowd at Mardel's, which snakes around the bookstacks in a long and cheerful queue that ends at the empty signing table. The authors are due to arrive in ten minutes, and a couple of hundred fans are already here to greet them.

Over the past ten years, the fifteen novels in the *Left Behind* series have assured Americans that they're on the verge of the End Times, the last moments before the apocalyptic prophecies of the Bible are fulfilled. Tim LaHaye, like most Bible prophecy enthusiasts in the United

States, believes that our current world system - governments, economies, religions, cultures - is about to collapse. The warning signs are already there for the faithful to observe; in fact, God will rescue true Christians before things get really bad, in a massive spiritual airlift known as the Rapture. This is where the *Left Behind* series begins, with the baffling, instantaneous disappearance of all true believers.

The hero of the books isn't one of these lucky few who are snatched away by God. He's a 747 pilot called Rayford Steele who misses out on the Rapture because he doesn't share his wife's faith in Christ. In the dramatic first scene of the original *Left Behind* novel, Rayford is chatting up one of his flight attendants at precisely the moment when dozens of Christian passengers vanish into thin air. Seven years later, the series ends with the Second Coming, and Rayford gets to meet Jesus Christ himself.

It's hard to think of a more blockbuster ending to a fictional saga - the final book is called *The Glorious Appearing* - but along the way things get very nasty for Christians. The Antichrist, a loyal servant of Satan called Nicolae Carpathia, becomes the leader of the world. Christians are persecuted for their faith and ordered to worship Nicolae. A giant earthquake kills more than a billion people. Worst of all, the United States falls by the wayside. America, for once, does not ride in to save the world from the bad guy. Satan manages to install Nicolae as secretary-general of the United Nations, and repeatedly bests the White House. (By the third book in the series, a UN army has bombed Chicago and other American cities.) The Antichrist sets up his world headquarters in the rebuilt Iraqi city of Babylon, and America fades from view. This period is known as the Tribulation, and it's going to be as bad as that sounds.

All of this may seem implausible, but the point of these books is to jar us from our everyday reality and remind us

that God is in charge of our future. In the real world, President Bill Clinton managed to remove the troublesome UN secretary-general, Boutros Boutros-Ghali, back in 1996; Clinton's successor, George W. Bush, invaded Iraq in 2003 against the wishes of the Security Council. In the *Left Behind* universe, it's the Antichrist who bosses the UN and seizes Iraq, and only Jesus Christ can sort out the ensuing mess.

Littleton is as patriotic as any other American suburb. By the entrance to Mardel's, there's a prayer tree inviting shoppers to write the names of loved ones or friends serving in the US military on blue leaves, so that other customers can pray for them. The tree is crammed with leaves, filled out with tiny handwriting. Many of them say 'President Bush' as well as the names of soldiers and units. But the *Left Behind* books suggest that the current world order is on the verge of collapse, and that the 'war on terror' is about to be overshadowed by a much grander conflict in which America plays no role. The Antichrist may already be among us, suggest Tim LaHaye and Jerry Jenkins, and when he comes to power there'll be nothing that the United States can do about it.

WHEN TIM AND Jerry finally arrive, the crowd bursts into applause and the signing begins. LaHaye turned eighty in April, and he looks at least ten years younger. He has a full head of red hair and a bright smile as he meets his readers, but there is something a little too healthy about his appearance: he's sprightly in a rather artificial way, like a bagged salad. Jerry Jenkins is much younger, tall with a smartly trimmed grey goatee.

As they sit at the table, Tim LaHaye's wife, Beverly, joins him and helps with the signing. Beverly is also a conservative celebrity. Back in 1978, she was so appalled by the liberal agenda of American feminists that she founded Concerned Women for America, a pressure group

dedicated to fighting the Equal Rights Amendment (which was intended to make sex discrimination unconstitutional) and the 'spiritual forces of darkness' more generally. Nearly thirty years later, Beverly's organization has successfully kept that amendment at bay through fundraising and Washington lobbying, and CWA has branched out. These days, it runs campaigns against gay rights, abortion, sexually active teens and even popular music. Sometimes these issues overlap in exciting ways: 'iPods Keep Teens from Saying No!' declares a recent news story on the CWA website.

Tim's hand is giving him trouble, so the publicity people have pre-printed his signature on a book plate and only Jerry is signing the books. Beverly is busy sticking plates into the new copies of *The Rapture*. The authors seem genuinely happy to chat with the customers, and there's a cheery air. The posters for the event had darkly trailed the release date - '6/6/6 - Will You Be Ready?' - but Mardel's seems unruffled by the arrival of the Antichrist's special day.

'We picked this date a long time ago, but then they scheduled *The Omen* for a Tuesday release.' I've found my way to LaHaye's publicist, a smart and wary woman who's also called Beverly. She put together the *Rapture* signing tour and has arranged for me to chat with Tim when the event is over. 'Movies come out on Fridays, not Tuesdays - books come out on Tuesdays, but they've taken our slot.' Beverly has been handling interviews with LaHaye and Jenkins all day, and she's been too busy to read the short piece in the *New York Times* that mentioned the book in passing. (The *Times* article also reports that 216 people have bet an average of \$2 each that the world will end today, at odds of 100,000 to 1. It's not clear how they intend to collect.) In addition to the many suitors from the local media, the Fox News Channel sent someone to the afternoon press junket to do a piece on LaHaye and Jenkins

and the 6/6/6 tie-in, but Beverly has just found out that it's been bumped from the evening broadcast: 'They found an exorcist instead,' she says with a familiar resignation.

The crowd continues to move towards the signing table. There are quite a few younger people in the queue, as well as some children who seem to have been dragged along by their parents. (The kids perk up when they're handed an empty box by the Mardel's people: 'LEFT BEHIND: ETERNAL FORCES - THE VIDEO GAME. Pre-order your copy today!') Many of the readers have stories to tell about how the *Left Behind* books have helped them in their own spiritual lives. Tim LaHaye isn't stand-offish, but Jerry Jenkins, who lives just down the road in Colorado Springs, directs the banter. Jenkins actually writes the books; LaHaye helps with the plotting, and ensures that the spiritual message is clear and biblically consistent.

These responsibilities seem to inform the public reception of the authors: LaHaye is the revered elder, Jenkins is the stand-to guy who brings LaHaye's world to life. A man in his forties approaches the table, wearing what looks like a Nike hat. When he comes closer, I notice that the red swoosh is actually followed by 'ESUS' in black italics. (On even closer inspection, there's a bar at the top of the J - it's a crucifix-swoosh.) The man is telling LaHaye and Jenkins how he met his wife protesting outside an abortion clinic. Tim and Jerry tell him to keep up the good work, and he collects his signed copy. Another happy reader moves down the line, and dozens more wait for their moment.

I FIRST HEARD about Tim LaHaye nearly ten years ago. I grew up in Britain, but in 1997 I moved to Princeton to do a Ph.D. in American history. Back then, Tim was already a legend in evangelical circles, but he wasn't well known more generally in America. Soon after arriving in New Jersey, I read a review of *Left Behind* in a magazine and I

was intrigued. I'd come to America to study 'manifest destiny' - the idea that God had a special plan for the United States. The Americans that I was writing about described their nation with a mixture of pride and spiritual confidence. John Winthrop, who led the Puritan migration to Massachusetts in 1630, thought that New England was a 'city on a hill', a community set up by God for the rest of the world to admire. Abraham Lincoln filled his Civil War speeches with religious rhetoric about America's 'vast future'. Woodrow Wilson told cheering crowds that God had given the United States a special responsibility to spread democracy throughout the world. As recently as the 1980s, Ronald Reagan liked to talk about his 'eternal optimism' for America, and his belief that God had planted the nation as an outpost of freedom. Tim LaHaye, on the other hand, believed that America's days were numbered. This seemed like a very un-American idea, and yet *Left Behind* was at the top of the bestseller lists. As I worked on my thesis about the United States as a chosen nation, I kept wondering about the Christians in contemporary America who were abandoning their faith in the nation's redemptive potential.

Then, around 2000, Tim LaHaye suddenly crossed over and became a household name. *Left Behind* and its sequels had now sold tens of millions of copies. A New York publisher offered Tim a \$40 million advance for a new series of apocalyptic novels. The original *Left Behind* books were made into movies. Tim was the subject of a cover story in *Time* magazine. The market for religious books and films had taken off, fuelled by the upsurge of interest in the apocalypse. Tim was at the centre of this, but an entire industry was growing up around him.

This apocalyptic mood was fired by two events that changed America. In December 2000, the bitter presidential election was finally decided in favour of George W. Bush, a committed evangelical who spoke on the

campaign trail about how Jesus Christ had ‘changed my heart’. Christian voters – precisely the people who were buying *Left Behind* and other apocalyptic books – had been instrumental in swinging the narrow election towards Bush. The following September, the 9/11 attacks seemed to confirm for many Christians that the nation was on the verge of the End Times predicted by prophecy. As thousands died in New York and Washington, and the United States was besieged by a terrorism of apocalyptic proportions, many evangelicals could see the events of *Left Behind* leap onto the front pages of their newspapers.

By 2002, according to a poll commissioned by *Time* and CNN, nearly 60 per cent of Americans had come to believe that the Bible’s scariest prophecies – in the Book of Revelation – would literally come true. Nearly 20 per cent – more than fifty million Americans – believed that the apocalypse would take place in their own lifetime. While I was writing a thesis about the enormous confidence and optimism of American Christians in the past, evangelicals in twenty-first-century America seemed to be adopting a much bleaker view. God hadn’t created America to save the world, because the world wasn’t going to be saved. It was going to be destroyed by Satan and the Antichrist, and the end was nigh.

I SPENT SEVEN years in the United States, from the beginning of Bill Clinton’s second term until the end of George W. Bush’s first term. Across that period, I lived in New Jersey, New York and California. I never met an apocalyptic Christian, and none of my friends or acquaintances had any contact with those fifty million people who had apparently embraced the apocalypse. But by 2004, many of my secular friends – and large sections of the liberal media – had become skittish about the influence of evangelical Christians on American politics. Books and articles had started to appear about the rise of the Religious Right, and

its ominous agenda for remaking America and the world at large.

Even moderate Republicans were worried. In 2006, the veteran conservative commentator, Kevin Phillips, published a book called *American Theocracy* which argued that the American government had been taken over by evangelical zealots with apocalyptic beliefs. At a press conference in Cleveland, President Bush was asked directly whether the war in Iraq and the attacks of 9/11 were 'signs of the apocalypse', and he gave a typically nervous answer:

The answer is - I haven't really thought of it that way. Here's how I think of it. The first I've heard of that, by the way. I guess I'm more of a practical fellow.

Phillips wasn't happy with the President's response. In a follow-up interview he declared that the President saw himself as an instrument of God's will; and, worse, that many Republicans had come to view Bush as a kind of prophet, a man with a hotline to God himself who had been placed in the White House by Divine Providence at a crucial moment in American history.

As a lapsed Catholic, I was drawn to those liberal warnings of evangelicals run amok. But I couldn't figure out one thing: why would apocalyptic Christians, who believe that the world is about to be ruined by the Antichrist, want to get involved in politics? Historically, prophecy enthusiasts have tended to withdraw from the political scene and to wait for Christ to return, or for the world to end. If God is in charge, what's the point of electing a Republican Congress or an evangelical president?

Even after reading countless liberal assaults on *Left Behind* and the Religious Right more generally, I didn't know what prophecy enthusiasts actually believed. Are their lives totally overshadowed by the End Times? What do

they think about America? Why have they decided to get involved in politics? So I decided to take a trip through the world of apocalyptic Christianity. I read books on prophecy, watched apocalyptic movies and even played the *Left Behind* video game. I interviewed some of the most influential apocalyptic Christians, travelling through the Bible Belt and exploring their world from the inside. And I watched America's leading prophecy preacher forge a close alliance with Senator John McCain, the Republican nominee for the 2008 presidential election. In my reading and on my travels, I was guided by two questions in particular. Why do fifty million Americans believe that the world is about to end? And should the rest of us be worried about this?

1. JEWS AND A FURIOUS CHRIST

IT'S A LITTLE after eight on a muggy Sunday morning, and I'm standing outside Cornerstone Church in San Antonio, Texas. The parking lot is vast, filling up with minivans, pickups and SUVs nearly half an hour before the service begins. The church itself, set back from the road, looks like a resort hotel: there's one of those semicircular drives just in front of the main doors, and I'm half expecting to see valet parking. Cornerstone is the headquarters of John Hagee, one of the most influential Christian leaders in America. Pastor Hagee, like tens of millions of evangelicals, believes that the world is about to end.

A few months earlier, in a second-hand bookstore in New York, I'd stumbled upon *Jerusalem Countdown*, Hagee's 'warning to the world' about the looming nuclear confrontation between Iran and the United States. The first paragraph got my attention.

Jerusalem Countdown is a page-turning heart-stopper! Using my confidential sources in Israel, information from military experts around the world, and electrifying revelations from Bible prophecy, I will expose this reality: unless the entire world - including America, Israel, and the Middle East -

reaches soon a diplomatic and peaceful solution to Iran's nuclear threat, Israel and America will be on a nuclear collision course with Iran!

The book was brand new, and I guessed that some jaded New York reviewer had discarded it. I bought a copy but I didn't think that anyone else would.

When I arrive in Texas in May 2006, *Jerusalem Countdown* has sold more than 600,000 copies and reached number 14 on the *USA Today* bestseller list. Since Hagee completed the draft of the book the previous autumn, President Mahmoud Ahmadinejad has steered Iran towards a diplomatic showdown with the United States. Bang on the Hagee schedule, Ahmadinejad has just announced to the world that Iran has succeeded in producing weapons-grade uranium. Even though the war in Iraq is going badly for America, some pundits are predicting that the Bush administration will go to war with Iran. Does John Hagee know something that the rest of us don't? 'We are standing on the brink of a nuclear Armageddon,' he warns in the first part of the book. 'The coming showdown with Iran is a certainty!'

Cornerstone is just off a major freeway, and as you drive into the parking lot you pass beneath an enormous sign that flashes the times of church services, the names of upcoming church speakers and events, and a billowing Stars and Stripes. The sign is also an advert for the latest products from the Hagee commercial empire. Today, it's plugging *Jerusalem Countdown*, but John Hagee isn't just a pastor and author. He's the president of John Hagee Ministries, a sprawling enterprise which sells sermons, videos, Israel tours and even high-speed internet access that filters out unsavoury websites. ('John Hagee Online can protect you and your children from the dangers of the internet!') He appears regularly on Trinity Broadcasting Network, the leading Christian TV station in America, and

he has his own 'television ministry' - Global Evangelism Television - to broadcast Cornerstone services and events to subscribers and across the internet.

According to the local newspaper, Hagee made \$1.25 million in 2001, more than three times as much as other nonprofit directors and executives in this part of Texas. He lives in San Antonio's most exclusive gated community, the Dominion, near the stars of the local NBA franchise. When he was challenged by a journalist to justify his income, he pointed out that he worked an eighty-hour week and was entitled to a decent living: 'I deserve every dime I'm getting.'

Jerusalem Countdown has been keeping Hagee busy. Since it was published in January 2006, the pastor has been touting his 'confidential sources' and styling himself as an Iran expert. Some journalists have taken him at his word. Earlier in the year, I saw him interviewed on the Fox News Channel, probed by the presenter for some indication of Ahmadinejad's next move. 'Make no mistake,' Pastor Hagee assured viewers. 'Iran will use nuclear weapons against Israel and use nuclear weapons against the United States of America.' Hagee has made a number of appearances on Fox, though curiously he isn't introduced as an apocalyptic preacher.

It's not unusual to see evangelical Christians on American television. Most of the big names appear regularly on Christian networks and take their message to the mainstream media whenever they can. These forays don't always turn out well. On September 13, 2001, the veteran televangelist Pat Robertson interviewed his old friend Jerry Falwell about the terrorist attacks two days earlier. The pair of them agreed that the attacks were God's revenge on an America that tolerated pagans, gays, feminists and the American Civil Liberties Union. Although Falwell apologized the following day, both men remained in the headlines for their extreme views about the war on

terror. In 2002, Falwell told *60 Minutes* that ‘Muhammad was a terrorist.’ (Another apology was issued.) In 2005, Pat Robertson suggested on his TV show that President Bush should assassinate the troublesome Venezuelan leader Hugo Chavez.

Evangelicals like Falwell and Robertson have made an impact on mainstream culture since 9/11, but I don’t think they’ve found a lot of new converts this way. I remember being in the immigration queue at Newark Airport in January 2006 watching a CNN report on Pat Robertson’s latest assertion. Ariel Sharon, the Israeli Prime Minister, had just been felled by a stroke after removing Israeli settlers from the Gaza Strip. Robertson saw this as a simple case of divine vengeance. (The CNN headline: ‘Robertson suggests God smote Sharon.’) As the story played out on the video screen at Newark, I watched Americans and visitors in the arrivals hall react to the story with a mixture of amusement and disgust.

John Hagee’s relationship with the media seems very different. CNN has invited him to chat about the end of the world as if he were discussing the congressional elections. Fox News treats him like an expert from the Council on Foreign Relations. In spite of his open embrace of doomsday in *Jerusalem Countdown*, John Hagee has become an authority on the Middle East even while the region has been gripped by unprecedented instability and violence. He isn’t just offering a bleak commentary on this debate: he’s helping to shape it.

There’s another thing I can’t work out about John Hagee, and I see some evidence of it even as I’m walking through the Cornerstone parking lot towards the church building. To the left of the main entrance is a honey-coloured stone wall, about six feet high. Most of the churchgoers head straight for the entrance, but a group of them linger in front of this wall and seem lost in the moment. There’s an inscription running across the top,

taken from one of Pastor Hagee's favourite psalms: 'Pray for the Peace of Jerusalem. They shall prosper that love thee.' The message here is a little misleading. While it sounds as if the pastor is a strong advocate of the Middle East peace process, he's actually a staunch and unrelenting supporter of Israel. Right now, he's organizing a new evangelical lobbying group called Christians United for Israel, which will put pressure on the White House and Congress to adopt a biblical foreign policy in the Middle East: God gave the land to Israel, and the President of the United States doesn't have the authority to give any of it to the Palestinians. In an even-handed touch, Hagee insists that the Israelis can't give any away either.

The wall outside Cornerstone Church is more than just a political statement. John Hagee claims not only to support Israel but to *love* it, and his San Antonio 'prayer wall' is a homage to the Holy Land. It's a scale model of the Western Wall in the Old City of Jerusalem, which Israel captured in the Six Day War of 1967. The Western Wall is the last remaining part of the Jewish Temple that was destroyed by the Romans after the siege of Jerusalem in AD 70, and it's revered as the holiest place for religious Jews. People flock from around the world to pray at the wall, and for centuries pilgrims have written their divine requests on scraps of paper which they've jammed into cracks between the ancient stones.

These days, you can send your prayer via the internet and - if you have the money to spare - an Israeli firm will print your message and squeeze it into the Western Wall within thirty minutes. ('This is express service,' says their cheerful website, 'and it costs \$120.00.')

Or you can visit Cornerstone Church and deposit your prayer in the Texas substitute. John Hagee asked his builders to leave gaps between the stones for the same reason. He's asking the people of San Antonio - and pilgrims from further afield -

to exit the freeway, dodge the strip malls and push their problems and desires into his miniature Jerusalem.

I've come to Texas to find out why John Hagee thinks the world is going to end, and how he's persuaded people to accept him as a commentator on the increasingly unstable Middle East. But the wall reminds me of another thing about Hagee that takes some explaining. How does a Christian fundamentalist come to love Israel and the Jews? And how do American Jews feel about their apocalyptic cheerleader?

'I LOVE HIM, I respect him, I admire him, I pray for his welfare.' This glowing testimony to Pastor Hagee came from Aryeh Scheinberg, a conservative rabbi who's lived in San Antonio for nearly forty years. I heard that Rabbi Scheinberg was a regular at Cornerstone, and a guide on Hagee's tours of the Holy Land, so I went to see him a few days before my visit to the church. The rabbi had recently got into a spot of trouble: in an interview with the *Jerusalem Post* about Pastor Hagee, he apparently implied that his good friend believed Jews could be saved without believing in Jesus. Worse, the rabbi suggested that Hagee had persuaded Jerry Falwell that this was true. Predictably, the *Post* splashed this 'revelation' in its headline: 'Falwell: Jews can get to Heaven'.

A flurry of denials followed, including a particularly withering one from Falwell, and I felt rather sorry for Scheinberg. He's a very friendly man, and completely sincere in his regard for Hagee. I found him in his office at the heart of the Congregation Rodfei Shalom compound, which is a retirement community cum synagogue for Orthodox Jews. There are a lot of Jews in San Antonio, I discovered, though not all of them agree with Rabbi Scheinberg about John Hagee.

'That was based on an incorrect communication! A genuine mistake!' The rabbi lays out a complicated story

involving an old interview which Hagee did with the *Houston Chronicle*, and a misstep by the reporter for the *Jerusalem Post*. Scheinberg is an animated man of sixty with a wispy white beard. He stumbled into this mess after agreeing to be the Jewish face of Christians United for Israel, the lobbying group which Hagee founded in February 2006. CUFI has already made national headlines, and Pastor Hagee is busy organizing a 'Washington/Israel Summit' for early July. Rabbi Scheinberg and three thousand delegates from across the country will take Hagee's pro-Israel message directly to Congress.

You may think that the American Congress already does a pretty good job of supporting Israel, or that there are active lobbying groups - including the formidable American-Israel Public Affairs Committee (AIPAC) - which have this covered. But John Hagee wants something more reliable than AIPAC, and he sees CUFI as the best way to ensure that the United States government stays on Israel's side in its many disputes with its neighbours.

I ask Rabbi Scheinberg how he met John Hagee. 'It was 1981, when Israel bombed the Osirak nuclear reactor in Iraq. So of course there was worldwide condemnation of Israel's action, including the United States, and that's when Pastor Hagee thought of having a Night to Honor Israel for what she did.'

Hagee, like most evangelical Christians, feels a special attachment to the land of Israel. His epiphany came in April 1979 when, on his first visit to the Holy Land, he was overwhelmed by 'the courageous enthusiasm of these sons and daughters of Gideon'. From this point onwards, Hagee became a staunch supporter of Israel.

The Israeli bombing of the Osirak reactor in 1981 caused quite a stir at the time, not least since the Iraqis pointed out that Israel had introduced nuclear weapons to the region during the 1960s. Hagee saw this as a chance to formalize the revelation he'd had in Jerusalem two years

earlier. 'A Night to Honor Israel' - part fundraising event, part Judeo-Christian variety performance - has taken place in San Antonio every year since then, invariably with Rabbi Scheinberg representing the Jewish community. It has even spread to other cities. The week before my visit to Cornerstone Church, Hagee flew up to Canada to attend ANTHI in Toronto. \$649,000 was raised for Israeli charities in a single evening, though the flagship event at Cornerstone doles out nearly ten times that sum.

According to Scheinberg, Hagee originally met with resistance from Jews in San Antonio when he suggested an event that would honour Israel. 'Their first question was: Well, what is the hidden agenda? What missionary activity lies behind all this?' But the rabbi himself decided to see if John Hagee was for real. The relationship between the two men has grown stronger over the years, and Scheinberg insists that Hagee has never tried to convert him or any other Jew. Meanwhile, A Night to Honor Israel became more and more successful, and with Scheinberg's blessing has attracted prominent Israelis as well as American politicians. Recent speakers include Tom DeLay, the former leader of the House of Representatives; Gary Bauer, an adviser to Ronald Reagan who ran for the Republican presidential nomination in 2000; and even Ariel Sharon and Benjamin Netanyahu. South Texas seems like an unlikely destination for the movers and shakers of Israeli politics, but Hagee's quarter-century of unstinting support for Israel has put San Antonio on the map.

What makes this procession of Israeli and American leaders more odd is the backdrop to Hagee's views about the Middle East. Like Tim LaHaye, John Hagee insists that the End Times are fast approaching. His support for Israel is grounded not only in the shared ancestry of Jews and Christians, but in the belief that the apocalyptic events prophesied by the Bible will actually come to pass in the next few years. These events are focused on Israel, and on

the fate of the Jews as well as Christians - so Hagee believes that Christians have a special responsibility to follow Middle East politics for signs that the end is nigh. For more than a decade, he's been delivering bestsellers which map current events onto the apocalyptic scheme. They appear to be growing in popularity.

PERHAPS THE EASIEST way to understand John Hagee's love for Israel is to look at his ideas about how, exactly, the end of the world is going to come about. Hagee, Tim LaHaye and other doomsday preachers have a remarkably consistent view of how the Bible's prophetic promises will shape tomorrow's headlines. The Antichrist will take over the world; Christ will return in person to vanquish him; and Jesus will preside over a peaceful and harmonious world for a thousand years.

Apocalyptic Christians like Hagee and LaHaye have derived this scheme from a number of different parts of the Bible, but they stick to it with remarkable faithfulness. It's the plot that drives the *Left Behind* books, and the strategic scenario that informs John Hagee's views about Iran in *Jerusalem Countdown*. Israel has the starring role, from the first scene to the last.

1. Israel will be restored to the Middle East as a nation, after nearly two thousand years in which the Jews have been scattered throughout the world.

You can check this off: Israel won its independence in 1948, and this inspired the current wave of enthusiasm for Bible prophecy. In his books, Hagee often recalls listening to the radio with his father as an eight-year-old boy on the day that the United Nations recognized Israel. His dad - himself a prophecy enthusiast - apparently told him: 'We have just heard the most important prophetic message that will ever be delivered until Jesus Christ returns to earth.'

2. The world will gravitate towards a single government, a single economy and a single religion.

This one-world system only becomes truly evil when the Antichrist rises up to become its leader, but Bible prophecy Christians view 'globalization' as evidence that the Satanic takeover of the world is already under way. Although most of the world recognizes that the United Nations is a toothless creature, and that America is the superpower, prophecy believers imagine that the UN could be the vehicle for the Antichrist's rise. (It's the route to power favoured by Nicolae Carpathia in *Left Behind*.) The IMF and the World Bank also unnerve Bible prophecy Christians, and their fear of economic consolidation makes them wary of ATMs, credit cards and even barcodes.

3. All true believers will be 'Raptured' by God. Faithful Christians will instantly vanish from the Earth, creating political and social chaos.

Although this is where things start to sound far-fetched, the idea of a massive disappearance of true believers is based on a verse in a letter from St Paul to the Thessalonians. (You can hear Tim LaHaye reading the verse in question from Thessalonians, and admire a Flash animation of the Rapture, at timlahaye.com.) The Rapture is absolutely central to the prophetic scheme of most apocalyptic Christians in America. In a Christian superstore like Mardel's in Littleton, you can buy bumper stickers that read:

**IN CASE OF RAPTURE, THIS VEHICLE
WILL BE UNMANNED**

Prophecy believers use chat rooms to debate how they can reconcile public safety with the unknowable timing of the

Rapture. Some have suggested that true believers should think twice before becoming surgeons or airline pilots, because they could easily endanger non-Christians by disappearing suddenly when God gathers up the faithful.

John Hagee sincerely believes that he will be Raptured. In fact, some of his books contain a rider in which he anticipates this scenario: *'For those who have missed the Rapture: You may be confused and terrified by the momentous events you are experiencing. You may be in hiding. Take heed to this book, then lift up your heads - your redemption draws near.'*

From this point onward in the End Times scheme, you should keep in mind that the world will have to fare without the help of Bible prophecy teachers and true Christians like John Hagee and Tim LaHaye. The effort to resist Satan will be waged only by those 'left behind'.

4. Russia, in alliance with Arab and/or Islamic nations, will attack Israel. Israel will be miraculously spared destruction, and virtually all of the invading forces will be destroyed.

Pastor Hagee admits that he's not totally sure about the sequence here. It's possible that the Russian attack may come before the Rapture, as in the *Left Behind* books. But he doesn't doubt that a war involving Russia, Iran and Israel will be a crucial part of the apocalyptic sequence. This assumption is based on a prophetic vision in the Book of Ezekiel, which describes an attack on Israel by a prince called Gog. Gog ruled over the kingdom of Magog, which equates roughly to Turkey, Iran and Central Asia. Or perhaps to Russia.

On the basis of this ancient and mysterious prediction, Hagee suggests that 'it is reasonable to assume Russia will lead a massive Pan-Islamic military force to invade Jerusalem'. The same passage in Ezekiel leads Hagee to believe that the invasion will be a complete failure. God will

strike down the Russians and their Muslim allies with earthquakes and brimstone. Or perhaps these references are metaphorical. 'The fire and brimstone might refer to Israel's release of nuclear weapons in a last-ditch attempt to prevent annihilation,' Hagee helpfully suggests. 'In either case, the results are equally catastrophic.'

There's an unnerving aside in the Ezekiel passage that promises brimstone not only for the unfortunate aggressors of Magog, but also for those who are 'living in security in the coastlands'. In *Jerusalem Countdown*, Hagee lingers on this clause: 'Could it be that America, which refuses to defend Israel from the Russian invasion, will experience nuclear warfare on our east and west coasts?' He adds, rather disingenuously for a San Antonio resident, 'That's exactly where most of us live today.' When he thinks about the sins that could provoke such a calamitous judgment from God, Hagee returns to anti-Semitism: 'Right now in America's major universities, professors, many whose positions are funded by Saudi Arabian oil money, blast Israel as the cancer on the soul of humanity.' The liberal elite, and its anti-Israel rhetoric, might eventually draw down God's vengeance on the entire nation.

Hagee likes to tell a story about a trip he made to Berlin during the 1980s. He'd been invited to give a speech to American GIs, and he was taken around the western half of the city by a German guide. When they got to Checkpoint Charlie, and looked over at Soviet East Berlin, the guide asked Hagee sadly why God had 'permitted the communists to build a wall around us'. Hagee, who'd been to Dachau the day before, instantly replied: 'Everything your parents did to the Jewish people, son, the communists are doing to you.' This is a general rule, repeated in Hagee's books: 'What a nation or an individual does to the nation of Israel is what God repays to them.'

5. In the aftermath of this terrible war, the world will reach a peace agreement brokered by a charismatic leader, probably from Europe. This leader is the Antichrist, and the peace treaty marks the beginning of the 'Tribulation', the seven-year period in which he takes over the planet. He will unify the world under a single government and will purge Christians and anyone opposed to his reign. With the aid of his sidekick, the 'false prophet', the Antichrist persuades or compels everyone to worship him.

If you've accepted the logic of the story so far, perhaps this won't seem bizarre. The Antichrist is the embodiment of evil, a false version of Jesus who seems to solve the world's problems but actually serves Satan himself. He isn't the literal incarnation of Satan, but he's the instrument through which the devil will attempt to destroy the world.

Naturally, he's European. (There's a reason for this in the Book of Daniel, but it must be intuitive for many Bible prophecy enthusiasts.) He capitalizes on the chaos following the Russian war, and the Rapture, and he manages to fool the world into accepting him as a peacemaker, a leader and eventually as a god. By the time people realize what's happening, the Antichrist is already in charge.

Here's where the one-world government really takes off. The Antichrist places the 'mark of the Beast' on everyone, and insists that this mark is used in every transaction. Perhaps the mark will appear on coins and banknotes. Or perhaps the Antichrist will abolish cash and insist on credit cards embossed with his insignia. Some prophecy enthusiasts have an eye on more elaborate technologies - RFID chips that could be implanted beneath the skin, for example - but everyone agrees that the Beast's stranglehold on economic activity will make it impossible to survive without accepting his mark. A growing number of people (Jews and recent converts to Christianity) will try to

reject the Antichrist's rule, but he's brutal in suppressing their dissent.

6. Things get very bleak indeed. The Antichrist is assassinated by two Jews who realize his true identity, but then he rises from the dead with Satan's help - a trick which only strengthens his control over the world. Everyone who refuses to worship him is killed.

This is a good place to reflect on why it's better to become a Christian before the Rapture than afterwards.

7. The Antichrist is attacked by armies from Russia and China - but then somehow persuades the Russians and the Chinese to team up with him. This is just as well, since they are now facing the ultimate enemy: Jesus Christ himself, who comes down from heaven with an army of wrathful angels and fights the hostile armies on the plains of Armageddon, in northern Israel.

Seven years have passed since the peace treaty between Israel and its enemies, and the Antichrist has ravaged the world. Now Christ is back. So are all the believers who were Raptured by Christ at the start of the apocalyptic sequence. Hagee reminds us that Christ isn't the gentle hippie that he's sometimes portrayed as being: 'This is no weak-wristed, smiling Jesus come to pay the earth a condolence call. This is a furious Christ, ready to confront the gathered armies of the world.'

It seems odd that the Russians and the Chinese, who originally set out to attack the Antichrist, would switch sides at precisely the moment that Christ crashes through the heavens with an invincible army of saints. But the misguided opponents of the Lord, led by the Antichrist himself, take up arms and are soundly defeated. Everyone who continues to reject Jesus is slaughtered by him. (Including any Jews who, like the Russians and the Chinese, defy the furious Christ.)

Armageddon is a real place in northern Israel. This vast plain is one of the highlights of the Holy Land vacations organized by Hagee, Tim LaHaye and other prophecy enthusiasts.

8. The Antichrist and the false prophet are chained to a lake of fire, condemned to perpetual torment. Christ establishes a new kingdom on earth, which will last for a thousand years - this period is the 'millennium' that's promised in the Bible. Satan is locked away in hell throughout the millennium, and the Christians who were Raptured before the seven years of the Tribulation return to live on earth.

This is the earliest that any of us can expect to find true peace in the world. Christ himself will rule over the Christians that he Raptured, as well as anyone who came to Jesus during the Tribulation. (Like the heroes of the *Left Behind* books.) Pastor Hagee expects that he will return to earth with Christ and lead a normal life when the apocalyptic dust has settled. People will be born and will die during the millennium, though some evangelicals have speculated that Christians will be able to live for hundreds of years, as the patriarchs of the Old Testament always seemed to do. (There are some elaborate theories about the composition of the earth's atmosphere and the rays of the sun, if you're interested in the science behind this.) Because Satan hasn't actually been destroyed - that won't happen until the millennium is over - there is still sin in the world, but Christ won't put up with it. 'He shall rule an age of peace with a rod of iron,' Hagee warns.

9. After a thousand years, Satan will be set loose again from hell. There'll be one more massive battle between God and Satan at Jerusalem. Satan will be permanently vanquished, the earth will be destroyed, and a new earth will descend from the heavens.

Yet another apocalyptic drama might seem excessive, especially after the fireworks of the first one, but Hagee points out that the purpose of this millennial period is to demonstrate that people will still turn against God even when Christ rules over them in person. Only when Satan has been defeated for a second time, and the entire earth has been destroyed, can we expect a world without sin.

JOHN HAGEE APPEARS to believe all this with absolute confidence, which makes two questions seem particularly pressing. How could this message be remotely appealing to Jews? And should the rest of us feel unnerved that Hagee is meeting with Israeli and American leaders, and appearing on the news to offer advice about US policy in the Middle East?

‘JOHN HAGEE IS not a true friend of the Jewish people,’ says Rabbi Barry Block, who heads the Reform community in San Antonio. He assures me that he has a great deal of respect for Aryeh Scheinberg, and that the city’s Jewish community is united on a lot of important issues. ‘The fact we don’t always agree doesn’t undermine our respect for each other,’ though John Hagee has become a sticking point. ‘He preaches hatred – he’s anti-Muslim, anti-gay – and he advocates against positions that we hold dear.’ Block considers himself a supporter of Israel, and Hagee’s gameplan for the End Times rules him out as an ally. ‘His pro-Israel actions are based on his prophetic vision, but as Jews we don’t come out well at the end of that story.’

I hadn’t expected Rabbi Block to be a fan of Hagee’s, but I’m surprised at the extent of his criticism. ‘I don’t have anything positive to say about Pastor Hagee,’ he concludes. But then he remembers the flurry of articles about CUFI and he thinks of a parting shot. ‘His new Christian version of AIPAC is positive, because it will show Americans that when the US backs some of Israel’s right-wing policies, it’s