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Ghosts of America's Past, Present, and Future: A Review of Preparing for War

Abstract

"Despite our theologies of human sinfulness, we somehow thought people would prove better than that. They didn't. The stakes are too high for complacency."

Posting about the book *Preparing for War* from *In All Things* - an online journal for critical reflection on faith, culture, art, and every ordinary-yet-graced square inch of God's creation.

<https://inallthings.org/ghosts-of-americas-past-present-and-future-a-review-of-preparing-for-war/>

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Comments

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Ghosts of America's Past, Present, and Future: A Review of *Preparing for War*

Scott Culpepper

January 5, 2023

Title: *Preparing for War: The Extremist History of White Christian Nationalism—and What Comes Next*

Author: Bradley Onishi

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Bradley Onishi poses an unsettling question at the beginning of *Preparing for War: The Extremist History of White Christian Nationalism—and What Comes Next* for those of us who were raised in any of America's conservative Christian subcultures: Would I have been there? As Onishi watched the carnage unleashed at the United States Capitol on January 6, 2021, he pondered roads not taken and lives unlived.

Onishi became a consummate conservative evangelical insider after his conversion at fourteen, distributing evangelistic pamphlets as a teenager and steeped in the shibboleths of early nineties youth group culture. He served as a youth pastor to a megachurch youth group numbering two hundred by his early 20s. Life, education, and spiritual exploration led him in a different direction. After seven years of staff ministry, Onishi pursued graduate studies at Oxford University and the *L'institut catholique de Paris*. Along the way, he left his Christian faith. He established the *Straight White American Jesus* podcast with fellow Oxford alum Daniel Miller in 2018. Onishi provides commentary on religion and politics through the podcast and public speaking while also teaching at the University of San Francisco. Every author's personal biography is important because it impacts their work in both tangible and intangible ways. Knowing Onishi's personal story adds resonance to his provocative opening question. **Would I have been there?** Whether someone has formally left the Christian faith as Onishi has or their journey has led them from the forms of conservative Christianity he describes in the book to other branches, we still carry that past and must reckon with its lasting impact on who we are and who we might have been. Onishi argues in *Preparing for War* that we have to grapple individually and collectively with how the fusion of far-right politics and white conservative Christianity fueled the rage of January 6, threatening the future of America's democratic republic.

Onishi eloquently captures the wounds January 6 left on our national psyche in his first line when he writes, “Processing the Capitol insurrection is akin to coming to terms with a national home invasion.”¹ He argues that January 6, far from an aberration, erupted as the logical extension of a long history of conservative White Christian grievance and nostalgia politics stretching back to the early history of the United States. Those forces evolved and accelerated in response to cultural shifts beginning in the 1960s. *Preparing for War*’s central thesis rests on that foundational argument and explores the historical evolution of the cultural currents that made January 6 possible. That larger history is interspersed with Onishi’s personal story and how it intersected with those developments. *Preparing for War* is structured to address three essential framing questions: “How did the rise of the New Religious Right between 1960 and 2015 give birth to violent White Christian nationalism during the Trump presidency and beyond?” (chapters 1-5), “What aspects of the White Christian nationalist worldview propelled some of the most conservative religious communities in the country to ignite a cold civil war?” (chapters 6-8), “And how can understanding the history of White Christian nationalism help us anticipate how it will take shape in and influence the public square in years to come?” (chapters 9-11)

Onishi describes how White Christian nationalism uses “crisis narratives” driven by visions of decline and apocalypse; decline from a mythical pristine American Christian past, and an ominous apocalyptic future foretold in scripture and incited by human rebellion against God.² Their perception of cultural apocalypse as lived reality justified the adoption of radical steps to right the ship. Onishi writes, “If authoritarianism and conspiracy were necessary to retake America, then democracy be damned. What mattered was a pure nation constructed according to White Christian supremacy rather than multiracial democracy.”³ He traces the beginnings of the conservative coalition fostered by Barry Goldwater’s 1964 presidential campaign and how its challenge to the Republican establishment laid the ideological foundations for the more successful challenges to establishment control posed by Donald Trump. Much of what Onishi recounts about the rise of the new religious right and the influence of his native sunbelt has been covered in more focused academic studies. The same is true of his observations on the sexual purity movement, gender issues, and racial issues. The value Onishi brings is through collecting these threads into one accessible narrative, directing his readers to discover these other scholars and their insights.

Onishi tackles well questions about why a growing number of experts insist that we need to use the term “White Christian nationalism” instead of simply “Christian nationalism.” The use of the term “white” in this context draws furious responses from critics. It remains the most misunderstood aspect of arguments against Christian nationalism, with some of that misunderstanding being sincere while much of it is calculated distortion used to discredit arguments against Christian nationalism as “racist” or absurd. Onishi provides a thoughtful and balanced analysis of how racism has been interwoven with Christian nationalist ideals since the beginnings of American history. He also addresses the irony that it can be very appropriate to speak of “White Christian nationalism” even when it is coming from African American pastors. This notion of “whiteness” as a way of conceiving properly ordered reality with the “right”

winner in charge of society infuses Christian nationalism with irresistible appeal for people who feel they are losing control of the social order. As both a biracial person and a former evangelical insider, Onishi brings rich personal insights to this complex conversation.

Onishi radiates both passion and provocative style in *Preparing for War*. It is no dry academic treatise. *Preparing for War* rests on the solid foundations of careful research and extensive notes while also clearly communicating to the broadest audience in persuasive language. Onishi gives us an excellent example of public scholarship for troubled times. While clear-eyed objectivity is still a worthy and necessary goal for all of us who write and research, the issues at stake in our national debates have reached a point where they are so fundamental that we can't afford to be dispassionate about them. These issues matter. Getting them right matters. Onishi communicates the urgency of our historical moment, offering hope while also warning that the worst is not yet behind us.

The future cast of Onishi's argument ventures to places where historians fear to tread. Historians caution people all the time about presuming to predict the future through their studies of the past. While the past gives us valuable insight into the probabilities and possibilities of the future, it is littered with the failed pronouncements of would-be prophets. Forecasting is doubly hard when dealing with movements as erratic and unpredictable as White Christian nationalism. Onishi makes a convincing case for our need to make educated forecasts about where all this is going by posing a second haunting question. "Why didn't we see this coming?"⁴

For those of us raised in conservative Christian subcultures, we always knew these demons lurked within the Christian cultures that formed us. I've spent most of my adult life encouraging people to resist them as a youth minister, pastor, and professor. We knew there were better angels within those cultures as well and convinced ourselves that the darker tendencies were minority voices, overshadowed by the greater good that loving Christ communities could contribute to the world. Even in my own deep cynicism and disappointment with many Christian communities I encountered, I held on to a belief that reasonable and responsible voices would prevail and restrain the madness. Onishi argues convincingly that anyone who assumes that restraint and reason are inevitable outcomes of this story were not paying attention on January 6, 2021. We always knew in our hearts that something like this could come. Despite our theologies of human sinfulness, we somehow thought people would prove better than that. They didn't. The stakes are too high for complacency.

Americans stand at a crossroads as the two hundred and fiftieth anniversary of our republic approaches. Are we going to recommit ourselves to the bold and demanding vision of the United States as a pluralistic democracy that strives however imperfectly to achieve liberty and justice for all? Or will we let fear push us into a reactionary tribalism that will eventually drive us into decline as it has every other major society that has pursued that path throughout history? Brad Onishi's *Preparing for War* should be read widely and discussed thoughtfully for the history he uncovers, the cultural constructs he explains, and the prophetic warnings he

voices. Like him, our personal stories intersect with the greater stories. It is both our privilege and responsibility to ensure that we are fully present for these historic moments so that January 6 is viewed in years to come as a cautionary tale of what we might have become rather than the first step to a dark future.

1. pg. 1

2. pg. 21

3. pg. 218

4. pg. 218