

`Debtocalypse' and America's fascination with The End

by [David Gibson](#)

August 1, 2011

(RNS) For many Americans, nothing is as exciting as an impending apocalypse, except perhaps for the thrill of waking up the next day and discovering that Armageddon did not arrive and we have been spared.

And that has generally been the result, whether it was the "Great Disappointment" of the 1840s when Jesus did not return as expected, or, more recently, when the Rapture failed to occur on May 21 as evangelist Harold Camping said it would. Camping had also predicted doomsday for 1994, and has since shifted his latest forecast to October.

But there is no reason to wait that long, as the Capitol Hill default spectacle has provided the nation with a handy apocalypse fix.

Indeed, Tuesday, Aug. 2, the day when the government says it will run out of money to pay its bills if political leaders can't agree to raise the debt ceiling, is routinely referred to as Armageddon or Judgment Day, with apocalyptic consequences if something is not done.

"Debtocalypse," as Slate's Annie Lowrey dubbed the anxious prognostications.

An intriguing aspect of this latest round of hand-wringing, however, is that the traditional roles are somewhat reversed.

Surveys show nearly six in 10 white evangelicals -- the core of the Republican base -- believe Jesus will return in judgment by 2050, as opposed to 41 percent of all Americans. And two-thirds of white evangelicals believe recent natural disasters are signs of the end times. Secularists who tend to be liberals and Democrats are least likely to espouse those views.

Yet in the default debate, Democrats are the loudest voices sounding the alarm -- "Playing with Armageddon," as President Obama's budget director, Jack Lew, put it -- while many Republicans are dismissing the predictions as overwrought.

"Scare tactics," GOP presidential candidate and conservative Christian Rep. Michele Bachmann, R-Minn., called the Democratic prophecies.

"I do not believe for one moment that we will lose the full faith and credit of the United States," Bachmann said during a question-and-answer session at the National Press Club in Washington on Thursday.

Other conservatives are taking the more traditional theological consolation that a fiscal Armageddon is not so bad because it will in fact reward the virtuous and punish the wicked. So true believers -- that is, those who advocate spending cuts and living within our means -- will actually be better off after a default and the free-spenders will get their comeuppance. "Gods of the New Dawn," as the New York Times conservative columnist David Brooks labeled these sanguine prophets of cataclysm.

No one seems likely to change their minds, however. "I think divine inspiration already happened," Rep. Tim Scott, R-S.C., said Thursday night after he decided to vote against House Speaker John Boehner's budget plan, preferring to see what a default would do. "I hope the Lord blesses our nation in a way that is measurable."

Such disregard for the possible consequences of a default astonishes liberals, who believe that the economic fallout will rain on the just and unjust alike, as Jesus might have put it. "What we're trying to do is save the world from the Republican budget," House Minority Leader Nancy Pelosi said in a rhetorical flourish that might make even Harold Camping blush. "We're trying to save life on this planet as we know it today."

That liberals are more anxious about the latest apocalypse should not necessarily come as a surprise. So much about today's world -- the

wobbly economy, terrorism, political polarization, the state of William and Kate's marriage -- is so uncertain and complex that it is overwhelming. The natural human response is to find some rationale for it all, and a simple exit strategy.

"In religious narratives, God smites sinners and resurrects the virtuous. For secularists, the sins of humanity are atoned through a change in our political, economic or ideological system," author Michael Shermer wrote in a column in New Scientist magazine.

"In the face of confusion and annihilation we need restitution and reassurance. We want to feel that no matter how chaotic, oppressive or evil the world is, all will be made right in the end."

Evidence of secular apocalyptic anxieties could be found in the "Y2K" predictions of disaster at the turn of the millennium in 2000 and in the New Age-inflected, CGI-hyped depictions of "The End Of The World As We Know It" in 2012 when an ancient Mayan calendar allegedly predicts bad things of some sort will happen.

The problem is that so many end-times scenarios include fairy-tale endings -- the collapse of the Soviet Union without nuclear war, for example -- or wind up as complete busts that, as theologian Susan Brooks Thistlethwaite wrote in The Washington Post, "the rush of adrenaline from this biblical brinksmanship gets old." Heck, even the "Carmageddon" predicted for Los Angeles this July when a stretch of the 405 Freeway was closed for repairs failed to materialize.

But what happens if Chicken Little turns out to be right? Some doomsday prophecies, at least of the secular variety, can have a basis in reality, such as concerns over climate change and, yes, a possible economic disaster or at least a slow-motion downgrade if the government defaults on its debt obligations.

"Cognitive dissonance" is the classic term for the mind faced with facts that don't conform to fiercely held beliefs. The phrase was coined by a psychologist, Leon Festinger, who in the 1950s chronicled the reaction of a doomsday cult whose prophecy failed to come true.

Festinger showed how the believers adapted by rationalizing the absence of an apocalypse and wound up growing, not shrinking in shame.

In the default scenario, either liberals and Democrats, or conservatives and Republicans, will be proved wrong, but the loser's political future may depend on how they spin that failure to themselves, and to the public.

Or, a last-minute resolution to the crisis could simply avert Armageddon once again, and we'll wake up the next day looking for the next shot of apocalyptic adrenaline.