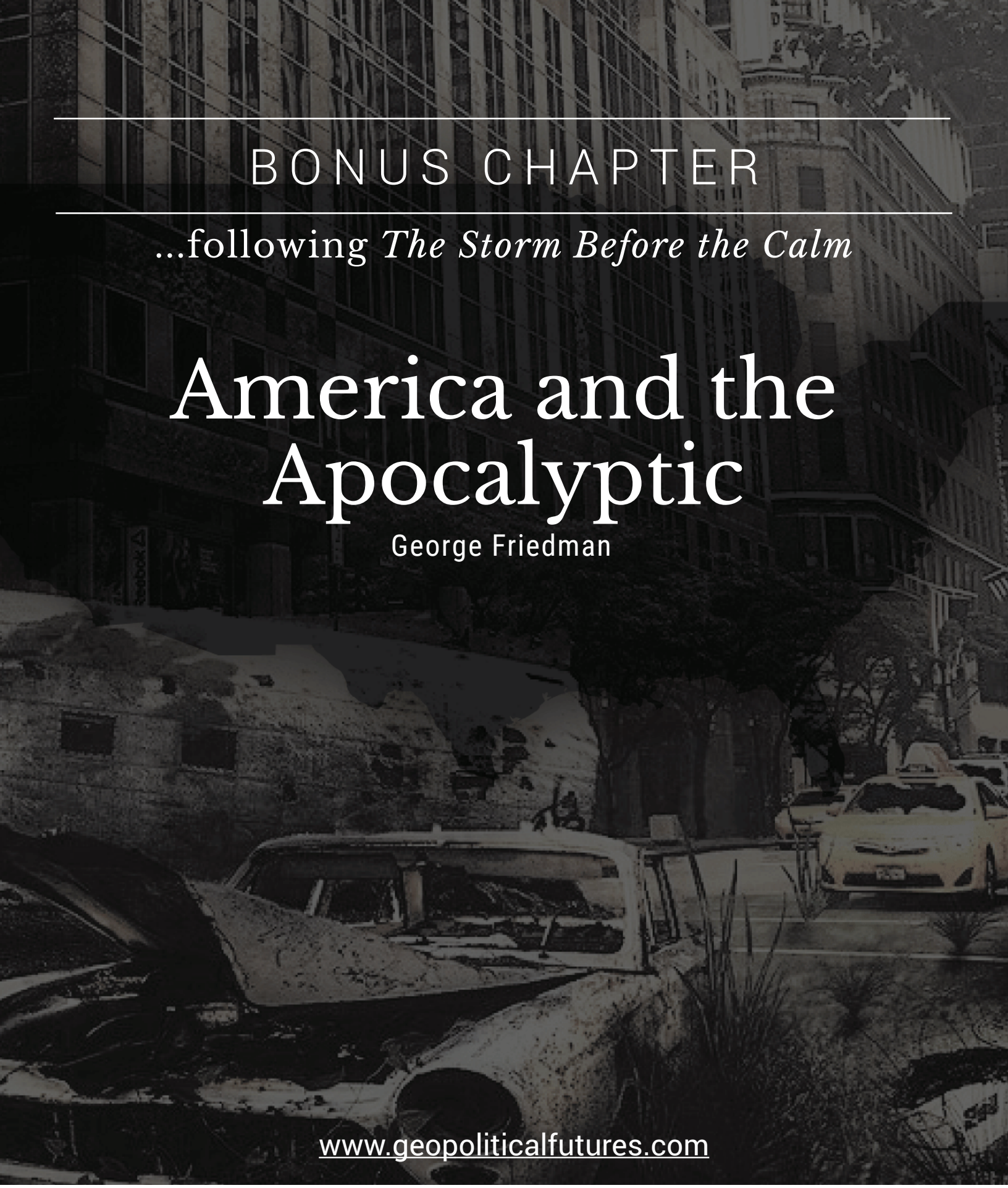

BONUS CHAPTER

...following *The Storm Before the Calm*

America and the Apocalyptic

George Friedman

www.geopoliticalfutures.com

GPF | GEOPOLITICAL FUTURES

The Roanoke Colony was, as I discussed in Part One, the first English settlement in North America. One hundred-fifteen people crossed the North Atlantic in the summer of 1587. They were funded by venture capitalists hoping to make a profit from the settlement, as were the settlers. There was nothing lofty in their aims, nothing revolutionary, nothing that might challenge a wrathful God. They came simply to make money and then to go home. The banality of the settlement was its only distinguishing characteristic.

The unknown lurked and the unknown is the greatest fear of all humans. But by landing on an island, they felt reasonably secure. Greed, the self-assurance of the English and a channel separating the island from the mainland mitigated the fear they must have felt. After they arrived, the ship they came on left, and no English ship returned for three years. A war had broken out with France that made resupply impossible. When a supply ship finally came back, the colony was no longer there. The settlers had disappeared without a trace.

There are many theories of what might have happened, for no one was left to say. The only sign was a carving on a post: Croatoan. It was the name of a tribe nearby, on Hatteras Island. It might have been a warning about the tribe, it might have been a welcome sign, it might have been the idle doodling of someone who was bored. In the end, these were merely theories. The truth was simple: The settlers had landed in Roanoke and some force, human or not, annihilated all but their memory.

God threatened Noah with an apocalypse that would obliterate all of humanity. He also promised one that would destroy Sodom and Gomorrah, to annihilate the Egyptian pharaoh and the army with which he pursued the Israelites. God may have been mysterious, but he made his will known. Sodom and Gomorrah fell, and the pharaoh felt his wrath. There was a transaction and there was a choice. There was no mystery.

Roanoke was different. All nations fear annihilation by a jealous God or neighbor, or by a plague that doesn't respect rank. Humans live with the awareness that their life will end in a personal catastrophe, and so they can imagine their life ending in the catastrophe of all. But all of them know their own land and its animals and trees, and all of them know their neighbors. They know what is possible and not. For the settlers at Roanoke, there was no such familiarity. They had come to a place that was

as far from their home as space and culture could permit. What they found there was by its nature strange, and they lived by laws and customs other than theirs. This was true of the people, the animals and the trees. They were all strangers. And deeper in the forest across the channel may have lived gods and devils unknown to those who searched for the colony.

Catastrophe at hands of the unknown was the only reasonable way to think of things. And the fear that there might be something present that you couldn't see or even fathom was unlike the fears of an Englishman. It makes a difference whether you die from something you understand, or you die from something beyond your imagination. That frees your imagination to dread.

There were two types of European presence in North America. There were those who came to explore, hunt or trap – men who had steeled themselves to the fear of the unknown. And then there were the settlers, who came with their children and their wives. They had come here to live, to make a home in a place of uncertain dangers. Roanoke was populated by families who planned to return to England. Some, of course, planned to stay, and for them annihilation meant far more than their own deaths. They bet the lives of all they loved for a chance to make a decent living. Every immigrant made that bet, for no matter what they were told in letters, no matter what they thought they knew, they were going to a place where the city was a forest, and lurking in the forest were dangers unforeseen and unimaginable.

The American fear and fascination with the apocalypse is rooted in the experience of all who migrated here or descended from those who migrated here. All of us are one or the other, and the tales that were passed down were far less important than the sensibility they possessed. The settlers had made a bet of astonishing hubris, bundling entire families as the ante on the poker table of the continent. Each immigrant family faced their own Roanoke.

The story of America is the story of immigration, beginning with the Mayflower and continuing even today. It is normally a story of comfort and triumph. The comfort is achieved by a stranger in a strange land discovering he is at home. The triumph is seen as generational, the store of a poor immigrant whose child became whatever he or she aspired to be. This is a real story, a common one simply because the comfort and triumph are real. What's

untold is the story of how near the immigrant came to disaster, and the price that he paid for the child's success. Notably omitted is the dread and regret the immigrant felt each night going to bed, regretting the decision to leave all that was familiar, and dreading the morning, when it was time to face the Calvary once more.

The Calvary was work. When two Americans meet, the first question frequently is: What do you do? Embedded in the answer is the measurement of success in America: money. Whether you are kind, humorous or depressed is of little interest to the other. What makes you a human elsewhere is secondary to the primary question. Who you are is defined by what you do. For the immigrant, the fear was to lose the comfort carved out for his family. The immigrant knew America to have little pity for failure and even less for weakness. America seemed to promise everything, and then delivered the bill.

When the stock market crashed in 1929, leading to the Great Depression, an apocalypse struck at the very heart of why immigrants come to America. Masses were thrown out of work, endless businesses failed, banks collapsed, stock brokers became penniless, and for the weakest, the only solution was suicide. The Depression left little room for wealth or wisdom. If America was demanding, the Depression was pitiless.

What was most terrible about the Depression was that it seemed to come out of nowhere, with no warning, no chances for someone to wrap himself up to protect himself from the cold. Undoubtedly, there were those who glimpsed the rising water of a tsunami, but they were few, and fewer still had heard their warnings. The Depression came unheralded; I suspect that was the case with Roanoke. There was a darkness in America that the immigrant never imagined. It was not prejudice and hatred – although there was certainly prejudice and hatred – but a mass failure that could not be evaded nor forced back. The unbearable truth was that even work couldn't save you, for there was little work to be had. What you had come to America for, a chance to be comfortable and triumphant, was taken from you not by your own fecklessness and laziness but by a dark force that came from nowhere.

There had been many financial crises, but none had seared themselves on the nation's soul as did 1929. We still measure failure against the Great Depression. Every time the stock market

sputters or businesses fail, a moment of disquiet overcomes us. That our economic life is filled with tails of triumph of billionaires also has a darkness inherent in it. It is the fear that if life is as good as it was in 1928 you are still unsafe. The apocalypse had come once, and if it can come once, it will come again. It's a fear that undergirds every hope for the future we have.

The unexpected apocalypse drives home how little control we have over our lives, a control that is never quite there but that is craved all the same. On Dec. 7, 1941, the Japanese attacked Pearl Harbor without warning. In fact, the government knew there was going to be a war, it just didn't think it would begin with an attack on Pearl Harbor. Tactically, the United States had warnings. Two radar men had detected a large flight of aircraft approaching from the north. They transmitted the information to the watch officer, whose response has become legendary: "Well, don't worry about it."

For decades, the U.S. had been gaming the war with Japan at the Naval War College. The games had generated a strategy: The Japanese would go to war to seize the Dutch East Indies – now Indonesia – to take control of oil and other resources. The route back to Japan would always pass close to the Philippines, so the Japanese would attack there as well. The U.S. would marshal its fleet at a place and time of its choosing, and then would engage and defeat the Japanese fleet. It was an excellent solution if not for Japan's understanding of the strategy, which was hardly a secret. So instead of simply attacking the Philippines, the Japanese attacked Pearl Harbor to destroy the fleet the U.S. intended to use in its counterattack.

Americans were stunned by the attack. They were made aware that the U.S. government had not prepared the fleet for action. Washington was evacuating Hawaii, and the stories told seemed to become more lurid with time. Terror seized the public, particularly on the West Coast. Residents there began to see Japanese warships approaching, Japanese aircraft overhead and Japanese spies everywhere. When the apocalypse allows its victims to draw a breath, it is not relief but panic they feel. And then the Americans waged a ruthless war driven by a hatred for Japanese duplicity.

Pearl Harbor introduced a new, or at least a more intense, dimension of the fear of apocalypse: the conspiracy theory. It went something like this. Franklin Roosevelt wanted to join the war

against Germany. Roosevelt knew that the Japanese would attack Pearl Harbor – and in one version, he actually wanted the Japanese to attack. The theory suffers from two shortcomings. First, Roosevelt did want to intervene against Germany, but the attack at Pearl Harbor didn't help since the public would insist on a clear focus on Japan. Hitler declared war on the U.S., not the other way around. Second, even if he knew of the coming attack, it made no sense to keep the fleet and its crewmembers there. Generously assuming he wanted an attack, it makes no sense that he would want his fleet decimated because doing so would make it more difficult to shift to a European strategy.

The U.S. went to war in a way that seemed apocalyptic. The fact that the war opened with a surprise attack was shocking, validating the deepest fears Americans had. The United States suffered a defeat either through incompetence or complacency. Neither explanation was especially satisfying. One of the deepest beliefs of Americans, particularly after World War I, was that the United States was competent. To accept the idea of incompetence was terrifying. If we were incompetent, then the Japanese might win the war. The other more comforting explanation for Pearl Harbor was that the U.S. was competent and that Roosevelt was competent, if evil. By believing his hand was managing Pearl Harbor to justify a war in Europe, the public could believe that he was also capable of protecting the U.S. (There was no theory that held him to be a traitor.) Paradoxically, absolving the military and blaming the president created a comforting matrix that made the apocalypse less frightening.

It's true that Pearl Harbor was not the apocalypse, but it was surely an apocalyptic event. No other military event had generated such fear since possibly the Civil War. This was the first time the threat of a foreign military seemed real, and that the U.S. for a time did not seem able to protect the nation. Above all it created a sense that the world was filled with threats, and that one might strike us without any warning in the place and time where we were most vulnerable. After Pearl Harbor the United States stood constant watch for the coming of the apocalypse.

But from this came the fear of an honest-to-god apocalypse: nuclear weaponry. World War II ended with the revelation that atomic bombs existed and one bomb could annihilate a city. After the joy of victory wore off for the U.S., Americans and indeed the entire world were filled with dread. As the Soviets

(and others) developed nuclear weapons of their own, the rational and sensible fear of nuclear annihilation was magnified by the dark intents of an unknown enemy. The forests outside Roanoke were replaced by the opacity of the Kremlin walls.

That fear led to the institutionalization of the possibility of surprise attack. The Depression and Pearl Harbor surprised Americans. The Depression and World War II defined a generation. That generation, in power after World War II, was obsessed with the apocalypse lurking out of sight.

The response can be found in Cheyenne Mountain, near Colorado Springs. It has been hollowed out to try to make it invulnerable to nuclear attack. Inside the mountain is the North American Aerospace Defense Command, or NORAD. In the 1950s, it was in constant communication with the Distant Early Warning Line of radar stations strung across northern Canada and into Greenland. They watched for Soviet missiles, and if they had been launched, NORAD would inform the Strategic Air Command as nuclear bombers, some always in the air, others on ready alert, stood by to annihilate the Soviet Union.

The idea was that at any moment, without warning and without rational cause, the apocalypse would be upon us. The public would have a matter of minutes to take cover and launch weapons, not to save the nation but to retaliate in kind. The real intent was deterrence. The knowledge that retaliation was inevitable and catastrophic would discourage a Soviet attack. And the general assumption was that absent a Soviet attack, the United States would never start a nuclear war. Whether that assumption was true, or whether mutually assured destruction worked, seems like a thin edge on which to balance the fate of the U.S., if not the world, but that was the only basis available.

The fear of the apocalypse turned into a fear of the Soviets, and the fear of the Soviets spread from nuclear war to the idea that they had infiltrated and, according to some, overtaken the United States. Sen. Joseph McCarthy famously alleged that the most senior members of the U.S. government were communists. The John Birch Society believed Dwight Eisenhower was a communist agent. It seems as though the fear of the hidden stretched from Roanoke to the intelligence apparatus.

There was never a nuclear holocaust, of course, but its shadow has haunted Americans for 40 years. When I was a

child, the sound of a siren being tested terrified me. The children knew there was a monster stalking them, and they knew that the sound that would signal their annihilation would be a siren. Before about 1975, the fear of nuclear war and the distrust in the ability of our government to protect us were part of the unspoken fantasies of children and adults. They deferred only because these fears were reasonable and the monster of fairy tales really was out there.

The prospect of an apocalypse receded over time, partly because the government was successful in protecting Americans when their fears diminished. But throughout the Cold War, when the fear of annihilation was everywhere, there was another vision of the end lingering below the surface. The population of the world was growing and there was a fear that hunger and disease would destroy humanity. As the population grew, the resources needed to feed and house people did not. Shortages of food in India and of oil in America fueled the fear that unless population was curbed, the human race would either destroy itself or, failing that, be reduced to a state of primitive hunger. The Club of Rome, the most prestigious think tank of its time, predicted that by 1970, the population explosion would exhaust all natural resources. Their warning was taken seriously throughout the world but was uniquely suited to the American view that man's appetite for sex and food would destroy the planet.

But the birth rate declined, and the world pressed on. Apocalypse by nuclear war disappeared while the prospect of hunger and disease declined. It was a rare period in the U.S., a time when we were not tempting the gods by some willful act of our own.

Then came 9/11. With no warning, al-Qaida struck targets in Washington and New York with civilian aircraft it had hijacked. Three thousand people were killed, and the United States, as it was in 1941, was surprised and terrified by what might come next. The nightmare was a return to the nuclear fire as speculation focused not unreasonably on whether the jihadist group had dirty bombs and, if so, what it would strike next. I remember boarding an airplane the day flights were resumed. The plane was half full and I stared at each passenger, wondering which one of them might be from the Middle East, and what weapons they might be carrying. I imagined how I might bring him down if he moved toward the cockpit.

My behavior was not unreasonable. We had been attacked by a force that we knew opposed us, but we did not imagine it carrying out such an attack. We civilians were stunned, and we suspected our government was as surprised as we were. We didn't know the capabilities or intentions of our enemy. Fear was the only reasonable response. The fear after Pearl Harbor was reignited.

The apocalypse did not lurk in the forest, nor in the cities of immigrants. It originated not in the mind of an emperor nor in the mysteries of the Kremlin. The uncontrolled lust of men and women wouldn't bring it about. We were convinced that it lurked in the minds of a billion Muslims who intended to destroy our civilization. As at the founding of the United States, Americans feared not death but annihilation.

The apocalyptic sense endures and given that the apocalypse did annihilate Roanoke, we had no basis for dismissing any of these fears. Today the apocalypse lurks in the heart of our civilization. The temperature is rising as a result of our sins, and we will be punished for it by the gods destroying the Earth, or so do earnest and credible prophets claim. God might have promised not to destroy the Earth when he spoke to Noah, but he said nothing of us destroying ourselves. What the Earth would look like is unclear. Perhaps the Sahara would bloom while New York disappears. The consequences of our sins, good and bad, are beyond our knowing and nearly beyond hope. Americans may have feared many things that did not destroy them. It does not mean that we will not one day be destroyed.

The apocalyptic tradition in America divides itself between violence done to us and violence we have done to nature. In both forms there is the idea that in some way, we Americans have brought it on ourselves. At Roanoke, some carelessness caused the settlers to evaporate. At Pearl Harbor, a president was Machiavellian, and a lieutenant failed to heed the warnings. In the Cold War, the scientists created the monster. The population explosion was due to reckless reproduction, and 9/11 due to our reckless behavior in the Muslim world. And, of course, global warming is the result of our profligacy with the things that produce heat.

The fear of the apocalypse in America divides into two parts. One blames the apocalyptic force, the other blames America or its leaders. The former is a natural response. The latter is more interesting because it divides into two further parts. One part rests in blaming

our leaders for being heedless of the threat. The other claims that America has conjured up the apocalypse by its own wanton sins.

But the apocalypse is located in a deeper place, in the endless emptiness of our continent, even today. When I discussed the movie "High Noon" in an earlier chapter, I spoke of the nameless threat posed by evil men motivated only by evil. The sheer emptiness of much of America opens the door for evil men to flee into the wilderness and return at the time and place of their own choosing. The principles motivating many Americans coming to this strange place inevitably caused them to fear the things they couldn't see, much like a child afraid to look under his bed. But like a child the fear is not foolish. There is evil and Roanoke found it.

GPF | GEOPOLITICAL FUTURES

facebook.com/geopoliticalfutures

twitter.com/GPFutures

instagram.com/geopoliticalfutures

linkedin.com/company/geopolitical-futures

www.geopoliticalfutures.com