

BEWARE THE RED HEIFER

How religious nutballs could start World War III by [Justin Raimondo](#)

While the American secretary of state shuttles back and forth between Yasser Arafat and Ariel Sharon, trying desperately to cobble together a) a ceasefire, and b) some basis for a settlement of the world's most tiresome perpetual crisis, it behooves us to examine the issue of ... [the red heifer](#).

Say *what?*

You heard me, I said *the red heifer*....

IMPOSSIBLE – YET IT HAPPENED!

When I was a lad, my favorite feature of the Sunday comics was something called "[Impossible! – Yet It Happened!](#)" Stories of haunted ghost ships, three-headed babies, and frogs mysteriously raining down from the heavens, odd occurrences chronicled in the classic style of [Charles Fort](#) and breathlessly described in lurid prose under the tantalizing headline: **Impossible? Yet It Happened!** It seemed to me to be a trope for the irrationality of the world I was beginning to enter, a sign that the society of adults wasn't all it was cracked up to be: after all, if it's impossible, then it *couldn't* have happened – right?

Wrong! To confirm this fact, we need only look at the most significant recent development in the Middle East, and, no, I don't mean the intifada, or Colin Powell's visit, or the suicide bombings, or any of that other stuff: I'm talking about the recent birth of a red heifer on a farm in Israel. Why is this so important? The answer is to be found in a fascinating piece by Rod Dreher in *National Review Online*, "[Red Heifer Days](#)," which recounts the theological significance of this event – and its ominous implications for the future of the region:

“Could this little calf born last month in Israel bring about Armageddon? The concept would have struck many people as absurd the last time such a calf was born, in 1997, and probably makes most readers laugh today. Big mistake: Never underestimate the power of

religious faith to shape events, especially in the Holy Land. Especially right now.”

THE ESCHATOLOGICAL FACTOR

It all has to do with eschatology, a religious conception of the Final Days of mankind, a scenario mapped out by three of the world’s major religions in very similar (and specific) detail. The focus is on the Temple Mount – the site of Ariel Sharon’s provocative visit that set off the current *intifada*, and also site of the First Temple of the Hebrews. Destroyed by King Nebuchadnezzar, and then again by the Romans, according to Jewish traditionalists the Third Temple will be built by the Messiah, who will be not only king of Israel but also high priest of the rebuilt Temple. To the Muslim Palestinians, and their co-religionists worldwide, this is the site of the Dome of the Rock, a Muslim shrine, the sacred al-Aqsa mosque, and the place where Mohammed mounted a fine Arabian horse and galloped straight up to heaven. A large number of Christian fundamentalists have also imbued this spot with millennialist import: according to this “dispensationalist” view, Jesus Christ will return to earth to do battle on the plain of Armageddon and triumph over the Antichrist only after the building of the Third Temple. Dreher cites Gershon Gorenberg, whose book, *End of Days: Fundamentalism and the Struggle for the Temple Mount*, describes the apocalyptic intersection of religion and politics both in Israel and the US:

“What happens at that one spot, more than anywhere else, quickens expectations of the End in three religions. And at that spot, the danger of provoking catastrophe is greatest.”

I hate to tell you this, but the danger just got much greater. Now, as for that red heifer....

OUR NUTBALLS, AND THEIRS

The key thing to remember, in all this mythological murk, is that no religious Jew is allowed to set foot on the Temple Mount, for fear of desecrating the sacred ground. In any case, the Temple can only be reconstructed when the Messiah returns to save his people, and, so far, no Messiah, and no Third Temple. But not all Israelis are willing to assume such a passive stance, tradition or no tradition. Ever since

Israel came into possession of old Jerusalem, in 1967, a fanatical group of Israeli nationalists have tried to kick-start the eschatological machinery, plotting the destruction of the Muslim shrines and busily constructing the various ritual objects for use in the rebuilt Temple. These Israeli nutballs have forged a natural alliance with *our* Christian nutballs, who have their own theological rationale for hurrying Apocalypse along. They are [dispensationalists](#), who believe – [among other things](#) – that the colonization of the Holy Land by the children of Israel signals the second coming of Christ: the efforts of these “Christian Zionists” account for the uncritical support for Israel among many “born again” Christian conservatives.

PROVOKING ARMAGEDDON

Okay, so now we get to the part about the red heifer: it turns out that, although no religious Jew is allowed on the Temple Mount, there’s a loophole – it’s okay if he or she is first purified in the ashes of a pure red heifer. These creatures are exceedingly rare. One was born a couple of years ago, in Israel, but it soon began sprouting white hairs on its tail and was deemed insufficiently pure by the rabbinical authorities. Ah, but science found a way around the fickleness of God’s creation, and through the modern miracle of genetic engineering – and funding provided by “Christian Zionists” in America – a red heifer has been bred, and pronounced pure. As Dreher points out, the world media covered this as a joke, but in reality the red heifer is the theological and political equivalent of a suitcase nuke waiting to go off. Dreher cites [Richard Landes](#), a professor of history at Boston University and director of the Center for Millennial Studies:

“These kinds of circumstances are exactly what people are waiting for. We could be starting a war. If this is a real red heifer, and strict Orthodox rabbis have declared her worthy of sacrifice, then a lot of Jews in Israel will take that as a sign that a new phase of history is about to begin. The Muslims are ready for jihad anyway, so if you have Jews up there doing sacrifices, talk about a red flag in front of a charging bull.”

Rod Dreher, by the way, is the only writer I know of to catch the significance of this red heifer business, because the media tends to not take religion seriously, and yet I can’t help thinking that he perhaps unintentionally underscores another overlooked reality: that the problem of fundamentalism is not limited to the Arab world. The Islamic brand brought down the World Trade Center, but the Judeo-

Christian varieties may succeed in starting World War III.

We have heard much about the evils of “moral equivalence” in the Palestinian-Israeli conflict. The former, we are told, are superstitious terrorists, whose fanatical mindset makes the perfect receptacle for the hatching of murderous plots, while the Israelis are Westernized democrats, ensconced, just like us in, in a secularized consumer culture. But Dreher points to the existence and growing influence of Jewish fundamentalists, fanatics on the order of Al Qaeda, who could well spark an all-out Arab-Israeli war. Citing Professor Landes, he writes:

“It’s entirely conceivable that this [red heifer] could trigger a new round of attempts to blow up the Dome of the Rock.’ This is something the Israeli security forces have long been vigilant against. But with their attentions drawn elsewhere by the war with the Palestinians, it’s possible that a radical group could slip the net. And it’s possible that religious extremists elements within the Israeli army could help them.”

EVEN IF...

As Colin Powell shuttles back and forth between Sharon and Arafat, I can’t help but think of that red heifer, growing fat and glossy under the ministrations of its deluded creators. Even if the US somehow succeeded in forging a “peace plan,” even if President Bush actually had the guts to stand up to Sharon and say: “Enough – *or else!*” Even if, somehow, the nutball tendencies among the Palestinians could be minimized or at least contained – even then, it seems, the cause of peace in the Holy Land is utterly doomed. For what happens at the end of three years, when the red heifer grows old enough to sacrifice, and its ashes can be used for purposes of ritual purification? At that point, the locus of religious conflict in the world could well see yet another Israeli invasion, this time prompted by an upsurge of religious fanaticism married to a virulent ultra-nationalism – precisely the forces that want to propel the Satanic [Benjamin Netanyahu](#) and his [nutball followers](#) into power.

HISTORY AND IRONY

Sharon knows full well that if he accedes to the demands of the

Americans, Netanyahu, the ultra-hardliner, is bound to succeed him. The irony of US intervention, in brokering a “peace plan,” is the unintended consequence of a burgeoning religious supremacism in Israeli politics, one with the power to undo all the good work of American diplomacy.

A DANGEROUS HERESY

What, then, is the solution? The widespread idea that it is the task of American diplomacy to come up with a solution to all or even some of the world’s most intractable problems is precisely where US foreign policy has gone wrong since the days of the Founders. It is a dangerous heresy promulgated by cold warriors trained in the European tradition of *realpolitik* that the earth is our chessboard, and we must always be making or planning a move: this troublesome activism has been the cause of much misery in the world, and much social and economic dislocation in this country. It is responsible for the policy of perpetual war pursued in modern times by our rulers in Washington, and eventually it will be our undoing. For what can Colin Powell do against the red heifer? Against this improbable creature, the whole architecture of US policy in the Middle East could be laid low, and that is a humbling thought – or at least it *ought* to be.

INGRATITUDE, THY NAME IS ‘ISRAEL’

You’ll recall that the big reason for US involvement has been to clear the decks for an all-out attack on Iraq. Hey, but wait a minute – with all this talk of Saddam’s alleged “weapons of mass destruction,” the image one gets is of the Iraqi ruler raining missiles down on, say, Brooklyn. But he hasn’t got anything even close to that kind of range: now that the Iraqis and the Saudis have kissed and made up, his only possible target is Israel. We are begging Sharon to please lay off the Palestinians so we can do Israel the favor of taking out a deadly threat to its continued existence. And still, Sharon says *no*.

GO, COLIN, GO!

Since US tax dollars have funded the colonization and humiliation of a people, the Palestinians, the American secretary of state has a

moral responsibility to see that they get a break, and a fair deal. Powell seems admirably committed to that, and he is more than living up to the role implicitly ascribed to him in this space as the conscience of the Bush administration. As such, he faces a powerful and vocal interventionist clique, reflexively pro-Sharon (actually, pro-Netanyahu), and highly influential in the Republican party. It's one man against the War Party, a truly heroic struggle on Powell's part, and, so far, he's proving himself to be at least the equal of his adversaries. More power to him – as long as he sees that the only rational long-term strategy for the US in the Middle East is an *exit* strategy.

A FUTURE SCENARIO, CIRCA 3002

Our Israel-centric foreign policy, which has alienated the entire Arab world, Muslim and Christian alike, must *go*. The urgency of this reorientation is underscored by the Israeli government's intransigence. We need to extricate ourselves from this volatile region, which seems cursed by some special blight, and a likely target of divine anger or *some* kind of retribution that can't be long in coming. For all the good intentions, the diplomatic phrases, the talk of "peace" and "justice," are as nothing when they come up against the awful power of the red heifer.

In this context, imagine the following scenario. It is the year 3002, and some kid is reading the Sunday funnies – yes, they still have Sunday comics, because *some* traditions are indeed sacred – and he comes across a little item that starts like this:

*"How could a red heifer have started World War III? Impossible?
Yet it happened...."*