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Unipolar Dispensations: Exceptionalism, Empire, and the End of One America

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ABSTRACT

Public and political discourse around the 2016 US Presidential election constructed it as a time of crisis for America. Yet, while over 80% of white evangelicals voted for Donald Trump, religion's role in this crisis has been marginalized. Analyzing Trump's support among premillennial dispensationalists, this article explores connections between dispensationalist discourses of divine providence and constructions of Trump's election as a "turning point" for America. Charting links between conflicts over domestic cultural homogeneity and attempted impositions of US power over global "deviants" (terrorists, rogue states), it argues that the crisis of American identity figured by Trump's election is tied to religious and secularized soteriologies emerging from notions of American exceptionalism and empire inaugurated by the end of the Cold War.

KEYWORDS

Dispensationalism; empire; soteriology; Trumpism; unipolarity

Becoming one America

"Can we become one America in the twenty-first century?" Bill Clinton asked on 14 June 1997, announcing his new Initiative to realize the promise of a nation: "One America in the Twenty-First Century: The President's Initiative on Race." Aimed at promoting dialogue across racial and ethnic divides, the Initiative sought to heal the "problem of race" as both the "oldest" and "newest" dilemma confronting the United States. By 2017, as the presidency passed from Barack Obama not to Hillary Rodham Clinton – as predicted by pollsters and pundits – but to Donald Trump, a candidate who campaigned on a platform of open xenophobia and white racial *ressentiment* and whose political career had been launched by the conspiracy that Obama was not truly American, the answer to Clinton's question might have appeared self-evident. However, rather than being a mere negation, Trump's election might be considered an (unintended) consequence of this question – for unspoken in the question is an assumption: that "one America," a unified America, is also *one* America, a specific or certain America.

In the move towards transcendence of its differences, this America differentiates itself. Such differentiation divides the nation from its geopolitical others, as-yet-divided, and

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from its own history, imperfectly realized. More than this, it divides one America from competing visions of its future – from Americas that will or should not be. Public discourse around the 2016 election framed it as a choice between such Americas.¹ Yet although white evangelicals voted for Trump by a greater margin than in any election since 2004, the relevance of religion has tended to be marginalized in favor of race, class, or gender.² This article addresses this omission. Unpacking the theopolitics behind some of Trump’s prominent evangelical supporters, it argues that the crisis of American identity seen as embodied in the 2016 presidential election is tied to a broader crisis, religious and political, inaugurated by the advent of geopolitical unipolarity at the end of the Cold War.³

This crisis is, I contend, oriented around anxieties over (more or less) secularized discourses of salvation and damnation (soteriologies) rooted in systems of American exceptionalism and empire management. To demonstrate this, I draw on the theological concept of the *dispensation* – common among Trump’s evangelical supporters.⁴ I unpack the “dispensation” as a system of law and order that determines the means of salvation in a historical period, facilitating the creation of borders between “saved” and “damned” tied to ideas of national or imperial belonging. Interrogating dispensationalist support for Trump alongside framings of Trump as representing a “turning point” in US politics, I then argue that the “dispensation” can act as an analytical tool for reframing the relation between domestic and international politics. Juxtaposing post-Cold War consolidations of American unipolarity against terrorists and rogue states to domestic culture wars over the authentic identity of the nation, I contend that “the unipolar moment” that marked America’s place as sole superpower symbolically inaugurated a “unipolar dispensation” in which “salvation” (for individuals and nation-states) became bound to a capacity to approximate (if never completely embody) a unified “American” identity that was itself ceaselessly contested. It is this broader framework of contestation and crisis that, I argue, Trump’s election should be situated in: the crisis of “one America” – of the question of and the quest for one America, and competing visions for what this America should be.

Citizens of paradise

For many of Trump’s prominent white evangelical supporters, his election represented a specific vision for the nation’s future. “The Lord’s plan is being put in place for America,”

¹On 6 November, for example, Domenico Montanaro of *NPR* situated the election in a context in which demographic and cultural change were “straining the fabric of what it means to be American.” On election day, politics professor Samuel Abrams asked in the *New York Times* if it was a “Political Turning Point” for the nation. Earlier, on 2 September, Molly Ball of *The Atlantic* had framed the election through ideas of fear and identity, citing immigration advocate Frank Sharpy’s blunt assessment that 2016’s was “not a political campaign” but “an identity campaign.”

²I do not here intend to minimize racial, sexual, gendered, or class-based reasons behind Trump support – these are clearly important, as documented by Mutz (‘Status threat’) and Schaffner, MacWilliams, and Nteta (‘Understanding White Polarization’).

³This article uses the common international relations theory periodization of “Cold War/post-Cold War,” while it is aware of significant problems with this periodization (see, for example, Park-Kung, *Fictional International Relations*, 141). I follow Adib-Moghaddam in dating the formal start of “unipolarity” to the 1990–1991 Gulf War (*International Politics*, 75), and Bacevich in conceptualizing the war on terror as fundamentally in continuity with (if still distinct from) existing US imperial praxis, notably the pursuit of openness (*American Empire*) and the associated need to increase freedom through endless expansion and extraction (*Limits of Power*).

⁴The strand of evangelicalism this article focuses on is premillennial dispensationalism, which represents an influential strand of conservative evangelicalism and fundamentalism in America broadly. While the article recognizes that not all the evangelicals who voted for Trump are dispensationalists, premillennial, or otherwise, many of his more prominent or visible advocates (such as Falwell, Robertson, Lindsey, and Jeffress) hold premillennialist dispensationalist views. For overviews of conservative evangelicalism in the US more broadly, and dispensationalism’s place within it, see Boyer, *When Time Shall Be*; Lahr, *Millennial Dreams*; Sutton, *American Apocalypse*; Wojcik, *End of the World*.

Pat Robertson informed his audience on the 15 February 2017 episode of *The 700 Club*. Speaking after another leak to the press from inside the White House, Robertson situated the actions of both renegade staffers and the press itself in a context of national and cosmic rebellion: “these people are not only revolting against Trump,” he stated, “they’re revolting against what God’s plan is for America.” The day after Trump’s inauguration, meanwhile, Hal Lindsey drew parallels on HalLindsey.com between the election and the repentance of Nineveh, which postponed the city’s “well-earned destruction.” At a private sermon for the president-elect on the morning of his inauguration, Robert Jeffress, who is among the president’s core evangelical advisors, compared Trump’s plan for a southern border wall to the mission of Nehemiah: “Nehemiah wasn’t a politician, he wasn’t a prophet, he was a builder,” he said on *The Mike Gallagher Show* that evening, “God told him to build a wall around Jerusalem and he did that, and God made it a great success.”

“Who the Americans are”

Many of these figures share a theological worldview that became dominant in American conservative Christianity since the nineteenth century: premillennialist dispensationalism. Facilitated by the fusion of Christianity and nationalistic anticommunism in public and political life during the Cold War, dispensationalism was popularized by evangelists such as Billy Graham, Jerry Falwell, Sr., Robertson, and Lindsey.⁵ Attempts to categorize the paradigm have often focused on its commitment to “biblical literalism,” its apocalyptic orientation, and support for socially conservative causes, such as resistance to LGBT rights, black civil rights, and reproductive rights.⁶ Public discussions of Trump’s appeal for dispensationalists usually focus on the middle pillar: apocalypticism and dispensational notions of history. For example, Tara Burton of *Vox* situates dispensationalist support for Trump specifically in relation to the belief that political chaos advances the end times and (thus) Christian victory.⁷ On 9 May 2016, months before the election, Dan Sinykin in the *LA Review of Books* drew the connections even more starkly, juxtaposing the bestselling dispensationalist *Left Behind* (1995–2007) novels by Tim LeHaye and Jerry B. Jenkins – in which “Morally imperfect but virile leaders” bring hope to “a besieged people, surrounded by chaos and decadence” and “guide the faithful to paradise” – with Trump supporters’ cultural and economic anxieties and desire for leaders to alleviate them. For these authors, Trump’s dispensationalist support is tied not necessarily to the content of religious claims or his own religious character, but rather to ideas of legitimate authority, teleological progress, and theopolitical election.

As a theological concept, the dispensation amalgamates ideas of history, authority, and salvation. Deriving from the Latin *dispensatio*, the term refers to a concept of salvation history that sees time as divided into several epochs (dispensations) in which relations between God and humanity are soteriologically distinct. In dispensationalism, two of the most important dispensations are the dispensation of law (under which the Israelites lived) and the current dispensation of grace (inaugurated by Christ). According to the 1909 Scofield Reference Bible, a comprehensive early dispensationalist text, during the

⁵Boyer, *When Time Shall Be*; Lahr, *Millennial Dreams*.

⁶Sweetnam, “Defining Dispensationalism,” 198; Wojcik, *End of the World*, 34.

⁷See in particular her articles of 15 July 2017 (‘Trump coped with the Russia scandal by courting evangelicals. Here’s why that’s worrisome’) and 12 December 2017 (‘#RaptureAnxiety calls out evangelicals’ toxic obsession with the end times’).

dispensation of law the relation between God and humanity (or rather the Israelites) rested on Mosaic Law, which functioned as “rule for living” and force of “disciplinary restriction and correction ... to hold Israel in check for their own good.”⁸ Meanwhile, dispensationalists hold that in the current dispensation of grace, this relation rests not on the law but on faith: whereas salvation in the prior dispensation depended on adherence to divine law, it is now the grace of and faith in God that are the means for achieving salvation. For pre-millennialists, the current dispensation is projected to end with the rapture, when “true” Christians are raised into heaven and the remainder of humanity is left behind to suffer through Apocalypse. As such, predicting the rapture is often central to dispensationalist prophesying, and the divisions it inaugurates between the already-saved and the potentially savable, damned, and damnable are ones Sinykin sees reflected in the sociopolitical imaginary of Trump’s more dispensationalist-inclined supporters. “When the rapture comes, we will know who the Christians are,” he summarizes their worldview, and “When Trump is elected ... we will know who the Americans are.”

Sinykin’s phrasing, while mainly rhetorical, draws clear parallels between Trump’s election (then considered an implausible, if not impossible, event) and the end of the current dispensation – the instant of rupture when the means of salvation, previously stable, irrevocably alter. Yet if Trump’s election – symbolically and politically, rather than theologically – ends a prior soteriological order, what “dispensation” would this be and what paradigm of “salvation” was (thereby) dispensed with (and relatedly, begun)? In the rest of this article, I refer to this earlier era as the “unipolar dispensation” – one inaugurated by the “unipolar moment” and (potentially) ended by Trump’s election. In referring to these periods as “dispensations,” I do not mean that either is a dispensation in the theological sense used by Scofield or contemporary dispensationalists, but in the more symbolic sense implied by Sinykin. Trump’s election – much as his dispensationalist followers might wish otherwise – is not literally the rapture. Nonetheless, his election has represented a political shift in both US foreign relations – pithily if ironically encapsulated by a 16 March 2017 *Politico* article announcing President Trump’s meeting with German Chancellor Angela Merkel: “The Leader of the Free World Meets Donald Trump” – and in domestic political norms, complicating progressive understandings of the arc of history. Viewed in relation to strong dispensationalist support for Trump, the “dispensation” – as a prominent model of the historical shift in American evangelicalism – may serve as a useful heuristic for exploring tensions in American politics, religion, and identity in both the Trump era and that which preceded it. As I will argue, the “unipolar dispensation” served as a battleground over the means for knowing “who the Americans are,” for identifying the saved from among the savable, damned, and damnable – soteriological divides that Trump’s election both troubles and reinforces.

The triptych

The concept of the dispensation, as Yvonne Sherwood outlines, is tied to questions of sovereignty. It names both “a system of management (law and order) *and* the exception,” describing “a system of management, regulation, and economy” dispensed (with) by the

⁸Scofield, *Study Bible*, 114.

sovereign dispenser.⁹ The Latin term itself, *dispensatio*, commonly translates the Greek *oikonomia*, “economy” in the etymological sense of household management. This sense of economic regulation is not merely domestic or financial, however. As Adam Kotsko summarizes, while first referring “to the management of the household,” over time *oikonomia* also came to be associated “with the management of a culturally diverse empire” and, in Christian theology, “with God’s providential management of his creation.”¹⁰ The sense of dispensation in dispensationalism inherits all three associations, coming to reflect a triptych, a set of three associated works meant to be understood together. In the dispensational triptych, images of household, empire, and cosmos form a unified picture that is created and maintained by a sovereign dispenser. This dispenser keeps each image coherent with the others – and ultimately dispenses with and replaces the triptych entirely at the climax of each dispensation.

Imagining the dispensation as a household–empire–cosmos triptych elucidates the links between dispensational cosmology and dispensationalist political and sociocultural engagement. Ideas of “the household” are an illustrative example. Daniel Wojcik partly categorizes dispensationalism through its support of conservative political causes, two of the most central of which are opposition to LGBT rights and championing of a heteropatriarchal nuclear family.¹¹ As Erin Runions demonstrates, in contemporary America, the normative nature of the heteropatriarchal family is often legitimized through opposition to demonized others.¹² Most common of such others are LGBT people and people who have sex outside of wedlock (whose non-normative practices are figured as an excess threatening the stability and perpetuation of the family) as well as foreigners (seen as harbingers of threatening alien beliefs and practices, often sexual). Such opposition might seem more incidental than integral to dispensationalism, but the triptych allows us to see images of the family – *household* – as intimately connected to cosmic and national/imperial concerns. These links are made apparent in Jerry Falwell, Sr., and Robertson’s now-infamous claim on *The 700 Club* two days after the 9/11 attacks that they occurred because God had “lifted his veil of protection” from the nation due to its tolerance of an “Unholy Trinity of feminists, civil libertarians and homosexuals.” While publicly denounced, such statements are consistent with dispensationalist prophesying,¹³ and figure a worldview in which maintenance of American election and (thus) preeminence depends on the maintenance of “proper” household relations, which become essential for both cosmic order and the national or imperial order that mediates between them.

The nation-state – or rather what social theorist Julian Go terms the “empire-state” – constitutes the central image that mediates between household and cosmos. This imperial image of the dispensation is integral for considerations of what I am terming the unipolar dispensation, for – as I will elaborate – unipolarity’s providential economies are enmeshed within notions of American exceptionalism and practices of American empire. Framing the dispensation through the lens of empire reinforces how its soteriological economy relies on the drawing of lines of differentiation between insiders and outsiders, as well as – in the unipolar dispensation specifically – how such lines intersect with the

⁹Sherwood, “God of Abraham,” 320.

¹⁰Kotsko, *Prince of this World*, 164.

¹¹Wojcik, *End of the World*.

¹²Runions, *Babylon Complex*.

¹³Sutton, *American Apocalypse*, 369–370.

mechanisms of US imperialism. As Go outlines, the usual distinction drawn between empires and nations is of exclusivity versus inclusivity: nations (especially civic-liberal nations like America) ideally strive for inclusivity and equality by fostering “horizontal comradeship” among citizens, whereas empires maintain vertical systems of hierarchization between “citizens and subjects.” This, he argues, is a fallacy that obscures how nations are also built on the necessary structures of exclusion that differentiate between citizens and non-citizens, and how the borders of both categories are often constructed along exclusionary lines, including race and gender. There is thus not empire and nation-state but rather “empire-state.” While civic-liberal nationhood defines all persons as *capable* of citizenship, it has historically policed this citizenship by categorizing only some people as “persons” and others (women, slaves) as “property.” This is a moral but not a structural aberration for the nation, as “the very definition and meaning of who or what counts as a citizen in the civic community deserving of equal rights and privileges depends upon specifying who or what does *not* count.”¹⁴

American citizen/subject divisions are embedded in discourses of American exceptionalism, which Donald Pease describes as a “complex assemblage of theological and secular assumptions out of which Americans have developed the lasting belief in America as the fulfillment of the national ideal to which other nations aspire.”¹⁵ Rooted in the Puritan jeremiadic tradition, which projected a divine function for America and thus juxtaposed a flawed but ultimately correctable present to a utopic future, ideologies of exceptionalism mediated and sublimated the gulf between the evils of America’s present and its alleged higher calling (that is, between America as reality and America as ideal).¹⁶ The calling that America was intended to fulfill has altered over time, ranging “from the City on the Hill in the sixteenth century to the Conqueror of the World’s Market in the twentieth.”¹⁷ Yet all rest on shared foundations. Jasbir Puar identifies exceptionalism as “paradoxically signal[ing] distinction from (to be unlike, dissimilar) as well as excellence (imminence, superiority), suggesting a departure from yet mastery of linear teleologies of progress.” This double ascription facilitates “a process whereby a national population comes to believe in its own superiority and its own singularity.”¹⁸ For premillennial dispensationalists, this singularity was linked to the apocalyptic end of the current dispensation: the United States was a product of divine creation, and during the Cold War, creative interpretations of scripture permitted readings that gave America a chosen end times role in combatting an atheistic, Antichristian Soviet Union.¹⁹

As David Campbell cogently demonstrates, the “geographies of evil” constructed during the Cold War (such as Reagan’s “evil empire”) were not simply dramatizations of realist political strategies but justified a politics of identity. They fostered a worldview in which “enmity towards communism” consolidated a contingent identity (“America,” “the West”) by functioning “as a code for the inscription of the multiple boundaries between the ‘civilized’ and the ‘barbaric,’ the ‘normal’ and the ‘pathological.’”²⁰ Such

¹⁴Go, “Myths of Nations,” 69, 71.

¹⁵Pease, *New American Exceptionalism*, 7–8; see also Bacevich, *Limits of Power*; Bercovitch, *American Jeremiad*.

¹⁶For a comprehensive analysis of the jeremiad and its relation to shifting ideologies of American exceptionalism, see Bercovitch, *American Jeremiad*.

¹⁷Pease, *New American Exceptionalism*, 7–8.

¹⁸Puar, *Terrorist Assemblages*, 3–5.

¹⁹Sutton, *American Apocalypse*, 221–225, 263–292. See also: Hartman, *War for the Soul*, 98; Lahr, *Millennial Dreams*.

²⁰Campbell, *Writing Security*, 195.

borders here allow the creation of a theologico-geopolitics that figures US empire as the already-saved end of history, and (thus) as the bringer of world salvation. Facilitated by the enduring myth of the reluctant superpower, by which America is spurred into action not by self-interest but by evil,²¹ this theologico-geopolitics only intensified after the USSR collapsed. In the world order given shape after 1989, the eschatological promise of America seemed to have arrived. But as Andrew Bacevich observes, exceptionalist rhetorics imbued post-1989 US foreign policy with “an element of surrealism.”²² They obscured realities, reinforcing narratives that protected national innocence and impeded implementation of practical policies. Drawing on Amy Kaplan’s analysis of post-9/11 US empire, Puar argues that America used exceptionalism to evade accusations of imperialism by figuring a “superior United States [as] not subject to empire’s shortcomings,” deploying claims of national moral rectitude to frame its violence as anything but imperial. For Puar, exceptionalism masked strategic hypocrisy, rendering America – unique yet universal – “the arbiter of appropriate ethics, human rights, and democratic behavior while exempting itself without hesitation from such universalizing mandates.”²³ As the dispensation joins household to empire to cosmos, exceptionalism positions the US (as ideal, if not reality) as the apogee of human civilization, its national polity as a metonym for humanity, its national interests as the world’s. The fate of the nation segues into the doom of creation.

The final image of the dispensational triptych depicts neither the management of household nor empire(-state) but of cosmos: God’s control over reality as the sovereign who dispenses (with) the means of salvation. This shifts (while still maintaining) the core binary from Go’s *political* distinction between citizen and subject to the *theologico-political* distinction of saved (or savable) and damned (or damnable). As a unit of salvation history, the dispensation – as Scofield wrote of that of law – has a disciplinary function; it conditions the proper way that humans are to follow divine will, and thus differentiates necessarily between those who follow this will and those who dissent from it. Through analysis of *oikonomia*, Kotsko unpacks this disciplinary element by sketching parallels between Christian ideas of hell and Michel Foucault’s analysis of the prison. “What is being punished in hell as in the prison is not so much what the person has done as what the person *is*,” he states. Both achieve this end by continually constituting prisoners as what they (ostensibly) are inside, for just “as the experience of hell ensures that the damned will remain unrepentant for all eternity, so too does the prison produce the delinquents on whom it exercises its disciplinary techniques.”²⁴ In continually creating the damned, Kotsko argues, the soteriological economy – the dispensation – justifies the necessity of its own systems. In working to form citizens of paradise, the dispensation necessarily produces an excess – the damned – that (as with the empire-state) ensure the status of the saved *qua* saved and justify the existence of the means of salvation itself.

The union of dispensationalism and exceptionalism in American premillennialist dispensationism, which frames the US as the *telos* of history, works to conceptualize “America” – elected by God – as the legitimate dispenser of worldly salvation. Proximity to or distance from this America comes to symbolize one’s salvation, one’s sin. This

²¹For the history and relevance of this myth, see Bacevich, *American Empire*, 7–31.

²²Bacevich, *American Empire*, 43.

²³*Ibid.*, 8.

²⁴Kotsko, *Prince of this World*, 187, emphasis in original.

(theo)political union of soteriology with the empire-state manifests most clearly in what Catherine Keller termed “messianic imperialism.” Exemplified in the political rhetoric of the early war on terror, messianic imperialism casts America’s enemies as “not merely a historical foe, but a diabolical dark force which only the white light of our [America’s] messianic goodness can prevail.”²⁵ Yet, while possessing deep roots in ideologies of US exceptionality, the configuration of messianic imperialism unleashed after 9/11 was itself dependent on the transformations inaugurated and intensified by the advent of unipolarity, by what Charles Krauthammer, in his 1991 *Foreign Affairs* article of the same name, termed “The Unipolar Moment.”

Unipolar soteriologies

Riding on the triumphalism of what George H. W. Bush called the “New World Order,” Krauthammer announced in 1991 the arrival of “the unipolar moment in world history,” declaring to the international system that order would be restored by “American strength and will – the strength and will to lead a unipolar world, unashamedly laying down the rules of world order and being prepared to enforce it.”²⁶ This attempt to create and enforce world order produces the soteriologies of the unipolar dispensation – ones now being destabilized, if not dispensed with. Like those conditioned by Cold War bipolarity, unipolarity’s soteriologies operated on two fronts, “a political and military struggle abroad and a political and cultural struggle at home.”²⁷ The first is against the emergent threats to US power in the unipolar world – notably terrorism and rogue states – the second against the fracture of American identity itself, which had replaced images of the melting pot with multicultural pluralism and cultural unicity with celebration of diversity. Using the heuristic of the dispensation, which conceptualizes dynamic interdependencies between discourses of domestic, imperial, and cosmic order, this section explores how these two fronts (de)construct one another, with the tensions between them producing intertwined figures of damnation – states and populations that must be coerced into normativity, lest the world crumble.

Empire for the world

In his 2000 article, “The ‘Rogue State’ Image in American Foreign Policy,” Paul D. Hoyt demonstrates a shift in the perceptual construction of threats from the “enemy” image to the “rogue” after the Cold War. The enemy image, epitomized by the USSR, envisions a foe “comparable in power capability and similar in terms of cultural sophistication.”²⁸ The rogue, by contrast, is inferior both in military capability and cultural sophistication, framed through notions of radical asymmetry and moral lack. Having “no respect for the international system” but unable to foster viable alternatives, the rogue prefers “to disrupt what exists.”²⁹ The shift from enemy to rogue, prominent in the foreign policy of the Clinton era, encapsulates a broader post-Cold War transition from

²⁵Keller, *God and Power*, 20.

²⁶Quoted in Adib-Moghaddam, *International Politics*, 76.

²⁷Bacevich, *Empire*, 82.

²⁸Hoyt, ‘Rogue Image,’ 307.

²⁹Ibid. 308

power politics to what Miroslav Nincic terms “international deviance.” That is, global society was/is no longer ruled by peer states “jockeying for power and position” but by “a clash pitting most of international society, including its leading powers, against a few actors that, their lack of conventional power notwithstanding, challenge the majority’s interests and values.”³⁰

While generally conforming to “authoritarian” political systems, such states (which have included Iran, Iraq, North Korea, Cuba, Sudan, and former Yugoslavia) usually have differing governmental structures, legitimating ideologies, and capabilities for action.³¹ Moreover, the qualities constructed as marking a rogue state – development of WMDs; involvement in international terrorism; posing a military threat locally or globally; challenging international norms – were never unique to those states designated such. What unites rogue states is not structure or behaviors but “a common perception by American policy makers”³² – specifically, a perception of having deviated from a world order shaped by US unipolarity. This perceptual framing aligns with what Bacevich classifies as the main impetus of American imperium: a strategy of global openness and integration (only) under American auspices. As he demonstrates, unlike imperialisms of the past, American empire built itself not (chiefly) on territorial ownership or even administrative control but on commercial access. This strategy predates unipolarity by almost a century, but only with unipolarity and the America-led era of globalization it inaugurated could such a strategy approach realization, or at least the perception of realization. This perception frames the discourse of “rogue states” and galvanizes the global war on terror that succeeded it. The *concept* of the “rogue state” requires a perception (not necessarily the reality) of a single legitimating source of authority. In introducing notions of a global hegemon and an international constellation oriented around that hegemon, unipolarity creates a context in which states that fail to adhere to that system are framed as willfully deviant. By this, I do not mean that the actions of “rogue states” are not abhorrent with regards to human rights, equality, or religious and political freedom, only that their placement in post-Cold War “geographies of evil” constitutes part of broader discursive and material processes of (il)legitimation.

As Andrew Preston has cogently demonstrated, religion – particularly as it fostered and transfigured exceptionalist frameworks – has exerted a structuring force on American foreign policy throughout the nation’s history.³³ Here, however, I am less interested in how religion explicitly shaped foreign policy understandings on the rogue state than what the heuristic rubric of the dispensation might illuminate about how the rogue state functioned in the creation and perpetuation of particular soteriological economies. Drawing on Kotsko’s discussion of the disciplinary function of the soteriological economy – the dispensation – we might frame the “rogue state” in two intertwined ways. On the one hand, it is a “savable” figure, changeable coercively through the imposition of sanctions or forcibly via military intervention. On the other hand, it embodies Keller’s already-damned “diabolical dark force,” permitting ascriptions of American identity (and interests) as metonyms for (those of) humanity. Either way, in the (theo)-political imaginary of the unipolar dispensation, the “rogue state” – as a discursive figure

³⁰Nincic, *Renegade Regimes*, 1.

³¹Cameron, *US Foreign Policy*, 142–3; Nincic, *Renegade Regimes*, 12.

³²Hoyt, ‘Rogue State,’ 306.

³³Preston, *Sword of the Spirit*.

– emerges as a threat because it is an obstacle to the realization of America’s providential empire.

The figure of “terrorism” – as a product of rogue states and in more decentralized forms – functions similarly, perhaps even more acutely. Bacevich accurately classifies the war on terror as one “to preserve and to advance the strategy of openness,” but while he notes that “terrorism” provided an identifiable enemy broadly lacking since 1989, it is crucial to note that “terrorism” is not the enemy of Hoyt’s “enemy image” but of his “rogue,” marked by asymmetry of arms and ascribed inferiority of culture. At the same time, the “terrorism” conjured after 9/11 is a singular – amalgamating not merely al-Qaeda but all associated and adjacent groups and individuals – yet highly mutable object – as America determines who the “real” terrorists are – that while localized in specific organs (states) is metastasized throughout the global body. Providing a rationale for the sustained use of US military might – locally and globally – “terrorism” both epitomizes and transforms the function of the “rogue.” Unlike the latter, which can be coerced toward salvation, terrorism cannot be redeemed by integration into unipolarity. Rather, it is *already* integrated – but as the excess of damnation. Existing in global networks of information and arms trafficking, terrorism (as figure and reality) reflects the necropolized and necropolizing shadow of the unipolar world, one that contests and (thereby) consolidates America’s promised radiance.

Yet if America sought to remake the unipolar world in its own image, what this image was acquired paramount significance. The pursuit of unipolarity was dependent on domestic identity construction – both in that rogue states and terrorism consolidated a narrative of national identity in relation to the world, and in that that world in which America was attempting to coerce or cleanse such deviants took shape from that narrative of identity. But this domestic identity was a contested one – the nation faced a political and cultural struggle at home as much a political and military one abroad. Bacevich frames these conflicts as mutually destabilizing, and to an extent they were (and remain so) – it is perhaps indisputable that a loss of hegemonic identity in the homeland cannot but complicate imperial impositions of that hegemonic identity in the world at large. However, Bacevich situates this destabilization as the result of opposite sides of the culture war winning the domestic and international fronts of the struggle, and these sides – if radically opposed on policies – in reality utilized the same exceptionalist frameworks to frame their struggles. As Sacvan Bercovitch unpacks, the civil rights struggles of the sixties onwards (as well as their predecessors) drew on mythologies of “America as an unfolding prophecy,” which “castigated the defects of the present so as to give voice to the *abiding* national identity.” An absence of “inalienable rights” (tied to the nation’s founding) was denounced through ritualistic reiterations of such rights, wherein “charges of social abuse took the form of appeals to social ideals.”³⁴ If both conservative and progressive forces drew on shared (exceptionalist) mythological foundations, such disputes over the identity of “America” should perhaps not only be seen as destabilizing of imperial power but also as reinforced by – and, crucially, reinforcing of – that power.

³⁴Bercovitch, *American Jeremiad*, xiii, xvii–xviii.

A household divided?

The history of America, Hartman diagnoses, “is largely a history of debates about the idea of America.” In recent history, the 1960s hold a special place in these debates. They “gave birth to a new America, a nation more open to new peoples, new ideas, new norms, and new, if conflicting, articulations of America itself.” The sixties “universalized fracture,” paving the way for a national culture that today is perhaps more divided than at “any period since the Cold War.”³⁵ They (re)ignited the culture wars. First used in America to refer to the religious right’s campaign against what they saw as the indecent, subversive, and blasphemous works of liberal artists and academics during the Reagan Presidency, the term “culture war” was reintroduced in the early 1990s to refer to ideas that American society had drawn itself up along opposing ideological fronts, characterized by attitudes to homosexuality, abortion, recreational drug use, gun politics, privacy, censorship, and church-state separation.³⁶

One paradigmatic example of such culture war discourse came at the 1992 Republican National Convention where former presidential candidate Pat Buchanan framed Republican opposition to Bill and Hillary Clinton as a war “for the soul of America,” one “as critical to the kind of nation we will one day be as was the Cold War itself.” He drew a stark divide between an America he saw as aligned with and championed by the Clintons – characterized by “abortion on demand ... homosexual rights, discrimination against religious schools, [and] women in combat units” – and “a nation that we still call God’s country.” Buchanan would continue this lament long after Clinton’s presidency, opining in *American Conservative* on 10 July 2009, that the nation was still being transformed “without the assent of her people” from “a Christian nation” rooted in a white, European ethnos into “a multiracial, multiethnic, multilingual, multicultural Tower of Babel” unseen since the late Roman empire.

Images of divine judgment were widely deployed in laments at the decline of normative (white, Christian) America. In addition to that of Babel, the judgment of Sodom and Gomorrah – long sutured exclusively to sexual activity, specifically male same-sex relations – was especially common.³⁷ Philosopher Leon Kass, beloved by the religious right, framed the culture wars as a battle between “Sodom and Gomorrah and Middletown,” between “the values of the Bible and the values of the mass media,” which posed the greatest challenge to American unity since the Civil War.³⁸ Abortion and the continued growth of feminism and gay rights were figured as spearheading national descent, with conservative religious notions that homosexuality was itself “a contagious disease” and “sign of the end times, imagined as a plague-like epidemic threatening the entire American body” growing in cultural influence with the AIDS crisis.³⁹ The growth of “postmodernism” and new critical methodologies such as queer and critical race theory in the academy, as well as revaluations of the key role of black and indigenous Americans in the nation’s history and continued oppression in its present, also unsettled old certainties about America’s past and position in the world. In addition, however, America’s new place in this

³⁵Hartman, *War for the Soul*, 1–4.

³⁶Hunter, *Culture Wars*; Hartman, *War for the Soul*.

³⁷Jordan, *The Invention of Sodomy*.

³⁸Quoted in Abrams, *Commentary Magazine*, 263.

³⁹Long, *AIDS and American Apocalypticism*, 2–4.

world also provoked adjustments in dispensationalist fears, Clinton-era globalization reigniting fears of one world orders – fears LaHaye and Jenkin’s staggeringly successful *Left Behind* series remain exemplary of, and to which I return shortly.⁴⁰

As the latter elements of the conflict reveal, and Hartman unpacks in his history of the culture wars, the conflict – waged on one side by progressive political actors aiming at unsettling the (sexual, racial, gendered) hierarchies of normative America and on the other by neoconservatives and religious right groups trying to sustain or restore that normativity – was not only about specific issues but also the identity (and thus purpose) of the nation. This acquired critical focus after the Cold War’s end and its concomitant “loss of national purpose.” Neoconservatives saw an emerging “liberal ethos” as curtailing America’s efforts to remain the “exceptional nation among nations in the post-Cold War world.” Those of the religious right, meanwhile, framed this ethos as dedicated to the destruction of the divine foundations of the nation itself. Both, however, appealed to America’s “Judeo-Christian” foundations as offering the only platform for legitimate articulations of national identity. This conflict between “(Judeo-)Christian America” and a more diverse and openly heterogeneous “Tower of Babel” ties into what Hartman diagnoses as the “paradox of American secularization”; namely, that “religious authority dwindled even as the vast majority of Americans doggedly persisted in religious belief.” For the enduringly religious, loss of historical institutional privileges in areas of education, state politics, and law appeared as a “shattering of worlds.”⁴¹

The reduction of White Protestantism’s influence challenged the centrality of Christianity to Americanism. However, while Hartman is correct in his assessment that after the Cold War, “there was no going back” and the “culture wars were the new American norm,”⁴² it is crucial to recognize Bercovitch’s insight that these attempted transformations of normative America emerged chiefly from within its exceptionalist frameworks rather than from outside them. While the more radical sections of the left might have truly sought to shatter this foundation, many more (arguably the more successful) articulated their grievances using the language of America’s yet-unfulfilled promise, demanding recognition of their role in its history and staking a claim on its future. Hartman notes with irony that while the America envisioned by the sixties counterculture ostensibly won, it often did in more assimilable forms. The rise of neoliberal feminism, national and corporate pinkwashing, and what Puar cogently calls “homonationalism” – the leveraging of growing acceptance of non-straight citizens for the purposes of US empire-building against less tolerant (unenlightened, ergo barbaric) others – exemplifies this transition. As religious right and neoconservative actors tried to restore the fractured singularity of their America, assimilations of old antagonisms gave shape to new frontiers of exceptionalist normativity no less inherently amenable to the pursuit of unipolarity. While conservative forces framed countercultural forces as tearing down America from its rightful throne, and cultural contestations doubtlessly complicated the enforcement of unipolarity, the truth is that the culture wars were not a conflict over the exceptionality of America – merely the form that exceptionality should take, the vision of election to which other nations should aspire, and the soteriologies that must therefore be enforced.

⁴⁰See Sutton, *American Apocalypse*, 326–76. For a history of conservative Christian opposition to global bodies, see Ruotsila, *Christian Anti-Internationalism*.

⁴¹Hartman, *War for the Soul*, 276, 79, 6.

⁴²*Ibid.* 252.

The international front of the unipolar dispensation grounded the possibility of salvation on proximity to “America” – one’s capacity to adopt the norms America was constructed as embodying and (thus) facilitate American imperial interests. In order to approximate this “America,” however, its identity had to (or at least appear to) be stable and secured. The unipolar dispensation is thus marked by the question of and quest for this one America. It quests after oneness, and takes place after oneness: after oneness, as unipolarity, is possible if not present; after oneness, as cultural unicity, is shattered or at least irrevocably altered. As the dispensation’s logic helps to expose, empire and household here inflect one another. Yet while Bacevich situated the radiating fractures of unicity at home as only threatening to the consolidation of unipolarity abroad, it is better to frame them as mutually (de)constructive. A push for global openness driven by US leadership and ensured by American arms required the consolidation of an identity – it demanded *one* America. Which America this would be was fought on the battlefield of the culture wars. Despite otherwise irreconcilable differences, however, both sides in this war articulated their demands in a language inherited from shared exceptionalist foundations. Empire and household, if mutually complicating, ultimately buttressed a blurred but nonetheless singular (and singularly exceptionalist) image of a cosmos: one America, uniquely called (by God or History) to lead a unipolar world – even if where to was contested.

Trumping exceptionalism

The election of Donald Trump has both clarified and complicated this cosmic image. Trump’s iconic campaign slogan “Make America Great Again” drew upon the legacy of dispensationalist prophesying, framing its jeremiad in more secular terms but still calling upon the core claim that the US had strayed from destiny and urgent course correction was needed. In this, Trump’s campaign exemplified the ways that, as Bercovitch detailed, the American jeremiad operates as a tool for the ritualistic control of dissent, framing critiques of the nation within the national narrative, with its hallmarks of exceptionality and providence. Opposition to Trump, with its pop-culture-infused declarations of entering the “darkest timeline” and refrains of his presidency’s abnormality, merely reinforce Bercovitch’s insights. Framing himself as the rectifier of an errant history, Trump became (to his detractors) the marker of another. Yet despite its repetitions, the Trump era – or dispensation – brought notable transformations relative to the soteriologies that preceded it. Most significantly, it severed (or has attempted to sever) connections between constructions of American uniqueness and American universality, disrupting or perhaps even dispensing with exceptionalism itself.

Perhaps, the most definitive transition has occurred in the international sphere. The aforementioned *Politico* article reflects this by humorously indicating the loss of US standing in the international arena. Trump’s withdrawal from the Paris Climate Accords and the Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action, and Merkel and French President Emmanuel Macron’s ensuing declaration that Europe could no longer rely on American protection and must direct its own destiny seemingly signal an end to US unipolarity. Military might, the strength behind America’s will, remains, but the terms of engagement have shifted. Trump’s vow to respond to North Korea with “fire and fury like the world has never seen” if it provoked America’s wrath – rhetoric recently revived in claims that

“total decimation” would occur without a denuclearization deal – for example, was analyzed by news outlets like *MSNBC* and *Vox* as mirroring the rhetoric of Kim Jong-un more than of prior presidents. And while one can frame such exchanges as mere examples of puerile machismo played out on the world stage with potentially nuclear consequences, this eschewing of the rhetoric of humanitarianism that had categorized previous foreign interventions also points to the way Trump’s style and substance reflects that of the very “rogues” American empire was formerly constituted in contrast to.

As Nincic discusses, a nation’s status as “rogue” was often used in domestic politics of identity: ethnonationalism or “neoteric, radical, and rage-based forms of religion” were used to define national identity in opposition to cultural globalization and the idea that “hostile foreign forces have undermined the community’s dignity and significance.”⁴³ Yet, whereas for such nations the US exemplified such forces, Trump’s ethnonationalism and the Christian nationalism of figures like Robertson and Jeffress use similar discourses to cast America as similarly threatened. Trump’s stated commitment to defending “one beautiful nation under God” at the 2017 National Prayer Breakfast and his claim on 6 July in Warsaw that the “fundamental question of our time is whether the West has the will to survive” envisioned a model of Western, specifically American (White Christian), identity as one whose “dignity and significance” are besieged by “hostile foreign forces.” The exact identities of such hostile forces shift – and significantly so – often replicating racist topoi long present in American public culture, whether these be the deceptiveness and craftiness of China, or the images of terror, crime, animalistic appetites, and cultural inassimilability used to dehumanize migrants from Africa, the Middle East, or Latin America. Yet, while the imagery deployed to demonize these targets differs, the means by which they allegedly contravene the national body coheres around the specter of “globalism.”

Through his campaign, Trump deployed the term to characterize the policies and worldview of Barack Obama and Hillary Clinton. As reported on 14 November 2017 by the *New York Times*, then-Trump spokeswoman Hope Hicks defined globalism as putting “allegiance to international institutions ahead of the nation-state,” seeking unrestricted movement of goods and people and rejecting “the principle that the citizens of a country are entitled to preference for jobs.” The term is tied closely to conservative conspiracist discourses, notably that of founder of InfoWars media empire Alex Jones, with whom Trump conducted an interview in 2015. In these discourses, globalism’s undermining of national sovereignty is linked to the undermining of the heteropatriarchal family; asked about his view on same-sex marriage in June 2013, for example, Jones claimed that “from the eugenicist/globalist view ... they want to encourage the breakdown of the family, because the family is where people owe their allegiance.” Generally, “globalism” articulates anxieties of coming “one world government” or a “new world order” (NWO) that had circulated in “Patriot” and militia circles long before Bush 41’s (perhaps unfortunate) invocation of the phrase.⁴⁴ For such groups, the NWO referred to a shadowy international collective working to subvert US sovereignty and (in more religious variations) usher in the reign of Antichrist. As well as LayHaye and Jenkins’ fictionalized renditions, Robertson’s 1991 bestseller *The New World Order* is a noteworthy and

⁴³Nincic, *Renegade Regimes*, 182, 74.

⁴⁴Barkun, *Culture of Conspiracy*; Ruotsila, *Christian Anti-Internationalism*.

influential example. Framing the 1990–1991 Gulf War – often framed as the political instantiation of American unipolarity itself – as the ceding of US sovereignty to the United Nations, Robertson's text framed a "Christian United States" as necessary to combat a coming Satanic global order.⁴⁵

Externalizations of "deviant" populations via association with foreign adversaries or transnational groups, diasporic or otherwise, are far from new – in America or widely.⁴⁶ Additionally, conjurations of "globalist" threats have deep roots in and often replicate anti-Semitic conspiracies, with their fixations on internationalism and refrains of "international finance."⁴⁷ These are important and necessary factors to consider. However, I here wish to discuss how the figure of "globalism" within the context of Trump's election works to unify domestic and international strategies of demonization through the demonization of unipolar constructions of American universality. Globalist conspiracies draw radical distinctions between the US government and cosmopolitan elites – framed as in thrall to international bodies (the UN, the World Bank) and (especially after Trump's victory) the "Deep State" – and national sovereignty and "Real America[n]" authenticity. This framework was typified by conspiracist and popular discourse around the 2016 election, with Hillary Clinton being associated with both liberal internationalism and the rights of women, and sexual and ethnic minorities in stark opposition to Trump's ethno-nationalism and its "America First" claims to return sovereignty to "authentic" America. At the same time, however, the "America" here opposed to globalism is shaped by the shifts in US identity wrought by the culture wars and their new exceptionalisms. Trump's pledge at the Republican National Convention to protect "LGBTQ" Americans specifically from "hateful foreign ideology," following the Orlando nightclub shootings by ISIS-allegiant Omar Mateen, exemplified post-9/11 homonationalism, and fed into the Islamophobic rhetoric that Trump later carried forward into presidential policy-making. Various iterations of a ban on military service by transgender people who have either transitioned or are transitioning, one part of broader transphobic trends, highlight the geographic specificity of Trump's pledge – and perhaps an underlying fixation on the stability and security of borders around "natural" identities, personal as well as national.⁴⁸

Trump's campaign tapped into existing divisions drawn along gendered, racial, and sexual lines more than it invented new ones. However, viewed through the dynamism of the dispensational triptych, and exemplified by the overarching framing of (anti-)globalism, domestic contestations over identity should not be seen as distinct from international implementations of US imperial power. They are discursively and materially intertwined. Perhaps unsurprisingly, and coherent with his anti-globalism, Trump's opportunistic homonationalism drew internal borders more than external ones. And this drawing of domestic boundaries between saved and damned is the context in which Trump's apparent mimicry of "rogues" must be situated. Unlike under the dispensational economies of unipolarity, Trumpian domestic soteriologies do not relate to the mask that America shows the

⁴⁵See Fitzgerald, *Evangelicals*. For the impact of the Gulf War on unipolarity, see Adib-Moghaddam, *International Politics*.

⁴⁶For how minoritarian population became framed as allegiant to communities outside the nation as part of strategies of dehumanization, see Appadurai, *Fear of Small Numbers*.

⁴⁷Barkun, *Culture of Conspiracy*, 126; Ruotsila, *Christian Anti-Internationalism*, 40–41, 124, 175.

⁴⁸For links between transphobia, border securitization, and administrative violence, particularly in relation to homonationalism and pinkwashing, see Dean Spade, *Normal Life*.

world, the self-image of that “indispensable nation” against which others are judged and to which they are intended to aspire. This shattering of self-image should not be seen as simple isolationism – long a favored bugbear of those pushing America’s exceptional position on the world stage⁴⁹ – even if those new frontiers of the culture wars display shared fixations on national and bodily borders that shape the identity of damned subjects, who will be shielded only from “foreign” ideologies and excluded from the main institution that still enforces US power. Despite the isolationist tones of “America First” and contrary campaign comments, Trump’s presidency has shown a strong preference for unilateralism, with persistent admiration for military power and little hesitation over armed intervention, in either prospect (North Korea) or practice (Syria).

Reading the domestic reconfigurations of this Trumpian dispensation through the international ones reveals less a retreat from the world than a retreat from exceptionalism as previously defined. It severs the bond between American exceptionalism’s twin claims to uniqueness and universality, maintaining the nation’s singularity – its exceptionality as distinction – by shedding its ostensibly universal nature – its exceptionality as excellence. The soteriologies of unipolarity – drawing on and actualizing older traditions of American exceptionalism – were grounded in “America” as a metonym for the world and Americans as one of humanity. The new dispensation sketches its borders more sharply. Its definition of “who the American are” – of who they *can be* – is more circumscribed. In a sense, this circumscription merely exacerbates and exposes tensions present within the unipolar dispensation’s soteriologies, which were always built on the empire-state’s oft-disavowed distinction between the already-saved citizens and teeming masses of savable, damnable, and already-damned subjects. Yet, it also dispenses with the promise of universality on which unipolarity’s soteriologies were justified. More than a mere slip of the mask of exceptionalism from the face of empire – although it is this – this emerging soteriology figures America itself as having become damned (or at least damnable) precisely because of its universalizing aspirations, politically and ethically. Framed thus, it is not that this Trumpian soteriology refuses redemptive or regenerative language – his pledge to return the nation to greatness, to save ailing (and increasingly circumscribed) people from “American carnage” – as Trump’s inauguration speech had it – shows otherwise. It is that the carnage from which it seeks to save them might just be exceptionalism itself.

Closure

The current crisis over American identity figured by the 2016 election is part of a broader crisis tied to soteriological tensions inaugurated by US unipolarity. At once religious and political, this crisis emerges around anxieties over the correct path to salvation for the citizen-subjects of US empire. Framing this crisis through the heuristic of a “unipolar dispensation,” I argued that the globalization of “America” after the Cold War founded an unstable soteriological economy in which salvation was aligned with an American-ness that was itself ceaselessly (and necessarily) contested. In this framework, domestic culture wars – especially with the loss of the consolidating enemy image of the Soviet Union – represented the battleground for an American identity and normativity which other and othered nations might approximate. Cultivation – by agreement, coercion, invasion – of

⁴⁹See Bacevich, *American Empire*, 72.

this identity in such others constituted part of the strategy of openness, the means by which the rapidly globalizing world would be made (accessible to) America. Sublimation of America's increasingly acknowledged differences – exemplified, in the context of race, by Clinton's "One America," but also applicable to sexuality, gender, ethnicity, religion – is here necessary for the consolidation of a global imperium premised on others' ability to approximate the hegemon's self-image. As such, mutual (de)constructions of unicity and unipolarity gave shape to the soteriological economy of the unipolar dispensation.

Donald Trump's election complicates this soteriological economy, representing in different measures both the end of unipolarity's soteriologies and an end to which they have led. His presidency has unsettled the divisions between exceptionalism and empire that unipolarity relied on and thereby destabilizes exceptionalist visions of the nation as grounded in its ethical and political excellence – its exemplary universality. In both rhetoric and policy, the trumping of the old dispensation seeks to dispense with unipolarity and the soteriological frameworks it represented, which were premised on ideas of global openness and American leadership and moral superiority (however illusory or disingenuous such claims may have been). Yet, this qualifier begs a return to Sinykin's reading of Trump's dispensationalist supporters: was Trump's election truly the "rapture?" Has it inaugurated a new dispensation, the soteriologies of which supersede the prior, or merely laid bare tensions within existing soteriologies?

The answer is a complex one. The structuring power of the jeremiad in American culture will endure – and in this context, it is noteworthy that opposition to Trump (both left and right) often returns to the language of exceptionalism, lamenting the abdication of world leadership and concomitant loss of preeminence. But a desire to return does not necessarily enable one. The rise of new poles of global power (China) and destabilization of old alliances (Europe) make restorations of (American) unipolarity implausible at best. Thus, even if domestic conflicts over national identity are resolved (a prospect perhaps more implausible, given historical patterns and present realities), this resolution would lack its prior imperial salience (persistent military might notwithstanding).⁵⁰ It is this lack which signals the dispensing of the unipolar dispensation. This is not to argue that the question of and quest for one America – in the twenty-first century or beyond – will not continue creating new soteriologies, including exceptionalist ones. Nor is it to claim that such a struggle is not of paramount importance. The struggles of those that the new dispensation attempts to cast as damned subjects to legitimize the salvation of its citizens of paradise will shape and reshape its soteriologies, as others did before them. It is simply to posit that with the crisis and collapse of a unipolar world, one America – whichever (if ever) it might be – may be only that, and nothing more.

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⁵⁰For one analysis of recent trends in the US culture wars, see Angela Nagle's *Kill all Normies*.

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