

## ABSTRACT

1980: Reagan, Carter, and the Politics of Religion in America

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This dissertation examines the political uses of religion in the 1980 presidential election, doing so within the broader context of how and why those uses emerged, as well as how they functioned to usher in a new era, setting the parameters for future presidential candidates' uses of religion in presidential elections. I go about this by first examining several streams that converged in 1980, among them: the expansion of the American conservative movement upon its inclusion of religious conservatism as a major concern; the various historical factors that led to the engagement of religious conservatives in American politics; the surfacing of religious rhetoric in presidential politics during the 1976 election; and the disappointment experienced by religious conservatives during the Carter presidency. I then closely examine of the candidacies of Ronald Reagan, Jimmy Carter, and John B. Anderson in 1980, showing the ways in which these candidates constructed lasting discourses of political religion and signaled the emergence of a new religious era in presidential politics. Finally, I observe the legacy of the 1980 presidential election, offering lessons from it to inform what appears to be the present dawn of a new religious era in American politics.

1980: Reagan, Carter, and the Politics of Religion in America

by

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A Dissertation

Approved by the Department Political Science

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To Tiffany and Anna,  
with all the love a husband and daddy can give

Also to the memory of Dr. Donald L. Crolley,  
who understood more than any other that indeed,

“The true meaning of life is to plant trees  
under whose shade you do not expect to sit”

## CHAPTER ONE

### Introduction

On July 17, 1980, the audience inside Detroit's Joe Louis Arena, along with much of the rest of the country watching on television, saw Ronald Reagan, as though moved by the Holy Spirit, invoke an "unscripted" moment of silent prayer to end his party nomination acceptance speech. An unprecedented move, what followed was even more so—a twenty-minute-long standing ovation for a man who, unbeknownst at the time, was helping to usher in a new era of religious politics in America.

Reagan was not alone in this effort. His main competitor—the country's best-known Sunday school teacher and incumbent president, Jimmy Carter—explained to a group of ministers in October that "I think the United States of America was created by God with a purpose—on a purpose. . . . We're on the road to the promised land," and "I believe I was put here on a purpose."<sup>1</sup>

Appealing for votes by using religion so explicitly was new for presidential elections—and jarring to much of the country. Undoubtedly, there had been instances in the United States in which religion had factored into presidential politics. In 1908, for example, William Jennings Bryan's evangelicalism and William Howard Taft's Unitarianism played important roles. Al Smith's Roman Catholicism was important in 1928. And perhaps most famously, John F. Kennedy's Catholicism was prominent in

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<sup>1</sup> Jimmy Carter, "Remarks at the White House Reception for Black Ministers," October 23, 1980, John T. Woolley and Gerhard Peters, *The American Presidency Project* [online]. Santa Barbara, CA: University of California (hosted), Gerhard Peters (database). Available from World Wide Web: <http://www.presidency.ucsb.edu/ws/?pid=45362>.

1960, a major concern for voters skeptical of supposed papal plots. But generally speaking, each of these was an isolated incident, not the start of a trend or era, and most of these occasions involved presidential candidates *distancing* themselves from their religions, since presumably, too much religion (or too much of certain religions) was a bad thing.

That changed definitively in 1980, when both of the major party candidates, without equivocation, practiced the politics of religion, appealing to their strong religious values and Christian piety as selling points in their runs for the presidency. Reagan and Carter were joined that year by John B. Anderson, the disaffected former-Republican who ran—competitively at times—as an independent and whose curious candidacy gave an early sign that new constraints were in place marking the dawn of a new religious era in presidential politics. Hoping to avoid religion during his 1980 run for the White House, Anderson, who was a devout evangelical and had given considerable effort to the task of mobilizing evangelicals for politics in the 1960s and 1970s, found religion impossible to dodge in what had emerged as a new political milieu.

The political uses of religion that emerged in the 1980 election had lasting effects. 1980 marked the commencement of a new era not just because religion subsequently became a lasting political weapon for presidents and candidates, as scholars such as David Domke and Kevin Coe have documented,<sup>2</sup> but also because the political religions established that year by Reagan and Carter set some important constraints for the age to come—constraints that have fundamentally shaped the use of religion by presidential candidates ever since.

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<sup>2</sup> See David Domke and Kevin Coe, *The God Strategy: How Religion Became a Political Weapon in America* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2008).

This study aims to examine the political uses of religion in 1980, but it does so within the broader context of how and why those uses emerged, as well as how they functioned to usher in a new era, setting the parameters for future candidates' uses of religion in presidential elections. I will go about this by first examining several streams that converged in 1980, creating a rhetorical situation amenable to the birth of a new religious politics. I will follow this with a close look at the candidacies of Reagan, Carter, and Anderson in 1980, showing the ways in which they constructed lasting political religions and signaled the emergence of a new religious era in presidential politics. Finally, in a meditation of sorts, I will examine the legacy of the 1980 election and offer lessons from it to inform what appears to be the present dawn of a new religious era in American politics.

Establishing some context for Reagan's creation of what I term the political religion of the right, I begin in chapter 2 by examining the role of religion in the American conservative movement from 1944 to 1979. The reason for this task is simple: to determine whether the broader development of religious politics in presidential elections post-1980 was simply the result of movement conservatives establishing dominance within the Republican Party, and therefore establishing a permanent role in presidential elections, or whether the appeals to religious values and personal piety were something new even for conservatives. As I demonstrate in this chapter, the American conservative movement did not prominently feature religious rhetoric, either as a cardinal component of the movement or as a selling point for expanding it, until Reagan, as its standard bearer, decided to seek the 1980 Republican nomination. When movement rhetors did speak in religious tones prior to that time, such rhetoric could easily have been

construed—and thus opposed by conservative Protestants—as “Catholic” rhetoric, because it was primarily Catholics who either spoke or responded to most of the movement’s limited religious rhetoric.

In chapter 3, I seek to distill the marketplace for religious rhetoric as it emerged in the late 1970s, asking what occurred in the political environment to make religion salient in presidential politics. This involves understanding the engagement of religious conservatives in the political process, something that occurred gradually throughout the post-World War II era and climaxed with the creation of the New Christian Right (NCR) in 1979. I aim to identify in chapter 3 some of the specific reasons why religious conservatives became interested in politics generally and mobilized in such a way that drew the attention of presidential candidates more specifically. This involves five main factors—the emergence of evangelical Christianity from the backwaters to the mainstream of American life; the rise of interest group politics in the 1960s and 1970s; the Watergate scandal and the subsequent public sentiment that morality must be restored to politics and government; changes in church-state relations in the 1960s and 1970s; and a general trend toward permissiveness in American culture, which pointed the way toward changes in the relationship of personal morality to politics in the 1970s.

In chapter 4, I examine the 1976 election, which cracked the door to the use of religion in presidential elections. Carter’s piety and his status as the first presidential candidate to claim having been “born again” are well-known, and I examine the reasons why and the ways in which he used religion in the 1976 election. Lesser known, but just as important, his opponent that year, the incumbent Gerald Ford, also appealed to his own personal piety in the efforts to persuade the growing number of religious voters and to

inspire confidence in his own moral fortitude, which was important in the first election subsequent to Watergate. Together, Carter and Ford cracked the door to the regular and straightforward use of religious appeals as acceptable in presidential campaign discourse—a door that would be flung wide four years later. They brought religious rhetoric into prominence, leaving it to Reagan, “The Great Communicator,” to transform it upon realizing its potency by 1980—something he realized in part because he failed to utilize religious appeals in 1976 and fell short in his challenge to unseat Ford.

Carter won in 1976 in no small part because he appealed to and won over an emerging group of politically committed religious conservatives, some of whom characterized his candidacy as nothing less than a “miracle.”<sup>3</sup> But he also won by establishing a diverse coalition that included, in addition to religious conservatives, liberals, African Americans, moderate Southerners, and other traditional Democrats. Holding this group together throughout his term proved difficult for Carter, and in chapter 5 I examine the Carter presidency, particularly with respect to his disappointment of religious conservatives, who found themselves empowered as major political players soon after Carter’s election. One thing became clear about this group’s new political commitment during Carter’s term in office: as its focus on social and moral issues increased, so too did its influence and ability to alter the terms of the national political debate—a fact that proved problematic for Carter. Because Carter’s initial coalition was so diverse—especially on the hot-button issues that most concerned religious conservatives—his attempts to chart a middling course proved disappointing to several constituent groups, none more so than religious conservatives. By 1980, religious

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<sup>3</sup> See Howard Norton and Bob Slosser, *The Miracle of Jimmy Carter* (Plainfield, NJ: Logos International, 1976).

conservatives were so disaffected that Carter had little hope of gaining their electoral support in his reelection bid.

In chapter 6, I examine the politics of religion in 1980, the year that each of these streams converged. After just missing out on the Republican nomination and possibly the presidency in 1976, Ronald Reagan noticed that not only were the newly influential religious conservatives growing exponentially in both their size and in their discontent with Carter, they were also at least mildly interested in his candidacy as a means through which to have their political ambitions realized. Having built a career championing the traditional pillars of the conservative movement—economic libertarianism, small government, and anti-Communism, with little emphasis on religion—Reagan saw a tremendous opportunity to add religious conservatives to the traditional conservative base, which had finally gained long-sought control of the Republican Party. NCR leaders approached Reagan with a flirtation to win them over, and Reagan responded in kind with a strategy to bring religious conservatives on board the conservative movement to provide vital support in winning the election. Reagan appealed to religious conservatives by crafting what I call the political religion of the right, a two-part strategy comprised of private overtures and public rhetoric. The overtures functioned to assure the NCR elites that Reagan was a candidate worth mobilizing behind. The public rhetoric was aimed at elite as well as grassroots religious conservatives and wove five important elements into a coherent and effective religious discourse. Those five elements were: 1) the selection and endorsement of conservative religious audiences; 2) acts of piety; 3) the highlighting of moral and social issues and the manner in which Reagan's religious beliefs would

come to bear on them; 4) the spiritualization of “secular” issues; and 5) the use of the jeremiad.

By 1980, Carter had so disappointed religious conservatives that he had little hope of attaining their support in the election, something that was hammered home by their newfound excitement over Reagan. Carter saw his most important task for the 1980 election as winning over and mobilizing the traditional constituencies of the Democratic Party, since, as his advisors estimated, these would provide him with enough support to win the election. The traditional Democratic constituencies, unlike the NCR, stood mostly to Carter’s political left, and many of them were offended by the emergent NCR’s audacious claim that it could set the standards for what was “promoral” and “profamily” with regard to political action. As he had shown in 1976, Carter had the ability to make skilled and effective “values” appeals, so in his bid to win over some Democratic constituencies in 1980, he did just that, reinventing his 1976 use of religious rhetoric—which had been mostly based on piety and trustworthiness—into a construct that I call the political religion of the center-left. In this effort, Carter made concerted appeals to “religious” and “family” values—appeals, to be sure, that were less frequent and less direct than the religious appeals made by Reagan—but the “religious” and “family” values of Carter’s campaign were not based on the social issues of the right. They were instead the sorts of values that would mobilize the Democratic faithful—especially traditional constituencies such as African Americans, Hispanics, Jews, and the still traditionally Democratic Catholics—as well as any other voters who considered themselves “promoral” and “profamily” but who disagreed with Reagan’s and the NCR’s brand of cultural politics. The “religious” and “family” values Carter appealed to were

tolerance, civil rights, human rights, and social justice, and together with acts of piety, they formed what I call the political religion of the center-left.

In tandem, the political religion of the right and the political religion of the center-left, as established in 1980 by Reagan and Carter respectively, set the terms for what was to become a new era of religious politics in America. John B. Anderson's candidacy illustrated that political constraints were coming into place forcing presidential candidates to talk about religion, whether they wanted to or not.

As I show in chapter 7, for at least the next 25 years, presidential candidates would practice the rhetoric of political religion that Reagan and Carter established. These political religions came to accentuate an era of divisiveness in American politics, and given limited choices, religious conservatives opted *en masse* for the Republican Party, becoming its most unified, and at times most powerful, base. But the NCR fell captive to excessively partisan politics, according to the leaders of a new generation of evangelicals. NCR leaders compromised their roles as prophets and as religious change agents in the world, neglecting such clear biblical mandates as social justice, human rights, and stewardship of the environment—issues that Democrats had long championed. This new generation of evangelical leaders has sought to pull religious conservatives from partisan captivity, blurring some of the stark lines with respect to religion and politics that have dominated the campaign landscape for last 30 years.

Partly by virtue of this, and partly by virtue of Barack Obama's efforts to blur the old lines drawn by religion over the last 30 years, the old era of religious politics—the one founded by Reagan and Carter in 1980—might presently be giving way to a new

political configuration. With this in mind, I close this work by drawing lessons from 1980—the year that definitively set into motion the politics of religion in America.

## CHAPTER TWO

### Religion and the Conservative Movement: A Rhetorical History, 1944-1979

The aim of this chapter is to ask a simple but important question: what role did religion play in the rhetoric of the American conservative movement prior to the 1980 presidential election? The reason for asking this question is so that we might determine whether the broader development of religious politics in presidential elections post-1980 was simply the result of conservatives establishing hegemony in the Republican Party, and therefore establishing a permanent role in presidential elections, or whether the appeal to religious values was something brand new even for conservatives, a tactic employed first in 1980 that proved effective enough as a political weapon to be perpetuated throughout the modern era. As this chapter demonstrates, the American conservative movement did not prominently feature religious rhetoric, either as a core proposition of the movement or as a selling point for expanding the movement, until Ronald Reagan, as its chief spokesperson, set his sights on the 1980 presidential election. When it did venture toward religious rhetoric, such rhetoric could easily have been construed, and thus opposed by conservative Protestants, as “Catholic” rhetoric, because it was primarily Catholics who either used or responded to much of the conservative rhetoric that was religious.

The upshot of this is that we can judge Reagan’s invention of the political religion of the right in 1980 to be an intentional strategy aimed at converting to the conservative (and Republican) cause the increasing number of voters—especially religiously

conservative Protestants—whose attitudes toward politics emerged primarily from religious belief. That is, he was changing the face of American conservatism at the same time he was mobilizing what would become the most zealous group of voters to emerge on the American political scene in generations, thus changing American presidential politics indefinitely. That, of course, will be the subject of subsequent chapters, but for now, it is important that we establish the fact that in 1980, Reagan was not simply spouting the party line. He was instead crafting a discourse that was new unto conservatives, and also unto himself.

Before getting too far afield, it is probably worth giving some parameters to what is meant by the nebulous term “The Conservative Movement,” in addition to spelling out the reasons why the works I am examining here constitute that movement’s seminal pieces of discourse. George F. Nash, who has written one of the most influential histories of the movement, perhaps wisely eschews defining conservatism, in part because “conservatives themselves have had no . . . agreed-upon definition.”<sup>1</sup> Taking heed of Nash’s warning, I too will avoid defining conservatism, instead focusing on an identifiable and conscious “movement” of conservative ideas that, although clearly containing disparate strands and countless disagreements, possessed the singular aim of not just intellectually understanding the political world, but of changing it, or in the view of many, restoring it. This was a movement that most would date to around 1944 or 1945, which in retrospect was a time that one can view as a tide change, in part because World War II was coming to a close, marking a new epoch in American politics, but in part also because conservative ideas began to gain some traction outside the small

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<sup>1</sup> George H. Nash, *The Conservative Intellectual Movement in America Since 1945* (Wilmington, DE: Intercollegiate Studies Institute, 1998), xv.

academic circles to which they had previously been confined. That is, a series of thinkers began offering critiques of the liberal currents in American culture and politics, reaching wide audiences while offering a clear alternative to the liberal spirit of the times.

Under the umbrella of the early conservative movement were at least three prominent strands of thinkers and activists: first, traditionalists, a group of intellectuals who focused on the ills of relativism and encouraged a renaissance of traditional ethical and religious absolutes; second, libertarians, or classical liberals, who criticized the expansive state as a threat to liberty, free enterprise, and individualism; and third, staunch anti-Communists, who saw in nothing less than apocalyptic terms that the fate of the world depended on defeating communism both abroad and at home. As Nash notes, though, “no impassable gulf” segregated these strands of thinkers, who more than anything stood against America’s liberal drift.<sup>2</sup> The major ideas of these three groups had been disseminated to the American public at large by the early 1950s, usually via best-selling books, and by the middle of that decade there were some efforts toward consolidating the critiques into one movement. This included the publication of various journals—*National Review* chief among them—as well as the founding of several activist groups, mostly on college campuses, including the Young Americans for Freedom (YAF) and the Intercollegiate Society of Individualists (ISI), which later became the Intercollegiate Studies Institute. It also involved activism within the Republican Party, including, most prominently, pushes that began in 1960 to nominate Barry Goldwater as the Republican candidate for president. This worked in 1964, and although Goldwater lost to Lyndon Johnson in a landslide, conservatives were not finished in Republican

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<sup>2</sup> Nash, *The Conservative Intellectual Movement in America Since 1945*, xvi.

politics, pushing for Ronald Reagan in 1968, 1976, and again in 1980. By the time Reagan won the presidency in 1980, conservatives had become the dominant force in the Republican Party, and many would argue in American politics more generally.

What is interesting for present purposes is the fact that, if we view the movement in religious terms, it was a mostly secular, if perhaps slightly Roman Catholic movement before 1980.<sup>3</sup> By this I mean that the conservative movement was hardly reflective of the sort of religious conservatism (heavily dominated by conservative Protestants) that would come to be the cornerstone of American conservatism in modern times. To wit, William F. Buckley, who was the central figure in the movement with the publication of *God and Man at Yale* and the founding of *National Review* and YAF, was a devout Roman Catholic. So was his brother-in-law and fellow activist, Brent Bozell, who helped launch *National Review* and served as the ghost writer for the best-selling work of the movement, Barry Goldwater's *The Conscience of a Conservative*. Traditionalists Russell Kirk and James Burnham, prominent thinkers in the movement, both converted to Catholicism late in life after being away from the Church throughout most of their careers. Richard Weaver, who preached more than any other a return to metaphysics and absolutes, was officially Episcopal but attended mass only once a year at Christmas. The libertarians, whose primary interests were individualism and economics, were mostly secular, and there was little discussion of religion in their work, perhaps understandably so in light of their economic focus. Frank Meyer, the "fusionist" of traditionalism and libertarianism, was a secular Jew. And in the realm of practical politics, Barry Goldwater

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<sup>3</sup> I should be clear that the movement did not really view itself in religious terms until perhaps the 1980s. But since this chapter is focused on the role of religious rhetoric in the conservative movement, it is helpful to understand who the major figures of the movement were religiously.

was Episcopalian and Ronald Reagan belonged to the Disciples of Christ, although neither attended church with regularity throughout their careers. Moreover, they rarely talked about religion publicly.

Furthermore, as Paul Gottfried notes, at the grassroots level the Catholic presence among the highly activist students of the conservative movement was not only proportionately larger than the Protestant one, but also more central to the movement's growth. Gottfried makes clear that the most significant form of conservative student activism in the 1960s did not aim at converting large state universities, where liberals ran rampant, but instead aimed at sending conservative students, especially Catholic ones, into government and journalism and campaigns for conservative political candidates. In these activities, Catholic students, primarily from Catholic colleges, made disproportionately large contributions to the movement. *National Review*, the central hub of conservatism in the 1950s-1970s, was accused by its critics of being militantly Catholic, a charge most prominently raised by Max Eastman before he resigned from its board. This was largely because Catholic conservatives "wore their religious identity as a badge of honor," to use Gottfried's phrase. And conservative political strategists in the 1950s-1960s became convinced that Catholics were especially receptive to conservative positions, with several factors contributing to that perception, namely that Catholic priests and bishops were generally outspoken anti-Communists due to the persecution of Catholics, particularly Catholic clergymen, in Communist Eastern Europe.<sup>4</sup>

The conservative movement prior to the 1980s, in other words, was not led by Southern preachers, but in fact was carried out by some of the very people that many

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<sup>4</sup> Paul Gottfried, *The Conservative Movement*, Revised Edition (New York: Twayne Publishers, 1993), 33-34.

Southerners and Protestant conservatives feared most—secularists and Roman Catholics. While the anti-Catholic sentiment among Southern Protestants (and much of the general public) is beyond the scope of this work, we are on stable ground in simply acknowledging that the anti-Catholic current was strong among many conservative Protestants.<sup>5</sup> On the whole, the conservative movement was predominantly secular, with vestiges of Catholicism displayed prominently, which is ironic since many of the religious conservatives, particularly in the South, who helped to bolster the conservative movement and bring Reagan to power in 1980 were in the mid-20<sup>th</sup> century vehemently anti-Catholic. Put differently, in 1980 they joined, for religious reasons, a movement that had been secular and Catholic, when it was these forces—secularism and Catholicism—that for decades had represented their biggest fears in public life. It is thus the case that we must view 1980, when many conservative Protestants signed on to the conservative movement, as a breaking point, a time when a new message was being offered that was compelling enough to help overcome these traditional barriers. It was a message, of course, that would transform presidential campaigning indefinitely.

To do this, we must investigate the rhetoric of the conservative movement prior to 1980 to show that it was much different from that which would come to prominence after 1980. Such is the goal of this chapter, but given thousands of books, speeches, and articles spanning some 35 years, it is of course impossible to examine all of the rhetoric of the movement, as entire books devoted to conservatism in America do not even attempt such a feat. Instead, I have opted to examine what I see as the movement's

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<sup>5</sup> For an elaborate list of the various anti-Catholic groups and movements during the 19<sup>th</sup> and 20<sup>th</sup> centuries, see James Davison Hunter, *Evangelicalism: The Coming Generation* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1987), 117-119. Hunter, to be sure, is not alone in chronicling the strong anti-Catholic sentiment present in much of America.

seminal pieces of discourse. Several factors were involved in selecting these pieces. First, I think, it is important that we examine the rhetoric that represents both the movement as a unified whole, as well as that which represents each of the three distinct strands of conservatism between 1944 and 1979. In turn, this chapter investigates the most visible rhetoric of the most prominent spokesmen of the movement during the decades of the 1950s, 1960s, and 1970s, that is, the most widely distributed works of William F. Buckley, Barry Goldwater, and Ronald Reagan, respectively. In looking at the movement's distinct parts, I also give attention to the most prominent discourse of Richard Weaver as a traditionalist, Friedrich Hayek on behalf of the classical liberals, and Whittaker Chambers as a polemicist against Communism. It is worth noting, too, that each work herein examined, with the exception of Weaver's, reached wide audiences, often millions of Americans, which contributes to their canonical status.

I will proceed chronologically in this chapter. Thus, I begin with Friedrich Hayek's libertarian work, *The Road to Serfdom*, which was published in 1944 and reached wide readership in America in 1945, featuring almost no religious rhetoric. I then move to Richard Weaver's *Ideas Have Consequences*, a traditionalist piece published in 1948 that trumpets a return to ethical and philosophical absolutes (as often embodied in Christianity) as the antidote to the West's errand into relativism. Its critique is in many ways similar (if far more cerebral) to what Reagan would put forth in 1980, although, as mentioned, it was not the message being put forth by the movement's most visible spokespersons until Reagan took it to the masses thirty years later. Next I will examine William F. Buckley's *God and Man at Yale*, the 1951 bestseller that positioned Buckley at the helm of American conservatism and criticized the country's liberal

establishment, at least as it existed at Yale circa 1950. This work, although prominently communicating a message about God in the title, thus implying God's centrality to conservatism, does not argue explicitly that God should be central to our politics, but rather that God has been abandoned at Yale (which might have political implications). Leaving Buckley, we turn to Whittaker Chambers's *Witness*, his 1952 autobiographical bestseller that speaks apocalyptically about America's bout with communism. Although it spiritualized and framed that battle in a manner that entered the conservative psyche, and even appealed to the anti-Communist sentiment among Southern Protestants, the religiosity of *Witness* would remain confined only to anti-Communist discourse; and even then, not every conservative—and not even the most visible conservatives—would speak about communism in such spiritual ways. This becomes evident with Barry Goldwater, the rhetor to whom we next turn, who as a politician took conservatism to the mainstream of American politics with his 1960 and 1964 presidential bids. His *The Conscience of a Conservative*, a work almost entirely devoid of religious rhetoric, was the most widely read of all pieces of conservative discourse in the 20<sup>th</sup> century. Goldwater's presidential bid, though, foundered at the hands of Lyndon B. Johnson, thus threatening the momentum of the conservative movement if not for Ronald Reagan's taking of the torch in 1964. This chapter thus concludes by looking at Reagan's pre-1980 rhetoric, primarily from 1964-1979. Unlike the other rhetors of this chapter, Reagan never distributed a singular piece of best-selling, widely consumed discourse for our examination, and we will therefore examine his rhetoric in a slightly different manner—by looking at many of his most important speeches, radio addresses, and newspaper columns spanning from

1964 to 1979.<sup>6</sup> As becomes clear in doing this, we see that even Reagan, the author of the political religion of the right in 1980, did not rely much at all on religious rhetoric or appeals to religious values prior to the 1980 campaign.

It thus becomes clear, in examining the conservative movement's seminal pieces of discourse, that religious rhetoric, at least of the sort that is endemic to modern presidential campaigning, did not play a prominent role in the conservative movement prior to the 1980 presidential election.<sup>7</sup>

*Freedom or The Road to Serfdom? Friedrich A. Hayek's Conservative Critique*

Most histories of conservatism in America begin in the middle 1940s, a time when “‘conservatism’ was not a popular word in America, and its spokesmen were without much influence in their native land.”<sup>8</sup> There had of course been some dissemination of conservative ideas prior to 1945—Ludwig von Mises, for instance, had secured an international reputation in the 1920s and 1930s with anti-Marxist economic analysis and Southern Agrarians found residence on several college campuses—but their influence was typically confined to select academic circles instead of political circles, let alone mainstream ones. This began to change, however, when Mises's colleague Friedrich A. Hayek attracted, “with an extraordinary polemical weapon,” a number of

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<sup>6</sup> Reagan did release a couple of books throughout his career, but none by itself became a “seminal” work. Thus, I examine his body of work instead of a single piece.

<sup>7</sup> Admittedly, I am lumping together widely different types of writing in this chapter, all under the umbrella of the conservative movement. One should not expect some of these works to be religious, but the main point of this exercise is to show that the major strands that came together to find political success under Ronald Reagan's leadership did not emphasize religion prior to 1980.

<sup>8</sup> George H. Nash, *The Conservative Intellectual Movement in America Since 1945*, xvii.

admirers in the American public by publishing *The Road to Serfdom* in late 1944.<sup>9</sup> It gained wide distribution by 1945 and marked what many historians view as the starting place for the contemporary American conservative movement.

Hayek was an Austrian economist who had fled Nazism to teach at the London School of Economics, where he watched with increasing alarm the trend of economic planning being carried out by the British and American governments. Of greatest concern to Hayek was the effect of this tendency on the individual liberty of citizens, particularly that “socialism means slavery, [and] we have steadily moved in the direction of socialism. And now that we have seen a new form of slavery arise before our eyes, we have so completely forgotten . . . that the two things may be connected.”<sup>10</sup> Hayek’s main argument was that national economic planning in Italy and Germany had led directly to totalitarianism and that the current efforts toward planning and socialism in England and the United States would lead to the same fates—totalitarianism, the loss of liberty, and, worse yet, eventually back to “serfdom.”

It was an alarming critique, one that “shaken[ed]” even “left of center” commentators such as Paul Hutchinson, who wrote in *The Christian Century* that he “[did] not find it possible to dismiss” Hayek’s critique.<sup>11</sup> Initially published “unobtrusively” by the University of Chicago Press in fall 1944, the book rose quickly to national prominence in the spring of 1945, when *The Reader’s Digest* published a condensed version and the Book-of-the-Month Club published a million copies for

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<sup>9</sup> Paul Gottfried, *The Conservative Movement*, Revised Edition (New York: Twayne Publishers, 1993), 9.

<sup>10</sup> Friedrich A. Hayek, *The Road to Serfdom* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1944), 13.

<sup>11</sup> Paul Hutchinson, “Is a Planned Economy Slavery?” *The Christian Century* 62, no. 1 (January 3, 1945), 18.

distribution. Hayek embarked on an American lecture tour and became, as Lawrence K. Frank noted in *The Saturday Review of Literature*, “the spokesman for the economic beliefs which flourished up to 1929.” Seldom, after all, had “an economist and a non-fiction book reached such popularity in so short a time.”<sup>12</sup> It was, proclaimed the *New York Times Book Review*, “one of the most important books of our generation.”<sup>13</sup>

This is not to say that the book was warmly received across America. As Frank noted,

[Hayek’s] volume is important because it raises the central question of our times—the nature of social order and the place of the individual in that order. [But] it attempts to answer that question by using concepts and a way of thinking that are not *merely* obsolete but, in the new climate of opinion today, are almost archaic.<sup>14</sup>

The work did, however, raise some intriguing critiques, and it helped to create an audience—one of the chief functions of rhetoric—for conservative ideas in America in the late 1940s and early 1950s. As a result, Hayek’s success in America functioned as a galvanizing phenomenon. In other words, it was both the substance of Hayek’s ideas *and* their wide dissemination that made *The Road to Serfdom* a seminal piece of discourse in the American conservative movement.

Despite the fact that *The Road to Serfdom* was intended as an ethical defense of free enterprise, and while indeed some of its content focused on issues of ethics and morality, it can safely be said that the work was devoid of religious rhetoric. Instead, it focused on the fact that any sort of centralized and collectivist government tendencies,

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<sup>12</sup> Lawrence K. Frank, “The Rising Stock of Dr. Hayek: American Business Has Found a Shining New Prophet,” *The Saturday Review of Literature* 28, no. 19 (May 12, 1945), 5.

<sup>13</sup> Henry Hazlitt, “An Economist’s View of ‘Planning,’” *New York Times Book Review*, September 24, 1944, p. 1.

<sup>14</sup> Frank, “The Rising Stock of Dr. Hayek,” 5.

which Hayek grouped together under the moniker of “planning,” would undoubtedly lead to totalitarianism. And “Any attempt to control prices or quantities of particular commodities deprives competition of its power of bringing about an effective coordination of individual efforts.”<sup>15</sup> But that was secondary to the fact that

Whoever controls all economic activity controls the means for all our ends and must therefore decide which are to be satisfied and which are not. This is really the crux of the matter. Economic control is not merely control of a sector of human life which can be separated from the rest; it is the control of the means for all our ends. And whoever has sole control of the means must also determine which ends are to be served, which values are to be rated higher and which lower—in short, what men should believe and strive for. Central planning means that the economic problem is to be solved by the community instead of by the individual.<sup>16</sup>

This, in effect, was totalitarian, and the Nazis, whose socialist roots Hayek devoted an entire chapter to, were the worst realization of collectivist totalitarianism. “And those who think that it is not the system which we [Britons and Americans] need fear” should be reminded that it is indeed “possible that the same sort of system, if it be necessary to achieve important ends,” could occur here also.<sup>17</sup> So, economic liberty for the individual was to be preserved at all cost.

Certainly there were some religious or theological undertones to Hayek’s high regard for individual liberty, which he viewed as having evolved through time from “the foundations laid by Christianity and the Greeks and Romans.” But most striking is the emphasis he placed on the 18<sup>th</sup> and 19<sup>th</sup> century liberal extensions of that evolution, over against those “elements provided by Christianity and the philosophy of classical

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<sup>15</sup> Hayek, *The Road to Serfdom*, 37.

<sup>16</sup> Hayek, *The Road to Serfdom*, 91-92.

<sup>17</sup> Hayek, *The Road to Serfdom*, 134-135.

antiquity.” In other words, what Hayek was most concerned with was “the respect for the individual man *qua* man, that is, the recognition of his own views and tastes as supreme in his own sphere, however narrowly that may be circumscribed, and the belief that it is desirable that men should develop their own individual gifts and bents.”<sup>18</sup> Certainly, one could make some religious arguments to justify individualism of this sort, and many have done so well, but that was not the work of Hayek, who instead made his argument with individual liberty as the *telos*, rather than as the means to some theological end.

This view of liberty, when pushed to its logical conclusions, could easily be argued as heretical, and indeed, Hayek himself takes a short walk down that path:

[Individualism] starts from the indisputable fact that the limits of our powers of imagination make it impossible to include in our scale of values more than a sector of the needs of the whole society, and that, since, strictly speaking, scales of value can exist only in individual minds, nothing but partial scales of values exist—scales which are inevitably different and often inconsistent with each other. From this the individualist concludes that the individuals should be allowed, within defined limits, to follow their own values and preferences rather than somebody else’s; that within these spheres the individual’s system of ends should be supreme and not subject to any dictation by others. It is this recognition of the individual as the ultimate judge of his ends, the belief that as far as possible his own views ought to govern his actions, that forms the essence of the individualist position.<sup>19</sup>

By making the concession that the individual’s ability to follow his own values should only be allowed “within defined limits,” Hayek stopped just short of taking this philosophy to its logical conclusion, but he inevitably begged the question, what limits?

On this he was mostly mum, save only a short discussion on the importance of the rule of law, and this is precisely what differentiated Hayek’s discourse of classical liberalism or libertarianism with that of religious conservatism. Belief, after all, that “the

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<sup>18</sup> Hayek, *The Road to Serfdom*, 13-14.

<sup>19</sup> Hayek, *The Road to Serfdom*, 59.

individual is the ultimate judge of his own ends” was hardly the rhetoric that would win over the New Christian Right in 1980.<sup>20</sup> What is most important for the purpose of this work is not so much whether Hayek’s arguments are correct or meritorious, or even whether they might comport with orthodox Christian beliefs. Rather, what is important is the fact that *The Road to Serfdom*, the first important post-New Deal work of the conservative movement, was a piece of discourse almost entirely devoid of religious rhetoric. Such was not the case, however, with Richard Weaver, who published another important piece of discourse four years later.

### *Traditionalism and the Consequences of Ideas*

Of the works this chapter examines as the seminal pieces of discourse in the conservative movement, only Richard Weaver’s *Ideas Have Consequences* did not find a wide audience among the masses. What is more, Weaver never considered himself a movement conservative in the way many of these other rhetors did, even though he contributed numerous times to *National Review*. On the merits of these two factors alone, *Ideas Have Consequences* may seem an odd choice for inclusion among the seminal pieces of conservative discourse, but in point of fact it is hardly an odd choice at all. Lending truth to the title, the ideas of Richard Weaver did indeed have consequences—tremendous ones—among movement conservatives, as the work has been considered by many to be the central intellectual contribution to the conservative movement in America. Released in 1948 and imbibed in the subsequent few years by the

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<sup>20</sup> Admittedly, one might argue that Hayek writes solely about economics and in so doing puts forth a view that is not altogether inconsistent with religious conservatism. However, he is clear in a later chapter that “It is . . . erroneous belief that there are purely economic ends separate from the other ends of life.” See Hayek, *The Road to Serfdom*, 89.

conservative intellectuals who were then beginning to organize, Weaver's work became the "*fons et origo* [source and origin]"<sup>21</sup> of the conservative critique of the West's direction. Both an intellectual and a moral critique of that arc, it was Weaver's analysis that might be most appropriately labeled "the conscience of a conservative," for in spite of the fact that it never reached the masses directly, *Ideas Have Consequences* undoubtedly provided conservative elites with a solid moral and intellectual foundation for their efforts on behalf of the conservative cause. Of course, none, as becomes evident when examining the other rhetors of this chapter, ever articulated that foundation as well as Weaver did, and not until 1980 was the critique presented in a manner that grassroots religious conservatives might take hold of.

A quiet and methodical professor of English at the University of Chicago—an odd location, no doubt, for a Southerner who at least in part adopted Agrarianism—Weaver was an unlikely candidate to galvanize conservative elites. Sitting in his office at Chicago in 1945, as he did every day for hours on end, Weaver describes himself as “wondering whether it would not be possible to deduce, from fundamental causes, the fallacies of modern life and thinking that had produced this holocaust and would insure others. In about twenty minutes I jotted down a series of chapter headings, and this was the inception of . . . *Ideas Have Consequences*.”<sup>22</sup> He completed the book in 1947 under the title *The Fearful Descent*, but after wrangling with the publisher it came out the next year, to Weaver's discontent, under the title *Ideas Have Consequences*.

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<sup>21</sup> See Frank S. Meyer, “Richard M. Weaver: An Appreciation,” *Modern Age* 14 (Summer 1970): 243.

<sup>22</sup> Richard M. Weaver, “Up from Liberalism,” Reprinted in *The Vision of Richard Weaver*, ed. Joseph Scotchie (New Brunswick, NJ: Transaction Publishers, 1995), 19-36.

The book aimed to understand and to criticize the modern milieu under the premise that “modern man has become a moral idiot,” the fundamental cause of which was the “defeat of logical realism in the great medieval debate” by the nominalism of William of Occam, who insisted that only particulars—not universals—were real.<sup>23</sup> The logical conclusion of this, Weaver posited, was that a man became his own judge of truth, which has disastrous consequences—chief among them despair in finding objective truth and a view of nature that is closed to any divine interference, thus containing and setting its own standards. The “why” of the cosmos took a backseat to the “how” of it, and so religion found itself in a precarious situation during the Enlightenment. Thinkers such as Marx and Darwin then reduced the drama of human history to something contingent on one’s environment—the desire for wealth and a life of “practice without theory.” As a result, man has no comprehensive worldview, and so

He struggles with the paradox that total immersion in matter unfits him to deal with the problems of matter. His decline can be represented as a long series of abdications. He has found less and less ground for authority at the same time he thought he was setting himself up as the center of authority in the universe; indeed there seems to exist here a dialectic process which takes away his power in proportion as he demonstrates that his independence entitles him to power.<sup>24</sup>

Weaver began his discussion with what he saw as the three levels of reflection possessed by all human beings—levels that help them shape the world around. These three were: 1) specific ideas about particular things; 2) a set of convictions; and 3) what Weaver called a metaphysical dream of the world. Living merely at the first of these, in “pure worldliness,” as the nominalists contributed to our so often doing, leads invariably

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<sup>23</sup> Richard Weaver, *Ideas Have Consequences* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1948), 2-3.

<sup>24</sup> Weaver, *Ideas Have Consequences*, 6-7.

to “disharmony and conflict.”<sup>25</sup> To circumvent this, men—“even the simplest of souls”—move to the second level and “define a few rudimentary conceptions about the world which they repeatedly apply.”<sup>26</sup> However, the third level was the most important, and no doubt the most neglected, for it leads us toward understanding “the immanent nature of reality,” giving meaning to that which occurs at the other two levels. It is the “sanction to which both ideas and beliefs are ultimately referred for verification.”<sup>27</sup> Accepting this sort of metaphysical “dream,” Weaver argued, is liberating to man, for it helps to order a complex world and frees him from “sentimentality” and brutality. That is,

A waning of the dream results in confusion of counsel, such as we behold on all sides in our time. Whether we describe this as decay of religion or the loss of interest in metaphysics, the result is the same; for both are centers with power to integrate, and, if they give way, there begins a dispersion which never ends until the culture lies in fragments.<sup>28</sup>

In addition to losing this “metaphysical dream,” Weaver also lamented “the most portentous general event of our time,” which was the “steady obliteration of those distinctions which create society,” that is, the onset of pervasive and unassailable reverence for “equality.”<sup>29</sup> In Weaver’s view, “equalitarianism is harmful because it always presents itself as a redress of injustice, whereas in truth it is the very opposite,”<sup>30</sup> for it is disorganizing of what is natural and what has existed to bring order to society for

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<sup>25</sup> Weaver, *Ideas Have Consequences*, 18.

<sup>26</sup> Weaver, *Ideas Have Consequences*, 18.

<sup>27</sup> Weaver, *Ideas Have Consequences*, 18.

<sup>28</sup> Weaver, *Ideas Have Consequences*, 21.

<sup>29</sup> Weaver, *Ideas Have Consequences*, 35.

<sup>30</sup> Weaver, *Ideas Have Consequences*, 41.

ages. No society, he made clear, “can rightly offer less than equality before the law,” but beyond that, “there can be no equality of condition between youth and age or between the sexes; there cannot be equality even between friends. The rule is that each shall act where he is strong; the assignment of identical roles produces first confusion and then alienation.” This then leads to “poisonous envy,” and thus many of the world’s current ills.<sup>31</sup> The remedy, in his estimation, was hierarchy based in fraternity, concepts Weaver summoned from the works of Shakespeare, Edmund Burke, Milton, and even St. Paul.

Consumed by the quest for equality and without a metaphysical vision to make sense of the whole, “the very notion of eternal verities is repugnant to the modern temper,”<sup>32</sup> and man has resorted to “the facts on the periphery . . . hoping that salvation lies in what can be objectively verified.”<sup>33</sup> From this observation derived the “most important symptom of our condition, the astonishing vogue of factual information,” which was indicative of the greater problem of modern man—“a severe fragmentation of his world picture. This fragmentation leads directly to an obsession with isolated parts.”<sup>34</sup> Thus, by specializing and losing sight of the grander picture, “he has allowed himself to be maneuvered into a position in which he is not permitted to be a whole man.”<sup>35</sup>

The effects of this were many. “Egotism in work and art” was a primary spawn, and this led to workers and artists who abandoned examining the larger philosophical

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<sup>31</sup> Weaver, *Ideas Have Consequences*, 42.

<sup>32</sup> Weaver, *Ideas Have Consequences*, 53.

<sup>33</sup> Weaver, *Ideas Have Consequences*, 57-58.

<sup>34</sup> Weaver, *Ideas Have Consequences*, 58-59.

<sup>35</sup> Weaver, *Ideas Have Consequences*, 66.

questions, focusing instead on technique. But it did not end there. In the twentieth century, this egotism manifested itself in man's desire to please only himself. It could also be found in "The Great Stereopticon," the print media, cinema, and radio, which had the audacity to fill human minds—constantly—with sensationalism and banality.

Technology emancipates not only from memory but also from faith. What humane spirit, after reading a newspaper or attending a popular motion picture or listening to the farrago of nonsense on a radio program, has not found relief in fixing his gaze upon some characteristic bit of nature? It is escape from the sickly metaphysical dream. Out of the surfeit of falsity born of technology and commercialism we rejoice in returning to primary data and to assurance that the world is a world of enduring forms which in themselves are neither brutal nor sentimental.<sup>36</sup>

This, of course, was lost on the city dweller, whom Weaver had long critically observed from his proverbial perch atop Chicago. Like a "spoiled child," urban man "has not been made to see the relationship between effort and reward. He wants things, but he regards payment as an imposition or as an expression of malice by those who withhold for it."<sup>37</sup> This was because he had been exposed only to "this false interpretation of life," wherein "he has been given the notion that progress is automatic, and hence he is not prepared to understand impediments."<sup>38</sup>

Left in this state—that is, having yielded to materialism and to egotism, thereby creating the "social anarchy of the present world"<sup>39</sup>—what was man to do? Weaver devoted his last three chapters to expositing his solution, and it was in this offering, seemingly, that movement conservatives found such great appeal. The first means of

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<sup>36</sup> Weaver, *Ideas Have Consequences*, 112.

<sup>37</sup> Weaver, *Ideas Have Consequences*, 113.

<sup>38</sup> Weaver, *Ideas Have Consequences*, 113-114.

<sup>39</sup> Weaver, *Ideas Have Consequences*, 129.

restoration involved enriching what Weaver called “the last metaphysical right remaining to us,” that of private property. “The ordinances of religion, the prerogatives of sex and of vocation, all have been swept away by materialism, but the relationship of a man to his own has until the present largely escaped attack.”<sup>40</sup> While it might surprise the reader to think of property as a metaphysical right, indeed the last remaining one, such a notion was natural to Weaver, who explained that it is metaphysical because it does not depend on any test of social usefulness, that is, it is not relative. “Property rests on the *hisness* of *his*: *proprietas*, *Eigentum*, the very words assert an identification of owner and owned. Now the great value of this is that the fact of something’s being private property removes it from the area of contention. In the *hisness* of property we have dogma; there the discussion ends.”<sup>41</sup> Lest the unadulterated capitalist distort this position, Weaver made clear that he had no affinity for the sort of *laissez-faire* capitalism that created “General,” “Standard,” and “International” corporations of the nineteenth century. Instead, he was interested in the “distributive ownership of small properties. These take the form of independent farms, of local businesses, of homes owned by the occupants, where individual responsibility gives significance to prerogative over property.”<sup>42</sup>

Next Weaver turned to the notion that “a divine element is present in language,” and we should thus recover that divinity by taking seriously “the power of the word” in the ordering of our lives.<sup>43</sup> In so doing he pointed to the “overlordship” of man that began when he named the world, as well as to the Gospel of John, where we find that “In

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<sup>40</sup> Weaver, *Ideas Have Consequences*, 131.

<sup>41</sup> Weaver, *Ideas Have Consequences*, 132.

<sup>42</sup> Weaver, *Ideas Have Consequences*, 133.

<sup>43</sup> Weaver, *Ideas Have Consequences*, 148.

the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God. The same was in the beginning with God.”<sup>44</sup> The summons Weaver issued was for “training in definition,” which does no less than give the student “training in thinking.” And “if the world is to remain cosmos, we shall have to make some practical application of the law that in the beginning was the word.”<sup>45</sup>

Finally, after establishing himself in relation to property and repairing communication, man must, as Weaver’s last means of restoration, turn to piety and to justice. This was the crux of Weaver’s argument and was undoubtedly the most pointed call for religious awakening among any of the conservative rhetors of the 1940s and 1950s. But Weaver’s prescription took a slightly different form from the discourse of religious conservatism that would come much later. Here Weaver was pointing the reader toward the sort of piety one might find in Plato, that which regards in proper manner nature, neighbor, and the past. “Piety is a discipline of the will through respect. It admits the right to exist of things larger than the ego, of things different from the ego.”<sup>46</sup> In his impiety toward nature, man has concerned himself with conquering nature, viewing it as a “thing” much like the machines of the modern world. Regarding his neighbor, he has abandoned chivalry and the “basic brotherhood of man,” the “modern formula of unconditional surrender” being the most grotesque display of man’s impiety toward others. And finally, regarding the past, he has shown nothing but contempt, and if man is to recover piety, he must “know that people of the past generations lived and had

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<sup>44</sup> John 1:1, quoted in Weaver, *Ideas Have Consequences*, 149. It is worth noting that Weaver’s “word” is not the same as the “Word” from the Book of John, but Weaver uses the Book of John to note the importance of definition.

<sup>45</sup> Weaver, *Ideas Have Consequences*, 168-169.

<sup>46</sup> Weaver, *Ideas Have Consequences*, 172.

their being amid circumstances just as solid as those surrounding us. And piety accepts them, their words and deeds, as part of the total reality.”<sup>47</sup>

The final three pages of *Ideas Have Consequences* have particular pertinence to our discussion here, namely that Weaver acknowledged his own use of religious rhetoric, which, he said, was unavoidable.

I have tried, as far as possible, to express the thought of this essay in secular language, but there are points where it has proved impossible to dispense with appeal to religion. And I think this term must be invoked to describe the strongest sustaining power in a life which is from limited points of view “solitary, poor, nasty, brutish, and short.”<sup>48</sup>

When life is this difficult—and it is, he said—and men deny the metaphysical—which they have—the situation is dire, and the only solution is a return to religion. For “When it becomes evident that the world’s rewards are not adequate to the world’s pain, and when the possibility of other reward is denied, simple calculation demands *the ending of it all* [emphasis mine].”<sup>49</sup> This analysis was nothing if not alarming, and it must lead us to what Weaver sees as the only workable solution—no less than the religious panaceas of a “deep reformation” and a “revival.” His summons is worth quoting at length:

It may be that we are awaiting a great change, that the sins of the fathers are going to be visited upon the generations until the reality of evil is again brought home and there comes some passionate reaction, like that which flowered in the chivalry and spirituality of the Middle Ages. If such is the most we can hope for, something toward that revival may be prepared by acts of thought and volition in this waning day of the West.<sup>50</sup>

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<sup>47</sup> Weaver, *Ideas Have Consequences*, 176.

<sup>48</sup> Weaver, *Ideas Have Consequences*, 185.

<sup>49</sup> Weaver, *Ideas Have Consequences*, 185.

<sup>50</sup> Weaver, *Ideas Have Consequences*, 187.

As Marion Montgomery notes, Americans were in no mood for this critique in 1948. In the aftermath of World War II, on the heels of victories over European fascism and barbarism, Americans saw themselves as righteous victors who had taken the high road and were therefore pleased at what they had become.<sup>51</sup> To conservatives, though, whose critiques of the post-war political and cultural milieu were many in spite of this supposed moral high ground, Weaver's philosophically rich rendering of the West's fearful descent was poignant. Indeed, it did what no other work had done or would do for a long time, which was to attack the cult of the masses at its spiritual foundation. So, while Hayek might have argued that collectivism is, in philosophical if not real terms, totalitarianism, he was unable to stir the conservative at his spiritual core like Weaver did. And while Buckley, as becomes evident below, might argue that God is unwelcome in the elite realms of society, which has no shortage of important consequences, his summons is not for spiritual fortitude to redress this reality. Chambers, as we shall see, might beckon spiritual fortitude, but it is only so that an outer foe might go down in defeat. And Goldwater, moreover, all but denies the role of spirituality altogether. Considering these, it becomes evident why Weaver became the intellectual core of a movement that contained distinct, if somewhat disparate, strands, for it was Weaver who addressed, at least in some capacity, all of these strands at their spiritual foundation. But in addition to this, Weaver noted that "nothing is more certain than that we are all in this together," but it is we who are sinking our own ship because, in essence, we have denied God and resorted to nominalism. This, we now recognize, is the philosophical core of religious conservatism.

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<sup>51</sup> Marion Montgomery, "Is the Battle Over . . . Or Has It Just Begun?" in *The Vision of Richard Weaver*, 209.

But Richard Weaver was simply a Chicago English professor who by all accounts kept to himself. Weaver was not a mobilizer, and while his work reached “far beyond anything anticipated by the author,”<sup>52</sup> it did not reach a mass audience, even if its central tenets, perhaps in a bit of a different form, *should* have reached them in the effort to stir religious conservatives, whose political engagement was in slumber. But alas, Weaver wrote at a time when Americans were proud of themselves, in need of no prophetic word about their own self-destruction. And much was yet to occur that would send them further down the road Weaver described—much further—meaning Weaver’s prophecy would remain relevant, particularly when religious conservatives would in the 1960s and 1970s become increasingly self-aware of the situation Weaver described. Indeed, Weaver’s word would need to come to them again, but in parlance that mass audiences could take hold of. It would finally come, at least in part, in Reagan’s political religion of the right.

God and Man at Yale: *William F. Buckley and the Critique of the Liberal Establishment*

In *The Making of the American Conservative Mind: National Review and its Times*, Jeffrey Hart notes that “No entirely satisfactory biography of [William F.] Buckley has yet been written, and . . . the odds against one appearing are steep.”<sup>53</sup> In large measure, this is due to the magnificent volume of speaking and writing Buckley produced over the span of a more than 50-year career, during which he, more than any other movement conservative, “elevate[d] conservatism to the center of American

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<sup>52</sup> See Richard M. Weaver, Foreword to *Ideas Have Consequences* (Chicago: Phoenix Books, The University of Chicago Press, 1959), v.

<sup>53</sup> Jeffrey Hart, *The Making of the American Conservative Mind: National Review and its Times* (Wilmington, DE: ISI Books, 2005), 2.

political discourse.”<sup>54</sup> To many, Buckley was the voice of the conservative movement, dwarfed only on occasion by Goldwater or McCarthy, Chambers or Reagan, but it was Buckley who outlasted all these, laying much of the groundwork for the eventual success of the movement. His most lasting contribution was doubtless *National Review*, the periodical he founded in 1955, which went a long way in helping to corral a movement otherwise in *diaspora* by creating a central forum for the distribution of exclusively conservative ideas—a rejoinder of sorts to the *New Republic* and the *Nation*, the liberal magazines that enjoyed readership across the upper echelons of society. What brought Buckley to prominence before *National Review*, though, and enabled him to be the central force in conservatism, was his 1951 “best-selling scandal,”<sup>55</sup> *God and Man at Yale: The Superstitions of “Academic Freedom”*—a galvanizing critique of the perfidious liberalism that defined America’s elite establishment and which, if allowed to persist unchecked, posed no shortage of dangers to American society.

Buckley had grown up the privileged son of a wealthy oilman and entered Yale in 1946 on the heels of a brief stint in the Army. He flourished at Yale, rising to the ranks of editor of the *Yale Daily News*, one of the school’s most prominent posts given the paper’s wide readership across campus. As editor, Buckley stirred a considerable amount of controversy, often taking to task the school’s faculty, liberal students, and administration, as well as the liberal politics of the Truman administration in the wake of World War II. The sparks he created with his editorials, writings that were at once

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<sup>54</sup> Douglas Martin, “William F. Buckley Jr. Is Dead at 82,” *The New York Times* (February 27, 2008).

<sup>55</sup> See Hart, *The Making of the American Conservative Mind*, 7.

”debated, reviled, and praised,”<sup>56</sup> would soon pale in comparison to the firestorm of *God and Man at Yale*, which he published to wide readership the year after his graduation.

Long judged a “citadel of ‘triumphant conservatism,’”<sup>57</sup> Yale, in Buckley’s view, had turned its back on the twin pillars of Christianity and individualism, giving way instead to secularism, atheism, and collectivism under the guise of “academic freedom,” a bogey Buckley deemed unworthy of his *alma mater*’s protection. *God and Man at Yale*, then, was a book about “educational theory,” for “what is amiss at Yale is more drastically amiss in other of our great institutions of learning.”<sup>58</sup> The upshots of this, Buckley argued, were many and acute, “even in the context of a world-situation that seems to render totally irrelevant any fight except the power struggle against Communism,” for in Buckley’s mind, the struggle against communism was directly related to higher education, since “the winner [of the struggle] must have help from the classroom.”<sup>59</sup> Yale, “the institution that derives its moral and financial support from Christian individualists. . . addresses itself to the task of persuading the sons of these supporters to be atheistic socialists”<sup>60</sup>—an extreme breach of trust. *God and Man at Yale*, then, concerned itself with illuminating this egregious infraction, and its manifold effects.

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<sup>56</sup> John Chamberlain, Introduction to *God and Man at Yale: The Superstitions of “Academic Freedom”* (Chicago: Henry Regnery Company, 1951), vii.

<sup>57</sup> William F. Buckley, Jr., *God and Man at Yale: The Superstitions of “Academic Freedom”* (Chicago: Henry Regnery Company, 1951), xv.

<sup>58</sup> Buckley, *God and Man at Yale*, xv.

<sup>59</sup> Buckley, *God and Man at Yale*, xvi-xvii.

<sup>60</sup> Buckley, *God and Man at Yale*, xv-xvi.

The most important of these was what Austin W. Bramwell observed at the book's gold anniversary, namely that without *God and Man at Yale*, "one could fairly say, the conservative movement would not exist today. Soon after winning national attention with this controversial polemic, Buckley deployed his youth, charm, and intellect to unite a motley crew of cantankerous intellectuals into a viable conservative movement."<sup>61</sup> Indeed, *God and Man at Yale* is a foundational piece of discourse in the conservative movement, one of the first works to take to task a liberal establishment that had deeply entrenched itself by 1951 and a book that in Nash's view was "the most controversial . . . in the history of conservatism since 1945."<sup>62</sup> With its wide distribution, Buckley's work was reviewed by many major outlets—*Life*, *TIME*, *Newsweek*, *Saturday Review*, *Atlantic Monthly*, and a host of newspapers, academic journals, and law reviews—drawing the ire of the liberal elites who ran those publications. And of course, Yale was none too pleased. When all was said and done, the book catapulted Buckley to the fore of the conservative movement and disseminated widely the conservative critique of the American liberal elite. For that reason it deserves attention.

The book's title spoke to the centrality of religion in Buckley's critique, and the first chapter, "Religion at Yale," dealt exclusively with that subject. However, the work was less concerned with the merits of religion than one might expect. One is struck, to be sure, in the book's foreword by a then-audacious statement—it came about, after all, a year before Whittaker Chambers's *Witness* brought such a critique to wide audiences—

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<sup>61</sup> Austin W. Bramwell, "The Revolt Against the Establishment: *God and Man at Yale* at Fifty," in William F. Buckley, *God and Man at Yale*, 50<sup>th</sup> Anniversary Edition (Washington, D.C.: Gateway Editions, Regnery Publishing, Inc., 2001), xi.

<sup>62</sup> Nash, *The Conservative Intellectual Movement in America Since 1945*, 27.

that “I myself believe that the duel between Christianity and atheism is the most important in the world. I further believe that the struggle between individualism and collectivism is the same struggle reproduced on another level.”<sup>63</sup> In this regard, the whole book, not just the chapter on religion *qua* religion, concerned itself with Christianity and its centrality to conservatism. But Buckley quickly abandoned this line of thought; it was, after all, in a real and etymological sense, merely a foreword. As would become abundantly clear in the main text, the link between individualism and Christianity was not the focus of the work, and neither were Christianity and individualism as positive goods in and of themselves. As Buckley made clear, “I am not here concerned with writing an *apologia* either for Christianity or for individualism. . . . Rather, I will proceed on the assumption that Christianity and freedom are ‘good,’ without ever worrying that by so doing, I am being presumptuous.”<sup>64</sup> In a footnote he went a step further in stating that, “In point of fact, the argument I shall advance does not even require that free enterprise and Christianity be ‘good,’ but merely that the educational overseers of a private university should *consider* them to be ‘good.’”<sup>65</sup> In other words, Buckley was not concerned with the merits of either Christianity or individualism, but instead with the fact that Yale’s supporters considered them meritorious, while its faculty and administrators undercut those very ideals. In this regard, when dealing with Christianity and individualism, the book was primarily empirical as opposed to normative, concerned more with what *was* rather than what

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<sup>63</sup> Buckley, *God and Man at Yale*, xvi-xvii.

<sup>64</sup> Buckley, *God and Man at Yale*, xvii.

<sup>65</sup> Buckley, *God and Man at Yale*, xvii.

*should be*. That is to say that it was more of a piece with Joseph McCarthy than Richard Weaver or Ronald Reagan; it was concerned with who was an atheist and who a collectivist—who, that is, that had subverted the ideals of Yale—as opposed to why one might justify conservatism on the basis of Christianity.

An analysis of Buckley’s chapter on “Religion at Yale” backs up this assertion. The main question he asked was whether Yale “fortifies or shatters” a student’s “respect for Christianity,”<sup>66</sup> not whether or how religious belief breeds conservative politics. To provide an answer, Buckley examined both the curriculum—how many religion courses were offered and how many students were selecting them?—as well as, and more importantly, “the orientation and direction given to the students by the instructors in these courses, and . . . in other courses that deal or should deal with religious values.”<sup>67</sup> His procession began with a professor-by-professor look at the Religion Department, arguing that there, where one might assume the Christian faith would be defended, such ideals were often subverted if treated at all. Mr. Lovett, for instance, the most popular professor on the religion faculty, taught the Bible as a “monument over the grave of Christianity.”<sup>68</sup> T.M. Greene, who was “a Christian by a great many definitions,” neglected the truths of that faith, opting instead to teach “ethics, not religion.”<sup>69</sup> Professor Schroeder, who was chairman of the department, taught courses on religious thought wherein he did not “seek to persuade his students to believe in Christ, largely because he has not, as I understand

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<sup>66</sup> Buckley, *God and Man at Yale*, 3.

<sup>67</sup> Buckley, *God and Man at Yale*, 5.

<sup>68</sup> Buckley, *God and Man at Yale*, 6.

<sup>69</sup> Buckley, *God and Man at Yale*, 7-8.

it, been completely able to persuade himself.”<sup>70</sup> Even Mr. Goodenough, a Congregationalist minister of all things, did not himself do good work on behalf of the Christian faith, for he was “80 per cent atheist and 20 per cent agnostic.”<sup>71</sup> One quickly understands Buckley’s point—that the student need not look to the Religion Department for support for his faith, for there he would not find it, since it was a place of “keen disappointment.”<sup>72</sup>

In the social sciences and humanities, where one might turn next for religious inquiry, the situation was no less grave. Ralph E. Turner in History, for instance, was “a professional debunker, a dedicated iconoclast who has little mercy either on God, or on those who believe in Him, and little respect for the values that most undergraduates have been brought up to respect.”<sup>73</sup> In the Sociology Department, religion was, “at best, a useful superstition.”<sup>74</sup> In Philosophy, “the bias is notably secular, and, in some cases, straightforwardly antagonistic to religion.”<sup>75</sup> The Psychology Department too often made “little or no mention of religion, [so] the student assumes that the subject is neither important, nor relevant.”<sup>76</sup>

Buckley then proceeded to examine the role of religion in the extracurricular life at Yale, but by this point, one knows the general trajectory of his critique. Even in those

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<sup>70</sup> Buckley, *God and Man at Yale*, 8.

<sup>71</sup> Buckley, *God and Man at Yale*, 9.

<sup>72</sup> Buckley, *God and Man at Yale*, 9.

<sup>73</sup> Buckley, *God and Man at Yale*, 13.

<sup>74</sup> Buckley, *God and Man at Yale*, 14.

<sup>75</sup> Buckley, *God and Man at Yale*, 22.

<sup>76</sup> Buckley, *God and Man at Yale*, 25.

extracurricular oases of Christian faith, there was a great perversion of mission by the many who turn there merely for the enhancement of social status as opposed to the practice of Christian piety. *Et Veritas*, for instance, the magazine produced by the campus's most prominent Christian group, had been previously edited by one who "does not even classify himself as a Christian, although he saw fit to edit a magazine which is a function of the Yale University Christian Association. The present editor is an avowed agnostic."<sup>77</sup> Buckley's critique followed the same form as his critique of the academic departments on campus: each religious group was pointed out by name and then taken to task for its practices.

Thus ended Buckley's discussion of "Religion at Yale," and the book then moved to a discussion of individualism that mirrored the religion section, differing only insofar as it focused more on economics texts than professors. He then addressed the subject of Yale's alumni, arguing that the university was theirs to govern, which was followed by a missive on the "hoax" of academic freedom, "that handy slogan that is constantly wielded to bludgeon into impotence numberless citizens who waste away with frustration as they view in their children and their children's children the results of *laissez-faire* education"<sup>78</sup>—an interesting locution for a proponent of *laissez-faire* in so many other realms.<sup>78</sup> Finally, the conclusion: "If the majority of Yale graduates believe in spiritual values and in individualism, they cannot contribute to Yale so long as she continues in whole or in part to foster contrary values."<sup>79</sup>

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<sup>77</sup> Buckley, *God and Man at Yale*, 29.

<sup>78</sup> Buckley, *God and Man at Yale*, 182.

<sup>79</sup> Buckley, *God and Man at Yale*, 195.

The work was purely forensic inasmuch as it built an argument, piece by piece, against Yale's *laissez-faire* approach to educating its students. What is surprising in light of its title was its most basic assumption—not that Christianity and individualism were right, or even that they were useful in constructing a good society, but instead simply that Yale's supporters were Christians and individualists. Buckley proceeded with the argument nonetheless:

- 1) The views of the faculty ought to reflect those of the alumni.
- 2) The views of the faculty do not, in fact, reflect those of the alumni.
- 3) Therefore, the alumni should withhold their contributions until such time as the views of the faculty change.

For present purposes, what is most important is the fact that, perhaps surprisingly, religious rhetoric does not become central to the conservative movement via *God and Man at Yale*. To Buckley's credit, it is doubtful that he foresaw the impact of his work in helping to galvanize conservatives, and if he had, it is likely that he would have given more attention to the merits of Christianity and individualism, both to the university curriculum and to the building of a right society. But what instead entered the conservative discourse was a forensic case for alumni control of a university curriculum. To be sure, the title of the book, which had a rhetorical potency that should not be undervalued, conveyed the centrality of God to the emerging conservative movement Buckley spoke on behalf of. One could glean from this an assumption that the conservative critique rested on religious convictions. But upon opening this seminal

piece of conservative discourse, one would not find the elements of religious conservatism that would one day become so central to the movement.<sup>80</sup>

### *Whittaker Chambers and Anti-Communism*

Whittaker Chambers lived by most accounts a nightmarish childhood in an American “middle class family,” as he famously called it, and having escaped it in 1924 at the age of 23, he stumbled upon Vladimir Lenin’s *Soviets at Work*, which through communism promised liberation from the social malaise that plagued the very middle class of Chambers’s youth. Chambers joined the Workers Party of America (the organized American Communist party) the next year, and once in, went to work as a devotee, writing and editing Communist publications, some critically acclaimed. But in this role with this political organization, Chambers was not unique, nor terribly famous, for among the American Communist ranks during that era were a host of prominent artists and intellectuals. Communism, of the sort Chambers practiced, was in some ways en vogue in the 1920s.

In 1932, however, Whittaker Chambers joined an underground of Soviet Communist spies working against the United States from within. From the seat of Franklin Roosevelt’s New Deal program in Washington, Chambers worked most often as a courier, transporting to his Soviet superior in New York many of the important documents stolen by his underground colleagues working in departments of State, Justice, Labor, or Agriculture. But just a few years into this work, around 1937, Chambers began to doubt his allegiance to the cause when he considered the evils of

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<sup>80</sup> Admittedly, the argument that a liberal elite is actively undercutting traditional values of religious belief was an argument that would live on, but it is not an explicit argument on the merits of traditional values and religious belief.

Joseph Stalin's Great Purge, which had killed or otherwise persecuted hundreds of thousands of minorities or dissenters in Russia. Knowing full well the reach of Stalin's arm and the retaliation that awaited defectors, Chambers, in his uneasiness, "began, like Lazarus, the impossible return. I began to break away from Communism and to climb from deep within its underground, where for six years I had been buried, back into the world of free men."<sup>81</sup> This climb doubtless imposed a number of risks, not the least of which was death for Chambers and his family, but he nevertheless defected unscathed, at least physically, and began a flourishing career at *TIME* magazine in 1938.

Chambers could have toiled there in relative anonymity—save only that limited publicity reserved for magazine editors—were it not for a man named Alger Hiss. Chambers was summoned in 1948 to testify before the House Un-American Activities Committee (HUAC), and among those he named as Communists—indeed, the most important person he named—was Mr. Hiss, a prominent statesman from the Roosevelt administration. Hiss was well-known in Washington circles, having graduated from Harvard Law and clerked for Justice Oliver Wendell Holmes before serving stints at both the Justice Department and the State Department, where he rose quickly. Hiss became Assistant Secretary of State and did important work in that capacity, serving, for instance, as part of the American delegation to the Yalta Conference, where Roosevelt's American contingent worked closely with Stalin and Churchill to plan the defeat of Hitler and subsequent division of Europe. Hiss then presided over the United Nations Charter conference in San Francisco in 1945. Given his celebrity, Hiss was well-connected

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<sup>81</sup> Chambers, *Witness*, 25.

publicly—Ivy League, urbane, a dedicated public servant. But according to Chambers, he was a Communist and a turncoat, controversial accusations to be sure.

In his initial testimony before the HUAC, Chambers was by many accounts unimpressive, confessing to his own role and identifying by name government officials he had worked with, but doing so in less than forthcoming ways. Hiss, he said, had been a fellow member of an underground branch of the Communist Party, known later as the Ware Group, which existed to advance communistic policies in American government. Although he did not dole out charges of espionage in this initial testimony, Chambers's story would in the ensuing months take several twists and turns, including an accusation that Hiss was indeed a spy, to which Hiss responded with a plea to defend himself with testimony of his own before the HUAC. This request was granted, and thus began what became known as the Hiss-Chambers Case, or, more succinctly, the Hiss Case.

The stakes in this case were of course much higher than whether one man, Alger Hiss, had been a Communist or a spy. The Hiss Case was rather a metaphor for concerns about the larger domestic situation—about whether there were spies infiltrating the American government, about whether Democrats' liberalism was a fertile seed bed for Communism, and about whether the intimidating tactics of the Republicans on the HUAC were a proper mode of engagement for the U.S. House of Representatives.

The ensuing two years of Hiss trials are far beyond the scope of this work, but some of the results are worth noting. The five-year statute of limitations for espionage had since expired, so although Hiss was not charged and tried for spying, he did face other indictments for two counts of perjury related to his testimony to a grand jury, where he gave false statements about his relationship with Chambers. The first of his two

widely publicized trials, in 1949, ended in a hung jury, and the second, in 1950, resulted in Hiss's conviction on both perjury counts, resulting in a five-year prison sentence. During these two acrimonious trials, both men, Hiss and Chambers, were publicly defamed and defended, and the definitive answer as to Hiss's spy activities was never established.<sup>82</sup> He had become a national symbol, though, a smoking gun telling of egregious liberal breaches of trust to conservatives and a misrepresented and unfairly treated victim of Republican fear-mongering to liberals.

This is the background to Chambers's 1952 book, *Witness*, which became without a doubt the most notorious, and perhaps most influential, single piece of public discourse related to the anti-Communist outpost of the conservative movement. Chambers had in 1949, by necessity of the Hiss Case, left his post as a senior editor at *TIME*, and was living the life of what his biographer Sam Tanenhaus calls a "public recluse."<sup>83</sup> According to Tanenhaus, Chambers was approached several times around 1950 with the prospect of telling his story in an autobiographical memoir, and on a wintry morning that year, he sat down to pen the first pages of his story, which he envisioned as part memoir, part polemic that would seek to shed light on "the tragedy of the 20<sup>th</sup> century," answering why "men become communists, why they continue to be Communists and why some break and some go on." In searching for a publisher, Chambers fancied a more liberal house in the effort to spare his work from ghettoization, and upon judgment that his demo pages were well written and a sure best-seller, the magnate Random House offered Chambers a \$15,000 advance to publish his work, while the *Saturday Evening Post* was

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<sup>82</sup> The weight of evidence in recent years has certainly been against Hiss.

<sup>83</sup> Sam Tanenhaus, *Whittaker Chambers: A Biography* (New York: Random House, 1997), 443.

to pay him \$75,000 to serialize the completed chapters. Upon nearing completion in 1951, less than a year after the Hiss trial had ended, Chambers sent the book to Random House, whose publicity director was “ecstatic” about its commercial possibilities, promising a strenuous marketing campaign—the “biggest and most ambitious” in Random House history—with its release in early 1952. One hardly was needed. The book was purchased by the Book-of-the-Month Club for its primary selection in June 1952, and its first installment ran in the *Saturday Evening Post* in February, bumping Norman Rockwell’s famed work from that publication’s cover for the first time in 53 years. One hundred thousand extra copies of the magazine were printed and sold, and Chambers received a prominent twenty-minute spot on NBC radio and television on back-to-back nights. The book was a raging commercial success, due in no small part to the country’s fascination with the Hiss Case and the fear of communism, then widespread amidst full-throttle McCarthyism. *Witness* would spend a full four months atop the *New York Times*’s non-fiction list, and it ended the year as the ninth-best-selling book in 1952. The country’s most prominent periodicals, including *Saturday Review*, the *New York Times Book Review*, *The Nation*, *Atlantic Monthly*, *The Reporter*, and *Commonweal*, reviewed the book, some of them devoting as many as ten pages to Chambers’s *magnum opus*.<sup>84</sup>

For present purposes, all of this is important because it shows the extent to which the conservative movement was gaining prominence, for it had adopted Whittaker Chambers as one of its own in the wake of the Hiss case, and Chambers was becoming an important national spokesman against communism. Indeed, it was Chambers who stood

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<sup>84</sup> See Tanenhaus, *Whittaker Chambers: A Biography*, 459-463.

tall at the juncture of the grassroots conservative movement and the prominent right-wing politicians. In the political realm, Richard Nixon, who in those days served first as a congressman and then a newly minted senator from California, interrupted his work on the HUAC and his ascent toward prominence in the Republican Party for frequent treks from Washington to Chambers's farm in Westminster, MD. The two visited there frequently regarding Hiss, the book, and more importantly, the real threat of Communism, with Chambers making time and providing insight for his friend, even during his ascetic routine of writing and farming during nearly every waking hour.<sup>85</sup> His mark on Nixon was indelible: "'Witness' is a great book, and . . . the verdict of history will find it so. . . . 'Witness' is the first book of its kind to acknowledge the great hold of Communism on the human mind—which does not dismiss it as a cellar conspiracy which can be abolished by police methods." Nixon continued, "And 'Witness' goes further. It pleads eloquently and effectively for a counter-faith to combat the Communist idea—a faith based not on materialism but on a recognition of God."<sup>86</sup>

Chambers's other main congressional disciple was Joseph R. McCarthy, the Wisconsin senator whose anti-Communist infamy is unmatched and whose fervor for that cause has been well-documented. McCarthy was the most assertive—or reckless, depending on one's perspective—of the congressional Republicans crusading against American communism in the wake of the Hiss Case, and he first met Chambers in 1950 through Richard Nixon. According to Tanenhaus, Chambers was enthusiastic about McCarthy's early efforts, and he welcomed the Senator's admiration when McCarthy

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<sup>85</sup> See Tanenhaus, *Whittaker Chambers: A Biography*, 449.

<sup>86</sup> Richard Nixon, "Plea for an Anti-Communist Faith," *Saturday Review* (May 24, 1952), 12.

came to Westminster for his first visit. Soon McCarthy and his assistant were making frequent voyages to visit Chambers, who delivered his standard lectures on the Communist stronghold in America to a devouring McCarthy. The two kept private company for most of McCarthy's Red Hunt, with Chambers playing the old sage and McCarthy the fervid practitioner.<sup>87</sup>

But at his critical intersection, Chambers's impact also extended, perhaps more significantly, to the conservative intellectual movement, which was gaining steam in the early 1950s. In Nash's view, *Witness*, like Friedrich Hayek's *The Road to Serfdom* and Richard Weaver's *Ideas Have Consequences*, "assaulted the American Left at a moment of acute uncertainty. The impact of *Witness* on various [conservative intellectuals] was profound. . . . For many conservatives the book was a crucial intellectual experience."<sup>88</sup> William Rusher, for instance, the prominent publisher of *National Review*, called it the "Alpha and Omega" of his perception of the nature of communism in America.<sup>89</sup> John Chamberlain, a veteran conservative journalist, recalled learning many valuable lessons on the Communist threat from Chambers. And to intellectuals such as Eric Voegelin, who saw communism as merely a radical expression of liberalism, Chambers's work illuminated the dangers of allowing liberalism to fester.<sup>90</sup> But more than these, Chambers's critique roused William F. Buckley, then the brightest young figure in the conservative movement who had just a year before published *God and Man at Yale*. "It has long been," he said to Chambers, "the irrevocable consensus in my numerous family .

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<sup>87</sup> Tanenhaus, *Whittaker Chambers: A Biography*, 453-455.

<sup>88</sup> Nash, *The Conservative Intellectual Movement in America Since 1945*, 94.

<sup>89</sup> Quoted in Nash, *The Conservative Intellectual Movement in America Since 1945*, 94.

<sup>90</sup> Nash, *The Conservative Intellectual Movement in America Since 1945*, 93-94.

. . . that your courage, your skills, and your faith are the brightest beacon of the free world.” So taken with Chambers was Buckley that he went to great strides to befriend his elder and to enlist him to serve as senior editor of his upstart *National Review*. Indeed, it was Chambers, ironically, who had by this time in 1954 slightly moderated his politics, trying to persuade Buckley, an ardent McCarthy defender, of Eisenhower’s and Nixon’s conservative *bona fides*. As Tanenhaus notes, Buckley revered Chambers and “held [him] in awe—as ideologue, as writer, as hero of the Hiss case.”<sup>91</sup>

So, too, it is worth noting for present purposes that another man—at the time not a conservative intellectual or politician—was deeply stirred by the work of Whittaker Chambers. That man was Ronald Reagan, who at *Witness*’s release was still a motion picture actor in Hollywood. During his 1950s conversion from New Deal liberal to solid conservative Reagan read widely, but perhaps no one moved him as deeply as Chambers, to whom he would later posthumously pay homage with the nation’s highest civilian honor, the Presidential Medal of Freedom, in 1984. Four decades after it was published and he first read it, Reagan kept copies of *Witness* prominently displayed on his bookshelves both at home and at his ranch, and as Paul Kengor reports, countless Reagan associates attest to his ability to recite entire passages from *Witness* verbatim, even late into his life.<sup>92</sup> There are numerous mentions of or allusions to Chambers in Reagan’s speeches, perhaps none more prominent than the *Witness* passages inserted directly into Reagan’s famous “Evil Empire” speech to the National Association of Evangelicals in 1983.

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<sup>91</sup> Tanenhaus, *Whittaker Chambers: A Biography*, 485-489.

<sup>92</sup> See Paul Kengor, *God and Ronald Reagan: A Spiritual Biography* (New York: Regan Books, 2004), 86-87.

Boasting such great commercial success and such profound influence on the leading conservative intellectuals and politicians, it is clear that Whittaker Chambers's *Witness* is the most important piece of anti-Communist discourse in the American conservative movement. Indeed, the social critic Hanna Arendt called Chambers "the spokesman" of those for whom "Communism has remained the chief issue in their lives."<sup>93</sup> But what made the book so weighty, "one of the most significant autobiographies of the twentieth century?"<sup>94</sup> No doubt of interest was the hellish childhood Chambers recalled with striking clarity, as well as his musings on the intricacies of the Hiss Case, which had gripped the nation. But more than this, what made the most lasting impression was Chambers's framing of the battle against communism—not as a mere test of competing political ideologies, as Goldwater would later frame it, but as an apocalyptic battle pitting God and God's people against the evils of godless communism:

Communism is what happens when, in the name of Mind, men free themselves from God. But its view of God, its knowledge of God, its experience of God, is what alone gives character to a society or nation, and meaning to its destiny. Its culture, the voice of this character, is merely that view, knowledge, experience, of God, fixed by its most intense sprits in terms intelligible to the mass of men. There has never been a society or a nation without God. But history is cluttered with the wreckage of nations that became indifferent to God, and died. . . . The crisis of the Western world exists to the degree in which it is indifferent to God. It exists to the degree in which the Western world actually shares Communism's materialist vision, is so dazzled by the logic of the materialist interpretation of history, politics and economics, that it fails to grasp that, for it, the only possible answer to the Communist challenge: Faith in God or Faith in Man? is the challenge: Faith in God.<sup>95</sup>

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<sup>93</sup> Hannah Arendt, "The Ex-Communists," *Commonweal*, March 20, 1953, 595.

<sup>94</sup> Sidney Hook, "The Faiths of Whittaker Chambers," *New York Times Book Review*, May 25, 1952, 1.

<sup>95</sup> Chambers, *Witness*, 16-17.

In her 1952 *Atlantic Monthly* review of his work, the commentator Rebecca West tabbed Chambers a “Mystic” in the traditional Christian sense of that word, for above all else, he leaned on what she called “his understanding with God.”<sup>96</sup> This is a fitting characterization, for as Chambers recalled with great detail, he himself was godless during his stint as a Communist, but it was the revelation of God that rescued him from the Communist plight. “There came,” he wrote, “a moment so personal, so singular and final, that I have attempted to relate it only to one other human being, a priest, and had thought to reveal it to my children only at the end of my life.” That moment had occurred one day as Chambers climbed down the steps in his home, with his children playing nearby. Grappling at that time with the idea of abandoning communism—a risky venture—Chambers was stirred.

As I stepped down into the dark hall, I found myself stopped, not by a constraint, but by a hush of my whole being. In this organic hush, a voice said with perfect distinctness: ‘If you will fight for freedom, all will be well with you.’ The words are nothing. . . . What was there was the sense that, like me, time and the world stood still, an awareness of God as an envelopment, holding me in silent assurance and untroubled peace. There was a sense that in that moment I gave my promise, not with the mind, but with my whole being, and that this was a covenant that I might not break. . . . From that hall, I walked into life as if for the first time. . . . Henceforth, in the depth of my being there was peace and a strength that nothing could shake. . . . [The feeling] never left me because I no longer groped for God; I felt God. The experience was absolute.<sup>97</sup>

In light of stories such as this, it is no surprise that some have portrayed Chambers as a mystic, since, as West pointed out, to be a good mystic, “a man must be unselfish but egotistical. He must be supremely interested in finding out the truth concerning the

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<sup>96</sup> Rebecca West, “Whittaker Chambers,” *Atlantic Monthly*, June 1952, 37.

<sup>97</sup> Chambers, *Witness*, 84-85.

universe, and not at all interested in securing his own well-being in it.”<sup>98</sup> So it was with Whittaker Chambers. Arendt made the point that “it was obvious that this fellow was never interested in politics,” and insofar as Chambers elevated the battle against communism above the fray of mere politics and into the realm of mysticism or spirituality, she was absolutely right.<sup>99</sup> The break from communism was not to him a change in political party; it was, rather, a “religious experience. . . . A Communist breaks because he must choose at last between irreconcilable opposites—God or Man, Soul or Mind, Freedom or Communism.”<sup>100</sup> To wit, communism itself was not Marx or Lenin, catchphrases, or a series of workers’ rights movements. It was pure evil, at odds with God:

Communists are part of mankind which has recovered the power to live or die—to bear witness—for its faith. And it is a simple, rational faith that inspires men to live or die for it. It is not new. It is, in fact, man’s second oldest faith. Its promise was whispered in the first days of Creation under the Tree of the Knowledge of Good and Evil: “Ye shall be as gods.” It is the great alternative faith of mankind. . . . The Communist vision is the vision of Man without God. It is the vision of man’s mind displacing God as the creative intelligence of the world. It is the vision of man’s liberated mind, by the sole force of its rational intelligence, redirecting man’s destiny and reorganizing man’s life and the world. It is the vision of man, once more the central figure of the Creation, not because God made man in His image, but because man’s mind makes him the most intelligent of the animals. . . . Communism restores man to his sovereignty by simple method of denying God.<sup>101</sup>

In this regard, Chambers was more than mere mystic; he was also a prophet. The summons he issued in response to evil was clear: primarily that men must find the fortitude to confront it, lest they sit idly by while evil engulfs America. That fortitude

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<sup>98</sup> West, “Whittaker Chambers,” 37.

<sup>99</sup> Arendt, “The Ex-Communists,” 597.

<sup>100</sup> Chambers, *Witness*, 16.

<sup>101</sup> Chambers, *Witness*, 9-10.

must be spiritual, not merely political, for “at every point, religion and politics interlace, and must do so more acutely as the conflict between two great camps of men—those who reject and those who worship God—becomes irrepressible. Those camps are not only outside, but also within nations.”<sup>102</sup> In other words, Americans must, like the apostle Paul wrote, “live a life worthy of the calling [they] have received”<sup>103</sup> in confronting this menacing evil. To the astute observer, this summons beckons a common and potent American rhetorical form—that of the jeremiad, although with a slight, and I argue important, variation.

A rhetorical form invented in the American colonies by the early Puritans, the jeremiad was first identified by intellectual historian Perry Miller as a sort of hybrid religio-political sermon. On mission to become a “city on a hill,” or a working model for all the world, the early Puritans felt they had entered into a covenant with God that required of them vigilance and “continued obedience.” But, in Miller’s words, “before long, it became apparent that there were more causes for humiliation than for rejoicing” in this relationship.<sup>104</sup> As Sacvan Bercovitch notes, “[The Puritans] had pledged themselves to God, and He to them, to protect, assist, and favor them above any other community on earth. But at their slightest shortcoming, for neglecting the ‘least’ of their duties, He would turn in wrath against them and be revenged.”<sup>105</sup> Thus emerged the jeremiad as a rhetorical form, for it was the duty of Puritan preachers to chasten the

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<sup>102</sup> Chambers, *Witness*, 449.

<sup>103</sup> See Ephesians 4:1, NIV.

<sup>104</sup> Perry Miller, *Errand into the Wilderness* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1956), 20.

<sup>105</sup> Sacvan Bercovitch, *The American Jeremiad* (Madison: The University of Wisconsin Press, 1978), 3.

flocks in their errant ways. It functioned “to direct an imperiled people of God toward the fulfillment of their destiny, to guide them individually toward salvation, and collectively toward the American city of God.”<sup>106</sup> The seventeenth-century jeremiad, according to Bercovitch, took on this generic rhetorical strategy:

first, a precedent from Scripture that sets out the communal norms; then, a series of condemnations that details the actual state of the community (at the same time insinuating the covenantal promises that ensure success); and finally a prophetic vision that unveils the promises, announces the good things to come, and explains away the gap between fact and ideal.<sup>107</sup>

Chambers’s jeremiad differed in one important way. As Max Ascoli wrote in *The Reporter*, “It is not possible to derive from this book any other sentiment than a profound pity for Whittaker Chambers.”<sup>108</sup> That is because in addition to, or perhaps because of, his bad fortunes in life, Chambers saw the American future grimly. In his mind evil would prevail, and he would be a martyr for the cause of freedom. History, in his view, moved only in only one direction—toward communism and darkness.

Chambers’s work doubtless took a prominent, if not central, place in the psyche of the conservative movement, especially in the speaking and writing of Ronald Reagan, who became a torchbearer of Chambers’s Communist assessment in the 1950s. Needing to moderate his tone for political reasons in the 1960s and 1970s, however, Reagan mostly abandoned Chambers’s fiery brand of the anti-Communist jeremiad during those years, but he would resurrect it in a somewhat modified, more positive way in the 1980s. That important distinction has to do with a key intellectual difference between Reagan

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<sup>106</sup> Bercovitch, *The American Jeremiad*, 9.

<sup>107</sup> Bercovitch, *The American Jeremiad*, 16.

<sup>108</sup> Max Ascoli, “Lives and Deaths of Whittaker Chambers,” *The Reporter*, July 8, 1952, 6.

and Chambers. Reagan never saw communism as inevitable. He thought it was inconsistent with human nature and therefore ultimately less powerful. The victory over communism would require work—work he embraced. Reagan rejected Chambers’s withdrawal from politics, just as he rejected the Nixon/Kissinger foreign policies that were based on pessimism, and also why Reagan could foresee the fall of Communism when so many other conservatives (and liberals) could not. So while the appraisal of Communism as pure evil and the summoning of spiritual fortitude to combat it did not change with Reagan and some other conservatives, the outlook of the Armageddon did. With Reagan, the chronicler of “Morning in America,” there was optimism, if not confidence, that Good will prevail. It should also be noted that Reagan would extend and make effective use of the jeremiad in other areas of politics, all the while spurning the negativity of Chambers in favor of a positive outlook.

What is most important for our purposes is the fact that Whittaker Chambers introduced, widely and prominently, a critique of communism that was purely religious, and it caught on among many conservatives in the 1950s. However, such a critique was soon hampered or altogether eschewed because of two things. First, conservatism was branded extremism during this period, largely because of the staunchness of its anti-Communist rhetoric and because of McCarthy’s well-documented political blunders on behalf of the anti-Communist cause. When Barry Goldwater became the conservative spokesman in 1959-1960 and advocated what many commentators took to be extreme positions regarding the use of nuclear weaponry, thus further institutionalizing the charges of extremism, it became necessary for future conservative spokesmen with political ambitions (i.e., Reagan) to portray slightly more moderation throughout the later

1960s and 1970s. Second, in becoming the spokesperson for the movement by 1960, Goldwater halted this sort of religious critique because he generally avoided religious rhetoric—a reality to which we now turn.

*Barry Goldwater and the Move to the Mainstream*

In 1960, liberalism seemed to be zeitgeist of mainstream American politics. Its godfather, FDR, had served three-and-a-half terms in the White House, and his protégé Truman had rounded out his last and served another. Eisenhower, although breaking the trend with the election of a Republican in 1952, still in many ways carried on the legacy of the New Deal, expanding some of its major social welfare programs and initiating other massive federal spending projects such as the interstate highway system.<sup>109</sup> There were prominent dissenters flanked to the right of these presidents—the aforementioned anti-Communist crusaders and the isolationist Robert Taft come quickly to mind. But in the main, liberalism had fortified itself as the strongest current in American politics, with Democrats most often leading the way and “me-too” Republicans, spurred by the popularity of redistributive practices, often following suit.

There was, of course, a growing grassroots dissent, often overlooked by those who practiced politics on the national level. It was often disjointed, with dissenters of several stripes organizing themselves under several different banners, but without a doubt, and certainly in retrospect, the disparate threads of the conservative movement

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<sup>109</sup> I should be careful to note that Ike was not a bona fide liberal by a great many standards, and to be sure, he would certainly eschew this label. However, if we look at the broader arc of American political history, liberalism still in many ways thrived throughout the 1950s. Among the influential works in American political development that consider the Eisenhower years as part of a general liberal trend in American politics are Theodore J. Lowi, *The End of Liberalism: The Second Republic of the United States*, second edition (New York: W.W. Norton & Company, 1979); and Stephen Skowronek, *The Politics Presidents Make: Leadership from John Adams to George Bush* (Cambridge, MA: The Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 1993).

were moving toward one another by the close of the 1950s. In addition to the wide notoriety given to the important works mentioned above, Buckley's *National Review* boasted wide readership, and his fledgling Young Americans for Freedom experienced growth. And the legacy of the early conservative intellectuals was being carried on exponentially across college campuses, particularly via ISI, which in M. Stanton Evans's mind had become the cardinal link between the right's conservative scholars and the energetic activist generation of college students, who forged a "loose confederation" of young conservatives across the country.<sup>110</sup> These coteries were no mere smattering of right-wing extremists; grounded in a genuine intellectual challenge to the prevailing liberal orthodoxies, they instead represented the potentialities of the *tour de force* that would seek to stem the tides of American liberalism in the coming generation. But what they lacked most at that time was a visible rallying point, a leader.

Barry Goldwater became that leader, the standard bearer of conservatism's move to the mainstream of American politics.<sup>111</sup> The junior senator from Arizona was a crusader for the conservative cause throughout the 1950s, a proponent not just of greater fiscal restraint or of military strength against the Soviets, but a sometimes radical peddler of a total repeal of the New Deal state, a man whose sincerest convictions centered on the sanctity of the individual and his freedom. Goldwater's star rose quickly when he challenged, if a little late, for the Republican presidential nomination in 1960 on the basis of opposition to the party's liberal drift and rampant "me-tooism." The people deserved a

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<sup>110</sup> See M. Stanton Evans, *Revolt on the Campus* (Chicago: Henry Regnery Company, 1961), 65-71.

<sup>111</sup> One could certainly make the case that Nixon, as a conservative in his early years, had moved conservatism to the mainstream by serving as Vice President. On one hand this is the case, but he never galvanized the conservative movement the way Goldwater did, and moreover, he began moving toward the center in the 1960s in his efforts to gain broader Republican support.

clear choice against Jack Kennedy, he posited, not simply another liberal the likes of Nelson Rockefeller or a moderating Richard Nixon, whose shrewd political instincts pulled the vice president toward the center of his divided party. Backed by a host of movement conservatives—a group led by Clarence Manion, the former dean of Notre Dame Law School—Goldwater made a push in several Republican primaries in 1960 before finding himself “at the center of a Republican rebellion” at that summer’s nominating convention.<sup>112</sup> As Nixon, the shoo-in nominee, acceded to the party’s liberal wing on hot-button conservative issues, Goldwater found himself the leader of the conservatives’ spirited efforts to steer the party rightward, particularly as they drafted the party platform for that year. Although most conservatives wanted Goldwater to continue his vigorous challenge of the vice president’s nomination to the bitter end, Goldwater, more partisan than ideologue, conceded his nomination challenge to focus instead on altering the party platform, even if somewhat unsuccessfully. When the convention closed in 1960, Goldwater had fully established himself as a hero to the conservative wing of the party, which was motivated all the more to make theirs the reigning ideology of Republicans.

When Nixon received the nomination as expected, Goldwater spent that fall campaigning magnanimously and tirelessly for his party’s nominee, especially across the West and the old Confederacy, where he had himself gained such popularity. This role—stumping for Republicans—would become all too familiar to Goldwater in the ensuing two years. In addition to his regular senatorial duties, Goldwater also gained chairmanship of the Republican Senatorial Campaign Committee, the group committed to

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<sup>112</sup> See Lee Edwards, *Goldwater: The Man Who Made a Revolution* (Washington, D.C.: Regnery Publishing, 1995), 134.

ensuring national party support for those nationwide who sought Senate seats under the Republican banner—regardless of their ideological leanings. This was a job Goldwater took seriously, an unabashedly partisan role jet-setting the country on behalf of a party fractured by its most recent convention and leaderless upon the defeat of its presidential nominee. And in light of the way Washington works, it was also a job that might afford one any number of political IOUs, an astute political maneuver that positioned him not only to fill the vacuum as a leader of his party, but to become a more centrist leader than most expected.

Wide political support is doubtless a prerequisite for a presidential bid, something one often must gain tactically. But by most accounts, Barry Goldwater never *sought* the Republican nomination for president in 1964. Instead, he was drafted to that esteemed role by a grassroots group of conservative intellectuals and activists, movement conservatives who had burst onto the national radar with their showing at the 1960 Republican National Convention. Their successful efforts to win the 1964 nomination for Goldwater are beyond the scope of this work, but it is worth noting that this probably marked the climax of conservatism until Ronald Reagan's victory in 1980. And Goldwater, despite a perceived passivity, had also done his part in this ascent. Particularly because of his unwavering efforts on behalf of the party during the previous four years, he had in many respects bridged the chasm between conservatism—what many in mainstream American culture still considered right-wing extremism—and the more dominant moderate-to-liberal Republicanism. He did this not so much because he had compromised in his ideology or policy stands, but because he had built and maintained *enough* Republican ethos due to his work on behalf of fellow partisans,

regardless of their ideological flavor. To be sure, “enough” is a key word here.

Goldwater faced a seven-month campaign against his nomination from the liberal wing of his party, based mostly on the charge that he was an extremist, unfit for the nation’s highest office. This was a charge that would live with him—and intensify—throughout the ensuing general election campaign. Goldwater nevertheless had widened his support—largely through his efforts on behalf of would-be Republican senators in just about every state—to such an extent that he was able to shore up his nomination, with the driving force in this feat being the movement conservatives who held him up as their leader, their ticket to the mainstream.

Nash notes that national political activism and the conservative intellectual movement were, via the Goldwater campaign, “related to a degree that politics and intellectuals had not been for a long time,” and offers a litany of movement conservatives who stood fiercely behind Barry Goldwater in 1964: *National Review* enthusiastically promoted his candidacy; Russell Kirk helped to prepare speeches; Harry Jaffa wrote much of his party acceptance speech; Milton Friedman served as his economic adviser; William Rusher was “heavily” involved; Frank Meyer, Bill Buckley, Brent Bozell, and Ayn Rand endorsed him. “Indeed, it is likely that without the patient spadework of the intellectual Right, the conservative political movement of the 1960s would have remained disorganized and defeated,” and Barry Goldwater would have been little more than the junior senator from Arizona.<sup>113</sup>

But the question remains: what is it that moved an intellectual and grassroots political movement, theretofore ostracized, to the forefront of national politics? We

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<sup>113</sup> Nash, *The Conservative Intellectual Movement in America Since 1945*, 273.

know that many mainstream Republicans accepted Goldwater, if reluctantly, based mostly upon his work on their behalf. And it is clear based on their faith in the man that movement conservatives saw Barry Goldwater as their ticket to the masses, or at least to Republican hegemony. But why were movement conservatives so zealous in their support of Barry Goldwater, a dyed-in-the-wool Republican who had shown willingness to put party loyalty above the movement?

The simple answer is that Barry Goldwater had himself become both movement conservative and popular politician when he wrote the most widely read political book of the twentieth century, rivaled in the history of American politics, as Lee Edwards posits, “only, perhaps, by Thomas Paine’s *Common Sense*.”<sup>114</sup> That book was *The Conscience of a Conservative*, a short manifesto that arrived on the scene to help win support for Goldwater’s 1960 bid for the Republican nomination, but that by 1964 had sold some 3,500,000 copies.<sup>115</sup> Doubling as philosopher and politician, Goldwater used many of the same marginalized ideas that conservative intellectuals had long championed from the ghettos of American politics, taking them to the mainstream, and he did so with raging success, selling enough copies to give some credence to the idea that there might be more conservatives in America than anyone dared dream. That Barry Goldwater could challenge the orthodoxy not just of the Republican Party, but of American politics more generally, gave hope to those who wished so desperately to move their ideas to the mainstream of American political life. A book that is to this day called formative by

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<sup>114</sup> See Edwards, *Goldwater*, 110.

<sup>115</sup> Nash, *The Conservative Intellectual Movement in America Since 1945*, 273.

prominent conservatives,<sup>116</sup> *The Conscience of a Conservative* is undoubtedly the most prominent piece of discourse related to the conservative movement's journey toward mainstream American politics.

The book was not intended to be a bestseller. In fact, it was initially conceived as “pamphlet about Americanism,” a way of bolstering Goldwater's effort to shore up the 1960 Republican nomination—and it was not even written by Barry Goldwater. Brent Bozell, brother-in-law of William Buckley, took six weeks to write the book based on old Goldwater speeches and Bozell's own ideas, and Goldwater reportedly read it once and said, “Looks fine to me. Let's go with it.”<sup>117</sup> And go with it they did. Although the first printing yielded only 5,000 copies, several successive runs resulted in 85,000 books being sold in the first month. Copies were given to all senators and members of the House of Representatives, and in addition to positive reviews by prominent conservative intellectuals in any medium they could find—part of a shrewd marketing blitz—the Goldwater presidential committee also ran ads for the book in the country's biggest newspapers. Quickly, Goldwater found himself at the helm of the conservative cause, its primary rhetor with an audience wider than most had imagined.

More than this, Goldwater also established himself rhetorically as the *conscience* of that movement. These musings were not merely “The Policy Positions of a Conservative Republican Senator,” but instead proclaimed to be the conscience of a burgeoning political movement, offering many their first hard look at conservatism as a mainstream idea. Coupled with his most popular campaign slogan, which encouraged

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<sup>116</sup> For a list of many prominent activists and politicians who have called the book formative, see Edwards, *Goldwater*, 347-349.

<sup>117</sup> Quoted in Edwards, *Goldwater*, 115.

voters toward introspection by telling them, “In your heart, you know he’s right,” Goldwater’s most prominent message was that conservatism concerned itself chiefly with morality, issues of rightness and wrongness. These together deemed Goldwater a chief—if not *the* chief—arbiter of what was morally right about the conservative critique. One’s conscience, after all, is where one turns for guidance on moral issues, and the book functioned as an all-access look at what Goldwater had deemed right upon his own searching. The campaign slogan then asked the public to do the same, to engage the message and accept it as right.

Based on this call toward moralism, one might expect Goldwater’s book to be sermonistic if not theological, perhaps in the Whittaker Chambers mold. But this, surprisingly, was hardly the case. Goldwater’s message in the book was two-fold: First, “the Conservative looks upon politics as the art of achieving the maximum amount of freedom for individuals that is consistent with the maintenance of social order;”<sup>118</sup> and second, for this achievement to occur, “The government must begin to *withdraw* from a whole series of programs that are outside its constitutional mandate—from social welfare programs, education, public power, agriculture, public housing, urban renewal and all the other activities that can be better performed by lower levels of government or by private institutions or by individuals.”<sup>119</sup> The bulk of the book was devoted to expositions on a host of policy positions, most of which involved simple federal withdrawal from what Goldwater saw as state-level or private affairs.

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<sup>118</sup> Barry Goldwater, *The Conscience of a Conservative* (United States: Beta Nu Publishing, 2007), 7.

<sup>119</sup> Goldwater, *The Conscience of a Conservative*, 60.

To be sure, the book began by offering a philosophical foundation for the moral superiority of conservatism and used some religious language in so doing:

The root difference between the Conservatives and the Liberals of today is that Conservatives take account of the *whole* man, while the Liberals tend to look only at the material side of man's nature. The Conservative believes that man is, in part, an economic, an animal creature; but that he is also a spiritual creature with spiritual needs and spiritual desires. What is more, these needs and desires reflect the *superior* side of man's nature, and thus take precedence over his economic wants. Conservatism therefore looks upon the enhancement of man's spiritual nature as the primary concern of political philosophy. Liberals, on the other hand, – in the name of a concern for “human beings”—regard the satisfaction of economic wants as the dominant mission of society.<sup>120</sup>

This might well have been the case. Conservatives—and Goldwater never told us who conservatives were—might well have had interest in a man's spiritual wellbeing and indeed may have deemed it their primary concern. Likewise—although apparently Goldwater never read Martin Luther King, Jr. or Walter Rauschenbush, among others—liberals may have concerned themselves chiefly with “economic wants” in place of spirituality. But why or how this was the case was not immediately clear, nor did it become clear in the remainder of the book. Following the introductory chapter, which sought to offer a concise philosophical foundation for conservatism, the book proceeded with a brief chapter on the unconstitutionality of the federal government's expansion, before offering a conservative rejoinder to America's liberal drift in a series of policy areas—states' rights, civil rights, agriculture policy, labor and unionism, taxes and spending, welfare, education, and “the Soviet menace.” The language and the justification for the conservative positions were rarely spiritual or religious; it was hardly Ronald Reagan's discourse of religious conservatism. Instead, what linked spirituality-

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<sup>120</sup> Goldwater, *The Conscience of a Conservative*, 4-5.

as-chief-concern in chapter one to the libertarian small-government advocacy of the rest of the book were two short paragraphs on the role of the individual vis-à-vis society.

Every man, for his individual good and for the good of his society, is responsible for his *own* development. The choices that govern his life are choices that he must make: they cannot be made by any other human being, or by a collectivity of human beings. . . . So it is that Conservatism, throughout history, has regarded man . . . [not] as a part of a general collectivity in which the sacredness and the separate identity of individual human beings are ignored.<sup>121</sup>

And so, the conscience of a conservative required that one beat back the expansive national government, with its exorbitant taxes, its denigration of a man's dignity via welfare, its defilement of the role of the states. In short, "for the American Conservative, there is no difficulty in identifying the day's overriding political challenge: it is *to preserve and extend freedom.*"<sup>122</sup>

In explicating how this might best be done, Goldwater made arguments that relied little if at all on religion or religious justification. Instead, with an eye toward removing power from the freedom-dooming "tyrants"<sup>123</sup> of the federal government, he advocated a series of policy positions—or as Rick Perlstein more accurately notes, "policy *proscriptions*"<sup>124</sup>—that either maximized freedom—unless, of course, one happened to be an African American in the South—or comported with a libertarian or states' rights reading of the Constitution. In some cases, he even proposed that we divorce certain positions from religious influence—hardly a Reagan-style religious discourse. To be fair,

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<sup>121</sup> Goldwater, *The Conscience of a Conservative*, 6-7.

<sup>122</sup> Goldwater, *The Conscience of a Conservative*, 8.

<sup>123</sup> See Goldwater, *The Conscience of a Conservative*, 31. The sentence, referring to the federal government, reads, "Any other course enthrones tyrants and dooms freedom."

<sup>124</sup> Rick Perlstein, *Before the Storm: Barry Goldwater and the Unmaking of the American Consensus* (New York: Hill and Wang, 2001), 64.

some of the policy areas he addressed, such as states' rights, may not have been entirely conducive to religious justification. But others certainly were, and Goldwater chose a mainly secular rhetorical strategy. To gain a fuller picture of this, the policy areas he broached are briefly discussed.

His justification of states' rights was a purely constitutional argument, insofar as the Constitution—or rather Goldwater's reading of the Constitution—was the sole basis for claiming an encroachment by the federal government. The argument was far from religious, purporting instead that “today neither of our two parties maintains a meaningful commitment to the principle of States' Rights. Thus, the cornerstone of the Republic, our chief bulwark against the encroachment of individual freedom by Big Government, is fast disappearing under the piling sands of absolutism”—a sort of Madison in reverse.<sup>125</sup>

His chapter on civil rights, far from the impassioned religious pleas of Martin Luther King, Jr. and others, actually aimed to separate those rights from any notion of natural rights, in other words saying that there was no religious justification for civil rights.

*A civil right is a right that is asserted and is therefore protected by some valid law. It may be asserted by the common law, or by local or federal statutes, or by the Constitution; but unless a right is incorporated in the law, it is not a civil right and is not enforceable by the instruments of the civil law. There may be some rights—“natural,” “human,” or otherwise—that should also be civil rights. But if we desire to give such rights the protection of the law, our recourse is to a legislature or to the amendment procedures of the Constitution. We must not look to politicians, or sociologists—or the courts—to correct the deficiency.*<sup>126</sup>

This was a curious argument from a staunch individualist—particularly in light of the 14<sup>th</sup> Amendment's explicit protection of no one if not the individual—but fully unpacking that

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<sup>125</sup> Goldwater, *The Conscience of a Conservative*, 19.

<sup>126</sup> Goldwater, *The Conscience of a Conservative*, 26-27.

is beyond my intent. What is important for present purposes is the fact that not only did Goldwater offer no religious justification for his view on civil rights, he actually went to great lengths to separate any discussion of those rights from religious reasoning.

Regarding agriculture policy, the only higher powers Goldwater called on were those of supply and demand. “Farm production, like any other production[,] is best controlled by the natural operation of the free market. If the nation’s farmers are permitted to sell their produce freely, at [a] price consumers are willing to pay, they will, under the law of supply and demand, end up producing roughly what can be consumed in national and world markets.”<sup>127</sup>

In his discussion of labor and unionism, Goldwater’s argument was almost purely technical and wonkish, although he did summon some principles of morality. Critiquing provisions of the Clayton Act, the Norris LaGuardia Act, the Wagner Act, the Kennedy-Ervin Bill, and the Landrum-Griffin Bill, he called for “freedom for labor,” which required Americans “not to abolish unions or deprive them of deserved gains; but to redress the balance—to restore unions to their proper role in a free society.”<sup>128</sup>

Goldwater did actually use the language of morality here, noting some of the “evils” of labor unions and “a moral issue [that] is at stake. . . . *Is it morally permissible to take the money of a Republican union member, for example, and spend it on behalf of a Democrat?*”<sup>129</sup> To be sure, taken in context, this was as much an argument against the stronghold of unions as it was an argument about morals, for it fit within the broader

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<sup>127</sup> Goldwater, *The Conscience of a Conservative*, 35.

<sup>128</sup> Goldwater, *The Conscience of a Conservative*, 41.

<sup>129</sup> Goldwater, *The Conscience of a Conservative*, 47.

assertion that “The enemy of freedom is unrestrained power, and the champions of freedom will fight against the concentration of power wherever they find it.”<sup>130</sup>

In discussing “taxes and spending,” what was arguably the most sacred political issue for Goldwater conservatives, he came closest to using religious rhetoric.

One of the foremost precepts of the natural law is man’s right to the possession and the use of his property. . . . It has been the fashion in recent years to disparage “property rights”—to associate them with greed and materialism. This attack on property rights is actually an attack on freedom. It is another instance of the modern failure to take into account the *whole* man. How can a man be truly free if he is denied the means to exercise freedom? How can he be free if the fruits of his labor are not his to dispose of, but are treated, instead, as part of a common pool of public wealth? Property and freedom are inseparable: to the extent government takes the one in the form of taxes, it intrudes on the other.<sup>131</sup>

Taxation, in other words, should at least in part be based on natural law. Accordingly, those taxes that attempted artificially to force “equality among unequal men” worked against the laws of nature. “The graduated tax is a *confiscatory* tax. . . . [Its] aim is an egalitarian society—an objective that does violence both to the charter of the Republic and the laws of Nature. We are all equal in the eyes of God but we are equal *in no other respect*.”<sup>132</sup> It should be pointed out that despite leaning heavily on natural law, Goldwater was hardly employing the sort of religious rhetoric that conservatives would later come to adopt. Natural law argument, especially in 1960, was largely a Roman Catholic argument. It was the discourse of John Courtney Murray, not Billy Graham—an understandable choice given the authorship of Brent Bozell, a Roman Catholic, and a sound argument in opposition to the graduated tax. But bearing in mind that 1960 was

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<sup>130</sup> Goldwater, *The Conscience of a Conservative*, 51.

<sup>131</sup> Goldwater, *The Conscience of a Conservative*, 53.

<sup>132</sup> Goldwater, *The Conscience of a Conservative*, 56.

the same year that forced John F. Kennedy to the Southern Baptist South in defense of his Catholicism, a “Catholic” argument was not the best among choices of what one might employ if his primary aim was to persuade non-Catholic religious conservatives—further proof that in the days of Goldwater, religious conservatives, as such, were not the primary audience.

In his discussion of the welfare state, it was clear that Goldwater felt the need to address those on the left who viewed welfare programs as a means of Christian charity. Regarding those “donors” of government welfare, “Are they to be commended and rewarded, at some moment in eternity, for their ‘charity?’ I think not. . . . I am unaware of any moral virtue that is attached to my decision to confiscate the earnings of X and give them to Y.”<sup>133</sup> And as for “the consequences to the *recipient* of welfarism [emphasis mine],” the effects on him are thus:

the elimination of any feeling of responsibility for his own welfare and that of his family and neighbors. A man may not immediately, or ever, comprehend the harm thus done to his character. Indeed, this is one of the great evils of Welfarism—that it transforms the individual from a dignified, industrious, self-reliant *spiritual* being into a dependent animal creature without his knowing it. There is no avoiding this damage to character under the Welfare State.<sup>134</sup>

The argument here is curious when looked upon closely. A man who gives charitably has done nothing particularly right in the eyes of God, and the man who receives charity has actually been transformed from a spiritual being into a non-spiritual one. Arguments aside about welfare’s efficiency or its propriety as the primary means of charitable giving, this argument, by employing the language of charitability—of giving and receiving and of spirituality—seems to run counter to those biblical injunctions

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<sup>133</sup> Goldwater, *The Conscience of a Conservative*, 66.

<sup>134</sup> Goldwater, *The Conscience of a Conservative*, 67.

concerning such matters. Charity is, after all, a commended practice in the Bible, but Goldwater claimed that giving has no reward, and receiving transforms for the worse an otherwise dignified spiritual man. To be fair, Goldwater did encourage welfare and charitable giving as a matter of “private concern,” performed “in a way that is conducive to the spiritual as well as the material well-being of our citizens”<sup>135</sup>—a purely defensible and not uncommon approach to social welfare. But by also employing language that seemed to devalue the practice of giving and receiving, he made that point in a curious way.

Regarding education, Goldwater’s argument was straightforward. “[The Liberals’] recourse is to the federal government. Mine is to the local public school board, the private school, the individual citizen—as far away from the federal government as one can possibly go.” And at stake was “whether Western civilization is due to survive, or will pass away.”<sup>136</sup>

Finally, Goldwater devoted the last third of *The Conscience of a Conservative* to what he called “the Soviet Menace.” He acknowledged that “we are in clear and imminent danger of being overwhelmed by alien forces. We are confronted by a revolutionary world movement that possesses not only the will to dominate absolutely every square mile of the globe, but increasingly has the capacity to do so.”<sup>137</sup> This was of course problematic. But when one reads Goldwater next to, say, Chambers, there are clear differences concerning the religiosity of their rhetoric. Note that to Goldwater,

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<sup>135</sup> Goldwater, *The Conscience of a Conservative*, 68.

<sup>136</sup> Goldwater, *The Conscience of a Conservative*, 70.

<sup>137</sup> Goldwater, *The Conscience of a Conservative*, 81.

communism was two things: an alien force and a revolutionary world movement. He went on later to call the Soviets such things as “an enemy power” and “the Communist Empire,” but never did Goldwater border on the apocalyptic. In fact, he went far to the contrary: “Let us remember that Communism is a political movement, and that its weapons are primarily political. The movement’s effectiveness depends on small cadres of political activists, and these cadres are, typically, composed of literate and well-fed people.”<sup>138</sup> To Goldwater, then, the mission was not religious or even moral. It was military and it was political. And the goal, the *telos*, was victory—“not ‘peace,’ but victory.”<sup>139</sup>

Goldwater viewed American foreign policy only through the prism of that goal: “The key guidepost is the Objective, and we must never lose sight of it. It is not to wage a struggle against Communism, but to win it.”<sup>140</sup> At that point he examined several aspects of American policy—defensive alliances, foreign aid, negotiations, cultural exchange programs, disarmament, the United Nations, and its overall goals—arguing that the strategy must be offensive. His plan was tactical, dealing exclusively with the path to military and political victory over the Soviet Union. And the enemy, if one knew no better, seemed hardly at all the evil “vision of Man without God” constructed by Chambers. In short, as in much of the rest of the work, Goldwater created a secular and technical discourse—a far cry from the discourse of religious conservatism that would come after him.

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<sup>138</sup> Goldwater, *The Conscience of a Conservative*, 92.

<sup>139</sup> Goldwater, *The Conscience of a Conservative*, 83.

<sup>140</sup> Goldwater, *The Conscience of a Conservative*, 112.

In the end, Goldwater lost the 1964 election in a landslide, and while this fact left many conservatives dejected, there emerged from it one ray of hope. That ray was in the person of Ronald Reagan, to whom we now turn.

*Carrying the Conservative Torch: Ronald Reagan, 1961-1979*

Known throughout the 1940s-1950s for his role as a television and screen actor, Ronald Reagan burst onto the national political scene in 1964 with “The Speech,” his eleventh hour stump for Goldwater, which aired nationally on ABC television stations. Long since applauded by conservatives—and indeed canonized as both a “Landmark Speech” of the American conservative movement by Peter Schweizer and Wynton C. Hall,<sup>141</sup> as well as a “Top 100” speech of the twentieth century<sup>142</sup>—“The Speech” for many marked the handing of the torch of conservatism from Goldwater to Reagan, who gladly became the movement’s standard bearer, although with a “less harsh persona” than Goldwater’s.<sup>143</sup> But Ronald Reagan’s conservative political rhetoric did not begin in 1964.

While the 1964 address was what propelled Reagan to the front of the movement—indeed, after Goldwater was trounced in the election, Reagan was seemingly conservatives’ only hope for remaining relevant in national politics—it is not the case that Reagan had been apolitical prior to that year. He had campaigned for Franklin Roosevelt in 1944 and recorded radio advertisements for Truman in 1948. Then,

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<sup>141</sup> Peter Schweizer and Wynton C. Hall, *Landmark Speeches of the American Conservative Movement* (College Station: Texas A&M University Press, 2007), 41-54.

<sup>142</sup> Stephen E. Lucas and Martin J. Medhurst, *Words of a Century: The Top 100 American Speeches, 1900-1999* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2008).

<sup>143</sup> See Kurt Ritter, “Ronald Reagan’s 1960s Southern Rhetoric: Courting Conservatives for the GOP,” *Southern Communication Journal* 64 (Summer 1999): 333.

following a conversion from liberalism to conservatism in the early 1950s, he traversed the country speaking on behalf of the film industry (against charges of communism in Hollywood) and as a proponent of more favorable tax laws. Then, from 1954-1962, he toured the country as a spokesman for General Electric (GE), whose *General Electric Theater* Reagan hosted for CBS viewers every Sunday evening. On those excursions Reagan would tour GE plants around the country, boosting company morale and working to win the support of GE executives for the weekly TV program.<sup>144</sup> However, it was because of his heavy politicization of these events that Reagan was fired by GE in 1962. Thus, after “The Speech” proved Reagan a far more eloquent spokesman for conservatism than Goldwater had been—“Reagan was Goldwater without the rough edges and the unrestrained rhetoric,”—becoming a spokesperson for the conservative movement was a natural transition for Reagan, who had been traveling the country for years preaching a conservative message.<sup>145</sup>

Reagan opted to carry out this role not merely as a private citizen, but as a member of the government he had long assailed. He ran successfully for the California governorship in 1966, where he would serve consecutive terms. Then upon leaving office, Reagan, with clear presidential ambitions, spent 1975-1979 (interrupted only by his 1976 Republican nomination bid) giving speeches, writing a syndicated newspaper column, and delivering over a thousand radio addresses on stations across the country. Consequently, even though records of the GE tours are few and far between, we have

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<sup>144</sup> See Ritter, “Ronald Reagan’s 1960s Southern Rhetoric,” 335.

<sup>145</sup> Edwards, *Goldwater*, 334.

thousands of samples of Reagan's pre-presidential discourse from which to distill the role of religion in his conservative rhetoric. It is to this task we now turn.

Analyzing thousands of pieces of discourse spanning two decades sounds, *prima facie*, like an insurmountable task given limited space. Mary E. Stuckey, after all, devotes an entire book to this task, breaking Reagan's rhetoric into three distinct time periods, examining those time periods with a broad sweep before delivering a close reading of one representative speech from each era.<sup>146</sup> Such a taxonomy is not necessary for our purposes, however, because analyzing Reagan's religious discourse between 1961-1979 requires scantily more than *reading* the discourse, for perhaps surprising to most contemporary observers, Reagan's rhetoric, although vastly different in tone and texture from Goldwater's, was equally, if not sometimes less, religious than his forebear's. Instead, it was dominated by themes of anti-government, anti-communism, individualism, personal responsibility, and law and order, and only in rare instances were these themes addressed using religious language or by referring to religious values. In short, the political religion of the right was not part of the Reagan repertoire throughout his political career; it was, instead, an invention that occurred as he geared up for and then ran for president in 1980.

Perhaps most telling is the fact that in over 1,000 radio addresses between 1975-1979, Reagan used his bully pulpit less than three percent of the time to address "social" issues. Even then, these were usually not the social issues that most concerned religious conservatives, for this tally takes into consideration immigration, drugs, gun control laws,

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<sup>146</sup> Mary E. Stuckey, *Getting into the Game: The Pre-Presidential Rhetoric of Ronald Reagan* (New York: Praeger, 1989).

and other such “non-religious” social issues.<sup>147</sup> Not a single radio address was devoted to the issue of homosexual rights. Only one was devoted to abortion, one to religious freedom.<sup>148</sup> To wit, the price of beef, the fishing industry, John Wayne, and a green lawn each received as much airtime as abortion, while Joan Baez and the relationship of a man to his horse received more (two each). Most often these radio addresses centered around foreign affairs (all of which, to Reagan, related to communism), abuses of the welfare system, the costs and needless complexity of government, inflation, energy policy, and other vital issues of the day. Very seldom did these use religious language or appeal to religious values.

To be sure, when Reagan did broach social issues, he usually did so in line with what religious conservatives might hope, offering a message with which they could resonate, even if it was not a message so strong as to mobilize them. In May 1975, for instance, he gave an anecdotal account of a meeting he had held with California teenagers while serving as governor, during which several of these teenagers spoke out against abortion. Echoing their stance, if only tacitly, Reagan used his platform to encourage adoption.<sup>149</sup> On May 8, 1979, he spoke about the rise in birth rates among unwed mothers and concluded that “I’m not sure that more sex ed., as it is presently taught, is

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<sup>147</sup> Certainly there are religious justifications for positions on any of these issues, but on the whole, these are not the sorts of issues that galvanized religious conservatives in the late 1970s.

<sup>148</sup> These subjects were mentioned a few more times than this, but usually in passing. For example, on September 1, 1976, he mentioned that “the Repub. platform supports the efforts of those who would amend the const. to prohibit abortion on demand.” It was one line of one address on the Republican platform, and it was hardly the sort of strong language he would use in reference to abortion four years later. See Kiron K. Skinner, Annelise Anderson, and Martin Anderson, eds., *Reagan’s Path to Victory: The Shaping of Ronald Reagan’s Vision: Selected Writings* (New York: The Free Press, 2004), 62.

<sup>149</sup> See Ronald Reagan, “Adoption,” Radio address dated May 1975, quoted in Skinner, Anderson, and Anderson, eds., *Reagan’s Path to Victory*, 28-29.

the answer. . . . Can we completely divorce sex ed., as I'm afraid we do, from any association with moral behavior . . . ?"<sup>150</sup> On September 6, 1977, he abandoned politics altogether (which was not uncommon) to discuss a new, more readable translation of the Bible, and in so doing echoed that folksy bumper sticker found frequently across the South: "If it ain't King James, it ain't the Bible."<sup>151</sup> On March 2, 1977, he retold a feel-good story from the newspaper about an Athletes-in-Action Christian basketball team, which played great basketball but at halftime "pick[ed] up microphones [to] tell the crowd of their belief in God."<sup>152</sup> Each of these segments, and others like them, served to establish Reagan as a man who could identify with the concerns of everyday Americans, those who were wholesome and were working hard to raise a family. They served to distance him from the stereotype that conservatives were angry right-wing extremists, while at the same time anchoring him to the same values that alienated "a silent majority" of Americans from the liberal cultural drift of the 1960s and 1970s. Yet these were not the sorts of messages that mobilized religious conservatives. They were far more subtle than brash, communicating not a message to mobilize against the forces of secularism and liberalism, but instead a message that Reagan, too, was a wholesome man of character.

Perhaps surprising to contemporary observers, when Reagan did focus on those galvanizing issues of the religious right, such as abortion, he actually fumbled slightly.

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<sup>150</sup> See Ronald Reagan, "Sex Education," Radio address dated May 8, 1979, quoted in Skinner, Anderson, and Anderson, eds., *Reagan, In His Own Hand* (New York: The Free Press, 2001), 350.

<sup>151</sup> See Ronald Reagan, "The Bible," Radio address dated September 6, 1977, in Skinner, Anderson, and Anderson, eds. *Reagan, In His Own Hand*, 409-411.

<sup>152</sup> Ronald Reagan, "Sports and Religion," Radio address dated March 2, 1977, quoted in Skinner, Anderson, and Anderson, eds., *Reagan's Path to Victory*, 130.

To be sure, the overall message long before the 1980 campaign—to the extent that it existed at all—was that Reagan believed that unborn fetuses were human beings. However, when examined closely, his position did not mesh terribly well with that of religious conservatives. Reagan’s stance on abortion laws, in fact, was moderate-to-liberal in 1975, the only time he spoke publicly at length about the legal aspects of the issue prior to setting his sights on the 1980 presidential election. Reagan even seemed uncomfortable making a religious appeal for his position. Recounting his deliberations over an abortion bill when he was governor of California, he said:

In our Judeo-Christian religion we recognize the right to take life in defense of our own. Therefore an abortion is justified when done in self defense. My belief is that a woman has the right to protect her own life and health against even her own unborn child. I believe also that just as she has the right to defend herself against rape she should not be made to bear a child resulting from that violation of her person and therefore abortion is an act of self defense. I know there will be disagreement with this view but I can find no evidence whatsoever that a fetus is not a living human being with human rights.<sup>153</sup>

Several things are worth pointing out in this passage. What is striking at first is the appeal to “our Judeo-Christian religion,” which is a generic appeal to some sort of religious authority, but one is not sure exactly what. The term, as used here, might as well have been “In the West,” or something of the sort, for Reagan does not seem to take personal ownership as much as a sort of corporate one—one that all of us can espouse. And although “Judeo-Christian religion” and “Judeo-Christian values” would continue to be phrases used by Reagan even throughout 1980, he would later use those phrases in appeal for more controversial values or conservative positions.

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<sup>153</sup> Ronald Reagan, “Abortion Laws,” Radio address dated April 1975, quoted in Skinner, Anderson, and Anderson, eds., *Reagan, In His Own Hand*, 384-385.

This, of course, leads us to a second and related point about this passage, which is that Reagan was using this “religious” appeal only as a means for justifying when one could take a human life, not as a means of justifying provisions against doing so. That is, Reagan was here addressing those on the right who might issue religious proscriptions against all abortion as opposed to those on the left who were already accepting of abortion in most forms. The appeal, it is important to note, was to *justify* certain types of abortion.

This, of course, leads to a third point, which is that these positions themselves regarding when abortion was justified were not fully in accordance with those often espoused by religious conservatives. Abortion to save the life of the mother is not terribly controversial among mainstream pro-life circles, as it is often the lone consensus justification for any type of abortion. Abortions in cases of rape are also widely accepted, although usually with less consensus than the life of the mother. However, supporting abortion in cases where only the mother’s health is at stake is not likely to be accepted among many religious conservatives. On this note, it is worth pointing out that in his hand-written text for this radio address, Reagan originally phrased this “My belief is that a woman has the right to protect her own life & I’ll include health against even her own unborn child [emphasis mine].” In the final version, of course, he deleted “& I’ll include,” which we might interpret as a shrewd rhetorical move on Reagan’s part to appeal to those on his right. That is, as Aristotle noted, rhetoric involves *choosing* from among the available means of persuasion, and to keep whatever alliance he may have had with those religious conservatives with strong anti-abortion stances, Reagan made the deliberate choice to deemphasize *his* inclusion of the mother’s health as a means for

justifying abortion. This was a good idea, for among pro-life activists, this was not a typical position.<sup>154</sup>

Finally, one other point is worth noting about the foregoing abortion passage. In the last sentence Reagan notes that he “can find no evidence whatsoever that a fetus is not a living human being.” What is striking here is the negativity of the wording. That is, it is not a positive assertion that life begins at conception, but rather a double-negative asserting that Reagan can find no evidence that it does not. In finding his mobilizing voice five years later when he rallied religious conservatives for his presidential bid, Reagan drastically changed his tenor in making such statements.

Clearly, at least with regard to his radio program, Reagan did not see himself as a mobilizer for religious conservatives between 1975 and 1979, and in fact, his positions, to the extent that he expressed them at all, were often not fully in accordance with theirs on some hot-button issues. But what about his rhetoric prior to the radio program? What role did religion play in his speech and writing during those years? In short, the answer to this latter question is “not much.” As Stuckey points out, Reagan was clearly aware that to mainstream America he had ensconced a reputation as a right-wing radical after “The Speech.” So, in speaking to broad audiences, he was “reasoned and balanced,” and his rhetoric during his entire pre-gubernatorial years focused on a single theme: “The

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<sup>154</sup> To understand this, one need look back no further than the 2008 presidential election, when in one of their three debates John McCain—who himself had a long history of moderation on the abortion issue—used the mother’s health as a wedge to galvanize pro-lifers in opposition to Barack Obama’s liberal opposition to a partial-birth abortion bill, which he had opposed specifically on the grounds of wanting to protect the mother’s health. McCain, in one of the debate’s most theatrical moments, rolled his eyes and put finger quotations around the word “health,” noting that “That’s the extreme pro-abortion opinion.” See John McCain, The third presidential debate, October 15, 2008, Hempstead, NY. For a complete transcript, see <http://www.debates.org/pages/trans2008d.html>.

issue of our times is totalitarianism versus freedom.”<sup>155</sup> All other issues—domestic and international—were put into that context.

As governor of California from 1967-1975, Reagan was even more moderate and balanced, in part because he was governing a large state with diverse constituencies, but in part, too, because as a Republican loyalist, he was sensitive to any messages that might alienate Nixon’s Republican White House. He had become the spokesperson for the conservative wing of the party, and indeed he gained votes over Nixon to be the party’s presidential candidate at the Republican Convention in 1968, but while Nixon was in office, Reagan mitigated many of his claims about the evils of Washington. Still, however, even as he toured the country giving speeches, Reagan’s rhetoric was not religious, even in such venues as the South Carolina Republican convention, where the topic of his discussion was how the Democratic Party “switched to philosophies and policies that we could not accept.”<sup>156</sup> And as Stuckey notes, although he enjoyed the approval of a number of Southern Republicans, Reagan was not well regarded by the mainstream national Republican politicians during his tenure as governor, in part because many of them were still centrist or liberal, and to them Reagan represented the failures of the Goldwater experiment.<sup>157</sup> Thus, with clear national ambitions once Nixon left office, Reagan had to prove himself, much as Goldwater had done between 1960 and 1964, as a loyal and mainstream Republican. He was therefore in no position to introduce any sort of religious conservatism, even if he had wanted to—and of course, there is no indication

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<sup>155</sup> See Stuckey, *Getting into the Game*, 11.

<sup>156</sup> Ronald Reagan, “The Democratic Party Left Us,” Speech delivered to the South Carolina Republican Convention, 1967, quoted in *Ronald Reagan Talks to America* (Old Greenwich, CT: The Devin Adair Company, 1983), 47.

<sup>157</sup> Stuckey, *Getting into the Game*, 33.

that he wanted to. So while he was at times conciliatory and inclusive, appealing to “our basic values,” those that “pull us together as a people, and keep us strong,”<sup>158</sup> he did so in ways that were just that—conciliatory and inclusive, hardly the hallmarks of the Falwells and Robisons he would later claim to “endorse.”

What is clear in this analysis is that the discourse of religious conservatism was not part of the Reagan repertoire throughout his political career. There was, however, a particular moment when Reagan made a turn in a new direction, and not surprisingly given the foregoing analysis, it was after Reagan’s (and Ford’s) 1976 defeat, once Reagan’s sights were set on a new strategy for 1980. That moment was in a February 6, 1977, address to the American Conservative Union (ACU) banquet. To be sure, the strategy employed in this speech was similar to some of Reagan’s patterns in previous years, in that to conservative audiences he was thoroughly conservative, but to wider audiences he was more moderate and balanced. Addressing the ACU afforded Reagan the freedom to speak openly about his conservatism, and he did so within the broader context of “Reshaping the American Political Landscape,” that is, considering how conservatives might show Americans that a majority of them agree with conservative principles. One should bear in mind that this appears to be the only context in which Reagan turned toward religious conservatism during the post-gubernatorial, pre-1980 era. As indicated earlier in reference to his radio addresses, Reagan’s rhetoric during this period was by no means religious. But in the safe confines of the American Conservative Union, he could begin thinking of ways to convince Americans that they were

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<sup>158</sup> See, for example, Ronald Reagan, “Government Is Not the Answer,” 1968, quoted in *Ronald Reagan Talks to America*, 56.

conservative—ways, that is, that included focusing on the social issues that were so vital to the political religion of the right.

Reagan began this address by citing Harris and Gallup statistics that indicated a more conservative turn in the American electorate. While most Americans did not consider themselves to be a part of some conservative movement, they did espouse conservative values and expressed hope that America would turn in a more conservative direction. Taking liberty to interpret this, Reagan noted:

You know, as I do, that most commentators make a distinction between what they call ‘social’ conservatism and ‘economic’ conservatism. The so-called social issues—law and order, abortion, busing, quota systems—are usually associated with the blue-collar, ethnic, and religious groups who are traditionally associated with the Democratic Party. The economic issues—inflation, deficit spending, and big government—are usually associated with Republican Party members and independents who concentrate their attention on economic matters.<sup>159</sup>

The proper response for movement conservatives, then, was, “in short . . . to combine the two major segments of contemporary American conservatism into one politically effective whole.”<sup>160</sup>

The remainder of the address then crafted a vision for this new fusion, and it did so in subtly biblical terms that channeled the apostle Paul’s “new creation” language, or perhaps more saliently, Jimmy Carter’s “born again” rhetoric from the previous year’s campaign. “What I envision is not simply a melding together of the two branches of American conservatism into a temporary uneasy alliance, but the *creation* of a new, lasting majority [emphasis mine].” “What will emerge will be something *new* . . .

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<sup>159</sup> Ronald Reagan, “Reshaping the American Political Landscape (A Majority of Americans Agree With Conservative Principles),” Address to the American Conservative Union Banquet, February 6, 1977, Quoted in *A Time for Choosing: The Speeches of Ronald Reagan, 1961-1982* (Chicago: Regnery Gateway, 1983), 184.

<sup>160</sup> Reagan, “Reshaping the American Political Landscape,” 185.

because the *heart* of this undertaking is principled politics [emphasis mine].” “Let us *lay to rest*, once and for all, the myth of a small group of ideological purists trying to capture a majority [emphasis mine].” “It is possible to *create* a political entity that will reflect the views of the great, hitherto, conservative majority [emphasis mine].” “Our cause must be to rediscover, reassert, and reapply America’s spiritual heritage to our national affairs.” “I’m going to refer to it simply as the *New Republican Party* [emphasis mine].” “My friends, the time has come to start acting to bring about the great conservative majority party we know is waiting to be *created* [emphasis mine].” These are but a few examples of the “new creation” language.

Furthermore, Reagan spoke of this new creation with proselytizing terms. While he made explicit that “we are not a cult,” the task, he noted, was “to make the majority of Americans, who already share [the conservative philosophy], see that modern conservatism offers them a political home.” “The Democratic Party turned its back on the majority of social conservatives during the 1960s. The New Republican Party of the late ‘70s and ‘80s must welcome them, seek them out, enlist them, not only as rank-and-file members but as leaders and as candidates.” “In every congressional district there should be a search made for young men and women who share these principles, and they should be brought into positions of leadership in the local Republican Party groups.”

Finally, Reagan made clear that this new creation of conservative veterans and converts alike would stand for clear values and principles. “There are things we do strongly believe in, that we are willing to live for, and, yes, if necessary, to die for,” among them “common sense, intelligence, reason, hard work, faith in God.” Conservatives would oppose “those who would sacrifice principle to theory, those who

worship only the god of political, social, and economic abstractions, ignoring the realities of everyday life.” “We . . . believe that the preservation and enhancement of the values that strengthen and protect individual freedom, family life, communities and neighborhoods and the liberty of our beloved nation should be at the heart of any legislative or political program presented to the American people.” And perhaps most importantly for present purposes, he asserted:

Families must continue to be the foundation of our nation. Families—not government programs—are the best way to make sure our children are properly nurtured, our elderly are cared for, our cultural and spiritual heritages are perpetuated, our laws are observed and our values are preserved. Thus it is imperative that our government’s programs, actions, officials and social welfare institutions never be allowed to jeopardize the family. We fear the government may be powerful enough to destroy our families; we know that it is not powerful enough to replace them. The New Republican Party must be committed to working always in the interest of the American family.

It is clear from this speech that in 1977, as his sights were set on the 1980 election, Reagan perceived the value of expanding what had theretofore defined the conservative movement to include those social issues “usually associated with the blue-collar, ethnic, and religious groups.” This was not simply an adaptation of Nixon’s Southern Strategy. It was, instead, the framework of a new *religious* strategy, the tools of which would soon come to include the discourse of religious conservatism. Based on the evidence, which includes thousands of pages of speech texts, radio transcripts, and newspaper columns, it is clear that this sort of rhetoric was new to Reagan in 1977. When placing this speech next to his campaign rhetoric in 1980, it is clear that Reagan had not fully honed his religious rhetoric, but he was turning in that direction for the first time in his career. The same can also be said for the conservative movement more generally, for it too, with Reagan as the standard bearer, began to rediscover Weaver’s

call toward religious rebirth, a message that had to a large extent never been taken to the political masses by conservatives.

Goldwater had moved conservatism to the mainstream of Republican and American politics, but his was not a message about social or religious conservatism. Furthermore, his effort to make conservatives the majority, in the immediate sense, anyway, failed by a landslide. But to many conservatives, Goldwater was just the beginning, for there was clear ambition to expand the movement beyond where he had taken it in 1964, which was necessary if the movement was to enjoy any national electoral success. Substantively, though, little changed in conservative rhetoric in the years immediately following Goldwater's failed bid, for even if Reagan's calmer ethos throughout the 1960s and 1970s allayed some of the common fears about conservatism, the values and policy positions appealed to had changed very little—that is until Reagan opened the door, with sights set on success in 1980, to appealing to religious sensibilities.

This is why the 1977 speech to the ACU is important, for it marks, for the first time, an effort by the movement's most visible spokesman to expand the reach of conservatism. Weaver had provided the intellectual basis for such an act decades prior, but this was the first time we see the political leader of the movement step purposefully in this new direction. Reagan still had a long way to go to perfect his message to religious conservatives, and he did not immediately alter his speeches, radio addresses, and newspaper columns to reflect the "new creation" of the New Republican Party. This would have to wait until the campaign trail in 1980.

Although it is clear that by 1980 conservatives would need to adopt a new strategy in order to expand their movement to include religious conservatives, thus

bolstering their chances at national electoral success, one question that remains is why religious conservatives were suddenly awakened to politics, why they were a group suddenly worth courting by presidential hopefuls. The answer to this question is perhaps implied in the foregoing discussion of Reagan's 1977 turn toward social issues, that is, one can glean from this discussion that certain social issues had stirred religious conservatives from their self-imposed exile. The question we must now ask is what those issues were, and why they might be motivating. In other words, we know that movement conservatives gained interest in religious conservatives, but why might religious conservatives in turn be looking for a political ally? To that question we now turn our attention.

## CHAPTER THREE

### American Change and Religious Engagement, 1942-1976

In a 1965 sermon called “Ministers and Marchers,” a young Rev. Jerry Falwell criticized liberal ministers because of their involvement in the political process, which took away from what he saw as a minister’s primary responsibility to preach the gospel. By 1979, Falwell would seemingly do an about face on this position, utilizing his stature as a popular television preacher to mobilize, alongside other prominent ministers, a network of religious conservatives for involvement in conservative politics. In that short span of 14 years, Falwell’s mission morphed from political isolation for the sake of gospel preaching to his new “three-fold” ministerial vision to “Number one, get people saved; number two, get them baptized; number three, get them registered to vote.”<sup>1</sup> As we will see, what occurred to fashion such stark transformation in Falwell probably has less to do with an internal shift in one man’s conscience than an external shift in the culture around him, for there were several foundational changes in American culture and politics during the 1960s and 1970s that led Falwell and millions of other like-minded religious conservatives to mobilize as a political force.

With a broader view aimed at trying to determine why presidential campaign rhetoric took a sustained religious turn in 1976 and, more importantly, in 1980, I seek to distill the marketplace for religious rhetoric as it emerged leading up to those years. That is, what occurred in the political environment to make religion salient in presidential

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<sup>1</sup> Quoted in “Prophets and Advisors,” episode 4 of *With God on Our Side: The Rise of the Religious Right in America* (Alexandria, VA: PBS Video, 1996).

politics by the late 1970s? Without much reflection, one could opine that the sudden 1979-1980 rise of Falwell's Moral Majority, as well as other similar groups that came to constitute the New Christian Right (NCR), caused candidates to "spiritualize" their strategies in order to curry the favor of a new cadre of religious voters in 1980; then, when these groups stuck around, so did the strategy. I do not dispute this interpretation, for there is much truth to it, and indeed, we should view the emergence of the NCR in 1979-1980 as the full realization of an ongoing process of engagement for religious conservatives. But the religious turn in campaigning that began in 1976 occurred several years before the NCR formed; the NCR did not emerge out of nowhere. Thus, to gain a fuller and more accurate understanding of why presidential politics became more religious (as well as why it developed particular religious tenors), we must first dig a little deeper to begin to understand the engagement of religious conservatives in the political process, which was a gradual yet identifiable process well before it reached a fever pitch in 1979-1980. Our task, then, is to determine when, why, and how religious conservatives began to engage in the political process on the basis of particular religious beliefs—to elucidate the market for religious rhetoric as that market developed prior to the 1976 election.<sup>2</sup>

Social movement theorists have articulated some sophisticated theories related to the mobilization of religious conservatives in the United States. I am less interested in the specific combinations of macro-level independent variables (social, economic, political, or otherwise) that brought social movements such as the NCR into being as I am

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<sup>2</sup> I should note that this chapter actually will broach one thing that occurred after 1976, but that is the so-called IRS controversy, which actually spanned 1970-1978. Given that the controversy was continuous and that the bulk of it occurred pre-1976, it makes sense to include it here. I will come back to discuss some of its post-1976 ramifications once again in Chapter Five.

in understanding what contributed most to religious conservatives' permanent mobilization in presidential politics. This may seem like splitting hairs, but it is important, I think, to acknowledge that I am not identifying, nor do I aim to identify, every single contributing variable. Instead, having identified in the previous chapter that movement conservatives gained interest in religious conservatives leading up to the 1980 election, it is now important to identify some of the specific reasons why religious conservatives in turn became interested in politics generally and mobilized in such a way that drew the attention of presidential hopefuls more specifically. The answer to this can be found by examining five main factors.

The first has to do with the emergence of evangelical Christianity from the backwaters to the mainstream of American life. After World War II, liberal and many mainline Protestant denominations lost members, while more conservative denominations grew. By the 1970s, evangelicalism caught many, including the elite media, off guard with its growth and popularity, culminating in a "born-again" president and *Newsweek's* proclamation of 1976 as "The Year of the Evangelical." This newfound stature was accompanied by a newfound confidence and sense of political entitlement, and thus an effort to influence culture and politics.

The second main factor is the rise of interest group politics in the 1970s. This began in earnest in the 1960s and accelerated with passage of 1970s campaign finance laws, through which donations to political campaigns were capped, essentially creating a vacuum that was filled at least in part by the proliferation of Political Action Committees (PACs) and other interest groups. One important by-product of this legislation was the increase in political activity and political movements outside the traditional confines of

political parties; another was that any such group large enough to be a significant factor in the community could have its stability underwritten by the federal government. Thus the creation of groups tailored to any manner of political interests—including, of course, religious ones.

These first two factors we might think of merely as structural, rather than motivational. Put differently, they help to answer the *how* of a new religious political engagement, but they fail to address the *why*. The why can be understood by examining three other factors: the Watergate scandal and the subsequent public sentiment that morality must be restored to politics and government; changes in church-state relations in the 1960s and 1970s; and a general trend toward permissiveness in American culture, which pointed the way toward changes in the relationship of personal morality to politics in the 1970s.

My discussion of Watergate centers on the controversy itself, but also on the evangelical response to that controversy, since following Watergate, many evangelicals, along with much of the rest of the country, committed themselves to restoring morality to American politics. In the realm of church-state relations, I will pay particular attention to companion Supreme Court decisions in the early 1960s—*Engel v. Vitale* (1962)<sup>3</sup> and *Abington Township School District v. Schempp* (1963),<sup>4</sup> which found state-sanctioned prayers and Bible reading, respectively, unconstitutional in public schools—as well as the so-called IRS controversy of the 1970s, which threatened the tax-exempt status of many independent Christian schools because of their failure to meet federal racial integration

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<sup>3</sup> 370 U.S. 421 (1962).

<sup>4</sup> 374 U.S. 203 (1963).

standards. These developments contributed significantly to the mobilization of religious conservatives, who found themselves on the defensive because the government had in their view been taken over by secular humanists, the effect of which was a state hostility to religious practice and belief. And in the view of religious conservatives, these secular humanists not only controlled the government, they also controlled the general trajectory of the society, which was a third motivator for religious conservatives to engage. Having seen the secularist vision for society in the liberal cultural changes of the 1970s, religious conservatives aimed to change the social circumstances through politics. The three most galvanizing of these societal changes—the issue of abortion in the wake of *Roe v. Wade* (1973),<sup>5</sup> the cultural acceptance of homosexuality, and the efforts of women to gain equal rights—were the chief sources of motivation. Together these represented for religious conservatives America’s moral decay, and the NCR mobilized, gradually at first, for political action around these social issues.

In the final analysis, these five features would contribute to the engagement of religious conservatives in a brand new way, the culmination of which was the formation of the NCR in 1979. The social, cultural, and political developments examined here can be thought of as the gradual creation of an audience for religious ideas, one that was ripe with political potential and would eventually steer presidential candidates toward the use of religious rhetoric for political gain.

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<sup>5</sup> 410 U.S. 113 (1973).

### *The Newfound Prominence of Evangelicals*

Although the NCR consisted of more than just evangelicals, it can safely be said that it would never have formed if not for evangelical and fundamentalist Protestants, who made up a large majority of the movement. Furthermore, the formation and prominence of the NCR coincided with the rise of evangelicalism to cultural prominence, and it is thus that I am here concerned with that rise as a primary factor in the mobilization of religious conservatives. Most historians rightly trace American evangelicalism back to the First Great Awakening in the eighteenth century, but such a history is not necessary for present purposes. Instead, I am more concerned with what occurred in the twentieth century, particularly its latter half.

Following an active antievolution crusade in the early 1920s, evangelicalism was dealt a blow in the Scopes “Monkey” Trial of 1925 and stayed mostly on the sidelines of American culture during the ensuing two decades. It began to re-emerge from this self-imposed exile in 1942 when, with the express aim of steering a middle course between the modernism of mainline denominations on the one hand and separatist fundamentalism on the other, the National Association of Evangelicals (NAE) formed as a break-off from a separatist fundamentalist group called the American Council of Christian Churches. The NAE was an organization with membership open to denominations, to individual congregations or agencies, as well as to individuals, and as Barry Hankins notes, it represented most white evangelical organizations in one way or another from its inception.<sup>6</sup> Given the considerable post-World War II growth of conservative denominations, as well as membership standards that allowed many conservative

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<sup>6</sup> Barry Hankins, *American Evangelicals: A Contemporary History of a Mainstream Religious Movement* (Lanham, MD: Rowman & Littlefield, 2008): 35-43.

mainline Methodists, Presbyterians, Lutherans, and Baptists to join, the NAE grew considerably throughout the middle twentieth century.

As it grew, so too did several other evangelical organizations, the most important of which was *Christianity Today*, a magazine founded in 1956 by Billy Graham and several evangelical intellectuals interested in establishing an evangelical alternative to the mainline *Christian Century*. With the aim of articulating evangelical theological, cultural, and political concerns, the magazine increased readership and thus influence among evangelicals steadily over time, although secular America often paid little attention to such overtures of evangelical engagement. This neglect was not reserved, however, for Graham, who gained fairly broad cultural acceptance in the 1950s and 1960s as a preacher who spoke a revivalistic message while also taking care to cooperate with many mainline or liberal Christians. His popularity and acceptance was such that Graham was often voted among the Ten Most Admired Men in the World, and he was a friend and confidant of Presidents Eisenhower, Johnson, and Nixon.<sup>7</sup>

Yet, despite steady growth and successes such as these, many in mainstream American culture still considered evangelicalism and fundamentalism dead or irrelevant after the Scopes Trial, largely because most evangelicals concerned themselves with matters of spirituality rather than culture or politics, and an anti-intellectual bent left them mostly outside the orbit of American elites.<sup>8</sup> Evangelicals, for their part, were largely at ease with the culture around them in the middle twentieth century, since it was a culture

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<sup>7</sup> See Hankins, *American Evangelicals: A Contemporary History of a Mainstream Religious Movement*, 35-43.

<sup>8</sup> See Mark A. Noll, *The Scandal of the Evangelical Mind* (Grand Rapids, MI: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1994).

that mostly affirmed a Judeo-Christian ethic. This of course changed in the 1960s and 1970s, which is a subject we shall turn to shortly, but before that time, evangelicals were, generally speaking, ignored by scholars, commentators, educators, and politicians. Underscoring this is Will Herberg's seminal and widely-read 1955 volume on religion in the United States, *Protestant, Catholic, Jew*, which ignored both fundamentalism and evangelicalism, coming closest to them by devoting a meager two lines to Southern Baptists and four to Pentecostals, both of which, it should be noted, considered themselves entirely separate from evangelicalism and fundamentalism for significant periods in their history.<sup>9</sup> Furthermore, contributing to evangelicals' status as overlooked, most public intellectuals thought the broad trend in America, like all modernized countries, was toward secularization, meaning movements such as evangelicalism would, over time, become even less relevant. Such respected commentators as Herbert Croly, Walter Lippmann, and Harvey Cox, whose views were widely shared, proved to be wrong about what secularization might do to conservative religion in America.<sup>10</sup>

In the 1970s evangelicals began to take on a much more pronounced role in the culture. Even though Croly and the intelligentsia had been mostly correct about mainline churches, such as Episcopal, Presbyterian, Methodist, and Congregational denominations, which lost 15 percent of their members between 1970 and 1985, they were clearly mistaken about evangelical churches, which grew explosively—and to many, quite

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<sup>9</sup> See, for example, David S. Dockery, ed., *Southern Baptists and American Evangelicals: The Conversation Continues* (Nashville: Broadman & Holman, 1993).

<sup>10</sup> See Herbert Croly, *The Promise of American Life* (New York: The Macmillan Company, 1914); Walter Lippman, *Drift and Mastery* (New York: M. Kennerley, 1914), and Harvey Cox, *The Secular City: Secularization and Urbanization in a Theological Perspective* (New York: The Macmillan Company, 1965). All devote considerable space to the idea that America will secularize.

surprisingly—during that same span.<sup>11</sup> As sociologist Robert C. Liebman notes, the numerical growth of evangelicalism was one of the most striking religious developments of the 1970s.<sup>12</sup> Several national polls reported rising numbers of Americans who subscribed to the defining features of evangelicalism, and a remarkable 34 percent of Americans answered yes when asked in 1976, “Would you describe yourself as a ‘born again’ or evangelical Christian?”<sup>13</sup> Especially in the 1970s, evangelicalism saw tremendous growth in the number of Christian schools, the enrollment at evangelical colleges, the readership of evangelical magazines, and the proliferation of radio and television stations sponsored by evangelicals and fundamentalists.<sup>14</sup>

One of the most significant developments, in addition to this numerical growth of evangelicalism, was the increased visibility of televangelists. By the late 1970s, evangelists could be found in nearly every form of media, bringing wide attention to evangelicalism and laying important groundwork for the political engagement that would follow. As Jeffrey K. Hadden and Charles E. Swann reported at the end of the decade:

Big-time TV preachers are generals of [a] new power base. They are flanked by scores of lieutenants who lead more than sixty syndicated television programs. And more programs are being readied for syndication, to be sent by satellite to cable systems over the Christian Broadcasting Network (CBN), PTL Broadcasting Network, and Trinity Broadcasting Network. But this is only the tip of a vast communications network. More than 300 radio stations broadcast religion full-time. Hundreds more—perhaps thousands—sell many hours of time each week to

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<sup>11</sup> See Paul Boyer, “The Evangelical Resurgence in 1970s American Protestantism,” in *Rightward Bound: Making America Conservative in the 1970s*, eds. Bruce J. Schulman and Julian E. Zelizer (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2008), 33.

<sup>12</sup> Robert C. Liebman, “The Making of the New Christian Right,” in *The New Christian Right: Mobilization and Legitimation*, eds. Robert C. Liebman and Robert Wuthnow (Hawthorne, NY: Aldine Publishing Company, 1983), 234.

<sup>13</sup> See Boyer, “The Evangelical Resurgence in 1970s American Protestantism,” 33.

<sup>14</sup> Robert C. Liebman, “The Making of the New Christian Right,” 234.

religious time buyers. There are thirty-six television stations with full-time religious schedules, some of which broadcast twenty-four hours a day. Hundreds of commercial TV stations are completely sold out on Sunday morning—or any other time they are willing to sell to religious telecasters. Sunday evening is fast becoming as lucrative as the morning for those willing to sell to the religious syndicators. There is virtually no home in the United States into which the electronic church cannot send its songs, sermons, and appeals in generous measure. Merely to contemplate its potential power is staggering. There is no doubt that the electronic church has brought to millions of Americans a new way of experiencing religion. In fundamental ways, the electronic religious experience is affecting the manner in which those same millions view and understand the world they live in.<sup>15</sup>

Headlined by names such as Graham (who had been on TV since the 1950s), Oral Roberts (live since the 1960s), Rex Humbard, Jerry Falwell, Pat Robertson, James Robison, Jim and Tammy Faye Bakker, and Jimmy Swaggert, the electronic church, as it was often called, clearly put evangelicalism on the radar of many Americans. Still, one could certainly make the case that evangelicalism could be compartmentalized by mainstream America, for after all, the television networks were only alternatives to the big three, and *The 700 Club* provided only a news alternative for those looking for explicitly Christian news commentary. But such an ability to compartmentalize would not last long.

Despite all of this growth and the increased visibility of evangelicalism, what validated American evangelicals more than anything was the 1976 presidential race, which pitted professed “born-again” Sunday school teacher Jimmy Carter against Episcopal-but-now-born-again incumbent Gerald Ford. That race is the subject of the next chapter, but it is worth noting here simply because it brought unprecedented

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<sup>15</sup> Jeffrey K. Hadden and Charles E. Swann, *Prime Time Preachers: The Rising Power of Televangelism* (Reading, MA: Addison-Wesley Publishing Company, 1981), 8.

visibility to evangelicalism, placing it front and center in the country's consciousness as it took part in the most mainstream of any national events, a presidential election.

As Lynn Buzzard has observed, "Perhaps the whole notion of a 'born again' president . . . was a symbol of the success of that phrase—that no longer were these people simply tent revivalists, they were now part of the mainstream of American life. Now that they were legitimized, it was possible in that sociological sense to move into political life."<sup>16</sup> Of course, the nation's political life had to be amenable to such a move, and as we shall see, key facets of it certainly were.

### *Interest Group Politics of the 1970s*

Interest groups, it can safely be said, are almost endemic to democracies and have always played some part in American politics. Yet they have not always been in their current form, nor were there as many. Interest groups exploded in the United States in the 1960s and 1970s, contributing greatly to the formation and rise of the NCR and a new religious politics. The election of 1896, note Mark J. Rozell and Clyde Wilcox, was a watershed for interest group involvement in American electoral politics, as Mark Hanna, a Cleveland industrialist, contributed the equivalent of more than one million in today's dollars to the presidential campaign of Republican William McKinley and raised as much as one hundred times that from bankers. That same year, Democrat William Jennings Bryan mobilized groups of farmers, workers, and Christians for his campaign, thus setting into motion a showdown of constituent groups that would affect politics for years to come. Throughout the early twentieth century, interest groups made their presence

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<sup>16</sup> Lynn Buzzard, "The 'Coming Out' of Evangelicals," in *Contemporary Evangelical Political Involvement: An Analysis and Assessment*, ed. Corwin E. Smidt (Lanham, MD: University Press of America, 1989), 135.

known in party politics, with Democrats gaining the support of organized populist and progressive groups in the Midwest, in addition to labor unions and new waves of immigrants around the rest of the country. Republicans courted large and small businesses as well as many of the nativist groups that opposed new immigration. By the 1930s all of this gave way to the Democrats' diverse New Deal coalition of labor, Catholics, Jews, racial minorities, and southerners, and the Republican constituency of both large and small business owners. Certainly, party organizations remained strong despite these various interests, but increasingly interest groups became active and visible as members of party coalitions. And as Rozell and Wilcox note, parties and interest groups had established comfortable relations by midcentury: parties chose candidates and developed platforms, while interest groups backed the party nominees.<sup>17</sup>

This changed drastically in the 1960s. As Burdett A. Loomis and Allan J. Cigler make clear in their study on interest group politics, formation of interest groups increased substantially during that decade, and their attention was directed increasingly toward Washington, which had become the center of power. There was, thus, "a veritable explosion" of Washington lobby groups in the 1960s and 1970s.<sup>18</sup> The biggest contributor to this explosion was the development of broad social movements during those decades, in particular the civil rights, antiwar, and feminist movements, among others. In 1986, Kay Lehman Schlozman and John T. Tierney reported that most civil rights groups and more than three-quarters of citizens' groups, social welfare groups, and

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<sup>17</sup> Mark J. Rozell and Clyde Wilcox, *Interest Groups in American Campaigns: The New Face of Electioneering* (Washington D.C.: CQ Press, 1999), 4.

<sup>18</sup> Burdett A. Loomis and Allan J. Cigler, "Introduction: The Changing Nature of Interest Group Politics," in *Interest Group Politics*, eds. Allan J. Cigler and Burdett A. Loomis (Washington D.C.: CQ Press, 1998), 9-10.

poor peoples' organizations that spotted the political landscape had been founded since that pivotal date of 1960, and most of these made their way into the Democratic Party.<sup>19</sup> Demanding representation and an active voice therein, many of the new interest groups were disappointed at being shut out from the Democratic National Convention in 1968 by the party establishment. Their frenzied protests in the Chicago streets outside the convention caused the Democrats to alter their regulations to allow interest groups a greater say in party nominations in the future. The pendulum, of course, perhaps swung too far, as George McGovern won the next nomination and was trounced by Nixon in 1972.

Around the same time, changes in campaign finance laws opened the way to an even greater increase in the involvement of interest groups in electoral politics. Congress in the early 1970s enacted legislation with several far-reaching aims: namely, reducing candidates' dependence on major individual donors who contribute large amounts of money; bringing these donors and their donations out into the open; discouraging illegal contributions; broadening the base of public support beyond wealthy individuals; and controlling escalating costs in presidential campaigns. The first legislative act in this effort was the Federal Election Campaign Act (FECA) of 1971, which set ceilings on the amount of money presidential and vice presidential candidates could contribute to their own campaigns, while allowing unions, corporations, and other groups to form political action committees that were allowed to solicit voluntary contributions to be given to candidates or parties or to fund the group's election activities. Important changes to the FECA were made in Watergate's wake in 1974, with amendments requiring public

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<sup>19</sup> Kay Lehman Schlozman and John T. Tierney, *Organized Interests and American Democracy* (New York: Harper and Row, 1986), 75.

disclosure provisions, contribution ceilings for individuals and groups, spending limits for campaigns, as well as the creation of federal subsidies for major party candidates in the nomination process, federal funding provisions for the general election, and the creation of the Federal Election Commission, among other things. And while portions of this were found unconstitutional in *Buckley v. Valeo*<sup>20</sup> in 1976, the FECA did have major effects, the most important of which, for our purposes, was the proliferation of PACs and other extra-party political apparatuses, thus paving the way for a political culture conducive to the formation of the NCR.<sup>21</sup>

By capping individual campaign contributions at \$1,000, the FECA created a partial political vacuum, which extra-party organizations stepped in to fill since PACs were able to contribute as much as \$5,000 per campaign. These limits obviously favored political organizations over individuals, since they could raise small amounts of money from many contributors and then systematically use that money to support a number of candidates. But perhaps more importantly, *Buckley* had held that these contribution limits applied only to the actual campaigns of political candidates, meaning there were virtually no limits on the activities and expenditures of groups formally independent of campaigns, so long as they kept their official distance from the candidates and their campaign organization. The result was the growth of PACs and other extra-party organizations to the point that by 1980, PACs raised more money than either political party. As Jerome L. Himmelstein notes, moreover, this proliferation of PACs has

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<sup>20</sup> 424 U.S. 1 (1976).

<sup>21</sup> See Stephen J. Wayne, *The Road to the White House 2008*, 8<sup>th</sup> edition (Boston: Thompson Wadsworth, 2008), 38-40.

generally favored the more conservative forces in society. By 1980, New Right groups headed the list of the biggest spending PACs.<sup>22</sup>

The proliferation of PACs in the electoral realm and the onset of interest group politics more generally created an entirely new political climate in the United States in the 1970s, contributing, in fact, to what political scientist Theodore J. Lowi has called “the second republic of the United States.” The situation was such that by the 1970s, the liberal state had grown to immense proportions without self-examination, doing so in large measure by responding to the demands of major interests, by assuming responsibility for programs sought by these interests, and by assigning that responsibility to administrative agencies. Lowi characterizes this as a “state of permanent receivership,” in which government maintains a steadfast position that any institution large enough to be a significant factor in the community may have its stability underwritten. Actual policy comes from a tripartite bargaining of specialized administrators, relevant members of Congress, and representatives of organized interests. Thus, government’s bias favors established and well-organized interests in the policy-making process.<sup>23</sup>

Under this rubric, then—with extra-party groups having been incentivized to involve themselves in electoral politics via the FECA, with many liberal social movements having organized as legitimate interest groups in the 1960s, and now with a “state of permanent receivership” established in the government, which would underwrite

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<sup>22</sup> Jerome L. Himmelstein, “The New Right,” in *The New Christian Right*, eds. Liebman and Wuthnow, 28-29.

<sup>23</sup> See Theodore J. Lowi, *The End of Liberalism: The Second Republic of the United States*, second edition (New York: W.W. Norton Press, 1979).

almost any viable interest (most of which were liberal in the 1960s-1970s)—it stands to reason that a movement of religious conservatives would try to organize and mobilize as a viable extra-party network. The structures for such a course were clearly in place by the late 1970s.

### *Watergate*

What remains largely unanswered, though, despite the fact that evangelicalism had grown to unprecedented size and stature and that the political climate was conducive to its organized involvement, is *why* evangelicals and other religious conservatives would want to mobilize as a political force. To answer this, I now turn to the three major factors—in what I view as ascending order of importance—related to the political involvement of religious conservatives. The first of these is Watergate, which was important because it symbolized for many Americans—and especially many evangelicals—the corruption not just of the president, but of American political life more generally in the 1970s. The unsavory events of the affair embittered almost all Americans, imperiling the public’s trust in those vested with leadership of the country, and doing so with two major effects: it contributed to many religious conservatives’ convictions that it was time to change the political culture; and it incentivized politicians who could run on appeal to their personal morality (including their religion), since the public mood seemed to call for such.

Watergate was a series of events, one could argue, that grew primarily out of greed and hunger for power, vices that belonged not just to Richard Nixon but that extended far beyond the break-in of an office building in 1972. Greed and struggles for power were in some respects at the heart of American politics in the 1960s and 1970s,

Watergate, to be sure, being the most severe and visible case. But the roots of Watergate grew deep. In the wake of a legislative struggle over Nixon's "New Federalism" program, which a Democratic Congress had rejected early in Nixon's first term, the president shifted his governing strategy and attempted nevertheless to enact parts of the program through administrative action—or what naysayers would have called fiat. In this effort, Nixon expanded and reorganized the Executive Office of the President (EOP) so that it might forestall some of the traditional responsibilities of the bureaucracy, instead hoarding those powers close to the president in the West Wing of the White House. So, in foreign affairs, for instance, Henry Kissinger, as national security adviser, played a far more prominent and important role than Secretary of State William Rogers, who in a nearly unprecedented slight was not even briefed in advance that Nixon was opening relations to China, perhaps his most important diplomatic move in office. Similar moves were made in domestic affairs, as well—especially relating to Nixon's impounding of funds in the effort to contravene the policies of the Democratic Congress. By the end of Nixon's first term there were visible signs that the White House was amassing tremendous power. None was more evident than the fact that the EOP staff had doubled from 292 under Johnson in 1968 to 583 by 1972.

When Congress remained squarely in the hands of the Democrats following Nixon's reelection in 1972, it quickly became clear that the president would continue the efforts to expand his executive power, primarily through a new reorganization of the executive branch. This involved moving proven loyalists into departments and agencies, and then consolidating the leadership of the bureaucracy into a "supercabinet" of four secretaries whose job it was to oversee execution of all of the Nixon administration's

policies. The president was determined, it seemed, to acquire power, and the Congress was determined to stop him. The upshots were a presidency that was pushing the bounds of authority and a Democratic perception that Nixon was engaged in a reckless usurpation of constitutional power. Some even argued that Nixon, as well as Johnson before him, had created an “imperial” presidency.<sup>24</sup> Although I tend to disagree with that assessment—there is a viable argument to be made that Nixon was merely engaged in a logical extension of a continually evolving office—it was still the case that Nixon was defiantly hoarding unprecedented power, including some that members of Congress believed were rightly theirs. The result was a struggle for power. In some cases ethical behavior be damned. And it was the effort to preserve that power—and of course, a few of the improper ways it was wielded—that led to Nixon’s downfall.

In seeking reelection to his second term, Nixon—in keeping with the trend of hoarding power—had created a personal reelection organization, which was entirely autonomous of the normal Republican Party apparatus, called the Committee to Re-elect the President (CREEP). In June 1972, a security guard at Washington’s Watergate office complex arrested four suspected burglars who had broken into the headquarters of the Democratic National Committee, which was housed there, and one of those men was found to be on the CREEP payroll. Nixon condemned the break-in, declaring no White House involvement, but the trouble did not go away. The men were convicted of the “third-rate burglary” in January 1973, and several of them brought allegations against Nixon associates before the special Senate committee charged with investigating the affair. The committee discovered that the Watergate break-in was one of several

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<sup>24</sup> See Arthur M. Schlesinger, Jr., *The Imperial Presidency* (New York: Popular Library, 1973).

espionage acts committed by Nixon associates, and as a result, some of Nixon's staff were forced to resign in humiliation. But Nixon was impetuous, denying his involvement and declaring that he would get to the bottom of the situation by appointing the highly respected Elliot Richardson as attorney general, who in turn appointed Archibald Cox, a former Kennedy administration official, to investigate as special prosecutor.

The Senate committee soon discovered that Nixon had implemented a secret White House taping system that recorded all of the President's phone calls from the Oval Office. Cox demanded that some of the tapes from that system be turned over as evidence in the Watergate investigation. Nixon refused, citing absolute executive privilege, and then ordered Richardson to fire Cox. First Richardson, and then his number two, Deputy Attorney General William Ruckelshaus, refused on principle and resigned immediately. So Justice Department number three, Robert Bork, fired Cox upon his handsome promotion to Attorney General to round out what became known as the "Saturday Night Massacre." The "massacre" sparked a public firestorm, whereupon Nixon grudgingly released several transcripts from the tapes, some of which contained damaging discussions between Nixon and his aides about how to silence the convicted felons and thus mitigate the fallout from the whole affair. Equally damaging were Nixon's disparaging remarks about others in government and the fact that the transcripts were laced with the president's profane language, indicated on the records by the famous—and all too frequent—phrase "expletive deleted."

Based on the evidence, as well as many Democrats' longstanding animosities toward Nixon and the fact that so many Americans were incensed by the president's behavior, the House Judiciary Committee began to draft articles of impeachment, settling

on three that were to be moved to the whole House for a vote. This vote was not to be, however, because on July 24, the Supreme Court handed down an opinion in *U.S. v. Nixon*<sup>25</sup> ordering the President to turn over several of the important tapes he had withheld. Among these were the prized “smoking gun” tapes, containing a conversation in which Nixon ordered a cover-up upon hearing about certain operatives’ involvement in the Watergate break-in.

What support Nixon had been able to retain on Capitol Hill quickly evaporated with the release of these tapes, and it became clear that he would soon be impeached by the House, tried by the Senate, and likely removed from office. So, on August 8, 1974, Richard Nixon became the first American president to resign from office.

The whole debacle had been debilitating for the country, and while there are a number of perspectives on the Watergate scandal we might usefully explore, what is most important for present purposes is the manner in which Watergate functioned to help mobilize religious conservatives for politics. The immediate impulse for many was to shy away from politics. This was proof, after all, that politics was a dirty business—too dirty, some thought, for the devout. But on the other hand, there were two important reasons why Watergate was galvanizing. The first is that it provided an opportunity for Christians to clean up politics. The second is that Watergate changed the general public mood toward the Washington establishment and thus incentivized politicians who could run on appeal to their personal morality. This, of course, was the seed bed for politicians such as Jimmy Carter.

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<sup>25</sup> 418 U.S. 683 (1974).

That Watergate was motivation for Christian citizens to clean up politics could be seen clearly on the pages of *Christianity Today*. Early on, editorials were loath to determine Nixon's guilt or innocence, but should the president be found guilty, *Christianity Today's* thoughts on the matter were clear: a "coverup" would be absolutely "intolerable."<sup>26</sup> This soon gave way to a call for action—even if, still in the early stages, it was private action: "Christians should examine their consciences, inquiring whether they have followed the biblical injunction to pray for those in authority—or have left them an easy prey to spiritual wickedness in high places. To the extent that we have not prayed, we can begin now, too late to undo past disasters but in time to forestall new ones."<sup>27</sup> Soon there were "Biblical Lessons From Watergate" enjoining evangelical readers: "Let us love. Let us care. Let us make certain that justice prevails. Let us call for repentance from those who have done wrong, refusing to put a glaze of respectability on immoral activity."<sup>28</sup> Then, as the pivotal spring of 1974 turned to summer and the transcripts became public, the calls became direct for Christian influence in Washington, where the central questions were now moral: "The transcripts show [Nixon] to be a person who has failed gravely to live up to the moral demands of our Judeo-Christian heritage. We do not expect perfection, but we rightly expect our leaders, and especially our President, to practice a higher level of morality than the tapes reveal."<sup>29</sup> This sentiment was echoed during the historic month of August, when the editor noted "the

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<sup>26</sup> "The Message to the President," *Christianity Today*, November 9, 1973, 41.

<sup>27</sup> "The Mortality of Presidents," *Christianity Today*, November 23, 1973, 42.

<sup>28</sup> John A. Huffman, Jr., "Biblical Lessons From Watergate," *Christianity Today*, March 15, 1974, 12.

<sup>29</sup> "Should Nixon Resign?" *Christianity Today*, June 7, 1974, 28.

central demand of the nation,” which was “the need for truth, honesty, and integrity in the White House and throughout the government.”<sup>30</sup>

The most poignant calls came from Billy Graham, the President’s well-publicized friend and confidant. Graham, in a *Christianity Today* cover story titled “Billy Graham on Watergate,” was clear in issuing a call toward much-needed Christian involvement. “Let’s hope we realize,” he said, “that there is one crisis more urgent than [the current one] and that this is the crisis in integrity and in Christian love.” Also, more pointedly, Graham noted “I think evangelicals have been far too much on the defensive. . . . We have a social responsibility. . . . I think we have to identify with the changing structures in society and try to do our part.” Then, in concluding, Graham gave what amounted to a prophetic call for a Jimmy Carter to become president: “I would like to see any President who is a professing Christian to go to church every Sunday, and attend the prayer meetings at the White House—and show up once in a while for the Senate and House prayer breakfasts. It is my prayer that all the events that have happened during the past few months will tend to deepen the religious convictions of the President.”<sup>31</sup>

Graham, it turns out, could not have been more prescient. The overwhelming feeling in post-Watergate America was a need to restore confidence—especially moral and ethical confidence—in American political culture, and this could only be done if leadership were vested in men and women who were ethical and moral. So, this sentiment was the second way in which Watergate served to bring about religious conservatives’ involvement in politics, as well as the appeals to religious values in

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<sup>30</sup> “Fifteen Turbulent Years,” *Christianity Today*, August 30, 1974, 24.

<sup>31</sup> Billy Graham, “Watergate,” *Christianity Today*, January 4, 1974, 9-19.

presidential campaigns. Soon, both Jimmy Carter and Gerald Ford would be appealing to their own Christian piety in an effort to restore American confidence in the post-Watergate presidency.

### *Changes in Church-State Relations*

In addition to the uproar over Watergate, major changes in church-state relations that occurred in the 1960s and 1970s also brought religious conservatives increasingly to politics. More specifically, these church-state changes related to Supreme Court decisions regarding prayer and Bible reading in public schools as well as the IRS controversy of the 1970s, which threatened the tax-exempt status of many independent Christian schools.

The religion clauses of the First Amendment state, in sixteen rather succinct words, that “Congress shall make no law respecting the establishment of religion, or prohibiting the free exercise thereof.” As any student of Supreme Court jurisprudence knows, however, how these words are to be interpreted is a complex matter. What concerns us most here is the first of these two clauses, known as the Establishment Clause, for it is in what many religious conservatives view as a narrow interpretation of that clause that we find the most galvanizing controversies related to church and state.

Many modern observers, following the Court’s lead, have been quick to recall Thomas Jefferson’s now-famous letter to the Danbury Baptist Association in which Mr. Jefferson interpreted the amendment as constructing a “wall of separation” between the institutions of church and state. But others—primarily religious conservatives—are not so sure that this is the proper interpretation. There are, after all, many questions involved in the relationship of church and state: What constitutes the church? What constitutes the

state? What is religion? What is “establishment?” And doesn’t it say “*Congress shall make no law . . .*”? These are important and no doubt controversial questions, and in the view of religious conservatives, the answers provided by the Supreme Court have often been unsatisfactory—perhaps none more so than those provided in the *Engel* and *Schempp* cases, which rang out like gunshots at the start of a war in 1962 and 1963.

For much of the nation’s history, the Establishment Clause was interpreted very differently than it would be interpreted in the latter half of the twentieth century. The first Congress in the United States established a chaplaincy for both houses of Congress as well as the military. Several states, moreover, held on to established churches well into the nineteenth century, without seemingly being in violation of the First Amendment.<sup>32</sup> In 1817 Congress subsidized religious education among tribes of Native Americans, a practice it maintained until the turn of the century. In 1899, in its first Establishment Clause case, the Court decided unanimously that a Congressional appropriation to charter a Catholic hospital was not an establishment of religion. One quickly understands the trend—namely that not much constituted an establishment of religion until the mid-twentieth century.

The case of *Everson v. Board of Education* (1947)<sup>33</sup> opened the modern era of Establishment jurisprudence and gave us the Court’s first overt exposition on the Establishment Clause. That case dealt with the right of New Jersey’s Ewing Township to finance bus transportation for children attending parochial schools, a service it provided free of charge for the town’s public school students. *Everson* actually sustained this

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<sup>32</sup> This, of course, is because the First Amendment said “Congress shall make no law. . .” and the 14<sup>th</sup> Amendment and the idea of incorporation takes some time to develop.

<sup>33</sup> 330 U.S. 421 (1947).

practice against an Establishment Clause challenge, however the victory was only in the immediate sense. In the first place, the Court incorporated the Establishment Clause in *Everson*, meaning it applied the clause to state governments, not just the national government, by way of the Fourteenth Amendment. But also Justice Black, writing for the majority, used this, the Court's first explanation of the clause's meaning, as a forum to establish a strict separationist reading of the amendment's scope and power. That is, to Black,

The "establishment of religion" clause of the First Amendment means at least this: Neither a state nor the Federal Government can set up a church. Neither can pass laws which aid one religion, aid all religions, or prefer one religion over another. Neither can force nor influence a person to go to or to remain away from church against his will or force him to profess a belief or disbelief in any religion. No person can be punished for entertaining or professing religious beliefs or disbeliefs, for church attendance or non-attendance. No tax in any amount, large or small, can be levied to support any religious activities or institutions, whatever they may be called, or whatever form they may adopt to teach or practice religion. Neither a state nor the Federal Government can, openly or secretly, participate in the affairs of any religious organizations or groups and vice versa. In the words of Jefferson, the clause against establishment of religion by law was intended to erect "a *wall of separation* between church and state." . . . The First Amendment has erected a *wall between church and state*. That wall *must be kept high and impregnable*. *We could not approve the slightest breach* [emphasis mine].<sup>34</sup>

Despite holding that Ewing Township had not breached that wall, the effects of the case were such that a new separationist era had been established. As John Witte, Jr. notes, *Everson* "set the tone for much of the Court's early interpretation and application of the [Establishment] clause."<sup>35</sup> And it was this tone that brought us *Engel* and *Schempp* a decade and a half later.

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<sup>34</sup> 330 U.S. 421 at 425 and 431-432.

<sup>35</sup> John Witte, Jr., *Religion and the American Constitutional Experiment*, second edition (Cambridge, MA: Westview Press, 2005), 202-203.

The New York State Board of Regents, a body vested by the state constitution with general supervisory power over education in the state, had authored a short non-sectarian prayer to be recited in classrooms. It read: “Almighty God, we acknowledge our dependence upon Thee, and we beg Thy blessings upon us, our teachers, and our Country.” Schools were not required to use the prayer, and if they did use it children were not compelled to repeat it. But if any prayer was to be used in New York classrooms, it was this one. The test case came from New Hyde Park on Long Island, and the plaintiffs were Unitarian and Jewish parents who thought the prayer’s presence in New York classrooms constituted the establishment of religion. Their petition was rejected by the New York Court of Appeals, which said the prayers were fine, so long as the schools did not compel any student to join in the prayer over his or his parent’s objection. So, when the Supreme Court decided to hear their appeal, the case drew much attention—especially from 21 state attorneys general who came to New York’s, and thus their own, defense.

When it heard the case, the Court, not surprisingly given the *Everson* exposition, extended its separationist streak. Through the pen of Justice Black once again, it delivered a blow to school prayer supporters, who were many.

It is no part of the business of government to compose official prayers for any group of the American people to recite as part of a religious program carried on by government. . . . There can be no doubt that New York’s state prayer program officially establishes the religious beliefs embodied in the Regents prayer. . . . Neither the fact that the prayer may be denominationally neutral nor the fact that its observance on the part of the students is voluntary can serve to free it from the Establishment Clause. . . . When the power, prestige, and financial support of government is placed behind a particular religious belief, the indirect coercive pressure upon religious minorities to conform to the prevailing officially approved religion is plain.<sup>36</sup>

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<sup>36</sup> 370 U.S. at 421.

Black was not finished. He continued:

There can, of course, be no doubt that New York's program of daily classroom invocation of God's blessings as prescribed in the Regents' prayer is a religious activity. It is a solemn avowal of divine faith and supplication for the blessings of the Almighty. The nature of such a prayer has always been religious. . . . We agree with [the petitioners'] contention since we think that the constitutional prohibition against laws respecting an establishment of religion must at least mean that in this country it is no part of the business of government to compose official prayers for any group of the American people to recite as a part of a religious program carried out by the government.<sup>37</sup>

Finally, a "union of government and religion tends to destroy government and to degrade religion."<sup>38</sup>

Given that homeroom devotional exercises occurred in a third of the nation's public schools, including 60.53% in the South and 68.33% in the East,<sup>39</sup> the decision sparked a firestorm, one that Leo Pfeffer observed was "unusual in its intensity" for a Supreme Court opinion.<sup>40</sup> While President Kennedy urged public respect for the Court and echoed that the proper place of prayer was in the home and church and not the public school, others were not so reserved. Presidents Hoover, Truman, and Eisenhower, the only living presidents, called it a mistake. In Congress, there was considerable demagoguery, such as Representative Robert T. Ashmore's proposed bill to have "In God We Trust" emblazoned in gold above the Supreme Court bench. Other congressmen, such as Robert Byrd of West Virginia asked: "Can it be that we, too, are ready to embrace the foul concept of atheism? . . . Somebody is tampering with America's soul. I

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<sup>37</sup> 370 U.S. at 424-427.

<sup>38</sup> 370 U.S. at 432.

<sup>39</sup> See "Editorial: Religion Sponsored by the State," *Journal of Church & State* 4 (November 1962): 143.

<sup>40</sup> Leo Pfeffer, *Church, State, and Freedom*, revised edition (Boston: Beacon Press, 1967), 466.

leave it to you who that somebody is.” Congressman Mendel Rivers of South Carolina declared that “The Court has now officially stated its disbelief in God Almighty.”

George W. Andrews of Alabama noted, on the heels of *Brown v. Board of Education*,

that “They put the Negroes in the schools, and now they’ve driven God out.” And

Senator Sam Ervin of North Carolina went so far as to note that “The Supreme Court has made God unconstitutional.”<sup>41</sup>

Many religious groups and religious leaders, moreover, released statements on the decision. The Cardinal Archbishop of New York called it “frightening” and “shocking,” and the Methodist Bishop of California declared that “the Supreme Court has deconsecrated the nation.”<sup>42</sup> *America*, the national Jesuit weekly, proclaimed a line that would be echoed by religious conservatives for decades to come: “Responsibility . . . belongs to the American Civil Liberties Union, the Ethical Culture Society, the Humanist associations, some Unitarians, many atheists, and certain other groups with doctrinaire views on the meaning and application of the principle of separation of Church and State.” Perhaps no statement was as reflective (or resounding) as Billy Graham’s simple one: there was, in his view, “a pattern of national actions to take the traditional concept of God out of national life.”<sup>43</sup> And “this is another step toward the secularization of the United States.”<sup>44</sup> It was also another step—a very important step—toward the mobilization of religious conservatives.

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<sup>41</sup> Quoted in Pfeffer, *Church, State, and Freedom*, 466.

<sup>42</sup> Quoted in “Editorial: Religion Sponsored by the State,” 142.

<sup>43</sup> Quoted in “Editorial: Religion Sponsored by the State,” 142.

<sup>44</sup> Quoted in Pfeffer, *Church, State, and Freedom*, 466-467.

But the Court had not finished. Despite all of this criticism (or perhaps even because of it), it agreed to hear another, even further-reaching case the next year. By statute, Pennsylvania had mandated the reading aloud of at least ten verses from the Bible each day at the opening of public school. Either the teacher or a volunteering student would read the text, and the reader was permitted to select the day's passage. No commentary or discussion was to follow, and the methods varied among schools, with some using a common reading that was broadcast throughout the school, and others leaving the task to individual classrooms. In Abington School District, the reading was followed by students' recital of the Lord's Prayer. Parents and students were advised that any student was free to absent herself from the classroom or, should she choose to stay, not to participate in the religious exercises.

Against the backdrop of *Engel* just one year earlier, the Court, by an 8 to 1 margin, found this to be a clear violation of the Establishment clause—not surprising in light of its recent interpretations. This time Justice Clark wrote for the majority, accepting Justice Black's previous readings of history and adhering simply to the doctrine of *stare decisis*. The Pennsylvania policy, and others like it, he said, clearly constituted a religious exercise that was mandated by the state for impressionable minors, who were compelled to be in school and had no realistic opportunity to abstain from participation without drawing undue attention. Thus, "the exercises and the law requiring them are in violation of the Establishment Clause."<sup>45</sup> And aware that Establishment cases would continue to come up, he created a singular, two-pronged test for religious establishment,

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<sup>45</sup> 374 U.S. at 223.

one that would be expanded upon in *Lemon v. Kurtzman* a few years later and used in Establishment decisions for decades to come:

What are the purpose and the primary effect of the enactment? If either is the advancement or inhibition of religion then the enactment exceeds the scope of legislative power as circumscribed by the Constitution. That is to say that to withstand the strictures of the Establishment Clause there must be a secular legislative purpose and a primary effect that neither advances nor inhibits religion.<sup>46</sup>

Fully cognizant of the uproar the year before, which would surely follow this further-reaching decision, Justice Clark emphasized that to prohibit these practices in public schools was not to ban them from society altogether:

The place of religion in our society is an exalted one, achieved through a long tradition of reliance on the home, the church, and the inviolable citadel of the individual heart and mind. We have come to recognize through bitter experience that it is not within the power of government to invade that citadel, whether its purpose or effect be to aid or oppose, to advance or retard. In the relationship between man and religion, the state is firmly committed to a position of neutrality.<sup>47</sup>

Echoing Billy Graham's statement in the wake of *Engel*, Justice Stewart's sharp (and singular) dissent argued that the Court had now firmly established a religion of its own—that of “secularism.” Justice Clark, however, countered that reading and presciently foresaw the societal uproar that lay ahead by noting:

We agree of course that the State may not establish a “religion of secularism” in the sense of affirmatively opposing or showing hostility to religion. . . . We do not agree, however, that this decision in any sense has that effect. . . . It certainly may be said that the Bible is worthy of study for its literary and historic qualities. Nothing we have said here indicates that such a study of the Bible or of religion, when presented objectively as part of a secular program of education, may not be effected consistently with the First Amendment.<sup>48</sup>

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<sup>46</sup> 374 U.S. at 222.

<sup>47</sup> 374 U.S. at 226.

<sup>48</sup> 374 U.S. at 225.

Compared to *Engel*, reaction to the *Schempp* case was at least in the immediate sense more subdued, largely because *Engel* had softened the blow; *Schempp*, that is, was hardly unexpected. Furthermore, many devoutly religious separationists had worked hard in the intervening year to convince fellow adherents that church-state separation was not all bad. For instance, Baptists, who have a strong heritage of separationist stances, were prodded toward acceptance of the Court's decisions by Dr. C. Emanuel Carlson of the Baptist Joint Committee on Public Affairs (which represented the public affairs interests of affiliated Baptist groups, including, at that time, Southern Baptists) as well as the Baptists at Baylor University's J.M. Dawson Institute of Church-State Studies, publishers of the *Journal of Church and State*. The General Assembly of the United Presbyterian Church, moreover, issued an uncompromising statement affirming the principle of church-state separation, and the National Council of Churches wrote just days before *Schempp* was handed down that "neither true religion nor good education is dependent upon the devotional use of the Bible in the public school program."<sup>49</sup>

Yet these voices did not represent most evangelicals, who were, not surprisingly, distressed. Robert A. Cooke, president of the NAE, called *Schempp* and its forebears a "sad departure from the nation's heritage under God" that "opens the door to the full establishment of secularism as a negative form of religion." Billy Graham said he was shocked by the decision, which he noted was a penalty for the "eighty percent" of Americans who "want Bible reading and prayer in the school." And as a harbinger of the unlikely evangelical-Catholic alliance that would form in the coming decades, a number of Roman Catholics expressed displeasure of their own much like that of the

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<sup>49</sup> Pfeffer, *Church, State, and Freedom*, 474.

evangelicals'. Noted Cardinal Cushing of Boston, it was "a great tragedy that the greatest book that was ever published cannot be read in the public system of education." Cardinal Spellman of New York went a step further: "No one who believes in God can approve such a decision."<sup>50</sup>

So, with prayer and Bible reading now gone from the public schools, many religiously conservative parents withdrew their children from public education in the years following *Engel* and *Schempp*, opting instead for the growing number of new Christian alternative schools. The independent Christian school movement began slowly, but it gathered considerable pace in the 1970s. As Steve Bruce notes, whereas the overall school enrollment declined by 13.6 percent between 1970 and 1980, the number of independent Christian schools grew by 95 percent.<sup>51</sup>

It should be noted that some of the many independent schools that cropped up, especially in the Deep South, began as efforts to resist Court-ordered integration. Many critics, thus, are at least partly correct in asserting that the growth of independent schools was merely white flight. It is not the case that all of the new independent schools were founded under such circumstances, though, but it can be difficult to sort out everyone's motives. Most founders denied any racist intent and instead asserted that they simply wanted to establish a religious alternative to the liberal-drifting public schools. There were, however, some clearly racially inspired bad apples among these new schools, and these became the impetus for the so-called IRS controversy.

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<sup>50</sup> Pfeffer, *Church, State, and Freedom*, 475.

<sup>51</sup> Steve Bruce, *The Rise and Fall of the New Christian Right: Conservative Protestant Politics in America 1978-1988* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1990), 41.

Private schools, as nonprofit educational institutions, are exempt from income taxes under Section 501(c)(3) of the IRS tax code. Throughout the twentieth century, tax exemption was often used as a means of forcing organizations that might wish to benefit from such exemption to conform to certain governmental dictates—bans against racial discrimination being perhaps the most prominent of these dictates after 1954. As Sharon L. Worthing notes, this was indeed the primary social policy principle that has been applied to church-related schools, which are often only viable due to their non-profit status under the federal tax laws, since this shields them from income taxes and allows individuals to make vital tax-deductible donations to them. Until 1970, the IRS did not particularly concern itself with the race policies in private schools, but that year, a federal district court enjoined the IRS from treating as tax-exempt several Mississippi private schools that had discriminated in admissions on the sole basis of race. The IRS, following up on this court decision, issued a news release indicating that this was now its official policy; that is, it would not treat as tax exempt any schools that discriminated on the basis of race, nor would it allow charitable tax deductions for private contributions to such organizations—the basic lifeblood of many private schools.<sup>52</sup>

Backed, if passively and recalcitrantly, by the Nixon administration, the IRS began implementation of these policies amid civil rights groups' concerns over how it would actually assess the discriminatory status of the independent schools. Through the mid-1970s, civil rights advocates put tremendous pressure on the IRS to identify schools in violation, including those schools that had been founded clearly in response to secularization not desegregation. In response, the IRS published two new revenue

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<sup>52</sup> Sharon L. Worthing, "The State and the Church School: The Conflict Over Social Policy," in *Religion, the State, and Education*, ed. James E. Wood (Waco, TX: Baylor University Press, 1984), 88-89.

procedures in 1975, one strengthening the guidelines requiring schools to make a public statement of nondiscrimination, and the second placing private church schools in the same category as secular private schools with regard to race standards. Then in 1978, with Carter now president, the IRS went further in trying to clarify its intentions by releasing more new guidelines. Under these, schools not only had to enroll minority students, they had to enroll an IRS-defined “significant” number of minority students—a task much more difficult than it sounds. As Joseph Crespino observes, “In classic bureaucratese,” the IRS had determined that schools’ minority enrollment was “insignificant” if it was “less than 20 percent of the percentage of the minority age population in the community served by the school.” Now, it was not just the schools in Mississippi that were being targeted; the stringent new rules greatly affected schools throughout the country.<sup>53</sup>

To borrow Crespino’s phrasing once more, the response to these decisions “bordered on apoplectic.”<sup>54</sup> Over 120,000 protest letters were sent to the IRS, and 400,000 more were sent to members of Congress. Additionally, Bob Billings, a church school organizer, joined forces with conservative activist Paul Weyrich to found the National Christian Action Coalition with the express purpose of organizing to defeat the IRS’s measures—measures they could now brand as having come from “Carter’s IRS.” What is important to note about these two organizers is that their banding together in 1978 would have tremendous long-term consequences. Weyrich was arguably the godhead of what Steve Bruce has called “the Holy Trinity” of the New Christian Right—

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<sup>53</sup> Joseph Crespino, “Civil Rights and the Religious Right,” in *Rightward Bound*, eds. Bruce J. Schulman and Julian E. Zelizer, 94-100.

<sup>54</sup> Crespino, “Civil Rights and the Religious Right,” 100.

Richard Viguerie and Howard Phillips being the other two. Bob Billings would go on to become the executive director of the Moral Majority before joining the Reagan campaign and then administration as a liaison to religious conservatives. Indeed, it was Weyrich and Billings's work together organizing Christians against the IRS that served as the immediate precursor to the organization of the NCR in 1979.

The IRS controversy and the responses to it were watershed events mainly because, to use Weyrich's words, they "shattered the Christian community's notion that Christians could isolate themselves inside their own institutions and teach what they pleased."<sup>55</sup> That is, religious conservatives, in their own view, were now being attacked outright by society's liberal elites, the secular humanists who had taken over control of the government. It was these forces, in their minds, that had kicked God out of the public schools in *Engel* and *Schempp*. Despite religious conservatives' best efforts to flee to their own enclaves and practice their beliefs in isolation, the secularists were committed in their efforts to secularize all of America, including the very institutions to which religionists had retreated. So, in the effort to defend their fortresses, masses of conservative Christians mobilized in response to the IRS controversy in ways not seen in half a century. In Viguerie's words, the controversy thus "kicked the sleeping dog. It galvanized the religious right. It was the spark that ignited the religious right's involvement in real politics."<sup>56</sup> Thus, it was partly out of self-defense that religious conservatives entered politics.

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<sup>55</sup> Quoted in Crespino, "Civil Rights and the Religious Right," 91.

<sup>56</sup> Quoted in Crespino, "Civil Rights and the Religious Right," 91.

But this entrée into politics was also out of fear of what else these secular humanists might do if they were allowed to retain control of the apparatuses of government. Such fears were based upon what religious conservatives saw as the general trend toward cultural permissiveness in the 1960s and 1970s—the fourth major factor that led them into politics.

### *The Permissive Culture*

Religious conservatives were no doubt correct in noting that American culture had become more liberal in the 1960s and 1970s. While factors such as general changes in mores can often be difficult to pinpoint, there are several prominent issues and movements in 1960s and 1970s America that help us to identify this drift. Primarily, I am concerned with abortion, homosexuality, and women's liberation—all of which, religious conservatives believed, involved major changes to traditional morality that were being forced on society. Early response to these issues was often small or isolated, and it was not until they were all brought together under one banner in 1979-1980 that they functioned to bring religious conservatives together into one political movement.

The aggregate statistics related to changes in some of American society's traditional practices during the 1970s are staggering. The ratio of legally induced abortions, for example, increased from 196 per thousand live births in 1973—the year *Roe v. Wade* was handed down—to 358 per thousand in 1979.<sup>57</sup> Furthermore, during the 1970s alone, families headed by unwed mothers rose 356 percent. By the end of the decade, this meant that 21 percent of families with children under eighteen were headed

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<sup>57</sup> See “Abortion Surveillance—United States, 1999,” Report by the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention. Available at <http://www.cdc.gov/mmwr/preview/mmwrhtml/ss5109a1.htm>.

by single parents. In 1979, 17 percent of children, including 55 percent of African American children, were born out of wedlock. Violent crime rose to an all-time high by decade's end. And recreational drugs and pornography were available to anyone who could pay for them.<sup>58</sup> The statistics, of course, tell only part of the story. The traditional moral boundaries were being tested every day by television producers. Feminists and homosexuals pushed an agenda for equality and acceptance. And at the root of each of these, to many religious conservatives, was a collapse in the moral foundations of American society, signaling to them nothing less than society's imminent demise.

The most prominent signal for many religious conservatives was abortion. In 1970, Norma McCorvey ("Jane Roe") had brought suit in a U.S. district court in Texas to contest the state law preventing her from obtaining an abortion. Claiming she had been raped, McCorvey wished to terminate her pregnancy but was forbidden from doing so under state law. The district court ruled in McCorvey's favor on the merits but refused to issue an injunction, so McCorvey appealed to the U.S. Court of Appeals, and then to the U.S. Supreme Court. On January 22, 1973, the Court in the case of *Roe v. Wade* issued a resounding 7-2 rebuke of the Texas law, and any such state abortion law, with a far-reaching and technical opinion—one that has drawn the ire of both liberal and conservative constitutional scholars ever since because, as John Hart Ely has noted, it "is not constitutional law and gives almost no sense of an obligation to try to be."<sup>59</sup>

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<sup>58</sup> See A. James Reichley, *Religion in American Public Life* (Washington D.C.: The Brookings Institution, 1985), 317.

<sup>59</sup> John Hart Ely, "The Wages of Crying Wolf: A Comment on *Roe v. Wade*," *Yale Law Journal* 82(April 1973): 920.

While Ely's characterization is perhaps a little exaggerated, there is truth to it insofar as Justice Blackmun's *Roe* opinion relied as heavily on medical principles as it did on constitutional ones, and even the constitutional principles upon which it did rely are themselves controversial. That is, Blackmun considered the right to an abortion, which he limited in absolute terms only to the first trimester of the pregnancy, to be in congruence with a constitutional right to privacy, though nowhere in the Constitution is such a right enumerated. The right to privacy had emerged just eight years before in the case of *Griswold v. Connecticut*,<sup>60</sup> which found unconstitutional a series of Connecticut statutes forbidding both the use of contraceptives as well as any professional advice to use them. In *Griswold*, the Court had said that the right to privacy, though never explicitly mentioned, existed in several provisions of the Bill of Rights, in the Fourteenth Amendment, as well as in the "penumbra" of the Bill of Rights. This reading was then adapted by the *Roe* Court, which extended the right beyond the use of contraceptives to the right of a woman to terminate her pregnancy. And because privacy was considered to be a fundamental right, any law infringing upon that right was subject to strict scrutiny. Texas, the Court said, did not have a compelling interest in Ms. McCorvey's private reproductive decisions, and so abortion, as outlined by Blackmun's elaborate trimester system, was deemed to be a constitutionally protected act.

Leading up to the *Roe* decision, states had differed drastically in their abortion laws, and abortion was certainly a much-discussed issue. Yet nothing galvanized opponents of abortion rights like the Court's decision to make these rights constitutionally protected in all states in the union. A number of evangelicals opposed

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<sup>60</sup> 381 U.S. 479 (1965).

the decision, as did Roman Catholics, who had long been vocal in their opposition per Church teaching. Although these two groups had a decade prior been in agreement over the Court's school prayer and Bible reading decisions, *Roe* brought them together as allies far more than any other single cause, a significant development testifying to the power of the *Roe* decision.

Evangelicals, as they do with most all things, turned to the Bible as the authoritative source on this issue. The only problem with this, notes Robert Booth Fowler, was that

Evangelical interpreters, who had their hearts in the right place, just could not and did not find an overwhelming case against abortion in the Bible. They could and did argue that abortion was against the Christian tradition, assuming that abortion was murder. But there was precious little specific discussion of abortion, no matter how remote or small in the scriptures.<sup>61</sup>

Nevertheless, evangelical interpreters used what they could and were resolute in their opposition to the Court's decision. As Harold Lindsell, editor of *Christianity Today*, phrased it, with the *Roe* decision the Court "[stood] on the side of paganism against Christianity" when it stood on the side of abortion rights.<sup>62</sup> *Christianity Today* devoted frequent articles and editorials to the subject of abortion following the *Roe* decision, and while the content often varied in these pieces, the message was usually the same: the government must act to put a stop to all abortions.<sup>63</sup> This is significant, because while during these early years evangelicals did not stage the sorts of mass rallies to encourage political action that they would later become known for, they did make an important step

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<sup>61</sup> Robert Booth Fowler, *A New Engagement: Evangelical Political Thought, 1966-1976* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1982), 196.

<sup>62</sup> Harold Lindsell, "Editorial: A License to Live," *Christianity Today*, July 26, 1974, 32-33.

<sup>63</sup> Booth Fowler, *A New Engagement*, 196.

in that direction by pointing the finger at the government and by identifying it alone as the necessary locus for change.

The issue of homosexuality presents a similar story inasmuch as there was general agreement over the issue among religious conservatives, but the responses were mostly isolated, and unlike abortion, there was no single triggering event like *Roe v. Wade*. To the extent that one can find single events, the 1969 “Stonewall riots” in New York or *Time* magazine’s 1975 cover story titled “Gays on the March,” might suffice, since both announced the arrival of homosexuality as a mainstream movement, the latter chronicling a “spread of unabashed homosexuality.”<sup>64</sup> Yet, unlike a landmark court case, where laws are involved, these events merely drew attention to a social movement already in place, one without a central nucleus to rally around or to rally against. Response was thus focused more on the grassroots level.

While nationwide crusades against homosexuality had yet to emerge in the middle 1970s, the opinion of religious conservatives on the issue was mostly uniform. The Bible, after all, offers instructions on homosexuality arguably much clearer than those on abortion.<sup>65</sup> In discussing homosexuality, then, evangelicals usually “analyzed the Bible less even as they cited it often in their arguments. Its ready ban on homosexuality made it a handy weapon among people who took it seriously as the word of God.”<sup>66</sup> And so

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<sup>64</sup> See “Gays on the March,” *Time*, September 8, 1975, 33-43.

<sup>65</sup> I do not say this to assert that these instructions are indisputable or in fact crystal clear. Rather, I am simply saying that most religious conservatives see these instructions in such a way. For a fuller discussion on biblical interpretation and homosexuality, see Dan Otto Via and Robert A.J. Gagnon, *Homosexuality and the Bible: Two Views* (Minneapolis: Augsburg Fortress, 2003).

<sup>66</sup> Robert Booth Fowler, *A New Engagement*, 198.

with “the sword” in hand, several Christian conservatives acted definitively when opportunities to wield it arose.

The most prominent controversy occurred in Miami, where the “spread of unabashed homosexuality” had made its way onto the local agenda with the Dade County Commission’s passage of a measure that would ban discrimination against homosexuals in employment, housing, and public services. Headed by the famous singer Anita Bryant, who vehemently opposed the measure, the group Save Our Children formed to rally support for its repeal. Bryant claimed that the ordinance had infringed upon her right to raise her family according to traditional morals, since homosexuals who refused to stay in the closet were “asking to be blessed in their abnormal lifestyle” through a county ordinance that “discriminates against my children’s rights to grow up in a healthy, decent community.”<sup>67</sup> Bryant’s effort in Miami drew the attention of many religious conservatives nationwide, partly because it succeeded. But its success in overturning the Dade County ordinance also brought about organized protests in cities across America by homosexuals who were outraged by such overt discrimination, thus strengthening their cause. As their mobilization grew to become a national spectacle, religious conservative activists, of whom there were still comparatively few in the mid-1970s, were increasingly able to lump homosexuality into the narrative of the nation’s moral decay. So, when they did organize in 1979, homosexuality was one of the prominent issues they cited. Falwell, for instance, condemned the gay themes on television, called homosexuality an “outright

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<sup>67</sup> Quoted in Matthew D. Lassiter, “Inventing Family Values,” in *Rightward Bound*, eds. Schulman and Zelizer, 24.

assault on the family,” and endorsed Bryant’s jab that “homosexuals cannot reproduce themselves, so they must recruit.”<sup>68</sup>

Finally, the women’s liberation movements of the 1970s (which had been around since at least the 1950s) provided religious conservatives with another issue around which to organize in criticizing the country’s moral drift. To be sure, there was much greater disagreement on women’s issues than on other hot-button issues in evangelical and Roman Catholic circles, but it is clear that those who took the traditionalist or conservative stance often used women’s issues as a galvanizing agent when they rallied together against society’s declining morals.

In the early 1970s, politicians of all stripes seemed to be jumping, even if not vocally, on to the women’s rights bandwagon. The Equal Rights Amendment (ERA) passed overwhelmingly in both houses of Congress (354 to 23 in the House and 84 to 8 in the Senate) in 1971, drawing the support of legislators ranging from Ted Kennedy to Strom Thurmond. By constitutional mandate the ERA went to the states for ratification, and in March 1973, only eight more states were needed to ratify when a major groundswell of opposition grew, mainly from groups of conservative women concerned over the effects of both this amendment and the broader feminist movement on the traditional family. Chief among these protestors was Phyllis Schlafly, a devout Roman Catholic and long-time conservative activist and Goldwater supporter who founded the Eagle Forum as a hub for many of the loosely confederated ERA opposition groups. Her efforts gained wide support and succeeded in quelling the ERA’s momentum, but the same could not be said for the broader pro-women’s movement she opposed, which

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<sup>68</sup> Jerry Falwell, *Listen, America!* (Garden City, NY: Doubleday, 1980), 185.

continued to grow. Proof of this was congressional sponsorship in 1977 of the “International Women’s Year” (IWY), a series of state and national conferences aimed at soliciting women’s recommendations for federal government action on their behalf. As Marjorie J. Spruill notes, these IWY conferences were “watershed events” in American history, mainly because they attracted and galvanized—for sustained political conflict—both of the opposing sides of the women’s movement.<sup>69</sup> The National Women’s Conference, the culminating event of IWY, drew 20,000 attendees to Houston, which was no doubt significant. But it also, in an unintended turn of events, attracted as many as 20,000 more to Houston for an opposition rally across town. At their conference, the IWY women adopted planks on issues such as equal access to jobs and credit, aid for elderly and displaced women and “displaced homemakers,” an end to sex-role stereotyping in schools and the media, and of course a resounding call to ratify the ERA. The opposition rally voiced criticism of these issues, but perhaps more importantly it succeeded in expanding the interests of many ERA opponents beyond just the ERA, mobilizing them against broader feminist efforts and corralling them into a nascent “Pro-Family” movement.<sup>70</sup>

These issues surrounding the ERA and the IWY, while certainly not constituting the full extent of the women’s movement and its opposition, provide us with a more than sufficient backdrop for noting the fact that women’s issues were at once prominent on the national stage in the 1970s and a galvanizing issue for many religious conservatives who opposed the women’s movement as a further embodiment of America’s moral decay.

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<sup>69</sup> Marjorie J. Spruill, “Gender and America’s Right Turn,” in *Rightward Bound*, eds. Schulman and Zelizer, 71-72.

<sup>70</sup> Spruill, “Gender and America’s Right Turn,” 75-77.

Schlafly, who would maintain ties to the NCR throughout the 1980s, was but one conservative voice in opposition. Others, such as Billy Graham, disapproved of women's liberation, and his wife Ruth noted that a wife's calling was, above all else, "to create an atmosphere of love, appreciation, and encouragement for her husband."<sup>71</sup> Harold Lindsell, who was less antagonistic than many others, was still not terribly fond of the women's movement because in his view many of its partisans "have sold out to license" and selfishness, and there were few Christians among their ranks—not surprisingly in his view.<sup>72</sup> Elizabeth Elliot, the devout missionary who was revered in evangelical circles, added with the 1976 publication of *Let Me Be a Woman* that "the woman was created from and for the man;" "motherhood is the essence of womanhood;" and "it is in the nature of the woman to submit"—hardly ringing endorsements of the women's liberation movement.<sup>73</sup> What is clear from just these few opinions, and even more so from the strong efforts to mobilize against both the ERA and the IWY, is that religious conservatives saw the women's movement as a key indicator of society's moral downfall.

As Booth Fowler notes, evangelical interest in these social and "family" issues was enormous, but the curious fact remains that at least in the early and middle 1970s, evangelicals and other religious conservatives did not see their interest and involvement in these questions as the expression of substantial social commitment. Instead, they usually claimed that their concern was to defend the private family and Christian norms against the drifting secular world—a distinction that is worth noting because of how

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<sup>71</sup> See "Mrs. Billy Graham: Lunching with 11,000," *Christianity Today*, October 24, 1969, 45.

<sup>72</sup> Booth Fowler, *A New Engagement*, 205.

<sup>73</sup> Elizabeth Elliot, *Let Me Be a Woman* (Carol Stream, IL: Tyndale House Publishers, Inc., 1977).

quickly this sentiment would develop into a sustained political commitment.<sup>74</sup> The change occurred when these mostly isolated movements were put together under one umbrella alongside the aforementioned church-state issues and were attributed to a common enemy—the secular humanists. Together, the legalization of abortion, the growing acceptance of homosexuality, the “selfish” efforts of women to gain social equality, and the hostile changes in church-state relations offered substantial evidence that America was in a moral crisis, and the government was a co-conspirator. The perpetrators of social ills and declining morals, as well as those in government harboring hostility toward religion, were one in the same. And so, with evangelicals having risen in size and stature by the 1970s, they were now set, with whatever conservative allies would come on board, to become the nation’s conscience. As Robert C. Liebman has worded it, it had become “their God-given duty to make their voices heard or to suffer in silence as America fell from greatness.”<sup>75</sup> To go about this required nothing less than an outright war of ideologies against the secular humanists, who

became a screen on which [religious conservatives] projected all that was hostile to [their] own beliefs. Secular humanists stood accused of deifying human reason and denying God’s word, of encouraging permissiveness through moral relativism, and of separating God from government and society. Through their alleged control of the federal bureaucracy, of public education, and of the media, secular humanists were held responsible for the nation’s moral decline.<sup>76</sup>

Against this backdrop, and with a political environment conducive to the formation of extra-party interest groups, it is no surprise that some group would organize for political action.

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<sup>74</sup> Booth Fowler, *A New Engagement*, 191.

<sup>75</sup> Liebman, “The Making of the New Christian Right,” 229.

<sup>76</sup> Liebman, “The Making of the New Christian Right,” 230.

That group would be the New Christian Right. But before examining its emergence in 1979-1980, it is important first that we examine the pivotal 1976 election and the Carter presidency, which also played an important role in the onset of a new religious politics in America.

## CHAPTER FOUR

### Raising the Rhetoric of Righteousness: The Pivotal 1976 Election

Appeals to personal religious piety entered the modern presidential campaign vernacular in 1976, when Jimmy Carter squared off against President Gerald Ford. Carter's deep religiosity and his status as the first presidential candidate to claim having been "born again" is well-known, but it is lesser known that he was not alone in appealing to religious values that year. Ford also appealed to his own personal piety in the efforts to persuade religious voters and to inspire confidence in his own moral fortitude, which was important in the first election following Watergate. Together, these two candidates cracked the door to the regular use of religious appeals in presidential campaign discourse—a door that would be flung wide four years later. They brought religious rhetoric into prominence, leaving it to Reagan, "The Great Communicator," to perfect it in 1980.

Reagan challenged for the Republican nomination in 1976 and was at times the Republican favorite up until August, when Ford finally eclipsed him in the delegate count at the Republican National Convention. But interestingly in light of his effective use of religious rhetoric four years later, we see limited use of such rhetoric during Reagan's 1976 bid. The most important thing he did in this regard was to help lead the charge on some social issues within the Republican Party as it drafted its 1976 platform. This would later pay dividends in helping to secure religious conservatives for the Republican cause, but beyond his late push on social issues, Reagan's 1976 campaign stuck closely to

conventional sorts of campaign issues and the themes he had long addressed—defense, economics, taxes, and the Panama Canal.

In the long view of history, the 1976 presidential election was in several respects nothing spectacular. The vote was heavily partisan, and turnout was low. It produced a one-term president who found himself in the unfortunate position of presiding over what Stephen Skowronek would call a “vulnerable regime,” which is to say that Carter was on par with such presidents as Herbert Hoover in practicing “disjunctive” politics, caught between the priorities of his own political coalition and the priorities of an emerging new political regime—a more conservative one that Reagan would usher in four years later.<sup>1</sup> The tendency is thus to overlook 1976 as an unimportant election, but that would be a mistake. It is important that we pause to examine the landmark development in presidential campaigning that occurred in 1976—purposeful and frequent use of religious discourse.

#### *How Ford versus Carter Came to Be*

The presidential election of 1976 was indeed unique on several fronts, namely the fact that a relative unknown emerged to become the first president from the Deep South since the Civil War, rising to the post by defeating an incumbent president who had himself battled fiercely to avoid becoming the first sitting president since Chester Arthur to lose his party’s nomination for the nation’s highest office. Several important factors contributed to these and other anomalies, including the wreckage of the Watergate scandal, the resulting federal and state legislation related to campaign rules, as well as changes in the parties’ rules and organization, which stemmed from efforts to move the

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<sup>1</sup> Skowronek, *The Politics Presidents Make*, especially 361-406.

seat of power in their nomination processes from the proverbial smoke-filled rooms to the people themselves.

The most obvious result of the Watergate scandal was the fact that Gerald Ford had become president and had done so without receiving a single vote for that office. He had ascended to the vice presidency upon Senate confirmation when Nixon's original number two, Spiro Agnew, had resigned after tax corruption charges, unrelated to Watergate, drove him from office. Then, when the Nixon "smoking gun" tapes were handed over to the special prosecutor in the turning point of the Watergate scandal, leaving Nixon no option but to resign or be impeached, Ford became the first president in American history to enter that office with no claim of popular support.

The office itself had no doubt been corroded in the years before Ford entered it, starting with the secrecy and controversy of the Vietnam War, and followed quickly by its shrinking moral authority with Nixon's and Agnew's actions. But as many argued, Ford compounded that corrosion even further when he exercised the president's pardoning power, issuing his predecessor a full pardon for any acts connected to the Watergate scandal. This proved troublesome for Ford over time. In light of the many struggles Nixon encountered with the Democratic congressional majority, it is no surprise that many of these same Democrats (as well as some Republicans, who resented the ill effects Watergate was having on the Party) harbored only contempt for Ford upon his arrival in the White House. In the wake of these challenges, then, Ford was in a precarious political position in serving out Nixon's second term, especially when one takes into account the astute observation of Richard E. Neustadt that "Presidential *power*

is the power to persuade.”<sup>2</sup> Thus, with such highly questioned moral judgment following the Nixon pardon, and with his attempt to govern from such an enervated political position in Nixon’s shadow, Ford could not assume that the power of incumbency would assure his nomination to the Republican ticket in 1976. Combine that with the fact that Ronald Reagan’s star had risen tremendously both within the Republican Party and around the country via his radio broadcasts and newspaper columns, and it becomes clear that the Republicans were destined for a long nomination fight. Reagan, having received support from movement conservatives in 1968 and 1972 and having long viewed himself as the party’s legitimate successor to Nixon, chose to fight to the end.

In addition to this political fallout for Ford, Watergate had also left a legal legacy that would come strongly to bear on the 1976 election. Campaign finance reform had passed in 1974, and even after it was modified slightly by the Court’s *Buckley* decision in early 1976, it was clear that the 1976 election would not be politics as usual. Previously, campaign finances were controlled by parties and individual candidates, but as Lord Acton had long ago indicated and the Watergate controversy made clear, power corrupts. Parties and candidates had previously been allowed to raise whatever money, in whatever amounts, and from whomever they so desired. And once it was secured, they could spend whatever was in the coffers, if not more. In brief, the new laws aimed at ending abuses of power by putting caps on individual contributions at \$1,000 to prevent *quid pro quo* for large donors, while groups such as PACs were limited to \$5,000 contributions. The laws also provided federal funding for presidential candidates, accessible to any candidate who would accept certain spending limits and could raise an initial sum of at

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<sup>2</sup> Richard E. Neustadt, *Presidential Power: The Politics of Leadership from FDR to Carter* (New York: Macmillan Publishing Company, 1986), 10.

least \$5,000 in twenty states—a total of just \$100,000. The primary effect of these changes was a relative ease of access to competition, since federal dollars were now available to anyone who could meet this lower threshold.<sup>3</sup> And now that private contributions had been capped, candidates who had previously been financed by the wealthy were no longer able simply to outspend and thus overwhelm the competition. All were forced to search far and wide for support. Plus, the process had been democratized via the rapid onset of presidential primaries in most states, a trend that developed quickly between 1968 and 1976, and now that campaign funds were going to candidates instead of parties and were so heavily regulated, the parties found themselves in a weakened position with regard to selecting their nominees.

Important intra-party changes also occurred, more for the Democrats than for the Republicans. Basking in consecutive presidential election victories, Republicans more closely heeded the axiom that “if it ain’t broke, don’t fix it.” Nevertheless, there were some changes going on within the party as its power base was shifting from the old “Eastern Establishment” to the Republicans of the “Sunbelt” spanning the southern half of the United States from coast to coast. The major effect of this was a shift away from the candidates of the Eastern Establishment toward candidates who could appeal to the Sunbelt.

The Democrats, scrambling for reform after the 1968 convention uproar and the 1972 trouncing of McGovern by Nixon, instituted a series of sweeping reforms to their nomination process. One of these was the manner in which delegates were selected, with new party rules that required all aspiring delegates to declare their candidate preference,

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<sup>3</sup> It should be pointed out that these were the rules for the nomination stage, not the election stage.

meaning delegates were pledged in advance, thus lessening the opportunities for convention confrontations or backroom bargains. Perhaps more important was a provision establishing proportional representation from each state—much like many European parliamentary elections—such that the convention delegates would closely represent the distribution of candidate preferences among the electorate. In other words, Democratic primaries and caucuses were no longer “winner-take-all,” and any candidate with a decent showing in a state would emerge from that state with several pledged delegates to the national convention. The effects of this were obvious: a candidate could benefit even if she lost a state, and the traditional power-wielding delegate blocs from large states could no longer assume absolute control of the convention. Democrats, thus, were altering their character from the old (but diverse) New Deal coalition to a more coherent organization with a stronger national purpose—a portent of the continuing nationalization of American politics.<sup>4</sup>

Together, each of these reforms limited the power of state and local party organizations in the selection of convention delegates—and thus presidential nominees—and therefore increased the opportunities of outsider candidates, media “darlings,” and personable politicians who could connect with the wider assortment of people they were now being forced to come into contact with in pursuit of their party’s nomination. The new name of the game was organization and personal appeal, especially for the Democrats, whose new nomination process required a broad strategy.

About a dozen serious presidential candidates emerged from the Democratic Party ranks leading up to 1976. But as Gerald M. Pomper has argued, with the exception of

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<sup>4</sup> See Gerald M. Pomper, “The Nominating Contests and Conventions,” in *The Election of 1976*, Marlene M. Pomper, ed. (New York: David McKay Company, 1977), 7.

Jimmy Carter, “they were [all] fighting previous wars, not preparing for the current struggle.”<sup>5</sup> In other words, none of them took into account the new rules of the game—the new finance laws, the onset of primaries and proportional representation, and so forth. Many failed to acknowledge the need to enter all of the primaries, missing out on proportional (and pledged) delegates as a result; other “establishment” candidates misread America’s post-Watergate mood, which was discontent with nearly all institutions of government, not just the presidency or the Republican Party.

Jimmy Carter avoided most of these errors in his pursuit of the Democratic nomination. Guided by a political wunderkind from his governor’s staff, Hamilton Jordan, Carter entered the competition early with a strategy that rested on four basic assumption that, if proved correct, might win him the nomination. These assumptions can be summarized as follows:

1. That the nomination would be won in the tortuous parade of over thirty primary elections in the early-round caucus-convention states, not in the smoke-filled backrooms at the Democratic convention.
2. That fellow southerner, Governor George Wallace, despite his spectacular primary campaign in 1972 before he was gunned down by a would-be assassin, could be knocked out of the race in 1976 and his influence as a national political figure reduced to a token level.
3. That Carter’s own Southern origins and his images as an unknown newcomer without ties to the Washington establishment could be turned into formidable assets, not crippling liabilities.
4. That most voters would be more favorabl[y] disposed toward a candidate stressing personal qualities—trust and integrity—than toward a candidate emphasizing his ideological stand on the issues.<sup>6</sup>

To be sure, it was a long shot. Carter announced his candidacy in December 1974—apparently attempting to ride the wave of the Democratic congressional sweep that year,

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<sup>5</sup> Pomper, “The Nominating Contests and Conventions,” 8.

<sup>6</sup> Quoted in Leslie Wheeler, *Jimmy Who? An Examination of Presidential Candidate Jimmy Carter: The Man, His Career, His Stands on the Issues* (Woodbury, NY: Barron’s, 1976), ix.

which he had helped to engineer as the party's Congressional Campaign Committee chair—but as late as October 1975, just one year before he was to assume the title “President-elect,” Gallup found that Carter was the presidential choice of only 1% of Democratic voters.<sup>7</sup>

Carter had used his post as the party's Congressional Campaign Committee chair to travel the country, gaining Democratic allies and establishing a personal network in every state and nearly every congressional district. Given his relative national anonymity, though, he rested his presidential strategy on the notion that any early success in the primaries would be magnified by national media because it was such a surprise. And these political instincts—or better yet, Hamilton Jordan's instincts—proved right when Carter's intensive organization in Iowa yielded several first-place finishes in local caucuses there. His painstaking personal campaigning efforts and his natural charisma, so essential to wooing New Hampshire's prideful and informed voters, then combined to bring a first-place finish in that state's first-in-the-nation primary. The effects of these victories were as expected. National media exaggerated the meaning of a mere 23,000 New Hampshire votes and labeled the once-“dark horse” Carter the new “front runner.” Cover photos and countless interviews soon followed, introducing Carter to the country and bearing such titles as “Jimmy Who?”.

As his campaign continued to gain steam throughout the spring and summer, Carter in many respects remained “fuzzy” on the issues—or at least that is how the media portrayed him. He detailed his policy positions on most important issues—as many as sixty of them spanning the gamut of national and international affairs—yet Carter was

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<sup>7</sup> See Wheeler, *Jimmy Who?*, ix.

continually bombarded by the charge that he was vague or even duplicitous, taking one stand with some audiences but another when it was politically expedient. Moreover, as a relative newcomer with a scant national record, Carter faced the difficult task of overcoming the national media's impressions of him. As Jordan had detailed to him in one internal campaign memo:

Just as you lack control over the image that is created (Jimmy Carter is “fuzzy” on the issues), you have even greater difficulty changing those initial impressions in specific ways or refining them. . . . [But] I do not believe that your image is fully developed or has much depth. I believe that there is still time for wrong impressions to be corrected and certain strengths to be magnified. . . . It is important that we carefully consider the image you project during the Summer [1976] months.<sup>8</sup>

To a certain extent, the media's “fuzzy” characterization was true. Carter may not have entirely evaded issues, but he certainly did not emphasize them, stressing instead his persona (what Jordan had called his “image”) as someone who was ethical, honest, trustworthy, competent, and yes, “born again”—characteristics alien to the Washington establishment, or so the electorate believed, in the wake of Watergate. Carter was all things to all people, something that exuded from even the first paragraph of his candidacy announcement: “We Americans are a great and diverse people. . . . I am a farmer, an engineer, a businessman, a planner, a scientist, a governor and a Christian.”<sup>9</sup> As Pomper observed, Carter correctly sensed that in the turbulence of social upheavals, corruption, and alienation, “the voters were seeking a means to revive their underlying trust and affection for the American government. The electorate wanted to express—in the best

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<sup>8</sup> Quoted in Martin Schramm, *Running for President 1976: The Carter Campaign* (New York: Stein and Day, 1977), 239-240.

<sup>9</sup> Jimmy Carter, “Formal Announcement,” quoted in *The Presidential Campaign 1976, Volume One, Part One: Jimmy Carter*, Compiled under the direction of the Committee on House Administration, U.S. House of Representatives (Washington, D.C.: United States Government Printing Office, 1978), 3.

sense of the word—its patriotism, its basic love of country.”<sup>10</sup> In Carter, they found someone who confidently portrayed that he could deliver such things. Common words used on the stump included “integrity,” “dedication,” “courage,” “compassion,” “trust,” “Christian,” “highest ideals,” “trustworthy,” “honesty,” “openness,” “fairness,” “pure,” “personal sacrifice,” “prayer,” “purpose,” “conviction,” and so on. In one repeated and characteristic statement Carter proclaimed: “With the shame of Watergate still with us and our 200<sup>th</sup> birthday just ahead, it is time for us to reaffirm and to strengthen our ethical and spiritual and political beliefs.”<sup>11</sup>

Armed with a shrewd political strategy for all of the primary states and an even shrewder rhetorical strategy to emphasize personal qualities over issues, Carter was able to win wide support within the Democratic Party, which was still home to diverse constituencies. Remaining somewhat centrist—if not “fuzzy”—when he did broach the issues, Carter’s political strategy successfully leaned on his ability to successively eliminate each of the other candidates who either relied on tactics ill-suited for the new rules or who appealed to the more extreme factions of the party. He eliminated the more liberal Birch Bayh and Sargent Shriver following the Massachusetts primary. He triumphed over fellow-Southerner and the more conservative George Wallace by taking Florida and North Carolina, victories that pivotally secured the South as a base for Carter. He knocked out Scoop Jackson in Pennsylvania and bested Hubert Humphrey when Humphrey declined to enter the New Jersey primary. He then faced only scattered opposition from Morris Udall and late-comers Frank Church and Edmund Brown, and

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<sup>10</sup> Pomper, “The Nominating Contests and Conventions,” 11.

<sup>11</sup> Jimmy Carter, “Formal Announcement,” 4.

although Carter did not *win* every state, he *entered* every state and amassed considerable numbers of delegates under the party's new proportional pledged delegate rules. By the time all of the primaries wrapped up, Carter had guaranteed the nomination, thus assuring that there would not be a convention fight. He gained the endorsement of his former rivals as well as top Democrats from around the country in the month between the final primaries and the convention, the effect of which was to produce a unified front against a maligned and now fractured Republican Party.<sup>12</sup>

For their part, the Republicans started with a considerable handicap in Watergate and the daunting reality that in 1976 only one-fifth of voters self-identified as Republicans. This was compounded by the fact that Reagan was determined to challenge the incumbent Ford for the nomination and would do so all the way to the convention. This was the surface plot to an underlying struggle within the party in which conservatives had recently made considerable strides to gain hegemony over the moderates and liberals. By 1976, conservative Republicans outnumbered liberals two to one, which meant that on the issues, Republicans were en masse far more unified than Democrats. But the same could not be said of their unity in selecting a candidate.

Reagan found himself at a relative advantage under the new campaign finance rubric, since the fundraising advantages of an incumbent were mitigated by caps on donations. He was also on equal footing with Ford since the federal government was now subsidizing any viable campaign, and more to the point, he was able to use his name recognition and the growing conservative grassroots organizations to generate contributors. Further clouding the picture, Reagan held no political office while Ford

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<sup>12</sup> What is remarkable here is that Carter took a system that seemed to encourage the nomination of more ideological candidates—i.e. McGovern—and used it to win as a moderate.

found himself “burdened” by his role as commander in chief, meaning Reagan held a considerable campaigning advantage in the new milieu that required a vast organization and personal appearances in nearly all fifty states, which for Republicans were still mostly winner-take-all contests. This proved particularly advantageous to Reagan, who had already been popular among the Sunbelt Republicans who were now the growing base of the Party. And finally, the fact remained that the growing conservative movement had only grown stronger and scrappier following its several near-misses in the 1960s, so not only was Ford disadvantaged by not being “one of them,” he also faced the unenviable task of squaring off against the conservatives’ most prominent spokesman. Couple that with one last detail—that the party Ford led had never played any role in selecting him to be either vice president or president—and one can begin to see why the Republicans were so fractured over their nominee in 1976.

While in truth the two candidates were not terribly far apart on many policy issues, Reagan had long been openly ideological and was thus able to ride the party’s conservative tide more easily than Ford, who by virtue of his office was the president of all people, not just Republicans, and was forced constantly into compromise given the strength of the Democrats in Congress and his attenuated political position following Watergate and the Nixon pardon. Reagan was thus able to use forcefulness in advocating conservative economic policies or, more potently, a posture for dealing with Communism, since his role, unlike Ford’s, was chiefly political not diplomatic. Reagan could appeal directly to the ideological impulses of conservatives, who were now the party’s chief activists, and this was particularly advantageous since it was activists who were consistently more likely to show up at the polls for primaries and caucuses.

Ford mounted a strong fight early, taking the first five primary states, but Reagan became a viable contender when he unexpectedly took North Carolina. The scene then shifted to the Sunbelt, where Reagan had long found support and where in some states such as Texas, which was dominated by “Yellow Dog” Democrats, rules permitted Democrats and Independents to vote in Republican primaries. So, by the middle of May, when half of the delegates had been chosen for the convention, Reagan had become the front-runner. Ford, of course, would recover some of the momentum in northern states such as his native Michigan, but even in the final weeks of primaries and caucuses, it appeared as if the Republican nomination would be a draw. It would be up to the convention to decide who the Republican nominee would be.

Ultimately, Ford won by a narrow margin, partly because Reagan had entered the convention promising to run alongside liberal Pennsylvania Senator Richard Schweiker, while Ford remained coy about his pick for vice president. Schweiker drew the ire of the party’s conservative purists, so much so that several prominent conservatives such as Jesse Helms and Strom Thurmond led efforts to remove him from a would-be Reagan ticket. Reagan remained stalwart, however, telling Schweiker, “Dick, we came to Kansas City together and we’re going to leave together.”<sup>13</sup> This, in the view of some, helped swing the nomination toward Ford.

In any case, there were two major effects of the convention fight, which left a battered party with a battered nominee. First, the conservatives had been effective in crafting a conservative party platform. Traditional moral positions made their way into the platform, with antiabortion measures, for instance, included for the first time. The

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<sup>13</sup> Quoted in Craig Shirley, *Reagan’s Revolution: The Untold Story of the Campaign that Started it All* (Nashville: Nelson Current, 2005), 326.

foreign policy position was also altered significantly after a particularly contentious fight and much criticism of the Ford-Kissinger posture toward the Soviet Union. Rather than risk losing the nomination, many of Ford's supporters simply acceded to these changes, even though it meant Ford would be running on a platform that was partly critical of his own performance. Second, this bitter fight had left Ford well behind in the polls for the general election, particularly since the Democrats had for weeks known that Carter was their nominee, and their especially harmonious convention had given Carter a substantial bump in the polls. As Michael Duval, Jerry Jones, Foster Chanock, Robert Teeter, and Dick Cheney wrote to Ford in a memo:

You face a unique challenge. No President has overcome the obstacles to election which you will [face] following our Convention. . . . For example, President Truman trailed Dewey in August 1948 by 11 points, whereas we expect to be trailing Carter by about 20 points. . . . Because you must come from behind, and are subject to many constraints, no strategy can be developed which allows for any substantial error.<sup>14</sup>

*Ford versus Carter: A Brief Campaign Overview*

In light of this major deficit coming out of the convention—Gallup and Harris both gave Carter a two-to-one margin over Ford—Ford engineered a remarkable comeback to make 1976 a much closer election than many expected. But as Pomper noted in retrospect, the months of September and October following the conventions had no determining influence on the November election. Ford, helped in part by Carter gaffes, made considerable strides to make it a close election, but after examining the numbers, Pomper concluded that

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<sup>14</sup> Quoted in Schramm, *Running for President 1976*, 253.

The outcome was decided by those factors that existed and were in the minds of the electors before the first burst of oratory. These crucial factors were that Jimmy Carter was Democrat, that Gerald Ford was President, and that the economy was in a period of uncertainty. These dimensions of the electoral decision never changed. Carter was aided by his party label, Ford by his incumbency. The balance between these influences would be tipped by the economy.<sup>15</sup>

Ford cut into Carter's lead immediately following the Republican convention, and that trend continued throughout the month of September. During that time, the Carter campaign continued its attempts to stave off the criticism that Carter was "fuzzy" on the issues, and in addition to this, there were several campaign blunders that worked to Ford's advantage. The most prominent of these, which I will return to shortly, was an interview Carter did with *Playboy* magazine in which his attempts to allay the fears of those on his left, who might fear his deep religiosity, failed on two fronts. First, Carter angered some religious voters who found *Playboy* to be offensive and the wrong forum for a politician—especially a Christian politician—to voice his views. Second, and equally as important, Carter failed in his efforts to reach out to those on his left because of a backhanded, puritanical condemnation of the lifestyles of many who would be reading *Playboy*. He also raised their suspicion with some of his religious commentary. The whole episode was a debacle. Carter later said, "If I should ever decide in the future to discuss my deep Christian beliefs and condemnation of sinfulness I'll use another forum besides *Playboy*."<sup>16</sup> Although the final polls indicated that few votes were cast in

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<sup>15</sup> Gerald M. Pomper, "The Presidential Election," in Pomper, ed., *The Election of 1976*, 65.

<sup>16</sup> Jimmy Carter, quoted in The Third Presidential Debate, October 22, 1976, transcript available from <http://www.debates.org/pages/trans76c.html>.

direct response to the *Playboy* interview, the entire controversy helped to contribute to an already-growing sentiment of doubt about Carter as a presidential candidate.<sup>17</sup>

Carter's slide stabilized in the final weeks. Although most commentators considered the candidates' first debate as having been won by Ford, Carter by most accounts took the second debate because of his ability to keep up with Ford on international affairs, which was an area in which Ford was presumed to have more expertise in light of his experience as president. Ford, however, had a major misstep in speaking about Poland, while Carter outperformed expectations, and as a result, the debate calmed many voters' uncertainty about Carter's knowledge and ability, while Ford's gaffe slowed his momentum. Additionally, the last weeks of the campaign saw continued concerns among the electorate about high unemployment and other economic problems, and as tends to happen in tough economic times, this advantaged the Democrats, especially since the hard economic times came at the end of back-to-back Republican administrations.

In the final analysis, it was partisanship that ruled the day. Carter won four of every five registered Democrats, while Ford won nine out of every ten Republicans. This was especially important for Carter, since in 1976 there were twice as many Democrats as Republicans.<sup>18</sup> But to be sure, the vote was close, with Carter amassing 51.05% of the popular vote to Ford's 48.95% and gaining a 297-241 advantage in the Electoral College.

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<sup>17</sup> See Pomper, "The Presidential Election," 68.

<sup>18</sup> See Pomper, "The Presidential Election," 73.

*Religious Rhetoric in 1976: A Major Development*

Malcolm D. Macdougall, who was Ford's advertising chief in the campaign, recalls in his campaign memoir that the first time Dick Cheney, Ford's chief of staff, summoned him to the White House to talk strategy, Cheney could hardly contain his excitement over what was to become a new, key facet to the campaign: "Wait till you hear what [John Teeter, Ford's chief pollster, has] found out about the religious issue. . . . It's the goddamnedest thing you ever heard," said Cheney.<sup>19</sup> That "religious issue," Teeter would explain, was this:

People feel good about Carter. . . . We can't ever forget that. Of course we may surmise that he's a vindictive, vicious bastard. We know that the reporters who cover him every day will vote for Ford. We may fear that he's another Nixon—a cold, calculating son of a bitch without a non-political friend in the world. . . . But this is reality. *This* is the Carter we have to deal with. . . . Let me tell you something interesting. . . . Several years ago—long before anybody had ever heard of Jimmy Carter—I was at a research seminar with Pat Caddell [one of Carter's chief political strategists]. We were both speakers. He stood up and predicted that the next President of the United States would be a Baptist from Georgia. . . . That was before Carter was born again! . . . What he'd spotted, of course, was the religious thing. The strongest movement in America. He saw the political implications.<sup>20</sup>

After running through a litany of surprising statistics—39% of people had an actual experience with Jesus that had changed their lives; 14% of people had actually seen or touched Jesus Christ; 72% of people read the Bible regularly and found it to be their main source of comfort; 71% thought that their political leaders should pray to God before making decisions—Teeter noted that the Carter strategists planned to tap into this.

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<sup>19</sup> Malcolm D. Macdougall, *We Almost Made It* (New York: Crown Publishers, 1977), 24.

<sup>20</sup> Quoted in Macdougall, *We Almost Made It*, 45-46.

What they want to do, of course, is turn the religious movement into a political movement. . . . It could be the most powerful political force ever harnessed. . . . One of our own Republican state chairmen said he'd have trouble voting against Jimmy Carter. He'd been born again, too. . . . Let me give you an idea of just how strong this movement is. . . . They've got an underground communications network. . . . And Jimmy Carter is plugged right into it.<sup>21</sup>

Whether Carter's motives were purely Machiavellian (and it is doubtful, according to everyone close to Carter, that they were), is not as important as the fact that the Carter campaign saw this potential and utilized a rhetorical strategy that relied heavily on his appeals to religious values and to his own religious commitments. That he did this so early in his campaign forced Ford to adopt, at least in part, a similar strategy to gain the votes of this emerging new political movement of voters that the Ford camp believed should be Republicans. The result was that religion became a salient campaign issue in 1976, and religious rhetoric found its way into presidential campaign discourse in a prominent—and permanent—way. Before examining the uses of this rhetoric by Ford and Carter, though, it is worth taking a look at the efforts of Ronald Reagan.

### *Reagan's Religious Rhetoric*

Surprisingly in retrospect, Reagan was the anomaly of the three major contenders in 1976 in that he did *not* make concerted appeals to religious voters. Of course, based on what I have already shown about religious rhetoric in Reagan's career, it should come as no surprise that he did not prominently feature a religious message in his bid to unseat Ford. But this is not because Reagan was unreligious, as many believed. Interestingly, Reagan had actually undergone a deep religious transformation about ten years before, and his faith had become central to his life, though not very public. He attended an

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<sup>21</sup> Quoted in Macdougall, *We Almost Made It*, 46.

evangelical church and knew the pastor well, and he had become captivated by biblical eschatology, a topic he discussed often with close friends—and even with Billy Graham. Yet few knew much about Reagan’s faith because he kept it mostly under wraps. As *Christianity Today* noted with some regret in May 1976, “Reagan attends the Bel Air Presbyterian Church when he’s at his Los Angeles area home but talks very little in public about his faith.”<sup>22</sup> They reiterated that point a month later, as Carter and Ford continued their religious appeals, noting Reagan’s reluctance to make “a public issue of faith.”<sup>23</sup>

Part of this public reticence resulted, in my view, from the fact that Reagan had long been viewed by the Republican establishment, as well as liberal Democrats, as extremist—the inheritor of what they saw as the Goldwater mistake. As the *Chicago Daily News* (like many other liberal outlets) editorialized toward that end, “The trouble with Reagan, of course, is that his positions on the major issues are cunningly phrased nonsense—irrationally conceived and hair-raising in their potential mischief. . . . Here comes Barry Goldwater again, only more so, and at this stage another such debacle could sink the GOP so deep it might never recover.”<sup>24</sup> Given the fears this reputation produced and the need to gain broad national support, certain issue stands and certain qualities would need to be minimized or moderated, and Reagan’s religious background and beliefs were among these because they were, in fact, extreme in some regards. I will

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<sup>22</sup> Edward E. Plowman, “An Election Year To Remember,” *Christianity Today*, May 7, 1976, 37.

<sup>23</sup> Albert J. Menendez, “Will Evangelicals Swing the Election,” *Christianity Today*, June 18, 1976.

<sup>24</sup> “Taking Reagan Seriously,” *Chicago Daily News*, 21 November 1975. Steven F. Hayward also recounts a number of similar editorials written about Reagan. See Steven F. Hayward, *The Age of Reagan: The Fall of the Old Liberal Order, 1964-1980* (Roseville, CA: Prima Publishing, 2001), 453-454.

further detail the nature of these later, but for now, it is sufficient simply to make the point that emphasizing these religious beliefs was a risky strategy for Reagan. Running to the right of Ford on some issues—such as détente, taxes, the economy, social security, or the Panama Canal—was one thing, since there had long been conservative critiques on these issues, and the conservative movement had grown considerably around these and other core issues after several near-misses in the Republican Party. But religion was something else entirely, and in the primary stages of 1976, it was still brand new to the national political lexicon; Carter alone was blazing that trail during the early period. Religion had not been central to the growth of the conservative cause, moreover, and although change was just around the corner—as soon as February 6, 1977, when Reagan spoke to the ACU—the 1976 primaries were a little too early for an “extremist” to prominently introduce his possibly controversial religious beliefs.

It should be noted that on one occasion in 1976, Reagan did speak openly about his Christian faith and its role in his politics, but he did so in a situation where the stakes were relatively low. His close friend and religious confidant George Otis hosted a charismatic talk show with a limited audience on a Christian television network, and in a friendly and clearly favorable interview he asked Reagan about some of his religious beliefs. The audience was not terribly large, nor was the interview widely picked up by news sources, but Reagan was mostly forthcoming. With regard to the Bible, he noted “I have never had any doubt about it being of divine origin. . . . How can you write off the prophecies in the Old Testament that hundreds of years before the birth of Christ predicted every single facet of his life, his death, and that he was the Messiah?” He even quoted two passages at length. On prayer, he then said, “Yes, I do pray. . . . There have

been so many [answers to prayer] and some momentous ones. . . . Yes, I did seek God [before making the decision to become a candidate for President].” Regarding the American people, he opined with astute biblical knowledge that “When you go out across the country and meet the people you can’t help but pray and remind God of Second Chronicles 7:14, because the people of this country are not beyond redemption. They are good people and believe this nation has a destiny as yet unfulfilled.”<sup>25</sup>

Given the limited audience and limited press coverage, the interview was not a galvanizing event. Nor, seemingly, was it intended to be. The opposite, however, was true of several of Reagan’s quasi-religious efforts to secure the nomination following all of the primary contests, which had left him in a dead heat with the President heading into the convention. Although these were too little and too late for 1976, they would pay dividends in 1980. Ford, for his part, had put James A. Baker, III in charge of winning over unpledged delegates, and Baker’s clever strategy focused on utilizing the advantages of incumbency, including such overtures as invitations to the White House and private lobbying opportunities with cabinet members. This worked in many cases, and in the last days before the Kansas City convention, a significant number of unpledged delegates had been swayed to vote for Ford, giving him a slight advantage over Reagan—about 40 votes according to the *New York Times*. Reagan’s recourse, then, was to announce that he would run alongside the moderate-to-liberal Schweiker, who also had, in addition to an ideological balancing effect, what Steven Hayward has identified as some religious appeal. To be sure, the balancing effect was the primary reason for picking Schweiker,

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<sup>25</sup> Video of this interview is seemingly out of circulation, but *Christianity Today* reprinted excerpts of the interview the next month. The above quotations are from that reprint. See “Reagan on God and Morality,” *Christianity Today*, July 2, 1976, 39-40.

but it did not hurt that he was also a Catholic who was known for his strong “family values” as the loyal father of five.<sup>26</sup>

However, Reagan’s best effort, in addition to the Schweiker gambit, was to help stir a platform fight over several issues, including some hot-button social and religious ones. To be certain, this was as much the effort of his supporters as it was of Reagan, and this was not new to the Republican convention. Conservatives had made concerted efforts to push the planks rightward since at least 1960, and the same was to be expected in 1976—especially since these fights might draw some right-leaning Ford supporters over to Reagan. Important for present purposes is the fact that some of the issues the conservatives pushed—in many respects under Reagan’s leadership—were either couched in moral terms or involved what might clearly be viewed as “moral” issues. The most divisive one involved the Ford (or what conservatives would pejoratively term the “Kissinger”) foreign policy posture. The Reagan forces, it was well known, disliked Ford-Kissinger détente—many of them disliked Kissinger the man even more—and they had made that clear throughout the primaries. But instead of simply countering Kissinger’s with a philosophy of their own, they raised the stakes of the foreign policy discussion by submitting a plank called “Morality in Foreign Policy,” the rhetorical effect of which was a backhanded gibe at the “immorality” of détente. As Cheney commented, it “did everything but strip [Kissinger] bare of every piece of clothing on his body.”<sup>27</sup> And it worked, much to Kissinger’s exasperation, because Kissinger’s unpopularity

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<sup>26</sup> See Hayward, *The Age of Reagan*, 475.

<sup>27</sup> Quoted in Shirley, *Reagan’s Revolution*, 324.

forced the Ford camp to simply accede to these demands, lest it risk the sort of fight that might cost Ford the nomination.

In addition to foreign policy, galvanizing issues included busing, welfare, and gun control. And there were others that were raised in 1976, but which would become much more significant in the post-election period in efforts to win over religious conservatives. These included a prominent endorsement of a constitutional amendment allowing school prayer—an issue evangelicals and Catholics, on the whole, continued to support—as well as an endorsement of the Human Life Amendment, which had been unsuccessfully considered in Congress several times in the three intervening years since *Roe*, aiming explicitly to overturn the Court’s holding in that case. Ford opposed the plank, but Reagan heartily supported it.

In the end this was not enough, and Ford captured the nomination by a narrow margin, 1,187 to 1,070. Reagan, however, got the last word, and ironically at Ford’s suggestion. Upon concluding his nomination acceptance address, Ford called Reagan down from his press box and asked him deliver a few remarks. On the president’s night to shine, this would turn out to be a mistake, since the “Great Communicator” delivered—impromptu—one of his most memorable political speeches. In fact, upon viewing the two men side by side, many wondered how the party had gone for Ford instead of Reagan. As one important Ford delegate announced following Reagan’s Kansas City speech, “I’ve made the worst mistake of my life.”<sup>28</sup>

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<sup>28</sup> Quoted in Hayward, *The Age of Reagan*, 481.

In the final analysis, Reagan could only declare that “it wasn’t part of God’s plan,” that he did not win, and “God chooses his own time.”<sup>29</sup> Presumably, that time would be four years later, when Reagan would turn publicly to that same God in his efforts to become president.

### *Ford’s Religious Rhetoric*

The Ford campaign took two approaches to “the religion issue” in 1976—a broad one involving campaign commercials for general consumption and a narrow one utilizing tailored speeches to specifically religious audiences. When dealing with the broader public, the Ford campaign took a softer and more subtle approach than did the Carter campaign, weaving “the religion issue” into a broader strategy about the president’s “human dimension,” which was relevant for the entire electorate in the wake of Watergate. But to supplement this, the Ford campaign also took a second, narrower approach, which was to select two specifically religious audiences in Carter’s own “backyard,” using pointedly religious rhetoric to appeal to voters that Ford felt were being “stolen away” from a more natural home in the Republican Party because of Carter’s religious strategy.

The Ford campaign implemented this two-pronged approach because it was in many ways playing defense against Carter, who had adopted a religious strategy first and had utilized an active approach in presenting his own religiosity, doing both with tremendous success. Plus, Ford was at somewhat of a handicap given a skeptical perception among some religious conservatives about his faith, voiced poignantly by *Christianity Today*: “He encouraged his son Michael to select an evangelical seminary.

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<sup>29</sup> Quoted in Shirley, *Reagan’s Revolution*, 328.

But he smokes a pipe, dances, and drinks cocktails before supper.”<sup>30</sup> In 1976, tobacco products, dancing, and drinking alcohol were considered “sins” by many fundamentalists and evangelicals. Yet now that religion was a viable issue and Carter had established himself as particularly pious, the Ford campaign had to strike a delicate balance on two different fronts: how to show that Carter was wearing his religion on his sleeve simply for political gain, and how, in turn, to show that Ford *was* religious but did not wear it on his sleeve like Carter. These were the important questions that the Ford campaign had to ask in crafting its rhetorical strategy. After all,

The President *does* pray before making important decisions. His son is a divinity student. The President is a genuinely religious person. He doesn’t wear his religion on his sleeve. . . . [And] when you run a commercial that says you don’t wear your religion on your sleeve, you are, in fact, wearing your religion on your sleeve. People are smart enough to see that.<sup>31</sup>

So, in its broader approach to the general public, the Ford strategy had two parts. The first was to attempt to prompt a reevaluation of assumptions about Ford’s “personal characteristics.” In the minds of Ford strategists, even to the general public this election was about values—“traditional American values. That’s what the people are really concerned about. Traditional American values. Love of Family. Love of God. Love of Country.”<sup>32</sup> The Ford camp had to woo some of these “values” (or what they called “swing”) voters over to the president if he was to win the election. The second part was to “develop a major and highly disciplined attack on the perception of Carter” in the effort to “close the gap between Carter’s perception and his actual weakness.” This

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<sup>30</sup> Plowman, “An Election Year To Remember,” 37.

<sup>31</sup> Macdougall, *We Almost Made It*, 47.

<sup>32</sup> Quoted in Macdougall, *We Almost Made It*, 50.

would involve, among other things, showing Carter as “arrogant,” “deceitful,” “devious and highly partisan (a function of uncontrolled ambition),” “liberal,” and, most importantly, “one who uses religion for political purposes; an evangelic [sic].”<sup>33</sup>

One effort to denigrate Carter came in September—*Playboy* month—after *Newsweek* had done a cover story on “The Ford Presidency.” *Newsweek*’s was a fairly balanced and disinterested appraisal of Ford’s accomplishments in office—hardly a “puff” piece—but it was nevertheless an esteemed publication (and a left-leaning one, to boot) using its cover to herald the president’s work. This gave the Ford camp the idea for a newspaper advertisement in mid-sized markets across middle America, such as those in Baton Rouge, LA, Sioux City, IA, and Waco, TX—“places where you are most likely to find people who think that Presidential candidates shouldn’t appear in magazines that have naked girls on the cover.” The ad featured a picture of the *Newsweek* cover alongside the *Playboy* cover chronicling Carter’s famous interview. The *Newsweek* cover was simple, featuring the words, “The Ford Presidency,” while the *Playboy* cover showed busty cover girl Patti McGuire removing her shirt next to the words, “NOW, THE REAL JIMMY CARTER ON POLITICS, RELIGION, THE PRESS AND SEX IN AN INCREDIBLE PLAYBOY INTERVIEW.” The tag line to the advertisement said simply: “One good way to decide this election. Read last week’s *Newsweek*. Read this month’s *Playboy*.” Carter was of course incensed by the ad, but this had the adverse effect of giving it far more national exposure than it would have received simply by running in mid-sized markets. And more than anything, Carter’s anger helped to magnify the entire *Playboy* gaffe, contributing to the idea that Carter was not as religious or as

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<sup>33</sup> Ford Campaign Memo, quoted in Schramm, *Running for President 1976*, 263.

virtuous as he had been presenting himself to be. It was a brilliant stroke by the Ford campaign.<sup>34</sup>

The effort to defame Carter's character also took the form of a short commercial featuring W.A. Criswell, pastor of the largest Southern Baptist church in the country, the First Baptist Church of Dallas. This was especially compelling given that Carter's Southern Baptist affiliation was so central to his message.<sup>35</sup> In the commercial, a narrator instructed the viewer to "Listen to pastor W.A. Criswell," who was shown behind his quintessentially Southern Baptist pulpit alongside robed members of the church choir. Criswell then said,

On a Thursday, of a week ago, along with other men of faith, I was invited to visit the President in the White House. And in our conversation with him, we asked him, "Mr. President, if *Playboy* magazine were to ask you for an interview, what would you do?" And the President replied, "I was asked by *Playboy* magazine for an interview, and I replied with an emphatic, 'No.'" And I like that!

Even though the message did not mention him by name, it was an obvious gibe at Carter, who had taken considerable flak for his *Playboy* interview. And it was a clear effort to show that his religiosity was shallow and contrived, an obvious political ploy. Choir members in the background nodded their disapproval at the very mention of *Playboy*, and in addition to that, shots of Ford in the congregation listening intently to the conservative preacher lent Ford a tremendous amount of religious credibility, especially among the 13

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<sup>34</sup> See Macdougall, *We Almost Made It*, 172.

<sup>35</sup> Carter and Criswell, it should be noted, were entirely different types of Southern Baptists. Carter was probably on the liberal end of the "moderate" camp of Southern Baptists, which in 1976 controlled the machinery of the denomination and had for a long time. Criswell was at the forefront of the "conservative" or "fundamentalist" camp, which was just three years shy of engineering a takeover of the denomination. It is hardly a surprise, to observers of the Southern Baptist Convention, that Criswell would oppose Carter. Yet, to the general public, a Southern Baptist was a Southern Baptist, and this was a particularly successful and presumably devout one blasting one who was suspected of using his religion for political gain. It was a powerful tactic.

million Southern Baptists who sat in similar pews each Sunday. Following Criswell's rebuff of *Playboy*, and thus of Carter, the narrator returned with a simple message:

"President Ford: he's the kind of man we should keep in the White House."<sup>36</sup>

"The kind of man"—that was, of course, the number one theme the Ford campaign wanted to communicate to the general public, to an even greater degree than it aimed to bring down Carter. The so-called "human dimension"—the effort to present Ford as a devout man with impeccable values—was in fact the main strategic point of the campaign's entire advertising strategy. This involved showing Ford as a family man and a devout Christian:

We will show the various members of the President's family not just as campaigners, but as warm, interesting individuals. We will show how they relate to one another and how they relate to their father. We will place heavy emphasis on Betty Ford. She will talk directly about traditional American values, about the feelings she has about her children and her husband. These talks should be uplifting to the American people—should help to give more purpose to their own lives. We also think it is important to introduce the real Jerry Ford to America. We want Americans to meet his friends and hear what they have to say about him. We think Americans should know of his accomplishments throughout his life, not just his accomplishments as President. Finally, we think people should hear how the President himself feels about the things that are important to him: his religion, his hometown, his youth, his feelings as he tries his best to solve the problems a President must face.<sup>37</sup>

This was achieved most prominently with a five-minute commercial on Ford's family as well as a five-minute biographical spot. A short commercial titled "Leadership" also portrayed Ford as a man who understood the power of his office but accepted it reverently because of his virtues. In that commercial, Ford was described as

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<sup>36</sup> "Criswell," Ford campaign commercial, 1976. Available from <http://www.livingroomcandidate.org/commercials/1976>.

<sup>37</sup> Macdougall, *We Almost Made It*, 74.

“above all, a decent man.” In Ford we see “the power of the office tempered by the decency of the man.”<sup>38</sup>

In the view of Macdougall, the campaign’s advertising chief, the advertising effort was tremendously successful in its objective.

When we’d started, the country knew Jimmy Carter better than the President. Thanks in part to our five-minute commercial on the family and our five-minute biography, America knew just about all there was to know about Jerry Ford. Grand Rapids . . . Eagle Scout . . . football hero at Michigan . . . war hero in the Pacific . . . student working his way through Yale Law School . . . Congressman Ford . . . Minority Leader Ford . . . Ford the good father . . . Ford the good husband . . . Ford the churchgoer . . . Ford the President who listens to people . . . Ford the non-imperial president. . . . And if people really were going to vote the man and not the issues, as we’d originally stated, then this was a pretty significant accomplishment.<sup>39</sup>

Indeed, there were few at campaign’s end who thought Ford a duplicitous or bad person; the same could not be said for Carter.

Ford’s second, narrower approach to “the religion issue” was to talk to specifically religious audiences with a message that was much more straightforward than the advertisements targeted at larger audiences. The idea was to establish a religious bona fides but also to show religious groups that they had an ally in Ford. There were two major instances in which Ford did this—most prominently in an address to the several thousand “messengers” at the Southern Baptist Convention (SBC), but also in an address to representatives of the National Religious Broadcasters (NRB) association and the National Association of Evangelicals.

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<sup>38</sup> “Leadership,” Ford campaign commercial, 1976. Available from <http://www.livingroomcandidate.org/commercials/1976>.

<sup>39</sup> Macdougall, *We Almost Made It*, 196.

In the address to the joint NRB/NAE audience, Ford showed that he was comfortable speaking the language of Zion—that he was not some slick politician who was speaking an unfamiliar dialect. From the very outset, he commended the organizations as ones that “follow the great commissions of Jesus, to go into the world to preach the gospel.” This statement set the tone for a message that was far more religious than political, as one can find in it no central political theme or call for directed political action. Rather, Ford spoke on such themes as “the number of lives that have been changed by the gospel you preach throughout the world.” He broached the lessons of the Psalms, which state that “blessed is the nation whose God is the Lord. I believe that very, very deeply, and I know that you believe it, too.” He mentioned the quiet and sacred moments in his own life, when the word of God had inspired him, one such moment being shortly before he was to be sworn in as President:

I was asked by one of my aides what verse I wanted the Bible open to when I took the oath of office. I turned to the Bible which had been given to me when I became Vice President by my oldest son, Mike, who is a divinity student. . . . Ever since I was a little boy, I have used a very special verse in the Bible as a kind of prayer. I am sure you are all familiar with it. It comes from the Book of Proverbs, and it says, "Trust in the Lord with all thine heart; and lean not unto thine own understanding. In all thy ways acknowledge Him, and He shall direct thy paths." That was the verse that I placed my hand upon when I took the oath of office administered to every President since George Washington. These words have meant much, very much to me as I have dealt with the problems of this Nation and the world.

Together these themes functioned to show a devout man, one whose own language and personal experiences were genuine. The speech was not laced with policy justifications or even with hot-button social issues, which might serve to mobilize the group in Ford’s favor for immediate action. Instead, the speech established a religious ethos, aiming more than anything else to connect Ford with his audience over their shared

religious experiences. This ethos was further aided by Ford's familial words for well-known men in the audience—Thomas Zimmerman, Abe Van Der Puy, Paul Toms, “my good friend, Billy Zeoli,” and “Dr. Ockenga,” who was president of Gordon-Conwell Theological Seminary, where Ford's son was studying for ministry, and who would be addressing the group the next night. The message was in essence, “these men, whom we all know well, can vouch for me.”<sup>40</sup>

The address to the SBC was perhaps more powerful because it was delivered in summer of 1976, at a time when Carter was as well-known by the public as President Ford, and he was perhaps known more for being a “born-again” Southern Baptist than anything else. That Ford would go into Carter's own “backyard” to deliver this address was in many respects audacious, but Ford, once again, established quickly his religious bona fides, holding his own with an audience one might presume to be more receptive to a Carter message.

In a masterful stroke, Ford opened his comments by recalling the only other time he had addressed a group of Southern Baptists, two years before at a Brotherhood Commission breakfast. In addition to the fact that he was comfortably speaking Southern Baptistese by recalling the specific group he had addressed in terms—“the Brotherhood Commission”—that only Southern Baptists would understand, Ford also recalled the “very considerate, very generous . . . and very friendly” man who had been the one to introduce him at the denominational event—none other than then-Governor Jimmy

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<sup>40</sup> Gerald R. Ford, “Remarks at the Combined Convention of the National Religious Broadcasters and the National Association of Evangelicals,” February 22, 1976, John T. Woolley and Gerhard Peters, *The American Presidency Project* [online]. Santa Barbara, CA: University of California (hosted), Gerhard Peters (database). Available from World Wide Web: <http://www.presidency.ucsb.edu/ws/?pid=5606>. All of the below quotes from this speech can be found here.

Carter.<sup>41</sup> “I would like to return that compliment to the gentleman who introduced me then,” Ford said. This opening functioned brilliantly in several ways. First, it indicated that this speech was not about politics; Ford spoke of his opponent only in friendly terms. Second, and related to this, Ford applauded a man who was likely revered by many in his audience. The SBC, it should be noted, was still in those days controlled by its leadership of “moderates,” many of whom shared Carter’s religion if not his politics. But in addition to this, even if they were not Carter supporters, this was an audience that would take pride, like him or not, in the viability of a Southerner’s campaign to become president—especially since he was touting his Southern Baptist roots in the process. When the liberal-drifting dominant culture seemed so far removed from the overlooked lives of Southern Baptists, it was nice to be validated on the national stage by the front-runner for the presidency. Thus, Ford did well to steer clear of criticizing his political foe. Finally, and most importantly, Ford’s magnanimous mention of Carter also served to put Carter in the consciousness of his audience. This was shrewd because it set Ford up to be compared directly by his audience to Carter, who to many there possessed the religious reputation Ford so desired. By increasing the likelihood that he would be compared to Carter, Ford prepared his audience to make an unexpected—and perhaps favorable—comparison, if he could succeed in delivering a speech that would be met approvingly.

Ford’s address was also on target insofar as it was not filled with platitudes about evangelicalism. Ford instead kept his remarks centered on Baptist themes—his own

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<sup>41</sup> Gerald Ford, “Remarks to the Southern Baptist Convention in Norfolk, VA,” June 15, 1976. John T. Woolley and Gerhard Peters, *The American Presidency Project* [online]. Santa Barbara, CA: University of California (hosted), Gerhard Peters (database). Available from World Wide Web: <http://www.presidency.ucsb.edu/ws/?pid=6127>. All quotes from this speech can be found here.

affiliation with Baptists, for instance, as well as what he viewed as the indispensable contributions Baptists had made to the success of America. This was subtle, but important for reasons that a less astute politician might easily overlook. Among Southern Baptist moderates there was a certain degree of antagonism toward self-identified or “card-carrying” evangelicals. Many vehemently eschewed this classification, perhaps none more characteristically than Foy Valentine, director of the SBC Christian Life Commission. Nineteen seventy-six was the year elite media discovered evangelicalism, and no sooner had they done so than Valentine complained in *Newsweek*’s “The Year of the Evangelicals” issue that

Southern Baptists are not evangelicals. That’s a Yankee word. They want to claim us because we are big and successful and growing every year. But we have our own traditions, our own hymns, and more students in our seminaries than they have in all theirs put together. We don’t share their politics or their fussy fundamentalism, and we don’t want to get involved in their theological witch-hunts.<sup>42</sup>

By avoiding the lethal pitfall of heaping these groups together, as media had mistakenly done, Ford did well. But he went further. He first noted his own connection to Baptists, which no doubt consisted of personal affinity: “My oldest son, Mike, who is now a divinity student at Gordon-Conwell Seminary in Massachusetts, was graduated from the Baptist-affiliated Wake Forest University. And it was my pleasure 4 years ago, to be the speaker at his graduation ceremony.” Then, his words were nothing short of panegyric toward Baptists, as Ford turned to what he saw as their vital contributions to American life: “Baptists have played a very fundamental part in the birth and growth of America.” “I have long admired the missionary spirit of Baptists and the fact that you keep the Bible

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<sup>42</sup> Quoted in Kenneth L. Woodward et al., “Born Again! The Year of the Evangelicals,” *Newsweek*, 25 October 1976, 76.

at the center of your lives.” “History gives us many, many more examples of profound Baptist influence on American life, a tradition still being enriched today.” “I also respect and appreciate your commitment to health care and educational advancement of your fellow citizens, as exemplified by the many hospitals, universities, and seminaries supported by Baptist churches.” “The Southern Baptist Convention has sought throughout much of its history to overcome the enemies of the world—ignorance, disease, poverty, tyranny, injustice, greed, and war itself—even while setting your sights on the gates of heaven.”

Furthermore, Ford was also able to show that it was not only Carter who had the corner on understanding Baptists. Throughout the campaign Carter quoted generously from his “favorite theologian(s),” Reinhold Niebuhr and Paul Tillich, neither of whom were Baptist. So, Ford one-upped him, quoting not just from Roger Williams, the Baptist pioneer in colonial America who hailed from 17<sup>th</sup>-century New England, but also from George Truett, the former Southern Baptist pastor of the First Baptist Church of Dallas, who was legendary in Southern Baptist life for having once preached a famous sermon from the steps of the U.S. Capitol hailing many of the same Baptist contributions to American life that Ford noted. Ford also mentioned Southern Baptists’ prized product, Billy Graham, as well as Brooks Hays, a former House of Representatives colleague and “very dear friend” of Ford’s who had twice been president of the SBC.

It was clear that Ford’s speechwriters had done their homework, as Ford was at ease in adopting the language of Southern Baptists. And it appears that he effectively impressed them with his knowledge of Baptists while at the same time honoring their contributions without saccharine flattery. In those regards, the speech was successful in

its efforts to prove to Southern Baptists that Ford was both devout and knowledgeable, even though he did not gallivant around the country “wearing his religion on his sleeve,” like Carter.

Sensing, too, that Southern Baptists, as archetypal traditional Americans, were concerned about restoring morality to public life no matter what their political stripe, Ford shaped the bulk of his message around a theme of strong moral leadership. “You have always jealously guarded the separation of church and state,” he said, “but you have always believed that private morality and public service can and must go hand in hand.” Ford then outlined “the essential task of leadership in our modern age,” which he based explicitly on biblical teaching. “We stand in danger today of losing the soul of America,” but as Jesus said, “What is a man profited, if he shall gain the whole world and lose his own soul?” Public officials, Ford noted, should be at the forefront of preserving America’s soul, setting an example for the country because, once again, as Jesus said, “Unto whomsoever much is given, of him shall much be required.” To remedy this loss of soul, though, “we must look not only to the government but, more importantly, to the Bible, the church, the human heart. We must look to the family for the instruction in righteousness.” “For it is as true today as it was in the Old Testament times that ‘blessed is the nation whose God is the Lord.’ I believe that very deeply, and so do you.” Finally, “As America enters its third century . . . we could ask no better inspiration than those words of a favorite passage of mine from the Book of Proverbs: ‘Trust in the Lord with all thine heart and lean not unto thine own understanding. In all thy ways acknowledge Him and He shall direct thy paths.’”

*Carter's Religious Rhetoric*

Those close to Jimmy Carter during his political years had decidedly mixed feelings about Carter the man. As Patrick Anderson, his chief campaign speech writer, once noted of Carter,

He was our hope and our despair, leader and loose cannon, Machiavelli and Mr. Rogers. Hiding behind his big smile and pieties about love and peanut farming was a far more interesting and complex man than the voters knew. He possessed not only intelligence and high moral purpose, but a mixture of pride and piety that could make him quite maddening to deal with. I found much to respect in the candidate and much to regret in the man.<sup>43</sup>

Carter had what Anderson joked was a “dirty mouth”—it was by non-Southern Baptist standards quite tame—though he was ever vigilant about keeping it under wraps from the general public. “I’d fire his ass,” he once grouched to a reporter asking a hypothetical question about what he would do if cabinet members acted inappropriately, before then attempting at the end of the interview to retract the statement from the record.<sup>44</sup> He also once said of Nixon, “I loathe the bastard,” and when the line was printed in the *New York Times Magazine*, Carter was livid because he thought he had said it off the record.<sup>45</sup> Carter played poker sometimes in the evenings, and his drink of choice was scotch and water (in moderation), but he hid such things from the public, lest it affect his image as good Southern Baptist Christian. Instead, his public escapes were softball and handfuls of peanuts, not cards and fine liquor. His closest political advisers, moreover, were what

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<sup>43</sup> Patrick Anderson, *Electing Jimmy Carter: The Campaign of 1976* (Baton Rouge, LA: Louisiana State University Press, 1994), 2.

<sup>44</sup> Quoted in Anderson, *Electing Jimmy Carter*, 14.

<sup>45</sup> Quoted in Anderson, *Electing Jimmy Carter*, 38.

Robert Scheer called “as hard-drinking, fornicating, pot-smoking, freethinking a group as has been seen in higher politics.”<sup>46</sup>

Yet to many in 1976, Jimmy Carter was a saint, a righteous man who was in politics for the right reasons, to restore integrity and wholesomeness to government. This perception testifies, no doubt, to the power of rhetoric, to the effectiveness with which Carter’s public messages could create a public image consisting only of his strongest personal virtues. This is because from the outset of the campaign, Carter carefully crafted his image. As Jordan wrote to him, “Only by bombarding [the electorate] with impressions over an extended period of time is an image created. . . . Because your rise politically this year has been so rapid and dramatic . . . it is important that we carefully consider the image you project.”<sup>47</sup> Thus, he was “a farmer, an engineer, a businessman, a planner, a scientist, a governor, and a Christian.”<sup>48</sup> He was also a man who called his Sunday school teacher before every Sunday he was to be home in Plains during the campaign, so that he might take over the teaching duties that morning and bring the press along with him—even to such an extent that “we don’t have room to put everybody now when I teach.”<sup>49</sup>

To many this seemed contrived because it was conscious. But to those closest to Carter—many of whom were leery of using religion or creating a religious image—it was far more natural than contrived. Greg Schneiders, for instance, who was an aide during

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<sup>46</sup> Robert Scheer, quoted in Anderson, *Electing Jimmy Carter*, 2.

<sup>47</sup> Quoted in Schramm, *Running for President 1976*, 239-240.

<sup>48</sup> Quoted in Carter, “Formal Announcement,” 2.

<sup>49</sup> Quoted in “Playboy Magazine,” Transcript of Carter’s interview with Playboy magazine in *The Presidential Campaign 1976, Volume One, Part Three*, 963.

the 1976 campaign before directing the speechwriting office in the Carter White House,<sup>50</sup> notes that,

While I'm sure [Carter] had a sophisticated understanding of the potential power of religion in politics, speaking openly of his faith was something that came very naturally to him and was no more contrived than talking about his navy background or his business experience or his rural roots—all of which also worked to his political benefit.<sup>51</sup>

In acknowledging that it was natural, we should still be careful to note that this does not preclude the religious message from being deliberate. Carter surrounded himself with many Democrats who were unreligious, and many of these aides were loath to infuse religion into politics given their own beliefs and what they perceived as America's long tradition of separating church from state, religion from politics. Yet for Carter, who at the end of the day had the last say in what came out of his mouth, the use was intentional, proof of which was the fact that he refused to heed this constant advice and the fact that his very first speech, which had been planned and pored over scrupulously because of its importance, was clear in its efforts to craft an image of Carter as moral and pious. It was clearly Carter's goal from the very beginning to present himself as both a born-again Christian and a man who could restore integrity to the nation's highest office, and in so doing to tap into what his pollster Pat Caddell had found was a growing religious sentiment in the electorate. The third sentence in his announcement speech mentioned his Christianity. He then noted that the nation must "reaffirm and . . . strengthen our ethical and spiritual and political beliefs." He quoted from the Bible: "If the trumpet give

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<sup>50</sup> Schneiders's official role in Carter's unconventionally organized White House was Director of the Speechwriting Office, although it is unclear to what extent he was involved in writing speeches. Carter leaned heavily on two chief speechwriters—James Fallows and Hendrick Heigzberg—although Schneiders often served as a liaison between the writers and the president.

<sup>51</sup> Greg Schneiders, Email correspondence with the author, April 25, 2009. Transcript in the author's possession.

an uncertain sound, who shall prepare himself to the battle.” In expressing an environmental commitment, he referred to “God’s world.” He spoke of prayer and religious convictions. He summoned compassion and care for the poor. And throughout, he used such touchstones as ‘honesty,’ “sacrifice,” “pure,” “fair,” “trustworthy,” “courage,” “compassion,” and “integrity.”<sup>52</sup>

Later that night, at an Atlanta rally where he announced his presidential ambitions to friends and supporters, Carter made clear that his intentions in running for office were noble, and he would never compromise his integrity in the process. “I have to tell you with complete candor,” he said, “that being elected President of the United States is not the most important thing in my life.” He followed that with the most famous line from the evening: “There are many things that I would not do to be President. I would not tell a lie; I would not mislead the American people; I would not avoid taking a stand on a controversial issue which is important to our country or the world. And I would not betray your trust.” What most people fixated on was the “I would not tell a lie” line, and this led to a very early perception that Carter was either a) very righteous, b) very self-righteous, or c) very naïve. He also contested that he could help to restore “in the purest and highest way” the hopes and ideals of the American people:

Because one of the most serious defects in public life in recent years has been a slow deterioration in our standards and a subtle acceptance of mediocrity or failure in government which would be contrary to the best hopes and ideals of individual human beings as they shape and reshape and reexamine their own lives in their homes among people that they love, in their places of worship where they reestablish their relationship with God.<sup>53</sup>

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<sup>52</sup> All quotes from Jimmy Carter, “Formal Announcement.”

<sup>53</sup> Jimmy Carter, “Atlanta Rally,” quoted in *The Presidential Campaign 1976, Volume One, Part One*, 11-13.

Soon after he kicked off the campaign, Carter released *Why Not the Best?*, a short book intended to introduce the candidate to the country by outlining not only his policy goals and an autobiographical sketch, but also to relay to the country his sense of values and his deep religious piety—and how those could contribute to an effective presidency.

Government at all levels can be competent, economical, and efficient. Yet I would hasten to point out that nowhere in the Constitution of the United States, or the Declaration of Independence, or in the Bill of Rights, or the Emancipation Proclamation, or the Old Testament or the New Testament do you find the words “economy” or “efficiency.” Not that these two words are unimportant. But you discover other words like *honesty, integrity, fairness, liberty, justice, courage, patriotism, compassion, love*—and many others to describe what a human being ought to be. These are also the same words which describe what a government of human beings ought to be.<sup>54</sup>

Carter was framing the campaign such that voters would be electing a president based on personal traits more than anything else. This, of course, was not done without intention; the implication was that he was a man of “honesty, integrity, fairness,” and similar values. And the way we know is to listen to his story and to observe his piety.

The book did this in part with a pictorial history of Carter throughout his life, with each photograph portraying Carter as someone defined by some or all of the words listed above. He was shown with children and with African Americans, with the elderly or the displaced. He was shown in military garb or on the farm, or with a solemn look while taking Georgia’s oath of office. And perhaps most poignantly, he was shown “speaking to a church assembly” beneath a towering Christian cross that occupied upwards of three-quarters of the page, to Carter’s one-fourth.<sup>55</sup>

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<sup>54</sup> Jimmy Carter, *Why Not the Best?* (Nashville: Broadman Press, 1975), 116.

<sup>55</sup> Carter, *Why Not the Best?*, 122.

The book also showed Carter in these terms via anecdotal stories from throughout his life. There were episodes in which he showed compassion on the poor children of a little Mexican town he was “passing through.” He told tales of church mission trips he had taken, one “working among Spanish-speaking families in a ghetto area of a New England city,” where it was Carter’s duty to stand between the downtrodden “Cuban and Puerto Rican people who had recently come to our country” and the American mission workers, since Carter was able to speak the language of both.

Other sketches were far more powerful, such as one in which he had learned a humbling lesson about his self-righteousness, but which still, no doubt, went to great lengths to show the extent to which Carter had in fact been very righteous in his life.

That is, at the end of the story, he was both humble *and* righteous:

One day I was invited to speak to a nearby church group in Preston, Georgia, which is a small town with a population of about 300. . . . The subject assigned to me was “Christian Witnessing.” I thought immediately that they had undoubtedly heard about the wonderful work I was doing in my own church.

When I went into the front room to write my speech about witnessing, it was with some sense of self-satisfaction. About halfway through composing the speech I decided to make a real impression on the audience. I began to figure how many individual visits I had made for God. Since it had been fourteen years since I had returned home from the Navy, and I had visited an average of two families a year, and assuming two parents and three children per family, there were a total of 140 visits! I proudly wrote the figure down on my notes, and still have it.

While I was congratulating myself, suddenly I remembered the 1966 governor’s election. It was very late when we decided to make the campaign, so we had to work furiously to overcome the handicap of the late start. I left everything I cared for—my farm, my family, my bird dogs—and my wife and I spent 16 to 18 hours a day trying to reach as many Georgia voters as possible. We went in opposite directions, shaking hands and telling everyone what a wonderful man I was and why they should vote for me. At the end of the almost-successful campaign we had met more than 300,000 Georgians.

The comparison struck me—300,000 visits for myself in three months, and 140 visits for God in fourteen years!

I began to read the Bible with a new interest and perspective, and to understand more clearly the admonitions about pride and self-satisfaction. I read

again the parable (Luke 18:10-13) about the Pharisee who came into the Temple and said: “God, I thank thee that I am not like the other men, extortioners, unjust adulterers, or even like this tax collector. I fast twice a week, I give tithes of all that I get.” But the tax collector, standing far off, would not even lift up his eyes to heaven, but beat his breast, saying, “God, be merciful to me a sinner!” For the first time I saw that *I* was the Pharisee.

I began to expand my personal service in the church, and to search more diligently for a closer relationship with God.<sup>56</sup>

It was clear from such passages, as well as from the rest of *Why Not the Best?*, that Jimmy Carter was a devout man, and as such, he could restore to Washington the integrity that had been sorely lacking for the last decade. “Coincidentally,” of course, polls indicated that this was one of the country’s strongest desires in its next president. So, if this was a man who knew God directly, who could quote theologians, do mission work for the poor and lost, preach sermons and teach Sunday School—even do such alien acts as “Christian Witnessing”—then surely he was incapable of the atrocities of the Nixon years. Surely this was the man who could bring to the nation’s highest office “*honesty, integrity, fairness, liberty, justice, courage, patriotism, compassion, love*”—the words commanded of him by the Constitution, the Declaration, and even the source he took far more seriously—the Bible.

Stories and phrases such as these in Carter’s campaign book were undoubtedly exotic to the political culture not just of the 1970s, but to the entire twentieth century more generally. And once they were out there, Carter could not escape these themes, which is to say that reporters, having discovered the evangelicals that year, continually harped on Carter’s religiosity. This is an important point, because it underscores the fact that once the campaign was in motion, the focus on religion was much more a media phenomenon than something Carter talked about day to day. He would answer questions,

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<sup>56</sup> Carter, *Why Not the Best?*, 133-134.

often in ways that eschewed brevity and shifted focus away from politics and onto religion, but Christian piety was not the stuff of the everyday with regard to the speeches and other messages that the campaign crafted. As Anderson reported, “I don’t recall him ever. . . pushing religious rhetoric. . . . I wrote speeches for him, and I’m not religious at all. It never occurred to me to put anything like that in. . . . It was more the media.”<sup>57</sup>

Along those lines, Bill Moyers,<sup>58</sup> for instance, asked Carter many questions on religious themes. “How do you know God’s will?” “Who were the villains in your life?” Echoing the Ten Commandments, “You said once that you never really seriously considered disobeying your father.” “[Where I grew up] we danced not at all. We never went to a movie on Sunday. . . . We had to go to BTU [Baptist Training Union, a phrase like a dog whistle to Southern Baptists], and if we violated it, we were in trouble. It was a stern life. Was it in Plains [where you grew up]?” “What do you think you’re on earth for?” “Do you ever have any doubts? About yourself, about God, about life?” “Can you be ruthless . . . and a Christian?” And “What was your favorite Baptist hymn?” These questions, it should be noted, were all from one interview. Beyond this, there were countless others that were similar, if less informed about the Southern Baptist brand of Christianity, because this side of Carter was peculiar and made great news.

Carter, for his part, did not try to deflect these questions nor usually did he give attenuated responses. To Moyers, for instance, he spoke Southern Baptist-to-Southern Baptist in answering most of these questions, seeming almost oblivious to the fact that

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<sup>57</sup> Patrick Anderson, Interview with the author, 30 March 2009. Transcript in author’s possession.

<sup>58</sup> Moyers was a PBS reporter, a former aide to fellow-Democrat Lyndon Johnson, and as a graduate of Southwestern Baptist Theological Seminary in Ft. Worth, a fellow-Southern Baptist moderate like Jimmy Carter.

the millions of Americans who were “listening in” had no idea what Baptist Young People’s Union—let alone “BYPU,” as Carter called it—meant. Carter might well have been speaking another language, and it was up to Moyers to clarify what “BYPU” stood for—not that simply giving the formal name meant anything to the 200 million non-Southern Baptist Americans out there.

In this respect, Carter was often guilty of what Anderson would later call “him not understanding how others might react to his views.”<sup>59</sup> There was a real sense in which Carter keenly understood that America wanted someone with strong moral values in the White House, but he was too often myopic in thinking that his own piety and religious experiences were easily translatable to most Americans. So instead of steering some of the above-mentioned questions toward politics, Carter spoke to Moyers as though he was being interviewed as America’s new candidate for pastor, not for president. A few examples offer proof.

Moyers asked how Carter could know God’s will. This was, to be quite sure, an unusual question to ask someone who was running for president, but Carter did not seem to view the question with skepticism. Rather than dodging it, as one might expect a presidential contender to do, Carter took the question head on, eschewing brevity in the process: “Well, I pray frequently,” he said. “Not continually, but many times a day. When I have a sense of peace and just self-assurance—I don’t know where it comes from—that what I’m doing is the right thing, I assume, maybe in an unwarranted way,

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<sup>59</sup> Patrick Anderson, Email correspondence with the author, 26 March 2009.

that that's doing God's will."<sup>60</sup> When Moyers asked him why he thought he was here on earth, Carter waxed theological:

I could quote the Biblical references to creation, that God created us in his own image, hoping that we'd be perfect, and we turned out to be not perfect but very sinful. And then when Christ was asked what are the two great commandments from God which should direct our lives, he said, "To love God with all your heart and soul and mind, and love your neighbor as yourself." So I try to take that condensation of the Christian theology and let it be something through which I search for a meaningful existence.<sup>61</sup>

To Moyers's "Do you ever have any doubts? About yourself, about God, about life?",

Carter responded with striking certainty: "I can't think of any, you know. . . . Doubt about my faith? No. Doubt about my purpose in life? I don't have doubts about that."<sup>62</sup>

Then, when pressed like he often was about whether he had told a lie and whether, in the event that anyone came forward with evidence of one, he would quit the campaign,

Carter was firm in his righteousness: "I think I would, because I haven't told a lie."

At one point in the interview, Carter also told a lengthy story about his religious experience:

I was going through a state in my life then that was a very difficult one. I had run for governor and lost. Everything I did was not gratifying. When I succeeded in something, it was a horrible experience for me. And I thought I was a good Christian. I was the chairman of the Board of Deacons. I was the head of the brotherhood in all the 34 churches in my district, and head of the finance committee, and Sunday school teacher just about all my life. I thought I really was a great Christian.

And one day the preacher gave this sermon—I don't remember a thing he said—I just remember the title which you just described—"If You Were Arrested for Being a Christian, Would There Be Any Evidence To Convict You?"

And my answer by the time the sermon was over was "No." I never had really committed myself totally to God—my Christian beliefs were superficial.

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<sup>60</sup> Jimmy Carter, quoted in "Discusses Childhood, Religion," in *The Presidential Campaign 1976, Volume One, Part One: Jimmy Carter* 165.

<sup>61</sup> Quoted in "Discusses Childhood, Religion," 167-168.

<sup>62</sup> Quoted in "Discusses Childhood, Religion," 168.

Based primarily on pride, and—I'd never done much for other people. I was always thinking about myself, and I changed somewhat for the better. I formed a much more intimate relationship with Christ. And since then, I've had just about like a new life.<sup>63</sup>

Carter would return to this rebirth later in the interview when Moyers asked him about his “most significant discovery,” speaking of the recommitment as having almost magical power:

In my relationship with Christ and with God, I became able in the process to look at it in practical terms, to accept defeat, to get pleasure out of successes, to be at peace with a world, and when I . . . stand on a factory shift line, like I did this morning in Erie, Pennsylvania, the General Electric plant, everybody comes through there—when I shake hands with them, for that instant, I really care about them. In a genuine way. And I believe they know it.<sup>64</sup>

Carter's discussions of religion, as is clear from these passages (and there were many others), were unusual for a presidential candidate, and on some level, Carter was aware that not all of America operated within the same religious framework as he, and therefore not all of America could fully grasp what he was saying. He undoubtedly sensed that there was a tendency for media to obfuscate some of his religious nuance, and in turn, the cynical or the casual observer might sense that Carter could be a little *too* religious for her comfort based on media accounts. But in any case, media obfuscation or not, Carter was violating some basic social expectations by so prominently thrusting religion into the campaign. So, to allay some of these fears among the electorate, he agreed to the infamous *Playboy* interview.

On the one hand, this was just another example of Carter being Carter—all things to all people. He had been just religious enough to try to galvanize the growing numbers

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<sup>63</sup> Quoted in “Discusses Childhood, Religion,” 176.

<sup>64</sup> Quoted in “Discusses Childhood, Religion,” 178-179.

of religious voters who feared America's moral descent, and even if such religiosity was not exactly a moderate voter's flavor, at least Carter was tolerable because he was no Nixon. But lest this religiosity become a liability, Carter set out to prove that he was no Puritan, and thus he agreed to the *Playboy* interview in a manner similar to his decisions to appeal to labor unions, big city party bosses, or Jewish Americans. Bob Scheer was to do the questioning for *Playboy*, and as Anderson remembers him, "Scheer was a political radical and a relentless interviewer whose specialty was to ask the most obnoxious questions possible, hoping to goad his subject into self-revelation."<sup>65</sup> Carter and Scheer were a mismatch, to risk understatement. In this interview, the "Scheer terror" technique meant endless questioning about religion and whether Carter's religious worldview might somehow make him unfit to lead in a pluralist society. Both interviewer and interviewee were stubborn, the holders of "world-class egos,"<sup>66</sup> and their impatience with each other became clear throughout the interview. Carter was taken to task over his "Baptist beliefs," to which he responded, "I'm not unique." "We've heard that you pray 25 times a day. Is that true?" asked Scheer suspiciously. "I've never counted," said Carter with equal misgiving. "Do you mean you pray as a kind of pause, to control your blood pressure and relax?" Scheer countered. "Well, yes," responded Carter. The interview was tense, with Scheer relentlessly pushing Carter to the brink of anger over questions about his own beliefs, his sister's beliefs, his beliefs about homosexuality and drug use and sin and any manner of laws governing personal behavior. The multiple rounds of such questions affected Carter the way they might affect most anyone—they were

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<sup>65</sup> Anderson, *Electing Jimmy Carter*, 111.

<sup>66</sup> Anderson, *Electing Jimmy Carter*, 111.

“driving Carter up the wall.”<sup>67</sup> Finally, when Carter was told by a press aide that he was late for another appointment, and therefore the interview was over, Carter and Scheer exchanged pleasantries and proceeded to the front porch for their goodbyes. As Scheer and *Playboy*'s editor stood at the door, recording equipment in hand, Carter launched into a missive that can be viewed as nothing other than an attempt to get the last word. As Anderson remembered the scene, these words were also Carter's attempt to rebuke Scheer. They would haunt Carter, perhaps forever, and are worth quoting at some length.

He started softly, speaking about his own church and the autonomy of all Southern Baptist churches, as well as how Baptists had a strong heritage in believing in the “absolute and total separation of church and state.” He was not some sort of cultist, brainwashed by bishops or bosses. He was instead like many others of his “innocent” generation, and “the normal thing to do was to go to church.” Then, Carter grew in intensity with his most famous words from the episode:

What Christ taught about most was pride, that one person should never think he was any better than anybody else. One of the most vivid stories Christ told in one of his parables was about two people who went into a church. One was an official of the church, a Pharisee, and he said, “Lord, I thank you that I'm not like all those other people. I keep all your commandments, I give a tenth of everything I own. I'm here to give thanks for making me more acceptable in your sight.” The other guy was despised by the nation, and he went in, prostrated himself on the floor and said, “Lord, have mercy on me, a sinner. I'm not worthy to lift my eyes to heaven.” Christ asked the disciples which of the two had justified his life. The answer was obviously the one who was humble.

The thing that's drummed into us all the time is not to be proud, not to be better than anyone else, not to look down on people but to make ourselves acceptable in God's eyes through our own actions and recognize the simple truth that we're saved by grace. It's just a free gift through faith in Christ. This gives us a mechanism by which we can relate permanently to God. I'm not speaking for other people, but it gives me a sense of peace and equanimity and assurance.

I try not to commit a deliberate sin. I recognize that I'm going to do it anyhow, because I'm human and I'm tempted. And Christ set some almost

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<sup>67</sup> Anderson, *Electing Jimmy Carter*, 111.

impossible standards for us. Christ said, “I tell you that anyone who looks with lust has in his heart already committed adultery.”

I’ve looked on a lot of women with lust. I’ve committed adultery in my heart many times. This is something that God recognizes I will do—and I have done it—and God forgives me for it. But that doesn’t mean that I condemn someone who not only looks on a woman with lust but who leaves his wife and shacks up with somebody out of wedlock.

Christ says, Don’t consider yourself better than someone else because one guy screws a whole bunch of women while the other guy is loyal to his wife. The guy who’s loyal to his wife ought not to be condescending or proud because of the relative degree of sinfulness. One thing that Paul Tillich said was that religion is a search for the truth about man’s existence and his relationship with God and his fellow man; and that once you stop searching and think you’ve got it made—at that point, you lose your religion. Constant reassessment, searching in one’s heart—it gives me a feeling of confidence.

I don’t inject these beliefs in my answers to your secular questions.  
(Carter clenched his fist and gestured sharply.)

But I don’t think I would *ever* take on the same frame of mind that Nixon or Johnson did—lying, cheating and distorting the truth. Not taking into consideration my hope for my strength of character, I think that my religious beliefs alone would prevent that from happening to me. I have that confidence. I hope it’s justified.<sup>68</sup>

It was a remarkable statement of candor, and nothing if not unusual for a presidential candidate to pronounce. There was immediate uproar over Carter’s “lust” and “adultery in my heart” comments—as well as his “screws a whole bunch of women” and “shacks up with somebody out of wedlock” lines, but for different reasons—and it came from all sides. Carter had done the interview to assuage the fears of many to his left, but he had in fact done just the opposite, making them feel a little uncomfortable with the idea of having this man as their president. Those to his right who were attracted to Carter based on his religious piety were likewise disenchanted, but mostly because Carter had agreed to appear in *Playboy* in the first place, and also because he talked about “screwing” women and so on. These voters—like most, it bears mentioning—would never pick up an issue of *Playboy* to read these remarks in full, yet the headlines linking

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<sup>68</sup> Quoted in “Playboy Magazine,” 963-964.

Carter and *Playboy* and admissions of lust were inescapable. Couple that with the Ford campaign's shrewd exploitation of the debacle, and it was clear to many of these voters that Carter might not be the devout man they had hoped for.

It was an embarrassing fiasco, and more than that, it was politically debilitating. Within the week, Carter fell from a commanding ten-point lead in the polls to running from behind for the first time. As Anderson remembered it, "There had not been any burning issues in the campaign, but now there was an issue that everyone could understand: our pious candidate had made himself look silly."<sup>69</sup>

This, in my view, was the beginning of the end for Jimmy Carter. He would of course go on to win the election, but as the polling data made clear, he won in spite of the *Playboy* debacle. He won because he was a Democrat, and just about any Democrat could have won that year. But the fact remains that Carter could have won by much more. In a year when the Democratic nominee should have won in a landslide—Carter was up by close to 30 points coming out of the conventions, remember—Carter squeaked by. He never gained a "mandate." His relations with the press turned sour. His command as the leader of his party never materialized, leading to an uncooperative Congress, despite the fact that it was controlled by Democrats. To a large swath of Americans, he became a peculiar man, one who did not necessarily make them comfortable in his role as commander in chief. And perhaps more importantly, he began the process of losing his proverbial halo among many religious conservatives—something that would cost him dearly four years later.

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<sup>69</sup> Patrick Anderson, *Electing Jimmy Carter*, 113.

### *Religious Rhetoric: Did it Matter?*

The question that immediately comes to the fore in concluding this discussion is a simple one: did all of this religious rhetoric matter? The answer is no less simple: a resounding yes. And it mattered in several important ways.

In the short term, even in spite of the *Playboy* gaffe and a run to the left, Carter's religious rhetoric translated into votes. While one should no doubt be careful in presuming direct causes and effects when dealing with rhetoric and response, there seems to be a clear correlation in this instance. There was no shortage of Christians who supported Carter, and did so openly, on the basis of his Christian beliefs, which they knew by no means other than his Christian messages on the campaign trail. One such example was California minister Louis P. Sheldon: "God has his hand upon Jimmy Carter to run for President," he noted. "Of course, he's wise enough not to be presumptuous with the will of God. But he's moving in the will of God."<sup>70</sup> A more prominent example was a book by evangelical writers Howard Norton and Bob Slosser called *The Miracle of Jimmy Carter*, which the title makes clear was an assertion that Carter's candidacy was nothing if not miraculous. It was released leading up to the election and was designed to rally conservative Christians—especially those who might tend toward the Republicans or might not vote at all—to consider Carter because of what his presidency could mean for the gospel. The authors noted, in fact, that "*Jimmy Carter was one of the best things to happen to American evangelical Christianity in this century* [emphasis mine]." They continued,

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<sup>70</sup> Quoted in Howard Norton and Bob Slosser, *The Miracle of Jimmy Carter* (Plainfield, NJ: Logos International, 1976), 9.

In the months that he was in the national spotlight campaigning for the nomination, the secular press did more to spread the gospel—by factual reporting of the Carter campaign—than all the religious press combined. Cynical, hardened political reporters by the scores learned what it meant to be “saved” or “born again,” hardly standard-brand newspaper jargon. And, as accurately as could be expected under the circumstances, they wrote about it.<sup>71</sup>

It is worth noting, too, that Slosser was a close ally of Rev. Pat Robertson, a towering member of the faculty at Robertson’s Regent University—an authentic religious conservative. Retrospect affords us the ability to see the irony in Slosser’s vigor for Carter, and his and other evangelicals’ turn from Carter to the politicians of the right is a theme to which I will return.<sup>72</sup> For now it is important simply to note that Carter gained religious allies because of his religious messages, but the impact was even more profound than simply having someone write a book saying evangelicals should support him. Evangelicals did, in turn, support Carter. Many in 1976 were previously nominal Republicans or uncommitted voters, if they had been involved in politics at all. And though some saw early promise in Carter before jumping ship once he moved leftward, many stayed on board, especially Southerners—enough, in fact, to help push Carter over the top in his slim margin of victory. Exit polls showed that seven in ten Americans did not care what Carter believed theologically, but among the three in ten who did, 75% favored Carter because of his religious convictions—specifically because of his message of being born again. Without this electorate—especially the white part of it, although many African American evangelicals supported Carter, if for different reasons—Carter

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<sup>71</sup> Norton and Slosser, *The Miracle of Jimmy Carter*, 10.

<sup>72</sup> Slosser later wrote a similar book on behalf of Reagan in 1984 titled *Reagan Inside Out*.

might well not have won in 1976.<sup>73</sup> In that respect, the religious rhetoric of 1976 was important.

It was also important insofar as it helped to legitimize evangelicals in the American mainstream. That legitimization was a key contributing factor in evangelicals' full-on mobilization in politics, and the subsequent creation of the New Christian Right in 1979. That movement would work in strong opposition to Carter, which is of course ironic given that Carter played such an important role in mobilizing conservative Christians in the first place.

Finally, and most importantly for present purposes, the religious rhetoric of 1976 mattered because subsequent to that election, religious appeals became acceptable in presidential campaign discourse. I should be clear, of course, that I am not asserting that candidates' religion had never factored in presidential politics. Examples, in fact, are plenty. William Jennings Bryan's evangelicalism and William Howard Taft's Unitarianism played important roles in 1908. Al Smith's Roman Catholicism was important in 1928. And perhaps most famously, John F. Kennedy's Catholicism was prominent in 1960, if for reasons opposite to Carter's evangelicalism. That is, Baptists and other evangelicals led the charge against supposed papal plots and backed Kennedy into disavowing his Roman Catholicism as it related to his politics. But each of these instances seemed to be an isolated event, not the advent of a new era or political trend.

What happened in 1976 was unique because for the first time in modern presidential campaigning, strong religious belief and Christian piety became selling points for presidential candidates, and they did so in a lasting way. The dominant forces

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<sup>73</sup> See James T. Baker, *Southern Baptist in the White House* (Philadelphia: The Westminster Press, 1977), 31.

in American society—including American presidential candidates—had been theologically homogenous *enough* that religion rarely played prominently in presidential politics during much of the nation’s history, unless that religion was cause for concern. But with America’s long-held social morals in steep decline in the 1970s, and directly on the heels of the largest White House scandal in the history of the union, it is no surprise that voters sought confidence in the moral bearings of their next president. They wanted someone they could trust to correct America’s course. As a result, it is not terribly surprising that candidates would appeal to their religious sensibilities in the effort to gain that trust. And in that regard, because the circumstances were at least somewhat amenable to these appeals, what we heard in 1976 was fairly benign—even if the pious appeals were slightly jarring and violated some social expectations since they had seldom been heard before in presidential campaigns.

But what is interesting with the advantages of retrospect is the fact that this was the start of a lasting trend. The religious appeals of 1976 were a crack in the door. The notion that religious appeals could help win voters was noted by future candidates, and the fact that there were so many of these potential voters out there was motivating to political professionals. And now that the door had been cracked—now that religious discourse was acceptable campaign discourse—it made sense given America’s other political and cultural developments that the door was soon to be flung wide, with religion becoming increasingly important in presidential elections.

Not surprisingly, the very next election, in 1980, was the most important in securing this trend, as three major candidates entered the contest, each with a unique religious story and a different strategy for utilizing it.

## CHAPTER FIVE

### Two Roads Diverged: Religious Conservatives and the Carter Disappointment

Carter won in 1976 by fashioning an unusual coalition; attempting to hold it together proved to be among his most difficult tasks as president. Among the diverse groups he brought into the fold were liberals, African Americans, moderate Southerners, as well as, to a slightly lesser degree, a newly involved group of religious conservatives who were increasingly willing to adopt a sustained political commitment. Carter, of course, had helped to validate evangelicals—the core of this latter group—as legitimate political players in 1976 by so prominently claiming to be the first “born-again” president. Throughout his term in office, one important thing became clear about this group’s new political commitment: as their focus on social and moral issues as the basis for involvement increased, so too did their influence and ability to alter the terms of the national political debate. Carter’s broader electoral alliance was diverse with regard to these hot-button issues, so attempting to appease the religious conservatives—with whom Carter in fact shared many similar religious beliefs<sup>1</sup>—often put the President in a difficult political position. In light of this, Carter’s strategy was to chart a middling course, and this ultimately proved disappointing to a host of constituent groups—none more than the rising religious right.

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<sup>1</sup> To be sure, I don’t want to assert that Carter’s beliefs were exactly the same as many of the prominent religious conservatives who became politically involved. In fact, on several occasions Carter acknowledged fairly moderate or even liberal views on the nature and authority of Scripture. But on the broad theological spectrum, Carter’s beliefs and theirs were similar insofar as they both believed generally in the authority of Scripture, in a Triune God, in the divinity and saving power of Christ, and other key evangelical doctrines.

Although Carter's coalition initially granted him broad support, it soon became clear that this support was also shallow, since it was based partly on Carter's personal appeal and was tied so closely to voters' reactions to Watergate and to Ford's subsequent pardon of Nixon, as well as to Vietnam and the credibility gaps of the Johnson and Nixon presidencies.<sup>2</sup> For many religious conservatives, Carter's appeal was also based solely on the fact that he professed a born-again faith. When the reservoir of public support proved unsustainable in the face of major challenges and the increasing conflict over social issues, Carter's moderate course proved troublesome. As aide Landon Butler put it,

The middle ground was not the high ground during the Carter years. The political high ground was on the extremes of right and left. The middle ground simply was not the position of strength during these years. So as we addressed these myriad of issues, we had to have an *ad hoc* approach to every issue. . . . Our rhetoric would be aimed in different directions. We would wind up with a hogde podge, *ad hoc* approach to our initiatives.<sup>3</sup>

As a result, Carter often found himself in something of a double bind by trying to stay near the center, and by 1979, liberals on the one hand seemed to be jumping ship by encouraging Ted Kennedy to run against Carter for the 1980 Democratic nomination, while religious conservatives on the other decided that Carter was, as Tim LaHaye put it, "out to lunch."<sup>4</sup> Even with the threat of losing both constituencies, Carter actually, in many instances, maintained his efforts to stay in the middle and keep the coalition together—at least partly because moderate positions reflected his own beliefs.

Ultimately, however, he made decisions on hot-button issues that placated liberals far

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<sup>2</sup> John Dumbrell, *The Carter Presidency: A Reappraisal* (Manchester, UK: Manchester University Press, 1995), 51.

<sup>3</sup> Quoted in Mary E. Stuckey, *Jimmy Carter, Human Rights, and the National Agenda* (College Station: Texas A&M University Press, 2008), xix.

<sup>4</sup> Quoted in William Martin, *With God on Our Side: The Rise of the Religious Right in America* (New York: Broadway Books, 1996), 189.

more than religious conservatives, since he did, to be sure, face the more immediate political reality of losing the nomination to Kennedy. Moreover, no one knew just how powerful religious conservatives could be until after they fully mobilized near the end of his term. The religious right's full-on mobilization was in significant respects a response to Carter's moderation, and this chapter aims to explain why.

After exploring the broader political context of the Carter administration, in which many citizens perceived Carter to be weak and ill-suited to lead as president, I will proceed by arguing that, while the same held true for religious conservatives, discordant philosophies on the mixing of religion and politics were the primary reason why they abandoned Carter by the end of his term. Certainly, his broader shortcomings on the economy or foreign affairs, for instance, contributed to Carter losing religious conservatives, just as they contributed to him losing many of his original supporters. But more than anything, what sent many religious conservatives searching for a new political ally was the fact that, in a shifting political milieu in which the moral and social issues they cared most about were gaining increasing traction, they and Carter differed drastically in their opinions concerning how religious belief should inform and influence political action. For Carter—a moderate Baptist who adhered to a traditional Baptist attitude on church-state separation—pursuing the public interest in his role as a civil officer superseded instituting his own private religious beliefs. For the emerging group of religious conservatives, their private belief, which, to them, was God-ordained and biblically derived, *was* the public interest and should be applied directly to all issues, especially moral and social ones. Put differently, they were culture warriors while Carter

proved not to be—a vexing reality for an emerging and increasingly influential group in search of a political partner.

*The Carter Disappointment Part I: The Broader Political Context*

Expectations for the Carter presidency were high for many people, not just the religious, and in several respects, especially early on, these expectations seemed well-founded. Viewing with historical perspective, we can see several things during the Carter presidency that his base would view as important accomplishments, especially in the realms of administration and diplomacy. Among these, to name just a few, were creation of the Departments of Education and Energy, a substantial reorganization of government, civil service reform, the Panama Canal treaties, normalization of relations with China, negotiation of an arms limitation treaty, an important Egypt-Israel peace accord, and the creation of a sustained American interest in worldwide human rights. Furthermore, Carter's legislative record was on the whole respectable, well within the range of performance for the most effective modern presidents, as Stephen Skowronek has shown.<sup>5</sup> In fact, his four-year record of "success scores" on congressional votes for his program sat at 76.4%, a number higher than that of many modern presidents.<sup>6</sup> Carter could boast such legislative accolades as two energy conservation packages, the deregulation of transportation and banking, and stiffer regulation of strip mining and offshore drilling, among others. House Speaker "Tip" O'Neill even remarked, before his eventual disappointment with the president (and with no shortage of gloating over his

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<sup>5</sup> Skowronek, *The Politics Presidents Make*, 380-381.

<sup>6</sup> Richard M. Pious, *Why Presidents Fail* (Lanham, MD: Rowman & Littlefield, 2008), 109.

role), that Carter's first four months in office were more productive than "most Presidents, except [Franklin] Roosevelt."<sup>7</sup>

But this fly-by view tells only part of the story. The fact is that many of the legislative achievements during Carter's term occurred in spite of Carter, and many of his best accomplishments, no matter what the realm, still did not get to the core of America's most important issues—particularly stagflation, a debilitating energy crisis, and several important international crises. There was a prevailing perception, as these problems continually confounded the nation, that Carter was weak and ineffective, that he was not cut out for the demands of the presidency and was overwhelmed by the tasks at hand. The public seldom believed that Carter deserved the credit for positive developments, even when his legislative programs were enacted at a 76.4% clip. Conversely, as Sidney M. Milkis and Michael Nelson have noted, when Carter was overcome by major setbacks such as out of control oil prices and the Iran hostage crisis, he was also the first to receive blame. In such a situation, any president will find difficulty governing, but this seemed especially true in Carter's case given his tendency to personalize the problems of state.<sup>8</sup>

In retrospect we can see that for much of this public perception, surely Carter was to blame, since the main reason he seldom received credit and often received blame was that he made several severe miscalculations about the president's role in the politics of

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<sup>7</sup> Jimmy Carter, *Keeping Faith: Memoirs of a President* (New York: Bantam Books, 1982), 73. Whether that was accurate is less important than the fact that defenders of the New Deal were pleased with the man they had elected on the heels of eight years of Republican presidents, and there were some significant legislative achievements.

<sup>8</sup> See Sidney M. Milkis and Michael Nelson, *The American Presidency: Origins and Development, 1776-2007*, Fifth Edition (Washington, D.C.: CQ Press, 2008), 359. Stuckey makes a very similar argument with regard to human rights when she states that "Carter tied human rights to his personal ethos. . . . He connected it to the overarching goals and ethos of his administration and to his political party." See Stuckey, *Jimmy Carter, Human Rights, and the National Agenda*, 71.

governing. For Carter to retain the political capital he had entered office garnering, one or both of two things were required—either good Washington relations or good public relations, preferably both. But Carter seemed at times interested in neither. This was particularly detrimental in his case since not only was his support shallow, but also because he underestimated the ill-will he had engendered by shortsightedly deprecating Washington as an evil place when he first ran for office as an outsider.

The latter was a sin that might be forgiven by Washington insiders with a little coddling, but Carter neglected—and at times scoffed at—this sort of activity, and the election gambit came back to haunt him when the realities of policy making materialized. Carter’s relationship with Congress was strained at best, acerbic at worst, despite the fact that it was controlled by two-thirds Democratic majorities. Part of this stemmed, as Charles O. Jones has argued, from the fact that Carter came to Washington to do what was “right,” not what was “political,” and he saw Congress as composed of reelection-oriented delegates of parochial interests who were misguided and weak. Conflict, thus, seemed inevitable, since Carter rejected the interest-group liberalism and bargaining tactics that had come to mark the legislative process of his era.<sup>9</sup> He was notoriously intolerant of political processes and was unwilling to “grease the legislative wheels” by engaging those activities he scorned as “merely” political.<sup>10</sup> As Carter would later note, “I learned the hard way that there was no party loyalty or discipline when a complicated or controversial issue was at stake—none. Each legislator had to be wooed and won

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<sup>9</sup> Charles O. Jones, *The Trusteeship Presidency: Jimmy Carter and the United States Congress* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1988).

<sup>10</sup> See Stuckey, *Jimmy Carter, Human Rights, and the National Agenda*, xix-xxii.

individually. It was every member for himself, and the devil take the hindmost!”<sup>11</sup> Such a context required close attention to the politics of governance, but Carter, as Mary E. Stuckey notes, tended to act as if his was the only reasonable and appropriate approach to policy, which Washington insiders and members of Congress with far greater policy-making experience found to be both disrespectful and frustrating.<sup>12</sup> Carter also staffed the West Wing with a sort of Georgia spoils system (the “Georgia Mafia,” as it became known), wherein longtime loyalists filled important posts despite inexperience in congressional relations and the ways of Washington. Tip O’Neill, arguably the most important figure on Capitol Hill, reported to have met with Carter’s chief political operative and eventual chief of staff, Hamilton Jordan (whom he called “Hannibal Jerkin,” incidentally), only three times during the four years Carter was in office—a fact indicative of Carter’s miscalculations and hardly a recipe for effective governance in the face of complex problems requiring legislative solutions.<sup>13</sup>

Of course, such a strategy can be workable, but it requires an ability to employ the “rhetorical presidency,” to go over the heads of Congress and appeal to the American people directly for support.<sup>14</sup> Carter resisted this approach, despite the fact that he seemingly had the ability to stir a crowd, as he had shown in the campaign. But once in office, Carter often chose not to employ those gifts, usually viewing public persuasion in the same way he viewed legislative pandering—as contrived, unnecessary, and “merely”

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<sup>11</sup> Carter, *Keeping Faith*, 80.

<sup>12</sup> Stuckey, *Jimmy Carter, Human Rights, and the National Agenda*, xix.

<sup>13</sup> This is reported in Fred I. Greenstein, *The Presidential Difference: Leadership Style from FDR to George W. Bush* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2004), 135.

<sup>14</sup> The literature on the rhetorical presidency is vast, but see, most prominently, Jeffrey Tulis, *The Rhetorical Presidency* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1987).

political. This came despite efforts of his close allies to convince Carter of rhetoric's potential power in harnessing popular support, and thus of maintaining political capital.

As his former chief of staff Jack Watson put it,

Men and women will differ on this point, and God knows there is much ground for difference, but I'm among those who believe that one of the elements we need in our leaders is passion and a capacity for inspiring, an ability to use the rhetorical phrase and a call to duty. You don't want to overuse it because its force will evaporate. But President Carter was always loath to do it.<sup>15</sup>

It is thus no surprise that Carter had difficulty maintaining public support.

In actuality, Carter was better suited as a technocrat. He was someone who appreciated the intricacies of policy making, believing that technical mastery of a complex situation was the best hope for solving big problems. This was Carter "the engineer." But he often eschewed some or all of the three important things necessary to put that skill set to proper use in solving the great "malaise" of his day: a unifying vision for his program; a willingness or ability to "go public" for his cause; or an ability to relate well to Congress (the actual policy makers) to hammer out policy solutions. The result was that Carter found himself in a precarious political situation, at odds with the Washington insiders and at the same time unable to sustain a wide but shallow political base in the electorate. So, when the problems of the nation mounted, Carter seemed to find himself too often in the position of blame.

More than any specific events, what hounded Carter's presidency most was the economy, which saw simultaneous inflation and production slowdowns throughout his term in office. Although seldom can a president alone fix an ailing economy, Carter at times seemed lost in trying, never settling on a consistent strategy for addressing inflation

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<sup>15</sup> Jack Watson, "Third Session of Carter Presidency Project," Miller Center Interview, University of Virginia, April 17, 1981, available from <http://millercenter.org/scripps/archive/forum/detail/63>.

or production slowdowns, the twin pillars of stagflation. Despite a soaring approval rating in late 1978, which came on the heels of his deft negotiation of an Israeli-Egyptian peace agreement, the woeful economy continued to confound Carter and sent his approval rating plummeting to a dreadful 29 percent in 1979. So, in July that year, he retreated to Camp David with 100 academics, clergymen, business and political leaders to try to discern the roots of the nation's problems. Ten days later Carter addressed the nation to declare a "crisis of confidence that strikes at the very heart and soul of our national will." The problems, he pronounced, were much "deeper than gasoline lines or energy shortages, deeper even than inflation or recession." Instead, they had to do with the people's morale and with the misguided priorities of many Americans. The culture had become too materialistic and too distrustful—not just of government, but of churches, of leaders, and of neighbors. This might have been true, and thus it might have been an act of virtue to identify the problem and to attempt to remedy it, but this was risky politics—whether Carter knew it or not. In effect, he was blaming the people more than the politicians or elites for the country's problems (something Reagan would later note and capitalize on), and it was up to the people collectively to find their way out of the great "malaise." The solution, he noted, involved a clear choice for the American people:

We are at a turning point in our history. There are two paths to choose. One is a path I've warned about tonight, the path that leads to fragmentation and self-interest. Down that road lies a mistaken idea of freedom, the right to grasp for ourselves some advantage over others. That path would be one of constant conflict between narrow interests ending in chaos and immobility. It is a certain route to failure. All the traditions of our past, all the lessons of our heritage, all the promises of our future point to another path, the path of common purpose and the restoration of American values. That path leads to true freedom for our Nation and ourselves.<sup>16</sup>

Immediate responses to this pivotal speech were fairly positive—the risk was paying off and Carter sounded by many accounts visionary and inspirational—but that would change quickly. Two days later, in an unusual and disquieting turn of events, Carter undermined the positive effects of his speech by demanding resignation letters from his entire cabinet. After accepting several of them, he also changed course by naming a chief of staff (something he had avoided up to that point since he believed he could manage his own White House and because he wanted to avoid the “imperial” perception of the Johnson and Nixon White Houses). The public perception was that Carter’s White House was in disarray. This was not the message the president wanted to project immediately on the heels of pronouncing that there were major problems facing the nation. This only further contributed to the idea that Carter was indecisive and not cut out to lead in conquering the tasks at hand. And an inability to deal with some of the crises that would arise in the coming months—chief among them the inability to take back the American hostages in Iran and the pronouncement that he was shocked by the Soviet invasion of Afghanistan—seemed to spell the end for Carter. Many of his original

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<sup>16</sup> Jimmy Carter, “Address to the Nation on Energy and National Goals: ‘The Malaise Speech’,” July 15, 1979, John T. Woolley and Gerhard Peters, *The American Presidency Project* [online]. Santa Barbara, CA: University of California (hosted), Gerhard Peters (database). Available from World Wide Web: <http://www.presidency.ucsb.edu/ws/?pid=32596>. Carter, it bears noting, never used the word “malaise” in this speech, which is commonly known as the “malaise speech.” This was a word fixed to the speech by media in the speech’s immediate aftermath.

supporters—especially those to his far left and his far right—began to doubt the President’s abilities, and it was clear, if nothing else, that his original political alliance had long since faded away.

*The Carter Disappointment Part II: The Rise of the Religious Right*

Among those who had by this time jumped ship were the growing numbers of politically active religious conservatives. For many of them, the story of Carter’s disappointment was much the same, but on a smaller scale and for some slightly different reasons. Their hopes, after all, had started high. Even despite the fact that the *Playboy* controversy during the waning months of the campaign had been cause for some suspicion, for many religious conservatives, there was early optimism for a Carter presidency, and Jimmy Carter was still a “miracle.”

In a great affirmation of that high hope, Carter spent time between Election Day and inauguration engaged in several public religious activities. He attended several churches in Georgia during that time, and knowing that his every move was being “watched closely by religious leaders . . . who are curious about what kind of personal style will emerge from his born-again faith,” Carter also stated publicly that White House decorum would be changed to comport with his Southern Christian lifestyle. Most prominently, he announced in an interview with *People* magazine that a Carter White House would impose a “wine only” policy for social functions.<sup>17</sup>

Inauguration day, too, provided a great affirmation of religious conservatives’ hope in a Carter presidency. First, although he was not directly involved, many who

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<sup>17</sup> “Inauguration Day, 1977: Heralding a New Spirit,” *Christianity Today*, February 4, 1977, 50-51.

were close to the president-elect took part in a newsworthy inauguration-morning “People’s Prayer Service” on the steps of the Lincoln Memorial. A crowd of more than 5,000 gathered in sub-freezing temperatures to pray for Carter and to listen to words from his Plains pastor, Bruce Edwards, as well as his evangelist sister, Ruth, and his most visible campaign supporter, Rev. Martin Luther King, Sr. Although Carter was not present, he did watch the service on television before attending a similar service of his own—a private “Pre-Inaugural Service of Prayer” at First Baptist Church in Washington. Included in that event were the prayers and homilies of several clergy, including Charles Trentham of First Baptist and Carter’s long-time “prayer partner,” Nelson L. Price.<sup>18</sup>

Further compounding these hopes, Carter’s first words as president, on the grandest of national stages, were no doubt pleasing to believers. “In this outward and physical ceremony,” he opened his inaugural, “we attest once again to the inner and spiritual strength of our Nation.” He then brought attention to the fact that, in an unorthodox (and intriguingly pious) move, he had been sworn in on two Bibles not one, and the one that he placed his left hand on was opened to the verse that would frame his ambitions as president (Micah 6:8): “He hath showed thee, O man, what is good; and what doth the Lord require of thee, but to do justly, and to love mercy, and to walk humbly with thy God.” “This inauguration ceremony marks a new beginning,” he continued, “a new dedication within our Government, and a new spirit among us all.” Finally, “I join in the hope that when my time as your President has ended, people might say this about our Nation: that we had remembered the words of Micah and renewed our

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<sup>18</sup> “Inauguration Day, 1977: Heralding a New Spirit,” *Christianity Today*, February 4, 1977, 51.

search for humility, mercy, and justice.”<sup>19</sup> Biblical instruction and a Christian ethic, it was clear, were to be central to a Carter presidency.

Even so, while each of these words and acts probably served to maintain the hopes of many Christians who had been excited by the prospects of an evangelical in the White House, it is clear that while Carter uttered the words and engaged in the actions, he and the emerging bloc of religious conservatives were moving apart from one another, on different trajectories, with regard to how they wanted to mix religion and politics. As religious conservatives’ influence was on the rise and as the social and moral issues they cared most about were being pushed to the fore of national political debates, this difference proved ultimately to be the chief source of their political divergence with Carter.

During the campaign, and even during his inauguration, Carter had been quick to mix religion and politics, which is to say that he openly talked of his Christian faith and the fact that it would come to bear in some important ways on how he would govern. Religious conservatives, on the whole, liked that idea insofar as their religious worldviews had likewise come increasingly to inform their political ones as they began to engage in the political process. Clearly, they and Carter were compatible—or at least that is what many of them thought in 1976. In point of fact, what we can observe in retrospect are two things: first, that by and large evangelicals initially misunderstood Carter and his approach to mixing religion and politics, something that was easy to do given that Carter’s words on the subject were not entirely clear or always consistent with

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<sup>19</sup> Jimmy Carter, Inaugural Address, January 20, 1977. John T. Woolley and Gerhard Peters, *The American Presidency Project* [online]. Santa Barbara, CA: University of California (hosted), Gerhard Peters (database). Available from World Wide Web: <http://www.presidency.ucsb.edu/ws/?pid=6575>.

his record; and second, that as a political movement, they began abruptly and without thorough reflection on the complexity of politics, and there was thus, for many religious conservatives, considerable uncertainty as to how and in what areas faith should come to bear on the political process. As their commitment to social and moral issues came more clearly into focus, and as they then began to understand how Carter brought his religious beliefs to bear on those issues, they began to see some irreconcilable differences with the President. Thus, they and Carter would eventually split ways.

All of this merits exploration, but let us begin by seeking to understand Carter's view of religion and politics—something we can discern by examining his words and actions in light of one another. We know, of course, that a religious message had been prominent on the campaign trail, and Carter was explicit that his faith would be central to his politics. “My decisions as a political leader . . . are affected heavily by my Christian beliefs,” he had noted while becoming the first Democrat to address the NRB. “I spent more time on my knees as governor of Georgia than I had spent all the rest of my life put together because I felt the responsibility of many other people's lives. I cling to the principles of the Judeo-Christian ethic.”<sup>20</sup> This was no doubt exciting to the devout, who, like many, were disgusted by the moral laxity of Washington. Here was an outsider and an evangelical who could go in and clean things up. He “would not tell a lie,” and even better, he prayed 25 times a day. To religiously devout political neophytes (and to many others, to be sure), this sounded like a panacea for the ills of the 1960s-1970s. Even Carter acknowledged that his piety was a political asset:

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<sup>20</sup> Jimmy Carter, in *The Presidential Campaign 1976*, 967.

I had adopted . . . I think an attitude of piety that aggravated some people, but also was the root of my political success in 1976. People wanted someone who wasn't going to tell another lie, who was not going to mislead the public and who was going to try to reestablish, in my judgment, ethics and morality in international affairs. That's what I offered, and that's what I tried to carry out.<sup>21</sup>

Yet, we must put Carter's religious campaign rhetoric—the first, remember, to be so expressly religious in modern campaigning—in the proper context of the first post-Watergate and post-Vietnam election. It was natural for Carter to talk about his religion—just like the navy and the peanuts, noted Greg Schneiders—but he was doing so primarily as a means of appealing to Americans' desires to restore honesty and integrity to the nation's highest office and to regain morality and credibility in the nation's conduct abroad. The credibility gaps of Johnson, Nixon, and even to some extent Ford, needed to be corrected, and that could only be done by someone who was honest and who had a moral vision. Carter would appeal then to his honesty and morality, and believing sincerely that he possessed those virtues and that they emerged from his religious belief, he thus appealed rather naturally to those beliefs.

What we notice with a little scrutiny, though, is that Carter was most often appealing to the role of faith in the political *process*—not necessarily in the political *outcomes*. There was some merit to the charge that Carter was “fuzzy” on the issues, and his main campaign appeals were based on personal traits and how those traits might restore integrity to the practice of Washington politics. As a campaigner he would of course broach the desired outcomes (“the issues”), and at times he would even do so with an emphasis on how his faith might provide the foundation for policy goals, but with the

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<sup>21</sup> Jimmy Carter, Miller Center Interview, “Carter Presidency Project: Final Transcript, Interview with Jimmy Carter,” November 29, 1982, available from [http://web1.millercenter.org/poh/transcripts/ohp\\_1982\\_1129\\_carter.pdf](http://web1.millercenter.org/poh/transcripts/ohp_1982_1129_carter.pdf), quote on p. 66.

advantages of retrospect and close examination, we can see that his summoning of faith was not based on a desire to impose a set of values. For Carter, Christian faith supplied the deep commitments to honesty, peace, human rights, justice and mercy. But these were all imperatives that could be found outside the Christian faith and might easily be deemed worthy of American pursuit by a plural society. Carter's own private faith might have been the basis for *his* beliefs in these things, but he had no interest in instituting that dogmatically—a subtle, yet significant distinction that Lee Canipe has noted was as old as Carter's Baptist tradition itself. That is, in the Baptist tradition, the freedom to follow Jesus effectively ends where matters of conscience become matters of state.<sup>22</sup> Religion and politics *can* effectively coexist, can do so well, and in many cases perhaps *should* do so, Carter asserted, but for him, there was a line, sometimes difficult to define, that ultimately separated the two when personal beliefs encountered governing decisions. He said as much in 1978, when speaking to a group of Southern Baptist men, noting that “you can't divorce religious belief from public service,” but “at the same time, of course, in public office you cannot impose your religious beliefs on others.”<sup>23</sup> For Carter, it was his civic duties and the national interest, not his private religious beliefs, that ultimately won out in providing the basis for his decisions as president.

To be sure, the two were not always—nor *usually*, according to Carter—dissimilar, although it is here where we must examine Carter's words in light of his record. Regarding the compatibility of his religious beliefs and his political duties, Carter

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<sup>22</sup> Lee Canipe, “Can a Baptist Be President? Jimmy Carter and the Possibility that John Smyth May Have Been Right After All,” *Journal of Church & State* 50 (Spring 2008): 282.

<sup>23</sup> Jimmy Carter, “Remarks to Members of the Southern Baptist Brotherhood Commission,” June 16, 1978, John T. Woolley and Gerhard Peters, *The American Presidency Project* [online]. Santa Barbara, CA: University of California (hosted), Gerhard Peters (database). Available from World Wide Web: <http://www.presidency.ucsb.edu/ws/?pid=30961>.

told the Baptist Brotherhood early during his term that “Separation [of religion and the affairs of state] is specified in the law, but for a religious person, there is nothing wrong with bringing these two together. . . . I have never detected nor experienced any conflict between God’s will and my political duty. It’s obvious that when I violate one, at the same time I violate the other.”<sup>24</sup> As will become clear momentarily, the latter part of this statement is slightly problematic in light of Carter’s record—and even in light of some later statements on the subject. That is, it was rarely as seamless as he intimated here. Yet, this exposition is tremendously insightful in helping us to understanding how Carter, as president, approached the mixing of religion and politics.

“Bringing these two together” is the key phrase here. Carter never intended, as many might have read the above statement, to simply translate religious beliefs into political action or to impose it for the sake of policy outcomes. Carter was no theocrat, something that was abundantly clear to all observers. Rather, “bringing these two together” meant, for Carter, making sure that religious beliefs and political action were compatible if possible. He left open what would happen if they were not, and if we explore his record, we see that “God’s will” and Carter’s political action were at times difficult to reconcile. When this occurred, Carter’s recourse was to pursue the broader public interest over his personal beliefs, then subsequently to make every effort possible to “bring these two together”—to minimize cognitive dissonance, in other words—which at times, no doubt, required extensive “rationalization.” The sometimes great lengths required to make such rationalizations offer proof that at the end of the day, Carter’s personal beliefs would lose out to what he felt was required of him in his civic role. This

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<sup>24</sup> Jimmy Carter, “Remarks to Members of the Southern Baptist Brotherhood Commission.”

becomes clear by examining his record in two important areas—foreign policy and abortion—the latter of which contributed significantly to religious conservatives’ eventual divorce with Carter.

“Bringing these two together” without any conflict between “God’s will” and the national interest seemed to occur most easily in foreign affairs where the national desire, if not the national tradition, was to conduct a foreign policy based on morals, virtues, and ideals.<sup>25</sup> This is also an area in which the president is given the most freedom to act unilaterally, and thus to determine how compatible personal beliefs and policy goals might be. Carter began his term with promises of a new foreign policy, one drawn from the imperatives of justice, peace, compassion, and human rights—imperatives that he noted were biblical, but could also be embraced by a plural people, many of whom did not share his religion. In this sense, there was no “conflict between God’s will and [Carter’s] political duty,” since his approach was dually justifiable in both civil and religious realms. In fact, Carter frequently made arguments concerning the same foreign policy, sometimes based exclusively on his Christian beliefs and other times based exclusively on the national interest. Consider the following two statements. “My own religious convictions are deep and personal. I seek divine guidance when I make a difficult decision as President and am supported, of course, by a common purpose which binds Christians together in a belief in the human dignity of mankind in the search for worldwide peace.”<sup>26</sup> Seven months later, Carter said: “I believe we can have a foreign

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<sup>25</sup> A number of works broach the American tradition of morals in foreign affairs, but see, most notably, Claes G. Ryn, *America the Virtuous: The Crisis of Democracy and the Quest for Virtue* (New Brunswick, NJ: Transaction Publishers, 2003).

<sup>26</sup> Jimmy Carter, “The President’s News Conference,” Warsaw, Poland, December 30, 1977, John T. Woolley and Gerhard Peters, *The American Presidency Project* [online]. Santa Barbara, CA: University

policy that is democratic, that is based on fundamental values, and that uses power and influence, which we have, for humane purposes. We've fought fire with fire, never thinking that fire is better quenched with water. . . . We can no longer separate the traditional issues of war and peace from the new global questions of justice, equity, and human rights."<sup>27</sup> Stuckey is thus correct in arguing that Carter "made human rights an issue that stemmed logically, if not inevitably, from the widely shared sense of national identity."<sup>28</sup> But clearly, his deepest private religious values also played a role, as those beliefs and the foreign policy philosophy he laid out were one in the same; there was no "conflict between God's will and [his] political duty." Foreign affairs thus seemed to be an "easy" realm in which to "[bring] these two together."

But stating a philosophy and serving as commander in chief are hardly the same things, and when the realities of world politics presented themselves to Carter, which of course did not take long, it became clear that the president was willing to give his religious (and philosophical) ideals a backseat to the *realpolitik* concerns of America's national security. As Gaddis Smith has suggested, Carter began his presidency in the mold of another idealistic Christian president, Woodrow Wilson, but he drifted gradually and steadily toward a more hard-line approach as events beyond his control—the hostage crisis and the Soviet-Afghan war, for instance—sent the administration into a perpetual

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of California (hosted), Gerhard Peters (database). Available from World Wide Web: <http://www.presidency.ucsb.edu/ws/?pid=7075>.

<sup>27</sup> Jimmy Carter, "University of Notre Dame—Address at Commencement Exercises of the University," May 22, 1977, John T. Woolley and Gerhard Peters, *The American Presidency Project* [online]. Santa Barbara, CA: University of California (hosted), Gerhard Peters (database). Available from World Wide Web: <http://www.presidency.ucsb.edu/ws/?pid=7552>.

<sup>28</sup> Stuckey, *Jimmy Carter, Human Rights, and the National Agenda*, 71.

state of crisis.<sup>29</sup> Carter was thus forced to rationalize the fact that his religious beliefs were seemingly incompatible with his civic duties, and in so doing he showed that his first priority was to fulfill his civic duty.

To be sure, this was not terribly difficult in the realm of foreign policy, as there had been considerable groundwork laid for Christians in such a situation. In fact, it was Carter's hero, Reinhold Niebuhr, who had done much of that work. Niebuhr had provocatively written four decades earlier that what is moral for the individual can be dangerously naïve (and thus ill-advised) when applied to the affairs of state, and what is conversely defensible for the national interest, "a purely individual ethic must always find embarrassing."<sup>30</sup> As Canipe notes, Carter's Baptist tradition had long since reconciled itself to Niebuhr's distinction between what *ought* to be and what *is* in the public square. For Baptists entrusted with civil responsibilities, the *is* eventually must always trump the *ought*; to believe otherwise gives undue influence to private convictions over public policy.<sup>31</sup> So, Carter could easily justify the manner in which he rationalized the seeming incompatibility between "God's will" and his political duties. As he stated in 1977, providing a moral basis for foreign policies would not confine him to imprudence. It "does not mean that we can conduct our foreign policy by rigid moral maxims. We live in a world that is imperfect and which will always be imperfect—a

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<sup>29</sup> Gaddis Smith, *Morality, Reason, and Power: American Diplomacy in the Carter Years* (New York: Hill and Wang, 1986). Thanks to Canipe for pointing me toward Smith's take on Carter's idealism.

<sup>30</sup> See Reinhold Niebuhr, *Moral Man and Immoral Society: A Study in Ethics and Politics* (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1932), xi.

<sup>31</sup> Canipe, "Can a Baptist Be President?," 290.

world that is complex and confused and which will always be complex and confused. I understand fully the limits of moral suasion.”<sup>32</sup>

Thus, as his actions in the realm of foreign affairs made clear, Carter was willing to abandon his religious beliefs for the sake of a civic duty when the two seemed, *prima facie*, incompatible, but this was not terribly problematic to religious conservatives for at least two reasons. First, as theologians and ethicists had made clear, the ethics of conducting a moral and theologically sound foreign policy were much more complex than meets the eye. Giving personal religious beliefs a backseat to politics may in fact be the most ethical thing for the Christian to do. But second, and perhaps more importantly, with the exception of several hard-right, fundamentalist anti-Communists during the 1950s, foreign affairs were hardly what galvanized religious conservatives. In other words, it was nice that Carter intended to bring a particular Christian worldview to bear on his decisions in international relations, but the fact that he ultimately gave these religious beliefs a backseat to the national interest was not as galvanizing for religious conservatives as his disappointments on other issues, largely since foreign affairs and national security can be so arcane to the everyday observer—especially when those observers are brand new political converts. In short, it was not foreign policy that steered religious conservatives increasingly toward politics; it was domestic issues of church and state as well moral and social issues. So, when Carter’s Baptist belief that matters of personal conscience should be subordinated to his civic duties came face-to-face with such hot-button issues such as abortion and homosexual rights, fundamental differences

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<sup>32</sup> Carter, “University of Notre Dame—Address at Commencement Exercises of the University.”

with Carter more readily presented themselves to religious conservatives, who in turn became disappointed in the leadership of their fellow believer.

As became clear when they pressed these issues, Carter was not willing to compromise his public-private hierarchy on anything, even abortion, the issue that came to top evangelicals' political agendas while Carter was in office. For Carter, reconciling a theological and deeply personal opposition to abortion with his role as president was difficult but not impossible, and once he made the reconciliation in his mind, he decided not to take up the fight against abortion, something that would prove deeply disappointing, even infuriating to religious conservatives. The way Carter reconciled his religious beliefs and civic duties was straightforward. He decided that carrying out his presidential oath to faithfully execute the laws, and thus to be true to his promises, was the first priority, even if it meant executing laws with which he theologically disagreed; the civic duty trumped a religiously motivated struggle. When it came to abortion, as president he merely rationalized letting the one win out over the other, and it is here that he abandoned his earlier statement that the two were always compatible:

I never have found any basic incompatibility between my commitment as a Christian and my honoring the oath of office that I took as president or as governor. I swore before God on inauguration days that I would enforce the laws of my country and support the constitution of our nation. I was never tempted to violate those oaths, so there was very little incompatibility that ever existed. The *one exception to that*, for me at least, was on the subject of abortion. It's inconceivable to me that Christ would approve abortion just as a means to control birth. In the case of a mother's life or—that would be an extenuating circumstance. But at the same time I was sworn before God to uphold the laws of my country as interpreted by the Supreme Court which is the constitution of our country [sic]. So, that was a difficult problem for me. So, I rationalized it—which I guess we have to do in many cases in our daily existence [emphasis mine].

He continued, “That was the one issue on which I felt that there was a difference between perhaps my duties as a president to uphold the laws as they were then interpreted and my feelings as a Christian.”<sup>33</sup>

This course would prove telling and costly, since “God’s will,” for Carter, was seemingly losing out to his civic duty and to broader public concerns, something that called the sincerity of his Christian beliefs into question among religious conservatives, who took a much more straightforward approach. Rather than “fight the good fight of faith,” Carter “weakly” proposed that “positive action should be taken in better education, better family planning programs, the availability of contraceptive devices for those who believe in them, better adoption procedures.”<sup>34</sup> Such an approach to dealing with abortion seemed rather spineless to hard-liners, such as Falwell, who believed that “if our President . . . will take [a] stand on holy living, we can turn this country around.”<sup>35</sup> Carter’s argument that he, as president, could do little besides education to stop abortion seemed to fall on deaf ears, even when he promised that on those matters where he could exercise some control, he would, arguing against federal funding and appointing administrators with his same views. He expounded upon that two months into office:

I have to abide by the laws of the land as interpreted by the courts. Joe Califano, who’s the new Secretary of HEW, feels the same way I do against abortions. I think he has done everything possible within the law to prevent Federal funds from being used to pay for abortions. I would like for the Congress to take whatever steps they can under the Constitution to eliminate this encouragement for abortions. I think that this is something that is more deeply felt by people than any issue that arose during the recent [1976] campaign. And I don’t know what

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<sup>33</sup> Jimmy Carter, quoted in “Insights into the Faith of a President: Interview with President Carter by Bill Summers,” *Baptist History and Heritage* 32 (January 1997): 45-46.

<sup>34</sup> Jules Witcover, “Carter Finds his Words are Watched,” *Washington Post*, January 27, 1976.

<sup>35</sup> Jerry Falwell, *Listen, America!* (New York: Doubleday and Company, 1980), 17.

else I can do, except under the law itself and with the appointment of my own top administrators, to try to hold down the need for abortion. The other thing that we will do is this: Under the new revised welfare system, we'll do everything we can to provide a permanent, nationwide system of family planning, to make sure that as much as humanly possible to encourage that every child is a wanted child [sic]. And we'll try to give families a chance to make sure that they can avoid unwanted pregnancy with adequate instruction, to provide birth control opportunities for those who believe in them, and also make sure that there is a government attitude to discourage abortions as much as possible. But there is a great deal, as you know, that we cannot do to prevent abortions completely. But what we can do under the law we are doing and we'll continue to do it.<sup>36</sup>

Despite the promise that he was doing all he could under the law, Carter's argument was not satisfying to many religious conservatives, in no small part because he was speaking in a code that even they understood, using a slogan of Planned Parenthood ("Every child is a wanted child"). Even though it was principled and justifiable given his constitutional limitations as president, many religious conservatives believed that their supposed ally—who had both the same theological position as theirs on abortion in addition to the biggest bully pulpit of anyone in the country—was shirking his duties to fight against the taking of innocent life by hiding behind objectionable interpretations of the law and thus affirming the law as it existed. Maybe he could not end abortion by fiat—nor by any constitutional measure, since the president has no role whatsoever in amending that document—but their point was that as an evangelical with moral qualms about the practice, he was in the best position of anyone to provide rhetorical leadership for the cause of outlawing abortion. He, more than anyone, had to execute those laws, so he, more than anyone, should protest them if he disagreed. Carter refused, never offering an argument more forceful than the one above, and the numbers of abortions continued to

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<sup>36</sup> Jimmy Carter, "Clinton, Massachusetts Remarks and a Question-and- Answer Session at the Clinton Town Meeting," March 16, 1977, John T. Woolley and Gerhard Peters, *The American Presidency Project* [online]. Santa Barbara, CA: University of California (hosted), Gerhard Peters (database). Available from World Wide Web: <http://www.presidency.ucsb.edu/ws/?pid=7180>.

increase during Carter's term in office; the situation was only becoming direr. So, it quickly became clear that Carter's lukewarm position and his emphasis on fulfilling civic duties over implementing religious beliefs was not going to be sufficient for religious conservatives.

Carter, as was becoming clear, was not a culture warrior. He did cling to many traditional personal beliefs on hot-button issues, thus leaning toward the "orthodox" side of James Davison Hunter's cultural battle lines,<sup>37</sup> but because he attempted to navigate a middle way rather than force what he saw as his private beliefs, Carter found himself in the crossfire of the culture war. It was a paradox: his personal beliefs were "orthodox," but his political actions were "progressive." Those to his left were disappointed in the moderate course the President was attempting to steer by not allowing federal funds, for example, while the emerging religious conservatives to his right realized they did not have a White House ally for the fights they cared most about because Carter the president would give a backseat to Carter the Christian.

Given that religious conservatives were increasingly succeeding in putting moral and social issues like abortion, "family values," and homosexual rights at the forefront of national political debates, and given that the two polar sides were committed to fighting fiercely on such issues, Carter found himself in a precarious political situation by the latter half of his term. Culture war issues began to reach a fever pitch by the late 1970s, and Carter was proving an impotent leader to both sides. So, without Carter's help, several elite religious conservatives began to become involved in politics to fight for the

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<sup>37</sup> James Davison Hunter, *Culture Wars: The Struggle to Define America* (New York: BasicBooks, 1991). Hunter, who has written the most influential work on culture war, delineates the "orthodox" and "progressive" sides of the American culture wars.

orthodox cause, bringing their religion to bear on the political process and hoping that they could mobilize a force to make sure that the progressives—or the “secular humanists,” as they preferred to call them—would not win.

Many of these elites shared Carter’s evangelical faith, but as they had discovered, they aimed to bring those beliefs to the public square in a manner wholly different from how Carter mixed religion and politics. While Carter the moderate Baptist would subordinate religious belief to what he perceived to be the public interest, these evangelical and fundamentalist elites saw the two as one in the same. That is, to them, America would be blessed if it honored God in its public policies—the same argument the Puritans had made in the early Republic. Creating laws that honored God, then, was in the public interest. And based on the view that their personal beliefs emerged straight from God (usually by way of biblical mandate), their personal beliefs therefore *were* the public interest. It is clear, therefore, that Carter and this emerging group of religious conservatives were moving in different directions, and the results, as the religious conservatives gained steam and were discovered by Republican-leaning political operatives, were not good for Carter.

Conservative activists Richard Viguerie, Howard Phillips, and Paul Weyrich, whom historian Steve Bruce termed “the Holy Trinity,” clearly saw the difference between Carter and the ruminating evangelical elites. They capitalized on these differences by trying to coordinate these elites’ diffuse efforts into one powerful movement, thus driving the wedge between the emerging Christian right and Carter even deeper. Their creation—a masterful one given the speed, complexity, and effectiveness with which it emerged—was the New Christian Right, which sought in no uncertain

terms to mobilize as many Christians as possible into a massive political movement, aimed at reclaiming traditional (read “conservative religious”) values and winning the culture war. While the mobilization of religious conservatives in politics had been slow—beginning, as it did, as early as the 1940s—the exact opposite can be said for how effectively they emerged once the Trinity provided the vision, the leadership, and the infrastructure in 1979-1980.

Each of these men was a veteran conservative activist. Viguerie was an evangelical, Weyrich an Eastern Rite Catholic, and Howard Phillips a Jew, and despite longstanding ties to the Republican Party, each had grown increasingly frustrated throughout the 1960s and 1970s by the GOP’s continued moderation. Given the contumacy of the party machine, they had been willing to move outside the traditional confines of the Republican Party to further their causes when the party proved mulish, and like many during their era who saw the proliferation of interest groups as a viable option, they formed a host of single-issue PACs aimed at furthering conservative causes in the 1970s. Yet, as veterans of the conservative movement, they were continually pulled by the same forces that had long kept the movement generally within the party, namely the fact that, as John H. Aldrich has observed, parties, being malleable, are often the most suitable institutions through which political actors can advance principles and policy preferences.<sup>38</sup> So although Viguerie and Weyrich often described their activities as “bipartisan,” this was hardly the case. It is much more accurate to say that they instead put principle above party and were driven by an independent streak that often left them at odds with the Republican Establishment. To wit, Viguerie and Phillips had formed the

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<sup>38</sup> John H. Aldrich, *Why Parties? The Origin and Transformation of Political Parties in America* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1995).

Campaign for the Removal of the President in 1974 not because of Watergate, but because of Nixon's liberalism. Their affections were even less for Gerald Ford, who eschewed Reagan on his right as a V.P. pick and reached left instead for Nelson Rockefeller, portending a host of other liberal inclinations held by the president. In other words, these men stood to the right of the Republican Party. The Democrats, in their minds, were a lost cause, outflanking even the most liberal of Republicans. They therefore had no hope of changing the Democratic Party, so they stuck, if at times reluctantly, by the Republicans.

Ultimately, then, their efforts were oriented toward making the Republican Party thoroughly conservative, in the hope that the Party might then be the means through which to affect real change in American life. After two decades of near-misses and continued frustration, it was abundantly clear to these three that the conservative movement's economic and anti-Communist platforms alone would not be sufficient for such a goal. Fed up with the failures of the "Old Right," and convinced that their predecessors had failed to develop a coordinated political strategy sufficient for taking over the GOP, the Trinity became far more interested in hard-nosed politics and political mobilization than their forebears had been. With ideas to expand the conservative cause beyond individualism and anti-Communism, they came to call themselves the "New Right." Viguerie's *Conservative Digest* understood that "the millions of [religious conservatives] in America were a political army waiting to be mobilized."<sup>39</sup> Their vision, then, was to creatively combine the various individual social-issue constituencies that had popped up around the country—such as the Bryant-led Miami revolt against gay rights or

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<sup>39</sup> Quoted in Bruce, *The Rise and Fall of the New Christian Right*, 59.

the various efforts against the ERA—into a sustainable multi-issue movement that might combine forces with the veterans of the conservative movement who had long been active in the Republican Party. So, the Trinity moved—quite shrewdly—to bring several of the most active evangelical elites on board with conservative politics, in the hope that they might mobilize the troops on the ground for the same cause. Together, then, Weyrich, Phillips, and Viguerie birthed the New Christian Right under the broader umbrella of the New Right, with sights set on using newly mobilized religious voters to reformulate a conservative Republican Party once and for all and thus to alter the American political landscape.

Their main way to the sheepfold of religious conservatism was through Ed McAteer, who had been the Southeastern sales manager for Colgate-Palmolive for 25 years and a conservative activist. As he traveled his sales region, McAteer slowly built up a network of conservative churches from several different denominations. In 1976, he quit his work with Colgate-Palmolive to work as national field director for the Christian Freedom Foundation, educating churches about government, politics, and the free enterprise system. In these various capacities, McAteer developed relationships with churches and with conservative activists, including the Trinity. By 1979, McAteer was in position to put the Trinity in touch with several eager and prominent preachers who were interested in politics, most importantly Jerry Falwell and James Robison. Having held “I Love America” rallies on the steps of state capitols around the country since 1976, and having more recently worked alongside several other religious broadcasters in the late 1970s against both the IRS and the ERA, Falwell had begun to realize that “he was moving into new territory, and he liked the lay of the land. He also recognized he was

not alone.”<sup>40</sup> That is, Falwell had discussed with his friends and fellow television preachers Charles Stanley, D. James Kennedy, and Robison the ways they might work together in response to the growing moral crisis occurring in American life. By early 1979, Stanley, who pastored the massive First Baptist Church of Atlanta, had already disseminated hundreds of thousands of copies of his sermon, “Stand Up, America,” in which he had urged conservative Christians to become active in politics for the sake of moral causes. Kennedy, a megachurch pastor in Florida, was also introducing more political content to his televised sermons.

In Texas, Robison was embroiled in an epic fight against WFAA, the Dallas ABC affiliate, which had pulled his nationally syndicated Christian talk show that February after Robison made denigrating comments about homosexuals. Upon doing this, WFAA received a major backlash as thousands of Christians mobilized to protest the decision, just another one of the many efforts around the country in which pockets of religious conservatives rallied to affect major change at the local level. What made this particular event special was the fact that Robison’s “Freedom Rally”—held in the immediate aftermath of the WFAA decision—overflowed the Dallas Convention Center and brought together Robison, Falwell, W.A. Criswell, and other prominent preachers with McAteer, Weyrich, Phillips, and Viguerie. At the event, Robison delivered a stirring speech that caused the audience to come “unglued,” to use his word, when he began with the rhetorical question “Why am I here?” Answering his own question, he declared:

I’m here to announce my intention to maintain freedom, to blast the avowed enemies of freedom, to challenge the assassins of freedom, to demand the rights of our freedom, to dedicate ourselves to the noble cause of freedom, to enlist an army of the defenders of freedom, to enlighten the minds of people concerning the

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<sup>40</sup> Martin, *With God on Our Side*, 188.

tragic losses of freedom, to file my objections concerning the abuses of freedom, to generate concern for reapers of freedom, to gain a new hold on freedom. I'm here to halt the infringements against freedom, to implement ways to maintain our freedom, to insist on the full privilege of freedom, to magnify the importance of freedom, to muzzle the wounds of freedom, to oppose the foes of freedom, to object to the losses of freedom, to wrestle the foes of freedom, to yell for the cause of freedom, and to zero in on the shortage of freedom. That's why I'm here tonight.<sup>41</sup>

Robison eventually won the battle when WFAA—overwhelmed by the protest and subsequent threats of advertisers to withdraw their accounts—put him back on the air. But more important than this local and short-term victory, the Dallas rally also brought Robison and Falwell together with Weyrich and Phillips, who had shown up on McAteer's counsel when McAteer determined that it was nigh time all of these men met one another to begin the work of coordinating a nationwide movement. Robison, it turned out, provided just the right spark. He recalled that Weyrich and Phillips, especially, had been moved:

I remember Paul Weyrich and Howard Phillips, they were standing by Ed McAteer and both had tears in their eyes at the Freedom Rally, and they turned to Ed McAteer . . . as I was speaking and they were watching the crowd. And they looked at Ed, and they said, "For the first time, we see hope for America to return to the principles that made us strong. We see hope for our freedom. . . This is the first time we've ever seen this potential." And Ed told me that later, he said, "You just need to know how moved these [men] were."<sup>42</sup>

The excitement of that night turned quickly into action. McAteer, together with Robison, founded Religious Roundtable that spring in an effort to energize conservative Southern Baptist and evangelical ministers. Roundtable joined the ranks with one other upstart Christian group—Robert Grant's nascent Christian Voice—which had worked

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<sup>41</sup> James Robison, Interview with the author, June 19, 2009. Transcript in the author's possession. Robison read his 1979 speech text to me during the interview.

<sup>42</sup> Robison, Interview with author.

with Bob Billings (of IRS controversy fame) in the effort to create a “Christian majority in a Christian Democracy” by assembling “scorecards” that rated legislators according to their stands on various issues deemed critical to conservative Christian voters. With these two groups in place, the other important bloc that needed to be mobilized, according to Weyrich and Phillips and their new field lieutenants, was the growing network of independent Baptist and “Bible” churches. The man to head that operation, in their minds, was Falwell, who had expressed his clear interest in political action and had impressed Weyrich and Phillips in Dallas just weeks before. In May, only two months after the Dallas meeting, Weyrich and Phillips joined McAteer, Billings, and Falwell at the Holiday Inn in Falwell’s hometown of Lynchburg, Virginia, to help Falwell, who “didn’t know what he wanted to do and . . . certainly didn’t know how to do it,” begin the work of mobilizing religious conservatives for conservative politics. Together the political veterans tutored Falwell, who as a prominent television preacher and self-starter—having grown the Thomas Road Baptist church from a few dozen members to several thousand—was eager for the task of political mobilization. The group spent much of this meeting discussing the issues on which a Falwell-led organization could focus—with abortion topping the list since that would mobilize conservative Protestants and also attract traditionally Democratic Catholics. Such a focus would also put Carter in a precarious spot. The group devoted considerable attention to how they might influence the Republican Party in 1980. The Trinity clearly saw the GOP as the best means through which to make lasting changes. From that meeting also came a name—the Moral Majority.<sup>43</sup>

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<sup>43</sup> See Martin, *With God on Our Side*, 199-200.

The organization officially launched a few weeks later in June 1979, with headquarters in Washington, DC. It boasted a board of influential ministers such as Stanley, Kennedy, LaHaye, and Greg Dixon, who were committed to mobilizing their own flocks and encouraging fellow ministers to do the same. Bob Billings, who had been another strong link between Falwell and the Trinity, having served with Weyrich the year before in founding their anti-IRS organization, was named the executive director of the Moral Majority, Inc. This was to ensure that there was some political know-how guiding the operation. And now with these three major organizations in place—the Moral Majority, Christian Voice, and Religious Roundtable—the NCR was born, with the Trinity of political organizers at the helm. The political pros, noted Weyrich, functioned as “sort of the operations people. It [was] our job to tell them, ‘Okay, here is what to do.’”<sup>44</sup> Or, put differently by political scientist Michael Lienesch, “Far from a ‘grass-roots’ uprising, the religious right was organized from the top down.”<sup>45</sup> It entered politics according “to the master plan of the New Right.”<sup>46</sup>

This marked for the New Right activists their largest and most prominent effort to date to erect the broad coalition for a sustained conservative counteroffensive, one they had long hoped to launch. And the key to doing it successfully, they believed, was to emphasize above all the social issues that had already been effective in galvanizing pockets of religious conservatives around the country and could be deemed acceptable by many of the traditional conservatives who emphasized economics and anti-Communism.

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<sup>44</sup> Quoted in Himmelstein, “The New Right,” 26.

<sup>45</sup> Michael Lienesch, “Right-Wing Religion: Christian Conservatism as a Political Movement,” *Political Science Quarterly* 97 (1982): 409.

<sup>46</sup> Quoted in Himmelstein, “The New Right,” 26.

By 1979, most religious conservatives had developed consensus on what they saw as strictly *moral* issues—abortion, homosexual rights, women’s liberation, and the role of religion in public life—and so the task for the New Right and its mobilizers was to convince religious conservatives in the churches of America that these were legitimate *political* issues, worthy of the sustained political and social commitment they had been loath to demonstrate. The way to do this was to have conservative Republicans who were in office or who were running for office emphasize that Republicans could help deliver changes on these issues. The preachers would supply a crowd, and the politicians would try to win them over.

Falwell, quickly after forming the Moral Majority in June 1979, headed a July rally on the steps of the U.S. Capitol that was attended by 12,000 people. Addressing the crowd, thanks to Weyrich and Phillips, were Senators Jesse Helms (R-NC) and Gordon Humphrey (R-NH) and Rep. Robert Dornan (R-CA), each of whom encouraged the group to be steadfast in its efforts to combat the liberal forces in American society. By appearing, they showed that it was the Republicans who were committed to the NCR’s moral causes. A similar rally was held by Roundtable in September, bringing conservative clergy together to meet with several veteran Republicans. Speaking to that group were Senator Humphrey, Phyllis Schlafly of ERA/IWY fame, Richard Dingman of the House Study Committee, Dallas pollster Lance Torrance, Clay Claiborne of the Black Silent Majority, and of course Phillips, Weyrich, and Viguerie. Among the ministers in attendance, remembers Viguerie, were Billings, newly minted Southern Baptist Convention President Adrian Rogers (the first conservative president following the conservative takeover of that denomination), Bob Dugan of the NAE, G. Cameron

Townsend of Wycliffe Bible translators, Ben Armstrong of the NRB association, and John D. Beckett of Intercessors for America.<sup>47</sup>

In addition to these rallies, the activists also quickly employed the direct-mail genius of Viguerie, who had used this new technological tactic to much avail for several individual political causes throughout the late-1970s. At the Holiday Inn meeting, Falwell had spoken of seven million families on his mailing list—probably an exaggeration, we now know—and of similar lists held by other televangelists. Viguerie, no doubt, had known of such lists, but they had been hard to come by given the historic political reluctance of many evangelicals as well as the threat of poaching faced by traveling evangelists who solicited donations. So while it had been difficult up until 1979 to tap the Christian market for direct-mail, that changed quickly once Falwell was willing not just to cooperate, but to help lead the way. Viguerie tapped in knowing full well how powerful direct-mail could be, since it enabled users to say things they might otherwise not be able to say using more public media. Using his massive list, Falwell flung his message wide, noting, for instance, that “we are losing the war against homosexuals,” a war that must be countered with political action on behalf of moral causes. In this particular piece he offered proof by noting that

Gays were recently given permission to lay a wreath on the Tomb of the Unknown Soldier at Arlington Cemetery to honor any sexual deviants who served in the military. That’s right—the gays were allowed to turn our Tomb of the Unknown soldier [sic] into: THE TOMB OF THE UNKNOWN SODOMITE!<sup>48</sup>

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<sup>47</sup> See Viguerie, *The New Right*, 154-155. Viguerie reports of “Houston pollster Lance Thomas,” but he meant Dallas pollster Lance Torrance.

<sup>48</sup> Martin, *With God on Our Side*, 204-205.

In short, what is important to note is that the political professionals were doing a masterful job of employing various inroads to affect religious conservatives on the ground. On the one hand, they spent considerable effort coordinating with their field lieutenants—Falwell, Robison, Stanley, Billings, Kennedy, LaHaye, and others—to reach clergy members, who in turn were to affect their parishioners. But to bolster this effort, they also went straight to the source, using Viguerie’s direct-mail prowess to speak directly to the masses. And the vision was not meager; their aim sounded nothing short of revolutionary. As Viguerie reported it, the foundation of the Moral Majority would be fundamentalists, especially “the estimated 15 million Americans who watch Falwell’s ‘Old Time Gospel Hour’ regularly. Rev. Falwell has a remarkable base to work with.” Adrian Rogers, he went on, “represents 38,000 churches and 13 million Southern Baptists” as president. Christian Voice “enlisted 37,000 clergymen from 45 denominations” in just a short time, the effects of which would be great once the clergy brought their parishioners on board. In total, “The potential of such a coalition is tremendous. There are an estimated 85 million Americans—50 million born-again Protestants, 30 million morally conservative Catholics, 3 million Mormons and 2 million Orthodox and Conservative Jews—with whom to build a pro-family, Bible-believing coalition.”<sup>49</sup> And there was no doubt about which political party would work for that coalition.

Never mind that some of Viguerie’s figures were flat-out wrong, or even that he grossly failed to understand the dynamics of polity and authority within many Protestant

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<sup>49</sup> Viguerie, *The New Right*, 162-164.

denominations.<sup>50</sup> What was important was that one of two things was taking place. Either these men really believed it was within their power to sway the votes of some 85 million Americans just by putting some effort to it, or they simply had in mind to threaten political candidates with such power by shifting the terms of the political debate more toward culture war issues. In either case, the effect was the same: prominent religious conservatives were committed to stirring a yet-unmobilized mass from their pews based mostly on moral and social issues, and it was in politicians' vested interests to pay attention.

They went to work quickly and at the highest levels of government. The first major instance in which the emerging NCR aimed to affect political change at the national level, and indeed the most visible instance that exhibited the fissuring difference between their mix of religion and politics and Carter's, was ironically at an event that Carter convened with the hope of salvaging religious conservatives' support—the nationwide White House Conference on Families (WHCF)—which occurred in late 1979 and 1980.<sup>51</sup> The idea for such a conference had been borne out of Carter's 1976 campaign when “family issues” were gaining saliency. He found that he needed Southerners, Catholics, and conservative Protestants to turn out in his favor at the polls. Candidate Carter declared that “The American Family is in trouble. It is clear that the national government should have a strong pro-family policy, but the fact is that our Government has no family policy, and that is the same thing as an anti-family policy.

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<sup>50</sup> For instance, Martin reports that Falwell's regular viewers numbered slightly fewer than one million. See Martin, *With God on Our Side*, 204.

<sup>51</sup> The term “conference” is a little misleading. The WHCF was actually a series of state meetings, wherein delegates were elected to one of four national meetings that took place around the country. The whole effort was headed up by Carter appointee Jim Guy Tucker.

Because of confusion or insensitivity, our Government's [sic] policies have often actually weakened our families, or even destroyed them." So, having delayed long enough on this issue and sensing the urgency of losing what conservative support he had been able to retain, Carter established the WHCF in 1979 to "examine the strengths of American families, the difficulties they face, and the ways in which family life is affected by public policies."<sup>52</sup> Its goals were noble, if naïve, aiming, among other things, "to initiate broad nationwide discussions on families in the United States," "to develop a process of listening to and involving families themselves," "to recommend new policies designed to strengthen and support families," and "to encourage diverse groups of families to work together."<sup>53</sup>

Noble and well intended as these goals were, what Carter failed to take into account was the fact that by the time he got around to convening this conference, "the debate over the family [had] acquired a life of its own,"<sup>54</sup> largely because the NCR had begun the task of mobilizing and altering the content of national political discussions to include moral and social issues. Carter's meticulous effort to account for "the regional, racial, ethnic, and religious diversity of this country"<sup>55</sup> did not make matters any easier for someone who was already in the difficult spot of trying to lead from the middle in a fervent debate. Although that might have been good statesmanship, it was bad politics

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<sup>52</sup> White House Conference on Families, *Listening to America's Families: Action for the 80s, A Summary* (Washington, D.C.: US Government Printing Office, 1980), 56.

<sup>53</sup> WHCF, *Listening to America's Families*, 58.

<sup>54</sup> Hunter, *Culture Wars*, 274.

<sup>55</sup> WHCF, *Listening to America's Families*, 12.

for someone hoping to salvage the religious conservatives, for whom “family values” were front and center and whose definitions were not matters for debate.

Not surprisingly, politicization of the conference began almost immediately. As feminist and gay rights groups entered the fray looking to expand the traditional definitions of family to include single parents and unmarried or homosexual couples, the newly energized NCR prepared to fight tooth and nail for traditional definitions—or no government involvement in the family at all. In so doing, the NCR hoped to expand its nationwide outreach and to mobilize more troops on the ground for a sustained fight against the “secular humanists.” Early on, the progressives succeeded on several fronts, not the least of which was the fact that what was originally conceived of as a “White House Conference on the Family” became the White House Conference on *Families*. Furthermore, famous family “defenders” and social conservatives such as Phyllis Schlafly were kept out of the proceedings while liberals such as Marian Wright Edelman of the Children’s Defense Fund were invited to participate. Moreover, liberal groups such as the National Organization for Women (NOW) and the National Abortion Rights Action League (NARAL) mobilized their memberships and dominated several state delegations, such as New York, while exerting some influence on many other states outside the South.

For their part, religious conservatives saw these developments as greater reason to become involved. Even though WHCF would be somewhat of a different cause from what had previously rallied pockets of religious conservatives, given that it was a national cause, leaders saw this as no impediment. As brand new Moral Majority executive director Bob Billings later noted about their efforts in the WHCF,

We had resolved a lot of the problems with the Christian schools, and in a way we were almost like the March of Dimes. They raised enough money and found a cure for polio, then decided they didn't want to go out of business, so they found another cause. Now it's all birth defects. Well, by this time we had motivated and spurred a lot of Christians to involvement, so we had a small army and needed another battle to fight.<sup>56</sup>

The forces on the right tapped as their leader for this cause Connaught "Connie" Marshner, who had gotten her start in YAF at the University of South Carolina before developing a close relationship with Weyrich and Phillips in the middle 1970s. After working as a sort of early liaison between these New Right operatives and religious conservatives, plowing the ground for what became the NCR, Marshner began to edit a newspaper called the *Family Protection Report*, which aimed to monitor the impact of public policies on the traditional family. Carter's announcement that he was convening the WHCF was of course right up her ally, so alongside various NCR leaders, she mobilized as many religious conservatives as she could for involvement in state conventions, which would elect delegates to the national conference and help decide what items would be on the conference agenda. Her efforts, in many ways, were successful insofar as religious conservatives responded in several states. Falwell and his Lynchburg contingent, for instance, came to the Virginia state convention by the busload, and a similar turnout occurred in Michigan, enabling religious conservatives to dominate those conventions and send mostly their own as state delegates to the national conference. However, seeing how effective such early efforts had been, several governors and state leaders aimed to avoid similar developments in their states and thus decided to limit the number of *elected* delegates from their conventions to the minimum number required by the White House, exercising their rights to select the rest and insure diversity of opinions.

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<sup>56</sup> Quoted in Martin, *With God on Our Side*, 174.

This, of course, led conservatives to complain—rightfully—that the deck was being stacked against them, which inflamed their passions even more. In the end, when only 250 of some 1,500 national delegates came from the conservative ranks, the religious conservative activists, who were doubtless the most passionate of any conference observers, were incensed that they had been muted by the White House, which drove them even further away from Carter—the exact opposite of the conference’s original intent. Thus, the religious conservatives resolved to act in whatever ways they could.<sup>57</sup>

In the face of these numbers, it became clear that the conference would head in a liberal direction and would probably end up endorsing the ERA, abortion on demand, and certain homosexual rights. So, religious groups around the country held prayer vigils in protest since they had been shut out. And for those who had been allowed to attend, Marshner—who had herself secured a spot as an at-large delegate when conference chair Jim Guy Tucker relented and invited her to insure that conservative views would be adequately represented—staged a boycott in the form of a well-publicized walkout. “Families,” she said, “consist of people related by heterosexual marriage, blood, and adoption. Families are not religious cults, families are not Manson families, families are not heterosexual or homosexual liaisons outside of marriage.” Homosexuals, given a more sympathetic welcome at the conference than the boycotters, did not appreciate being lumped together with mass murderer Charles Manson, but gladly bade Marshner and her fellow-walkers “good riddance.”<sup>58</sup>

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<sup>57</sup> For a fuller discussion, see Martin, *With God on Our Side*, 174-177.

<sup>58</sup> Kenneth J. Heineman, *God Is a Conservative: Religion, Politics, and Morality in Contemporary America* (New York: New York University Press, 1998), 111.

As the conference spun out of control, it was immediately clear that the president's efforts to reclaim his bona fides among religious conservatives had been a flop, and he was stuck in the middle of a bitter and symbolic fight over values, rather than leading a discussion on the mounting economic concerns facing families in the 1980s. It was a far cry from assembling diverse groups of families to "work together" toward solutions, which had been one of the conference's original goals. And while many of the 125,000 participants at WHCF state forums had focused, as intended, on economic issues, Tucker lamented that by the time the national gatherings convened, those concerns had been overshadowed by "a denial of the realities of family life today, in a nostalgic search for easy answers. . . . [The result was] a bitter partisan and ideological conflict over families."<sup>59</sup> It was, to be sure, a quintessential culture war, and not only was Carter the one who had convened it, he was also the one who stood to lose the most, standing in the crossfire and engaging in what both sides viewed as neutered leadership on vitally important questions about values.

As far as the newly mobilized religious conservatives were concerned, here in plain view was the clear distinction between Carter's view on religion and politics and theirs, for despite similar religious views, their politics could not be more different. He seemed to be rolling over and acceding to the democratic process—or worse, stacking the deck of that process to ensure liberal outcomes—rather than using his political position to further religious principles. They fought; why couldn't he?<sup>60</sup>

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<sup>59</sup> Quoted in Marvin Stone, "Focus on the Family," *U.S. News and World Report*, May 5, 1980, 88.

<sup>60</sup> There are certainly grounds for arguing that Carter was adopting a position that was actively hostile to the religious beliefs of a large number of Americans—in other words, he was taking the clearly liberal side in this fight. That is, many Americans did not want to use the government to enforce religious

For Carter, the whole affair was disconcerting, since by then it was high noon for the 1980 election. To stop the bleeding, he did make one last ditch effort to reach out to religious conservative elites, hosting a White House breakfast in January 1980—the day before his most important State of the Union address—for a small group of conservative ministers including Falwell, Oral Roberts, Rex Humbard, Jim Bakker, Kennedy, Stanley, and LaHaye. But like the WHCF, this did not go well, and for predictable reasons. When, early during the breakfast, someone pointed out that a group of marchers was assembling across the street for the annual March for Life in opposition to *Roe v. Wade*, Carter made a statement on abortion that they considered vague—not surprising given his position on the issue. When asked about the fact that there were few evangelicals in his administration, Carter apparently hedged again. Then, the same held true for the ERA, remembered Tim LaHaye, who asked,

Why he as a Christian and a pro-family man, as he protested to be, was in favor of the Equal Rights Amendment in view of the fact that it would be so harmful to the family, and he gave some off-the-wall answer that the Equal Rights Amendment was good for the family. Well, I knew when he said that that he was out to lunch. We had a man in the White House who professed to be a Christian, but didn't understand how un-Christian his administration was.<sup>61</sup>

The group, it was clear, had discovered once and for all that their differences with Carter were fundamental and irreconcilable. They might have had similar religious beliefs, which had been exciting in 1976, but recognizing how those played out for Carter

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perspectives, but neither did they want to use government to undermine them. This was the “moderate” position, and it was the one getting squeezed out by the fight. Conference leaders were arguably as responsible for that as the religious right. Carter’s role in “stacking the deck” is in some ways unclear. It is possible, but not known, that he led out in the efforts to have governors stack the deck against mobilized conservatives in state conventions. If in fact he played an active role, then no doubt, he was on the liberal end of this fight. If he did not, and simply allowed governors discretion in appointing delegates, then in fact his position was agnostic if not moderate. Either way, he wasn’t fighting for the conservative cause, and this was the major cause for concern among religious conservatives.

<sup>61</sup> Quoted in Martin, *With God on Our Side*, 189.

in practical politics was, by 1980, deeply disappointing; the luster had long since gone. After the breakfast, while waiting for a limo to take him back to his hotel, LaHaye recalled that he turned reflective.

I stood there and I prayed this prayer: “God, we have got to get this man out of the White House and get someone in here who will be aggressive about bringing back traditional moral values.” And little did I know that several others prayed essentially the same prayer. We got into this limousine, and here were some of the leading ministers of America, and they were stone silent. It was just like depression had settled on all of us. We all had made a commitment to God that day that, for the first time in our lives, we were going to get involved in the political process and do everything we could to wake up the Christians to be participating citizens instead of sitting back and letting other people decide who will be our government leaders. And ever since then we’ve been trying to get people involved by just waking Christians up to the realization that we can no longer vote Republican or Democrat or Independent. Christians have to vote for the candidate most deeply committed to moral values, because if he’s going to represent us, he’s going to have to represent our moral values.<sup>62</sup>

Carter, it had been made manifest, was not their man. They knew it by early 1980, and so did he. What no one knew at that point, though, was how effectively religious conservatives nationwide would galvanize under the banner of the New Christian Right later that year, not only forcing candidates to adopt strategies aimed at winning them over en masse, but also changing the parameters of national political debates for decades to come.<sup>63</sup>

In an unprecedented turn of events, three devout evangelicals, each with seemingly sincere and theologically conservative religious beliefs—Jimmy Carter, John B. Anderson, and Ronald Reagan—would emerge as legitimate contenders for the

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<sup>62</sup> Quoted in Martin, *With God On Our Side*, 189-190.

<sup>63</sup> There is a view, no doubt warranted, that conservative Christians were reacting to what they saw as an attempt by liberals to use government to attack their beliefs. In other words, religious conservatives did not put the ERA or abortion on the agenda; liberals did, and religious conservatives could either capitulate or respond. But the ERA, for example, passed in Congress with wide bi-partisan support and wasn’t necessarily cause for much debate until religious conservatives forced it back onto the agenda.

presidency and were thus presented with opportunities to curry the favor of the NCR and other religious conservatives based partly on those beliefs. Given that the door had been opened to religious appeals in 1976, and given, too, that religious conservatives had succeeded in forcing social and moral issues into the mainstream of American political debates, appealing to these religious beliefs and values was fair game for 1980, and each candidate, to some degree, had a religious story to which these voters might relate.

But the Carter “disappointment” had made at least one thing abundantly clear: being an evangelical with orthodox religious beliefs was not enough. Those beliefs had to translate into a proper admixture of religion and politics, wherein personal religious beliefs were not held subsidiary to civic duties or the broader concerns of a plural society. Rather, to win the favor of religious conservatives in this new milieu, candidates would have to profess that conservative religious beliefs and the public interest were one, especially on social issues. And they must follow that profession with action, or risk breaking communion with the NCR.

## CHAPTER SIX

### The Birth of a New Religious Politics in 1980

Having formed during a presidential administration that proved not only disappointing but unreceptive, the New Christian Right stood at its greatest crossroads leading up to the 1980 election, positioned and motivated to have its ambitious goals realized by affecting government, for the first time, through presidential elections. Its goals, broadcast emphatically, were to create a society that was “promoral” and “profamily,” ideals that could be realized exclusively through “godly” leadership, since, according to Falwell’s characteristic argument, “Only by godly leadership can America be put back on a divine course. . . . We must have leadership in America to deliver God’s message.”<sup>1</sup> The way to ensure “godly” leadership was to affect elections, more specifically for “moral Americans [to] band together . . . and rise up against the tide of permissiveness and moral decay that is crushing in on our society from every side.”<sup>2</sup> Such permissiveness and decay could be fought most effectively, NCR leaders reasoned, if “godly” leaders and fellow “promoralists” were sent to take up residence in all levels of government, but most importantly in the White House, the nation’s highest office. So, the NCR mobilized leading up to the 1980 election in an unprecedented way, the most immediate consequence of which was an altering of the terms on which the presidential election would be decided. Because of its sheer size, boisterousness, novelty, and momentum, and also because of the press’s fascination with this new political entity and

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<sup>1</sup> Jerry Falwell, *Listen, America!* (Garden City, NY: Doubleday, 1980), 17.

<sup>2</sup> Falwell, *Listen, America!*, xi, 17.

the mystery surrounding just how influential it might be, the NCR altered the terms of the election. Its leadership claimed to know best what and who were “promoral” and “profamily,” and by following their lead Americans were promised that they could change the face of American politics based on these moral standards. The natural response was that some candidates clamored for the NCR’s support based upon the “promoral” and “profamily” standards it espoused. However, there was also a mirrored response to this movement—typified, perhaps, by a counter-slogan that read “The Moral Majority is Neither.” Some voters were offended by claims that the NCR possessed the exclusive corner on what was “promoral” and what was “profamily.” As a result, pockets of voters outside the NCR became receptive to candidate appeals that validated their own moral standards and “family” values, creating a context in which values of a slightly different stripe would be the media through which some other candidates might appeal for votes among constituencies other than the NCR. The result was that the 1980 election became one that was based in an unprecedented manner on “religious,” “family,” and “moral” values—of several different varieties.

After just missing out on the Republican nomination and possibly the presidency in 1976, Ronald Reagan began to notice that not only were the newly emergent and influential religious conservatives growing exponentially in both their size and in their discontent with Carter, they were also at least mildly interested in his specific candidacy as a means through which to have their political ambitions realized. Having built a career championing the conservative movement—which, as we have seen, focused mostly on economic libertarianism, small government, and anti-Communism, often with little emphasis on religion—Reagan saw a tremendous opportunity to add religious

conservatives to the traditional conservative cause, which had finally gained long-sought control of the Republican Party. NCR leaders actually approached Reagan with a flirtation to win them over, and Reagan responded in kind, offering rhetoric that appealed in important ways to religious conservatives, helping to bring them on board the Republican cause. Reagan won over religious conservatives by crafting what I call the political religion of the right, a construct that had two basic parts: private overtures to NCR elites and public rhetoric that appealed to religious conservatives. The overtures functioned to assure the NCR elites that Reagan was a candidate worth mobilizing behind. The public rhetoric wove five important elements into what we can identify as a coherent and effective religious discourse. Those five elements were: 1) the selection and endorsement of conservative religious audiences; 2) acts of piety; 3) the highlighting of moral and social issues and the manner in which Reagan's religious beliefs would come to bear on them; 4) the spiritualization of "secular" issues; and 5) the use of the jeremiad.

Jimmy Carter tried only briefly and half-heartedly to win over the support of the growing NCR during the 1980 campaign. As James Robison recalls, "You know, Carter [once] sent one of his aides to meet with me for a couple of hours, and not one point did I agree with him."<sup>3</sup> Carter's effort basically stopped there. The Southern Baptist Sunday school teacher did little subsequently to woo the NCR, in part because he knew that it was a lost cause given the deep political disagreements. Furthermore, Carter saw his most important task as winning over and mobilizing the traditional constituencies of the Democratic Party. These, unlike the NCR, stood mostly to Carter's political left, and it

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<sup>3</sup> Robison, Interview with author.

was those constituencies who were offended most by the notion that the NCR alone knew what was “promoral” and “profamily” with regard to political action. As he had shown in 1976, Carter had the ability to make skilled and effective “values” appeals, so in his bid to win over some Democratic constituencies in 1980, he did just that, reinventing his 1976 use of religious rhetoric—which had been mostly based on piety and trustworthiness—into a construct that I call the political religion of the center-left. In this effort, Carter made concerted appeals to “religious” and “family” values—appeals, to be sure, that were less frequent and less direct than the religious appeals made by Reagan—but the “religious” and “family” values of Carter’s campaign were not based on the social issues of the right. They were instead the sorts of values that would mobilize the Democratic faithful—especially traditional constituencies such as African Americans, Hispanics, Jews, and the still traditionally Democratic Catholics—as well as any other voters who considered themselves “promoral” and “profamily” but who disagreed with Reagan’s or the NCR’s brand of cultural politics. The “religious” and “family” values Carter appealed to were tolerance, civil rights, human rights, and social justice, and together with acts of piety, they formed the political religion of the center-left.

In tandem, the political religion of the right and the political religion of the center-left, as established in 1980 by Reagan and Carter respectively, set the terms for what was to become a new era of religious politics in America. We can actually see an early confirmation that a new political reality was coming into place that year in the curious candidacy of John B. Anderson. Anderson was a moderate-to-liberal Republican who had served for two decades in the House of Representatives before entering the 1980 Republican primaries. Having failed to gain the Republican nomination, he opted to

abandon what he perceived to be a hopelessly conservative party to run as an independent. Anderson's was a viable campaign—immediately following the party conventions he polled as high as 25%, which was no doubt competitive in a three-way race—and although his support would eventually wane leading up to the election, Anderson was in fact a major player throughout the fall campaign. A devout evangelical who had gained some considerable notoriety in evangelical circles in the late 1960s and early 1970s with his efforts to cajole evangelicals toward politics, Anderson, at least in the abstract, had what one might consider to be the inside track on gaining the favor of religious conservatives in 1980. But this was not to be. In point of fact, Anderson's greatest appeal in his 1980 presidential bid was to liberals, a group among which he found a unique niche. At least partly as a result of this, he spent considerable effort during the 1980 campaign distancing himself from the NCR, which he perceived to be a parochial and intolerant perversion of the evangelical political engagement he had called for throughout the 1970s. Anderson's actions actually had more to do with liberals' and the press's pressures than with his own initiative. Indeed, if Anderson had had his own way, he would have avoided religion altogether during the campaign—partly for fear of being lumped together with the NCR, but also partly for principled personal reasons about how religion should factor into politics. But because Anderson's appeal in the campaign was to liberals, and because many of these liberals feared what seemed to be the new ubiquity of religion in American politics (and thus raised questions about the role of conservative evangelical beliefs in Anderson's politics), Anderson was *forced* into a position of having to talk about religion, not only to distinguish himself from the NCR, but also to carve out his own philosophy on religion and politics. This was an early sign

that new constraints were in place marking the dawn of a new religious era in presidential politics, despite the preferences of individual candidates.

Because it was the emergence of religious conservatives that played the greatest role in spurring this new era, and because Reagan was the only one of the three candidates to base his religion strategy on obtaining the NCR's favor, I begin by exploring Reagan's religious politics, the culmination of which was his crafting of the political religion of the right in 1980. Following that, I will move to Carter's response, which was to accept the new terms of the debate but to carve out a different set of "religious" and "family" values in his effort to rally the Democratic base, resulting in his establishment of the political religion of the center-left. Finally, I will take up the curious case of John Anderson, whose treatment of religion served as a harbinger of the fact a new era of religious politics was dawning. I close by tying together some of the broader implications of the 1980 election.

*Forging the Political Religion of the Right:  
Ronald Reagan's Religious Politics*

Of the three candidates in the race in 1980, Ronald Reagan made religious appeals that were the most frequent, most direct, and arguably the most effective. He built important relations with the elites of the NCR and created a public discourse that appealed to religious conservatives nationwide. Together these constituted the political religion of the right, a lasting construct, the contours of which merit considerable exploration. Before doing that, however, it is important first to understand who Ronald Reagan was as a religious believer, since, as I have shown, that was something largely

hidden from the public for much of his pre-presidential life, and it came to bear in essential ways on the political religion he preached in 1980.

There have been, of course, many differing accounts as to what Reagan actually believed and how that belief came to bear on his politics. Many of his political opponents, in addition to a number of journalists and scholars, have been deeply skeptical of Reagan's public piety. The broad strokes, after all, tell a story supportive of their dubiety—that Reagan was a Hollywood actor, a divorcee estranged from some of his children, and at best an irregular church attendee who seemed to turn to public piety for political purposes. On the other hand, Reagan could speak comfortably about his faith, both with regard to what he knew and what he had experienced, and many of his closest allies spoke of Reagan's authentic religious devotion. Because the accounts differ so drastically, and since, genuine or not, religion came to play an important role in Reagan's politics, it is worth trying to distill not only *what* Reagan believed, but how he brought his beliefs and experiences to bear on politics—as well as whether the manner in which he brought these to bear changed throughout his political career.

Reagan grew up in Dixon, Illinois, and his childhood was filled with some darkness. His father, Jack, was a sometimes-violent alcoholic, something that often disgraced Reagan and forced him to look to his mother and his minister for guidance throughout his early years. Jack was a non-devout Irish Catholic known to disappear for days at a time during drinking binges, while Reagan's mother, Nelle, was by stark contrast a humble and devoted servant of the Christian Church (also known as the Disciples of Christ). Jack and Nelle had met in Fulton, Missouri, around the turn of the century and married there in the town's Catholic church. Jack, who had never been

nearly as serious as Nelle in his religious practice, held to his Catholicism despite rarely attending mass, while Nelle poured heart and soul into Protestant congregations in each of the towns the two inhabited. She joined the Church of Christ in Tampico, Illinois, when the newlyweds moved there, and when they relocated to Dixon in 1920 with their two small boys, Nelle quickly became active in the First Christian Church. There she played a number of important roles: for eighteen years she taught the True Blue Class of 25 adult women in Sunday school; she was song director for the choir; she belonged to the Women's Missionary Society and headed the missions committee therein; she was a congregational leader in the effort to build a parsonage for the pastor's family; she always tithed faithfully, even despite the family's meager means; and she devoted considerable time on behalf of the church to visiting hospital patients and inmates at the local jail. Perhaps most importantly, she made sure that her two sons, Neill and Ronald (or "Moon" and "Dutch" as the town knew them, respectively), were always in church with her.<sup>4</sup>

Given the struggles and often the absence of his own father, Reagan took to his minister, Ben Cleaver, as a sort of surrogate father figure during his formative years. Reagan met Cleaver soon after moving to Dixon at age nine, and the two grew close as Reagan spent much of his youth and college years in a romantic relationship with Cleaver's daughter, Mugs. Ben Cleaver offered considerable advice and counsel to Reagan, who was often found around the Cleaver home. He taught Reagan basic life lessons, such as how to drive a car, and even got him into college at Eureka, the local

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<sup>4</sup> Considerable credit must be given to historian Stephen Vaughn for his discussion on Reagan's childhood and early religious experience. See Stephen Vaughn, *Ronald Reagan in Hollywood: Movies and Politics* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1994), 3-16.

Disciples of Christ school, which was no small feat for someone from Reagan's social circumstances in the 1920s.

It is clear that Cleaver and Nelle were the two primary spiritual influences on Reagan during his youth. But what about the Christianity they practiced? A history of the Disciples of Christ denomination (they would reject the term "denomination," but it is helpful and practical for present purposes) is less important than understanding the particular church of Reagan's formative years, although the two are of course not mutually exclusive. The Disciples of Christ had been founded in the early 1800s by brothers Thomas and Alexander Campbell and their associate, Baron Stone, in a schism from the Presbyterian Church. Despite a Presbyterian heritage, many observers, such as the authors of *The Encyclopedia of American Religions*, group the Christian Church in the "Baptist Family," noting that "Many members of the Christian Church and its sister bodies would be offended by being thought of as 'Baptists,' but they would also, upon reflection, find many reasons for being considered [alongside] the Baptist family."<sup>5</sup> Among those reasons are the fact that the Campbells belonged to a Baptist association during portions of their Presbyterian exile, but more importantly, the denomination adheres to such "Baptist" practices as believers' baptism by immersion, celebration of the Lord's Supper as a memorial meal, and the effort to restore New Testament Christianity. The Christian Church protested the division of Christianity (hence the dislike of the word "denomination"), and adhered to a creed of "Bible only." It originated in rural America and flourished during Westward expansion, particularly in the rural communities of the Middle West. And long before Cleaver joined its clergy—and long before Reagan joined

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<sup>5</sup> J. Gordon Melton, ed., *The Encyclopedia of American Religions*, Third Edition (Detroit: Gale Research Inc., 1989), 66.

the Disciples—the church established itself as a mainstream American denomination, confirmation of which was the fact that one of its own, ordained Disciples minister James Garfield, had risen to the ranks of the presidency. In the words of Stephen Vaughn,

[The Christian Church] shared views held by many other Americans at the turn of the [twentieth] century—belief in Providence, faith in progress, a nationalistic spirit that equated the country’s interests with God’s will and occasionally explained America’s mission in millennialistic terms. They believed in Anglo-Saxon superiority. They revered farmers and laborers and were against big cities and the immoral people who lived there.<sup>6</sup>

The particular congregation of Reagan’s Youth, the First Christian Church of Dixon, maintained these and several other defining traits. In Vaughn’s view, paramount among these were emphases on the brotherhood of man, limited charity, enterprise, patriotism, and above all, personal character. This meant, at least in general and relative terms, that there were few major problems stemming from racial tensions in the Dixon congregation, save only the considerable fact that African Americans were still typically viewed as inferior by parishioners. Moreover, there was at least some effort to work on behalf of the poor, although that typically only occurred if the poor were orphans, as the overwhelming sentiment was to emphasize personal responsibility, since many congregants were known to equate poverty with sin. No doubt related to this was the church’s high esteem for local businessmen, of whom there were many in the congregation. The church offered instruction in business etiquette, hosted the local Kiwanis club, and invited speakers from the business community to give such talks as “How to Do the Most and Live the Happiest.” The church also then, in this same general context, expressed a strong anti-Communist sentiment, even to such an extent that there was general disfavor of the New Deal. And New Deal or not, these were a patriotic

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<sup>6</sup> Vaughn, *Ronald Reagan in Hollywood*, 10.

people, as the Women’s Missionary Society, for instance, would open its meetings by singing “America” before reciting the Lord’s Prayer, and the Ash Wednesday service once featured a talk on Lent immediately preceding a talk on George Washington, whose birthday happened to fall on the same day that year. Finally, the church emphasized more than all of these the importance of personal character and proper conduct. Consumption of alcohol was usually frowned upon, so much so that Cleaver had supported the temperance movement and the Eighteenth Amendment. The church’s Ladies’ Aid Society put out a *Hostess Reference Book* in 1928 detailing the ways in which one should conduct oneself, ranging on issues from simple parental obedience to personal hygiene, proper etiquette in male-female relationships, table manners, and the undesirability of being a “know-it-all.”<sup>7</sup>

It is clear, indeed, based on these examples and others, that similar to many other mainline churches of the twentieth century, the emphases in Reagan’s home parish were on certain social concerns and on personal conduct. It is worthwhile here to pause for a moment to compare Reagan’s childhood religious context to the experiences of Anderson and Carter and of most of the NCR leadership, which emphasized salvation, revival, and missions—that is to say, the central tenets of evangelicalism. I should be clear that this does not preclude Reagan from relating his religious experience to that of evangelicals, especially since he gravitated toward evangelicalism (of a different sort) later in life. Nor is it to say that the Disciples were not a devout people who concerned themselves with personal salvation. Indeed, they did, and Reagan and Neill were baptized together in the church when Reagan was ten years old. But it was still an experience much different

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<sup>7</sup> See Vaughn, *Ronald Reagan in Hollywood*, 11-15.

from that of conservative evangelicalism, and Reagan, because of his background, was never a true “insider” among evangelicals. Once, in fact, when grilled by reporters during the 1980 campaign about whether he had been “born again,” Reagan was forced to write to his then-current pastor, Donn Moomaw, to inquire as to whether he indeed had been.<sup>8</sup> This illustrates the fact that Reagan’s experience was much different from that of an evangelical, and while not untranslatable, it hardly afforded him the sort of inside track on understanding the evangelical culture of the NCR that Anderson or Carter enjoyed leading up to the 1980 election—even though Anderson and Carter chose not to put such understanding to use.

Beyond his Dixon childhood, Reagan’s religious experience is a little more difficult to decipher. There are questions as to whether the religious teaching of his youth sunk in, one such skeptic being Ben Cleaver’s daughter, Helen, who was Mugs’s sister and saw Reagan up close during most of his adolescence. She questioned the depth of Reagan’s commitment to what he was taught, since in her view, even though he was in church fairly often, there “was far from any great feeling for it.” Reagan himself even noted once that he spent more time in church looking at Mugs than paying attention to the sermons. And no sooner than he reached young adulthood, while he was working his first job in radio in Iowa, Reagan turned to liquor, often in excess, until a particularly bad hangover convinced him of the merits of moderation. In these respects, one wonders about the impact of Reagan’s childhood faith. But on the other hand, there is

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<sup>8</sup> Moomaw once told this story to Kurt Ritter, Professor Emeritus of Communication at Texas A&M University. The transcript of that exchange is in the author’s possession, although Ritter asked me not to quote the interview without explicit permission from Rev. Moomaw—permission I have not officially been granted. The full cite for the interview is: Rev. Donn Moomaw, Interview with Kurt Ritter, February 26, 1996.

considerable evidence to support the idea that these teaching and experiences were meaningful and lasting. “One thing I do know,” he later told the Cleaver family in 1973, was that “all the hours in the old church in Dixon (which I didn’t appreciate at the time) and all of Nelle’s faith have come together in a kind of inheritance without which I’d be lost and helpless.” Further proof of this is the fact that when he moved to Hollywood and brought his mother with him, Reagan joined the Hollywood-Beverly Christian Church in town, where he would officially retain membership until about 1990—even if he rarely attended.<sup>9</sup>

There is little sign that religion played a central role in Reagan’s life during early and middle adulthood. In fact, Kurt Ritter has argued that Reagan’s personal turn toward religion coincided with his first run for governor of California, which occurred in 1966 when he was 54 years old.<sup>10</sup> Signs of Reagan’s ambivalence include, for instance, his profession, which was viewed with particular scorn by many religionists—the old axiom being a Hollywood actor “could not even be buried in the churchyard”—and Reagan, apart from his fight against communism, hardly ran against the grain of the Hollywood lifestyle for most of his tenure there. Likewise, he married show business confederate Jane Wyman in 1940, and despite having two children together, the two filed for divorce in 1948—a verboten practice among most devout Christians at mid-century. Reagan then met another actress, Nancy Davis, shortly after the divorce in 1949, and the two married in 1952 only *after* she became pregnant with their first child. And finally, the fact that he

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<sup>9</sup> See Vaughn, *Ronald Reagan in Hollywood*, 14-15.

<sup>10</sup> See Kurt Ritter, “The Origins of Reagan’s Religiously-Oriented Political Rhetoric: Mainstream, Evangelical, Charismatic and Apocalyptic Influences,” Paper delivered at the Speech Communication Association Convention, San Diego, CA, November 23, 1996.

did not often go to church: “He was greatly interested in what his mother was doing [in church]. . .” commented Hollywood-Beverly’s education director Elsa Mattison, “but you know actors. They are so busy.”<sup>11</sup>

Yet, while there might have been some visible “vices” during much of this span, there is substantial evidence that Reagan had not altogether abandoned the religion of his youth. To wit, he maintained his ties to the Hollywood-Beverly Christian Church, and he was even the featured speaker to its men’s group in 1952 after becoming a professional public speaker. In 1958, Reagan was asked to narrate four radio religious dramas about the Disciples in a series featuring several denominations broadcast by the National Council of Churches. It is unclear to what extent Reagan was involved in writing this program—it is doubtful that he wrote much of it since it was part of an entire drama series—but regardless, he at least tacitly agreed with the content since he was the narrator and introduced himself by name. In his trademark folksy tone, he even personalized the introduction to one of the broadcasts and waxed theological:

I’m Ronald Reagan and the program is “Let There Be Light,” brought to you by the National Council of Churches. Some people I meet, who know I am a member of the Disciples of Christ, often ask me: “How can you tell if a man is a Christian?” Because he goes to church? Maybe. By his profession of faith? Could be. Or is he a Christian because he prays, or reads the Bible, or believes in God? But then, I know many non-Christians who pray and read the Bible and believe in God. Well, then they insist: “Is there one definition for a Christian?” I tell them this: “If a person commits his life to Christ—and I don’t mean only on Sundays, but every day of the year—then he could be called a Christian.” “Hold on a minute,” they say, “That would make a man a saint, or at the very least, a minister.” Not so. I believe that an individual, you, can commit your life to Christ no matter what you do for a living. You can be a cab driver, schoolteacher, salesman, stenographer, an actor, a housewife, a doctor, lawyer, or Indian chief.

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<sup>11</sup> Quoted in Pat B. Anderson, “Friends Remember Nellie [sic] Reagan, ‘Ronnie’s Mother,’” *Los Angeles Times*, 10 May 1981: Part VII, p. 2.

“As I see it,” he continued, “the important thing is to base your life on Christian ideals, and follow through as best you can, on the job, at home, school, and at play. Today the Disciples of Christ, or Christian churches as they’re known locally, present their views on the Christian vocation. . . .”<sup>12</sup>

Reagan’s entrée into politics in the 1960s, as Ritter has argued, was accompanied by a turn back to religion, including at least some involvement with evangelicalism. In 1963 Reagan delivered a series of his standard traveling stump speeches on conservatism—the need to resist communism, lower taxes, and so forth—to a gathered audience at the newly established Bel Air Presbyterian Church. Before giving the speech, he was contacted by the church’s founding pastor, Rev. Louis H. Evans, Jr., who wanted to make himself fully apprised of Reagan’s content and intentions, since he would be using the church’s facilities and addressing many of its members. The two struck up a relationship, and the Reagans apparently enjoyed their visit to Bel Air. But as Evans recalls, at that time “the door was not open to encourage [Reagan] to [join Bel Air Presbyterian] . . . because he was . . . a member at Beverly Christian.”<sup>13</sup> Still, after giving these speeches, Reagan and his wife Nancy began to visit Bel Air Presbyterian on occasion, increasingly so when Donn Moomaw, former All-America football player at UCLA, took over the pastoral duties of the church and also befriended the Reagans. Over time this became the church that the Reagans attended more than any other, although they never became weekly attendees and did not join until much later—in 1990,

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<sup>12</sup> “The Star,” audio tape recording of a radio program narrated by Ronald Reagan and broadcast by the National Council of Churches, 1958, Disciples of Christ Historical Society, Nashville, TN. Transcript in author’s possession.

<sup>13</sup> Louis H. Evans, Interview with Kurt Ritter, 17 February 1997, transcript in author’s possession.

when Reagan's mother had passed away and the Reagans moved back to California after their stint in the White House.

Bel Air, as its founder Evans recalled, was “definitely an evangelical church, evangelistic in tone.”<sup>14</sup> Yet in several respects, there were things that differentiated Bel Air Presbyterian from a “typical” evangelical church. First is the fact that it flourished during the era of uninhibited growth in Southern California, and as such, it had a knack for attracting members who had not previously been evangelicals. In fact, largely as a result of this, the church developed at least in part into what one might classify as a “charismatic” church. Evans reports that as the congregation of previously unchurched members took shape, it came to accentuate several charismatic practices, including a prominent emphasis on the Holy Spirit in worship, speaking in tongues, and even faith healing.<sup>15</sup>

The fact that this congregation was also located in the affluent community of Bel Air added another interesting dynamic. There existed in the congregation an uncustomary juxtaposition of mystical religion with debonair high society that helps to explain some of the church's appeal to the Reagans—especially to Nancy, who was known to be attracted to both of these things throughout her life. That is, she was never, it seems, fully orthodox in her religious belief—proof of which was her well-publicized turn to astrology following the assassination attempt against her husband in 1981—but she had also always been drawn to the Hollywood “in crowds,” making every effort to move in the most prominent show business social circles throughout her Hollywood

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<sup>14</sup> Evans, interview with Ritter.

<sup>15</sup> See Robert Walker, “Church on the Mountaintop,” *Christian Life* (July 1963): 27-31.

tenure. The unconventional confluence of these two features at Bel Air Presbyterian likely had some appeal to Nancy Reagan, and in fact, Moomaw would later conjecture that it was Nancy who brought the Reagans to Bel Air, in no small part because it was an upscale church with a penchant for the mystical.<sup>16</sup>

Through Moomaw and through his attendance at Bel Air, Reagan came to know several prominent evangelicals and charismatics who seemed to have some influence on his religious beliefs and practice. One of these was Billy Graham, who accompanied Moomaw on a visit to Reagan when the newly minted governor was in the hospital recovering from minor surgery in 1967. Reagan was apparently intrigued when Graham mentioned biblical prophecies related to the second coming of Christ, and apparently Reagan was impressive in some of his knowledge on the matter. Moomaw later said that “Graham and Reagan became engrossed in a discussion of Bible prophecy in relation to the signs of the times and . . . Reagan held his own with the noted evangelist.”<sup>17</sup> In fact, Reagan became so interested in these biblical prophecies that he asked Moomaw for some literature on the subject, and a few months later Moomaw came through with a packet of material on several related subjects “concerning the return of Jesus Christ and the millennium question.”<sup>18</sup> Where Reagan had acquired his initial knowledge on the subject is uncertain. It is doubtful that it was part of his Disciples of Christ upbringing, and according to Moomaw, who himself doubts the premillennialist reading of the Bible, Bel Air Presbyterian placed no institutional emphasis on these sorts of prophecies. Yet

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<sup>16</sup> See Moomaw, Interview with Ritter.

<sup>17</sup> See William Rose, “The Reagans and their Pastor,” *Christian Life* (May 1968): 24.

<sup>18</sup> Ritter, “The Origins of Reagan’s Religiously Oriented Political Rhetoric,” 15.

somewhere along the way Reagan gained interest, and he would continue to read on these matters for some time to come. As his gubernatorial aide and sometimes religious confidant, Herb Ellingwood, reported, Reagan even read and “repeatedly discussed” with his charismatic friends Pat Boone and George Otis *The Late Great Planet Earth*, Hal Lindsey’s book of prophecies that was at once a laughingstock to many in mainstream America but a reliable and indispensable docket of God’s plans for the earth to many conservative Christians at its release in 1970.<sup>19</sup> Given this eschatological interest and the fact that it eventually became the subject of some public speculation, there have been several efforts—many of them plausible, such as an hour-long National Public Radio documentary in 1984 titled “Ronald Reagan and the Prophecy of Armageddon”—to connect these prophetic fascinations with some of Reagan’s later policy initiatives, including his “Evil Empire” philosophy and the Strategic Defense Initiative, or “Star Wars.”<sup>20</sup> Direct correlations are of course difficult to unravel from the outside, but once a controversy ignited in 1983, Reagan “came clean” about, at minimum, a long-time fascination with Armageddon in an interview with *People* magazine. He spoke of some unnamed “theologians” who had given him reliable counsel on these issues. While it is unknown exactly whom he was referring to, we can speculate, given what we know about their frequent discussions, that perhaps Reagan had in mind Graham or Otis. In any case, these theologians, according to Reagan,

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<sup>19</sup> Ellingwood reports this in Stephen D. O’Leary, *Arguing the Apocalypse: A Theory of Millennial Rhetoric* (New York, Oxford University Press, 1998), 182. To be sure, *The Late Great Planet Earth* was the best-selling “non-fiction” book of the 1970s, but this didn’t necessarily mean it was mainstream reading.

<sup>20</sup> For further discussions on Reagan and the politics of Armageddon, see Lou Cannon, *President Reagan: The Role of a Lifetime* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 1991), and Ritter, “The Origins of Reagan’s Religiously Oriented Political Rhetoric.”

Have been studying the ancient prophecies—What would portend the coming of Armageddon?—and have said that never, in the time between the prophecies up till now has there ever been a time in which so many of the prophecies are coming together. There have been times in the past when people thought the end of the world was coming, and so forth, but never anything like this.<sup>21</sup>

In any case, Reagan came to admire Graham after their end times discussion in 1967, and he made some effort to continue the relationship while he was governor. On September 26, 1969, Reagan and Moomaw listened to one of Graham's evangelistic crusades, and Reagan asked Moomaw to look into getting a printed transcript of the sermon. Moomaw followed up with Graham's staff, obtained a tape of the sermon, and Reagan's staff transcribed it for the governor. So moved was he that Reagan subsequently arranged an event that was a less than subtle mixing of church and state, inviting the evangelist to preach to a joint session of the California Legislature in a stately affair that included both houses along with the California Supreme Court and the members of the Reagan administration. In his remarks Graham encouraged the California leadership to accept the task of leading spiritually not just civically.<sup>22</sup>

Another of the important relationships Reagan cultivated, connecting him deeper with conservative Christianity—and indeed to the charismatic movement and the theology of Armageddon—was with the famous singer-turned-actor and *Late Great Planet Earth* discussant, Pat Boone. In several respects, Reagan's and Boone's relationship was not surprising; both had come to Bel Air with similar stories. Boone had grown up a devout member of the Church of Christ, which shares a close family lineage

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<sup>21</sup> Ronald Reagan, "Interview With Garry Clifford and Patricia Ryan of *People Magazine*," December 6, 1983. *The Public Papers of President Ronald W. Reagan*. Ronald Reagan Presidential Library. <http://www.reagan.utexas.edu/archives/speeches/1983/120683c.htm>.

<sup>22</sup> See Ritter, "The Origins of Reagan's Religiously Oriented Political Rhetoric," 9.

with Reagan's Disciples of Christ. He left that church, however, when he and his wife, Shirley, began to have experiences with the Holy Spirit that drew them to the charismatic movement.<sup>23</sup> Given their striking similarities—that is, similar religious backgrounds, similar professions in the Hollywood entertainment business, as well as similar apocalyptic convictions on the nature of communism—Reagan and Boone took to one another quickly. In fact, their relationship became famous when Reagan would later mention Boone in his speeches, none more famous than Reagan's "Evil Empire" speech.<sup>24</sup> Reagan had once heard Boone deliver a rousing address of his own to a packed audience of 16,000 in the Los Angeles Sports Arena, and in the "Evil Empire" speech to the National Association of Evangelicals, Reagan recalled Boone's words: "I love my little girls more than anything. [Yet] I would rather see my little girls die now, still believing in God, than have them grow up under communism and one day die no longer believing in God." Reagan, who was moved by Boone's speech, then recalled that he was not alone in this experience: "There were thousands of young people in that audience. They came to their feet with shouts of joy. They had instantly recognized the profound truth in what he had said with regard to the physical and the soul and what was truly important."<sup>25</sup>

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<sup>23</sup> Just to be clear, Bel Air Presbyterian itself should not be classified as a wholly "charismatic" church, but certainly there were charismatic pockets in the church. The Boones would only attend Bel Air for a brief time before eventually settling at the more charismatic The Church on the Way.

<sup>24</sup> Reagan did not mention Boone by name in the "Evil Empire" speech, but he did in others. The "friend" he spoke of in that speech was clearly Boone, though.

<sup>25</sup> Ronald Reagan, "Remarks at the Annual Convention of the National Association of Evangelicals," March 8, 1983. John T. Woolley and Gerhard Peters, *The American Presidency Project* [online]. Santa Barbara, CA: University of California (hosted), Gerhard Peters (database). Available from World Wide Web: <http://www.presidency.ucsb.edu/ws/?pid=41023>.

Boone became something of a liaison between Reagan and charismatic Christians, introducing Reagan to other charismatics such as Harold Bredesen and George Otis. In fact, Boone was instrumental in arranging a 1970 meeting in the Reagans' home that involved himself, Otis, Bredesen, Herb Ellingwood, and the Reagans. As Otis and Bredesen would later report, that meeting ended with a prayer by Otis as the group circled and held hands. According to Otis, the Holy Spirit entered him during the prayer, and Otis began to shake uncontrollably, which apparently ran through the others like an electric current as they held hands. As this happened, Otis claims that the Holy Spirit took over his voice and began speaking directly to Reagan, addressing him as "my son." He then prophesied: "If you walk uprightly before Me, you will reside at 1600 Pennsylvania Avenue."<sup>26</sup> The event apparently left an indelible mark on Reagan, who some ten years later, when asked if he remember it, reported to Boone, "Of course I do."<sup>27</sup> The visit also included a gift from Boone, Otis, and Bredesen to Reagan, a copy of their own 32-page premillennialist tract, *The Solution to Crisis-America*, which no doubt played to Reagan's fascination with Armageddon and provided more fodder for their discussions on the matter.

Despite this growing role of religion in Reagan's life throughout the 1960s and 1970s, there was still little in the way of a public religious persona during Reagan's pre-1980 years. There are several reasons why this might be the case, but the strongest hypothesis is the same one I posited earlier: Reagan's political ambitions were always

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<sup>26</sup> This incident is reported in several places, including George Otis, *High Adventure* (Old Tappan, NJ: Fleming H. Revell Company, 1971), 189-190. See also Bob Slosser, *Reagan Inside Out* (Waco, TX: Word Books, 1984), 13-15.

<sup>27</sup> See Paul Kengor, *God and Ronald Reagan: A Spiritual Life* (New York: Regan Books, 2004), 137.

national, and he was acutely aware that to much of America, he had ensconced a *political* reputation as a right-wing radical after his efforts on behalf of Goldwater and his taking of the torch to lead the conservative movement. So, in speaking to broad audiences—and the state of California was nothing if not a broad audience—he attempted to remain as rhetorically “reasoned and balanced,” to borrow Mary Stuckey’s words, as he conceivably could be while pushing a conservative political ideology that focused on economics, the size of government, and Communism.<sup>28</sup> Appeals to civil religion were one thing; Reagan was known to frame policy debates in the wider context of shared values on God and country. And as his longtime aide and chief pollster, Dick Wirthlin, has reported, almost instinctively, Reagan had always wanted to use “values” as a vehicle to persuade and to motivate. “What put Reagan in a league of his own [as a communicator],” Wirthlin recalls, “was his intuitive but sure understanding that values are the strategic linchpins of effective persuasion.”<sup>29</sup> But appealing to values was not the same as elaborating on one’s own religious beliefs and convictions, and for the most part, that was a practice Reagan eschewed for most of his career.

His thoughts and behavior in private circumstances were much less inhibited, however, since, as longtime friend and aide Edwin Meese recalls, Reagan “thought religion was a private matter [for much of his life], so he didn’t . . . show it on his sleeve.”<sup>30</sup> He was by no means ashamed of his relatively newfound religiosity, and if the situation presented itself as appropriate, Reagan would appeal strongly to religious

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<sup>28</sup> See Stuckey, *Getting into the Game*, 11.

<sup>29</sup> Dick Wirthlin with Wynton C. Hall, *The Greatest Communicator: What Ronald Reagan Taught Me about Politics, Leadership, and Life* (Hoboken, NJ: John Wiley & Sons, 2004), 51.

<sup>30</sup> Edwin Meese, Interview with author, June 1, 2009.

beliefs. That opportunity often presented itself in private letters, and Reagan was known to pour heart and soul into his handwritten correspondence. “I believe very much in His promise that, ‘where two or more gather in My name, there will I be also,’” he wrote to the Ripple family of Bakersfield, who had prayed for the governor with members of their church. “I think I have known and felt the power and help of those prayers.”<sup>31</sup> He once wrote to a Brooklyn resident that “What we need is a spiritual awakening and return to the morals of a Christian society.”<sup>32</sup> That, it seems, was a common theme for Reagan’s letters to citizens: “I am deeply concerned with the wave of hedonism—the humanist philosophy so prevalent today—and believe this nation must have a spiritual rebirth, a rededication to the moral precepts which guided us for so much of our past, and we must have such a rebirth very soon,” he wrote to another.<sup>33</sup> Further, “I find myself believing very deeply that God has a plan for each one of us,” he wrote to a family in New York.<sup>34</sup> He even once found occasion to rebut a liberal minister, who condemned Reagan’s personal faith in Jesus as naïve:

Perhaps it is true that Jesus never used the word “Messiah” with regard to himself (although I’m not sure that he didn’t) but in John 1, 10 and 14 he identifies himself pretty definitely and more than once. Is there really any ambiguity in his words: “I am the way, the truth and the life: no man cometh unto the Father but by me?” . . . In John 10 he says, “I am in the Father and the Father in me.” And he makes reference to being with God, “before the world was,” and sitting on the “right hand of God.”<sup>35</sup>

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<sup>31</sup> Quoted in Helen Von Damm, *Sincerely, Ronald Reagan* (Ottawa, IL: Green Hill Publishers, 1976), 82.

<sup>32</sup> Quoted in Von Damm, *Sincerely, Ronald Reagan*, 84.

<sup>33</sup> Quoted in Von Damm, *Sincerely, Ronald Reagan*, 84.

<sup>34</sup> Quoted in Von Damm, *Sincerely, Ronald Reagan*, 86.

<sup>35</sup> Quoted in Kiron K. Skinner, Annelise Anderson, and Martin Anderson, eds., *Reagan: A Life in Letters* (New York: Free Press, 2003), 276-277.

What is fascinating here is the fact that Reagan appeared to be well-versed and articulate on particular matters of Christian faith; this was not just the civil religion or appeals to broad values from his speeches. But unless one was fortunate enough to receive one of his prized hand-written letters or to reside in the inner precincts of his prayer circles or Armageddon discussion groups, there was little in the way of a *public* religious persona for Ronald Reagan prior to 1980. As Carter aide Greg Schneiders observed along these lines, sounding more Hare than Tortoise, “Who would have guessed that a divorced, non-church-going, California actor who was largely estranged from some of his kids would take the evangelical vote away from a Southern Baptist Sunday-school teacher?”<sup>36</sup> Such a sentiment, shared by many observers, led pundits to think that it was Ronald Reagan the actor, not Ronald Reagan the Christian, who took on the role of a devout and articulate Christian on the campaign trail in 1980. But this was not the case. Instead, just as Ronald Reagan had found *personal* religion when he turned toward politics in the 1960s, so he found *public* religion when he turned toward the presidency in 1980. The fact is, though, that only the public part of that was new, and it was not a stretch for Reagan to begin speaking more explicitly in public about the importance of his Christian faith. But why do this?

By 1980, Reagan had begun to understand that among a significant segment of the electorate, there was a growing desire for what he termed “inspirational leadership.” Reagan knew this mostly from Wirthlin’s polling, which had identified, according to Meese—who had become Reagan’s chief of staff and senior issues adviser for the 1980 campaign—a growing desire for someone to appeal to “religious [values] as well as

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<sup>36</sup> Schneiders, interview with author.

patriotism and the greatness of America.” These, Wirthlin had found, “were all allied with each other” and “of the same sort of inspirational quality,”<sup>37</sup> appealing to a sizeable (and even religiously diverse) segment of the electorate that lamented the liberal culture’s general turn away from traditional values and its seeming loss of pride in America. In a context in which self-identified Democrats vastly out-numbered self-identified Republicans (not to mention self-styled conservatives), Wirthlin and Reagan concluded that Reagan “had to shake the chess board of politics.” He chose to do so by appealing “in a very different way to the voters, and basically the appeal was a values driven appeal.”<sup>38</sup> In certain respects, then, attempting to mobilize this segment of the population would be natural for Reagan; “inspirational leadership” could come as an outflow of the civil religious and broad “values” rhetoric he had long employed.

But as Reagan mounted his run for president in 1980, he knew, too, that there were new and important dynamics at play *within* this broader segment of the population that required an extension and fine tuning of his traditional “values” appeals. Those dynamics were the concerted movement into politics of a group of devout religious conservatives (represented at the elite level by the NCR leadership) and the fact that, largely by virtue of this group’s engagement, the terms of national political debates had shifted to include the “promoral” and “profamily” issues religious conservatives cared most about. There was also the fact that religious rhetoric had entered the campaign vernacular in the 1976 election, and it was now seemingly fair game as a political weapon—a weapon that could be particularly potent, if used befittingly, to mobilize this

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<sup>37</sup> Meese, Interview with author.

<sup>38</sup> Richard Wirthlin, Interview with Kurt Ritter, April 22, 1993. Transcript in author’s possession.

important group, much of which had either never shown a sustained political commitment or had voted for Carter but grown malcontent. So, undergirding the broad rhetoric of “inspirational leadership,” there would need to be some rhetorical effort to appeal more directly to this sub-segment of religious conservatives, whom Reagan believed he could win over and who would provide pivotal support should he succeed in so doing.

A relationship soon developed between Reagan and the NCR. But initially, it is important to understand, it was the leaders of the NCR—who at the elite level represented this newly emergent bloc of voters<sup>39</sup>—who sought out Reagan as a possible ally, rather than vice versa. However, they did so at first with skepticism and simply to test the waters, inviting Reagan to win them over by proving that he was the type of “godly” leader they desired and was committed to the “promoral” and “profamily” causes they cared most about. Paul Weyrich, Howard Phillips, and Richard Viguerie, the political pros who were calling many of the shots for the NCR, initially had their questions about Reagan and were reluctant to support him. As Meese remembers, their

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<sup>39</sup> I should be clear that the leaders of the NCR by no means represented all religious conservatives, and certainly most religious conservatives did not take their cues directly from Falwell, Robison, McAteer, or the other figureheads of the movement. However, there is substantial evidence to support the idea that the NCR leaders represented the concerns of many newly active religious conservatives. First is a logical argument: many at the grassroots level increasingly came to vote based on their religious values, particularly on moral and social issues, and did so partly at the encouragement of their clergy, many of whom took cues from NCR leaders either because they were involved in the NCR network (via Roundtable, the Moral Majority, Christian Voice, or other groups) or because of similar convictions regarding politics as a means to remedy the increasingly secular environment around them. Political scientist Michael Lienesch has effectively shown this by arguing in a *Political Science Quarterly* piece that the NCR was indeed a “top-down” operation and an effective one at that. See Lienesch, “Right-Wing Religion.” Second, there is an empirical argument that the leaders of the NCR represented religious conservatives on the ground. Arthur H. Miller and Martin P. Wattenberg, using survey data from the 1980 National Election Study, have identified a sizeable and cohesive bloc of religious voters for whom particular conservative religious beliefs served as the foundation for political behavior. These were the same sorts of attitudes and behaviors expressed at the elite levels. See Arthur H. Miller and Martin P. Wattenberg, “Politics from the Pulpit: Religiosity and the 1980 Elections.” *Public Opinion Quarterly* 48 (1984): 301-317.

backing was hardly a foregone conclusion, since “in 1976, Paul Weyrich had denounced Ronald Reagan for bringing in Richard Schweiker [as his vice presidential pick]; Howard Phillips was never sure of whether Ronald Reagan was sufficiently conservative; and Richard Viguerie was always kind of questioning.” In other words, the leaders of the NCR were never “part of the strategic, strategy-making organization” of the Reagan campaign, but rather they were outsiders in search of a candidate who would champion their concerns, most of which were social issues and the need for “godly leadership”—things on which the Reagan record was, in their view, questionable.<sup>40</sup>

Nevertheless, they approached Reagan with invitations to speak at some of their NCR gatherings—just as they did with other candidates including Carter and Anderson, of whom they were far more skeptical—and Reagan prudently accepted these invitations because of “a recognition that this was an important group of people” who could provide crucial support. Plus, noted Meese, “their views and their values seemed to be very similar to Ronald Reagan’s personally,” and Reagan recognized that this fact would be invaluable in his effort to mobilize religious conservatives’ support.<sup>41</sup> He simply had to convince them that he was their man.

Given Carter’s and Anderson’s rebuffs, simply acknowledging the NCR’s importance went a long way toward securing its backing for Reagan, but acknowledgement alone would not be enough to mobilize religious conservatives nationwide behind Reagan’s candidacy. So, after the leaders reached out to him, Reagan reached back, both privately at the elite level and publicly to those at the grassroots, the

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<sup>40</sup> Meese, Interview with author.

<sup>41</sup> Meese, Interview with author.

result of which was a relationship between Reagan and religious conservatives that “just kind of developed,” to borrow Meese’s wording.<sup>42</sup> There was no question from the vantage point of the Reagan campaign that this was a group he needed, and the fact that it consisted mostly of Carter defectors or brand-new voters made it even more appealing. So, Reagan employed a strategy to curry religious conservatives’ favor that involved important private relations with NCR “generals” (Weyrich, Phillips, and Viguerie) and “field lieutenants” (including Falwell, Robison, and LaHaye), hopeful that these elites would come to know Reagan’s piety and commitments to their causes and would use their resources and newfound political clout to mobilize the troops on the ground. Second, of course, Reagan had to do his part to convince those on the ground, and he did so by employing public rhetoric within the larger theme of “inspirational leadership” that appealed to religious conservatives. Before long, a relationship developed between Reagan and the NCR that was, as Meese describes it, less a “collusion” than a “kind of strategic partnership.”<sup>43</sup>

The public part of that relationship, as I will detail momentarily, was mostly natural and genuine for Reagan. But dealing with the NCR elites was another matter, aides recall. “Reagan handled the [leaders of the] religious right,” remembers Stu Spencer, who had aided Reagan for nearly two decades and was the political director for the 1980 campaign, “with smoke and mirrors. . . . He’d bring them in. He’d listen to them and smile and tell one of his great jokes and then walk out—no commitment, nothing. That’s why I say ‘smoke and mirrors.’ Probably two things were working

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<sup>42</sup> Meese, Interview with author.

<sup>43</sup> Meese, Interview with author.

there: he was trying to do that [get out without a commitment], and they weren't smart enough to nail him down—at that time.”<sup>44</sup>

This “smoke and mirrors” act occurred in several ways, with perhaps the most important meeting of this sort occurring in Detroit during the Republican National Convention. Reagan called a private gathering in his hotel room with Falwell, Phillips, and Weyrich (who, lavishly, had been given a police motorcade to Reagan's hotel), during which time the NCR representatives attempted to persuade Reagan not to put George Bush on the ticket as vice presidential candidate because Bush was too liberal for their tastes. Their effort obviously failed, which might have been cause for some concern, but the message Reagan sent was clear: these men, and the movement they represented, had arrived, and the soon-to-be President of the United States of America was inviting them to the inner decision-making circle. Several years later they would catch on to the fact that politicians (Reagan included) did not usually intend to take their advice, but in 1980, these were new and exciting environs.

The other thing Reagan did in these private affairs was to ensure that the NCR leaders knew that he was a pious man. At another meeting, during the early primaries, Robison attempted to make sure once and for all that Reagan did indeed have what he called “the depth of conviction” to lead in a “godly” manner. Robison had been part of a prayer group prior to the presidential election during which he, Billy Graham, Bill Bright, Charles Stanley, and Rex Humbard had discerned that Reagan might be the man to support since he had “the oratorical skill to inspire a nation” for the right causes. But Reagan lacked a public religious persona; the men “didn't even know if he was a

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<sup>44</sup> Stu Spencer, Interview with Author, May 29, 2009.

Christian.” So Robison arranged for a meeting with Reagan “in a very cheap hotel room . . . to talk with him about his relationship with the Lord.” Robison “asked him this exact question. . . . [He] said, ‘Let me ask you a question the only way I know how to ask it. The way I know how to ask you is this way: Is Jesus real to you?’” Reagan, without missing a beat, “uttered that famous ‘Well,’ and he said, ‘Well, the only way I know how to answer it is: My father was an alcoholic. I didn’t know him, not well at all. And my mother was the greatest influence in my life. And Jesus is more real to me than my mother.’ That was his exact statement.” Robison, of course, was ecstatic. “When he said that, it just went right through me. . . . And I told him that I believed people of faith, even though you had an evangelical president, they’d rise up and back him. And according to [Reagan aide Jerry] Naylor to me, that was a very powerful meeting to Reagan.”<sup>45</sup>

In another outreach effort, Reagan opted two weeks after the private RNC meeting in Detroit to bring Bob Billings on board the campaign in an official capacity, naming him an official campaign liaison to religious groups. Billings had been serving as executive director of Moral Majority, and at the time the Reagan campaign hired him, Billings could boast of having registered more than three million new voters through the organization, most of whom were likely to support Reagan. Reagan thus made the shrewd political decision to reward Billings’s work, but also to communicate to the NCR leaders and their affiliates that Reagan was taking them seriously as political players—so seriously that he would hire one of their own in an advisory capacity.

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<sup>45</sup> Robison, Interview with author.

Reagan also made a point to meet privately with religious leaders at the religious gatherings he attended, and during such meetings he not only assured them of his piety and sincerity, he also put them to work, if in capacities less official than Billings's. At Religious Roundtable's National Affairs Briefing in Dallas in August, Reagan held a private meeting with Robison and Texas Governor John Connally on the ride from the airport to his hotel, and then he met privately with Robison twice more during the next two days. They shared a green room before going out to speak, and then Reagan and Nancy went to Robison's ranch the next day, where the three met and talked for more than half an hour. Nancy Reagan, recalls Robison, told him that the Briefing "was the most fun Ron's ever had. He'd never been so excited. She said she'd never seen him come home so excited. And [Ronald Reagan] thanked me." Reagan also put Robison to work for the campaign during that meeting. As Robison remembers, "He made several requests for me to work with leaders of various conservative coalitions—Right to Life and others—to try to bring those groups together . . . which I did."<sup>46</sup> Reagan also gathered a dozen of the evangelical leaders who were on hand for the Briefing, promising them that he would appoint "godly men" to positions in his administration. He also declared, much to the group's delight, that "I believe the government ought to do the will of God."<sup>47</sup>

This private strategy with the elites was important, but more than anything, it was aimed at serving the broader purpose of motivating these elites to go out and mobilize as many religious conservatives as possible to support Reagan (or more accurately, to

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<sup>46</sup> Robison, Interview with author.

<sup>47</sup> Quoted in Bruce Buursma, "Evangelicals Give Reagan a 'Non-Partisan' Stump," *Christianity Today*, September 19, 1980, 50.

support the conservative causes Reagan stood for). So, Reagan had to do his part publicly to communicate to elites and to grassroots voters alike that he was a candidate worth turning out for. In the effort to do this, Reagan, in a way that perhaps only “The Great Communicator” could do, constructed a discourse composed of what we can identify as five primary elements that were mixed and matched in various combinations throughout the campaign, woven together to appeal to this important and still-growing group. These five elements combined with Reagan’s strategy among NCR elites to form the political religion of the right. The elements, I argue, were: 1) the selection and endorsement of conservative religious audiences; 2) acts of piety; 3) the highlighting of moral and social issues and the manner in which Reagan’s religious beliefs would come to bear on them; 4) the spiritualization of “secular” issues; and 5) the use of the jeremiad. Reagan employed each of these elements to varying degrees and adapted them to the rhetorical situations at hand as he saw fit, meaning that in some instances, such as his speech to Roundtable’s National Affairs Briefing, he employed each of these elements without inhibition. At other times, to broader audiences, he employed some or all of these elements more subtly by appealing to the values shared by many Americans (the “inspirational leadership” strategy) while simultaneously speaking in ways that appealed specifically to religious conservatives.<sup>48</sup>

Before demonstrating the manner in which Reagan employed these five elements to forge the political religion of the right, it is worth noting that these elements were not

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<sup>48</sup> David Domke and Kevin Coe call this the “dog whistle” strategy, wherein candidates speak covertly in ways that only religious conservatives will hear and grasp. There is some truth to this, although I find their moniker for this phenomenon a bit demeaning. See David Domke and Kevin Coe, *The God Strategy: How Religion Became a Political Weapon in America* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2008), 8.

necessarily Reagan's *creatio ex nihilo*. Certainly Reagan was assisted by advisors, and moreover, he was not the first person to engage in each of these types of rhetorical acts. Rather, some of these elements were borrowed from other sources—such as the conservative movement, evangelical rhetoric, or previous presidential contenders, among others—and then adjusted by “The Great Communicator” and woven together skillfully in a singular discourse. So, for instance, Reagan was not the first to speak directly to religious audiences or to make efforts to assert his piety; Carter and Ford had both done that in 1976. Moreover, the jeremiad was not new to conservative politics, as Whitaker Chambers had employed a variation of it in the effort to draw new converts to the conservative cause in the 1950s, and Reagan himself had employed parts of that rhetorical form throughout his career. Falwell (and others), furthermore, had begun the work of spiritualizing “secular” issues, drawing scriptural lessons, for instance, to argue against a broken welfare state or the SALT II accords. And of course, various NCR leaders had made clear that, above all, moral and social issues were what concerned them; Reagan was simply taking these cues and championing the same causes, which he also happened to believe in. What made Reagan's effort unique was that he assembled these five components into a distinct discourse that spoke directly to religious conservatives in a way that resonated with them, forging a new political religion that helped to alter the manner in which presidential campaigns would be run for at least the next three decades.<sup>49</sup>

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<sup>49</sup> I should make clear that I am not arguing that all of the rhetoric that fell into these five categories was intended solely to win over religious conservatives. I am, rather, simply stating that what falls under these five categories did appeal to religious conservatives for various reasons. Certainly, parts were directed solely at religious conservatives; we cannot deny, for instance, that direct appeals to religious conservatives were the primary motivation for selecting various audiences. However, the strategies behind

This discourse was in part heavily scripted and in part “Reagan being Reagan.” After the primaries—during which time Reagan had been given relatively free range to speak as he saw fit—the Reagan-Bush Committee changed course by arranging for Reagan’s speeches to be written in time to be cleared by several people (including, of course, Reagan himself). This was a far cry from Reagan’s traditional 4x6 index cards full of a shorthand that was discernable only unto him. The Committee also decided, in the words of one aide, to “control the environment” as much as possible, meaning Reagan would be less accessible to the press and less spontaneous during the general campaign than he had been during the primaries. As one press observer put it, “[Reagan’s aides] behave as if they were a group of trainers who have a beautiful racehorse on their hands—one that must be given constant care.”<sup>50</sup> Accordingly, the campaign brought in Stu Spencer—a trusted and experienced Reagan ally who had been with Reagan during both runs for governor, during his 1976 presidential bid, and then with Ford in 1976 after he beat out Reagan—as political director and overseer of Reagan’s scheduling and public relations.

Spencer, like others on the campaign, understood the value of mobilizing the religious right and was especially attuned to its value after watching both Reagan and Ford narrowly lose their presidential bids in 1976 when they failed to mobilize the still-emerging group. By 1980, the presence of this important segment of the electorate, according to Spencer, “became fact, in a way. So you had to look at it and say ‘how am I

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other rhetorical acts that fall under this rubric are less clear, and thus I am loath to call all of this a singular strategy. Rather, since we can’t know the strategy behind all of it, I’ll simply say that what I detail here had appeal to religious conservatives.

<sup>50</sup> See Elizabeth Drew, *Portrait of an Election: The 1980 Presidential Campaign* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 1981), 262-269.

going to work with it?’ You can employ [religious rhetoric], write it off, *et cetera*.” But in any case, “The religious right was a fact that we had to deal with.” So, the campaign at least partly scripted a public religion strategy, one that, from Spencer’s standpoint, was intentional but not contrived. “I don’t think [Reagan] was stretching himself. . . . He was a Christian . . . so he had no problem talking about God.” Meese agrees: “The use of religious rhetoric and so on was . . . part of Ronald Reagan himself,” even if it was scripted.<sup>51</sup>

Indeed, as we have seen in examining his religious background, Reagan was comfortable and knowledgeable in his faith, having engaged in countless discussions on important theological matters and having certainly convinced those who were close to him that his faith was real. He was also articulate in his faith, evidenced by his impressive enunciation on faith matters in his letters to private citizens. All that was left to do was to translate these things into a public discourse and a public persona that would convince the new bloc of religious conservatives that Reagan was the “real deal”—that he was the right sort of “godly” leader, with the right sort of “promoral” and “profamily” commitments—the sort that would be able to deliver the nation from the wages of its sins.

### *The Conservative Religious Audience*

Perhaps the most important thing Reagan did in courting religious conservatives was to accept the invitation to speak at Religious Roundtable’s National Affairs Briefing, since that event allowed him both to shore up his relationship with the NCR elites and simultaneously to speak to the broader religious public. The event was James Robison’s

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<sup>51</sup> Meese, Interview with author.

brainchild based upon what Robison claims was a vision from God. “I did get the vision for the National Affairs briefing 100% on my heart,” he said.<sup>52</sup> Robison’s plan, in conjunction with Weyrich, Phillips, and McAteer, was to organize a massive assembly of conservative Christian pastors and leading laypersons for a two-day conference in Dallas, where they would gather to hear guest speakers and to obtain resources to get their congregations mobilized for politics. The organizers would also extend invitations to political leaders, who were invited to articulate their views on various issues. It would be the first political assembly of Christians of such proportions in American history, and when Robison first pitched the idea to Weyrich and Phillips, “They were blown out; even appalled,” and helped him to enlist a program of speakers that would include the four main organizers—Weyrich, Phillips, McAteer, and Robison—in addition to what had become a usual cast of characters at NCR gatherings—Falwell, Pat Robertson, LaHaye, Schlafly, Senator Jesse Helms, and Congressman Phillip Crane.<sup>53</sup> What differentiated this event from the others that had been put on by the NCR was the fact that it would be very large and that it would occur while the presidential election was in full swing. It would also, if all went according to plan, be headlined by the three presidential contenders, each of whom was issued an invitation.

The only “hitch” occurred when Carter and Anderson rejected their invitations, which came as no surprise to Robison, and may in fact not have been a hitch at all. Interestingly, their invitations were issued in a manner much different from the manner in which Reagan’s was issued. According to Robison, “We wrote a letter to [Carter and

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<sup>52</sup> Robison, Interview with author.

<sup>53</sup> Martin, *With God on Our Side*, 214.

Anderson], and I'm sure it was sorted through their offices." He continued, "I knew they wouldn't [come] . . . . And of course, they didn't. . . . I don't know what their pickings were, but they wouldn't be sympathetic with us, and it wouldn't be a sympathetic audience." Or, perhaps mail had not been the best medium for such an invitation, had the organizers really wanted the two men to come. Reagan, however, received a more personal overture. Robison was allowed to pitch the idea directly to Ronald Reagan because of a mutual friend they shared—Pat Jacobson, a Republican state senator from Fort Worth who was instrumental in Texas's Republican realignment and would later go on to be appointed by Reagan as a member of the National Voluntary Service Advisory Council. "She asked Reagan to listen to me," Robison said, "and for some reason he did. He respected her enough that he did." "And he agreed to [come to the event], period." This, of course, came much to the delight of Robison and the other organizers, who had postponed announcing a final date until Reagan agreed to speak.<sup>54</sup> Spencer, who controlled Reagan's calendar, remembers that the decision to accept this invitation was easy: "The strategy [for selecting campaign stops] was that we simply looked at his base, then pockets of it."<sup>55</sup> The National Affairs Briefing fit that criterion since, as Meese remembers, "you had a large group and . . . it was in a particular area of the country where [a religious message] would resonate beyond just the people that were in the audience. . . . And the importance basically of the South and what might be called the

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<sup>54</sup> Robison, Interview with author.

<sup>55</sup> Spencer, Interview with author.

‘Bible Belt’ was to the campaign—all of that, I think, went into the decisions as to where [Reagan] went, particularly on this stop.”<sup>56</sup>

In the view of some of Reagan’s staff, this was just “another event in the campaign,” one that did not have “any particular significance other than its size.” Meese recalls that it had “no more significance than, say, going to the Statue of Liberty [for a Labor Day speech].”<sup>57</sup> Yet Reagan seemed to sense that this was more, especially when Carter and Anderson chose not to come and it became clear that Reagan would be the keynote speaker to more than 15,000 pastors and Christian laypersons from 41 states who had packed into Dallas’s Reunion Arena to learn how to mobilize the millions of Christians they represented. Robison estimated that, when the gathered ministers’ television and radio audiences were added to the number of congregants in their churches, as many as fifty to sixty million voters were represented at the event. That estimate was of course a bit high (even outrageous), but the sentiment Robison expressed holds true: a new political movement was coming to realization and would greatly impact the 1980 election, and the National Affairs Briefing reflected the movement writ large.<sup>58</sup> By showing up, Reagan indicated that he believed this movement was important, and by delivering a powerful sermon that strayed from his usual stump speech—centering on “promoral” and “profamily” commitments—he showed that this was not just “another event in the campaign.”

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<sup>56</sup> Meese, Interview with author.

<sup>57</sup> Meese, Interview with author.

<sup>58</sup> See Martin, *With God on Our Side*, 215.

The event, to be sure, did not escape political controversy, which should have created some difficulty for Reagan. A travelling press entourage (more than 400 journalists, including all the major TV networks and nearly a dozen foreign correspondents) attended because this was the largest event of its kind in American history and it featured the frontrunner for the presidency. The mainstream media were shocked to hear several controversial sermons, none more polemic than a harangue by Southern Baptist Rev. Bailey Smith, who proclaimed that “God Almighty does not hear the prayer of a Jew.” Nearly as controversial were the remarks by Robison, who, as the conference’s organizer, chose the limelight and filled the timeslot immediately preceding Reagan’s address. Reagan, against the better judgment of some of his advisors, chose to sit on the stage while Robison spoke. As Robison remembers it, John Connally had pitched that idea to Reagan on the drive from the airport:

Connally said to Reagan on the way [to the hotel], “You’ve got to come out and listen to James speak. You’ve never heard anyone communicate like he does. You really need to do that. You’re not going to believe the effect it has.” And then Reagan was actually excited about doing it, [but his advisors] were uneasy about him coming out on the platform, basically joining in the standing ovations for many of the statements that stirred the crowd that I was privileged to share.

The uneasiness of his advisors, especially of Michael Deaver, was not private knowledge. According to Robison, “I talked to Mike [Deaver] before the meeting. He did not like it, and he was nervous about it. [He and some other advisors] were disturbed that Reagan sat on the platform and listed to me preach.”<sup>59</sup> Perhaps there was good reason for their uneasiness, as the fiery evangelist declared to a receptive audience that “I’m sick and tired of hearing about all of the radicals and the perverts and the liberals and the leftists and the Communists coming out of the closet. It’s time for God’s people to come out of the

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<sup>59</sup> Robison, Interview with author.

closet.”<sup>60</sup> He continued with marching orders that “We’ll either have a Hitler-type takeover . . . or God is going to take over this country. It is time to crawl out from under the pews and stop looking through the stained-glass windows. . . . We’ve had enough talk. If we ever get our act together, the politicians won’t have a stage to play on. We can turn to God or bring down the curtain. We can sound the charge or play taps.”

Reagan apparently loved the sermon, enthusiastically applauding several times throughout and joining in several standing ovations.<sup>61</sup> Then it was Reagan’s turn after a brief introduction from D. James Kennedy, who called Reagan, without “endorsing” him, “a man who understands the signs of the times and our nation’s great traditional principles. Our hope is in God and the promises of his Word. Here is a man who believes that word, who trusts in the living God and his Son Jesus Christ.”<sup>62</sup> As Reagan approached the podium, he electrified the audience with an important line, one that went a long way toward gaining the favor of religious conservatives but further alarmed an already aghast press corps: “I know you can’t endorse me,” Reagan declared, “but I want you to know that I endorse you.” The crowd loved it, and let Reagan know. As Meese remembers, it was “typical Ronald Reagan. That’s the kind of thing he did entirely on his own. It wasn’t as though [the campaign staff] sat around and consciously determined [that he would say] that. I mean, that was his personal belief. Some of his handlers and some of the people on the campaign said ‘you ought to back off a little bit,’ but that was

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<sup>60</sup> Quoted in Howell Raines, “Reagan Backs Evangelicals in their Political Activities,” *The New York Times*, August 23, 1980, A-8.

<sup>61</sup> Martin, *With God on Our Side*, 216-217. See also Robison, Interview with author.

<sup>62</sup> Quoted in Buursma, “Evangelicals Give Reagan a ‘Non-Partisan’ Stump,” 50.

not his style.”<sup>63</sup> As Ed Dobson, Falwell’s number two at Liberty Baptist College and Thomas Road Baptist Church, noted: “I don’t think people understand that the average [Christian conservative] felt alienated from the mainstream of American culture [at that time]. That was a significant moment, because the candidate came to us; we didn’t go to the candidate [to seek this endorsement].” The moment was in retrospect the high point of the National Affairs Briefing, although the sermon Reagan delivered did not disappoint either. Republican activist Morton Blackwell, with no shortage of prescience, opined that Reagan’s performance was “a turning point in America,” because “vast numbers of religious leaders were deciding whether to get involved. . . ; as a result of that meeting, they decided to.”<sup>64</sup>

This event would not be the last time, of course, that Reagan would go to an audience of religious conservatives during the campaign. Six weeks later he spoke to the National Religious Broadcasters (NRB) association, which held its gathering that year in Lynchburg, Virginia, the NCR citadel where Falwell was pastor and college president. To that group Reagan’s message was slightly more tempered, centering on a message of peace through strength. This was the central philosophy of Reagan’s foreign policy and something he spoke about frequently, echoing Republicans back to Eisenhower, but to

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<sup>63</sup> Meese, Interview with author. It is worth noting that Robison claims to have given Reagan that line, but his story is cause for some suspicion. In speaking with me, he recalled that it occurred in a private room right before Reagan’s and Robison’s speeches, but Robison went to considerable strides to tell me that other conference organizers were across the room, engaged in other conversations. “I think Ed was over at the side with General Graham,” he said. “And I said [to Reagan], ‘May I give you a suggestion? You know, this is a nonpartisan meeting, and we’re not going to endorse candidates. And I would like to suggest that you make your opening remark ‘I know you cannot endorse me, but I want you to know I endorse you.’ I loved that, and that is exactly what he opened with.” Robison’s account when speaking to sociologist William Martin was different, however, recalling that he gave Reagan the line in the car with Connally. Given these differing accounts and the fact that Robison deliberately told me that the others were across the room, I tend to believe Meese’s account that this was Reagan’s idea. See Robison, Interview with author, and Martin, *With God on Our Side*, 215.

<sup>64</sup> Martin, *With God on Our Side*, 217-218.

this group, it was a deeply religious message. Reagan declared that “Peace the world cannot give” comes only through a return to and a deepening of our “Judeo-Christian values,” thus equating Judeo-Christian values with strength.<sup>65</sup>

Five days later Reagan gave the first of two major education policy speeches, both of which were given to religious audiences—a perceptive political gesture given Carter’s recent missteps with Christian schools during the IRS controversy. The first education speech was at the evangelical bastion of Wheaton College and was unusual for an education speech (or any policy speech, for that matter), focusing on the Great Commission of the New Testament, encouraging the evangelical audience to “Go ye, therefore, and teach all nations.” Reagan declared in this speech that the “great mission of the 1980s” was to “restore the traditional American view of education.”<sup>66</sup> Then, twelve days later, Reagan addressed the National Catholic Educational Association Chief Administrator’s Conference, where he argued that education builds its foundation in the family—a message that resonated deeply with many traditionally Democratic Catholics. Just as he had done at Wheaton, Reagan also voiced his support for a tuition tax credit for families that sent children to private religious schools, and both times this advocacy served as a visible contrast to Carter, who had only recently been the subject of Christian schools’ consternation. Reagan knew that “Carter’s” IRS policies had been a wedge between the President and religious groups, and by selecting these Christian audiences

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<sup>65</sup> Ronald Reagan, Speech to the National Religious Broadcasters Association, October 3, 1980 [Reference Copy from Vertical File, Ronald Reagan Library]. Hereafter cited as “Speech to the NRB.”

<sup>66</sup> Ronald Reagan, Speech at Wheaton College October 8, 1980 [Reference Copy from Vertical File, Ronald Reagan Library]. Hereafter cited as “Speech at Wheaton.”

for his lone addresses on education, Reagan drove that wedge deeper by endorsing their stances and proving himself to be their ally.

On the whole, by opting to take his political message to audiences of religious conservatives, Reagan was performing a powerful and important rhetorical act. He was, in short, endorsing and empowering these groups, some of which had never received this sort of national political attention. In a nationally televised debate, he let them know that their mark on him had been indelible:

Going around this country, I think that I have found a great hunger in America for a spiritual revival, for a belief that law must be based on a higher law, for a return to traditions and values that we once had. . . . Now, I have thought for a long time that too many of our churches have been too reluctant to speak up on behalf of what they believe is proper in government, and they have been too lax in interfering in recent years with government's invasion of the family itself.<sup>67</sup>

By going to these groups and, more specifically, by endorsing their political activities, Reagan was attempting to jar them from this so-called reluctance. And he was, of course, attempting to do so for his cause. But in order to gain their support, Reagan needed to do more than simply acknowledge their importance or endorse their activities. He had to prove that he was a candidate worth supporting.

### *Acts of Piety*

Given his Hollywood background, irregular church attendance, divorce and estrangement from family, and relative lack of a public religious persona (especially compared to Carter and Anderson), Reagan had to prove himself by establishing his own religious fealty and personal devotion to God. He did this privately in meetings with NCR leaders, but more importantly, he did it publicly on the campaign through public

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<sup>67</sup> Ronald Reagan, Anderson-Reagan Debate, September 17, 1980 [Reference Copy from Vertical File, Ronald Reagan Library]. Hereafter cited as "Anderson-Reagan Debate."

acts of piety. To be sure, as Carter had made clear during his presidency (and as Anderson was in the process of confirming), this personal piety was not *everything* to religious conservatives, but it was still important. After all, as Falwell had explicitly stated and as other NCR leaders echoed, “Only by *godly* leadership can America be put back on a divine course. . . . We must have leadership in America to deliver God’s message [emphasis mine].”<sup>68</sup> Privately, of course, Reagan was deeply religious and might have met these standards, but many in the voting public did not know that, meaning Reagan had to show them.

His most prominent—and probably most masterful—exhibition was on the grandest single platform he would have during the campaign—his acceptance speech at the Republican National Convention. Here, in a dramatic moment that was supposedly not prepared, Reagan, as though he had been stirred by the Holy Spirit, closed his speech by proclaiming:

I have thought of something that is not a part of my speech, and I’m worried over whether I should do it. Can we doubt that only a divine providence placed this land, this island of freedom, here as a refuge for all those people in the world who yearn to breathe freely: Jews and Christians enduring persecution behind the Iron Curtain, the boat people of Southeast Asia, of Cuba and of Haiti, the victims of drought and famine in Africa, the freedom fighters of Afghanistan and our own countrymen, held in savage captivity. I’ll confess that I’ve been a little afraid to suggest what I’m going to suggest. I’m more afraid not to. Can we begin our crusade joined together in a moment of silent prayer?<sup>69</sup>

After a prayerful pause, he then chimed in simply, “God bless America.” The room erupted, having just been part of a dramatic moment but also brilliant rhetorical performance, and the audience rewarded Reagan with a twenty-minute ovation. In the

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<sup>68</sup> Falwell, *Listen, America!*, 17.

<sup>69</sup> Ronald Reagan, Speech at Republican National Convention, July 17, 1980 [Reference Copy from Vertical File, Ronald Reagan Library]. Hereafter cited as “Speech to the RNC.”

space of 130 words and a few seconds of silence, Reagan established before a national audience that his candidacy was based on stewardship to God, and his mission was in a sense God-ordained—a response to “divine providence,” to use his words. But the display also functioned, through the dramatic act of moving from timidity to boldness in giving voice to a stirring from deep within, to forge a bond with religious Americans, many of whom could identify with the tensions of living out religious convictions in public. Here was Ronald Reagan, perhaps a little hesitant like them, committed to acting out the convictions God had laid on his heart and willing to do so with the eyes of the nation watching. It was, on the one hand, classic Reagan delivering a dramatic and powerful performance, but on the other hand, this was something entirely new—a display of piety aimed at forging a deep and impenetrable bond with religious America. What was especially skillful was the manner in which Reagan appealed to the values of all Americans by speaking about America as an “island of freedom” (this was Reagan’s broader “inspirational leadership” strategy), but he also spoke directly to religious conservatives, exhibiting a presumptive sensitivity and response to the Holy Spirit that, most likely, only religious Americans would pick up on.

In another act of piety, at the National Affairs Briefing, Reagan closed his speech to the group of ministers and lay leaders “on a personal note”:

I was asked once in a press interview what book I would choose if I were shipwrecked on an island and could have only one book for the rest of my life. I replied that I knew of only one goal [sic] that could be read and re-read and continue to be a challenge: the Bible—the Old and New Testaments. I can only add to that, my friends, that I continue to look to the Scriptures today for fulfillment and guidance.<sup>70</sup>

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<sup>70</sup> Ronald Reagan, Speech at the Religious Roundtable National Affairs Briefing, August 22, 1980 [Reference Copy from Vertical File, Ronald Reagan Library]. Hereafter cited as “Speech at the National Affairs Briefing.”

Off topic from the rest of the speech, this was, in short, little more than an attempt for Reagan to show that the Bible was important to him, a display of his own piety.

Not only did Reagan refer to Scripture in the abstract, as at the Roundtable gathering, he also quoted and drew direct lessons from it—no surprise to those who knew Reagan, since, as his pastor, Moomaw, has noted, Reagan was “very intelligent in his knowledge of the Scriptures.”<sup>71</sup> Quoting Scripture, of course, was hardly an uncommon practice for presidents or presidential hopefuls, but in Reagan’s case the practice served to further establish his religious ethos, since he knew that this part of his life was under scrutiny by the religious conservatives he was courting. So, to his Roundtable audience, for instance, Reagan told the story of the Israelites as they were about to enter the Promised Land. “They were told,” he said, “that their government and laws must be models to other nations, showing the world the wisdom and mercy of their God. To us . . . there is given [a similar] opportunity.” To this group he also noted, echoing Matthew 7:7-8, that “we have God’s promise that if we turn to Him and ask His help, we shall have it.”<sup>72</sup> Then to two audiences, the NRB and the B’Nai B’Rith Forum, he noted that “the Psalms speak to our concerns, for they encompass all that we strive for. . . .

May our garnerers be full,  
affording every kind of store;. . .  
May there be no breach in the walls,  
no exile, no outcry in our streets.  
Happy the people for whom things are thus.<sup>73</sup>

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<sup>71</sup> Quoted in Slosser, *Reagan Inside Out*, 48.

<sup>72</sup> Reagan, Speech at the National Affairs Briefing.

<sup>73</sup> Reagan, Speech to the NRB. Also, Ronald Reagan, Speech to the B’Nai B’Rith Forum, September 3, 1980 [Reference Copy from Vertical File, Ronald Reagan Library]. Hereafter cited as “Speech to the B’Nai B’Rith Forum.”

At Wheaton he framed his message around the Great Commission: “Go ye, therefore, and teach all nations.”<sup>74</sup> Quoting Deuteronomy 4:6, he told the National Affairs Briefing that “Surely this great nation is a wise and understanding people.”<sup>75</sup> Then, echoing Paul’s summons for salvation in II Corinthians 6:2, Reagan said repeatedly along the campaign trail that “The time is now.”<sup>76</sup> Only this was a different salvation from Paul’s—the kind offered through the election of Ronald Reagan.

The rhetorical strategy of pious acts went beyond praying and reciting verses of Scripture, as Reagan promised that his would be a presidency marked by steadfastness in prayer and ongoing faithfulness. This message had particular salience to his National Affairs Briefing audience, and Reagan noted to them that he and they were the kind of people “who seek Divine guidance in the policies of [our] government and the promulgation of [our] laws.”<sup>77</sup> To the NRB he noted that through prayer “and with God’s blessing, we will build peace,” but “the ‘peace the world cannot give,’ the peace of the spirit . . . comes only through religious values.”<sup>78</sup> He promised repeatedly in addresses throughout the country—in Harlingen, TX,<sup>79</sup> in Baton Rouge, LA,<sup>80</sup> to the Catholic

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<sup>74</sup> Ronald Reagan, Speech at Wheaton.

<sup>75</sup> Reagan, Speech at the National Affairs Briefing.

<sup>76</sup> Ronald Reagan, Speech at Harlingen, TX, September 16, 1980 [Reference Copy from Vertical File, Ronald Reagan Library]. Hereafter cited as “Speech at Harlingen.” See also Ronald Reagan, Speech at the International Business Council, September 9, 1980 [Reference Copy from Vertical File, Ronald Reagan Library]. See also Reagan, Speech to the RNC.

<sup>77</sup> Reagan, Speech at the National Affairs Briefing.

<sup>78</sup> Reagan, Speech to the NRB.

<sup>79</sup> Reagan, Speech at Harlingen.

<sup>80</sup> Ronald Reagan, Speech at Baton Rouge, LA, September 23, 1980 [Reference Copy from Vertical File, Ronald Reagan Library].

Educators Association,<sup>81</sup> and to the NRB<sup>82</sup>--that he would act “under God” or “with God’s help.” On election eve to a national audience, he noted that we often face “trials beyond our own understanding,” but we must resolve to keep faith in God.<sup>83</sup> In each of these statements—whether they were spoken to broad national audiences or exclusively to religious conservatives—the general effect was the same: Ronald Reagan was exhibiting his piety in the effort to prove to religious conservatives that he was indeed devout in his faith, and that faith would be formative in his role as president. Unlike Carter and Ford, however, who had also done this, Reagan employed other important rhetorical elements to prove that his piety actually mattered—that through Reagan religious conservatives could get what they wanted out of politics.

#### *Social Issues and the Mixing of Religion and Politics*

As Carter’s presidency had made clear, acting piously and speaking to religious audiences alone were not enough to maintain the support of religious conservatives. Many religious conservatives grew discontent with Carter primarily because of the manner in which he mixed—or failed to mix—religion and politics on moral and social issues, particularly abortion, “family” issues, and church-state or what they often called “religious discrimination” issues. Reagan sensed this and capitalized during the campaign by emphasizing conservative positions on each of these, proving himself not just to be an ally in the culture war, but inviting religious conservatives to crown him

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<sup>81</sup> Ronald Reagan, Speech to the National Catholic Educational Association Chief Administrators Conference, October 20, 1980 [Reference Copy from Vertical File, Ronald Reagan Library]. Hereafter cited as “Speech to the National Catholic Educational Association.”

<sup>82</sup> Reagan, Speech to the NRB.

<sup>83</sup> Ronald Reagan, “A Vision for America,” November 3, 1980 [Reference Copy from Vertical File, Ronald Reagan Library]. Hereafter cited as “A Vision for America.”

their leader by electing him president—Commander in Chief to all the generals, field lieutenants, and the multitude of foot soldiers of the New Christian Right. And it was not as though Reagan simply answered questions on these issues when pressed by what had become the new terms of national political debates. Instead, he featured his convictions on these issues and made clear that these convictions would not be subjugated to more plural concerns, as had been the case with Carter.

To be sure, seizing the “promoral” and “profamily” issues of the NCR was not seamless for Reagan because his record was mixed. According to those closest to him, such issues “had always been a serious concern,” but the fact remained that moral and social issues had not been the public focus of Reagan’s political career. Reagan, remembers Meese, who had been his gubernatorial aide, had developed his concern for “promoral” and “profamily” issues—especially abortion—as early as his first campaign for governor in 1966, when he toured California and did question-and-answer sessions at which these issues seemed to pop up more frequently than he had anticipated. Reagan developed strong convictions about abortion specifically during that time, and while he never forced the issue himself during most of his political career, he “felt very keenly” about it when it did arise. And it did arise. Part of Reagan’s problem during the 1980 campaign was that as governor of California, he had signed an abortion measure—the Therapeutic Abortion Act of 1967—that in effect greatly liberalized California’s abortion restrictions. This had never been his intention, aides say, since in Reagan’s view the law had been drafted to ensure that the mother’s life and health would be protected by abortion only as a last resort. Meese recalls that Reagan’s decision-making process over whether to sign this bill was grueling: “I don’t know if there was any topic during the

eight years he was governor that he spent more time on.” He convened with pastors, with theologians, and with doctors, and ultimately Reagan decided to sign the bill because it required two doctors beyond the treating doctor to sign off on an abortion before it could be prescribed, and it was supposed to be prescribed only to save the life or health of the mother. Soon, however, it became the case that finding two doctors was not terribly difficult for anyone seeking an abortion, and the measure became, in effect, almost abortion on demand. Reagan, remembers Meese, then further solidified his very strong position on the issue “because he felt that he had been betrayed.”<sup>84</sup>

Reagan’s task for the campaign was thus to prove that, despite his record, he was indeed committed to fighting the culture war, since abortion, “family,” and “religious discrimination” issues were the most important issues to many religious conservatives, and standing firm on these was nonnegotiable if he expected to gain their support. So, as the NCR pushed moral and social issues to the fore leading up to the 1980 campaign, “there was no question [from Reagan’s standpoint] that what they were talking about resonated with him and his own personal beliefs.”<sup>85</sup> And what differentiated Reagan from Carter, who also held fairly conservative personal beliefs, was the fact that Reagan was committed to fighting on these beliefs when those fights arose, not suppressing his religious convictions, as Carter did, for the sake of some broader public interest. Reagan seemed to believe, instead, that his religious convictions were part of the broader public interest. Thus, his task was to prove this to religious conservatives, who had some merited reasons for initial skepticism.

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<sup>84</sup> Meese, Interview with author.

<sup>85</sup> Meese, Interview with author.

When Reagan brought up abortion during the campaign—which he did several times—he took a hard-line approach and firmly expressed his “pro-life” position in a way that was considerably more forceful than what he had conveyed as recently as 1977. At no time was this more prominent than in his nationally televised debate with Anderson. During the debate, Reagan spoke the language of religious conservatives:

Judges to be appointed should have a respect for innocent life. . . . I think all of us should have a respect for innocent life. With regard to the freedom of the individual for choice with regard to abortion, there is one individual who is not being considered at all, and that is the one who is being aborted. And I have noticed that everybody that is for abortion has already been born. . . . But I do believe that maybe we could find the answer through medical evidence if we would determine once and for all, is an unborn child a human being? I happen to believe it is.<sup>86</sup>

This was by no means a soft or centrist position. Reagan’s concern was for the life of the fetus, not the fact that one’s choices might be limited with the enactment of abortion restrictions. The terms he used echoed closely the terms used by the “pro-life” movement, as Falwell, for instance, had stated almost the same thing verbatim:

“Members of the judiciary must begin to display some moral conscience to protect the rights of those who do not have the ability to defend themselves.”<sup>87</sup> According to Reagan, those who supported “choice” did not, by implication, “have a respect for innocent life.” They were, in fact, “for abortion.” By using such absolute terms, Reagan made sure that religious conservatives knew that he was their ally. He also expressed moments later that he supported the most far-reaching measure available on the issue, a constitutional amendment, further proof that he would fight for the “orthodox” cause if elected president.

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<sup>86</sup> Reagan, Anderson-Reagan Debate.

<sup>87</sup> Falwell, *Listen, America!*, 179.

In addition to abortion, Reagan also expressed great concern for issues related to the family, but these were not the “family” issues Carter was talking about throughout the country. Instead, Reagan referred to family as the first and most foundational component of a “community of values,” which he mentioned in his standard stump speech, calling attention to a “new consensus” on “family, work, neighborhood, peace, and freedom.”<sup>88</sup> While clearly there was *not* nationwide consensus on “family” issues—as evidenced, at minimum, by the recent White House Conference on Families as well as the fact that Carter was drumming “family” values that were entirely different from the “family” values Reagan spoke of—Reagan knew that among religious conservatives, there was near uniformity on the hot-button issues under his “family” umbrella. As with abortion, Reagan proved himself to be religious conservatives’ ally, speaking in ways that drew clear contrasts between his stances and Carter’s and doing so directly on the heels of what religious conservatives perceived to be Carter’s fumbling of family issues at the WHCF.

Oftentimes Reagan’s language about family was strong, indicating that with religious conservatives’ support, he would use the president’s bully pulpit to be their leader in the culture war. To the Polish American League he noted that “every family is under attack,” but “I reaffirm to you my pledge to fight for the family, and if in the White House, I’ll do all I can to see that the common good is once more the true goal of decision-making.”<sup>89</sup> Then, echoing Pope John Paul II to the National Catholic

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<sup>88</sup> Quoted here from Reagan, Speech to the RNC. Reagan used this theme throughout the country and in many speeches.

<sup>89</sup> Ronald Reagan, Speech to the Polish American League, October 7, 1980 [Reference Copy from Vertical File, Ronald Reagan Library]. Hereafter cited as “Speech to the Polish American League.”

Educational Association, Reagan observed that “the family is threatened,” but as president he would “stand up and reaffirm that the family is necessary not only for the private good of every person, but also for the common good of every society, nation, and state.”<sup>90</sup> “The office of the presidency,” he continued at the National Affairs Briefing, “must ensure that the awesome power of government respects the rights of parents and the integrity of the family.”<sup>91</sup>

Religious conservatives also had an advocate in Reagan with regard to the church-state, or so-called “religious discrimination,” issues that were high on their agendas following the IRS controversy and several textbook controversies in school districts across the country. Reagan indicated several times to religious audiences that he supported a tuition tax credit for families that sent children to religious private schools, couching the issue, like they did, in terms of discrimination. He did this, in fact, despite polling numbers among non-Catholics indicating that a clear majority of the country—63.9% according to one Harris poll—opposed the subsidies.<sup>92</sup> Reagan knew, however, that this was not a galvanizing issue for most Americans, but it was for many of the religious conservatives who were abandoning the increasingly secular public schools in favor of the rapidly increasing number of private Christian schools. Furthermore, he made concerted efforts to defend the tax exemptions of these and other religious groups, something that won him the favor of those who had been incensed by the IRS controversy. Reagan also, shrewdly, voiced his support for a constitutional

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<sup>90</sup> Reagan, Speech to the National Catholic Educational Association.

<sup>91</sup> Reagan, Speech at the National Affairs Briefing.

<sup>92</sup> Harris 1979 ABC News Survey No. 792133, available from the Association of Religion Data Archives.

amendment—once again the furthest-reaching of any possible measure—allowing voluntary prayer in public schools.<sup>93</sup>

Reagan further extended the “discrimination” issue to another matter on which he was clearly in the minority, but it was a matter, like tax subsidies, that would serve to galvanize religious conservatives, who cared deeply about such things. While he was addressing the press at the National Affairs Briefing, a reporter asked Reagan about his beliefs regarding Darwin’s theory of evolution and the teaching of creationism in public schools. “This,” notes Steven F. Hayward, “is the kind of question a politician should duck on the grounds that it has no relevance for the would-be occupant of the White House.” But not Reagan, who likely had in mind a single audience when he responded, “I think that recent discoveries down through the years pointed [out] great flaws in [Darwin’s theory].”<sup>94</sup> “Creationist theory” should be taught alongside evolution in the public schools, he said, intimating that religious conservatives were being discriminated against by having this widely held belief excluded in scientific instruction.

It became clear throughout the campaign that abortion, “family,” and church-state issues were important to Reagan, and he pledged to go to Washington as an advocate for religious conservatives on these issues. In addition to these important matters, Reagan also broached others: the “pornography that defaces our neighborhoods,” the “drugs that ravage the young,” street crimes, and “permissiveness that assails our schools.”<sup>95</sup> In short, Reagan made clear that the “promoral” and “profamily” commitments of gravest

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<sup>93</sup> See Reagan, Speech at Wheaton College and Reagan, Speech to the National Catholic Educational Association.

<sup>94</sup> Quoted in Steven F. Hayward, *The Age of Reagan: The Fall of the Old Liberal Order, 1964-1980* (New York: Forum, 2001), 680-681.

<sup>95</sup> Reagan, Speech at the National Affairs Briefing.

importance to religious conservatives were commitments that were also important to him, and if elected, he would not shirk his responsibilities on behalf of religious conservatives as Carter had done. Reagan was a culture warrior, and his invitation to this new bloc of voters was to allow him, as president, to be their advocate and leader.

### *Spiritualizing “Secular” Issues*

A fourth important way Reagan appealed to religious conservatives was by framing several “secular” issues—which were, no doubt, the most pressing issues for the country—in spiritual terms. This had the general effect of helping to mobilize religious conservatives by encouraging them to think of the presidential election as something much greater than a political act. This was a subtle way of reframing the Reagan versus Carter contest into one of Good versus Evil; the implications of the election were thus spiritual, not merely political. Reagan did this, moreover, with subtle cues, casting debates in terms that meant little to most observers but much to religious ones.

One way Reagan went about this was by explicitly framing his overall presidential bid in spiritual terms. He placed the campaign in the master trope of a “crusade,” asking his supporters to join him as though he were off to fight a spiritually sanctioned battle. The reality was that Reagan was simply running for president, as hundreds of men had done before him, but he sought to mobilize supporters by offering the subtle hint that they were involved in something much greater, doing “the work of God” by supporting his presidential bid. After all, “Can we begin our crusade joined together in a moment of silent prayer?”<sup>96</sup> stirs something much deeper and more spiritual

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<sup>96</sup> Reagan, Speech at the RNC.

than “I would like to pray to kick off the presidential campaign against the Democrats.” Reagan called the campaign a crusade dozens of times in speeches around the country.

Inflation was another issue Reagan spiritualized. At a campaign stop at the Lounsberry Farm in Iowa, Reagan’s spiritualization of that issue was poignant:

*Carter* inflation just doesn’t take away dollars from our pockets. It takes away hope from our hearts. It erodes the *spirit* of the elderly and the poor and those who work. . . . Inflation is a *spiritual* as well as an economic *evil*, and *Jimmy Carter* has stood by while this *evil* has chipped away at the very heart and *soul* of Americans [emphases mine].<sup>97</sup>

The repetition of spiritual terms here is striking, and the manner in which they were put together is subtle but pregnant. Inflation was not just *evil*, but a *spiritual evil*, Reagan said, and he pinned it on Carter by calling it “*Carter* inflation.” So, if *inflation* equals *spiritual evil* in Reagan’s view, then this statement could also be read: “*Carter’s spiritual evil* just doesn’t take away dollars from our pockets...” And Carter’s spiritual evil, he went on, harms not only our pocket books, but our very *souls* and *spirits*.

This, of course, was not the last time Reagan would spiritualize the issue. To the RNC he offered that “Ours are not problems of abstract economic theory. These are problems of flesh and blood; problems that cause pain and *destroy the moral fiber* of real people who should not suffer the further indignity of being told by the White House that it is all somehow their fault [emphasis mine].”<sup>98</sup> He also noted, speaking of inflation, energy policy, and weakened defense that, “Never before in our history have Americans been called upon to face three grave threats *to our very existence*, any one of which could

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<sup>97</sup> Ronald Reagan, Speech at Lounsberry Farm, September 30, 1980 [Reference Copy from Vertical File, Ronald Reagan Library]. Hereafter cited as “Speech at Lounsberry Farm.”

<sup>98</sup> Reagan, Speech at the RNC.

destroy us [emphasis mine].”<sup>99</sup> Admittedly, this was in many ways no different from FDR’s rhetoric on economics. But the point is no less true: Reagan made it, like some others before him, a spiritual issue in need of a spiritual response.

Spiritualization did not, to be sure, stop with inflation. It also carried over into foreign affairs, where Reagan argued that spiritual commitment, religious values, and prayer were the bedrocks of peace. In a television address on election eve, Reagan noted that “It is our *spiritual* commitment—more than all the military might in the world—that will win our struggle for peace [emphasis mine].”<sup>100</sup> To the audience gathered at the National Affairs Briefing, he said

While trusting in a power greater than ours, we can do everything that really needs doing. We can exert America’s moral leadership in the world again. We can have a foreign policy which understands the danger we face from governments and ideologies that are at war with the very ideas of religion and freedom.<sup>101</sup>

To the NRB he noted that “Peace in the world is built by our actions and our *prayers* [emphasis mine].”<sup>102</sup> In short, Reagan put foreign policy concerns, along with inflation and the overarching aim of his campaign, in terms that resonated with a deeply spiritual people and in so doing succeeded in subtly framing the campaign as a spiritual battle pitting good versus evil.<sup>103</sup>

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<sup>99</sup> Reagan, Speech at the RNC.

<sup>100</sup> Reagan, “A Vision for America.”

<sup>101</sup> Reagan, Speech at the National Affairs Briefing.

<sup>102</sup> Reagan, Speech to the National Religious Broadcasters Association.

<sup>103</sup> Once again, I should be clear that Reagan was not alone in framing a presidential contest as one of good versus evil. I am merely pointing out that in so doing, he was increasing his appeal among religious conservatives.

*The Jeremiad*

Finally, Reagan pulled each of these elements together in a coherent narrative that manifested itself along the entire general election campaign trail, from his July 17 RNC acceptance speech to his election as the 40<sup>th</sup> president on November 4. This narrative took the form of the American jeremiad, the rhetorical form invented by Puritan clergy of the colonial era who sought “to direct an imperiled people of God toward the fulfillment of their destiny, to guide them individually toward salvation, and collectively toward the American city of God.” In its original form, the jeremiad consisted first of a scriptural precedent; followed by a series of condemnations detailing the actual fallen state of the community and clarifying the way things are supposed to be; and finally a prophetic vision unveiling the good things to come and explaining away the gap between what is and what ought to be.<sup>104</sup> In Reagan’s use of the jeremiad, the narrow scriptural precedents of the Puritans were replaced by a hybrid of principles handed down in Scripture and by the nation’s Founders. Reagan’s narrative was as follows: a statement of the way things were designed and ordained (by God and by the American Founders), followed by the way we (actually, Carter and the liberals) have failed, and finally a vision of the way things will be if we return to the original design.<sup>105</sup>

One key difference worth noting between Reagan’s jeremiad and the Puritans’ was that, despite periodically offering a series of warnings, Reagan’s “dominant tone . . . was positive,” as Ritter and David Henry have argued in reference to much of Reagan’s

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<sup>104</sup> Bercovitch, *The American Jeremiad*, 9-16.

<sup>105</sup> Admittedly, this general discursive form is similar to what other presidential candidates use in trying to defeat an incumbent: the incumbent presides over a disaster, so we must return to the original vision if we are to prosper. Traces of the jeremiad, that is, live on in American political discourse beyond Reagan’s use.

pre-1980 jeremiadic rhetoric.<sup>106</sup> John M. Jones and Robert C. Rowland have noted similarly that there was always an important distinction to Reagan's jeremiad: he held fast to the belief that an ongoing commitment to the original values would help find answers for current problems.<sup>107</sup> He was optimistic, in other words. A "progressive jeremiad" of this sort was much more positive than a Puritan jeremiad, and in fact sounded quite different. In generic form, however, Reagan's jeremiad and the Puritans' were much the same.

Reagan's use of the first part abounded. In a Houston campaign stop he summoned the "kind of government envisioned two hundred years ago by Thomas Jefferson."<sup>108</sup> In Dallas he noted "what Madison meant when he drafted the Constitution and that precious First Amendment." In that same address, he conjured "'that old time religion' and that old time Constitution."<sup>109</sup> At the RNC he recalled what "Tom Paine had in mind" leading up to the American Revolution,<sup>110</sup> and on election eve he pointed to the spirit of Bunker Hill.<sup>111</sup> He also pointed several times, as he had been doing for nearly 30 years, to the Puritans themselves and to one of the original proprietors of the Puritan jeremiad, John Winthrop: "Three hundred sixty years ago, in 1620, a group of families dared to cross a mighty ocean to build a future for themselves in the new world.

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<sup>106</sup> Kurt Ritter and David Henry, *Ronald Reagan: The Great Communicator* (New York: Greenwood Press, 1992), 39.

<sup>107</sup> John M. Jones and Robert C. Rowland, "A Covenant-affirming Jeremiad: The Post-presidential Ideological Appeals of Ronald Wilson Reagan," *Communication Studies* 56 (June 2005): 161.

<sup>108</sup> Ronald Reagan, Speech in Houston, September 16, 1980 [Reference Copy from Vertical File, Ronald Reagan Library].

<sup>109</sup> Reagan, Speech at the National Affairs Briefing.

<sup>110</sup> Reagan, Speech at the RNC.

<sup>111</sup> Reagan, "A Vision for America."

When they arrived at Plymouth, Massachusetts, they formed what they called a ‘compact.’”<sup>112</sup> Reagan even quoted at length from Winthrop himself on several occasions, election eve among them. In Winthrop’s words,

We shall be a city upon a hill. The eyes of all people are upon us, so that if we shall deal falsely with our God in this work we have undertaken and so cause him to withdraw his present help from us, we shall be made a story and a byword through the world.<sup>113</sup>

Echoing this passage in addressing the National Affairs Briefing, he said of contemporary America, “Well, the eyes of all mankind are still upon us, pleading with us to keep our rendezvous with destiny.”<sup>114</sup> Reagan further commentated on the way things were designed and supposed to be by declaring during his debate with Anderson, as he had throughout his speechmaking career, that:

I have always believed that this land was placed here . . . by some divine plan. It was placed here to be found by a special kind of people, people who had a special love for freedom and who had the courage to uproot themselves and leave hearth and homeland and come to what in the beginning was the most undeveloped wilderness possible. . . . We built a new breed of human called an American, a proud, an independent, and a most compassionate individual for the most part.<sup>115</sup>

Moreover, to the Italian American Foundation he noted that “Two hundred years ago, Americans believed it was in their power . . . ‘to begin the world over again.’” They came to America that we might have “the blessing of liberty.”<sup>116</sup> He reminded an audience at Wheaton that “We have always been different. We have created with God’s

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<sup>112</sup> Reagan, Speech at the RNC.

<sup>113</sup> Reagan, “A Vision for America.”

<sup>114</sup> Reagan, Speech at the National Affairs Briefing.

<sup>115</sup> Reagan, Anderson-Reagan Debate.

<sup>116</sup> Ronald Reagan, Speech to the Italian American Foundation, September 13, 1980 [Reference Copy from Vertical File, Ronald Reagan Library].

help . . . something that never before existed on the face of the earth.”<sup>117</sup> At a New York dinner he noted that God intended our freedom.<sup>118</sup> In the Anderson debate he noted that our founding documents placed us under God’s headship.<sup>119</sup> On election eve and at Wheaton he expressed that God has always been America’s source of strength,<sup>120</sup> and noted to the American Legion that that strength has been the source of peace.<sup>121</sup> From day one as a people, moreover, our answer to “you can’t” has always been “we will.”<sup>122</sup>

In the Reagan jeremiad, America’s failure to fulfill its God-ordained purpose was not a collective failure so much as the failure of Carter and the liberal worldview he represented. The language Reagan used throughout the campaign to draw attention to Carter’s shortcomings, like the language used by Puritan preachers, was often the language of sinfulness. The most common theme, used repeatedly on the trail, was a narrative of trust and betrayal. Recalling a famous line from Carter’s 1976 campaign, “Trust me,” Reagan hinted repeatedly at Carter’s betrayal of the trust he was granted. To the workers of Cyclops Steel in Ohio, for instance, Reagan declared that “Candidate Carter probably made more campaign promises than any presidential candidate in history, and . . . he said simply, ‘trust me.’ Well, we trusted him, and now . . . he’s broken

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<sup>117</sup> Reagan, Speech at Wheaton College.

<sup>118</sup> Ronald Reagan, Speech at New York Closed Circuit Dinner, September 30, 1980 [Reference Copy from Vertical File, Ronald Reagan Library].

<sup>119</sup> Reagan, Anderson-Reagan Debate.

<sup>120</sup> Reagan, “A Vision for America” and Speech at Wheaton College.

<sup>121</sup> Ronald Reagan, Speech at the American Legion Convention, August 20, 1980 [Reference Copy from Vertical File, Ronald Reagan Library]. Hereafter cited as “Speech at the American Legion Convention.”

<sup>122</sup> Ronald Reagan, Transcript of “Commitment ’80” [Reference Copy from Vertical File, Ronald Reagan Library].

probably more promises than any president in U.S. history.”<sup>123</sup> Or, “Back in 1976, Mr. Carter said, ‘Trust *me*.’ And a lot of people did. Now, many of those people are out of work.”<sup>124</sup> To a Philadelphia audience he was more forthright: “[Many] have been betrayed by the present administration.”<sup>125</sup> “The Carter record,” he continued at the Statue of Liberty on Labor Day, “is a litany of despair, of broken promises, of sacred trusts abandoned and forgotten.”<sup>126</sup>

Betrayal, Reagan continued, was not the only sin Carter was guilty of. In Cleveland, Houston, and twice in New Jersey; at the RNC, a businessmen’s club in Chicago, and to the American Legion, the charge was outright lying.<sup>127</sup> In Iowa, Cleveland, and New Jersey, the sin was robbing.<sup>128</sup> To the RNC, the Veterans of Foreign Wars, and the American Legion, Reagan declared Carter a hypocrite.<sup>129</sup> He had outright assaulted the American people, Reagan said to audiences in Miami, New

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<sup>123</sup> Ronald Reagan, Speech to the Employees of Cyclops Steel, October 2, 1980 [Reference Copy from Vertical File, Ronald Reagan Library].

<sup>124</sup> Reagan, Speech at the RNC.

<sup>125</sup> Ronald Reagan, Speech at St. Joseph’s University, September 7, 1980 [Reference Copy from Vertical File, Ronald Reagan Library].

<sup>126</sup> Ronald Reagan, Speech at Liberty State Park, September 1, 1980 [Reference Copy from Vertical File, Ronald Reagan Library].

<sup>127</sup> Ronald Reagan, Speech at Cleveland, OH, September 10, 1980 [Reference Copy from Vertical File, Ronald Reagan Library]. Cited hereafter as “Speech in Cleveland, OH.” Ronald Reagan, Speech in Houston. Ronald Reagan, Speech in Houston. Ronald Reagan, Speech in South Bergen County, NJ, October 30, 1980 [Reference Copy from Vertical File, Ronald Reagan Library]. Hereafter cited as “Speech at South Bergen County, NJ.” See also Reagan, Speech at Liberty State Park. Reagan, Speech at the RNC. Reagan, Speech to International Business Council. Reagan, Speech at the American Legion Convention.

<sup>128</sup> Ronald Reagan, Speech at Lounsberry Farm. Reagan, Speech in Cleveland, OH. Reagan, Speech at South Bergen County, NJ.

<sup>129</sup> Reagan, Speech at the RNC. Ronald Reagan, Speech to the Veterans of Foreign Wars Convention, August 18, 1980 [Reference Copy from Vertical File, Ronald Reagan Library]. Hereafter cited as “Speech at VFW Convention.” Reagan, Speech at the American Legion Convention.

Orleans, Philadelphia, Iowa, and New Jersey, as well as to the Polish-American League and at an international business forum.<sup>130</sup> Carter evaded; he acted unjustly; he shattered hope; and he bruised dignity. He emanated despair and had questionable character. According to Reagan, he was weak, smug, insensitive, pandering, and a poor example. He “jimmied” us and turned his back on us. And what is more, there was no apology, no remorse.<sup>131</sup> Carter’s sins, in short, had broken the God-ordained covenant of the American Founding.

Faced with this litany of betrayal, Reagan offered hope, which would come, he promised, if the nation would return to its original design and purpose. It would do this, no doubt, by electing him. Note first Reagan’s aforementioned summoning of the “compact” that began “360 years ago” at Plymouth. This was a subtle signal that the country was now coming full circle—360 years/360 degrees—back to the renewal of the compact. Reagan was persistent in this message, inciting hope over and over again for a “new beginning” or the “great mission of the 1980s.”<sup>132</sup> He noted in a television commercial that “America is ready for a new beginning. America is ready for a new commitment. . . . This is our promise today. It is why we have gathered.”<sup>133</sup> So, he told a group of

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<sup>130</sup> Ronald Reagan, Speech in Miami, September 22, 1980 [Reference Copy from Vertical File, Ronald Reagan Library].

<sup>131</sup> Reagan, Speech at Lounsberry Farm. Reagan, Speech at South Bergen County, NJ. Reagan, Speech at South Bergen County, NJ. Reagan, “Commitment ‘80” Transcript. Ronald Reagan, Speech in Knoxville, TN, September 22, 1980 [Reference Copy from Vertical File, Ronald Reagan Library]. Ronald Reagan, Dulles Airport Press Conference, September 17, 1980 [Reference Copy from Vertical File, Ronald Reagan Library]. Reagan, Speech at the RNC. Reagan, Speech at Lounsberry Farm. Reagan, Speech at VFW Convention. Reagan, Speech at National Catholic Educational Association Conference. Reagan, “Commitment ‘80” Transcript. Reagan, Speech at New Orleans. Reagan, Speech in Knoxville, TN. Reagan, Speech at Lounsberry Farm.

<sup>132</sup> Reagan, Speech at Wheaton College.

<sup>133</sup> Reagan, “Commitment ‘80” Transcript.

Mexican-Americans, “let us dedicate ourselves . . . so that all Americans can have a new beginning.”<sup>134</sup> If America would commit itself to this, Reagan prophesized, it would become once again a “city on a hill.” It would be a place of hope, optimism, and faith, and there would be a great “restoration” of the Founding vision. Finally, Reagan declared, America would once again become the “last best hope of man on earth.”<sup>135</sup> The time had come to renew the compact of the nation’s genesis.

The Reagan strategy for mobilizing religious conservatives, combining private overtures toward NCR leaders and public rhetoric aimed at religious conservatives nationwide, proved to be a lasting and powerful weapon, contributing significantly to the dawn of a new religious politics in America. Of course, Reagan’s political religion addressed mainly the right. Those on the political left and center felt, too, that their values were “promoral” and “profamily,” that the right alone did not have the corner on that market. So Carter, who by this point had no hope of wooing the NCR, responded by appealing to the “religious” and “family” values of the Democratic faithful.

*Forging the Political Religion of the Center-Left:  
Jimmy Carter’s Religious Politics in 1980*

In his 1980 bid for the White House, Carter was forced to run leftward and shore up the traditional Democratic base if he were to have any chance at winning the election, a political reality that almost single-handedly shaped his campaign strategy. When he had entered office in 1977, Carter’s chief pollster, Pat Caddell, had urged the moderate

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<sup>134</sup> Reagan, Speech at Harlingen, TX.

<sup>135</sup> Reagan conjured this image numerous times. See, for instance, Reagan, “A Vision for America.” Reagan, Speech in Knoxville, TN. Reagan, Speech at St. Joseph’s University. Reagan, Speech at Wheaton College.

new President to forge a “fundamentally new ideology,” a “synthesis” that was neither “stew” nor “patch-up job” nor “bits and pieces of old policies.”<sup>136</sup> As aide Greg Schneiders aptly summarized this effort, Carter was “committed to moving the Democratic Party in a more moderate direction,” while at the same time trying to “please the very liberal, activist crowd.”<sup>137</sup> By 1980, Caddell would concede that President Carter had failed at completing this task because it was beyond his abilities; Carter simply lacked the vision and persuasiveness to steer the party in a moderate direction while keeping the party base on board.<sup>138</sup> As a result, the president increasingly found himself in a weak political position and was deemed by many, especially those on both the left and right flanks of his coalition, to be a disappointment. Although 58% of the country still self-identified as Democrats in 1980, Carter’s own polling numbers were much lower, and his party was divided by his moderation and his failure to provide a unifying vision.

Consequently, as Andrew E. Busch has put it, “Carter’s rightward drift, his appearance of incompetence, and above all his political weakness invited a challenge from leading figures in his party.”<sup>139</sup> The more liberal Ted Kennedy supplied that challenge, and although Carter was able to fend off Kennedy in the end and secure his party’s nomination, what remained for the president was the unenviable task of uniting a majority party that stood mostly to his left, discontent with his moderate course. This

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<sup>136</sup> Quoted in Kenneth E. Morris, *Jimmy Carter: American Moralist* (Athens: University of Georgia Press, 1996), 249-253.

<sup>137</sup> Schneiders, Interview with author.

<sup>138</sup> Morris, *Jimmy Carter: American Moralist*, 253.

<sup>139</sup> Andrew E. Busch, *Reagan’s Victory: The presidential Election of 1980 and the Rise of the Right* (Lawrence: University Press of Kansas, 2005), 35.

task was essential if he was to win reelection in 1980 because he needed the base to turn out and vote in the general election, but also because John Anderson's more liberal independent campaign was taking away liberal party defectors. "A vote for Anderson," many said, "[was] a vote for Reagan," since the main effect of an Anderson vote was the fact that one less liberal would be casting a ballot for Carter.

Caddell explained the campaign's top priorities—the essential and dire need to mobilize the "left leaning" Democratic base, above all else—to Carter and the campaign staff in rather emphatic terms in an internal memorandum following the final victory over Kennedy:

President Carter faces an extremely difficult reelection. Struggling against a persistent defeated primary challenger, we face a united Republican party with a challenger posed to our right [Reagan] attempting to crowd our center. To our left, we face an Independent candidacy [Anderson] raiding our unhappy left leaning base and threatening the key electoral vote rich industrial belt. For a candidate who has often appeared a 'remainderman' [Carter] —taking the votes left over—a two front assault is of great concern.

Coming out of the primaries, Caddell explained, the numbers were alarming, especially among what he termed "*hard core* primary voting Democrats," whom Carter needed most of all if he was to be reelected. Among the party loyalists, Carter's job approval ratings were well below 50% in many states; loyalists doubted seriously whether Carter had the "vision to provide solutions;" "hard core" Democrats were split down the middle over whether Carter was qualified for the job; and perhaps most alarming, about half of Democrats wanted the party to nominate someone else. "These numbers," Caddell declared, "are stunning. . . . Looking at [Democratic] constituency groups one must be alarmed."

“*Everything we do,*” Caddell thus advised, “must be directed at [the following] targets of solidification and opportunity [emphasis mine]:”

1. We must work to solidify blue collar and middle class Catholics.
2. We must solidify blacks and browns.
3. We need to improve with Jews, liberals, upper educated young and cut them away from Anderson
4. We must move to targets of opportunity in *key* states. Among them are:
  - a. Protestants
  - b. Middle class/upper middle class moderate Independent/Republicans
  - c. Small town/rural voters.

In summary, “Carter has no real base, particularly when it comes to Democratic constituencies.” The task, thus, more than anything, was to shore up “left leaning,” “hard core” Democrats with the thought that, adequately mobilized, they would go a long way toward winning the election. Of course, as target number four indicated, a few Protestants and rural voters from “*key* states” would help, but strategies for appealing to these groups would take a back seat to shoring up other constituency groups from the party base.<sup>140</sup>

Several of the groups identified by Caddell as important to Carter’s electoral prospects—particularly African Americans, Jews, and Catholics—were among the very constituencies offended most by the notion that the NCR alone could dictate what constituted a “promoral” and “profamily” political ethic. “An agenda identified by Christian believers ought to reflect God’s concern for the whole world,” countered one ecumenical group, which included leaders from several predominately African American denominations. “There is no place,” it continued, “in a Christian manner of political life for arrogance, manipulation, subterfuge or holding others’ sin in contempt. There is no

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<sup>140</sup> Patrick Caddell, “The Caddell Memorandums, Memorandum I,” June 25, 1980, printed in Drew, *Portrait of an Election*, 388-397.

justification in a pluralistic and democratic society for demands for conformity along religious or ideological lines.”<sup>141</sup> Added Bishop Smallwood E. Williams of the predominately African American Bible Way Church in Washington, taking a shot at the self-righteousness of Falwell and the Moral Majority, “I’m from Lynchburg, Virginia, too—born there in 1907. I carried a paper route. We had to sit down on a long bench and they’d give the white boys their papers first so they could go out and get a head start and sell their papers. We sold the leftovers. . . . Where was the Moral Majority then?”<sup>142</sup> Anecdotal as these may be, they point to a larger sentiment felt among many Christians outside the NCR, which consisted primarily of white evangelicals and fundamentalists. And even greater chagrin was expressed, fittingly so, by Jews, who had been outraged not just by Bailey Smith’s National Affairs Briefing declaration that “God Almighty does not hear the prayer of a Jew,” but also by Falwell’s subsequent disambiguation of that same theological belief when pressed by media, embroiling the Christian right in a sustained and damaging controversy with Jewish leaders.

Many who were offended by the NCR were Democrats—“left leaning,” “hard core” Democrats—the ones Carter needed most to rally. So not only could Carter ill-afford the appearance of coming hither to the NCR, he had to go about the greater task of rallying these traditional Democrats’ support. Plus, Carter knew that making concerted appeals to the NCR would be nonsensical anyway, since he had gravely disappointed its leaders, who were in fact basing almost their entire political engagement on the very

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<sup>141</sup> Quoted in “Religious Leaders Fault Policies of Evangelical Political Groups,” *The New York Times*, 21 October 1980, B-6.

<sup>142</sup> Quoted in Carla Hall, “Politics in the Pulpit: Bishop Williams at Bible Way; Carter,” *The Washington Post*, 3 November 1980, D1.

issues on which Carter had disappointed them the most. But African American Protestants, Jews, Catholics, mainline Christians, even non-believers, Carter and his strategy team reasoned—these were people with values, with religious values, family values, strong values. They were “promoral” and “profamily,” and offended at the notion that the NCR alone could govern what that meant, affirming, as one group did, that “There is no place in a Christian manner of political life for arrogance.” Best of all for Carter, many of these proud “promoralists” were Democrats.

It thus made sense, on at least two fronts, for Carter to appeal to the “promoral” and “profamily” values of these voters (even if he did not use those words specifically) in rallying their support. First, such appeals were likely to work, since they would allow these voters to feel at least some sense of vindication in voting their own “promoral” and “profamily” values. Second, appealing to moral values was something Carter could naturally do. To be sure, this would be a different kind of religious appeal from those Carter had made in 1976, when his effort had been first to assert his piety as a means of garnering trust and second to bring a still-nascent and relatively small bloc of religious conservatives into the Democratic fold. But changing purposes and audiences for religious appeals in 1980 did not preclude Carter from being able to adapt his religious message, since it was religious values, after all, that in fact served as the basis for many of Carter’s liberal political stances—especially with regard to civil and human rights. Thus, making a religious case for Democratic rallying-points would not be a major stretch.

So, Carter made religious appeals in his election effort, and he did so in an important way that, given the political context and his need to run leftward, marked an

important political development, indicating that the terrain of presidential politics was shifting. Not only was this an election pitting three evangelicals against one another—a surprising development in and of itself—but even in his attempts to run to the left, Carter made concerted appeals to “family” and “religious” values (his words), indicating that these themes were becoming ensconced in the lexicon of presidential politics, used to appeal to voters across the vast majority of the political spectrum—not just those on the right. In Carter’s case, “religious” and “family” values were not the same ones that Reagan and the religious conservatives were preaching—abortion, homosexual rights, “religious discrimination” or the like. They were instead the sorts of “religious” and “family” values that would rally parts of the Democratic base as well as any of the leftover religious voters who would be drawn to vote based on values other than abortion, gay rights, or school prayer. The “religious” and “family” values of the Carter campaign were tolerance, civil rights, human rights, and social justice. Together with a few acts of piety, these formed what I call the political religion of the center-left.

Acts of piety, it bears mentioning, were not of the first priority for Carter, but this was only because public piety was part of Carter’s public persona by 1980 and did not require quite the same emphasis given by Reagan or any other candidates, past and future, who might want to appeal to religious values. In Carter’s case, not only had he run for office in an unprecedented manner based upon his deep religious devotion in 1976, but he had since given continual attention to his personal faith, boasting, for instance, of the fact that he had shared the Christian gospel with foreign dignitaries and had continued to pray daily despite the White House’s demands. Carter remained, to many, as much a “Southern Baptist Sunday school teacher” as he was a president, and in

light of this, acts of piety were less important on the campaign trail in 1980 than they might otherwise have been for a candidate appealing to religious values. Still, in all of the clamoring over the need for a “godly,” “promoral,” and “profamily” leader that year, Carter made sure to hammer home the point that in fact he met those standards. Most prominently, he ran a popular television ad stating: “Though he clearly observes our historic separation of church and state, Jimmy Carter is a deeply and clearly religious man. He takes the time to pray privately with Rosalynn each day. Under the endless pressure of the presidency, where decisions change and directions change, and even the facts change, this man knows that one thing remains constant—his faith. President Carter.”<sup>143</sup>

Pious acts such as these were important, marking a shifting terrain in presidential politics in light of the fact that they were directed as part of a leftward appeal, but given many Democrats’ gall over the perceived self-righteousness of the NCR, perhaps the most powerful thing Carter did in forging the political religion of the center-left was to argue that the right was intolerant, while Democrats, by implication or explication, grounded their politics in the religious virtue of tolerance. In making this case, Carter went to great lengths to distance himself from Reagan and the NCR, since the foundation of their political activity, he said, was intolerance in the name of religion—something he clearly avoided. To be sure, Carter *was* making the case that it was acceptable, if not desirable, to make political decisions based on religious commitments, but the values that Reagan and the NCR were putting forth were the “improper” or “wrong” religious values

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<sup>143</sup> Jimmy Carter, Television Commercial, Annenberg/Pew Archive of Presidential Campaign Discourse, Annenberg School for Communication, Philadelphia, PA, 2000.

upon which to vote, while those he was putting forth were the “proper” or “right” religious values, mostly because they were based in an outlook of tolerance.

Carter created the tolerant/intolerant dichotomy first and most powerfully by telling a story of an encounter he had during the campaign with a twelve-year-old Jewish boy, who, though young, observed perceptively that Reagan’s politics were intolerant and discriminatory. Following the National Affairs Briefing—during which at least two NCR leaders had claimed that God’s ears fell deaf when Jews prayed, and then Reagan made the startling statement that he endorsed the group despite its inability to endorse him<sup>144</sup>—the perception grew that Reagan was endorsing a group of people who were generally intolerant and who bordered on being anti-Semitic. This, no doubt, enraged many in the Jewish community (as well as many religious moderates and liberals), and it was in this context that twelve-year-old Avi Leiter posed a question to Carter: “In view of the fact that you, Mr. President, are Baptist, do you agree with the head of the churches who said that God should not listen to Jewish prayers? I’m a Jewish boy, and I pray three times a day for the welfare of the Americans and the Jewish people. Do you think that God does not listen to my prayers?” As Carter recalled the next day at the Alfred E. Smith Memorial Dinner, where many Catholic Northeasterners, many of them deeply religious, Democratic voters who considered themselves outside the NCR, had gathered,

I struggled for a moment, an awkward moment, difficult for a president or a human being, not because I was searching for the answer, but to know that such a question needs to be asked by a small boy in the United States in 1980. I told Avi that I believe God listens to his prayers just as attentively as God listens to mine . . . . I say again, the answer I gave Avi Leiter yesterday is not as important as his question. It’s a question no American child should ever have to ask. In our zeal to strengthen the moral character of this nation, we must not set ourselves up as

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<sup>144</sup> He did not endorse the statement, but many on the left were purposefully viewing in abstraction.

judges of whom God might hear and whom He might turn away. I understand the longing that many people have, very religious, very fervent people, for a sense of strong values. That longing is not exclusive to any one group, but it is shared by every person—Protestant, Catholic, or Jew—who cares deeply about the ethical standards of this nation.<sup>145</sup>

The implication was clear, according to Carter: Avi Leiter might legitimately have to ask such a question of Ronald Reagan, since it was presumably his supporters who had made the objectionable and intolerant statements, and more importantly, Reagan himself claimed to endorse the group on whose podium these words were uttered. But Carter was aghast that such questions should even have to be asked in the first place in America, the implication being that such questions would not be necessary if he and the Democrats were elected. Carter's remarks also served the dual purpose of distancing himself from the NCR's intolerance while still framing the questions of the election as questions of values. However, Carter was pointing to a different set of values, ones shared, he wagered, by a larger segment of the population and especially by the Democratic base. Carter repeated this story later in the campaign to both of the Jewish groups he addressed.

In similar efforts, Carter attempted on other occasions to tether Reagan to the NCR's most objectionable, intolerant traits. First, he ran ads in areas with heavy Jewish populations, the first of which featured Connecticut Senator Abe Ribicoff, a Jew, who announced that "While backing Ronald Reagan, the so-called 'moral majority' seeks to impose its own narrow concepts on all beliefs—Protestant, Catholic, and Jew. To assure religious diversity and reject the narrow moral majority, reelect President Carter on

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<sup>145</sup> Jimmy Carter, "Remarks at the Alfred E. Smith Memorial Dinner," October 16, 1980, John T. Woolley and Gerhard Peters, *The American Presidency Project* [online]. Santa Barbara, CA: University of California (hosted), Gerhard Peters (database). Available from World Wide Web: <http://www.presidency.ucsb.edu/ws/?pid=45312>.

November 4.”<sup>146</sup> A similar ad starred Leonard Bernstein, also Jewish, in which Bernstein expressed a sentiment much the same, saying, “My friends, patriotism, the love of country, must be equated with tolerance for all men and women. But some of Ronald Reagan's supporters, the so-called ‘moral majority,’ corrupt the ideal of patriotism by aiming to make our government a tool for imposing their images of God on all of us. You can help stop this dangerously un-American move by voting for President Carter on November 4th.”<sup>147</sup>

Furthering his message about tolerance, Carter said to a Jewish group in Philadelphia:

Three centuries ago a young English Quaker by the name of William Penn had a very prophetic notion. He believed that a people of diverse background and beliefs could live together. He believed that a society might be founded on the basis of full freedom of conscience, where religious liberty would not only be protected but would be respected as well. His belief in *tolerance* was not some abstract formulation or some theoretical commitment. He had felt the weight of *religious repression*, he had seen the price of *religious intolerance*, and he was resolved to do something about it. William Penn set a new standard to govern the New World. It's a standard and an ideal that we still respect. He said no man nor number of men on earth has power or authority to rule over men's consciences in religious matters. It's my privilege to lead a party, a political party that has *perfected this spirit of religious and cultural tolerance*. The Democratic Party not only allows diversity; it embraces diversity. We are not a rich man's party by any stretch of the imagination, but we are rich in our diversity, rich in representing the diversity which is America itself and the source of a great portion of our strength. The Democratic Party has always had room for East European Jews, for Italians, for Poles, for Irish, for blacks, even Baptists from the rural South [emphasis mine].<sup>148</sup>

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<sup>146</sup> Jimmy Carter, Television Commercial, Annenberg/Pew Archive of Presidential Campaign Discourse.

<sup>147</sup> Jimmy Carter, Television Commercial, Annenberg/Pew Archive of Presidential Campaign Discourse.

<sup>148</sup> Jimmy Carter, “Remarks to Members of the Young Men's Hebrew Association and Area Residents,” October 30, 1980, John T. Woolley and Gerhard Peters, *The American Presidency Project* [online]. Santa Barbara, CA: University of California (hosted), Gerhard Peters (database). Available from World Wide Web: <http://www.presidency.ucsb.edu/ws/?pid=45396>.

Carter also alleged in two speeches that Reagan would divide the nation along religious (and other) lines because he espoused the narrow and intolerant beliefs of the NCR. To a gathering of Democrats at fundraiser in Chicago, Carter declared that “You’ll determine whether or not this America will be unified, or if I lose the election, whether Americans might be separated, black from white, Jew from Christian, North from South, rural from urban; whether this nation will be guided by a sense of long-range commitment to peace, sound judgment, and broad consultations.” To a group in Washington he made an almost identical declaration, this time adding that only with Carter might there be “an end to discrimination.”<sup>149</sup>

Other “religious” values besides tolerance were important, too, Carter posited. In a common motif aimed at constructing a mythos of the Democratic Party as one with compassionate religious concerns, Carter used his Democratic Convention speech to frame the more liberal economic stances of the party as commitments that sprang from laudable “religious” and “family” values—values that came straight from the Bible. These, he added, were being summarily ignored and even scoffed at by conservative Republicans. “The Democratic Party,” he announced,

has always embodied the hope of our people for justice, opportunity, and a better life, and we’ve worked in every way possible to strengthen the American *family*, to encourage self-reliance, and to follow the *Old Testament* admonition: “Defend the poor and the fatherless; give justice to the afflicted and needy.” We’ve struggled to assure that no child in America ever goes to bed hungry, that no elderly couple in America has to live in a substandard home, and that no young person in America is ever excluded from college because the family is poor [emphasis mine].

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<sup>149</sup> Jimmy Carter, “1980 Democratic Victory Dinner Remarks at the Democratic National Committee Fundraiser,” September 30, 1980,” John T. Woolley and Gerhard Peters, *The American Presidency Project* [online]. Santa Barbara, CA: University of California (hosted), Gerhard Peters (database). Available from World Wide Web: <http://www.presidency.ucsb.edu/ws/?pid=45180>.

By sharp contrast, “what have the Republicans proposed?—just an attack on everything we’ve done in the achievement of social justice and decency that we’ve won over the last fifty years, ever since Franklin Delano Roosevelt’s first term.”<sup>150</sup> Clearly, according to Carter and by these standards, it was the Democrats, not the Republicans, who had the corner on the true biblical “family” values.

Carter repeated this theme in a speech in Philadelphia, only this time extending the Democrats’ commitments on poverty to civil rights, human rights, and social justice. Immediately after speaking of his religious commitments, Carter declared that:

We have a [Democratic Party] that has fought and has had to fight for civil rights for minorities. We had to fight for them and have to fight today for equal rights for women. And the disturbing thing about civil rights and equal rights for women is that we’ve had to fight for them. It has not been a shared commitment by both parties. Ours is a party that champions human rights abroad and faces opposition to this policy on the domestic political battlefield this year. The Democratic Party has fought for social justice because so many of us know too well the sting of social injustice. We’re a compassionate party because we can identify personally with those Americans who need help.<sup>151</sup>

To a primarily Jewish audience, Carter acknowledged the compatibility of his Southern Baptist beliefs with their Jewish ones, noting that some of their deep and shared religious sentiments could lead to a common political commitment on important issues. He called these beliefs “sacred convictions”:

I feel deeply that you and I share many beliefs and commitments, a permanent commitment to human rights, a commitment to progress, to humanitarian action, commitments to the deprived, to those who are persecuted, to those who are in the minority, to those who need a strong voice and don't have the numbers to exert their voice, to the protection of newcomers, haven for refugees, commitment to

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<sup>150</sup> Jimmy Carter, “Remarks Accepting the Presidential Nomination at the 1980 Democratic National Convention in New York,” August 14, 1980,” John T. Woolley and Gerhard Peters, *The American Presidency Project* [online]. Santa Barbara, CA: University of California (hosted), Gerhard Peters (database). Available from World Wide Web: <http://www.presidency.ucsb.edu/ws/?pid=44909>.

<sup>151</sup> Carter, Remarks to Members of the Young Men's Hebrew Association and Area Residents.

peace, a sacred conviction that an affront to just one person's belief is an affront to all humanity. And I pledge to you that as long as I am President of the United States, that commitment which you and I share will be kept.<sup>152</sup>

Carter also visited African American congregations and ministers on several occasions, affirming their heritage of commitment to civil rights, as well as the fact that such a commitment emerged from religious beliefs. To these audiences, Carter's message usually revolved around race relations and civil rights, as well as related concerns such as employment, urban affairs, and—by virtue of its commitments to these things—the need to mobilize on behalf of the Democratic Party. Carter couched these, like many African-American Christians had traditionally done, as issues of religious values. To the gathering at a White House reception for African American ministers, Carter explained that “I think the United States of America was created by God with a purpose—on a purpose. We're beginning to set an example for the rest of the world with human rights, with basic decency, with equality of opportunity. . . . That doesn't mean that we've done enough, but we're on the road toward the promised land. This, to me, is where you and I share a responsibility for the future we are facing now with economic problems.” He continued, “I believe I was put here on a purpose, and I believe you all came to the White House this afternoon on a purpose.”<sup>153</sup> In other words, God's purpose for America was to affirm civil and human rights and to provide an example to the world on these things. These were religious values, and the right, according to Carter, despite

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<sup>152</sup> Carter, Remarks to Members of the Young Men's Hebrew Association and Area Residents.

<sup>153</sup> Jimmy Carter, “Remarks at the White House Reception for Black Ministers,” October 23, 1980, John T. Woolley and Gerhard Peters, *The American Presidency Project* [online]. Santa Barbara, CA: University of California (hosted), Gerhard Peters (database). Available from World Wide Web: <http://www.presidency.ucsb.edu/ws/?pid=45362>.

its claims to know what was “promoral” and “profamily,” had no positive record or real commitment to these important religious issues.

In all of this—in his acts of piety and in his spiritualization of traditionally Democratic issues such as tolerance, civil rights, human rights, and social justice—Carter was creating the political religion of the center-left. It is important to understand that Carter did not emphasize religion nearly as much as Reagan did, and in fact, as rendered in 1980, the political religion of the center-left was only used as a political weapon when spoken to religious gatherings or gatherings that were known to contain a heavy concentration of a particular religious group (such as the Al Smith Dinner, which was not a religious gathering per se but consisted mainly of Catholic Northeasterners). Whereas Reagan would weave religious appeals into many of his messages, Carter seemed to do so only when the message was aimed at a particular religious group that sat immediately in front of him. The irony, of course, was that the man who was *not* known to be religious permeated his rhetoric with religious appeals, while the man known as religious limited his appeals to particular types—which might lead one to question his sincerity.

According to Carter and the political religion he crafted, religious values were an acceptable if not preferred foundation upon which to engage in political action, but his argument was that the most important religious values were not abortion, homosexual rights, or the other narrow and “intolerant” values of the religious right. Instead, the “correct” religious values upon which to act were those shared by the Democratic base—tolerance, civil rights, human rights, and social justice. In making this case, which was decidedly different from the religious appeals Carter had made in 1976, the president was widening the use of religion in presidential politics, shifting the political terrain such that

presidential elections increasingly became elections about values and about religion—not just for those on the political right, but for those on the left and center, too.

*Bidding Farewell to a Bygone Era:  
The Curious Case of John B. Anderson*

John Anderson's 1980 presidential bid offered an early indication that a new era of religious politics was in fact underway, but this signal came in a somewhat surprising way. Anderson, a devout evangelical known in some evangelical circles in the 1970s because of his efforts to energize them toward politics, actually spent his 1980 campaign distancing himself from religious conservatives and from the perception that his own religious conservatism might "inappropriately" affect his presidency. In running for president, Anderson's intention was actually to avoid religion for fear of being wrongly fettered to the NCR (and because religious appeals had less traction among the more ideological liberals who came to offer most of Anderson's support), but he ultimately found religion inescapable, partly because there was much in his own past that raised questions among liberals about the role of conservative evangelical beliefs in his politics, but partly because new lasting constraints were coming into place that forced Anderson into talking about his religious beliefs and values.

In using their 1980 campaigns to forge the political religions of the center-left and of the right respectively, Carter and Reagan were strongly affirming the idea that religious values and beliefs should inform and influence politics in profound ways. Although Carter held to the conviction that ultimately "private" beliefs should be subjugated to the public interest, at no point did he speak such words during the campaign. Rather, he, with Reagan, was ushering in a new era of religious politics by

affirming the foundational role of religion in their presidential ambitions. Because Anderson also held deep religious convictions, and because a noticeable trend of increasingly religious politics was forming, there emerged an expectation that Anderson, too, should talk about his religious beliefs and values. Thus, Anderson found himself, despite his efforts to avoid religion, constrained by the new religious politics that Reagan and Carter were ringing in. He was proving, among other things, that religion was going to be inescapable in the new American political milieu, whether one wanted to talk about it or not.

Fully understanding Anderson's efforts to distance himself in 1980 from religion generally and from religious conservatives more specifically requires us first to first understand Anderson's religious background. Not only was he a devout evangelical, but he was also a somewhat visible religious prophet who championed the need for evangelicals to involve themselves in the political process, which they soon did. In certain respects, then, Anderson got what he asked for when evangelicals emerged as a political force leading up to the 1980 election; and one might at first expect that he was in a position to capitalize on this engagement. But evangelicals' emergence took on a much different form from what Anderson had anticipated, and because of this, he found himself in a curious situation, supported by liberals who were mostly horrified by the NCR, but on record having seemingly called for the NCR to form. He was thus put on the defensive by liberals and by a press still scurrying to understand evangelicals and their new political engagement, needing to distance himself from the very activity he had seemingly beckoned.

Born in 1922 in Rockford, Illinois, about 50 miles from Reagan's native Dixon, Anderson grew up in an evangelical family. His parents had emigrated from Sweden around the turn of the century, and despite the hardships of losing three children at young ages, they remained devoted to their Scandinavian religious faith.<sup>154</sup> As Anderson remembered, they were a tightly knit family, devoting nearly all of their time outside home or school to church attendance and service. That meant weekly Sunday school attendance at 9:29, "rain or shine," as well as Sunday morning church service, followed by "young peoples' service" at 5:00, and then a Sunday evening evangelistic service. It meant Wednesday night prayer meeting and frequent "special meetings" featuring traveling evangelists or Bible teachers who made their way through Rockford. It meant annual missionary conferences and summer attendance at a church camp designed to provide Bible teaching from renowned scholars. It also meant an annual East Side Scandinavian "Union Tent Campaign," what Anderson later called a "soul-winning crusade." It was there, in fact, where at the age of nine John Anderson "felt so moved by the message being preached that [he] made a public confession of [his] desire to accept the Lord Jesus Christ as [his] personal Savior." Years later Anderson would remember vividly the experience, writing about it for the magazine *Evangelical Beacon*:

Seated there beside my parents on the rough planking of a makeshift church pew, I was suddenly gripped as never before in my young life by the message of this divinely-gifted man of God [Dr. Paul Rood]. His text was the old, yet ever-new message of John 3:16. Those words: "Ye must be born again" still reecho in my ears just as they did on the warm, still air of that evening long ago. . . . On that night, the Word of God as [Rood] expounded it simply and clearly became the "Sword of the Spirit" that pierced my heart and convicted me of my complete unworthiness. There . . . I fell on my knees and beseeched God's mercy. I can also remember the words that I used when Dr. Rood asked those of us who had truly been born again to publicly confess our faith. When my turn to testify came,

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<sup>154</sup> They belonged to the Evangelical Free Church.

I simply said, “I know that He knows that I know Him.” . . . I have the assurance that by this event I was reconciled to God. I have the precious knowledge that the instant of my salvation was not one of those ephemeral events that partake of such rapture at the moment and then slowly but inevitably fade into the oblivion of man’s forgetfulness. I remember not just a simple sequence of events related in time, but the cataclysmic change that is eternal in its consequence.<sup>155</sup>

Anderson would not soon lose his faith, nor its centrality in his life. He entered the University of Illinois in 1939, where as a skilled debater he majored in political science with sights set on law school. Interrupted by a two-and-a-half-year stint serving in World War II, Anderson would eventually take his law degree from the University of Illinois in 1946. He began his career practicing law in his native Rockford, but after several years he grew discontent with his small-town practice and accepted a graduate fellowship at Harvard Law School, where he earned an LL.M. degree and taught at nearby Northeastern University School of Law. Then, in what was to become a recurring theme, Anderson grew restless before moving back to a practice in Rockford and then on to a new-found dream of joining the Foreign Service as a diplomat. It was in clearing the bureaucratic hurdles for that role that he met Keke, a Greek Orthodox government employee, whom he would go on to marry once she joined him on assignment in Berlin. Then, upon completing his Berlin tour and starting a family, Anderson moved with his wife and children back to Rockford, where he reentered law practice and contemplated politics.

Just as he had done with each of these major decisions, Anderson recalls that he “prayed over” the decision to enter public life, but he did so assured that God would not guarantee success. And yet, success came. Anderson was elected State’s Attorney of

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<sup>155</sup> John Anderson, *Between Two Worlds: A Congressman’s Choice* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan Publishing, 1970), 13.

Winnebago County in his first political bid in 1956, and by 1959, he found himself successfully running for Congress. Once there, Anderson quickly gained the respect of his colleagues as a moderate Republican, someone who was honest and hardworking and dependable. He was a talented public speaker—and had been since his debate years—and a principled statesman who was known to buck party discipline for what he felt was right, regardless of the political fallout. What was right, in his judgment, often flowed from his Christian worldview: “We need legislators . . . who recognize that it is God who bestows the wisdom, understanding, and largeness of heart to interpret His truth and justice among men,” he said.<sup>156</sup> Of course, this often left him at odds with other Republicans, even on hot-button issues such as civil rights in the 1960s.

Still, Anderson rose through the ranks of the Republican House leadership, and when Nixon was elected president in 1968, he named Melvin Laird Secretary of Defense, meaning Laird’s Republican Conference Chairmanship in the House was left vacant. With Gerald Ford having been selected Minority Leader and Les Arends then confirmed as Republican Whip, the Republicans turned to Anderson to fill Laird’s seat as Conference Chairman, meaning just eight years removed from the Winnebago County State’s Attorney’s office, John Anderson became the third-ranking Republican in the United States House of Representatives. He retained his seat on the House Rules Committee, and despite his newfound leadership within the party, Anderson continued to demonstrate independence, winning the admiration of moderate and liberal Republicans as well as many Democrats, but incurring increased hostility from the growing numbers of conservative Republicans, who in turn funded a fundamentalist preacher’s bid to

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<sup>156</sup> Anderson, *Between Two Worlds*, 18.

unseat Anderson as the Illinois 16<sup>th</sup>'s Republican nominee in 1978. Anderson withstood this challenge but decided that his 1978 bid would be his last for the House, since the power base and ideologies of the Republican Party were shifting, and he had grown discontent with what he perceived to be many of the pedantic and parochial concerns of the House of Representatives. Anderson was interested in bigger ideas and greater influence, so he decided, at the inveigling of several allies, that he would run for president in 1980. This was sure to be an uphill battle for at least three reasons: first, he was a moderate-to-liberal Republican, a dying breed; second, Ronald Reagan was presumed by many to be the Republican nominee, riding the wave of the GOP's shifting conservative tide and his near-miss in 1976; and third, despite the fact that he was a ranking member of the House, Anderson was virtually unknown to most of the general public outside of Illinois.

Before examining Anderson's bid for the presidency, his unique religious notoriety must first be considered. Interestingly—and quite surprisingly to many who only came to know him in 1980—Anderson had become influential in some evangelical circles nationwide at several turns throughout his career. Throughout the 1960s, he did this by strongly supporting a constitutional amendment allowing school prayer following the Court's contested decision in 1962. He also, more infamously, submitted a resolution for the United States to acknowledge the lordship of Jesus Christ—an act he would later say was “an unwise thing. I was violating some of my own basic principles and beliefs about separation of church and state. . . . I never thought it would go anywhere . . . [like] one of the literally thousands of resolutions that are not adopted but

are dropped in the hopper and are consigned from day one to be destined for the waste basket.”<sup>157</sup>

As Anderson evolved, however, so too did the way he sought to engage evangelicals in politics. In fact, in the 1970s he made considerable efforts to involve them not as a politician selfishly looking for votes, but as a fellow traveler in the faith who spoke prophetically of the need for evangelical political and social action in the world. There were several ways he went about this, including invited contributions to *Christianity Today* and *Evangelical Beacon*. But even more prominently, he published two popular books with evangelical presses, each of which sought, in general terms, to articulate a coherent evangelical political ethic for the American context and to encourage evangelicals to get involved in politics for moral and spiritual reasons.<sup>158</sup> Certainly, these books are worth considering at length because they show not only the depth and sincerity of Anderson’s religious beliefs, but also, ironically, the reasons why he would later need to distance himself from religion when running for president.

The first of Anderson’s books, *Between Two Worlds: A Congressman’s Choice*, was written, from every indication, as an act of ministry not an act of politics. Published by the thoroughly evangelical Zondervan Publishing House, the book was marketed alongside Bibles and devotional books in Christian bookstores, aiming, as most books in that genre do, to encourage Christians to live out their earthly callings. In this case, that calling involved politics, and politician became prophet. Indicating that he was

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<sup>157</sup> John B. Anderson, Interview with the author, 15 May 2009.

<sup>158</sup> Anderson actually published three books prior to 1980, but he contributed only a chapter to *Congress and Conscience*, a book he edited in 1970. That book was not published by an evangelical house and was not meant to appeal specifically to evangelicals, as were the others. Plus, Anderson’s written contribution to that book was more empirical than normative. Thus, I will only give attention to two of Anderson’s books here.

addressing his audience Christian-to-Christian more than politician-to-Christian,

Anderson opened with these words:

There are difficult choices which we must make in many different areas as we pursue our earthly pilgrimage. My experience is in the political arena where I daily participate in the decision-making process of our national government. If in some small measure this book serves to define the critical issues of our time and helps to illumine the choices which we as Christians must make, I will feel richly rewarded for the effort and the investment of time that it represents. For time and again during His short thirty-three years on this earth, our Lord demonstrated His positive stand on the issues of His day. He was constantly aware of both the physical and the spiritual needs of all those to whom He ministered. I believe that He likewise expects those who are called by His name to show the same concern and to live and act decisively on the problems of our time.<sup>159</sup>

Just as Christian pastors, scholars, and evangelists write to encourage fellow Christians toward their earthly fulfillment of God's plan, so this was an effort by Anderson to prod evangelicals toward political action because he believed God called them toward such action. "How foolish we would be," he pleaded, "and with what tragic consequences, if we left the bedrock of our spiritual traditions at this turbulent, trying time in our nation's history. . . . I often wish that evangelical Christians would individually and as a group be more effective in presenting their ideas to men in government."<sup>160</sup>

Anderson went to considerable effort to explore this theme of evangelical engagement, and he did so in several thoroughgoing ways. The work opened with an autobiographical sketch, but given an explicitly Christian focus, it seemed less an "autobiography" than what an evangelical reader might call Anderson's "testimony." That is, he seemed less concerned with proving himself as a Christian than with telling

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<sup>159</sup> Anderson, Foreword to *Between Two Worlds*.

<sup>160</sup> Anderson, *Between Two Worlds*, 27, 39.

his story as a means of identifying with his audience, describing, for instance, the tent revivals of his youth and what it feels like when the Holy Spirit moves within the congregation and within the individual heart. Anderson focused much of his personal narrative on what he saw as the hand of God in guiding his life, including his entrée to politics. Most prominent, of course, was Anderson’s discussion of his religious conversion at a young age, which involved a fully “born again” experience, one not at all unlike those encountered by evangelical readers of the book. He also recalled the many blessings of having “family values” instilled by a Christian family, using his own experience as encouragement to his readers: “What a responsibility [we have] as parents to provide atmosphere of Christian love and understanding within the bosom of our family! Then as our children grow and develop, they can store up the water of spiritual knowledge to refresh and sustain the seed that may later fall upon their hearts under the converting power of the Holy Spirit.”<sup>161</sup>

Pursuant to his broad goal of encouraging reluctant evangelicals to become involved in politics, Anderson then went to great lengths to explain what it was like to be in Congress and how, like the teacher, doctor, or shopkeeper who was reading his book, he toiled there in the effort to live out his calling from God—Weber’s Protestant Ethic if ever there was one. He was, in effect, trying to alleviate some of the cynicism evangelicals felt toward Washington, showing that God had a place in Washington politics, and so should God’s people. He explained the difficulty of making political decisions, doing so by framing his choices theologically. This led to Anderson’s effort to

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<sup>161</sup> Anderson, *Between Two Worlds*, 15.

carve out a “New Christian Ethic” for politics, as well as a tenable Christian position on several pressing issues.

He began this effort with a discussion of how, in his own experience, he went about grappling with tough issues. While he could put forth no single or stationary formula, there were important factors that almost always came into play: the views of his constituents; the views of his party; media commentary, including that of *Christianity Today* and *Moody Monthly*; lobbyists; and study of committee hearings and reports. After considering each of these, Anderson acknowledged that the decisions were still difficult: “[The congressman] has to consider many different points of view and try to sift out a balanced view of the truth, which is not always an easy job, rather than faithfully follow a particular line.” He then noted the most important part: “My Christian convictions also come into play in this process,” he said. In a recurring theme of humility about not only his decisions, but how he made them, Anderson went on:

I want to make it clear that I do not believe there is necessarily a Christian position *per se* on every single social, political, or economic question that comes up. Dedicated Christians can disagree, and disagree widely, on particular political questions. They may all have followed the very same process I have just described in arriving at a thoughtful judgment on a given issue, and yet arrive at different conclusions. Sometimes we tend to believe that Christian conviction is going to lead everyone down the same narrow path toward foreordained truth. It isn't that simple and it doesn't work that way.

But faith can play a vital role in the decision-making process. Often I have occasion to resort to prayer, not in extremity, not as the last resort, but as a wonderful means of giving me peace and assurance that my mind is clear on a particular issue. My own worship experience has often been an important part of the process. . . . I can also think of sermons that have brought home spiritual truth with great impact, and have given me clearer insight into some of the problems that we deal with in the Congress. Personal Bible study is also important to me. There isn't a book that is more influential in my life, or more important in giving me a sense of the Divine purpose that rules all of our lives.

He continued, “The counsel of other Christians can also be helpful. . . . Often talks with fellow Christians have opened my heart because of the concern they have felt.”<sup>162</sup>

These considerations then led Anderson to the following conclusion:

God can give us, though His grace and power, the wisdom and strength that we lack in and of ourselves. If there is one heart cry that Christians in public office today do make, it is that we would have the wisdom and discernment that is not always there in the human heart, unless it is truly inspired by God Himself. I pray daily for real wisdom and understanding, to be able to surmount some of these pressures, and to have the courage that is sometimes required to oppose the unremitting demands of one or more of these elements in the complex of individual and group pressures. . . . My overriding conviction is that faith and trust in the power of God can aid me in any situation. God is ready to give us real help, real guidance, and more than mere earthly wisdom in coming to the judgments that must be made day in and day out in the halls of Congress. These words from Proverbs have proved their worth to me over and over again: “Trust in the Lord with all thine heart; and lean not unto thine own understanding” (Proverbs 3:5).<sup>163</sup>

With this Anderson launched a discussion of what troubled American institutions and how best the Christian might respond. In short, what was required in his view was a serious evangelical commitment to the well-being of society and thus to engagement in the political process. There were several pressing issues he believed Christians should care about, and Anderson articulated what he saw as a viable Christian perspective on each. Anderson was not dogmatic, approaching the issues deliberately and carefully and offering *a* Christian solution. Among the issues he deemed most important were racism, poverty, the environment, crime, atomic power, and Vietnam. In nearly every instance he called for imperatives such as compassion, peace, and devotion, since these, he said, were the bedrocks of Christ’s teachings.

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<sup>162</sup> Anderson, *Between Two Worlds*, 37-38.

<sup>163</sup> Anderson, *Between Two Worlds*, 38-39.

This exercise finally led Anderson to the “Outreach” section of his book, where he asked what role the Christian might take on in solving some of the world’s biggest problems. One chapter dealt in a scholarly fashion with what Anderson called “one of the most debilitating debates in Christendom—the argument between liberals and evangelicals about which is more important, personal salvation or social concern.” His answer, echoing the book of James on a similar question about faith and works, was that “either without the other is dead,” which led Anderson to an effort to combine salvation and social concern in a “New Christian Social Ethic.” In so doing he placed himself front and center in an ongoing Christian debate—further proof, in case we needed it, that this book is not written primarily for political purposes—and took the opportunity to “rearticulate what I think a concerned evangelical could and should stand for in the social arena.”<sup>164</sup> He began this with the statement that “while I am essentially a religious conservative, I do not believe that religious conservatism must be equated with or regarded as synonymous with conservative solutions to all our political problems.”<sup>165</sup>

Further,

As Christians, we must not, I repeat, succumb to the illusion that all man needs to do is restructure his environment. We recognize that basic to ultimate social change is the necessity that man have a new nature, that he become a new creature in Christ. “For in Christ Jesus neither circumcision availeth any thing, nor uncircumcision, but a new creature” (Galatians 6:15). But this does not deny our obligation to bring social institutions to the limits of perfection possible within the framework of an unregenerate society. Rather, it demands it. I, for one, hope that we do not allow this opportunity to pass us by.<sup>166</sup>

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<sup>164</sup> Anderson, *Between Two Worlds*, 142.

<sup>165</sup> Anderson, *Between Two Worlds*, 146.

<sup>166</sup> Anderson, *Between Two Worlds*, 147.

Thus, Anderson resorted to “the creation of a new and vital evangelical social ethic,” one that could be boiled down to three essential parts. First, “We need to develop a Christian social ethic that looks both to the need of the human heart and the inner man, and to man’s external relations, to both the spiritual and the physical elements of life.” Second, “We need a more positive outlook toward government. . . . Just because we do not regard government as the panacea for all our social ills, does not mean that we fail to recognize the fact that government is one of the fundamental orders of creation, and therefore deserves our respect as Christians every bit as much as marriage and the family.” Third, “We need a more realistic view of politics. . . . We must recognize that politics is no more corrupt or corrupting than many other professions.”<sup>167</sup>

Finally, Anderson closed with a call for worldwide action from evangelicals, an effort to follow Christ’s commission to take the gospel to the whole world, not just to go out and vote. Then, his final admonition:

Today there is moral poverty; there is spiritual want in our land, along with economic poverty. . . . The real solution to the paradox of our time will come if we as Christians help lead the way to a reaffirmation of basic spiritual values. . . . Nowhere is it expressed more beautifully than in the words of our Lord, in John 16:33: I have told you all this so that in me you may find peace. In the world you will have trouble. But courage! The victory is mine; I have conquered the world (NEB).<sup>168</sup>

Five years later, in the immediate wake of Watergate, Anderson was forced once again to take up where he left off on the theme of moral poverty, arguing that America’s original vision seemed to have been betrayed in the turbulent 1960s and 1970s, both by statesman and by citizen alike. This book, appropriately titled *Vision and Betrayal in*

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<sup>167</sup> Anderson, *Between Two Worlds*, 149.

<sup>168</sup> Anderson, *Between Two Worlds*, 162-163.

*America*, was published by yet another evangelical house, this time Word Books, and distributed in a manner similar to his previous work—that is, aimed specifically at an evangelical Christian audience. It was a work of both history and political philosophy—and an impressive one for someone who acknowledged that “a busy politician can scarcely claim any pretensions to continuing scholarship.” The book’s central call was for a restoration of “those moral presuppositions which constitute the anchor of our democratic faith.”<sup>169</sup> It was another call for evangelicals to get involved.

Anderson’s *Vision and Betrayal in America* reminds one almost immediately of Richard Weaver’s *Ideas Have Consequences*, a fact that is at once both surprising in one way and not so in another. It is *not* surprising given Anderson’s collaboration on the project with Calvin College political philosopher (and future GOP House member) Paul Henry, the son of noted evangelical theologian Carl F.H. Henry and a close confidant and former staffer of Anderson’s who offered both the concept of the book and the scholarship in political theory on which the book was based. Educated in political philosophy at Wheaton and Duke in the 1960s, the conservative Henry was no doubt influenced by the likes of Weaver and other traditionalist philosophers. But a Weaverian critique *is* on the other hand unexpected, since Weaver was in many respects the intellectual core of the conservative movement, the political arm of which stood in fierce opposition to Anderson, since a number of conservatives considered Anderson to be the quintessence of misguided liberalism, a cancer on the Republican Party.

One need not push the Weaverian similarities to extremity, to be sure. This was an independent work, and unlike Weaver’s, it was American-specific and aimed at

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<sup>169</sup> John B. Anderson, *Vision and Betrayal in America* (Waco, TX: Word Books, 1975), 9 and 6.

evangelicals. Yet at its core, Anderson's argument was essentially the same as Weaver's: "We desperately need a reaffirmation and rearticulation of . . . 'common core values.' At the heart of the system of values must be the realization that there is a moral order to the universe."<sup>170</sup> Just as Weaver had done, Anderson took dead aim at the source of America's troubles (even though to Anderson and Weaver the specific source differed slightly). Anderson argued that: "Our traditional moral values seem to be collapsing. They are challenged by the rise of an openly militant 'counterculture' which sometimes strikes us as being barbarous. . . . The pieties of the past are in a period of collapse, and so far we have no great moral vision by which we may redirect our energies as a nation."<sup>171</sup> Further, "situation ethics teaches that there are no fixed maxims of right or wrong other than the intent of an individual to do what he thinks is good. In other words, there are no ethical guidelines for one's behavior other than the intended end result."<sup>172</sup>

And also like Weaver:

The questions of politics are ultimately religious and philosophical questions. It does not make sense to talk about the proper ends and purposes of government without appealing to some assumptions about the ends and purposes of mankind itself. . . . Questions of good or bad political policies are ultimately questions about what is good and what is evil. . . . It is my belief that at the root of our current national problems is the dissolution of the moral presumptions on which our society was built. . . . In other words, democracy rests upon a moral foundation.<sup>173</sup>

Thus, the summons was that "The nation needs a new moral vision. We have learned that 'where there is no vision, the people perish.' Government simply can't direct a society

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<sup>170</sup> Anderson, *Vision and Betrayal in America*, 8.

<sup>171</sup> Anderson, *Vision and Betrayal in America*, 14.

<sup>172</sup> Anderson, *Vision and Betrayal in America*, 25.

<sup>173</sup> Anderson, *Vision and Betrayal in America*, 34-37.

that doesn't know where it wants to go."<sup>174</sup> And so, America must discover what Anderson referred to as "principled leadership."

Principled leadership acknowledging the existence of transcendent moral truths can infuse a new sense of purpose into our nation. It can rejuvenate and revivify our political institutions which are lacking in direction. It can unify a people who have become divided against themselves. Principled leadership can weave the conflicting demands of politics into a meaningful mosaic bearing the design of an order more fundamental than that imposed by the police power of the state. Principled leadership can rouse the conscience of the nation's peoples and inspire them to sacrifice their immediate selfish interests for nobler causes.<sup>175</sup>

Anderson's work in *Vision and Betrayal in America* demonstrated, above all, the need for a morally based political engagement, particularly one emerging from biblical and theological understanding. This, of course, was exactly how the NCR viewed itself four years later, and while one is no doubt struck by the fact that the NCR's emergence took on a slightly different form from what Anderson anticipated, focusing on the issues of the culture war, there were some important similarities between Anderson's critique of America and that of the future-NCR, creating a difficult situation for Anderson once both groups took the national spotlight in 1980. Like the NCR, Anderson, through both books, simply articulated the moral decline in American politics and culture and the need for concerned Christians to carry out a civic duty because God calls them to do so. Furthermore, Anderson and the NCR both pointed to some of the same culprits in America's decline, as Anderson decried—in a discussion on Freud, Darwin, Skinner, and situation ethics—the influence of what the NCR would later call "secular humanism." Anderson, like the NCR, took aim at the "counterculture" of the 1960s and 1970s. He grieved a "collapse of moral values" and said in no uncertain terms that America needed

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<sup>174</sup> Anderson, *Vision and Betrayal in America*, 29.

<sup>175</sup> Anderson, *Vision and Betrayal in America*, 127-128.

moral restoration and re-visioning. And like the NCR, Anderson stated definitively that it was spiritual fortitude, above all else, that would bring about this restoration. In other words, John Anderson was calling evangelical Christians to begin a religio-political renaissance for the very same reasons they would do so a few years later.

In certain respects, then, John Anderson seemed to possess tremendous potential to harness a movement that was about to commence in the late 1970s, having already called for it in profound and nuanced ways years before anyone else in mainstream politics was even attuned to it. He was, it seems, in several respects the right person for evangelicals to rally around as they stood at the crossroads of re-entering politics. He had the same religious story they did. He had the same conservative theology they shared. He, like they, believed America was in moral decline, and the foundation of a right American society was a Christian moral understanding of the world. Maybe they would differ on some issues, but could not the same be said for nearly any candidate? At the very least, Anderson was wholeheartedly committed to the work of Christ in the world—even through politics—and there was little questioning that from an evangelical perspective.

But by the time he ran for president, three important things had become clear. First, despite some notoriety in certain evangelical circles, Anderson had never actually succeeded in being the one to mobilize them for politics, and when he launched his bid for the presidency in 1978, he did not “[look] at them as a discrete group that would be sufficiently politically aware and politically active to make a major contribution to [the] campaign.”<sup>176</sup> Second, and perhaps most importantly, as evangelicals emerged without

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<sup>176</sup> Anderson, Interview with author.

his influence, they based their politics on culture war issues, which Anderson approached in much the same way as Carter did—that is, in a way that the NCR found objectionable. Carter had proven, if nothing else, that this was a deal-breaker in obtaining religious conservatives' support. And third, by virtue of the fact that the NCR formed around culture war issues, Anderson was embarrassed (if not enraged) by the NCR's brand of politics, and he did not want religious conservatives' support if it meant catering to their positions on these issues.

So, setting his sights on national office at the very time the NCR was gaining national prominence, Anderson found himself in a curious situation. Just as the press would begin the work of digging into his past to find elaborate writings that encouraged evangelicals to take on the country's immorality by engaging in biblically based politics, evangelicals were beginning to do just that in a way that Anderson deplored. How, then, should he deal with this juxtaposition? Anderson's recourse was to attempt to avoid religion while running for president and to run a campaign based exclusively on the liberal issue stances he had developed, paying no mind to the fact that these liberal stances had in fact emerged from his Christian worldview. Running as a maverick independent who disparaged both the weak politics of Carter and what he perceived as the hard conservative turn of the GOP, Anderson, it turned out, found his niche among liberal Democrats who had supported Kennedy and among liberal Republicans who lamented the party's new litmus test of conservatism. Anderson became, in effect, the liberal candidate of choice for many voters who had no other alternative. But one thing was becoming certain: despite appeal among liberals (many of them nonreligious), despite many thoroughly liberal policy stances, and despite every effort by Carter and

others to vilify the religious politics of Reagan and the NCR, John Anderson could not avoid religion forever.

Even in spite of Anderson's efforts to distance himself from his past and from the new trend of religious politics, the situation in 1980 was one in which Anderson ended up with no choice but to engage religion, an early indication that the American political landscape had shifted. This occurred mostly because Anderson was indeed devout in his faith, because he had previously been vocal about the need for a religiously informed politics, and because, quite simply, religion was becoming the stuff of presidential politics following the religious posturing of 1976 and its new emphasis for both Republicans and Democrats in 1980. So, while in general this new political milieu had the effect of sending candidates scrambling to play *up* their religious sensibilities, it sent Anderson—who wanted to be viewed as much more than some byproduct of the evangelical movement—on a much different path to play *down* his own. But either way, he still had to talk about it.

Any story dealing with Anderson's treatment of religion in 1980 must begin first with his stances on hot-button social issues—especially abortion, women's rights more generally, and homosexual rights—since his positions and emphasis on each of these created the stir that eventually forced him into talking about his faith. On each of these issues Anderson developed a liberal position that emerged in significant respects from his theological belief that a civil officer should not force his own theological beliefs on a plural society. "I believe that faith can influence how you analyze and approach and look at issues," he has said of how he approaches difficult moral issues, "but I don't think it should become part of the political debate. We don't need a national preacher, a

national evangelist, a doubling in brass with the political leader and the religious leader. I'd like to keep those two separate."<sup>177</sup> So, when in doubt, Anderson erred on the side of tolerance and individual choice, unlike the conservative stances of NCR leaders. And not only that, he began to emphasize the hot-button and morally divisive social issues when it became clear that his stances resonated with liberals, who, given Carter's moderation on abortion and homosexual rights, often found Anderson to be the only real liberal in the race.

Most prominent was abortion, which Anderson viewed simply and uncompromisingly as a woman's fundamental right. Far from hedging or looking for common ground, he emphasized this stance as a rallying point for the campaign. Unlike Carter—who tried to remain centrist on the issue and emphasized lowering the numbers of abortions over the fact that he supported choice—Anderson unequivocally voiced that he believed abortion choice was a woman's right, and the discussion should stop there. His outspokenness was based in significant respects on the fact that for the first time, the Republican Party had established an anti-abortion plank in 1980, also pledging that the next Republican president should consider a person's stand on abortion as a criterion for appointing judges. Anderson was incensed by the GOP's newfound rigidity on the issue, and at least in part, he saw his role in 1980 as welcoming to his camp those who might defect from the Republican Party based on important issue shifts such as this. Anderson himself was convinced that there was no longer a place in the GOP for any person concerned seriously with the rights of women, so when, for instance, Mary Crisp, the Republican Co-chair, was forced out of her position by the party's new powerful

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<sup>177</sup> Anderson, Interview with author.

conservative majority based on her abortion stance, Anderson welcomed her with open arms as Chairperson of his own campaign. He also took on Catherine East, the “Deep Throat” of the women’s movement who had birthed the National Organization of Women in 1966, as issue coordinator for women’s rights—a move that forcefully indicated Anderson’s seriousness on abortion choice.<sup>178</sup> And if that was not enough, Anderson publicly blasted the GOP over its newfound intransigence and what he considered arrogance in calling itself “profamily,” noting that the Republican platform “has the effrontery to call itself profamily. . . . I can’t believe it is pro-family when the Government forces a 13-year-old to bear a child.”<sup>179</sup>

As for his promises on the issue if elected, Anderson vowed that his administration would “oppose government intrusion or coercion in the most private of decisions—to bear or not to bear children. We support freedom of choice for the individual.” Further, Anderson strongly opposed “any constitutional amendment prohibiting abortion and [urged] that federal programs providing funding for medical care of pregnancy and childbirth should include funding for abortion”—a position that saliently outflanked Carter to the left. Moreover, he promised to increase federal funding of family planning services such as Planned Parenthood, including services for teens.<sup>180</sup>

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<sup>178</sup> East was referred to as the “Deep Throat” of the women’s movement by several observers who saw her as the mostly anonymous mover of the early women’s movement. See Anthony Ramirez, “Catherine East, 80, Inspiration for National Women’s Group,” *The New York Times*, August 20, 1996, available from <http://www.nytimes.com/1996/08/20/nyregion/catherine-east-80-inspiration-for-national-women-s-group.html>.

<sup>179</sup> Quoted in “Campaign Report; Anderson Criticizes Reagan and Carter on Rights Issues,” *The New York Times*, September 16, 1980, p. B-4.

<sup>180</sup> *A Campaign of Ideas: The 1980 Anderson/Lucey Platform*, compiled by Clifford W. Brown, Jr. and Robert J. Walker (Westport, CT: Greenwood Press, 1984), 221.

This strong abortion plank fell under the broader banner of “Justice for American Women,” a section of the Anderson platform that took ostensibly liberal positions on several women’s rights issues. In addition to abortion, the platform expressly validated the women’s movement, calling it “a vital force in our society.”<sup>181</sup> Moreover, Anderson strongly endorsed the ERA by lamenting the GOP’s flip-flop on the issue and by promising to “develop a joint strategy with state sponsors in unratified states to do our part to implement it. We will publicize the truth about the ERA and expose the distortions that are prevalent. We support the boycott of unratified states and urge private organizations to do so.”<sup>182</sup>

Given strong support for abortion and the ERA, it is no surprise that Anderson would complete the liberal trifecta and show vocal support, too, for homosexual rights. As his platform worded it, “We believe that discrimination due to sexual orientation should not be tolerated.” He went on,

An Anderson Administration would work to enforce the repeal of that section of the Nationality and Immigration Act which excludes individuals from immigrating solely on the grounds of sexual orientation. We would issue an executive order barring discrimination based upon sexual orientation within the federal government. An Anderson Administration would encourage Congress to extend the Civil Rights Commission the power to investigate acts of discrimination against individuals based upon their sexual orientation.<sup>183</sup>

On these hot-button social issues, Anderson’s positions and emphasis had two main effects: the ire of the NCR on the one hand and the growing support of liberals on the other. Anderson recalls that “[Evangelicals] let me know in rather unmistakable

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<sup>181</sup> *A Campaign of Ideas*, 217.

<sup>182</sup> *A Campaign of Ideas*, 221.

<sup>183</sup> *A Campaign of Ideas*, 214.

terms that they took issue with me on [these issues] and were distressed that . . . I would carry ideas like that with me on the political platform.” In fact, Anderson recalls, many had even begun to harbor “suspicions of me as being a true evangelical.”<sup>184</sup> Even his own denomination, the Evangelical Free Church of America, which he had served devotedly for most of his life, was distraught. As *The New York Times* worded it, “many members seem glad to have a fellow worshipper running for the Presidency, [but] there is widespread dismay” over his liberal social positions.<sup>185</sup>

Given these deep disagreements, Anderson rightfully never saw evangelicals as “a discrete group that would . . . make a major contribution to my campaign.”<sup>186</sup> In spite of his self-described religious conservatism, Anderson’s politics were increasingly liberal, and because he was the only true liberal in the race, his support among liberals continued to grow. As a result, Anderson tried to ignore religion and increasingly emphasized his liberal politics, cultivating his liberal base. Accordingly, knowing that he outflanked Carter on the social issues, he used them as a wedge to attract would-be liberal Democrats, calling the Carter administration’s record on liberal causes such as women’s rights “half-hearted.”<sup>187</sup> He likewise named Patrick Lucey, a Democratic former-Kennedy supporter, as his running-mate and began reaching out to Kennedy supporters. And for the first time, Anderson began to self-identify as a liberal, if with a slight conservative streak, acknowledging his inclination to “[carry] his heart on the left and his

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<sup>184</sup> Anderson, Interview with author.

<sup>185</sup> “Anderson’s Church and its Beliefs,” *The New York Times*, June 9, 1980, page B-12.

<sup>186</sup> Anderson, Interview with author.

<sup>187</sup> Quoted in “Campaign Report; Anderson Criticizes Reagan and Carter on Rights Issues,” B-4.

pocketbook on the right.”<sup>188</sup> He was, as he described, a “liberal in the concept of trying an idea that’s new, even if it’s outrageous.”<sup>189</sup>

Anderson had evolved into a liberal because he had “seen the light,” so to speak, having experienced “the awakening of John Anderson, the exposure to a lot of facts and a lot of conditions in the country that in my insular background I wasn’t aware of. I’m a product of rural Middle America. I didn’t [previously] think the cities were all that relevant to my existence,” he said. Thus, as he became more “enlightened,” he became more liberal, a fact that gave him tremendous appeal on liberal college campuses, to such an extent that, as *Newsweek* declared, “George McGovern might have envied” him.<sup>190</sup> The high point of Anderson’s liberal appeal was the New York State Liberal Party’s September endorsement of his campaign, indicating that in fact, John Anderson had arrived as a liberal.

Still, as Anderson’s liberalism increasingly came to define his candidacy and as many liberals saw him as the only liberal alternative in the race, lingering in the background was the fact that Anderson had previously been quite conservative in ways that might be off-putting to the liberals he was attracting. As his liberal appeal grew, increasing attention was thus called to this dichotomy. Frequent questions were raised about the “Jesus resolution” and about Anderson’s vocal support of school prayer in the 1960s. Perhaps greater attention was drawn to the considerable fact that Anderson had written articulate books on the mixing of religion and politics that sounded a lot like what

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<sup>188</sup> Quoted in Peter Goldman with Tony Fuller and Richard Manning on the Anderson campaign and James Doyle, Henry W. Hubbard, Gloria Borger and Howard Fineman in Washington, “John Anderson: The Wild Card,” *Newsweek*, June 9, 1980, 28.

<sup>189</sup> Quoted in Drew, *Portrait of an Election*, 157.

<sup>190</sup> Goldman, et al., “John Anderson: The Wild Card,” 28.

the NCR was pushing—something that no doubt frightened liberals. Anderson hung a picture of Jesus on the wall of his congressional office. He had preached in evangelical churches and was on record at congressional election rallies declaring that “God . . . is my campaign manager.” He had even at one point received a flat zero rating from the liberal Americans for Democratic Action, while receiving a 95 (out of 100) rating from the conservative Americans for Constitutional Action (ACA). He had also been endorsed by the ACA as a bulwark “against the liberal pressures in Washington . . . and the *permissive society* offered by the Great Society [emphasis mine].”<sup>191</sup>

Clearly, Anderson had undergone a transformation by 1980, but because religion had been so prominent in his life and because the terrain of politics was shifting, forcing presidential candidates to engage religion no matter what they believed, Anderson was confronted with a new political reality. He had to broach the subject. So he did, and it took two forms. First, Anderson attempted to show that the NCR did not represent what he stood for as an evangelical. This led him to a second task, which was to carve out his own tenable stance on religion and politics, since clearly he had a track record that needed some clarification. Such a stance had to be acceptable to moderates and liberals, since that was who Anderson most needed to mobilize as the campaign wore on.

With regard to the NCR, Anderson minced no words. In fact, in the safe haven of New Haven, Connecticut, he went so far as to call them an American version of Ayatollah Ruholla Khomeini, the Iranian religious leader who had overthrown the shah in the 1979 Iranian Revolution and instituted himself as the political and religious Supreme Leader of the country. Recalling Roundtable’s National Affairs Briefing, Anderson

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<sup>191</sup> Goldman, et. al., “John Anderson: The Wild Card,” 28.

noted that “many of the speakers who addressed them advocated . . . what amounted to an American version of Ayatollah Khomeini’s Iran. They invoked the scriptures as the sole source of political guidance and authority. They described secular political forces as satanic. And they were determined to repress all those who disagreed with them.”<sup>192</sup> Anderson even took this message to less-friendly turf, telling the National Religious Broadcasters association (in Lynchburg, VA, no less) that groups such as the Moral Majority and certain branches of the Catholic Church (particularly those that were telling parishioners that it was a sin to vote for candidates who supported abortion rights) were diluting their own spiritual authority with the particular manner in which they were involving themselves in electoral politics. “The political marriage of the Moral Majority and the New Right is not one ordained in heaven,” he declared. “It is a union which thunders with misguided motives . . . which seeks to inject unbending rigidity and intolerance into church pew and polling place alike.”<sup>193</sup> These new forces were “nothing less than an American version of religious intolerance.”<sup>194</sup> Furthermore, just as he had been doing since 1970, Anderson criticized evangelical churches in general for paying too little attention to poverty and social justice, but he noted that this negligence had recently reached a new level with “the stridency of this very conservative evangelical group [the NCR] that is focusing almost exclusively on things like trying to defeat women’s rights,” to the exclusion of trying to mend “the appalling conditions in the

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<sup>192</sup> Quoted in United Press International news release, October 8, 1980, PM cycle, General News section.

<sup>193</sup> Elizabeth Wharton, United Press International News Release, September 29, 1980, AM cycle, General News section.

<sup>194</sup> Warren Weaver, Jr., “Anderson Critical of Fundamentalists’ Political Role,” *The New York Times*, September 30, 1980, p. A-22.

ghettos.” He went on to note that “To the extent that they see themselves as part of the evangelical branch of the church, I think I’ve tried to distance myself from that point of view.”<sup>195</sup>

So, in distancing himself from the NCR, Anderson was presented with the related challenge to move beyond simply declaring what he, as a Christian, was *not*. Indicating that a new era of religious politics was dawning, Anderson, who had previously gone to great strides to avoid religion in the campaign, was forced to declare what his faith did mean to him, and thus what it would mean if he were president. “I want my faith to be relevant,” he admitted, “yet I have to be careful that this does not alarm many people by leading them to think that I’m transgressing the wall of separation between church and state and carrying religious beliefs where they don’t really belong.” Anderson’s means of dealing with religion, then, was to state a philosophy on the mixing of religion and politics that was similar to Carter’s, if slightly more explicit. When asked outright about that philosophy, Anderson explained that

I come from a very conservative religious tradition which emphasizes the salvation of the individual. But my religion, which I have related publicly many times, is an intensely personal matter, and I would not seek to intrude *any* religious views on my administration or the way I tried to govern in a pluralistic, secular country. We don’t elect a national priest, a national rabbi, or a national minister. . . . We have to be scrupulous in maintaining that separation between church and state [emphasis mine].<sup>196</sup>

In Anderson’s view, such an approach to religion and politics was as much a religious conviction as a political one, since to him over-mixing the two realms tends to

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<sup>195</sup> Quoted in Briggs, “Handling Anderson’s Position on Religion Poses a Dilemma for His Campaign,” B-12.

<sup>196</sup> Quoted in “Anderson on Anderson; an interview,” *Christian Science Monitor*, June 11, 1980, 12.

hurt religion the most. “In the long run,” he later added, “religion can retain its spiritual authority only if it keeps its distance from partisan politics. When a preacher becomes a politician, he diminishes the independent prophetic quality of his message.”<sup>197</sup> His friend Paul Henry echoed that sentiment on behalf of Anderson, telling *The New York Times* that “He’s seen how often religion has been misused and abused. . . . To him it’s too sacred to try to trumpet.”<sup>198</sup> To be sure, Anderson was not solely concerned with the negative effects of politics on religion; that street ran both ways, he observed: “When a politician becomes the instrument of a church, he or she forfeits the mandate bestowed by the electorate.”<sup>199</sup>

At the same time, Anderson did make clear that he had a “commitment to Jesus Christ.” He supported a “revival of religious life in this country,” and he pledged to accommodate and defend the rights of radio and television preachers to use the public airwaves for religious programming. He made this pledge, moreover, by attending the NRB association meeting, since that was now an implicit expectation for presidential contenders. Many of the evangelical broadcasters present in the audience were, to be sure, less than receptive to Anderson given his religious conservatism and his past role in the evangelical community, which they felt he was abandoning in pursuit of the presidency. In a news conference with some evangelical broadcasters, Anderson was pressed repeatedly about the perceived disconnect between his theology and his politics. One questioner said she believed there was “a conflict between what the Bible says and

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<sup>197</sup> Quoted in Weaver, Jr., “Anderson Critical of Fundamentalists’ Political Role,” A-22.

<sup>198</sup> Quoted in Briggs, “Handling Anderson’s Position on Religion,” B-12.

<sup>199</sup> Quoted in Weaver, Jr., “Anderson Critical of Fundamentalist’s Political Role,” A-22.

what you are saying,” to which Anderson responded: “You’re assuming something I would not consider to be true. . . . I do not make any public confession that I am being unscrupulous or dishonoring my religious beliefs as I see them.” Another questioner claimed that Anderson had sponsored a bill that “approved of the homosexual life style,” which was a sinful act on Anderson’s part if in fact his theological beliefs condemned homosexuality. Anderson rejected that characterization, noting that the bill merely barred discrimination in employment and housing on the basis of what he termed “affectional preference.”<sup>200</sup>

In the final analysis, despite what seemed to be a strident effort to avoid religion during the campaign, Anderson was forced in this new political milieu to speak about his faith. This stemmed partly, to be sure, from the fact that faith had been so central to his politics for so long, but it was also due to the fact that religion was now becoming an unavoidable subject in presidential campaigns. Anderson, who had intended to sidestep religion in his presidential pursuit, was forced to outline a position on the mixing of religion and politics. In meeting a new expectation, he attended and spoke to the NRB association with a religious message. He was taken to task over a perceived political and theological disconnect and was forced to defend his policy stances on a theological basis. And he was forced, moreover, to admit that in fact “I want my faith to be relevant.”

We should be careful, of course, not to overstate Anderson’s religious appeals. He remained reluctant to talk about his faith, and he seldom broached the subject by his own volition unless it was to question the motives of the NCR or a candidate’s “overt attempt[s] to sucker the attention and the goodwill of a particular religious faction.” But

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<sup>200</sup> Quoted in Weaver, “Anderson Critical of Fundamentalists’ Political Role,” A-22.

even still, reluctant and meager as his religious rhetoric might have been, Anderson was forced by a new set of constraints for presidential elections to address the role of religion in his presidential ambitions. Given the depth of his reluctance, the fact that Anderson gave in at all testifies to the presence of a new political reality.

*A Look at the Big Picture: What 1980 Meant for Religion in Presidential Politics*

Several of the streams that we have examined converged in 1980, which proved to be a landmark election. That year, the conservative movement—which had long focused almost exclusively on economic libertarianism, limited government, and anti-Communism, often with little emphasis on religion—finally did what it had been unable to do in the post-World War II era: it gained control of the Republican Party, nominating one of its own, Ronald Reagan, for the presidency. Reagan, wisely sensing the tremendous political potential of religious conservatives, who had independently emerged on the political scene in the 1970s to combat what they saw as America’s moral decline, expanded his traditional conservative message for the first time in his career to include concerted appeals to religious conservatives, a door that had been opened to him by their move to the mainstream of political life (evidenced in 1980 by their invitation for Reagan to court them) and by the unprecedented use of religious rhetoric as a political weapon in the presidential election in 1976. In turn, the movement of religious conservatives into conservative politics grew literally by the millions in 1980 after Carter, the first “born again” president, proved to be a major disappointment, and religious conservatives’ “promoral” and “profamily” concerns were featured prominently in a presidential campaign for the first time when Reagan not only validated those concerns, but also validated their movement, offering a full endorsement. Religious conservatives

subsequently gave Reagan their support. Not only had the conservative movement finally taken over the Republican Party, it had done so by altering its make-up to now include the concerns of religious conservatives, meaning that what constituted conservatism had also shifted. And because there were now millions of new conservatives, the conservative movement found itself in a position where it would not soon surrender control of the Republican Party. So, with the GOP becoming a thoroughly conservative party, and with conservatism having altered its parameters to include the interests and concerns of religious conservatives, the political religion of the right, as established by Reagan in 1980, was not soon to fade as a major weapon for the Republican Party.

The convergence of these streams in 1980 no doubt had a powerful effect in strengthening the GOP, but the effects did not stop there. As the country's broader political debates shifted to take on the concerns of religious conservatives that year, and as Republicans made religious conservatives' culture war causes their own, winning them over en masse as a result, Democrats discovered what some have termed a "religion problem." While Carter had provided evangelicals with early validation as political players in 1976, he proved woefully unable to sustain their support once he was forced into the political reality of catering to his left-leaning party base, and, just as importantly, as his traditional Baptist philosophy on the separation of church and state proved disappointing to religious conservatives and their "promoral" and "profamily" causes. That philosophy, ironically, was as much a deep religious conviction as a political one for Carter, who was in fact a pious man and was largely in keeping with a strong Baptist tradition of church-state separation. But it was a nuanced philosophy with regard to how

it treated the “moral” issues of the NCR, and by accommodating broader plural concerns and the freedom of individual conscience, it took on the appearance of condoning the behaviors that were, to the minds of emerging religious conservatives, destroying the moral fabric of America and depriving all Americans of God’s blessings on their country.

Even though Democrats had lost most religious conservatives, they were not willing, as Carter showed in 1980, to forfeit the market on what was “promoral” and what was “profamily” with regard to politics, as many Democratic constituencies were offended at the notion that the NCR alone could dictate such standards. So, Democrats dealt with religion in a brand new way. Carter framed tolerance, civil and human rights, and social justice as “religious” and “family” values, combining those issues with acts of piety to establish the political religion of the center-left.

Doing this, as we have seen, had the overall effect of expanding religion’s use in presidential politics to include, for the first time, appeals across the political spectrum. This indicated that religion was fixing itself to presidential politics, forcing all candidates to engage it, whether they wanted to or not. John Anderson’s campaign offered the earliest testimony that this was, in fact, the case. As his candidacy illustrated, constraints were coming into place that forced presidential candidates to talk about religion, marking the dawn of a new era of religious politics in America. And the two perspectives that were staked by Reagan and Carter in 1980 were the two that would last.

## CHAPTER SEVEN

### The Legacy of 1980 at the Brink of a New Era

The 1980 presidential election casts a long shadow over the last three decades, in no small part because since that time, religion has remained a prominent, and in many ways unchanging, part of presidential politics. While a few new uses of religion have doubtless been introduced by presidential candidates since 1980, and while various candidates have slightly tweaked the strategies introduced by Reagan and Carter to fit their own styles or the shifting political situation, in some clearly discernable ways, the rhetorical infrastructure that Reagan and Carter built for the use of religion in 1980 can be seen in almost every presidential election since.

In concluding this work about the watershed election of 1980 at this date and time, it seems fitting to do several things. The first is to confirm the importance of that election by showing the lasting impact of the political religions constructed by Reagan and Carter in just one election, also showing the manner in which those constructions have exacerbated the partisan divisions and resulting rancor of the last thirty years, something that has seemed to benefit no one in lasting and meaningful ways. The second is to discuss the prospect of a new era with respect to religion in American politics, the contours of which seem to be emerging at present. Finally, a meditation of sorts: if the presidential election of 1980 shaped the last era in such definitive ways, in what ways might it instruct us at this moment in time, as we stand at what appears to be the brink of a new era?

*The Legacy of 1980 . . .*

If the Carter-Reagan-Anderson contest was, as I have argued, a vital election in the development of presidential politics, then surely we must examine the manner in which it shaped the era that followed. I contend that indeed its effects were great, and the rhetorical infrastructures erected by Reagan and Carter—the political religions of right and center-left respectively—lived on distinguishably in the era that followed. To underscore this point, several instances bear mentioning because they show the lasting impact of Reagan and Carter on the last three decades.

On the Republican side, nearly every candidate has adopted much if not all of Reagan's strategy in the effort to win over and/or to mobilize religious conservatives, and who can blame them? Religious conservatives have not gone away as a political force and have established themselves as perhaps the most unified and at times most dominant voice in the Republican Party. All Republican nominees, thus, have adopted core components of the Reagan discourse, beginning with the private component. Each Republican nominee, that is, has met behind closed doors with Falwell, McAteer, Richard Land, James Dobson, Pat Robertson, or various other mobilizers of religious conservatives to assure these leaders of their own personal piety and their commitment to the causes of the religious right.

Moreover, the public component of Reagan's strategy has also been adopted by Republican candidates, if sometimes with less skill, as part and parcel of running under the GOP banner. The first of those elements, addressing and endorsing religious audiences, is perhaps the most conspicuous. For example, George H.W. Bush made campaign visits to Roundtable's 1988 National Affairs Briefing, to a Southern Baptist

Convention meeting, and to NRB meetings (starting as early as 1985, when Reagan had begun his second term and Bush had his sights set on the 1988 bid). Bob Dole ventured even further right in 1996, addressing an assembly at fundamentalist Bob Jones University among other places, as did George W. Bush in 2000.

Asserting piety, the second public element of the Reagan religious stratagem, has also been a staple of Republican presidential hopefuls. The elder Bush, for example, declared to a prayer group in Houston, which had turned out to pray for him on the morning of his 1992 RNC acceptance speech, that

More than ever, I believe with all my heart that one cannot be President of our great country without a belief in God, without the truth that comes on one's knees. For me, prayer has always been important. . . . When we sit in that historic family dining room on the second floor of the White House, we say the blessing before our meals. Today I ask for your prayers, not for the campaign that we're in but prayers asking God to give those of us in leadership positions and give me as President the strength to do what is right, the courage to lead this, the greatest nation on the face of the Earth, the United States of America, one Nation under God.<sup>1</sup>

In a similar effort, Bob Dole reminded the country that “I stand, with my feet on the ground, just a man, at the mercy of God. . . . With my feet on the ground, and my heart filled with hope, I put my faith . . . in the God who loves us all.”<sup>2</sup> Likewise displaying his piety, George W. Bush would note that his favorite political philosopher was “Jesus Christ because he changed my heart,” that a walk on the beach in Maine with Billy

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<sup>1</sup> George H.W. Bush, “Remarks at a Prayer Breakfast in Houston,” August 20, 1992, John T. Woolley and Gerhard Peters, *The American Presidency Project* [online]. Santa Barbara, CA: University of California (hosted), Gerhard Peters (database). Available from World Wide Web: <http://www.presidency.ucsb.edu/ws/?pid=21350>.

<sup>2</sup> Robert Dole, “Address Accepting the Presidential Nomination at the Republican National Convention in San Diego,” August 16, 1996, John T. Woolley and Gerhard Peters, *The American Presidency Project* [online]. Santa Barbara, CA: University of California (hosted), Gerhard Peters (database). Available from World Wide Web: <http://www.presidency.ucsb.edu/ws/?pid=25960>.

Graham had led to his born-again experience, and that prayers gave him “calmness in the storms of the presidency.”<sup>3</sup>

In addition to religious audiences and acts of piety, social issues and the “proper” manner of bringing religious belief to bear on them have, perhaps most saliently, also lived on among Republicans. George H.W. Bush noted that “If Congress can spend time debating Vanna White's appearance on the Home Shopping Network, surely Congress can find time to pass an amendment allowing voluntary prayer in our classrooms. So let's do what we can to bring the faith of our fathers back to our schools.”<sup>4</sup> Bob Dole, after initially issuing what some considered a “soft” abortion position by calling for civility in discussing the matter, found himself in a difficult spot among religious conservatives and thus went to considerable efforts to publicize his “pro-life” bona fides. Moreover, George W. Bush came out strongly against gay marriage in 2004 when that issue found itself just below his name on many states’ ballots in statewide referenda.<sup>5</sup> These, of course, are just some of the many examples.

Spiritualizing otherwise “secular” issues, the fourth public element of Reagan’s rhetorical invention, George H.W. Bush observed that “Over the past 3 1/2 years, bayonets have been no match for the righteousness of God. . . . By God's providence, the

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<sup>3</sup> George W. Bush, Debate at St. Louis, MO, October 8, 2004, John T. Woolley and Gerhard Peters, *The American Presidency Project* [online]. Santa Barbara, CA: University of California (hosted), Gerhard Peters (database). Available from World Wide Web: <http://www.presidency.ucsb.edu/ws/?pid=72776>. For analysis of how George W. Bush used the rhetoric of religion and religious audiences in his 2000 campaign for the presidency, see David C. Bailey, “Enacting Transformation: George W. Bush and the Pauline Conversion Narrative in A Charge to Keep,” *Rhetoric & Public Affairs* 11 (2008): 215-241.

<sup>4</sup> George H.W. Bush, “Remarks at a Prayer Breakfast in Houston.”

<sup>5</sup> For analysis of how George W. Bush used a religious framework to talk about gay marriage, see Martin J. Medhurst, “Mitt Romney, ‘Faith in America,’ and the Dance of Religion and Politics in American Culture,” *Rhetoric & Public Affairs* 12 (2009): 195-221.

cold war is over, and America's views prevailed.”<sup>6</sup> He went further in a speech at Notre Dame, contending that “Together we can lift our nation’s spirit, and together we can give our material, political, and economic accomplishments a larger, [nobler] purpose: to build God’s kingdom here on earth.”<sup>7</sup> Dole believed that

A presidential campaign is more than a contest of candidates, more than a clash of opposing philosophies. It is a mirror held up to America. It is a measurement of who we are and where we come from, and where we're going. For as much inspiration as we may draw from a glorious past, we recognize America preeminently as a country of tomorrow. For we were placed here, *for a purpose, by a higher power*, there's no doubt about it. Every soldier in uniform, every school child who recites the Pledge of Allegiance, every citizen who places her hand on her heart when the flag goes by, recognizes and responds to our American destiny [emphasis mine].<sup>8</sup>

George W. Bush, among other instances of spiritualizing “secular” issues, contended in defense of war in Iraq that “Freedom is not America's gift to the world. Freedom is the Almighty God's gift to each man and woman in this world.”<sup>9</sup>

Finally, channeling the Reagan jeremiad, George H.W. Bush declared that

There is a yearning in America, a feeling that maybe it's time to get back to our roots. Sure we must change, but some values are timeless. I believe in families that stick together, fathers who stick around. I happen to believe very deeply in the worth of each individual human being, born or unborn. I believe in teaching our kids the difference between what's wrong and what's right, teaching them respect for hard work and to love their neighbors. I believe that America will always have a special place in God's heart, as long as He has a special place in ours.<sup>10</sup>

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<sup>6</sup> George H.W. Bush, “Remarks at a Prayer Breakfast in Houston.”

<sup>7</sup> George H.W. Bush, “Remarks at the University of Notre Dame Commencement Ceremony in South Bend, IN,” May 17, 1992, John T. Woolley and Gerhard Peters, *The American Presidency Project* [online]. Santa Barbara, CA: University of California (hosted), Gerhard Peters (database). Available from World Wide Web: <http://www.presidency.ucsb.edu/ws/?pid=20979>.

<sup>8</sup> Robert Dole, “Address Accepting the Nomination.”

<sup>9</sup> George W. Bush, “Debate at St. Louis, MO.”

<sup>10</sup> George H.W. Bush, “Remarks Accepting the Presidential Nomination at the Republican National Convention in Houston,” August 20, 1992, John T. Woolley and Gerhard Peters, *The American*

Likewise, Dole asked,

After decades of assault upon what made America great, upon supposedly obsolete values, what have we reaped? What have we created? What do we have? What we have in the opinion of millions of Americans is crime and drugs, illegitimacy, abortion, the abdication of duty, and the abandonment of children. . . . But one must never compromise in regard to God, and family, and honor, and duty and country. . . . For the old values endure. And though they may sleep and though they may falter, they endure. I know this is true.<sup>11</sup>

Across the aisle and not to be outdone, most Democratic candidates have in some way kept alive the central components of the political religion of the center-left, asserting piety and offering moral and spiritual rationalizations for positions on issues that mobilize various moderate-to-liberal Democratic constituencies and offer cross-over appeal to many other voters concerned with religious and moral values. To be sure, the political religion of the center-left has differed drastically from that of the right for at least two reasons. First, it was slightly interrupted when Walter Mondale and Michael Dukakis mostly eschewed religious appeals—and lost—and the practice resumed when Bill Clinton ran in 1992. Since that time, it has continued unabated. Second, Democrats' use of religion has occurred within the broader context of a party that has, as a result of its need to cultivate upper- and middle-class issue activists to raise money and win elections, moved increasingly leftward since the 1970s, particularly on the social issues that galvanize religious conservatives. So, just as economic conservatism embraced religious conservatism for Republicans, economic liberalism also came to embrace lifestyle liberalism among Democrats. As a result, no matter who it nominated for president, the party often had little or no chance of winning over the religious

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*Presidency Project* [online]. Santa Barbara, CA: University of California (hosted), Gerhard Peters (database). Available from World Wide Web: <http://www.presidency.ucsb.edu/ws/?pid=21352>.

<sup>11</sup> Robert Dole, "Address Accepting the Presidential Nomination at the Republican National Convention in San Diego."

conservatives. Still, beginning with Clinton, appeals were made by Democrats on religious grounds. Gore and Kerry carried on this effort and, like Clinton, have utilized religious appeals in a Carterian cast.

With regard to personal piety, Clinton spoke often of his Southern Baptist religion, picturing himself as a pious man who sang in the choir at Immanuel Baptist Church in Little Rock. To one gathered audience he shared this testimony:

My faith tells me that all of us are sinners, and each of us has gone in our own way and fallen short of the glory of God. . . . Religious faith has permitted me to believe in my continuing possibility of becoming a better person every day. If I didn't believe in God, if I weren't, in my view, a Christian, if I didn't believe ultimately in the perfection of life after death, my life would have been much more difficult.<sup>12</sup>

Al Gore likewise called himself a “born again Christian”<sup>13</sup> who “believe[s] in serving God and trying to understand and obey God’s will.”<sup>14</sup> John Kerry noted his piety, too, quoting from Matthew, James, John, Luke, the Ten Commandments, and “Amazing Grace” in a speech on faith in Florida, also declaring that “I love my church; I respect the bishops.”<sup>15</sup>

Like Carter, subsequent Democratic candidates have also used religious values to appeal to various policy issues of importance to Democratic constituencies. Clinton, echoing Carter’s religious calls for civil and human rights, told a church audience in

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<sup>12</sup> Quoted in Randall Balmer, *God in the White House: A History: How Faith Shaped the Presidency from John F. Kennedy to George W. Bush* (New York, HarperOne, 2008), 137.

<sup>13</sup> Al Gore, *60 Minutes*, CBS, December 5, 1999.

<sup>14</sup> Quoted in Martin J. Medhurst, “Religious Rhetoric and the Ethos of Democracy: A Case Study of the 2000 Presidential Campaign,” *The Ethos of Rhetoric*, ed. Michael J. Hyde (Columbia: University of South Carolina Press, 2006), 118.

<sup>15</sup> See David M. Halbfinger and David E. Sanger, “Kerry’s Latest Attacks on Bush Borrow a Page From Scripture,” *The New York Times*, October 25, 2004, available from <http://www.nytimes.com/gst/fullpage.html?res=9500EFD7163DF936A15753C1A9629C8B63&sec=&spn=&emc=eta1>.

Tennessee that “you can't look down on somebody else because they're of a different religion, a different race, a different ethnic group, a different tribe. You got to treat people as if they're equal in the eyes of God and the law.”<sup>16</sup> In 1992 Clinton ran on a “New Covenant” platform latent with biblical allusion. As Al Gore noted in 2000, the “bedrock” of his approach to dealing with important policy issues would be to ask, “WWJD,” which stood, he explained, “for a saying that’s popular now in my faith, ‘What would Jesus do?’”<sup>17</sup> As to how that translated into policy, he offered several examples along the campaign trail. The environment often topped that list, but there were others. For instance, “It’s just wrong,” he explained, “for seniors to have to choose between food and medicine,” and “it’s just wrong to have life and death decisions made by bean-counters at HMOs.”<sup>18</sup> Gore, in fact, even ventured into “Republican” territory by addressing the morality of violence, pornography, and censorship, closing one campaign commercial with these lines: “Fight violence and pornography on the Internet, helping parents block out what children shouldn’t see. Al Gore. He’ll put his values to work for us.”<sup>19</sup> Staying true to this form, John Kerry contended that Christians believe in “caring for the sick, housing the homeless, feeding the hungry and stopping violence,” teachings,

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<sup>16</sup> Bill Clinton, “Remarks at the Salem Missionary Baptist Church in Fruitland, Tennessee,” August 19, 1996, John T. Woolley and Gerhard Peters, *The American Presidency Project* [online]. Santa Barbara, CA: University of California (hosted), Gerhard Peters (database). Available from World Wide Web: <http://www.presidency.ucsb.edu/ws/?pid=53153>.

<sup>17</sup> Sally Quinn, “The G-Word and the A-list,” *Washington Post*, July 12, 1999, p. C-1.

<sup>18</sup> Medhurst, “Religious Rhetoric,” 127.

<sup>19</sup> “The Ad Campaign: Another Look at Gore the Man,” *New York Times*, September 28, 2000, <http://www.nytimes.com/2000/09/28/politics/28ADBO.html>.

he charged, that the overtly Christian Bush administration was not heeding but that he would take seriously upon entering office.<sup>20</sup>

Together these Democratic and Republican uses of religion, which are just a few among many examples, seem to indicate some of the lasting effects of Reagan and Carter's 1980 rhetorical constructions. The political religions they invented lived on both in form and in content. But what about in frequency? To confirm the increased presence of religion in presidential politics since 1980—the legacy of Reagan and Carter—a few statistical measures are worth examining, since these too indicate the heightened use of religion as a political weapon. Measures of religious language in party convention acceptance speeches—typically the most widely received of any single campaign message and a useful barometer given that venue's invariability across years—serve us well. The Republican nominee invoked God an average of 5.2 times per acceptance speech between 1984 and 2004, a figure that is *more than twice* the pre-Reagan level among Republicans. GOP candidates during that span also included an average of 19.5 of what Domke and Coe have called “faith terms”—terms such as faith, pray, sacred, sin, worship, confession, evil, mission, and angel—marking a 65% increase from the previous era. Among Democrats, there were 4.3 God invocations and 16.5 “faith terms” from 1992 to 2004, marking respective increases of 77% and 40% over pre-1980 levels—levels that include both of Carter's bids.<sup>21</sup>

Beyond the fact that presidential campaigning shifted markedly in 1980, it is also worth pointing out that the consequences of that election did not end with campaigns. In

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<sup>20</sup> Halbfinger and Sanger, “Kerry's Latest Attacks on Bush Borrow a Page From Scripture.”

<sup>21</sup> See Domke and Coe, *The God Strategy*, 48.

fact, Domke and Coe have gone on to show that despite the fact that religion has always been a public part of the American presidency, with presidents regularly invoking a higher power and speaking in subtle religious terms and tones, the volume of religious language in presidential addresses increased sharply when Reagan took office in 1981 and has remained at this unprecedented level ever since. Reagan's victory established a new norm for the presidency, where religious appeals "no longer were just common among presidents; they became omnipresent." Among the presidents from FDR to Carter, God was invoked in roughly half of addresses to the nation. Post-Carter, Reagan invoked God 96% of the time; George H.W. Bush did so in 91% of his addresses; Bill Clinton did so at a rate of 93%; and George W. Bush came in at 94%. In addition, the number of times *per address* that presidents invoke God has also increased dramatically since Reagan took office. Pre-Reagan, each president averaged fewer than two invocations per presidential address, often much less than that (fewer than one for several presidents). From Reagan forward, that figure has nearly doubled. And with regard to "faith terms," usage of these per presidential address was more than 50% higher between 1981 and 2007 than usage per address between 1933 and 1980.<sup>22</sup>

Domke and Coe, who have done all of this invaluable computing, have attributed these significant changes to the 1980 election, an interpretation I cannot dispute. The Reagan-Carter-Anderson contest changed not just the conduct of presidential elections, but also the conduct of the presidency in some important ways. And given that presidential elections and presidential addresses tend to generate more news attention and thus spawn more public awareness than any other political phenomena in the American

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<sup>22</sup> Each of these measures is attributed to Domke and Coe, *The God Strategy*, 29-48.

system, this is no minor development. Martin J. Medhurst has argued that the use of religion in presidential politics has changed the very character of American politics. It has become an important part of America's democratic *ethos*, he contends—"an abiding dimension of the American character or, better yet, a national character seeking a place to abide, a locus of communal values that transcends parties, politics, and philosophies."<sup>23</sup> The presidential election of 1980 changed America.

Occurring alongside this major change in the conduct of American politics is another, just as important, development, one that directly affects and is affected by the heightened use of religion—namely, the increased polarization of political parties and candidates, and thus of American politics, over the last several decades. This development is attributable to several sources. As Robert Putnam has written about politics generally, "The world of public affairs is not [most people's] world. It is alien to them—possibly benevolent, more probably threatening, but nearly always alien. Most [people] are not interested in politics. Most do not participate in politics." As a result, the people who play the greatest role in politics are the people who *are* interested in politics. And the people who *are* interested in politics, generally speaking, are the people who tend to have the deepest policy convictions, programmatic commitments, or ideological motivations. They also, almost inevitably, tend toward having the most extreme views on the issues they care most about.<sup>24</sup>

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<sup>23</sup> See Medhurst, "Religious Rhetoric and the Ethos of Democracy," 116.

<sup>24</sup> Robert Putnam, *The Beliefs of Politicians* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1973), 1. This argument is also put forth by Stephen Wayne. See Stephen Wayne, *Is This Any Way to Run a Democratic Election?* 3<sup>rd</sup> edition (Washington, DC: CQ Quarterly, 2007).

Putnam's observation is important in the American context given the development of the party system and, more specifically, the role of the parties in selecting presidential candidates. In effect, because of developments across time, there is now little or no institutional party check on the selection of a candidate to carry the party label in presidential elections—something that has not always been the case and that has contributed significantly to the increased polarization (and thus hostility) of the Republican and Democratic parties. As James W. Ceaser has documented, prior to the formation of parties, the Framers of the Constitution sought to devise a system with an executive selected on the merits of his reputation and prior service, rather than on the basis of issue appeals—and that worked for George Washington and, to some extent, John Adams. But it changed when Jefferson sought to counteract what he considered the “seditious” designs of the Federalists by basing elections on issues, establishing two parties in the nomination process so that leaders would attach themselves openly to party principles. Martin Van Buren then developed Jefferson's general solution by establishing a permanent competition between two parties whose elites would control the path of access to presidential nomination, thus making presidential elections a choice between two tested and well-known parties, more than a contest between two individuals. A heavily partisan electorate thus resulted and remained mostly intact until Woodrow Wilson sought to end unreflective partisan voting by attempting to remove the party from all influence in choosing the nominee. He aimed to do this by having the nomination process determined by primaries, which enhanced the status of individual candidates and freed them from the party yoke, allowing them to craft their own popular constituencies and thus attain a wider mandate for presidential leadership. By the 1970s, the process

that Wilson had set into motion had become ingrained, meaning party nominees came to be chosen to a lesser extent by party leaders driven by a desire to win (a motive toward moderation), and to a greater extent by those who turn out to vote in primaries (a motive toward ideological extremism).<sup>25</sup>

When one links this to Putnam's observation that "Most [people] are not interested in politics" and "Most do not participate in politics," and that the ones who do participate have the deepest ideological convictions, we are confronted by the reality that the people who are selecting the presidential nominees for each party tend more toward the poles of the American spectrum rather than being representative of the overall electorate. They are more often concerned with ideological purity than with other moderating concerns. In Iowa, for instance, arguably the most important state in the union with regard to selecting party nominees, the highest turnout on record for primary caucuses is 12% of the voting age population, which occurred in 1988 when both parties found themselves in a competitive nomination cycle with no incumbent running. Generally the turnout percentage is even lower, often in the single digits. Because of this phenomenon (and Iowa is just a case in point), candidates must in early stages appeal to the more ideological impulses of their party bases. The ideological extremes are thus overrepresented in the candidate selection process, and the center is underrepresented.<sup>26</sup>

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<sup>25</sup> James W. Ceaser, *Presidential Selection: Theory and Development* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1979).

<sup>26</sup> For a good discussion of this phenomenon, see Morris P. Fiorina with Samuel J. Abrams and Jeremy C. Pope, *Culture War? The Myth of a Polarized America* (New York: Pearson Longman, 2005), esp. 96-103. To be sure, his phenomenon is also due to several other factors, among them the defection of conservative Southern Democrats during the latter half of the twentieth century, the virtual disappearance of liberal Republicans, and gerrymandering efforts that have yielded an abundance of legislators representing "safe" districts (i.e., their districts are thoroughly liberal or thoroughly conservative, and they can continue to win reelection precisely by being ideological).

What has resulted is a context in which parties and candidates are more thoroughly ideological on the full range of issues, including economics, foreign policy, the environment, and hot-button social issues. Blurring lines and enacting compromises become less likely under this rubric.

As even the most casual observers would agree, American politics has become excessively contentious on its best days during the last several decades, and downright nasty on its worst. As a result, the broader electorate, which is far less polarized than its elected officials and most avid participants, is faced with what Morris P. Fiorina describes as

a political order that characteristically debates policy proposals more extreme than necessary to address societal issues and community problems, a political order that spends inordinate amounts of time debating policy issues that most citizens do not view as among the more important issues facing the country, and a political order dominated by a political class whose behavior and operating style would be unacceptable outside of politics.<sup>27</sup>

The fact that much of this is now done in religious terms does not help the situation.

Since 1980, then, the context for the voter, generally speaking, has been as follows in presidential elections: The Republican Party offers pious candidates with steadfast commitments to economic conservatism based in free markets and less government spending, an aggressive foreign policy and military might, and, often cloaked in religious terminology, firm stances on social issues such as abortion, homosexual rights, and school prayer. The Democratic Party, on the other hand, typically offers pious candidates pedaling what they consider a more moralistic foreign policy based on ideals and engagement, a more *laissez-faire* approach to social and moral issues, and, grounded

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<sup>27</sup> Fiorina, *Culture War?*, 102.

often in religious appeals, commitments to social justice, assistance to the poor, the environment, and civil and human rights.

Religious conservatives, as I have shown, having emerged as a political force in the late 1970s in an effort to stem the tide of that decade's cultural upheaval, signed on with the Republican Party because of its candidates' promises to lead in fighting the culture war. There have always been exceptions among religious conservatives, of course, such as Jim Wallis and other "radical" evangelicals who have concerned themselves with anti-war protests and issues of social justice, but as a voting bloc, almost uniformly, religious conservatives have been Republicans since 1980. Because culture war politics proved salient and electorally beneficial (and in some cases out of true conviction), Republican politicians have continued to carry the mantle for religious conservatives, especially in presidential elections, which, as Byron E. Shafer has argued, are for a host of reasons amenable to cultural values appeals.<sup>28</sup> Given that it is culture warfare, and given the ideological party shifts that have yielded a bitter and divisive politics, many religious conservatives, especially at the elite level, have often painted Democrats as the enemy because of their alleged softness, accommodation, centrism, or liberalism on culture war issues. There is no chance, in other words, that many religious conservatives would sign onto the Democrats' agenda—no matter what the other spiritually grounded principles the party pushes—since for most post-1980 religious conservatives, cultural warfare easily trumps economics and foreign policy as a vital personal concern and as a basis for casting a ballot.

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<sup>28</sup> Byron E. Shafer, "The Notion of an Electoral Order," in *The End of Realignment?: Interpreting American Electoral Eras*, ed. Byron E. Shafer (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 1991).

So, because they mobilized for politics by joining the Republican Party, embracing along with their new membership the Party's cementing ideological positions on foreign policy and economics, to be a religious conservative, at the risk of overstating my case, has usually been to be a foreign policy hawk, an advocate of defense buildups, a defender of tax cuts for the wealthy, an opponent of welfare, environmental protection, or government-funded healthcare. For most evangelicals, notes Medhurst, this has been "a small price to pay for the preservation of . . . a Judeo-Christian culture."<sup>29</sup> However, in signing onto these partisan initiatives, one might argue, as even many prominent evangelicals have, that religious conservatives relinquished part of their soul, their summons to be "salt" and "light" as the Bible commands, their command to take care of the poor and oppressed and "to tend the earth and to keep it,"<sup>30</sup> to "Do justice, to love mercy, and to walk humbly."<sup>31</sup>

#### *At the Brink of a New Era*

In recent years, a significant development has occurred among religious conservatives, though. Several evangelical elites, especially of the younger, post-Falwell and Dobson generation, have taken notice of what they consider religious conservatives' bondage to Republican politics and have begun to blur many of the stark partisan and ideological lines that have captivated religious conservatives for the last three decades. The implications of this are not small, as such an act could contribute significantly to the

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<sup>29</sup>Martin J. Medhurst, "Evangelical Christian Faith and Political Action: Mike Huckabee and the 2008 Republican Presidential Nomination," *Journal of Communication and Religion* 32 (2009): forthcoming.

<sup>30</sup> Genesis 2:15.

<sup>31</sup> Micah 6:8.

prospect that the current era in presidential politics is passing, giving way to a new one. Many of these newer evangelical leaders, in addition to the younger flocks they lead, have committed themselves to exposing and reconsidering religious conservatives' close adherence to Republican politics by contending that a broader agenda—including emphasis on social justice, the environment, tolerance, human rights, and peace—must be pursued, in a less combative tone, if one is to more fully live out a sound biblical ethic in the public square. Although some important structural factors remain in place to foster ideologically divergent parties, perhaps continuing to limit these evangelicals' choices in presidential elections, it seems possible that this blurring of lines among evangelicals is occurring alongside slight changes in the political class, where some candidates—Barack Obama particularly, but perhaps others, too—seem likewise interested in moving beyond the divisive culture war politics of the last generation in ways that these newer evangelicals might celebrate and embrace. Let us consider both of these factors.

A new generation of evangelical leaders can be seen questioning the old orthodoxies on several fronts. None is more prominent than Rick Warren, bestselling author of *The Purpose-Driven Life* and senior pastor at Saddleback Church in Southern California, who has garnered the national spotlight in recent years. Warren, in fact, can be viewed as a consummate blurrer of the lines, working, for instance, like his conservative forebears in support of California's Proposition 8 to ban gay marriage, while also working on an initiative he founded called P.E.A.C.E. (*Promote reconciliation, Equip leaders, Assist the poor, Care for the sick, and Educate the next generation*), which has mobilized congregations around the world to respond to poverty, AIDS, and injustice. To boot, he hosted *both* the Republican and the Democratic nominees during the 2008

election to talk in a nationally televised forum about the role of religion in their politics and in public life. And perhaps most prominently, he eagerly agreed to pray at the inauguration ceremony of Barack Obama, echoing in his prayer the Democrat's calls for tolerance and environmental stewardship (begging God's forgiveness "when we fail to treat our fellow human beings and all the Earth with the respect they deserve"), while not hesitating to pray "in the name of the one who changed my life—Jesus."<sup>32</sup>

Like Warren, other well-known evangelicals have taken up similar initiatives, if with slightly less publicity in the national press. Their efforts, however, have not gone unnoticed in the evangelical community. Richard Cizik, former chief lobbyist for the NAE, has advocated environmental concerns on behalf of the agency by contending that so-called "creation care" is a biblical mandate, drawing, as a result, the ire of Dobson and others. Jim Wallis, who, as mentioned, has long advocated on behalf of the poor and oppressed, has finally found widespread traction for his message, garnering attention with a bestseller, *God's Politics*, a book bearing a subtitle that speaks directly to the rigid lines of the last thirty years: *Why the Right Gets It Wrong and the Left Doesn't Get It*. Orlando megachurch pastor Joel C. Hunter, a registered Republican, has taken up poverty in America as a major concern. Hunter also met privately (and with scant media attention) with Obama throughout the 2008 campaign, even accepting an invitation to offer the benediction at the Democratic National Convention. Among younger evangelicals, groups such as Evangelicals for Darfur, Evangelicals for Middle East Understanding, and Blood:Water Mission, which advocate human rights, interfaith dialogue, tolerance, and compassion, have popped up around the country, indicating a shift away from the culture

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<sup>32</sup>Rick Warren, Prayer at the Inauguration of Barack Obama, January 20, 2009.

wars that consumed the last generation of evangelicals. And in the bustling evangelical pop culture, popular musicians such as Derek Webb have attempted to offer a prophetic voice about poverty, war, and the dangers of partisan captivity: “There are two great lies that I’ve heard. . . . That Jesus Christ was a white, middle-class Republican, and if you wanna be saved, you have to learn to be [that, too].”<sup>33</sup> In a reflection of this new evangelical zeitgeist, it is worth noting too that within months of James Dobson announcing his plans to step down from the helm of Focus On the Family so as to step up his partisan advocacy and avoid running afoul of the IRS, his organization, for the first time in its three decades of existence, laid off workers and cut more than \$12 million from its budget because of a decline in revenue. Clearly, as we can see, the ground is shifting among a new generation of evangelicals.

It is possible, though far less certain at this point, that simultaneous to this shift among evangelicals, American politics more broadly might also be turning the corner on a new electoral era with what some have suspected to be the “disjunction” of the Reagan era and the partial “reconstruction” of an Obama era.<sup>34</sup> Given, among other factors, the Democrats’ major electoral gains in 2008, the charisma and “change” agenda of the candidate who won, the woeful approval ratings of the conservative Republican he replaced, the fact that the Republicans nominated their most moderate presidential candidate in a generation, and the near-impeccable 30-year timing that would make certain realignment theorists swoon, it is within reason to wonder whether Obama’s election constituted, as did Reagan’s, a paradigmatic shift. It is, of course, in addition to

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<sup>33</sup> Derek Webb, “A King and a Kingdom,” *Mockingbird*, INO Records, 2005.

<sup>34</sup> These are terms borrowed from Skowronek, *The Politics Presidents Make*. For an excellent discussion on the concept of an electoral era, see Shafer, “The Notion of an Electoral Order.”

being beyond the scope of this work, far too early to confirm that this has in fact occurred, but let us consider three things that transpired when Reagan was elected in a similar manner: first, he altered his party's philosophy for decades to come; second, he ushered in an era dominated by his party at the presidential level (the only Democrat to win in three decades, Bill Clinton, never won a popular vote majority); and third, he reshaped the opposition party such that its only hope of winning a presidential election for a generation to come required that it put forth candidates of a more centrist mold (both Clinton and Gore—the lone winner and the next-closest contender of that era—called themselves “New Democrats”). Again, I do not wish to claim the existence of a newly constructed regime or electoral order, but it is worth noting that as we see the ground shifting among a new generation of evangelicals, there might also be some major changes occurring in the political world they seek to engage.

If in fact these changes are lasting, what would they look like? While it is of course speculative at this point, Obama's 2008 campaign might offer us insight given its unforeseen and perhaps order-shattering success. His was a campaign marked by attempts, like those of younger evangelicals, to blur the old partisan lines, particularly with regard to the culture war. Undoubtedly, Obama's politics have a liberal bent, but with a message that resonated in particular among younger Americans, including some evangelicals. The political world Obama has sought to construct, and which may in fact be well underway and here to stay, aims to ease the rancor of the last generation by transcending the old battle lines of cultural warfare and partisan politics. “Whenever we dumb down the political debate, we lose,” he said in his campaign bestseller, *The Audacity of Hope*. “For it's precisely the pursuit of ideological purity, the rigid

orthodoxy and the sheer predictability of our current political debate that keeps us from finding new ways to meet the challenges we face as a country.”<sup>35</sup> It was in this vein that Obama called for a new kind of politics based upon shared understandings and commonalities, doing so in part by reaching out to religious groups in new ways, hopeful that one way to blur the old lines would be to tap into the changing religious landscape.

During the campaign Obama went about this in several ways, including the old Carterian strategy of asserting piety—“I let Jesus Christ into my life. I learned that my sins could be redeemed and if I placed my trust in Jesus, that he could set me on a path to eternal life”—and spiritualizing traditionally Democratic issues—“The challenges we face today—war and poverty, joblessness and homelessness, violent streets and crumbling schools—are not simply technical problems in search of a 10-point plan. They are moral problems, rooted in both society indifference and individual callousness, in the imperfections of man.”<sup>36</sup> But Obama went beyond practicing the political religion of the center-left, chastening, for instance, his Democratic forebears and contemporaries with words that might just as easily have come from a religious right activist. He called them politicians “who dismiss religion in the public square as inherently irrational or intolerant, insisting on a caricature of religious Americans that paints them as fanatical, or thinking that the very word ‘Christian’ describes one’s political opponents, not people of faith.”<sup>37</sup>

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<sup>35</sup> Barack Obama, *The Audacity of Hope: Thoughts on Reclaiming the American Dream* (New York: Three Rivers Press, 2006), 40.

<sup>36</sup> Barack Obama, Address to the African Methodist Episcopal Convention, July 5, 2008.

<sup>37</sup> Barack Obama, “Politics and Faith: A Call to Renewal,” June 28, 2006.

The Obama campaign organized 950 “American values” house parties, which saw a significant turnout of moderate evangelicals and mainline Protestants. He utilized a strategy of private outreach from the Republican playbook, hosting a meeting of 40 Christian leaders, including prominent evangelicals such as Cizik, Franklin Graham, T.D. Jakes, Max Lucado, and *Christianity Today* editor David Neff. As Cizik reported, this was the first time a Democratic nominee had requested a meeting with an NAE official in the 28 years he had worked there, noting that Obama was “reflective and willing to bridge divisions.” Obama also sent weekly correspondence to the NAE, while the McCain campaign failed to correspond a single time.<sup>38</sup>

Obama also sat for an exclusive interview with *Christianity Today*, something no Democratic candidate had ever done. He proposed (and eventually enacted soon after entering office) expanding Bush’s faith-based initiative, which had theretofore been fiercely opposed by liberals because of their concerns over what such a program meant for church-state separation. He acknowledged, moreover, despite policy positions that were decidedly liberal, but unlike the Democrats of the past, that abortion is a moral issue, with real moral elements at play, telling *Christianity Today* readers that “I do think that those who diminish the moral elements of the decision aren’t expressing the full reality of it.”<sup>39</sup> And he also took aim specifically at the traditional partisan divisions, lamenting them especially as they related to religious conservatives:

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<sup>38</sup> John W. Kennedy, “Preach and Reach: Despite his liberal record, Barack Obama is making a lot of evangelicals think twice,” *Christianity Today* 52 (October 2008): available from <http://www.christianitytoday.com/ct/2008/october/18.26html?start=1>.

<sup>39</sup> Barack Obama, “Q&A with Barack Obama,” Interview by Sarah Pulliam and Ted Olsen, *Christianity Today*, January (Web-only) 2008, available from <http://www.christianitytoday.com/ct/2008/januaryweb-only/104-32.0.html?start=1>.

You know, I think there's been a set of habits of thinking about the interaction between evangelicals and Democrats that we have to change. Democrats haven't shown up. Evangelicals have come to believe often times that Democrats are anti-faith. Part of my job in this campaign, something that I started doing well before this campaign, was to make sure I was showing up and reaching out and sharing my faith experience with people who share that faith. Hopefully we can build some bridges that allow us to move the country forward.<sup>40</sup>

The fact that this change in style and substance has occurred in step with both the prospective birth of a new political era and the shifting terrain among a new generation of evangelicals carries with it no shortage of important implications regarding the role of religion in American public life. If it is the case that Obama is constructing a new era—one in which, like Reagan, his party will tweak its philosophy with regard to religion (and other issues) and will make inroads among a shifting evangelical landscape; one in which Republicans will have to move toward the center to win elections; and consequently, one in which, as in 2008, an aging and less-powerful religious right will have a diminished role in the selection of Republican candidates—if this is the case, then we are doubtless at a turning point with regard to religion in American politics. And as we stand on the brink of what might be a new era, the first turning point of such proportions for religion in public life since 1980, I think that it is important, before charging ahead, to draw lessons from 1980. As the preceding pages have shown, so much of the last era—especially its divisiveness—was shaped by the constraints erected in 1980.

We are presently at a point, moreover, where the future role of religion is still malleable; we have not, in other words, because of a new kind of candidate and his efforts to appeal to an emerging movement of evangelicals, entered irreversibly into the age to come. Although he made inroads among religious voters, especially younger ones,

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<sup>40</sup> Barack Obama, "Q&A with Barack Obama."

Obama still carried a small percentage of evangelicals relative to McCain in 2008, even if his evangelical support did mark an increase over all other Democrats' since Carter in 1976.<sup>41</sup> Further, Republicans might not be pulled to the center. Mike Huckabee, who as a Republican candidate showed early signs of blurring old distinctions, combining social and cultural conservatism with economic populism and a self-proclaimed Christian concern for issues of such as poverty, found it impossible to sustain his moderation and “compassion” agenda when the Republican nomination was at stake. He ran increasingly rightward on gay marriage, immigration, taxes, foreign policy, and other conservative causes in search of support for the nomination as the primary season wore on.<sup>42</sup>

The old lines, in other words, have not completely blurred or disappeared. But it would appear that definitive change might loom on the horizon, as important factors such as a shifting evangelical landscape and calls by a potentially “reconstructive” president to abandon the culture war have coalesced in recent years. It strikes me—though one should not carry this comparison too far—that the 2008 election resembles in certain respects the 1976 election, when both the parties and religious conservatives found themselves in an uncertain state of flux with major transitions ahead.

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<sup>41</sup> According to exit poll data analyzed by the Pew Forum on Religion and Public life, Obama improved among every religious group, but was still in the minority among many of them. He increased his performance among white evangelicals five percent over Kerry in 2004 but still ran behind McCain 74% to 24% among that group. McCain won among white mainline Protestants 65% to 34% and white Catholics 52% to 47%. Among nonwhite Christians, Obama's gains were dramatic, as he drew 95% of the African American vote and 66% of the Latino vote, up 7% and 13% respectively over Kerry. See Sarah Posner, “Obama and Religious Voters,” *The American Prospect*, November 6, 2008 (web only), available from [http://www.prospect.org/cs/articles?article=obama\\_and\\_religious\\_voters](http://www.prospect.org/cs/articles?article=obama_and_religious_voters).

<sup>42</sup> For an excellent analysis of the role of religion in Huckabee's bid, see Medhurst, “Evangelical Christian Faith and Political Action.”

*A Concluding Meditation on Religion in Presidential Politics*

In looking ahead, the first things to consider are the most obvious—whether religious values *will* and *should* have a role in presidential politics. At the most basic level, the answers to these two questions seem straightforward. So long as religion remains a thriving enterprise in America and religious Americans remain active in politics, religion will continue to be part of our political discourse. This, I contend, is not a bad thing, or at least it does not have to be. Politics, ultimately, is about values. We value equality, so we hold democratic elections. We value liberty and restraint, so we establish a system of checks and balances. We value individual rights, so we amended our system of governance soon after its inception to guarantee those rights considered most precious. Many of these most fundamental values have even emerged from the Christian traditions of the West. For the American citizen in more contemporary times, the values of gravest national concern are usually expressed most readily in the selection of our lone nationally elected official. This, of course, is not new: religious values have been a major motivation for voters in presidential elections since at least 1796.

Americans from the media and political elite to the ordinary citizen would do well to more responsibly acknowledge not only this precedent, but this present reality. Contrary to popular myth, it is no breach in the supposed wall that separates church from state—especially in this postmodern world where you hold your values and I mine—for me to bring *all* of my values, and you yours, even the religious ones, to bear in some way at the polling place. While this consideration changes slightly when we talk about the role of religion for the elected civil officer, it is fairly straightforward with regard to the voter and the candidate. Religion as a political motivation is likely here to stay, and it

would serve our politics well to acknowledge this fact and accept it as a suitable part of American political life.

Beyond these two most basic questions of *will* and *should*, there are many theological and philosophical considerations as to *how* religion should come to bear in political life. A robust and centuries-old literature has emerged around these considerations, and given the breadth and diversity of that literature, I have no plans to summarize or re-write it here. Instead, my concluding aim is normative but more practical: in looking ahead, what can the last thirty years teach us practically about how religion should come to bear in presidential politics?

Although there is some (though certainly not full) consensus on the acceptability of religious values in electoral politics, my contention is that this is not—or should not be if we learn our lessons—*carte blanche* for the divisive use of religious faith. Thirty years of culture war politics has showed us nothing if not the futility of using faith in this manner, and has left most of us, no matter what our political persuasions, unsatisfied with the results. Rancor and division have benefitted no one in any lasting ways, least of all religious conservatives who, thirty years later, still find abortion legal, homosexual rights even further expanded, gay marriage allowed in many states, school prayer rules unchanged, politicians of both parties committing egregious moral lapses, and a liberal wing of the Democratic Party as intransigent as ever—this after 20 of 28 years with religiously devout Republicans in the White House and a large majority of that time with one or both houses of Congress under Republican control as well. Religious conservatives have fought hard, but, one could contend, substantively little has been gained through politics for their causes—except, to quote Obama, scores of people

“thinking the very word ‘Christian’ describes one’s political opponents, not people of faith.” In other words, civic-minded religious conservatives have become sworn political enemies in the minds of many Americans because, in setting out to change the culture, they have attached themselves to the Republican Party; and during the last thirty years the Republican Party has been consistently opposed by roughly half of all Americans. So not only have religious conservatives failed to see their social and cultural goals realized, they have also erected barriers between themselves and half of their fellow citizens—something that invariably interrupts evangelicals’ efforts to be religious change agents in the world. To the lament of many Bible-believing Christians, moreover, the poor have grown poorer, the earth less cared-for, and the world less peaceful during that time. Surely religious conservatives are not solely to blame for these misfortunes, but without question, they have ceased to take up these clearly biblical issues in favor of fighting an increasingly futile and always hostile culture war.

If the goals of religious conservatives are seemingly as far off now as they were thirty years ago, it bears asking: Can such goals be achieved at all through politics? Fairly soon after the political victories of 1980, Jerry Falwell admitted that a formerly held belief—that upon mobilizing, he and like-minded Christians would succeed quickly at changing America—was proving to be false. He soon realized that the task was much more difficult than he had imagined. I would argue, for several reasons, that it might just be impossible, and here is why:

Political change in the American context requires compromise. Politics is not the vehicle for realizing one’s biblically defined or religiously motivated values when the

*demos* represented is marked by a diversity of biblical definitions and religious motivations.

Political change in the American context is intentionally designed to be slow and modest. Politics is not the vehicle for realizing immediate change or radical transformations of values.

Political change in the American context depends on people, and people are imperfect. Politics is not the vehicle for realizing any group's biblically defined or religiously motivated values when the very people who might bring about these values fall short of such standards themselves.

Political change in the American context involves the Republican and Democratic parties, which concern themselves with an array of economic, social, and diplomatic affairs. Politics is not the vehicle for realizing one's biblically defined or religiously motivated values when those values are not perfectly represented by either party.

Finally, and perhaps most importantly, political change in the American context is “downstream” of culture. Politics is not the vehicle for realizing one's biblically defined or religiously motivated values when it is the more deeply rooted culture that requires change.<sup>43</sup>

Political change, it thus follows, is hard to come by, and it is *not* the panacea for what many view as an ailing society.

But political change in the American context is not a lost cause, and it is not the case that religious conservatives, or any group hoping to see its values realized, should

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<sup>43</sup> This upstream/downstream metaphor can be attributed to Stephen Monsma and Mark Rodgers. See Stephen Monsma and Mark Rodgers, “In the Arena: Practical Issues in Concrete Political Engagement,” in *Toward an Evangelical Public Policy: Political Strategies for the Health of the Nation*, ed. Ronald J. Sider and Diane Knippers (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Publishing Group, 2005), 325-341.

eschew involvement in politics altogether. Culture warriors should, however, adjust their expectations—an act that would likely have rippling effects throughout American political culture. Lowering the stakes of political debate, our politics would become less about incurring God’s judgment and more about making marginal gains—as the American system is designed to do—toward shared societal goals, something that would yield as an added benefit, one hopes, greater civility. And after all, it is religious conservatives who, for the sake of their more fundamental causes on earth, should purpose to see the divisions and hostilities lessened.

Evangelicals should be leaders in efforts toward civility, toward humility, and toward reconciliation in American political life. They should do so, like all Americans, while still striving toward the realization of their values. But in so doing they should take with them the lessons of the last thirty years—that politics alone is not the answer, and that short of theocracy (which most evangelicals do not advocate), their goals will never be realized perfectly through the political process. And even should “victory” be realized, at what cost would that political success be to their ability to be “salt” and “light” in a troubled world? A simple cost-benefit analysis of culture war politics seems in order.

Political candidates, for their part, should speak freely about their own religious values as well as how those values inform their politics if they so desire, but they should not be required to do this. Additionally, they should speak of these values in the effort to bring people together, not to drive them apart, something that is possible as evidenced by Clinton’s leadership on the Religious Freedom Restoration Act in 1993, an initiative that brought together conservative Southern Baptists and liberal Jews alike, as well as just about everyone in between.

Furthermore, and perhaps most importantly, candidates should bring religion into politics humbly, acknowledging, for instance, that while in their belief the Bible might speak of absolute truths, it does not usually speak of these truths in a legislative context. In a related manner, candidates might also acknowledge the limits of the offices they seek. These might be *constitutional* limitations—such as the fact that the president has no official role in amending the Constitution—or even *political* limitations—such as the fact that the president alone cannot steer public opinion on difficult issues. Candidates for office might also acknowledge, too, that they are not priests or theologians, and while they will seek in their official capacities what is good, what is noble, what is true and what is right, ultimately, seeking is all they can do. Such limited promises would likely lower the stakes of our politics, pointing us not just toward more modest and attainable goals, but perhaps also toward goals that can be reached with greater consensus.<sup>44</sup>

Admittedly, these proposals are, if not unrealistic, idealistic. But after thirty years, culture war politics has become a tired act—a cancer that has convinced us all that we are divided into red and blue, partly by our religious values, with no compromise in the middle. All the while, we have raised the stakes of our politics to proportions impracticable, at times apocalyptic.

A new generation of religious conservatives has called foul, and a new president has attempted to bridge divisions. Obama's calls to move beyond the culture war are refreshing, but his politics are decidedly liberal—a hindrance to many evangelicals who might share the goal of ending the culture war but might not be willing to vote for a candidate who favors abortion rights, for example. What is needed is a Republican

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<sup>44</sup> Medhurst makes a similar argument. See Medhurst, "Mitt Romney, 'Faith in America,' and the Dance of Religion and Politics in American Culture."

candidate who would serve as the mirror image of Obama—one who is, like Obama, charismatic and interested in ending the culture war, but who mirrors Obama’s liberal policy positions with more conservative alternatives. Huckabee ventured briefly down this road, attempting to talk about issues other than abortion and gay marriage. But ultimately he ran right in search of the party nomination, as do many moderates, at the same time he faced the unenviable task of convincing the left—including those in the media—that he did not intend to fight the culture war simply because he was a conservative Baptist minister. A Republican candidate who can overcome such hindrances might prove effective at closing the door on an era of culture war politics—something that might just prove electorally beneficial for the Republican Party as well.

Meanwhile, let us hope that the tones set by a newer generation of evangelicals and by the some of the campaign rhetoric of Barack Obama are harbingers of a new religious politics for the age to come—a politics that aims to be civil, that seeks common ground where there is some, that is principled in conviction but aware of the limitations of politics in the American context.<sup>45</sup>

These attributes have been in short supply in the culture war politics of the last thirty years, but hope is not lost for the age to come. In presiding over a transition of eras far more profound than our own, Abraham Lincoln, one of our finest statesmen, summoned with almost unfathomable depth of conviction the sort of reconciliation that “the better angels” of our collective natures might heed at this moment in time:

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<sup>45</sup> Admittedly, Obama’s rhetoric did not often express an awareness of the limitations of politics in the American context in many areas.

Neither party expected for the war the magnitude or the duration which it has already attained. . . . Both read the same Bible and pray to the same God, and each invokes his aid against the other. It may seem strange that any men should dare to ask a just God's assistance [for seemingly unjust causes], but let us judge not, that we be not judged. . . . With malice toward none, with charity for all, with firmness in the right as God gives us to see the right, let us strive on to finish the work we are in, to bind up the nation's wounds, to care for him who shall have borne the battle and for his widow and his orphan, to do all which may achieve and cherish a just and lasting peace among ourselves and with all nations.<sup>46</sup>

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<sup>46</sup> Abraham Lincoln, Second Inaugural Address, March 4, 1865.

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