

# Psychohistory News

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## *From Islamic State to Kiev: Apocalyptic Fantasy and American Power*

by Brian D'Agostino



Captain America

On the eve of September 11, Evil—Islamic State (IS, also known as ISIL or ISIS), addressed himself to a television audience of several billion people spanning each of the planet's six inhabited continents and its nearly 200 countries. The United States, he said, will lead a global coalition and take unilateral military action to destroy the world's latest incarnation of

The forces of Good will “degrade and destroy” the radical Sunni organization, which Obama likened to a cancer, by hunting down and killing its leaders and fighters wherever they try to go. This will protect and advance the

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## BOOKS

*In the Name of the Father: the Bush Years  
and the Legacy of Childrearing Violence, p. 2*

*LITTLE FAILURE: A MEMOIR, p. 3*

### **The Disheartening Life of Ferguson's Michael Brown** by Gilda Graff

An unarmed 18-year-old black man, Michael Brown, was shot and killed on 9 August 2014 by a police officer in Ferguson, Missouri, a St Louis suburb which is about two-thirds African-American. “There are grieving parents and a seething community” (Blow, 2014). The ongoing investigations may clarify the conflicting

accounts of what led to the shooting, but the context, the state of race relations in the United States 150 years after the Civil War, needs to be understood.

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*Exploding the  
Anti-Immigrant  
Group Fantasy, p. 8*

## APOCALYPTIC FANTASY

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Good, epitomized by American values. The president noted in passing that the US was also mobilizing its European allies to defend not only Kiev but all of Eastern Europe from Russian aggression, further establishing America's unique moral and heroic status.

This speech is what apocalyptic fantasy looks like, though to all the Americans and others caught up in the fantasy it seemed like the model of sober and responsible leadership. Meanwhile, to the world's jihadis and their many sympathizers, who also span the globe, it only confirmed America's status as the Great Satan and their own unique role as God's warriors, who will triumph in the end against overwhelming odds precisely because God is on their side.

Thus was the world ensnared by a potent group fantasy to act out in reality a tragic and interminable destruction of lives and resources. President Obama, on the anniversary of Osama bin Laden's greatest triumph, unwittingly paid the most fitting possible tribute to the jihadi leader. The latter's triumph was not, as is commonly thought, the destruction of the World Trade Center as such. Rather, it was the "War on Terror" that 9/11 provoked, the apocalyptic war that bin Laden knew the jihadis would win because it would be fought on their home turf. All he had to do was lure the Great Satan into the apocalyptic field of battle and God would do the rest; it was precisely that successful provocation that bin Laden accomplished on 9/11.

## The Challenge for Psychohistory

What can we as psychohistorians do to counteract this state of affairs? The first step is to not get caught up in the group fantasy ourselves, which is easier said than done. Several psychohistorians I know seem unwilling or unable to confront the aggressive nature of NATO's post-Cold War expansion in Eastern Europe. Rather than acknowledge that aggression and incorporate it into their picture of the West, they project it onto Vladimir Putin and turn him into the archetypal Aggressor. Others who I know, practicing psychoanalysts, repeatedly denounce radical Islamists such as Hamas and ISIL as the embodiment of Evil while exonerating the Israeli and American governments of any major role in the region's political violence.



Flag of Islamic State

Such thinking is a measure, in my opinion, of the work that is cut out for us. We need to build on pioneering studies in this area such as Marc-André Cotton's *In the Name of the Father: the Bush Years and the Legacy of Childrearing Violence* (Editions L'Instant Présent 2013; see summary on page two). Chuck Strozier et al examine the psychology of radical Islam in *The Fundamentalist Mindset: Psychological Perspectives on Religion, Violence, and History* (Oxford 2010) and Howard Stein's "Jewish Identity: a Shared 'Chosen Trauma'" (*Journal of Psychohistory* 41, 4; Spring 2014) sheds new light

on apocalyptic Zionism. Others have explored the role of perinatal trauma in apocalyptic group fantasies, notably Richard Morrock in *The Psychology of Genocide and Violent Oppression* (MacFarland and Company 2010) and of course Lloyd deMause in *Foundations of Psychohistory* (1982; available at [www.psychohistory.com](http://www.psychohistory.com)).

In the remainder of this essay, however, my task will be more modest—to pose some questions that can help separate fantasy from reality. Then other psychohistorians, building on the above-mentioned studies and other relevant research, can provide a psychodynamic analysis of the fantasies themselves and the traumas out of which they arise. I will end by sketching what a reality-based US foreign policy might look like.

## Separating Fantasy from Reality

A reality-based world-view, in contrast to apocalyptic thinking, does not divide the world into "us" and "them," where the former are equated with Good and the latter with Evil. But rejecting such dualism does not entail moral relativism—far from it. In my ethical universe, torture, wars of aggression, and the killing of civilians are always bad and democracy, gender equality and respect for differences of religion, race, and sexual orientation are always good. What makes me non-apocalyptic is that I apply these same ethical standards to "us" and "them." This can only occur when I recognize that "we" are not archetypal heroes beyond reproach and "they" are not archetypal villains fit only to be destroyed.

Imagine, for example, if the Soviets had won the Cold War and rather than disbanding the Warsaw Pact, they expanded it into Latin America,

bringing state after state into the now unnecessary military alliance and projecting Soviet power to America's very borders. If such policy would constitute aggression, then so did the US promotion of NATO expansion into post-communist Eastern Europe. Such thought experiments—asking “how would *we* like it if *they* did this or that”—are as fundamental for understanding international relations as for interpersonal relations.

Similarly, if dictatorship is evil then this cannot apply to some dictators, say Saddam Hussein, and not others, say Hosni Mubarak or Abdel Fattah el-Sisi, depending on their relationship to the United States. If nuclear weapons are too destructive for Iran to have, then how can it be acceptable for Israel and the United States to have them? Finally, if beheading people for political reasons is a heinous crime, then how can that apply only to IS and not also to Saudi Arabia, which has done it for decades, and on a much larger scale?

### Reality-Based Policy

I turn now to the question of what a reality- and values- based US foreign policy might look like. Among other things, it would withdraw the United States from the role of world policeman and the expectation that this country is uniquely entitled to unilateral uses of force. To fill the power vacuum thus created, the US needs to promote effective institutions of collective security (see also [www.globalactionpw.org](http://www.globalactionpw.org)). This would include repairing relations with Russia in the interests of a unified UN Security Council. The latter would then be empowered to undertake timely humanitarian intervention, for example, to prevent genocidal acts by IS or any other state or non-state actor.

A demilitarized US foreign policy would include phasing out the US-dominated and obsolete NATO and empowering the European Defence

Agency to fill the vacuum. This could well defuse the crisis in Ukraine, but if Russia continues to menace Kiev the solution is not to militarize Europe but to equip Ukraine with the non-offensive capabilities it needs to deter attacks on its territory, such as anti-aircraft and anti-tank weapons. It would include phasing out military aid to Egypt and Israel and replacing it with locally controlled civilian economic development aid intended to eradicate poverty in Palestine and the entire region. Only this can remove the conditions in which terrorist organizations and a politics of despair flourish. It would include normalizing relations with Iran in exchange for Iranian commitment to the security of Israel.

So what about the Islamic State? I don't feel informed enough on this subject to comment with much confidence except to say that there appear to be no magic bullets. In the short term, some kind of multilateral military response may be needed, similar perhaps to the kind President Obama indicated—US air support for local and regional “boots on the ground.” If indeed that is the best response, however, it is essential that it be recognized for what it is—at most a stopgap measure that will only produce a new generation of jihadis if not accompanied by a broader shift to a new, demilitarized foreign policy paradigm of the sort proposed here.

The conditions that created the Arab spring—Western backed dictatorships and corrupt monarchies that have lost all legitimacy with ordinary people—have not fundamentally changed, and future instability in the region is certain. It is essential that the West stop supporting these regimes and identify responsible groups—including religious reformers who are reviving Muhammad's and the Quran's authentic message of peace and justice—that enjoy popular support. (About these reformers, see

Reza Aslan, *No god but God: The Origins, Evolution, and Future of Islam*). A proactive Western policy of channeling economic development assistance to such groups with no strings attached can help build the civil society needed for a democratic future in the Middle East. Continued reliance on a militarized foreign policy, by contrast, will ensure the continued ascendancy of violent jihadi groups.

**As-salamu alaykum**

**Peace be upon you**

The foreign policy agenda I have sketched here will of course be dismissed out of hand as utopian by hawk and so-called “realist” elites. But these are the same people who have been in power and whose policies have failed miserably in the real world. Only a progressive mass movement demanding a demilitarized foreign policy can turn the tide. Any president committed to such an agenda—and Barack Obama could be such a president if pressured by a progressive mass movement—will of course be denounced as a wimp. Machismo is therefore another psychohistorical issue that must be confronted as we seek to fashion a post-apocalyptic policy discourse (see my “Self-Images of Hawks and Doves,” *Political Psychology* 16, 2). Helping create such a discourse is a task for which the psychohistory community is well suited.

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- Summer 2015    Hiroshima, Iran, and the Future of Nuclear Weapons  
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- Winter 2015    Behind the CIA Torture Report: Sadism, Power, and Behavior Modification
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- Winter 2013    How to End Violence in America, Statement of the IPA  
                    Mass Killing: Why Are American Men Now "Going Postal?"  
                    On America's Gun Culture