



THE RISE OF THE CONSERVATIVE CHRISTIAN VOTING BLOC

by

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## **Chapter One: The Foundations of American Religious Politics**

The most prevailing national myth in American culture asserts that God gave the United State of America a special place on the world's stage. From the colonial period to the present, Americans believed a divine presence in their national politics and history. The American credo stipulates that United States was founded by God-fearing men and guided by Christian principles. Whether the United States is a "Christian nation" or not, the effect of religion on the country can hardly be exaggerated. Religious persecution brought many colonists to America, the influence of Manifest Destiny sent settlers west, and all the while religion and politics grew more entwined. Though the Founding Fathers attempted to create a secular state, Americans refused to separate politics completely from religious inclinations.

Religion served as a national issue during the 1800 presidential election, and remained in the public spotlight thereafter. The Civil War brought distinct religious justifications both for abolition and the continuance of slavery and social reforms, often developed from notions of Christianity. While the nation became a more secular society in the early twentieth century, Americans put religion on the national political stage again in the 1928 and 1960 presidential elections over the issue of electing a Catholic as president. The beginnings of the current religious voting bloc started with the emergence of evangelist Billy Graham and his crusades starting in the 1940s. Though the Constitution calls for a separation of church and state, American Christianity never veers far from national politics. From the colonial period through the election of President John F. Kennedy in 1960 and the rise of Billy Graham to the national scene, religion influenced political leaders, voters, and steered political emotions.

The emergence of the Christian Coalition and the Moral Majority in the 1980s through the present rests on their predecessors in American history. These two Christian groups are neither unique in American history nor unprecedented, but the political influence of the current religious voting bloc nonetheless remains the subject of much political discussion and speculation. Far from being a new influence, religious political activism began before the creation of the United States.

A brief review of the founding of the United States is necessary to understand the prominence of religion in American political society. The origins of American Christianity developed, of course, across the Atlantic Ocean. Under the reign of Queen Elizabeth in England, Puritanism began as a movement to reform the Anglican system of church government. Puritans grew in number and political power, but under the reign of Charles I they, faced political and religious persecution. A number of the congregation at Scrooby separated from the Anglican Church and fled to Holland, but they became disenchanted and sought a “haven where they could live and die as Englishmen” of the Puritan faith. They negotiated with the Virginia Company to settle in the New World.<sup>1</sup> In 1620, about 100 Puritans boarded the *Mayflower* and set sail to the New World and the migration of Puritans to America continued throughout the 1630s. By 1643 over 20,000 people resided in Massachusetts, many of them Puritans. Eventually all of New England subscribed to the Puritan way of life.

Other colonies in the New World also found their origins in religion, creating safe havens for marginal religions and their leaders. Those in the Middle Colonies included a

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<sup>1</sup> Hardman, Keith J. *Issues in American Christianity: Primary Sources with Introductions*. (Grand Rapids, Michigan: Baker Books, 1993), 14.

large mix of Quakers, Catholics, and Lutherans. In a prophetic predecessor to modern American religious diversity, the Middle Colonies remained a haven of religious pluralism. An English Quaker, William Penn, received a charter to found the colony of Pennsylvania. Penn wished to establish a colony that invited religious freedom, not merely toleration. While Pennsylvania Quakers represented the dominate denomination, Scot-Irish Presbyterians, Welsh Baptists, free African Methodists, Irish Catholics, and Anglicans all found their way into Penn's social experiment.<sup>2</sup>

The Southern Colonies tended to follow the Baptist and Anglican churches, though a large number of Catholics also resided in the South. Cecil Calvert received a charter from King Charles I in 1632. Seeking to make his colony an economic success, Calvert encouraged both Protestants and Catholics to settle in Maryland. A Catholic himself, Calvert encouraged those practicing Catholicism to "be silent upon all occasions of discourse concerning matters of religion." The Catholics of Maryland ignored his warnings and in less than ten years, Protestants began to bid to gain political power. In an attempt to restore religious harmony and prevent future religious conflict, the Maryland Assembly passed a Toleration Act in 1649, which granted to all Christians the right of free worship and immunity from all coercion in religion. Though religious strikes continued in Maryland, this legislation demonstrated the close relationship of politics and religion. The colony of Georgia, with its population so sparse and spread out, represented a diversity of Anglican, Baptists, and Methodists churches.<sup>3</sup>

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<sup>2</sup> Gaustad, Edwin S. and Leigh E. Schmidt. *The Religious History of America: Revised Edition*. (San Francisco: Harper Collins Publishers, 2002) 78-94.

<sup>3</sup> Maclear, J. F. *Church and State in the Modern Age: A Documentary History*. (New York: Oxford University Press, 1995) 39.

This political and religious atmosphere in Colonial America demonstrated the religious roots of the United States. Colonists settled along religious and geopolitical lines. People in the Southern Colonies created a culture of more religious diversity, if not toleration, while the Middle Colonies provided a haven for marginalized religious converts. New England remained staunchly Puritan even after the Revolution. Under these cultural, economic, and religious divisions, opposition to England could not present an united front. Clearly, social conditions had to change before a revolution could succeed.

A unifying force came to the American colonies in the form of a religious revival. During the 1730s and 1740s, the First Great Awakening swept through the American colonies. Jonathan Edwards emerged as one of the great theologians of the Awakening. He believed “religion was not a matter of doctrinal knowledge alone, not a matter of mere propositions.”<sup>4</sup> The acceptance of this theology encouraged open conversations, with clergy from various denominations preaching as guests in town meetings and churches. The Awakening began in the Middle Colonies and New England, then spread to the Chesapeake Bay area by the 1760s.<sup>5</sup>

As preachers and evangelists traveled from city to city and colony to colony, the Awakening created a sense of unity among the colonies. While the Awakening concentrated in New England, ripples traveled throughout all of Colonial America. Denominational divisions and geopolitical boundaries arose in the colonies, causing Bostonians to realize they had more in common with Philadelphians than Londoners. Despite geopolitical differences, the colonists overwhelmingly supported Protestantism. Population exploded in the colonies, doubling roughly every twenty years, and approximately three fourths of the

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<sup>4</sup> Gaustad and Schmidt, *The Religious History of America*, 58.

<sup>5</sup> Lambert, Frank. *Religion In American Politics: A Short History*. (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2008) 21.

colonists attended church weekly, allowing the clergy to influence a significant portion of Americans.<sup>6</sup>

The American Revolution provided a new political platform for the clergy in all the colonies. In the 1760s the British Empire attempted to coerce the colonies into funding their efforts to protect the colonies. The British Parliament, containing no members from the colonies themselves, set into motion a series of extremely unpopular taxes. During the 1760s, while increasing taxes and legislation in the colonies, England also attempted to send bishops from the Church of England to American soil. Some Anglicans in New England and the Middle Colonies pleaded for the bishops to be sent quickly, before the colonists turned away from the Anglican Church and England all together. Those requesting the bishops appeared to be a small minority. Boston Minister Jonathan Mayhew cautioned the colonists to guard against a slow erosion of their rights and privileges, stating “people are not usually deprived of their liberties all at once, but gradually, by one encroachment after another, as it is found they are disposed to bear them.”<sup>7</sup>

Some colonists began advocating separating from the English government, but the issues of dissatisfaction were principally civil issues.

A majority of clergy and religious leaders nevertheless supported the American bid for independence; indeed, many of them interpreted the coming revolt as proof of God’s blessing on the colonies. Using the pulpit, sermons, and their significant social status, they attempted to persuade their congregations to support the struggle. Protestant preachers supported the revolution in much higher percentages than the general population. One preacher allowed soldiers to rip pages out of his church’s song books and use the paper for

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<sup>6</sup> Hardman, *Issues in American Christianity*, 75.

<sup>7</sup> Gaustad and Schmidt, *The Religious History of America*, 123.

musket wadding.<sup>8</sup> Clearly, the clergy felt their influence should not be limited to strictly religious matters, and they moved firmly into the political sphere. Once again, religion and politics found themselves intertwined.

As the colonies gained their independence, the task of developing a system of government fell to the political and social elite. Patriotic ministers attempted to persuade people that God remained sovereign over the new nation, and that the nation should be founded on God's laws. In 1774 Reverend Samuel Sherwood of New York reminded Americans that God called for devout rulers who would govern with Biblical principals. Like many Protestant clergy, Sherwood wanted the United States to represent a "New Israel," a true Christian nation. Delegates to the Constitutional Convention wanted to avoid the creation of a Protestant State, fearing that such a creation could only lead to sectarian strife and church-state oppression.<sup>9</sup> The Constitution and the Bill of Rights left the question of religion to the people, as it did not establish an official religion or church. The fervor of the First Great Awakening had faded somewhat and many of the Founding Fathers subscribed to deist ideals.

By the 1780s a debate centering on religious tests for public office became a major issue for Americans. Clergy leaders especially found the lack of a religious test disturbing. Baptist minister Reverend Henry Abbott questioned, "as there are no religious tests, pagans, deists, and Mahometans might obtain office, by whom were men to swear by- Jupiter, Juno, Minerva, Proserpine, or Pluto?" Reverend David Caldwell argued that removing the religious test potentially undermined the nation's moral foundation. Without electing Protestants to national office, clergy feared the nation could be ruled by a Papist or a Mahometan. Though

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<sup>8</sup> Hankins, Barry. *The Second Great Awakening and the Transcendentalists*. (Westport, Connecticut: Greenwood Press, 2004) 6.

<sup>9</sup> Lambert, Frank. *Religion in American*, 14.

the Constitution included no official religious test for office, clergy used their influence to maintain a de facto religious test. Although the new federal government did not support a single religious denomination as a national church, religion nonetheless continued to affect the political realm. A few states continued to include religious requirements into their requisites for public office, substituting a state sponsored religion for a national religion. New Englanders in particular felt slighted by the exclusion of any reference to the divine in the Constitution and held onto their religious requirements for state public office for another three decades.

Religion entered into the presidential campaign of 1800 when the Federalists and New England Calvinists attacked Thomas Jefferson's questionable beliefs. In general, Federalists tended to view themselves as political conservatives, valuing "religion, tradition, and family authority as means of fostering social, economic, and political order."<sup>10</sup> Federalist candidate John Adams, represented himself as a "God-fearing Christian" leader. The Federalists labeled Jefferson as an "infidel" and an "atheist."<sup>11</sup> Some pamphlets even asked if Americans would continue "in allegiance to God- and a religious President; or impiously declare for Jefferson- and no God?"<sup>12</sup>

Jefferson saw himself as a Christian, though his beliefs differed from those of the Calvinists. He believed in religion as a private matter, and moral behavior as being more important than doctrinal purity, whereas Calvinists believed Christianity to be both a public and private matter. They also believed that theology held the utmost importance and that

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<sup>10</sup> Larson, Edward J. *A Magnificent Catastrophe: The Tumultuous Election of 1800, America's First Presidential Campaign* (New York, New York: Free Press, 2007) 166-169.

<sup>11</sup> Lambert, *Religion In American Politics*, 34-37.

<sup>12</sup> Dunn, Susan. *Jefferson's Second Revolution: The Election Crisis of 1800 and the Triumph of Republicanism*. (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 2004) 148.

religious diversity offended the sovereignty of God.<sup>13</sup> Jefferson's very public commitment to religious freedom led to accusations of atheism. Two New York ministers, William Linn and Mitchell Mason, cited Jefferson's *Notes on the State of Virginia* as an indication of his contempt for organized religion. Timothy Dwight, the leading evangelical minister of his day and sometimes called the "Pope of Connecticut," prophesied that electing Jefferson and the Republicans would bring about the Final Judgment. Dwight called on Christians to oppose Jefferson and his French secularism. He cautioned voters that only Christian leaders fostered order and liberty and claimed that "if our religion were gone, our state of society would perish with it, and nothing would be left which would be worth defending."<sup>14</sup>

Republicans realized that Jefferson's public support of religious freedom created a political liability. They attempted to use their candidate's rhetoric of separation of church and state to silence the Federalists' concerns, knowing such liberal rhetoric would alienate a proportion of voters. They cited Jefferson's prose in the Declaration of Independence and his work in the state of Virginia as proof of his genuine commitment to religious freedom, rather than proof of his atheism.<sup>15</sup> For many Republicans, religion remained a highly personal matter and they appreciated Jefferson's dedication to protecting a religiously pluralistic society.

The election of 1800 proved one of the most vicious in American history. Wild accusations followed both candidates as the attacks became intensely personal. The religious issue religion permeated the entire campaign. While Federalists continued to claim Jefferson morally unfit for public office, the Republicans charged Adams with being intent on establishing a national church. Although Jefferson won the election, he realized his victory

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<sup>13</sup> Lambert, *Religion In American Politics*, 35.

<sup>14</sup> Larson, Edward J. *A Magnificent Catastrophe*, 166-169.

<sup>15</sup> "To The Citizens of the United States." *National Magazine*; 1 May, 1800; Volume 2, issue 6: p 179.

did not represent voter approval of his religious beliefs. His commitment to freedom of worship, rather than his own personal beliefs, allowed him to gain the White House. Adams, reflecting on the campaign years later, believed voter fear of enmeshing religion and politics explained his defeat. He believed the Republicans cast the election as either supporting religious orthodoxy or religious liberty, and given those options, Americans chose religious freedom.<sup>16</sup> In his inaugural address, attempting to calm the opposition, Jefferson pledged “sacred preservation of the public faith.”<sup>17</sup> The 1800 election foreshadowed many others in which religion would play a dominant role, and in which voters preferred candidates who mirrored their own religious and emotional preferences.

Twenty years after the American Revolution, the Second Great Awakening swept through the United States. This renewed interest in religion manifested itself in social and political reforms. In 1833 Massachusetts became the last state to abolish state religion. Until this point, the state supported the maintenance of orthodox churches with tax money. The discontinuance of tax funded churches forced every church into “a free and competitive religious marketplace.”<sup>18</sup> With churches competing for their congregations and forced to rely on parishioners for economic support, the clergy found themselves more active in society. Forced to compete with other denominations for parishioners and their financial contributions, clergy more openly advocated their religious and political viewpoints. The growth of churches and the increasing equalitarian nature of the congregations mirrored the expanding political participation of church members.

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<sup>16</sup> Lambert, *Religion In American Politics*, 37-39.

<sup>17</sup> Ferling, John. *Adams vs. Jefferson: The Tumultuous Election of 1800*. (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2004) 205.

<sup>18</sup> Lambert, *Religion In American Politics*, 43.

The Second Great Awakening began with the appearance of Charles Grandison Finney on the frontier. After an emotional and much publicized conversion, Finney began conducting revival meetings with great success. He led the revivals not only in the West, but also in eastern cities. He advocated an active role for clergy, both in the church and in the public sphere. In order for churches to survive, he cautioned, “Churches had to persuade and recruit, win and enlist vast multitudes to their own fellowships and budgets.”<sup>19</sup> A new spirit of religious activism spread into social and political movements.<sup>20</sup>

Believers felt a need to perfect themselves and society around them. To achieve this end, they founded semi-political groups and more openly engaged in politics. Lyman Beecher, one of the most outspoken proponents of the Awakening, set about to combine the religious revival with political initiatives. Speaking before the American Sunday School Union in 1828, Beecher outlined his vision for the nation. He urged the Sunday School Union to promote the intellectual and moral culture of the nation, perpetuate the republican and religious institutions, and encourage national prosperity and moral purity. For Beecher, religion obviously held a place in politics, so it seemed only natural for believers to create societies aimed at bettering the American nation.<sup>21</sup>

Semi-political organizations, based on religious philosophy and led by religious leaders like Beecher generated interest in a number of political causes: anti-slavery, women’s rights, education, and prison reform. Protestants felt the need to stem the tide of immorality in the nation and to reshape the political culture of the nation.<sup>22</sup> Beginning in 1816, Beecher and a diverse group of ministers began organizing these ventures. The Home and Foreign

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<sup>19</sup> Gaustad and Schmidt, *The Religious History of America*, 145.

<sup>20</sup> Lambert, *Religion In American Politics*, 57.

<sup>21</sup> Fraser, James W. *Pedagogue for God’s Kingdom: Lyman Beecher and the Second Great Awakening*. (New York: University Press of America, 1985) 25.

<sup>22</sup> Lambert, *Religion In American Politics*, 58-59.

Mission Society, the American Bible Society, the African Colonization Society, and the American Temperance Society all formed as voluntary benevolent societies. Every May, the societies met in New York or Philadelphia to share their successes and reaffirm their goal of a reformed America.<sup>23</sup> These organizations, both political and religious in nature, attempted to legislate moral or ethical behavior.<sup>24</sup>

Specific moral questions promoted direct political action from Protestants. In 1810 Congress had passed a law requiring post offices to deliver mail on Sundays, which Protestants felt violated the fourth commandment. From 1810 to 1817, Protestants engaged in petitioning Congress to repeal the law. Some argued that the act lessened regard for the Sabbath as a holy day, while others argued that the law required citizens to break a commandment. The Post Master General and the Supreme Court maintained that delivering mail on Sundays provided vital “economic lifeblood to the nation.”<sup>25</sup> Evangelicals in 1828 formed the General Union for the Promotion of the Christian Sabbath, which represented a broad based coalition demanding that Congress ensure that all laws conform to God’s law. The organization launched an aggressive campaign that included lectures lamenting the nations’ moral decline, printed copies of those talks, and petitions to Congress. The movement failed, but it illustrates the ability of evangelical leaders to mobilize and present a united front, transcending theological and denominational lines. Increasingly, church membership denoted political involvement. Within the space of ten years, from 1825 to 1835,

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<sup>23</sup> Fraser, *Pedagogue for God’s Kingdom*, 29.

<sup>24</sup> Hankins, *The Second Great Awakening and the Transcendentalists*, 15-17; Hardman, *Issues in American Christianity*, 112.

<sup>25</sup> Lambert, *Religion In American Politics*, 60.

Protestants increased their presence in the political sphere and generally attached themselves to the Whig Party.<sup>26</sup>

As the U.S. migration pushed westward, Baptists and Methodists found themselves in a position to influence in the West. Comprised mostly of farmer-preachers, Baptists indentified with the rough and rugged population. Using circuit riding preachers, the Methodists traveled over large areas and helped to keep settlers connected. While the Baptists and Methodists gained large followings, the West also included other Protestants, Catholics, and Russian Orthodoxy.<sup>27</sup>

The optimism of the Second Great Awakening further deepened Americans' sense of divine protection and national triumph. Unfortunately slavery, the peculiar institution of the South, shattered unification. Slavery, a hotly contested national issue since the 1830s, began to dominate the national political scene. As states divided over the issue of slavery, Christian denominations also divided. Religious leaders found Biblical support for both slavery and freedom, causing further rifts in religious denominations.

Clergymen in the North argued against the injustice of slavery, believing that it contradicted the message of Christianity. Unitarian clergyman William Ellery Channing composed a treatise against slavery in 1835. Calling for the spiritual kinship and brotherhood of all mankind, he argued any "institution so founded in wrong, so imbued with injustice" must be ended. Presbyterian Reverend Elijah P. Lovejoy supported abolitionists and rejected the view of black men as mere chattels. Lovejoy cautioned the nation that slavery "is a political evil of unspeakable magnitude and one which, if not removed, will speedily work the downfall of our free institutions, both civil and religious." Some denominations, such as

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<sup>26</sup> Hankins, *The Second Great Awakening and the Transcendentalists*, 53.

<sup>27</sup> Lambert, *Religion In American Politics*, 54.

the Disciples of Christ, advocated a gradualist approach on the issue of slavery. While believing the institution of slavery personally deplorable, Disciples leader Alexander Campbell declared the scriptures provided no condemnation of slavery as sinful. By 1840 some Protestants joined political organizations dedicated to the immediate destruction of the institution. The Free Soil Party and the Liberty Party encouraged their members to “vote as you pray, and pray as you vote.”<sup>28</sup>

Just as abolitionists found Biblical support for their position, southerners in support of slavery found scriptural justification for their peculiar institution. Minister Samuel B. How, a well known and outspoken proponent of the peculiar institution, believed the Old and New Testaments agreed on the legitimacy of slavery as a social institution. He saw the Bible justifying the right to own property and re-affirmed the rights of masters over slaves. How wrote that “the desire and the attempt to deprive others of property which is the law of God and the law of the land have made it lawful for them to hold slaves, is to strike a blow at the very existence of civilization and Christianity.” Other clergy found Biblical support in the fact that the Bible did not specifically condemn slavery. Roman Catholic Bishop John England believed slaves voluntarily gave up their freedom in exchange for protection and care from their masters. He felt many slaves would not accept freedom if they had a choice. Southerners felt that the practice of bondage provided not only a social order, but also God’s order. They used numerous Biblical examples of slavery, and even scriptures, that implied that God condoned the institution.<sup>29</sup> Though slavery obviously contained a moral issue, citizens re-enforced their own biases through religious and political arguments. Once again,

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<sup>28</sup> Lambert, *Religion In American Politics*, 67-68

<sup>29</sup> Lambert, *Religion In American Politics*, 71.

American politics utilized religion. The Civil War based in part on religious beliefs, tore the nation apart. The conclusion of the war brought reconciliation and ushered in the Gilded Age.

The American Gilded Age was a time of social inequality, wrenching poverty, and political corruption. Religious organizations responded to this corruption primarily in two ways: through promotion of the social gospel or a call to old fashioned religion. Evangelist leaders took those messages to parishioners, who in turn took their concerns into the political realm. Following the example established during the Second Great Awakening, evangelists motivated their followers to move from the religious to public sphere.

In the early twentieth century, evangelist leaders Billy Sunday and Dwight L. Moody represented the revivalists, those who believed in preaching the old fashioned gospel without direct political action. For Moody, taking the message to the grassroots level proved the best way to bring about moral change in America. Moody encouraged embracing new methods of communication and press, though he persisted in preaching a message hundreds of years old. Moody's embracing of new technology separated him from his contemporaries and provided an extremely useful example to later evangelists. Billy Sunday eschewed the use of politicians to bring about a moral revival, and greatly limited his desired audience. He gained notoriety by denouncing the theory of evolution.<sup>30</sup> Moody reached a broader audience than Sunday, though the basic tenants of their approach remained the same. The salvation of souls took precedence over political or social change. Both men felt that if individuals modified their behavior, society at large could be transformed.

Participants in the social gospel movement differed from the revivalists in that they believed redeeming an immoral and corrupt nation as more immediately important than the salvation of souls. Predominantly comprised of Protestants, they took a secular approach

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<sup>30</sup> Gaustad and Schmidt, *The Religious History of America*, 305.

to reforming society. For them, the root of America's social decay lay in collective sin, not individual weaknesses. To better America, reformers wanted to operate in both spheres. Washington Gladden, a Congregationalist pastor in Ohio, believed that a "voice crying in the wilderness might not be nearly as effective as a voice on the city council." In his book *Applied Christianity: Moral Aspects of Social Questions*, he encouraged Christians to confront the social and economic ills of society. Finding that responsible and religious citizens considered it "bad form" to involve themselves directly into politics, Gladden set himself as an example and served on his city council for two years. Religious leaders had come to acknowledge the necessity of united Christian action.

The two decades between the World Wars continued the inclusion of religion into the political realm and the election of 1928 proved one of the most heated presidential campaigns. It displayed the historical bias against Catholics when Alfred Smith, the Democratic nominee for president lost the race in great part, to his Catholicism. The first attack on Smith's religion came in the form of a letter. Charles C. Marshall wrote an open letter to Smith printed in the *Atlantic Monthly*.<sup>31</sup> Marshall questioned the ability of a Catholic to follow the Constitution or the Supreme Court when in direct conflict with the Roman Catholic Church. He included quotations from papal encyclicals, which most Catholics, Smith included, never read. He also challenged Smith's views on parochial schools and public funding.

Smith's answer to the letter, composed with the help of an attorney, was a calm and rational argument. The letter certainly explained his position, but only with a cold detachment from the issue. Smith believed he "should be a poor American and a poor

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<sup>31</sup> Warner, Emily Smith. *The Happy Warrior* (Garden City, New York: Doubleday Press, 1956) 34.

Catholic” to inject religious discussion into politics.<sup>32</sup> Smith’s reply was entirely a reaction to the letter in *Atlantic Monthly*, and he consciously decided not to pursue the question of religion. Smith and his campaign team decided to ignore the question of religion as much as possible, and to discuss Catholicism only when events made it necessary. Smith believed that by not discussing religion, he held the moral high ground.

The election of 1928 reveals the importance of religion in American politics in the twentieth century. Clearly, the Constitutional separation of church and state did not translate into a complete separation of religious and political beliefs in 1928 any more than it had in 1800. Many American religious leaders mobilized in response to a perceived religious threat, encouraging their parishioners to vote against Smith, just as the Calvinists mobilized against Jefferson.

The 1960 election provided another example of Protestant mobilization in national politics. John F. Kennedy, having studied Smith’s mistakes, determined not to overlook the question of his religion.<sup>33</sup> Kennedy and his campaign team were very aware of the historical bias against a Catholic presidential candidate, that the history of the United States focused on the narrative of white Protestants escaping religious tyranny in Europe for the freedom of the New World. The Kennedy strategists knew they must develop a strategy to effectively control the religious issue in the coming election, because anti-Catholic sentiments sprang up periodically throughout American history, but Catholic involvement in politics added fuel to the fire. Though Kennedy won the White House, religious questions remained relevant political issues.

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<sup>32</sup> Warner, *The Happy Warrior*, 187.

<sup>33</sup> Maier, Thomas. *The Kennedys*. New York, New York: Basic Books, 2003: 316.

Following World War II, a conservative religious voting bloc became a strong force in American politics. A core of conservative evangelical leaders laid the foundation for what would become the religious right. These leaders, charismatic and well known by the American public, began in the 1950s to reintroduce conservative Evangelism into American politics. In particular, Billy Graham encouraged a more active role for religion in the political sphere. Graham's "crusades" provide the most modern example of religious activism in the political realm before the introduction of the Pat Robertson's Christian Coalition and Jerry Falwell's Moral Majority.

One of the de facto supporters of Kennedy, Graham helped to ignite the modern conservative religious movement. Graham gained prominence as one of the most famous American preachers of all time and used his ministry to reach out to American evangelists. This same core of evangelists would mobilize in later decades. During Dwight D. Eisenhower's presidential years, Graham began his ministry preaching individual repentance and conversion. Graham achieved in his years as a revivalist what few others had been able to. He acted as an advisor to many presidents, including Eisenhower, Lyndon B. Johnson, and Richard Nixon, who won the 1968 election. Unlike so many other evangelists, Graham achieved a level of public visibility that allowed him to carry his message to the entire nation. His "crusades" drew thousands of people to football stadiums and civil auditoriums. Graham embraced new media and ways of reaching out to Americans.

The crusades began in 1947, but two years later the 1949 Los Angeles crusade launched Graham into the national and international spotlight. The crusade lasted eight weeks, with Graham employing the influence of local churches and businessmen. The crusade averaged three thousand people a night in attendance and the *Los Angeles Examiner*

covered the event. Within days, newspapers in Chicago, New York, Detroit, and San Francisco carried stories focusing on Graham and his crusades.<sup>34</sup>

Along with his family, Graham founded *Christianity Today*, a magazine that gave his movement the national spotlight. The magazine succeeded in linking neoconservatives to mainstream Americans, making Graham's message accessible for both.<sup>35</sup> The printed material created a respectability for the movement, allowing neoconservatives to paint themselves as defenders of revivalism and religion. Like Moody, Graham opened himself to new technologies and believed that reforming society began with reforming individuals.

Graham's radio and television programs broadcast his message and revivals across the nation. *Hour of Decision*, his radio program proved to Graham the importance of incorporating modern technology into his message. In the 1950s, radio broadcasts included only two nation-wide preachers, Dr. Walter A. Maier and Charles Fuller. When Dr. Maier died unexpectedly, Graham found himself invited to fill the position. Graham conceded to begin the *Hour of Decision*, which allowed him to speak to the nation on national and international affairs and social issues.<sup>36</sup>

Graham eventually turned his attention to direct action in the political realm. Beginning in the fall of 1951, Graham began a personal correspondence with General Dwight D. Eisenhower, who at the time served in France as Commander at the Supreme Headquarters of the Allied Powers in Europe. Graham intended to persuade Eisenhower that America needed him as president. Graham traveled to Europe in hopes of persuading Eisenhower, which he apparently succeeded in doing.<sup>37</sup> Throughout Eisenhower's

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<sup>34</sup> Graham, *Just As I Am: The Autobiography of Billy Graham* (San Francisco: Harper, 1997) 145-152.

<sup>35</sup> Gaustad and Schmidt. *The Religious History of America*, 336.

<sup>36</sup> Graham, *Just As I Am*, 175-180.

<sup>37</sup> Graham, *Just As I Am*, 192-193.

presidency, Graham remained his spiritual advisor. He often invited Eisenhower to hear his preaching, frequently making headlines as he did so. The relationship proved reciprocal, as the President also invited Graham to the White House on occasion.<sup>38</sup> By gaining the public spotlight, Graham represented to the nation an influential voice on religion and morality. His crusades and ministries allowed Americans from all stations of life to understand his message and he energized members of conservative churches as well as evangelicals.

From the colonial period to Graham's modern crusades, religion never strayed far from American politics. Religious leaders throughout the history of the U.S. appear to unite against specific political initiatives and organize believers into semi-political societies geared at legislating their values into American law. Clergy and religious leaders have inserted themselves into the national spotlight to achieve their goals. Lyman Beecher is not far from the modern example of Billy Graham. Both crossed from evangelism into politics, either directly or indirectly, to encourage a more moral society. While religiously motivated citizens failed in 1810 to end mail delivery on Sundays, they forced Congress to recognize their potential political power. The societies formed in the Second Great Awakening further pushed religious leaders into the political realm, demonstrating that Americans are hard pressed to separate their religion inclinations from their political agendas. The post-war era of American politics recognized the potential voting power of church members and evangelicals as they began to influence political leaders.

The Founders intended to remove religion from the political sphere, but they failed miserably. While no religious test existed after 1833 in the United States, voters routinely affirm their religious preferences to presidential candidates. The election of 1800 became

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<sup>38</sup> "Eisenhower Hears Graham Preach." *New York Times*, 7 March 1955, sec. A, p. 1; "President is Host." *New York Times*, 9 August 1955, sec. A, p. 9.

simply the first in which religion played a major role. Though Jefferson won the election, religion had entered the political national sphere, and would remain there through the present. Even in the modern, and supposedly secular age, religion finds itself emerged in politics. The presidential campaigns of 1928 and 1960 demonstrate the resistance of Protestant Americans to elect anyone outside of their particular form of Christianity, though Kennedy's election showed growing tolerance. The religious test voters developed in 1800 easily carried over to elections in the twentieth century.

Americans consistently placed politics close to religion. The emergence of the Christian Coalition and Moral Majority represented continuity with, rather than a break from, American political history. The first charters in the New World laid the foundation for a "Christian Nation," if not in name, surely in nature. Given the turmoil in years following World War II, including the Korean War, the Vietnam War, a presidential assassination, Watergate, and the rise of a counterculture, it is not surprising that conservative Americans looked to their religious leaders for political guidance.

## **Chapter Two: Jimmy Carter and the Expansion of Religious Conservatism into Politics**

“America is in trouble today not because her people have failed, but because her leaders have failed. And what America wants are leaders to match the greatness of her people.” So said Richard Nixon as he accepted the Republican Party nomination for the 1968 presidential campaign. Americans did indeed feel that their government had failed them, both domestically and internationally. Discontent had arisen over the failure of Lyndon B. Johnson’s Great Society to reach its lofty goal of producing an educated and equalitarian society. Across the nation, major cities broke out in racial violence, burning urban areas and producing intense riots. Assassinations of civil rights leaders and national figures, such as Martin Luther King, Jr. and Malcolm X, increased racial tension and mounting violence. Robert F. Kennedy’s assassination further deepened the sense of confusion and desperation. Internationally, the Cold War continued to stir global unease, while the Vietnam conflict dominated the consciousness of the American public, who desperately wanted troops out of Southeast Asia. President Johnson seemed to have no remedy for the conflict, while tensions with the Soviet Union and fears of nuclear war continued to distress the American people. Johnson announced he would not seek re-election in order to focus his efforts on ending the Vietnam War.

In accepting the Republican nomination, Nixon attempted to portray himself as a point of stability in the growing domestic and national chaos. He campaigned on the promise of peace with honor in Vietnam, and with the death of Democratic candidate Robert F. Kennedy, some Americans viewed him as the only suitable candidate. Unfortunately, Nixon’s presidency only furthered the sense of failure by American leaders. Rather than

restoring American's sense of faith in their government, Nixon and the Watergate scandal further eroded trust.

Nixon's failures in the international realm caused lasting consequences, and none of his actions lead to his promised "peace with honor." Nixon's sanctioned invasion of Cambodia, supposedly off-limits in the Vietnam War, caused domestic outrage. A protest at Kent State University in Ohio ended with the deaths of four students, when the Ohio National Guard turned and fired into the crowd of approximately five hundred students. Many Americans looked to the President to make sense of these needless deaths, only to be shocked by his statements. "This should remind us all once again that when dissent turns to violence it invites tragedy," Nixon told the press. Though no evidence existed that the students' protest turned violent, Nixon essentially blamed the victims. His callous reaction to the deaths, two of which were female, provoked a national student strike, which shut down over 500 universities, colleges, and high schools. <sup>1</sup>

Despite domestic challenges and a failure to end the Vietnam War, Americans re-elected Nixon by a landside in 1972. He won with more than 60 percent of the vote, though voters retained a majority Democratic Congress. Americans supported Nixon in the apparent hope that his peace negotiations in Vietnam might soon yield a positive end to the war. It appeared that Nixon might be able in his second term to restore faith in the nation's highest office, but public support for the White House quickly faded. <sup>2</sup> Any hope of regaining American faith vanished with the Watergate scandal and the ensuing investigations into the

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<sup>1</sup> Kifner, Todd. "4 Kent State Student Killed by Troops: 8 Hurt as Shooting Follows Reported Sniping at Rally." *New York Times*, 5 May 1970, sec. 1A, pg 1.

<sup>2</sup> Frankel, Max. "Margin About 60%: Triumph of President Extends to Every Area of Nation." *New York Times*, 8 Nov. 1972, sec. 1A, pg 1.

burglary of the Democratic Party headquarters at the Watergate Hotel in Washington, D.C. on June 17, 1972.

Only after the 1972 election did mounting evidence tie the president to the scandal. Further investigations linked five men to the White House, though Nixon denied any involvement himself. As his aides began resigning, mounting evidence implicated Nixon's role in the scandal. Investigations by journalists, courts, and Congress uncovered more illicit actions by Nixon. He accepted illegal campaign contributions, harassed political opponents with executive agencies, conducted wiretaps, and knew of the break-ins. The grand jury investigating Watergate named Nixon as an unindicted co-conspirator.<sup>3</sup>

Finally, his popularity plummeted after the "Saturday Night Massacre" of October 20, 1973. Nixon issued an executive dismissal of special prosecutor Archibald Cox, and Attorney General Elliot Richardson, while Deputy Attorney General William French Smith resigned. Rather than easing the pressure on him, Nixon's dismissals allowed for some in Congress to call for a full investigation. Nixon attempted at every turn to stall, stop, or impede the Congressional investigation.<sup>4</sup>

Formal impeachment hearing began in May of 1974. The House Judiciary Committee uncovered further abuses of power. Nixon's approval rating fell to 23% and his impeachment would soon follow. He resigned office on August 9<sup>th</sup> 1974, announcing that as he passed the office to Vice President Gerald Ford, "as he assumes that responsibility, he will deserve the help and the support of all of us. As we look to the future, the first essential is to begin healing the wounds of this Nation, to put the bitterness and divisions of the recent past behind us, and to rediscover those shared ideals that lie at the heart of our strength and unity

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<sup>3</sup> Herbers, John. "The 37<sup>th</sup> President is First to Quit Post," *New York Times*, 9 August 1974, sec. A1, pg 69.

<sup>4</sup> "Ervin Considers Probe Expansion." *Dallas Morning News*, 21 October 1973, sec 1, pg 33.

as a great and as a free people.” Nixon left the presidency and the nation in tatters. His actions, rather than healing the nation, only deepened the distrust Americans felt for their government and leaders.<sup>5</sup>

Nixon’s resignation left Ford in an insecure position. The next presidential campaign would be gearing up in less than a year, and the Republican Party needed to make up ground from Nixon’s shameful behavior. Ford attempted to distance himself from the mistakes of Nixon in his remarks after taking the Oath of Office. “In all my public and private acts as your president, I expect to follow my instincts of openness and candor with full confidence that honesty is always the best policy in the end.” While this certainly contrasted with Nixon’s approach to politics, Ford later pardoned him, which angered the public. The Watergate incident and Nixon’s resignation seemed to indicate a lack of moral direction.<sup>6</sup>

Even before Nixon’s second administration began, Georgia Governor Jimmy Carter decided that he would run for president in 1976. His advisors felt that by the end of Nixon’s administration, character and not experience would be a central campaign issue. Carter, lacking in national recognition and completely without any foreign policy experience, personified the ideal moral upstanding character. The conclusion of the Watergate scandal and Nixon’s resignation provided proof that Carter’s advisors correctly judged the political situation of the mid 1970s. He emerged among Democratic hopefuls even though he was an almost unknown figure despite his experience as Governor of Georgia. Before Carter could hope to win the Democratic Nomination, he needed to connect with the American people.

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<sup>5</sup> “Nixon Resigns Presidency Today, Gerald Ford to Take Office at Noon.” *Dallas Morning News*, 9 September 1974, sec. 1, pg 1.

<sup>6</sup> Ford, Gerald R. “Remarks on Taking the Oath of Office.” 9 August 1974, available from <http://www.presidency.ucsb.edu>.

Carter's personal and political background, especially his moral convictions, proved invaluable in the 1976 presidential campaign and presented a welcome contrast to Nixon.

The Carter family had settled in Plains, Georgia, in the early nineteenth century. Carter credited his family and background for his moral character. His father, James Earl Carter, owned a large amount of land and ran a general store at the edge of town. His mother, Lillian, instilled religious values in her children and raised them within the Southern Baptist Church. Jimmy Carter attended the Naval Academy at Annapolis and graduated in the top 10 percent of his class. When his father died in 1953, Carter resigned from the Navy and returned, along with his wife, Rosalynn Carter, to Plains to take over the family's peanut farm and business. Carter also became one of the few white businessmen in Plains not to join the White Citizens' Council.<sup>7</sup>

Carter began his political career at the local level, serving on school and hospital boards. In 1962 he ran for the Georgia state Senate against Joe Hurst, the sheriff of Quitman County. The election ended in a cloud of scandal as a number of deceased persons voted in alphabetical order for Hurst. Carter challenged the fraudulent results, and eventually won the Senate seat. He served two terms as a state senator before turning his ambitions to the office of Governor. Though he lost his first run for Governor, he did not lose his ambitions.<sup>8</sup>

Carter decided he would run for Governor again in the 1970 election. Carter's religious convictions became a central issue in the gubernational campaign when he chose to temporarily leave campaigning in order to do mission work. Earlier in 1969 he had experienced a personal religious revival. He became more active in church and missionary work; eventually the Southern Baptist Home Mission Board asked him to join a lay mission

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<sup>7</sup> Nielsen, Niels C. *The Religion of President Carter* (New York: Thomas Nelson, Inc, 1977) x-xiii; Allitt, *Religion in America Since 1945*, 149.

<sup>8</sup> Nielsen, *The Religion of President Carter*, x-xiii; Allitt, *Religion in America Since 1945*, 149.

team to establish a church in Pennsylvania. Carter embarked on this ten day mission in the midst of his campaign for governor, highly unusual for a politician seeking office. He took another week off from campaigning to participate in a Spanish language mission to Springfield, Massachusetts. While some in his family thought Carter might decide to continue in mission work full time, he felt politics to be his calling.<sup>9</sup>

Carter soundly defeated his Republican opponent, Hal Suit. Carter won 63 percent of the votes, possibly losing some, however, to his stand on race relations. Suit continually charged Carter with being a liberal in disguise. As proof, he pointed to Carter's stance on integration and the fact that one of his aides worked on Robert Kennedy's campaign years earlier.<sup>10</sup> Carter horrified some conservative whites in Georgia with his inauguration speech. Standing outside the Georgia capitol, he called for an end to racial discrimination. His religious education taught that before God, all people appeared equal and Carter took this message to his segregated, racially tense state. "No poor, rural, weak or black person should ever have to bear the additional burden of being deprived of the opportunity of an education, a job, or simple justice," he declared.<sup>11</sup> Two months later, *Time* magazine ran a story about the "New South" and Carter's statements at his inauguration earned him the cover. America's first national introduction to Carter came from this story.<sup>12</sup> The governor's strong and sincere religious beliefs made his statements about racial integration possible. Throughout his tenure as governor, Carter proved his moral sincerity and his political inexperience, and often made

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<sup>9</sup> Hefley, James. *The Church That Produced a President*. (New York: Wyden Books, 1997) 60-69.

<sup>10</sup> Delaney, Paul. "A Peanut Farmer Wins Race in Georgia," *New York Times*, 4 Nov. 1970, sec. 1A, p. 32.

<sup>11</sup> Nordheimer, Jon. "New Governor of Georgia Urges End of Racial Bias." *New York Times*, 13 January 1971, sec. B, p. 1.

<sup>12</sup> Anderson, Patrick. "Peanut Farmer for President," *New York Times*, 14 December 1975, sec. SM, p. 4.

statements and supported policies that hurt his political standing while following his convictions.

Carter decided to run for the office of president long before his actual campaign began. Hamilton Jordan, Carter's aide, drew up a campaign plan in November of 1972 just before Nixon's landslide victory. Jordan's proposal emphasized character over domestic and foreign policy, which he believed would be an important electoral issue. Carter accepted Jordan's evaluation of the political atmosphere, and by Nixon's resignation, character developed into a major campaign issue.<sup>13</sup> Carter knew other Democratic contenders already had more national recognition and experience and field at the start of the primaries proved very crowded. Few expected the southern governor to perform well.

Early in 1975 Carter announced his intention to run as the Democratic candidate for the 1976 presidential election. From the onset, Carter and his aides promoted character over individual issues or policies. Connection with the people, not a fully developed political platform, fulfilled Carter's campaign strategy. Carter's language conveyed an underlying hint of religion.<sup>14</sup> Winning the Democratic primary proved the first major obstacle but he hoped that by using small, intimate settings, he could produce a grassroots movement.

Throughout the pre-primary season, the Carter campaign focused on the strategy devised by Jordan. His campaign team hoped that Carter's sincerity and honesty could persuade a post-Watergate America to trust him. To clinch the Democratic nomination, they hoped his background as a farmer and small-business man appealed to the party base. As much as possible, Carter stuck a moderate tone, letting the more well known Democratic hopefuls split the liberal vote among themselves. When forced to enunciate his stance on

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<sup>13</sup> Nielsen, *The Religion of President Carter*, xi.

<sup>14</sup> Lydon, Christopher. "The Presidential Nomination, in Both Parties, Is Up for Grabs," *New York Times*, 16 March 1975, sec. E, p.4.

divisive issues, Carter appeared more liberal than portrayed in his publicly crafted character. He supported the decriminalization of marijuana, approved the *Roe v. Wade* decision, and supported massive public works programs to reduce unemployment. These stances conflicted with the majority of conservative religious voters, so Carter preferred not to discuss them if possible.<sup>15</sup>

Carter, in a direct primary challenge to George Wallace, spoke of policies crafted out of compassion, not economics or political motivation. Speaking at the Cove Inn Club in Naples, Florida, Carter outlined his position on welfare and produced an image of a decidedly more compassionate approach than Wallace advocated. He spoke of equipping welfare recipients with trainings and job skills, and that those unable to work should be treated with compassion and respect. While in line with Christian teachings, this approach appealed to few politicians. After the scandals of the Nixon administration, it did appeal to voters and Carter secured the Democratic nomination.<sup>16</sup>

At the Democratic National Convention in July, the Carter campaign proved the strategic value of their tactics. Carter won the nomination by over 1,500 delegate votes, an astonishing victory for a little known southern governor. He continued with the theme of contrasting moral characters in his acceptance address. Emphasizing the stark difference between the previous president and himself, Carter declared, “Our country has lived through a time of torment. It is now a time for healing. We want to have faith again. We want to be proud again. We just want the truth again.” He promised the American people guidance “by

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<sup>15</sup> Anderson, Patrick. “Peanut Farmer for President,” *New York Times*, 14 December 1975, sec. SM, p. 4.

<sup>16</sup> Allitt, Patrick. “Peanut Farmer for President,” *New York Times*, 14 December 1975, sec. SM, p. 4.

lasting and simple moral values,” and alluded to his spirituality throughout the speech. His acceptance speech set the tone for the general campaign.<sup>17</sup>

Carter’s campaign team’s strategy for the general election proved more sophisticated than during the Democratic primaries. From the onset, his team encouraged Carter to speak publicly and often about his religious conversion. Carter never broached the subject himself, but when asked about his religious feelings, he could eloquently and elaborately discuss his convictions. The campaign planned to target members of the evangelical Christian movement, to which Carter belonged, more directly than previous campaigns. The evangelical movement had made large gains in membership in the decades leading up to the 1976 presidential campaign; some reporters even dubbed 1976 “the year of the evangelical.” Secular and religious reporters recognized the limelight shining on the Carter campaign given his evangelical rhetoric, and his team planned to expound on this theme whenever possible. While many evangelicals leaned conservative politically, the campaign team believed that Carter’s religious convictions would attract them.<sup>18</sup>

As with the primaries, Carter’s team gambled that his character would be more important than specific policy positions. The Carter camp released *Why Not the Best?*, Carter’s autobiography concerning his religious life, during the campaign and advertised it in Christian periodicals such as *Christianity Today* and *The Baptist Standard*. Throughout the campaign the book sold over 800,000 copies and further proved to Americans the sincerity of his religious convictions and moral character. Knowing that evangelicals and conservative

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<sup>17</sup> Morehead, Richard. “It’s Official: Jimmy Carter,” *Dallas Morning News*, 15 July 1976, sec. 1, p. 1; Carter, Jimmy. “Our Nation’s Past and Future,” *Address Accepting the Presidential Nomination at the Democratic National Convention in New York City*. 15 July 1976, available from <http://www.presidency.ucsb.edu>.

<sup>18</sup> Kucharsky, David. “’76: The Year of the Evangelical,” *Christianity Today*, 22 October 1976, volume xxi, issue 2

Christians did not represent a monolithic group, the Carter team intended to sway individual voters, not specific churches or organizations.<sup>19</sup>

Throughout the nation conservative Christians responded to Carter's message enthusiastically. His repeated assertion that he had been "born again" proved to be the cornerstone of his campaign for most Christian and evangelical Americans. While all American presidents before him claimed Christianity as their religion, none had expressed the personal relationship to Jesus Christ that Carter professed. For evangelicals especially, the concept of being "born again" is the key to their theology. It begins with a personal encounter with Christ, and involves a consciousness of being a sinner, then repentance, and faith in Jesus Christ as the redeemer. Far from just affiliating oneself with a denomination, professing "born again" faith announces a deeply personal religious experience.<sup>20</sup>

Despite the overall effectiveness of his religious persuasion, Carter sometimes acted with amazing naivety when presenting his religious convictions. In one of his most unorthodox moves, Carter agreed to an interview with Robert Scheer, knowing it would be printed in *Playboy Magazine*. In the interview, Carter stated, "Christ set some impossible standards for us." He admitted to having lusted in his heart many times, which Christ in the New Testament equated with committing adultery. Immediately after publication came an outpouring of criticism began. Carter appeared unprepared for the backlash that this interview produced. Some southern clergy decried him for agreeing to speak with *Playboy* at all, while others deplored his use of vernacular. The interview plagued Carter throughout the rest of the campaign.

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<sup>19</sup> Kucharsky, David. "'76: The Year of the Evangelical," *Christianity Today*, 22 October 1976, volume xxi, issue 2; "Campaign Countdown: 'Bloc Busters,'" *Christianity Today*, 22 October 1976, volume xxi, issue 2.

<sup>20</sup> Barnette, Henlee. "'Born Again': What Does it Mean?" *The Baptist Standard*, 21 July 1976, volume 88, issue 29.

For many evangelicals, Carter's profession of being "born again" earned him their political support, but other evangelicals feared his liberal policies and spoke out against him. Billy Graham recognized that many evangelicals and conservative Christians considered voting for Carter simply because of his spiritual beliefs. Graham cautioned evangelicals to vote for the most qualified candidate, and said being "born again" did not meet sufficient requirements to hold the office of president. Graham, who historically supported Republican candidates, warned that if evangelicals voted as a bloc and "a candidate gets in and falls on his face, or corruption gets into his administration close to him, then evangelical Christians are going to get blamed." He went on to point out the religious beliefs of Carter and Ford did not appear dramatically different from one another.<sup>21</sup>

Jerry Falwell, host of the "Old Time Gospel Hour" television program, also opposed Carter's liberal policies and his *Playboy* interview. Falwell pastored Thomas Road Baptist Church in Lynchburg, Virginia, which claimed more than 15,000 members. Decrying Carter's discussion of sex and religion, Falwell soundly criticized the candidate on his television program. Due to Federal Communications Commission regulations, Falwell offered Carter the chance to respond, but he refused. Presenting himself as "a pastor speaking on moral issues" and not a political pundit, Falwell implored the faithful to carefully consider their votes. W. A. Criswell, a prominent Baptist preacher from Dallas, Texas, also endorsed Ford, in part due to Carter's *Playboy* interview. Ford attended Criswell's First Baptist Church while campaigning in Texas at the end of September, and on the church steps the pastor

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<sup>21</sup> "Rebirth Not Sufficient Reason," *The Baptist Standard*, 18 August 1976, volume 88, issue 30.

“issued a ringing endorsement.” Baptists around the country and many pastors in Dallas resented Criswell’s endorsement, criticizing Criswell for engaging in politics.<sup>22</sup>

Just as the Carter campaign reached out to the religious community, the Ford campaign made a few major missteps. Mrs. Betty Ford, attempting to support Wayne Hays, the Chairman of the Committee of House Administration, stated that Americans needed to separate public life from private life. A sexual scandal surrounding the married Hays and his secretary drew ire from conservative voters, which accounted for their reaction to Mrs. Ford’s comment. James L. Sullivan, President of the Southern Baptist Convention, countered Mrs. Ford by announcing, “the morality of public officials is everyone’s business; we cannot set the moral tone of the country without it.” Though Hays was a Democrat, Mrs. Ford’s support of the congressman aided the Carter campaign and further distanced the Georgia governor from the perception of immorality that plagued Nixon and Ford.<sup>23</sup>

The Democratic Party, along with Carter, made sure his religious rhetoric did not impede on the separation of church and state. The candidate needed to attract religious conservatives without alienating more moderate or liberal voters. The 1976 Democratic Party Platform opposed the use of a constitutional amendment to reverse the legalization of abortion, while it took no stand on government prayer amendments or aid to parochial schools. Carter and his running mate Walter Mondale, while stating their personal opposition to abortion, opposed governmental intervention into *Roe v Wade*. Americans United for Separation of Church and State found that the Carter and Mondale ticket far superior than the Republican platform on issues of religious liberty. The Republican Party Platform, while not

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<sup>22</sup> “Time is Offered By a Carter Critic,” *New York Times*, 13 October 1976, sec. 1, p. 23; “Criticism of Carter Off One Show But Will Remain for Another,” *New York Times*, 15 October 1976, sec. 1, p. 36; “Crusade For the White House: Skirmishes in a ‘Holy War,’” *Christianity Today*, 19 November 1976, volume xxi, issue 4.

<sup>23</sup> “Sullivan: Cannot Separate Public Life, Morals,” *The Baptist Standard*, 23 June 1976, volume 88, issue 25.

specifically citing religion, favored a restrictive anti-abortion amendment, a school prayer amendment, and aid to religious schools. While counting on Carter's moral and religious character to make gains among conservative voters, the Democratic Party obviously did not want to alienate its liberal base.<sup>24</sup>

The sincerity of Carter's religion resonated with Americans struggling to trust their elected leaders. A Gallup survey conducted during Carter's campaign found that a vast majority belonged to a church or a faith, with the great majority of these evangelical in nature. Gallup estimated that evangelical voters comprised about 16 million in 1976, with another 50 million voters sympathetic to the evangelical viewpoint. Carter's profession of his "born again" faith connected him to evangelical voters in a way no national figure ever had. Another Gallup poll found that one-third of American adults shared Carter's "born again" religious experience. Of these voters, over 58 percent favored Carter over Ford. While these voters tended to lean conservatively in political questions, Carter favored liberal policies. These voters supported Carter, despite his liberal leanings, owing to a shared religious conviction. Jordan's prediction that character would matter more than policies appeared to be correct.<sup>25</sup>

The Democratic candidate finished the race with 51 percent of the popular vote and 297 electoral votes to Ford's 241.<sup>26</sup> He quoted from the book of Micah after taking the Oath of Office, "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." Calling for

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<sup>24</sup> "Demo Record Rated Superior," *The Baptist Standard*, 8 September 1976, volume 88, issue 36.

<sup>25</sup> Briggs, Kenneth. "Gallup Poll Finds New Evidence of the Religious Character of U.S.," *New York Times*, 12 September 1976, sec. A, p. 1; "Poll Finds that 34% Share 'Born Again' Feeling," *New York Times*, 26 September 1976, sec. A, p. 32.

<sup>26</sup> Rosenbaum, David. "Carter Has 291 Electoral Votes and Ford 241 in Final Election Tally," *New York Times*, 5 November 1976, sec. 1, p. 15.

prayers and support, Carter pledged to follow this scripture throughout his term in office. The question remains as to how influential Carter's personal conversion was among voters. Obviously, Nixon's disgraceful presidency hurt Ford, and allowed Carter to easily contrast himself as a morally upright man, but there is little research to indicate that his "born-again" status won the White House. More likely, Carter began a tradition which other politicians recognized as a successful and ingenious tactic. By speaking about his personal religious conversion, Carter connected with conservative voters that otherwise might not have approved of his politics. He also proved that politicians could discuss religious issues without being ostracized by the electorate. As the first "born-again" president, Carter set a standard that endured through the 2000 election. Unfortunately for Carter, his presidency proved a dramatic disappointment. Issues within and outside of his control wrecked his public approval ratings. His honest rhetoric appeared accusatory and his staffing choices for the White House cost him a great deal of public support.

As Carter took office, international events weighed heavily in the minds of Americans. The Cold War required firm leadership, but Carter hardly appeared willing to play the part of a Cold Warrior. He attempted to fashion policies more reflective of a cooperative, multistate global community rather than a conflict ridden bipolar world. Carter reminded Americans that their fate remained bound to other nations, both in economics and security. "This independence stretches from the health of our economy through war and peace, to the security of our own energy supplies." He cautioned that Americans could not afford to be narrow minded or selfish in their global pursuits.<sup>27</sup>

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<sup>27</sup> Carter, Jimmy. "The U.S.-Soviet Relationship," Remarks made before the Southern Legislative Conference, Charleston, South Carolina, 21 July 1977, Department of State Bulletin, 77 (August 1977): 193.

The most lasting success of the Carter administration had religious overtones. In 1978 Carter met at Camp David with Israeli Prime Minister, Menachem Begin, and Egyptian President, Anwar Sadat to broker a peace accord. The peace talks began in 1977 and lasted nearly a year, with the Carter administration playing a major role in mediating. The agreement ended hostilities between the world's only Jewish nation and one of the most influential Muslim nations. Carter's religious beliefs made him a staunch supporter of Israel, but he also believed in supporting a peace agreement.<sup>28</sup>

The peace agreement may have been a success in the Middle East, but the Iranian hostage situation overshadowed it in the minds of most Americans. On November 4, 1979, a group of Islamist student radicals took over the American embassy to show support for the Iranian revolution. Fifty-two Americans were held hostage as the Carter administration sought to get them released. As the ordeal dragged on, Carter ordered a halt to Iranian oil imports. The hostage situation reached a climax when Carter approved Operation Eagle Claw, on April 24, 1980, a rescue effort ended that in disaster when two U.S. helicopters collided and resulted in the deaths of eight American military personnel. Speaking to the nation, Carter accepted full responsibility for the incident. The crisis dragged on, with little end in sight as Carter and the Democratic Party prepared for the 1980 elections.<sup>29</sup>

With the time for campaigning drawing closer, Carter retreated to Camp David with his advisors in the summer of 1979. Carter and his advisors attempted to discover the reasons for general downward drift in America, and at the close of this retreat he delivered his "Sunday Night Sermon" to the nation. Carter began with an argument that Americans

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<sup>28</sup> Kraft, Joseph. "America's Mediating Role," *The Washington Post*, 18 December 1977, sec. C, p. 7; Allitt, *Religion in American Since 1945*, 150.

<sup>29</sup> Braigin, William. "Iranians Seize U.S. Mission, Ask Shah's Return for Trial," *The Washington Post*, 5 November 1979, sec. A, p. 1; Cormier, Frank. "Hostage Rescue Attempt Called Off; 8 on US Mission Die in Iran Crash," *Boston Globe*, 25 April 1980, sec. 1, p. 1.

continued to experience a loss of faith that began earlier in the decade. Americans appeared more concerned with individual goals than the national interest, he continued. Too many Americans identified with what they owned, rather than what they contributed to society. Carter told Americans that they would have to lower their expectations of material rewards, unlimited use of energy, and an continually rising standard of living. Carter attempted to explain to Americans the cause of nation problems, but many thought it was accusatory or that he blamed the average citizen for the national problems.<sup>30</sup>

Many conservatives became disappointed with Carter's performance in the White House. He proved far more liberal than they anticipated and his failure to gain the release of the American hostages caused some evangelicals to consider carefully who they would be voting for in the upcoming election. One of the most prominent American evangelicals, Falwell, emerged in the mainstream public spotlight from his "Old Time Gospel Hour." Though he once eschewed political activism by pastors, Falwell now believed America desperately needed religious and moral guidance. In 1965, Falwell said, "Believing the Bible as I do, I would find it impossible to stop preaching the pure saving gospel of Jesus Christ, and begin doing anything else- including fighting communism, or participating in civil rights reform." By the mid 1970s, Falwell changed his mind. In 1976, Falwell announced, "The idea that religion and politics don't mix was invented by the Devil to keep Christians from running their own country. If there is any place in the world we need Christianity, it's in Washington." Falwell came to recognize the untapped potential voting power of conservative Christians in America, and he intended to harness this power.<sup>31</sup>

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<sup>30</sup> Jorstad, Erling. *Evangelicals in the White House: The Cultural Maturation of Born Again Christianity, 1960-1981*. (New York: Edwin Mellen Press, 1981).

<sup>31</sup> Georgianna, Sharon Linzey. *The Moral Majority and Fundamentalism: Plausibility and Dissonance*, (New York: Edwin Mellen Press, 1989) 23.

The foundation of the Moral Majority, Falwell's organization, had begun in the late 1960s. Richard Vigurie, once executive director of Young Americans for Freedom and finance advisor to George Wallace, collected several thousand names of conservative donors. He found that often a single issue, whether it be anti-abortion, anti-homosexual, or economic policy, caused a voter to donate repeatedly. In the mid 1970s, Paul Weyrich, who headed up the Committee for the Survival of a Free Congress, joined him. The leader of the grassroots organization Conservative Caucus, Howard Phillips, also connected with them. The three offered their services to conservative Congressmen, which included computerized mailing lists of donors, specific issues on which conservatives could run and win, and ways to organize successfully on the local level. This led to the creation of the National Conservative Political Action Committee, which kept track of issues that interested voters, what issues brought in donors, which candidates in Congress seemed vulnerable, and what interest groups or bloc of voters seemed ready to move in a conservative direction. The three decided to organize the faithful into an action-orientated political voter bloc, but none of them had enough name recognition in the religious community for the organization to build around. After careful screening and interviews, they settled on national celebrity television preacher, Falwell.<sup>32</sup>

“What can you do from the pulpit?” Falwell asked, speaking to a gathering of Florida pastors. He asked himself this question before, when he discovered that vast numbers of church attendees did register to vote or participate in politics. His answer seemed simple enough. “You can register people to vote, you can explain issues to them, and you can

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<sup>32</sup> Jorstad, Erling. *Evangelicals in the White House: The Cultural Maturation of Born Again Christianity, 1960-1981*. (New York: Edwin Mellen Press, 1981) 139-141.

endorse candidates right there in church on Sunday morning.”<sup>33</sup> To move beyond influencing his own substantial congregation, Falwell recognized he would have to expand his base and the Moral Majority appeared the appropriate vehicle to do so.

In June 1979 Falwell, Vigurie, Phillips, Weyrich and several pastors founded the Moral Majority based in Washington, DC. Falwell’s primary concern proved to be steering America away from liberal, humanist and secular tendencies. The purpose of the Moral Majority centered on political, not religious, action. They planned to bring the issues to the voters, get people registered, raise funds, and endorse candidates. The Moral Majority brought together evangelical, traditional and Catholic denominations in order to bring about a moral revolution in American politics. The primary target of the Moral Majority appeared to be the 300 ministers, mostly Baptists, who agreed to take the message to their congregations.<sup>34</sup>

The organization received its name because Falwell believed that the majority of Americans shared his values, they just did not insert themselves into the political process. Falwell and his partners stated their goal as the formation “of a nonpartisan political organization to promote morality in public life and to combat legislation that favored the legalization of immorality.” Falwell claimed the Moral Majority remained separate from his ministry, but the organization clearly targeted Christian conservatives and promoted Christian values. Specifically, the Moral Majority opposed the equal rights amendment and

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<sup>33</sup> Vecsey, George. “Militant Television Preachers Try to Weld Fundamentalist Christians’ Political Power,” *New York Times*, 21 January 1976, sec. A, p. 21.

<sup>34</sup> Kotkin, John. “Ready on the Right: Christian Soldiers Are on the March,” *The Washington Post*, 25 August 1979, sec. A, p. 10.

equal rights for homosexuals, it supported a constitutional ban on abortion, and wanted church run schools to operate without state supervision or taxation.<sup>35</sup>

Falwell combined his efforts with other well known fundamentalist pastors, James Kennedy, Charles Stanely, Tim La Haye, and Greg Dixon, to outline the goals of the Moral Majority and its policy stances. They formulated “a nonpartisan political organization to promote morality in public life and to combat legislation that favored the legalization of immorality.” They supported the traditional family, and agreed that their organization would not be based on one theology, but rather represented a wide range of denominations. They also outlined ten major positions: separation of church and state, pro-life support, pro-traditional family, opposition to illegal drugs, opposition to pornography, support of Israel, support of strong national defense, support for women’s rights but opposition to the Equal Rights Amendment, and support of local grassroots organization. They also outlined specifically what the organization did not include. They did not intend to be a political party or endorse political candidates. While nominally non-partisan, their political stances aligned nicely with the Republican Party.<sup>36</sup>

The Moral Majority actually encompassed four separate organizations: Moral Majority, Inc. Moral Majority Foundation, Moral Majority Legal Defense Fund, and Moral Majority Political Action Committee.<sup>37</sup> Each division played a role designed to produce a more moral and just society. By utilizing these four organizations the Moral Majority developed a plan to “bring America back to moral sanity.” The first step involved educating Americans through their newspaper, *The Moral Majority Report*. After education, the

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<sup>35</sup> Epps, Garrett. “Born-Again Politics is Still Waiting to Be,” *The Washington Post*, 30 March 1980, sec. C, p. 1.

<sup>36</sup> Falwell, Jerry. *The Fundamentalist Phenomenon: The Resurgence of Conservative Christianity*, (New York: Doubleday and Company, 1981) 190-193.

<sup>37</sup> Georgianna, *The Moral Majority and Fundamentalism*, 27.

organization intended to mobilize these Americans into voters and organize them into a special interest group.<sup>38</sup>

While Falwell continued to claim that his organization remained separate from his “Old Time Gospel Hour” and Thomas Road Baptist Church, some of his tactics worried critics. Falwell instructed pastors how to lead a letter writing campaign during church services. By having each member bring two stamped envelopes to Sunday service, and having them write the letters during sermons, Falwell knew clergy could have an impact on Congressional decisions. “As long as you don’t use the building for special meetings,” Falwell reminded his follower, all this proved perfectly legal, if not in the spirit of the law.

The Moral Majority targeted a specific segment of the American population, but it appealed to a much large portion. Almost one third of Americans in 1977 held positions identical to the Moral Majority’s on homosexuality, school prayer, abortion, and woman’s role in the family. Almost half, while not in complete agreement with the organization, supported a conservative approach to social issues. Only twenty-eight percent of Americans supported a liberal agenda, which either wholly or partially conflicted with the Moral Majority. The vast majority of Americans, as Falwell repeatedly asserted, did hold values consistent with his organization. With this portion of the population in line with the Moral Majority, the potential to swing elections appeared a reality to both the organization and politicians.<sup>39</sup>

The organization did not speak for all conservative Christians though. While many conservative Christians agreed with the platform of the Moral Majority, they could not support the fundamentalist organization itself. Some believed the group was intruding into

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<sup>38</sup> Falwell, *The Fundamentalist Phenomenon*, 193.

<sup>39</sup> Bromley, David G. and Anson Shupe. *New Christian Politics*, (Macon, Georgia: Mercer University Press, 1984) 65-68.

the separation of church and state, while others could not reconcile the pro-life stance with the organization's encouragement of increasing nuclear capabilities. While Falwell desired to build a political voting bloc, some resented the assertion that it was an evangelical voting bloc.<sup>40</sup>

Despite the estrangement from some Christian groups and continual criticism, the organization grew rapidly. Within two years, the Moral Majority established chapters in all fifty states. The Washington office coordinated efforts of the numerous local affiliates and spent millions of dollars on media campaigns. Over a hundred thousand pastors supported Falwell officially, and his "Old Time Gospel Hour" and the "Moral Majority Commentary" broadcasted daily on almost four hundred radio stations.<sup>41</sup>

With the public approval of Carter dramatically low, the Moral Majority carefully considered the 1980 campaigns and elections. Carter's policies proved far too liberal for the conservative foundation and did not meet their standard of tradition values, so Falwell and his organization decided to support his Republican opponent. The Moral Majority created a "hit list" of liberal Congressmen up for re-election in 1980. For the first time, the Moral Majority gained national attention as Falwell and other preachers spoke out against these Congressmen, who were all liberal Democrats. Across the nation this new religious conservative movement garnered front page headlines and led stories on the evening news.<sup>42</sup>

The first signs of success for the Moral Majority came at the state and local levels. One of the most stunning victories came in Alaska, during the 1980 campaign season. Operating at the local level and under the leadership of Reverend Jerry Prevo, Moral Majority members turned out in great numbers in the February district caucuses. The number

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<sup>40</sup> Smith, Timothy L. "Protestants Falwell Does Not Represent," *New York Times*, 23 October 1980, sec. A, p. 13.

<sup>41</sup> Gerogianna, *The Moral Majority and Fundamentalism*, 27.

<sup>42</sup> Jorstad, *Evangelicals in the White House*, 143.

of Moral Majority members who arrived at the polls astounded the organization and politicians. They succeeded in electing a large majority of delegates to the state Republican Party convention, so when the Republican Party announced its resolutions, it followed the line of the national Moral Majority: anti-abortion, support of traditional family roles, and elimination of welfare for persons able but not willing to work.<sup>43</sup>

The Moral Majority also impacted politics in Alabama. Seeking to defeat the 16 year Congressional veteran, John H. Buchanan, the state chapter began aggressive grassroots techniques. Churches transported voters to the polls. Buchanan angered members of the organization by being soft on military issues and welfare, even though he represented the Republican Party. While the Moral Majority made no outright endorsement of Buchanan's rival, Albert Lee Smith, Falwell "took a couple of shots" at Buchanan on his television show. Smith's campaign volunteers often came from churches, and sometimes Moral Majority members and his volunteers overlapped. They canvassed neighborhoods, distributed campaign literature, and sometimes offered to pray with residents.<sup>44</sup>

The overt failures of the Carter administration and his dwindling approval ratings seemed to assure the Republicans the White House; the question became which Republican would unseat Carter. One Republican candidate in particular understood that the appeal Carter used to gain the White House could be used in the 1980 election as well. Ronald Reagan, former governor of California, hardly seemed a likely rallying point for the conservative religious movement. He had no clear religious affiliation, had been divorced, and admitted experimenting with illegal drugs. Reagan spent the majority of his working life

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<sup>43</sup> Turner, Wallace. "Group of Evangelical Protestants Take Over the G.O.P. in Alaska," *New York Times*, 9 June 1980, sec. B, p. 12.

<sup>44</sup> "Evangelical Group Quietly and Angrily Upsets Alabama Primary," *New York Times*, 8 September 1980, sec. B, p. 10.

in Hollywood as an actor, which most conservatives viewed a city and career of sinfulness. He did have some connection with traditionalists, though. In the 1960s he became a staunch anti-Communist and defender of social conservatism. He rallied against Berkeley radicals, hippies, and the New Left.<sup>45</sup>

Reagan recognized political capital when it came his way. He had been a serious contender for the Republican nomination in 1976, but his chances now seemed much stronger. Realizing that appealing to Christian conservatives would aid his campaign, he pandered to conservative religious voters and the Moral Majority enough to gain their support, but remained moderate enough to keep mainstream voters. He also understood the national disappointment with President Carter. In announcing his candidacy for the Republican Party, Reagan said, “Our leaders are attempting to blame their failures on circumstances beyond their control... in an attempt to convince us our high standard of living, the result of thrift and hard work, is somehow selfish extravagance.” He went on to blame the failures of America on its leaders, not in a failure of the American spirit. The end of his speech borrowed language from religious conservatives, within and outside of the Moral Majority. He called for a spirit of revival, saying “Government should uphold and not undermine those institutions which are custodians of the very values upon which civilization is founded: religion, education, and above all, family.”<sup>46</sup>

Falwell announced that he personally favored Reagan over Carter in the summer of 1980 before Reagan officially won his party’s nomination. While the Moral Majority focused most of its resources on congressional races, there could be little doubt that its members favored Reagan. Among Carter’s other failures, Falwell reminded his organization that the

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<sup>45</sup> Allitt, Patrick. *Religion in America Since 1945*, 154.

<sup>46</sup> Reagan, Ronald. “Remarks Announcing Candidacy for the Republican Presidential Nomination,” 13 November 1979, available from [http:// www.presidency.ucsb.edu](http://www.presidency.ucsb.edu).

president failed to appoint a substantial number of evangelical Christians to high public office. “We are forty percent of the electorate,” Falwell said, reminding Carter and the Republicans of the potential power of his voting bloc.<sup>47</sup>

Upon winning the Republican nomination, Reagan again pandered to the religious conservatives. In the closing of his acceptance speech, he reached out to undecided voters, hoping to connect with them through religion. “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?” Then he paused and looked into the crowd, as if contemplating his next statement. “I confess that I’ve been a little afraid to suggest what I’m going to suggest- I’m more afraid not to- that we begin this crusade joined together in a moment of silent prayer.” The use of the word crusade spoke volumes to the religious conservatives, it seemed to be both a commission from God and reminiscent of Billy Graham’s tent revivals. Reagan broke the silence, “God bless America.”<sup>48</sup>

During the campaign Reagan followed Carter’s example in discussing his religious experiences. When asked by the executive director of the Christian Booksellers Association to quote his favorite verse, Reagan recited John 3:16 from memory. He expounded later its significance to him, “It means that having accepted Jesus Christ as my Savior, I have God’s promise of eternal life in Heaven.” Reagan remembered Carter’s appeal and imitated his example, though not nearly as often. He spoke just as sincerely and with as much conviction as Carter had four years earlier. With his conservative policies and religious rhetoric, Reagan provided the Moral Majority with a candidate they could enthusiastically support.<sup>49</sup>

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<sup>47</sup> Nyhan, David. “Run Out of Paper,” *Boston Globe*, 16 June 1980, sec. A, p. 12.

<sup>48</sup> Reagan, Ronald. “Address Accepting the Presidential Nomination at the Republican National Convention in Detroit.” 17 July 1979, available from <http://www.presidency.ucsb.edu>.

<sup>49</sup> Kengor, Paul. *God and Ronald Reagan: A Spiritual Life*. (New York: Harper Collins Books, 2004) 109.

Reagan showed more political sophistication than Carter did in 1976 by avoiding social issues and sticking to economics and the international situation. He realized that campaigning on social issues might lose the support of evangelicals, so he kept the rhetoric of “Judeo-Christian values” without expounding on specific policies these values might lead to. He quoted from both the Old and New Testament, to keep from alienating Jewish voters and promised to “set a moral example” in the White House through his actions and his political appointments. He used the language Carter used, but injected issues which Carter avoided. Reagan combined defense issues with the rhetoric of the evangelicals.<sup>50</sup>

The relationship between Falwell’s Moral Majority and Reagan became strained at points. Falwell almost caused an uproar for the Republican candidate when he said God only hears the prayers of those redeemed through faith in Christ. With the Moral Majority publically supporting Reagan, he could not risk Americans thinking him closed minded or anti-Semitic. When asked if he agreed with Falwell, Reagan answered, “Since both the Christian and Judaic religions are based on the same God, the God of Moses, I’m quite sure those prayers are heard.” Reagan included a remark that everyone should feel free to have their own interpretations and his rebuke of Falwell remained mild enough to maintain his support.<sup>51</sup>

When the election ended, Reagan won with 51 percent of the vote to Carter’s 42 percent. At his inauguration, Reagan thanked those that helped him and called for Americans to renew their commitment to the nation. “I am told that tens of thousands of prayer meetings are being held on this day... We are a nation under God, and I believe God intended us to be free.” He suggested that each inauguration day in the future should be a day of prayer.

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<sup>50</sup> Nolan, Martin F. “Reagan Stays Out of Religious Fray,” *Boston Globe*, 4 October 1980, sec. 1, p. 12.

<sup>51</sup> Cannon, Lou. “Reagan Disagrees with Fundamentalist Teaching on Prayers,” *The Washington Post*, 4 October 1980, sec. A, p. 1.

“Together with God’s help we can and will resolve the problems which now confront us.”

The Moral Majority celebrated Reagan’s victory, even as some pundits pointed out that they contributed far less than they claimed.

More than any other single event, Reagan’s election to the White House secured the relationship of the Moral Majority to the Republican Party. By connecting conservative social issues, the Moral Majority and the Republican Party reached a consensus. Carter had allowed politicians to speak openly about personal religious conversion experiences and awakened a segment of the population to political participation. The failure of his presidency, however, disillusioned evangelical and religious conservatives across the nation. Reagan, recognizing the potential of the conservative religious voting bloc, combined his conservative political stances with religious rhetoric to gain support of the Moral Majority and like-minded voters. Throughout his presidency, Reagan cultivated a relationship with the Moral Majority, bringing Falwell and his organization closer into the Republican fold.

### **Chapter Three: Religious Conservatism Begins Melding to the Republican Party**

Ronald Reagan, more than any other president, cemented the relationship of religious conservative voters to the modern Republican Party. By appealing to the Moral Majority, other religiously conservative organizations, and Jerry Falwell in particular, the Republican Party under Reagan's leadership attempted to reflect the core values of these voters. Falwell and other religious conservatives engaged in an often uneasy relationship with Reagan, both expecting political gain from it. For Falwell, Reagan's election represented the power of his movement. Religious conservatives believed that their influence at the polls, rather than Carter's dismal presidential performance or the shaken economy, played the deciding role in the 1980 election. As such, they expected to have the Reagan administration's full attention and wanted to direct it towards social issues: anti-abortion legislation, defense of traditional families, and a return to Christian values. Reagan realized that these voters, if solidly wedded to a single party, provided a large and stable bloc vote, but their agenda also threatened to alienate moderate voters.

During the decade of the 1980s, both the president and religious conservative organizations developed strategies designed to meld religious conservatism into the basic political ideology of the Republican Party. While the president viewed this alliance as politically valuable, Falwell and his followers believed this relationship could lead to the realization of their social agenda. Reagan, always an extremely adept politician, pandered to Falwell and his Moral Majority throughout his administration, but without actually pushing their controversial social agenda forward. Reagan tended to solidify this relationship around

elections, both congressional and presidential, by using the media to announce his personal and rhetorical, not political, support of the religious conservatives.

In the aftermath of the 1980 presidential and congressional elections, political pundits began to seriously consider the impact of the religious conservatives on the American electorate. For the first time in modern America, religious conservatives voted in large numbers and supposedly under central organizations. For both politicians and voters, the rise of Christian conservatives as a voting bloc came as something of a surprise. While Falwell and the Moral Majority campaigned vigorously and very publically for their preferred candidates, some analysts questioned how much impact their actions had on the outcome of the elections.

National news outlets reported that Reagan won the evangelical vote by more than 20 percent. One source cited the evangelical voting bloc as contributing to two-thirds of Reagan's ten point margin over President Carter. If true, Reagan owed much of his personal popularity and success to religious conservatives. While other analysts reported that religious conservative voters affected local and state elections more prominently than the presidential race, the media paid attention to the growing movement and fueled a perception of great importance.<sup>1</sup>

Falwell believed his organization's efforts truly affected the presidential election and would affect congressional elections in 1982 and 1984 as well as state legislative races. Just days after Reagan's election, Falwell organized a rally of the Moral Majority supporters on the steps of the New Jersey state house. The Moral Majority claimed they registered four million new voters and influenced another 10 million already registered in the 1980 elections. He announced that his organization spent three million dollars in the recent elections to

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<sup>1</sup> Warner, Edwin. "New Resolve by the New Right." *Time*. 8 December 1980, 25.

oppose liberal senators and warned officeholders with liberal records “to examine their records and get in step with conservative values or be prepared to be unemployed.” During the rally, Falwell outlined the conservative values that his organization supported, knowing that many proved controversial. He called for a strong national defense, one of Reagan’s campaign promises, and a return to traditional family values. He also spoke out against abortion, pornography, and homosexuality.<sup>2</sup>

A high number of Americans privately agreed with many of Falwell’s personal beliefs. About 10 to 15 percent of Americans supported the policies of the Moral Majority, even if they did not belong to the organization or participate directly in it. With such a high number supporting the basic platform of the organization, Falwell recognized that his group could potentially sway elections. Falwell reached to those outside his organization by appealing to pastors in the Baptist Bible Fellowship (BBF), who then carried the message to their congregations. The BBF organized in the 1950s as a fundamentalist branch of the Baptists, and its members appeared receptive to Falwell. As a consequence, those predisposed to accept his message heard it most often.<sup>3</sup>

Despite gains made in membership, financial contributions, and campaign volunteers by the Moral Majority, some evangelicals remained unconvinced that religion held a place within politics. While a great many Christian conservatives agreed in principle with Falwell’s political policies, it must be remembered that the labels “Evangelical” and “Conservative Christian” did not represent an entirely united political front. Specifically, Falwell and the Moral Majority tended to be unrepresentative of several specific demographics: black

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<sup>2</sup> Sullivan, Joseph F. “Falwell Warns Jersey Liberals at Capitol,” *New York Times*, 11 November 1980, sec. B, p. 2.

<sup>3</sup> Wilcox, Clyde. *Onward Christian Soldiers? The Religious Right in American Politics*. (Boulder, Colorado: Westview Press, 2000) 36-37.

protestants, Pentecostals, and both liberal evangelicals and extremely conservative evangelicals. Liberal evangelicals tended to disagree with Falwell's political positions, while the very conservative disagreed with his entrance into the political arena at all.<sup>4</sup>

Among the most prominent of the evangelical dissenters, Billy Graham repeatedly cautioned Americans from following "the pulpit to the polls." In direct opposition to Falwell's outspoken nuclear policies, Graham argued for the plowshare rather than the sword as God's modern weapon. On the contrary, Falwell advocated building military and nuclear programs. Far more moderate than Falwell, Graham insisted that nuclear and biochemical weapons should be destroyed and encouraged Christian evangelicals to involve themselves in disarmament politics. He attempted to remain above partisan politics in order to remain committed to his ministry.<sup>5</sup>

Following Reagan's inauguration, thousands of Christian evangelicals gathered in Washington, D.C. for a joint convention and to engage in political and spiritual discussions. While Falwell and his followers claimed responsibility for conservative gains in the elections nationwide, other evangelical groups criticized the Moral Majority. The National Association of Evangelicals, a more moderate group, denounced political involvement by religious organizations and criticized Falwell specifically. While united with the Moral Majority in defense of "secular humanism," moderate evangelicals felt that no one organization spoke for all of Christianity in matters social or political in nature.<sup>6</sup>

Other religious conservative organizations, however, noticed the successes of the Moral Majority. Recognizing the publicity and mainstream attention the Moral Majority received, conservative Christians organized nationally into several separate organizations.

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<sup>4</sup> Smith, Timothy L. "Protestants Falwell Does Not Represent," *New York Times*, 22 October 1980, sec. A, p. 31.

<sup>5</sup> Jumonville, Neil. "Diversity Among Evangelicals," *New York Times*, 12 May 1981, sec. A, p. 15.

<sup>6</sup> Slade, Margot and Eva Hoffman. "Ideas and Trends," *New York Times*, 1 February 1981, sec. E, p. 7.

Conservative religious political organizations generally organized around one specific issue or developed out of a specific constituency, though none achieved the national recognition or notoriety of the Moral Majority. The influence of the organization into American politics, and the Republican Party specifically, altered the political landscape for the next two decades. Perhaps one its most lasting success proved to in encouraging and energizing the mobilization of Christian conservatives. Though not necessarily part of the Moral Majority, many religious organizations supported the same political platforms as Falwell’s followers. These organizations later became known as the “Religious Right,” or the “New Christian Right,” though such labels are misleading and ineffective at best.

Phyllis Schlafly organized her grassroots following around opposition to the Equal Rights Amendment (ERA). She created Stop Taking Our Privileges ERA (STOP ERA) in 1972, though the movement gained momentum during the Reagan administration. She encouraged women to lobby in order to defeat the ERA, which she felt took away the special privileges of women in American society. Schlafly regarded herself as a defender of traditional society. Arguing against the feminist movement and perceived threats to the traditional society. She insisted that the family remained the basic unit of America and assured “a woman the most precious and important right of all, the right to keep her own baby and to be supported and protected in the enjoyment of watching her baby grow and develop.”<sup>7</sup>

Schlafly, though angering liberals and feminists alike, drew middle class women into the conservative Christian movement. With the exception of Phyllis Schlafly, the conservative Christian resurgence relied almost exclusively on men. Schlafly, despite her

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<sup>7</sup> Critchlow, Donald T. *Phyllis Schlafly and Grassroots Conservatism: A Woman’s Crusade*. (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2005) 216-218.

stance against the ERA, provided a rallying point for conservative women. Many of them found common ground with her stance on abortion and traditional families. She drew many young evangelical Christian women into the movement, who had never before been involved in politics. With the *Phyllis Schlafly Report*, published monthly, these women continued communication and involvement in the resurgence of Christian political conservatism.

The Pro-Life Action League developed solely around the specific issue of abortion and around one central leader. Joseph Scheidler, before founding his organization, wrote *Closed!*, a pamphlet on techniques to disrupt abortion clinics. The tactics included injecting glue into door locks, blocking doorways with concrete slabs, and locking protestors to doors or machinery. His Pro-Life Action League developed a strategy unique among the Religious Right: members sought to get themselves arrested in order to draw attention to their cause. Operation Rescue, led by evangelical preacher Randall Terry, borrowed Scheidler's techniques, but tried to have members arrested by the hundreds.<sup>8</sup>

One major organization predated the Moral Majority, the Christian Voice. Robert Grant originally founded his organization to combat pornography and homosexual rights in California, but eventually gained nationwide attention. By 1980, the organization claimed thousands of members from a variety of Christian denominations. The Christian Voice first formulated the concept of "Congressional Report Cards," which rated Congress members on their voting records. The report cards focused on the nature of "moral votes" by analyzing votes cast on social issues important to Christian conservatives.<sup>9</sup>

A network of evangelical preachers, lobbyists, and members emerged full force during the Reagan presidency. Many Americans not directly affiliated with these

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<sup>8</sup> Allitt, Patrick. *Religion in America Since 1945: A History*. (New York: Columbia University Press, 2003) 158-163.

<sup>9</sup> Wilcox, *Onward Christian Soldiers?*, 37-38.

organizations supported their policies on social issues, which meant these organizations had a huge potential to affect voters. Religiously motivated conservative organizations generally developed and thrived in small geographic areas and usually failed to garner a large or nationwide support base. The Moral Majority proved the major exception to this rule by gaining a nationwide following and developing into a formidable political organization. Falwell's exposure on his *Old Time Gospel Hour* and his celebrity status kept attention focused on the Moral Majority.

During Reagan's administration, Falwell's Moral Majority developed very specific strategies designed to put conservative Christians into office and advance their social agenda. Falwell recognized that religiously involved Americans still did not vote in great numbers, despite gains made in the 1980 election. He reminded his followers that their goal remained "to bring about a moral and conservative revolution." The Moral Majority's local chapters sponsored classes on percent organization, fund raising, telephone banks, and issued warnings about unions and the need for vigilance against liberal plots. Marc Nuttle, field director of the Committee for the Survival of a Free Congress, encouraged members to remember the importance of door-to-door canvassing. The leadership of the Moral Majority realized that in close elections such tactics might play an important role.<sup>10</sup>

Falwell attempted to define the Moral Majority as an interfaith organization dedicated to Judeo-Christian values. He claimed his organization declared war on "secular humanism," not religious tolerance. Falwell developed this concept of "waging war" in his. He told his television congregation that, "the local church is an organized army equipped for battle. . .

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<sup>10</sup> Clymer, Adam. "For Moral Majority: A Step Toward '82," *New York Times*, 14 June 1981, sec. A, p. 36.

and the Sunday School is the attacking squad.” Falwell placed emphasis on the local level in his military rhetoric and in his voter registration.<sup>11</sup>

By focusing financial resources on the local level, the Moral Majority supported candidates whose philosophy reflected their local membership. They also focused attention on influencing individual state Republican Party organizations rather than influencing the national party. By injecting members into the state party organizations, the Moral Majority influenced allocation of campaign funds, and gained the strength to endorse and nominate candidates.<sup>12</sup>

Another strategy of the Moral Majority and religious conservatives developed around encouraging their own members to join governmental departments or accept government appointments. Placing Christian evangelists willing to work towards a socially conservative agenda within governmental posts seemed a logical and effective technique to stifle liberal social shifts. Often referred to as the “New Right,” these federal employees intended to put a conservative stamp on governmental departments and policies. Well placed members of the Moral Majority helped draft legislation Reagan used for the school prayer amendment and tuition tax credits.<sup>13</sup>

Reverend Bob Billings, a former director of the Moral Majority, accepted a sub-Cabinet post with the Education Department. Billings, before his appointment, publically spoke against equal rights for homosexuals, sex education in schools, and abortion. His beliefs concerning social issues definitely permeated his beliefs concerning education. By

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<sup>11</sup> Allitt, *Religion in America Since 1945*, 150-153.

<sup>12</sup> Persinos, John F. “Has the Christian Right Taken Over the Republican Party?” *Campaigns and Elections*, September 1994, 21- 24.

<sup>13</sup> Rosellini, Lynn. “How Conservatives View U.S. Posts,” *New York Times*, 2 June 1982, sec. A, p. 16.

working within the Education Department, he could spread his beliefs more effectively than through his involvement with small private schools.<sup>14</sup>

*Time* explored the tactics of the Moral Majority's leadership tactics and found that Falwell effectively communicated his political beliefs from the pulpit. By utilizing preachers, leaflets, mass rallies, and television programs on hundreds of stations, Falwell spread his message nationwide. *Time* also credited the Moral Majority with influencing the Republican Party platform and policy stances. While this influence may easily be overestimated, there is no question that Falwell's national exposure caused his organization to receive more attention than most Christian conservative organizations.<sup>15</sup>

Falwell employed techniques used by Schlafly to maintain contact with the membership of his organization. He communicated with members by mailings, with the lists eventually reaching in the millions. He focused the organization's central messages: anti-abortion, Christian voters registration, opposition of the ERA, and support of nuclear defense. Falwell often exaggerated the subscription numbers to the media, attempting to claim more importance for the organization than what actually existed.<sup>16</sup>

Political tactics of the Moral Majority closely followed the techniques of the Christian Voice. Financially, they spent aggressively to target vulnerable liberal politicians and poured their resources into campaigns conservatives could win. Members researched voting records of politicians and attacked them if they had liberal tendencies. During the 1982 Congressional elections, members of the Moral Majority enthusiastically supported their candidates with these tactics. They engaged in massive telephone campaigns in which they

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<sup>14</sup> Isaacson, Walter. "Thunders on the Right." *Time*. 16 March 1981.

<sup>15</sup> Church, George J. "Politics from the Pulpit." *Time*. 13 October 1980.

<sup>16</sup> Fackre, Gabriel. *The Religious Right and the Christian Faith*, (Grand Rapids, Michigan: William B. Eerdmans Publishing, 1982) 109-112.

recommended “pro-life, pro-traditional family, and pro-school prayer candidates,” though they did not specifically name the candidates or tell callers who to vote for. To maintain their status as a tax-deductible non-partisan lobbying group, the Moral Majority could not name specific candidates though the implication was clear.<sup>17</sup>

The Moral Majority could be a political liability as it gained notoriety within the American mainstream media. Even before Reagan’s election, the organization drew criticism for the comments of member Bailey Smith. At the Religious Roundtable meeting in Dallas, Texas, protestant leaders gathered to discuss their political beliefs and hear candidate Reagan speak to the delegation. Smith, president of the Southern Baptist Convention and member of the Moral Majority, took the floor and declared, “God Almighty does not hear the prayer of a Jew. For how in the world can God hear the prayer of a man who says that Jesus Christ is not the true Messiah?” His remarks drew ire from the American Jewish Committee and national newspapers picked up the story. Falwell issued public statements disagreeing with Smith, and Reagan himself addressed the issue during the campaign.<sup>18</sup>

Soon after Reagan’s election, the American Civil Liberties Union (ACLU) took notice of the Moral Majority and its fundamentalists leanings. The ACLU called the Moral Majority an “exceptional threat” to American liberty. They equated Falwell’s Christian agenda with a plan designed to erode civil liberties. Ira Glasser, director of the ACLU, criticized the Moral Majority for representing opposition to every ideological point of the ACLU. He railed that “they are for book censorship, against the Equal Rights Amendment, against the right of a woman to choose whether to bear a child, for prayer in school... for

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<sup>17</sup> “Moral Majority to Hold Drive By Phone for ‘Pro-Life’ Votes,” *New York Times*, 25 October 1982, sec. B, p. 6.

<sup>18</sup> Allitt, *Religion in America Since 1945*, 152-153.

discrimination against homosexuals, and against remedies to combat racial discrimination.” The ACLU wanted to draw the attention of secular America to the perceived threat.<sup>19</sup>

The ACLU did not present the only political threat to the Moral Majority. Liberal academics began speaking against its conservative. In an address to incoming freshmen, A. Bartlett Giamatti, the President of Yale University, referred to Falwell’s followers as “peddlers of coercion” engaged in a “radical assault” on pluralism, civil rights, and political freedoms. He saw fundamentalism as a threat to diversity within American society. He claimed that the Moral Majority accused anyone not conforming to their beliefs as un-American, secular, and anti-family. “What nonsense,” Giamatti laminated, “What dangerous, malicious nonsense.”<sup>20</sup>

Reagan’s relationship with religious conservatives proved neither fully symbiotic nor entirely antagonistic. Reagan, more a politician than a theologian, understood the double-edged sword the Moral Majority and its followers represented. While far from a critical percentage of voters, they contributed to his election and high public support. He did not want to alienate them or turn them away from the Republican Party. At the same time, he could not risk alienating secular Americans and the more moderate base of the party majority, so his relationship with the Moral Majority thus fluctuated often throughout his administration. He essentially adopted three major strategies for handling the Moral Majority and religious conservatives. First, and most often, he supported their social agenda publicly and enthusiastically without acting on it politically. Secondly, he appointed religious conservatives to governmental posts in an effort to placate their organizations. By allowing

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<sup>19</sup> Briggs, Kenneth A. “Falwell Rejects a Charge by Rabbi of Helping Anti-Semitism to Grow,” *New York Times*, 26 November 1980, sec. A, p. 17.

<sup>20</sup> McFadden, Robert D. “Head of Yale Calls Moral Majority ‘Peddlers of Coercion’ on ‘Values,’” *New York Times*, 1 September 1981, sec. A, p. 1.

these employees to craft governmental policy, he satisfied religious conservatives while being able to politically distance himself from their policies. Lastly, and only when forced, Reagan chose to place himself firmly in one camp or the other. When politically expedient, he followed his public support of religious conservatives with legitimate political action. At other times, he broke entirely with them in favor of his own policies.

Once in office, Reagan put the social conservative agenda on backburner as the issues of anti-communism, military buildup, and his proposed tax-cuts required immediate attention. Conservatives felt their agenda should remain a top priority. The President realized that grassroots organizers, like Falwell and Schlafly, could provide support for his economic programs, as well as conservative social agendas if he kept them content. The task of maintaining friendly, but not overly intimate, relations with the religious conservative movement proved difficult.

Speaking at the Conservative Political Action Committee, Reagan declared that the Republican Party's coalition remained intact after the 1980 election. "Ours is a consistent philosophy of government, we can be very clear: we do not have a separate social agenda, a separate economic agenda, and a separate foreign policy agenda." He continued, "Just as surely as we seek to put our financial house in order and rebuild our Nation's defenses, so too we seek to protect the unborn." By issuing this statement, Reagan attempted to link his economic and military plan with his anti-abortion stance. In essence, he called on Christian conservatives to support his programs as he supported theirs.<sup>21</sup>

Religious conservatives felt their agenda could not wait, however, on Reagan's convenience. Barely a year after his inauguration, forty-five conservative leaders issued a warning to Reagan and his administration. They claimed he allowed "the abandonment,

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<sup>21</sup> Critchlow, *Phyllis Schlafly and Grassroots Conservatism*, 273..

reversal or blunting” of the policies conservatives believed in and had voted for. Rather than blaming Reagan directly, they denounced his administration’s aides, stating that these individuals too often attempted to woo Reagan adversaries rather than mobilize his supporters. Interestingly, these conservative leaders, Falwell and Paul Weyrich among them, recognized the position they placed themselves in. Since Reagan reportedly supported the same social conservatism, they could not withdraw support for him in favor of Democrats, who they felt threatened traditional society. Despite frustration with Reagan and his Administration, religious conservatives would not vote for liberal Democrats. Ronald Godwin, the executive vice president of the Moral Majority, portrayed his organization as composing “neither Democrats or Republicans” but “morally concerned Americans.” His wording reflected the delicate position religious conservatives now faced. In all actuality, the Republican Party represented their conservative interests more than the Democrats, so the Moral Majority could not credibly threaten a withdrawal of support.<sup>22</sup>

Religious conservatives demanded that the Reagan Administration concentrate on “moral issues,” and give them top priority. Dissatisfaction from the Moral Majority over selection of Sandra Day O’Connor as a Supreme Court Justice provided an urgency to their message. Falwell and his followers urged Reagan to turn his attention from economic and tax bill issues to their concerns. Falwell’s organization, as well as the National Pro-Family Coalition, and other clergymen began calling for followers to put pressure on the administration through mailing campaigns, rallies, and lobbying.<sup>23</sup>

Over the course of his Administration, Reagan developed a distinct and effective strategy to deal with the Moral Majority. He espoused rhetoric in support of their positions

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<sup>22</sup> “President Warned By Conservaitves,” *New York Times*, 22 January 1982, sec. A, p. 20.

<sup>23</sup> Clymers, Adam. “Right Wing Seeks a Shift by Reagan,” *New York Times*, 6 September 1981, sec. A, p. 20.

and lent symbolic support to religious conservative polices, while never fully lending political support to their causes. In this way, he kept their support without alienating moderates. At times, this created an uneasy relationship for the Republican Party and religious conservatives. Abortion remained a keystone issue for religious conservatives, and Reagan geared many of his symbolic gestures towards this issue. Early in his Administration, Reagan leaked through aides his consideration of a compromise constitutional amendment. This amendment would overturn *Roe v Wade*, but not ban abortions outright. Instead, states would regain the right to permit or prohibit the procedure. By supporting compromise legislation, Reagan appeared to be acting politically on an issue dear to the Moral Majority without actually moving to pass legislation. It also shifted political pressure from the federal government to the states.

Conservatives praised Reagan's attempts to limit the legality of abortion during his tenure. In the first year of his presidency, the Department of Health and human Services issued a regulation prohibiting any family planning clinic receiving federal funds from providing abortion information. Reagan also allowed Richard Schweiker, the director of the Department and an anti-abortion advocate, to conduct a federal investigation of Planned Parenthood. Though no violations of federal law came to light, Planned Parenthood felt threatened by the federal attention. Otis R. Bowen, upon taking over the Department, sought to limit access to contraceptives and abortion information. By allowing Bowen and Schweiker to wage war on abortion, Reagan satisfied religious conservatives and avoided direct political accountability from liberals and moderates.<sup>24</sup>

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<sup>24</sup> Brownlee, W. Elliot and Hugh Davis Graham. *The Reagan Presidency: Pragmatic Conservatism and Its Legacies*. (Lawrence, Kansas: The University of Kansas Press, 2003) 305.

President Reagan made symbolic gestures in other policy areas as well. The Moral Majority held voluntary school prayer as a pet issue, so Reagan announced in May of 1982 that he planned to propose a constitutional amendment to allow voluntary prayer in public school. While the president believed that no American child should be forced or coerced into religious exercise, he professed a belief “that neither should the Government forbid religious practice.” The Supreme Court’s ruling in 1962 had not prohibited private or voluntary prayer by individuals, only organized group prayers in school. Given the wording of the Court’s decision, Reagan’s proposed amendment changed little. Reagan announced his intentions in the White House Rose Garden to a gathering of 120 religious and conservative political leaders. The Moral Majority’s stand on school prayer proved popular with the majority of Americans, far more popular than their positions on abortion or civil rights. By adopting this meaningless policy, Reagan satisfied religious conservatives without alienating moderate or secular Americans.<sup>25</sup>

Despite the popularity of the Moral Majority’s position on abortion with the majority of Americans, a political controversy developed around the issue. Falwell praised Reagan’s public rhetoric, saying that the president supported the only morally correct stance. He went on to say that “the purpose of the constitutional amendment is to circumvent the Supreme Court and to put it out of their reach.” The president of the ACLU, Norman Dorsen, felt that Reagan’s actions amounted to little more than pandering to the Moral Majority. He assailed the president in the press for his opinions on both abortion and school prayer, stating “apparently dissatisfied with his destructive impact on the economy, the President is now moving to destroy the Constitution.” He went on to point out that no Supreme Court case

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<sup>25</sup> Rainess, Howell. “Reagan Endorses Voluntary Prayer,” *New York Times*, 7 May 1982, sec. B, p. 10.

ever limited or forbid voluntary silent prayers or meditations, so Reagan needed no amendment to protect it.<sup>26</sup>

Reagan staffed his Administration with a large number of religious conservatives in an attempt to placate the Moral Majority and the developing “Christian Right.” By putting their members into the governmental bureaucracy, Reagan allowed them to alter political and governmental policy without his being directly responsible. This meant that all political fallout from such appointments would first be directed at individuals enacting conservative policies and not the president himself.

Some of these appointments were not noticed by most Americans and thereby failed to create much controversy. JoAnn Gasper, appointed a deputy assistant secretary at the Health and Human Services Department, however proved to be a controversial appointment. For years, she attacked “homosexuals and other perverts,” the “social Gestapo” and “anti-family forces” in her column in *Conservative Digest*. She wrote against domestic violence, but claimed it could mean any form of belittling or teasing under current legislation. Under the Reagan administration, she found herself in charge of reviewing government regulations concerning domestic violence and other social policy regulations. She approved a regulation, hailed by conservatives and detested by liberals, requiring parental notification when minors received contraceptives from federally financed clinics.<sup>27</sup>

Reagan’s appointments to the Supreme Court mark an interesting point of contention with conservative Christians. Reagan managed in his tenure to move the Court ideologically more to the right by his appointments, but still drew political criticism from Falwell and the Moral Majority. Early in his Administration, Reagan appointed O’Connor to the Court and

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<sup>26</sup> Ibid.

<sup>27</sup> Rosellini, Lynn. “How Conservatives View U.S. Posts,” *New York Times*, 2 June 1982, sec. A, p. 16.

the Senate quickly approved her, but reaction from conservative organizations proved far less favorable. O'Connor drew the ire of religious conservatives because of her stance on a family planning bill and her call for population control. Responding to the anger of political religious conservatives, White House staff member Morton Blackwell met with many national leaders of the religious right. After meeting with over fifty leaders in 1981, Blackwell informed Reagan that religious conservatives felt slighted by the Administration and their opposition to the nomination would not change. Reagan wrote a mass circulated letter to grassroots conservatives attempting to explain his support of O'Connor and of her political stance. Failing to persuade religious conservatives, Reagan nonetheless pushed the nomination forth and the Senate confirmed O'Connor as the first female member of the Supreme Court.<sup>28</sup>

In 1986, Reagan needed to make an appointment to the Court for Chief Justice when Warren E. Burger retired. Burger's retirement allowed Reagan to appoint a conservative to the bench. Justice William Rehnquist's record proved only slightly more conservative than Burger, but his votes remained much more consistent. Conservatives railed against Burger's inconsistent votes on major issues, including school desegregation, busing, abortion, affirmative action, and separation of church and state.<sup>29</sup> Rather than filling the Chief Justice from outside the court, Reagan moved Justice Rehnquist into that position and appointed Antonin Scalia, of the United States Court of Appeals for the District of Columbia, as an Associate Justice. Both Scalia and Rehnquist displayed records more consistent in judicial restraint and conservative views than Burger.<sup>30</sup>

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<sup>28</sup> Brownlee and Graham, *The Reagan Presidency*, 307-309.

<sup>29</sup> Taylor, Stuart. "More Vigor for the Right," *New York Times*, 18 June 1986, sec. A, p. 1.

<sup>30</sup> Lambert, *Religion in American Politics*, 208.

Reagan's appointments proved inconsistent with the wishes of religious conservatives. He appointed secular minded conservatives to sub-Cabinet posts, creating early resentment among Christian Conservatives. After appointments to the State Department and Defense Department went to Republican moderates, the *Christian Digest* warned Reagan not to ignore his mandate for change. The 1984 presidential election brought a renewed relationship of Reagan to the Moral Majority and Christian conservatives. Reagan, competing against Democratic candidate Walter Mondale, sought to strengthen the perception of himself as the only candidate who truly defended religious and family values dear to the Moral Majority. The election proved a landslide for Reagan and he carried almost every state. During the campaign season, Reagan relied heavily on religious rhetoric and espoused policies consistent with Falwell's organization. While he clearly did not need to rely on the Moral Majority or Christian conservatives as swing voters, he did align himself with their social policies.

The 1984 Republican Platform reflected Reagan's interest in courting Christian conservatives. The platform painted liberals and "Washington elites" as launching an assault on communities and local institutions necessary to traditional values. The nation, the document claimed, relied on the institutions of home, family, religion, and neighborhood. Conservatives needed to back the Republican Party in order to defend America from liberal's "brave new world." Liberals and the Democratic Party "mocked the work ethic, scorned frugality and attacked the integrity of the family and parental rights." Without directly speaking to the language of the Moral Majority, the platform reflected similar social policy stances.<sup>31</sup>

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<sup>31</sup> Republican Party Platform of 1980, adopted by the Republican National Convention, 15 July 1980, available from <http://www.presidency.ucsb.edu>.

Outlining Republican education policies, the platform of 1984 spoke to the core constituency of the Moral Majority and the Christian conservative movement. Moral guidance played a large role in the educational program of the Republican platform, warning schools to return to their traditional task “of developing good character and moral discernment.” By advocating parental rights to choose the material taught in schools, the Republican Party appealed to many Christian conservatives. Creationism being taught alongside evolution proved a major concern for Falwell and his followers. Sex education in public schools also concerned many parents, and the Republican platform addressed their concern by calling on schools to “evaluate their sex education program to determine their impact on escalating teenage pregnancy.”<sup>32</sup>

Speaking to the cornerstone issue of the Moral Majority and Christian conservatives, the platform dealt directly with abortion and the Right to Life Amendment. Finding that the “unborn child has a fundamental individual right to life which cannot be infringed,” Republicans openly pandered to moral conservatives. According to the platform, the Fourteenth Amendment’s protection applied to unborn children and therefore the government could not financially support “organizations which advocate or support abortion.” The platform further courted the Moral Majority and anti-abortion organizations by commending “the efforts of those individuals and religious and private organizations that are providing positive alternatives to abortion by meeting the physical, emotional, and financial needs of pregnant women and offering adoption services where needed.” Republicans praised Reagan’s latest judicial appointments because they placed in the judiciary individuals who respected traditional family values. The platform did not directly conform to the rhetoric used by religious conservatives, but implied an agreement with their social policies very clearly.

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<sup>32</sup> *ibid.*

Evangelicals understood the rhetoric of “right to life” and “parental right to choose” as being consistent with their conservative social and political ideologies. Reagan marketed the 1984 Republican Platform to those conservative values, creating a sense of unity with the mission of the Moral Majority. Republicans painted themselves as the only party capable of relating to religious conservatives and returning society to traditional values.<sup>33</sup>

Throughout Reagan’s Administration, Falwell attempted to remain optimistic about the relationship of the Moral Majority to conservative politicians. By the end of Reagan’s second term, even the televangelists understood that the organization only garnered attention from seated politicians when they needed its support. Falwell also became frustrated by the lack of legislation designed to return America to traditional values. Following the 1986 Congressional elections, the Moral Majority’s leadership realized that their influence into politics seemed to be fading. The organization failed to impact many campaigns and failed to defeat many of their targeted politicians. One year after the 1986 elections, Falwell announced his retirement as the leader of the Moral Majority and he felt a need to return full time to his ministry. Falwell handed his organization over to Jerry Nims and encouraged him to further the grassroots foundation of the Moral Majority.<sup>34</sup>

Aside from the disappointing Congressional elections, scandals surrounding fellow television preacher Jim Bakker also encouraged Falwell to retire from the Moral Majority. In supporting Bakker, Falwell invited media charges of corruption and mainstream criticism of his own organization. Despite criticism, Falwell maintained that his organization remained relevant. “The Moral Majority by necessity became the lightning rod of the conservative

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<sup>33</sup> *Obid.*

<sup>34</sup> Kings, Wayne. “Falwell Quits as Moral Majority Head,” *New York Times*, 4 Novemeber 1987, sec. A, p. 14.

movement,” he claimed. Despite new leadership, scandal, and developing financial burdens, the organization continued to hobble along.<sup>35</sup>

In Las Vegas, Nevada, in June 1989, Falwell announced the dissolution of the Moral Majority. He announced that the organization had accomplished its mission, “the religious right is solidly in place. . . the religious conservatives in American are now in for the duration.” He conceded that the Moral Majority had failed to solve the problems of abortion, teen-age pregnancy, drug abuse, pornography, school prayer, and divorce, but claimed ultimate success for energizing the nation’s religious conservatives.<sup>36</sup>

Falwell’s Moral Majority had nonetheless struck a chord with religious conservatives. His message supporting family values and protesting liberal policies resonated with many conservative Christian beliefs. While the organization lasted only one decade, it shaped the political landscape for the next three presidential administrations and returned religious social issues to the forefront of American politics. Religious concerns inserted themselves into every modern presidential election following Reagan’s tenure. While Christian conservatives most often aligned with the Republican Party, Democratic candidates attempted to court this demographic.

The Reagan Administration’s relationship to the Moral Majority set the tone for political involvement with religious conservatives. Under the president’s leadership, the Republican Party platform reflected the values of the Moral Majority without initiating legislation directed at these values. The relationship proved beneficial for the Republican Party, if tense at times. Reagan set an example of how to interact religious conservatives

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<sup>35</sup> Freedmans, Samuel G. “Back in the Spotlight, Falwell Retains Long-Held Goals for God and Country,” *New York Times*, 4 June 1987, sec. A, p. 18.

<sup>36</sup> Stiefels, Peter. “Moral Majority to Dissolve; Says Mission Accomplished,” *New York Times*, 12 June 1989, sec. A, p. 14.

without alienating moderate voters. Falwell's Moral Majority proved that a grassroots movement could affect national politics and influence political parties, given the right circumstances. His personal prominence and treasure chest drew the attention of the national media.

Reagan's embrace of the Moral Majority and their core values aligned the Republican Party firmly with Christian conservative voters. As the Moral Majority dissolved, several other Christian political organizations developed and that supported the Republican Party. Following the dissolution of the Moral Majority, Pat Robertson's Christian Coalition became the standard bearer of the Christian conservative movement.

## **Chapter Four: Christian Conservatives Regroup and Rejuvenate**

The end of Ronald Reagan's presidency appeared to signal the end of political influence for religion conservatives. Reagan, while not entirely dutiful to the agenda of Christian conservatives, pledged personal support publically and often for their positions. He effectively walked a tightrope between supporting secular and religious conservatives within the Republican Party, but his assumed successor, Vice President George H. Bush, seemed less likely to follow a religiously conservative agenda if elected. Adding to religious conservatives' worries, the most prominent religious conservative organization, the Moral Majority, ended the Reagan years tainted by scandals, facing massive revenue losses, and eventually had to close its doors. Following the collapse of the Moral Majority, Jerry Falwell stepped back from the public stage. With Falwell and Reagan both leaving national politics, religious conservatives had no clear flagship organization or rallying point.

The political stage appeared wide open for new players to assume the roles of Reagan and Falwell. Those that thought the end of the Moral Majority reflected the end of religious conservatism as a movement could not have been more mistaken. While the Moral Majority represented the first major religious conservative organization to gain national prominence, it failed to reach many of its goals; a successor emerged in the Christian Coalition that developed into the most effective Christian lobbying political organization in modern U.S. history. Originating in full force under Bush, Sr.'s presidency, the Christian Coalition came into its own during 1990 and proved to be a political force under both the Bush and Clinton administrations; the growth was astounding, relying on both a national network and a grassroots organization. Under impressive leadership, the Christian Coalition adapted to new technologies and lobbied Congress effectively. All of this contributed to the recognition of

the Christian Coalition as the first truly professional Christian conservative political organization.

Much like the Moral Majority, the Christian Coalition developed around a singular personality, Marion Gordon “Pat” Robertson. He began life as the son of a conservative Democratic senator from Virginia. After a brief stint in the military, Robertson graduated from Yale Law School in 1955. He failed to pass the bar exam and subsequently failed in the business world as well. Robertson experienced a personal conversion, which he believed altered the course of his professional and private life. He decided to continue his education at the Biblical Seminary in New York, training to spread the Gospel rather than becoming a lawyer. Upon graduating, he returned to Virginia as an ordained Southern Baptist minister and began laying the foundations for the Christian Coalition.<sup>1</sup>

In 1961, Robertson started WYAH-TV in Norfolk, Virginia. This television station may have been the first completely devoted to religious broadcasting. From this one station, consistently plagued by financial and personal problems, Robertson eventually built the Christian Broadcasting Network (CBN). The CBN operated as a non-profit tax exempt organization and generated large monetary donation from viewers during telethons. Robertson hosted the primary program, *The 700 Club*. The program began as a Christian talk show, complete with on air displays of spiritual gifts and religious teachings. In the 1980s the show evolved into a magazine format, presenting news from a Christian perspective. From CBN, Robertson learned the value of appealing to his followers through technological means

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<sup>1</sup> Donovan, John B. *Pat Robertson: The Authorized Biography*. (New York: Macmillan Publishing Company, 1988) 20.

and how to gain donations from his followers, a skill that proved invaluable to the Christian Coalition.<sup>2</sup>

Like Falwell, Robertson first criticized “preacher politicians,” but social issues began to inflame his political interests by the 1970s. He supported Jimmy Carter’s bid for the White House, hoping a born again Christian might return the country to more traditional values. Carter’s appalling performance as president embittered Robertson and pushed him further into the political arena. In April 1980, Robertson served as the cochairman of the “Washington for Jesus” rally, which drew hundreds of thousands of participants to the District of Columbia. Robertson stated the rally did not represent a political rally but rather symbolized the power of the “silent majority” of Christian Americans. Well known televangelists, including Robertson, planned the rally for over a year and raised over a million dollars to produce it. They meant it as a show of strength to the government; they felt that the concerns of Christian conservatives resonated with enough people to force Congressional attention.<sup>3</sup>

Recognizing the success of Falwell’s Moral Majority in the public spotlight and questioning Vice President Bush’s commitment to a Christian agenda, Robertson decided to run for President in 1988. He officially changed his political affiliation to the Republican Party and, after Reagan’s two terms, Robertson felt that no Republican contender in the primary race reflected the necessary level of commitment to a religious conservative agenda. His campaign did not appear a serious endeavor to most Republicans; they viewed him as a fundamentalist and a divisive figure. Robertson later declared that he only ran after

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<sup>2</sup> Watson, Justin. *The Christian Coalition: Dreams of Restoration, Demands for Recognition*, (New York: St. Martin’s Press, 1997) 30-31.

<sup>3</sup> “Religious Rally on Mall in the Capital Draws Support and Criticism,” *New York Times*, 27 April 1980, sec. A, p. 64.

“numerous, conservative, highly placed friends” encouraged him to do so. After his surprising performance in the Iowa caucus, Robertson gain legitimacy as a national figure in American politics.<sup>4</sup>

Robertson’s campaign suffered from some severe setbacks before the primaries even began. He had never run for any public office before mounting a presidential campaign, an unusual move at best. Most of his staff and political supporters who volunteered on the campaign joined him out of religious or ideological convictions and had little political experience. The campaign repeatedly proved unable to reach out beyond its core constituency, conservative Christians, and some of its main supporters offended more secular minded Americans. Robertson himself generated a great deal of hostility as a candidate. Only 11 percent of Americans viewed him favorably, while 26 percent distrusted him. The negativity surrounding his campaign extended from Democrats and Independents and to even Republicans.<sup>5</sup>

Robertson actively sought to present himself as a serious candidate, not simply as a television preacher turned politician. He felt this label did not accurately convey his Yale education or his experience as a business executive. To widen his base, Robertson refrained from using Biblical quotes in his stump speeches, attempting to move his campaign more mainstream. Despite the misgivings of the Republican base, the campaign proceeded more professionally than one might expect. Robertson attempted to produce a policy platform on an array of political issues, hoping to show more political sophistication than the Moral Majority. The bulk of his policy positions mirrored Reagan’s and included fiscal

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<sup>4</sup> Watson, *The Christian Coalition*, 36-37.

<sup>5</sup> Dionne, E.J. “Polls Gives Hart and Bush Leads for Nomination,” *New York Times*, 25 January 1987, sec. A, p. 18.

conservatism, an aggressive anti-communist policy, a strong national defense, and tougher punishments for drug use and crime.<sup>6</sup>

His attempts to attract more moderates into his campaign failed miserably. Moderates felt Robertson's campaign amounted to a threat to freedom and diversity. During his announcement for candidacy, protestors often succeeded in shouting over his speech. Some carried signs reading "Hitler in '39, Robertson in '88." His opponents feared the institutionalization of religion into the political and public spheres and equated his attempts with fascism. Robertson addressed these concerns during his campaign by announcing that he would never use governmental power to force spiritual values on Americans. He also resigned his ordination and left his post at CBN in order to underscore his support of the separation of church and state.<sup>7</sup>

Within weeks of his surprising performance, Robertson found himself mathematically eliminated from gaining enough delegates to secure the Republican nomination. Undeterred, Robertson used his newfound national recognition to co-found the Christian Coalition. Some historians speculate that Robertson's intentions proved not to win the nomination, but to gain enough prominence to found his organization. Robertson himself hinted at his larger ambitions after his defeat on Super Tuesday, telling reporters "We are going to put Pat Robertson people on city councils, school boards, and legislatures all over the country. . . . That's His plan for me and for this nation." Robertson ordained himself as the president of the Christian Coalition, but understood the need to recruit Christian conservatives with political experience.<sup>8</sup>

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<sup>6</sup> Galley, Phil. "Robertson Tests the Candidate Voice," *New York Times*, 12 February 1987, sec. A, p. 20.

<sup>7</sup> Schribman, David. "Robertson Starts Presidential Campaign As Protestors Strive to Shut Him Down," *Wall Street Journal*, 2 October 1987, sec. A, p. 44.

<sup>8</sup> Reid, T.R. "Invisible Army Won Few Battles," *The Washington Post*, 24 February 1988, sec. A, p. 33.

Before Robertson's vision for the country could be fulfilled, he needed the collaboration and political sophistication provided by Ralph Eugene Reed. Unlike Robertson, Reed grew up in a staunchly Republican family and became active in politics while at the University of Georgia. Before graduating with a degree in history, Reed volunteered for Reagan's campaign, worked as a Senate intern, and became the chairman of his campus's College Republicans. Shortly after graduation, Reed converted into an evangelical Christian and brought a religious fervor into his political campaigning. Before considering politics a career, Reed returned to academia in search of a doctorate. His dissertation, *Fortress of Faith*, explored Southern evangelical colleges in the nineteenth century. He found that these colleges provided the base from which evangelicals after the Civil War could affect and influence Southern culture. Just as these colleges provided an institution for spreading religious conservatives, political organizations could affect modern conservatives.<sup>9</sup>

While Reed campaigned actively for conservative Christian legislators like Jesse Helms, he felt reluctant to involve himself with the religious conservative movement. He considered their tactics to be amateurish and felt their leaders did not understand the workings of politics. He once complained that when evangelicals first became politically involved "they didn't even know how to get a call through to Capitol Hill." Reed, more than most conservative Christians, realized how the Republican Party manipulated their votes. The Republican Party relied on their blind faith in Reagan to garner votes while largely ignoring their concerns as school prayer and abortion. Reed understood that the religious conservative movement needed to become more professional and incorporate a wider base before either political party would seriously consider their positions.<sup>10</sup>

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<sup>9</sup> Watson, *The Christian Coalition*, 46.

<sup>10</sup> Watson, *The Christian Coalition*, 42-44.

Following the Pennsylvania primaries in 1988, Vice President George Bush received a conciliatory telephone call from Robertson and a pledge of full support. Unexpectedly from Bush's view, Robertson's campaign remained the last viable rival for the Republican Party nomination. Bush realized that Robertson's campaign managed to galvanize religious conservatives in a way his own campaign had not been able, and Robertson's support might prove useful in the coming general election. Robertson conceded the nomination and promised his full support to Bush in the fall. His campaign manager even signed on to work in the Bush campaign.<sup>11</sup>

Following Robertson's failed bid for the presidency and the collapse of Falwell's Moral Majority, many pundits began predicting the end of the Christian conservative movement. One reporter for the *New Republic* lamented that a "movement of such reputed potential self-destructed so suddenly." Ironically, Robertson's failure to gain the White House launched him on the path to create the most effective Christian political organization in American history. Just as conservatives prepared to mourn the passing of the religious conservative movement, however, Reed and Robertson joined to create the Christian Coalition.<sup>12</sup> In January of 1989, Reed and Robertson found themselves seated next to each other at a dinner hosted by the Students For America. The SFA presented Robertson with their Man of the Year Award at this dinner. After the presentation, Robertson approached Reed about joining the staff of a political organization he hoped to form. Robertson wanted Reed to sketch out an organizational plan for a Christian political action group, detailing how it should look and function. Reed sketched out what would become the Christian Coalition, with Robertson as president and himself as executive director. The primary focus, much like

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<sup>11</sup> Dionne, E.J. "Bush Moving to Solidify Ties to Republican Right," *New York Times*, 28 April 1988, sec. A, p. 1.

<sup>12</sup> Wilentz, Sean. "God and Man at Lynchburg," *The New Republic*, 25 April 1988: 30.

other religious conservative organizations, would rely on grassroots efforts, though Reed hoped to build a professional organization. He believed that the organization must not be tied to election cycles, but maintain a permanent base.<sup>13</sup>

The Christian Coalition began in a warehouse, sharing space with materials left from Robertson's failed campaign. Robertson also lent his donor mailing lists to this new cause, creating early financial backing for the organization. Volunteers from his campaign recruited new members into the organization and worked to raise funds. In 1990, the Republican Senatorial Committee gave a onetime donation of \$64,000 to Robertson's organization. The Christian Coalition expressed similar goals to the now defunct Moral Majority, with their basic purpose stated as making "government more responsive to the concerns of Evangelical Christians and pro-family Catholics." Their mission contained five goals: to represent Christians before local councils, state legislatures, and Congress, to speak out in the public arena and in the media, to train Christian leaders for effective social and political action, to inform Christians about timely issues and pending legislation, and to protest anti-Christian bias and defend the legal rights of Christians. As a tax-exempt organization, the Christian Coalition did not pay taxes, but its donations proved non-tax deductible. Being tax exempt, the Christian Coalition could not openly support only Republican candidates.<sup>14</sup>

Much like the Moral Majority, the Christian Coalition represented the organization of state and local chapters. Each state branch secured its own tax-exemption and none were funded by the national organization, though they had to obtain a charter from the national Board of Directors. Local or county branches are usually units of the state organizations. By requiring state organization to reapply for charters annually, the national organization

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<sup>13</sup> Watson, *The Christian Coalition*, 57-58.

<sup>14</sup> *ibid.*

retained control of state to state operations. Reed insisted that the coalition proceed like a professional political organization. In addition to the publications, Reed further insisted on an up-to-date internet website. From this website, members downloaded press releases, position papers, voter guides, and the Christian Coalition publications. An online store allowed members to donate or purchase books and videos. Reed also hosted *Christian Coalition Live*, a monthly television broadcast. He felt the use of the “electronic Godzilla” made it possible for voters to affect government on an unprecedented level. Citing the power of the Christian Coalition, he noted that when Robertson encouraged members to contact Congressmen and Senators, the Capital Hill switchboard became overwhelmed.<sup>15</sup>

Aside from the advanced technological communication, the Christian Coalition adopted many of the techniques used by former religious conservative organizations. In 1991 the Christian Coalition began its annual “Road to Victory” conferences. Members attended to hear addresses by conservative politicians, presentations on social agendas, and workshops on local actions. The Christian Coalition also offered one and two day seminars around the country, aimed at practical and political conservative actions. Much like Falwell, Reed taught members how to run grassroots organizations, establish voter registrations from church, and how to lobby legislatures.<sup>16</sup>

In combining the grassroots tactics with developing technologies, the Christian Coalition taught members how to identify and mobilize “pro-family” voters. Computers aided in the identification of sympathetic voters by obtaining lists of registered voters, those who signed certain petitions, church membership lists, and names referred by current members. Prospective members then received an informal phone survey from Christian

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<sup>15</sup> Curtis, Carolyn. “High Tech Activism,” *Christian America*, October 1995:20-23.

<sup>16</sup> Watson, *The Christian Coalition*, 57.

Coalition members and current members participated in door-to-door canvassing. Robertson's Christian Coalition grew quickly. In the spring of 1990, when the mainstream press first took notice, membership reached 25,000. By the end of the year, the Christian Coalition claimed 57,000 members and an annual budget of over two million dollars. Incorporating tactics used by other religious conservative organizations, Robertson and Reed funneled much of the budget into three publications: the *Religious Rights Watch*, the *Congressional Scorecard*, and the *Christian American*. The *Religious Rights Watch*, published monthly as a one page flyer, focused on violations of the legal rights of Christians. It encouraged readers to contact their public officials in protest and to report incidents of discrimination to the Christian Coalition for publication. Twice a year, the *Congressional Scorecard* presented the voting records of Representatives and Senators on selected social and relevant political issues. The *Christian American* developed into a tabloid style newspaper, featuring news, editorials, and a question and answer article from Robertson. The last two publications were the direct incarnation of tactics used by other religious conservatives.<sup>17</sup>

While Bush accepted Robertson's support in the election, their relationship during his presidency proved more difficult than Falwell's and Reagan's. Bush could not pander to both religious conservatives and moderates like Reagan, but he felt less a need to. While the Christian Coalition continued to build their membership numbers and treasure chests, Bush found little use for them until the presidential campaign of 1992 when the economy became stagnant and Bush broke his campaign promise not to raise taxes. Reagan Democrats and many religious conservatives seemed poised to move back to the Democratic Party unless Bush could mobilize their support. Given these conditions, Bush sought out the Christian

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<sup>17</sup> Watson, *The Christian Coalition*, 54.

Coalition and hoped social issues might give him an edge over the Democratic presidential candidate, Arkansas Governor William Jefferson Clinton.

The Democratic candidate did not grow up in a religious household, though he appreciated the value of religious rhetoric in campaigning. Clinton publicly shared his own religious experiences to connect with voters. Though his parents rarely attended church, his mother encouraged him to attend Park Place Baptist Church in Hot Springs, Arkansas. He eventually went to one of Billy Graham's crusades and appeared deeply impressed by the scene. Most Americans knew little about Clinton before he launched his presidential campaign. His political experience began with an unsuccessful run for Congress in 1974, but he became the attorney general of Arkansas two years later. In 1978 he was elected governor, but lost a re-election bid two years later. He ran in again in 1982 and then twice for re-election before mounting a presidential campaign.<sup>18</sup>

Clinton represented all that religious conservatives feared; they portrayed him as a "draft-dodging serial adulterer who had insisted. . . that the election was about the economy." Clinton's extramarital relationships especially concerned religious conservatives and brought scandal into the campaign. Early in 1992, a cabaret singer, Gennifer Flowers, claimed Clinton had a twelve year affair with her. The accusations caused Clinton and his wife to work avidly on improving the public image of their marriage during his campaign. Though Clinton found little support among religious conservative voters, even his marital indiscretions failed to strengthen their relationship to Bush.<sup>19</sup>

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<sup>18</sup> Balmer, Randall. *God in the White House: A History: How Faith Shaped the Presidency From John F. Kennedy to George W. Bush*, (New York: Harper One, 2008) 133-135.

<sup>19</sup> "Clinton Denounces New Report of Affair," *New York Times*, 24 January 1992, sec. A, p. 14; Dowd, Maureen. "After Ordeal, Is Clinton Tempered Now or Burned?" *New York Times*, 2 February 1992, sec. A, p. 24.

Unfortunately for the president, his attempts to sway religious conservatives without alienating moderate voters seemed transparent to Robertson and the Christian Coalition. Like the Moral Majority, abortion remained a cornerstone issue for the organization and Bush failed to gain their support owing to his inaction and blatant contradiction of their position. In an attempt to placate moderates, both Vice President Dan Quayle and Bush stated they would support a daughter or granddaughter who elected to have an abortion even after being urged not to. Barbara Bush, speaking at a Republican convention, declared abortion to be a personal issue and said it should be omitted from political platforms altogether.<sup>20</sup>

Despite these public proclamations, the Republican Platform still spoke firmly against abortion. Echoing Robertson's rhetoric, the platform struck a tone of victimhood and decried liberal assaults on the traditional family. Quoting the Book of Proverbs, the platform encouraged parents to train children to be productive members of society, so that upon adulthood they would not stray from that path. The platform announced that Republicans welcomed "change that corrects the mistakes of the past, particularly those at war against the family." Throughout the platform, Republicans painted Democrats and liberals as leading a charge against families and children. Repeating the 1984 and 1980 platforms, the Republican Party affirmed the right to life of unborn children and its commitment to a human life amendment in the Constitution. The rhetoric of the platform reflected the desires of the Christian Coalition, but actions and statements made by the administration almost contradicted the official position. Clearly, Bush and his administration wanted the support of religious conservatives without sacrificing their moderate supporters.

Even with the rhetorical contradictions of the Bush administration, religious conservatives preferred the Republican candidate over Clinton, and Robertson's Christian

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<sup>20</sup> Apple, R.W. "Behind Bush's Mixed Abortion Signals," *New York Times*, 15 August 1992, sec. A, p. 1.

Coalition worked actively to support Bush in the general election. Unlike the Moral Majority, the Christian Coalition planned a sophisticated and organized opposition to Clinton. They planned to distribute 40 million voter guides comparing Bush and Clinton's position on social issues like abortion, school prayer, and homosexual rights. Their membership before the election numbered about 350,000 with the power to influence many more. Robertson told reporters that a vote for Clinton would not be sinful, but stupid and "God can forgive sin, but stupid is forever." More than simply securing victory for a trailing Bush, the Christian Coalition hoped to place themselves at the core of the Republican Party. If their turnout provided Bush with victory, his second term might be more responsive to their concerns.<sup>21</sup>

The Republican National Convention brought religious conservatism back to the forefront of the party. Pat Buchanan, a well known figure of the conservative movement, spoke at the convention to remind voters of the successes of the party and in support of Bush. "There is a religious war going on in this country, it is a cultural war as critical to the kind of nation we shall be as the Cold War itself." Buchanan called on faithful Republicans to support Bush in the "struggle for the soul of America." Buchanan painted a dramatic picture in which Bush fought against the Clintons for the moral control of America. The Christian Coalition feared a Clinton administration and worked dedicatedly for a Bush victory. Speaking to the Republican National Convention, Robertson accused Clinton of wanting to enact a "radical plan," one that would destroy the traditional family and transfer many of its functions to the federal government. While this may have energized the constituency of the Christian Coalition, it alienated moderates from the party. Though most agreed Clinton

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<sup>21</sup> Applebome, Peter. "Religious Right Intensifies Campaign for Bush," *New York Times*, 31 October 1992, sec. A, p. 1.

appeared more liberal than Bush, few believed he developed a plan to destroy American families.<sup>22</sup>

Robertson further hurt his cause in 1992 by espousing negative beliefs about the feminist movement. A fundraising letter written by Robertson decried the feminist movement and opposed the Equal Right Amendment, but the language in the letter incited fears and anger nationwide. He declared that the feminist movement did not exist to encourage equal rights for women. Instead, their agenda revolved around “a socialist, anti-family political movement that encourages women to leave their husbands, kill their children, practice witchcraft, destroy capitalism, and become lesbians.” Robertson’s remarks unleashed a wave of backlash, both secular and religious activists. Far from helping the Republican Party, such comments made them look like intolerant fundamentalists.<sup>23</sup>

Clinton’s campaign adopted religious rhetoric in an attempt to reach religious voters not affiliated with organizations such as the Christian Coalition. Clinton began speaking about the “New Covenant,” defining it as a solemn commitment between the people and their government. This new approach to government should offer more empowerment and less entitlement, Clinton declared in his acceptance address. By labeling his platform as a “Covenant,” Clinton invoked a sense of the Old Testament and spoke a language that resonated with Christian voters. Though his approval rating reached 91 percent in the year before, Bush’s campaign failed to generate much support. As the election closed, Bush gained only 37 percent of the vote. This proved the worst election for a sitting president since William Howard Taft, almost eighty years before. The economy probably contributed the most to Clinton’s victory. Bush’s Administration’s high budget deficits and free-trade

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<sup>22</sup> Robertson, Pat. “Address to the Republican National Convention.” Houston, Texas, 19 August 1992, available from <http://www.presidency.ucsb.edu>; Balmer, *God in the White House*, 136.

<sup>23</sup> “Robertson Letter Attacks Feminists,” *New York Times*, 26 August 1992, sec. A, p. 16.

policies also drew anger from voters. The unemployment rate continued to climb, though the recession officially ended in March of 1991. Clinton's election seemed even more assured when third party candidate Ross Perot pulled voters away from the Republican Party.<sup>24</sup>

After his inauguration, Clinton's actions sent many religious conservatives into a state of frenzy. In one of the most controversial moves, Clinton promised to remove federal restrictions on many abortion related issues. Under the previous administration, the government prohibited research using tissue from aborted fetuses, abortion and related procedures in military hospitals overseas, and the government prevented federally financed clinics from providing information about the procedure. Clinton acted on his promise as one of his first official acts. On the twentieth anniversary of *Roe v. Wade*, Clinton reviewed five abortion-related memorandums and revoked over a decade of bans by the previous Republican administrations. While symbolic of a break with the past, the legislation directly affected several policies. Federally financed clinics could now provide abortion counseling and information without risk of losing funds and allowed federal regulators to reassess the prohibition of RU486, more commonly known as the "morning after pill." During the signing ceremony, Clinton repeated his campaign promise of producing "an America where abortion is safe and legal, but rare." As Clinton signed the legislation, 75,000 people gathered in Washington, D.C. to protest both the original Supreme Court ruling and the new Administration's actions.<sup>25</sup>

The Christian Coalition considered abortion the greatest domestic social ill, and attacked Clinton on his support. Speaking to two thousand members of the organization at a

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<sup>24</sup> De Witt, Karen. "Clinton's Policy Trademark: 'New Covenant,'" *New York Times*, 17 July 1992, sec. A, p. 15; Phillips, Kevin. *American Dynasty: Aristocracy, Fortune, and Politics of Deceit in the House of Bush*. (New York: Viking, 2004) 267-268.

<sup>25</sup> Steinfels, Peter. "Beliefs," *New York Times*, 9 January 1993, sec. A, p. 9 ; "Clinton Reverses Abortion Restrictions," *New York Times*, 24 January 1993, sec. E, p. 4.

convention, Pat Buchanan pledged support for the Republican Party. “If a political party would turn its back on the 4,000 unborn children doomed to death every day in this country, then it is time to find a new party,” he told the crowd. Continuing, he promised a commitment to keep “our party pro-life.” In a statement that shocked the press, Buchanan then attacked multiculturalism, claiming that the Christian religion remained superior to others. While the rhetoric roused the membership and further pushed the organization into the Republican Party, it gave moderates cause for discomfort.<sup>26</sup>

Another point of contention with the Clinton administration developed around the “don’t ask, don’t tell” policy. When the question of homosexuals serving in the military first presented itself, Clinton supported reversing the ban altogether. After much debate, most of it fierce, the Administration reached a compromise. In May of 1993, Clinton amended the ban on homosexuals in the military. While he could not completely overturn the ban, he instituted a new policy allowing homosexuals to serve in the military. Eventually referred to as the “don’t ask, don’t tell,” policy, it allowed homosexuals to stay in the military if they kept their private life private. In essence, this policy institutionalized the already standing practice, but it drew anger and fear from conservatives. During a nationally televised question-and-answer session in the White House Rose Garden, a pastor brought his concern to the president’s attention. Clinton responded by distancing himself from the public policy and saying, “We are trying to work this out so that our country does not. . . appear to be endorsing a gay lifestyle, but we accept people as people and give them a chance to serve, if they play by the rules.”<sup>27</sup>

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<sup>26</sup> “Christian Group Keeping to the Right,” *New York Times*, 12 September 1993, sec. A, p. 38.

<sup>27</sup> Berke, Richard. “President Backs a Gay Compromise,” *New York Times*, 28 May 1993, sec. A, p. 1.

Following the 1994 congressional elections, in which the victorious Republicans hailed Reed as the “wunderkind” who delivered the evangelical vote, the Christian Coalition released the *Contract with the American Family*. They modeled their contract after the 1994 Republican *Contract with America*, which outlined the party’s stance on lowering taxes, increasing entrepreneurial activities, and reforming welfare. The evangelical document set forth an agenda of social issues and desired legislation. Reed sought to expand the base of the Christian Coalition by avoiding many of the controversial cornerstone issues. Critics of the Christian Coalition believed that political and organizational expedience prevented the inclusion of the more radical positions often associated with Christian conservative organizations. Other Christian conservative organizations, such as Operation Rescue, criticized Reed and his organization. Randall Terry, founder of Operation Rescue, blasted the Christian Coalition by saying, “We cannot, in the name of the Christian Coalition, sell out the law of the heaven for short-term political gain.”<sup>28</sup>

Shortly before Clinton’s re-election campaign in 1996, Reed and the Christian Coalition announced another ten point social agenda for Congress. Reed cautioned that this remained the “ten suggestions, not the ten commandments.” Flanked by members of Congress, the announcement demonstrated the power of the Christian Coalition to gain both political and media attention. While the plan included many of the staple issues for the Christian Coalition, such as protection for school prayer and opposition to abortion, it failed to mention opposition to homosexual rights. Notable about this announcement was the absence of Republican presidential hopeful, Senator Bob Dole. While a direct meeting with the Christian Coalition might prove a misstep, Dole could not completely ignore the organization either. He met the leaders of the organization following the official

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<sup>28</sup> Watson, *The Christian Coalition*, 73.

announcement and issued a statement explaining he endorsed the set of recommendations, but not the entire agenda.<sup>29</sup>

Republicans failed to unite effectively in the 1996 presidential election. Two candidates emerged as serious contenders during the primaries, Dole and Buchanan. Reed cautioned the Christian Coalition to adopt a “wait and deliver” attitude concerning the candidates; Reed felt that by supporting Buchanan they threatened the legitimacy and the extended base of the Christian Coalition. Should Buchanan manage to secure the nomination, he would almost surely fail in the general election and religious conservatives would be blamed for the defeat. Reed understood that for the Christian Coalition to survive and influence the next presidential administration, Dole needed to win the Republican nomination.<sup>30</sup>

Though Buchanan won many early primaries, Dole secured the nomination owing partly to the influence of Reed. He encouraged members of the Christian Coalition to support the Dole campaign and eventually Dole began winning primaries. In South Carolina, Dole won over 20 percent more of the Christian Coalition vote than Buchanan. Reed and Dole both understood the role the Christian Coalition played in his nomination. The 1996 Republican National Convention revealed the alignment of the Christian Coalition to the Republican Party. Of the roughly 1000 delegates at the convention, over 500 retained membership in the Christian Coalition. With such impressive numbers, they managed to firmly insert their social agenda into the Republican Party platform and even change the rules concerning future delegate selection. Unfortunately, their membership clashed with Dole, who called for tolerance on the abortion issue. Though the Christian Coalition managed to

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<sup>29</sup> Berke, Richard. “Christian Group Offers Policy ‘Suggestions,’” *New York Times*, 18 May 1995, sec. B, p. 13.

<sup>30</sup> Watson, *The Christian Coalition*, 80-82.

gain control of the platform, Dole made it clear he had not read it and therefore could not be bound to it. Interestingly, while religious conservatives shaped much of the Convention to their liking, the party asked few to speak publicly from the podium.<sup>31</sup>

With such factions in the Republican Party, it is not surprising that Clinton won an easy victory over Dole in 1996. His second term recommitted the Christian Coalition and many religious conservatives to the Republican Party. Aside from controversial political decisions, Clinton personally pushed the Christian Coalition further into the Republican camp with his indiscretions and embarrassing scandals that rocked the White House and tarnished his reputation with both his opponents and supporters. By the end of the ordeal, it appeared that the worst fears of religious conservatives materialized during the Clinton's Administration. Far from being a moral and religious role model, the president found himself in the midst of highly public sexual scandal. His affair with Monica Lewinsky affair came to the public's attention through another woman, Paula Jones. She accused then-governor Clinton of sexual harassment and during the lawsuit Clinton's relationship with White House intern Lewinsky came to light.

Republicans and conservatives pounced on the scandal, including Reed and the Christian Coalition. Reed hoped the scandal would do more than mobilize the loyal base of the organization; he hoped the controversy "would turn swing voters off" to the Democrats. While Reed publicly regretted the scandal and any benefits from it, he understood that it helped his cause. Surprisingly, despite the public nature of the affair and astonishing amount of detail known to the public, Clinton's public image remained relatively high. His approval ratings on the economy and foreign policy proved the highest of his presidency, though less

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<sup>31</sup> Gigot, Paul A. "The Religious Right Shows Its Own Strains," *Wall Street Journal*, 1 March 1996, sec. A, p. 16; Watson, *The Christian Coalition*, 83.

than half of Americans agreed that he shared their values. Only one-fifth of the general public felt Congress should begin impeachment proceedings.<sup>32</sup>

Though special prosecutor Kenneth W. Starr failed to prove any wrong-doings in the Clintons' real-estate venture in Arkansas the Lewinsky affair refocused his investigation. Members of the U.S. House of Representatives voted two articles of impeachment. Religious conservatives hoped the Senate would remove Clinton, an act that required two thirds majority. After a trial lasting over a month, the Senate rejected both articles, infuriating religious conservatives.<sup>33</sup>

Failing to witness Clinton's impeachment, the Christian Coalition floundered somewhat. Reed had produced the first professionally viable Christian lobbying organization, but it failed to engrain itself into the Republican Party or completely disable the Democratic Party. Following the disappointing 1996 elections, Reed announced his resignation as executive director of the group and announced his plan to start a campaign consulting firm to elect Christian-oriented candidates nationwide. Robertson realized how much the Christian Coalition stood to lose with the departure of Reed; he attempted to keep him tied to the organization by offering positions that would allow him to consult for the organization without being concerned with day-to-day operations. Reed felt the non-profit status of the Christian Coalition prevented him from perusing a personal goal of working directly in electoral politics.<sup>34</sup>

Aside from personal goals, Reed's resignation most likely involved his support of Dole in the presidential campaign. By supporting the more moderate Dole over an outspoken

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<sup>32</sup> Berke, Richard. "Clinton Job Rating Remains High Despite Doubts On Moral Values," *New York Times*, 27 January 1998, sec. A, p. 1; Henneberger, Melinda. "Conservative Talk Radio Finding Cause for Revelry," *New York Times*, 29 January 1998, sec. A, p. 18.

<sup>33</sup> Balmer, Randall. *God in the White House*, 140.

<sup>34</sup> Seelye, Katherine Q. "Ralph Reed Resigns," *New York Times*, 24 April 1997, sec. A, p. 1.

and well known religious conservative, Reed alienated himself from a large portion of the Christian Coalition. Though Reed understood the value of extending the organization beyond its core constituency, few members felt the same urgency or desire. When Dole failed to win the White House, members felt vindicated in turning away from Reed. While Robertson remained the president of the organization, the organization struggled without the steady and moderating influence of Reed.<sup>35</sup>

Financial problems developed for the Christian Coalition. In 1996 the organization's revenue topped twenty-six million dollars, but fell dramatically in the following year. The next year the figure ran about 17 million and caused the layoff of twenty employees. In March of 1997, the Christian Coalition settled a decade long legal dispute with the Internal Revenue Service (IRS) over whether the Christian Broadcasting Network violated federal tax laws. The IRS believed the Christian Coalition mispent funds from Robertson's failed 1988 campaign. The organization agreed to pay a large fine and retroactively forfeited its tax exempt status for the two years surrounding its founding.<sup>36</sup>

Another serious scandal developed around the Christian Coalition's relationship with the IRS. Since the Christian Coalition claimed 501(C) 4 tax-exempt status, they could not favor one party over another. To avoid repercussions from the IRS, the organization disbanded and re-organized under the already established Texas Christian Coalition and renamed itself the Christian Coalition of America. In conjunction, it set up a separate for-profit organization, the Christian Coalition International. Members of the Christian Coalition claimed the IRS acted out of political motivation because liberal lobbying groups, such as the

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<sup>35</sup> Brown, Ruth Marray. *For A Christian America: A History of the Religious Right*, (New York: Prometheus Books, 2002) 86.

<sup>36</sup> Bull, Chris. "Onward Christian Soldiers: Tax Troubles and Funding Woes add Fuel to the Antigay Campaign at Pat Robertson's Christian Coalition," *The Advocate*, 26 May 1998, Issue 760, pg 69.

National Organization of Women and the National Gay and Lesbian Task Force, did not face the same accusations.<sup>37</sup>

The financial and electoral scandals did not end with the IRS. A Federal Election Commission (FEC) lawsuit charged that the organization violated its tax-exempt status by giving over a million dollars in support of Republican candidates without similarly supporting Democratic candidates. Organizations that claim 501(C) 4 tax-exempt status can lobby in support of issues and distribute information on candidates, but cannot openly support a single political party. The FEC investigation had taken four years, though commissioners split along party lines as to how alleged illegal contributions should be perused. After much debate, the FEC proceeded with a lawsuit against the Christian Coalition for a lesser offense. They pressed forward with allegations that the Christian Coalition violated election laws that prohibit corporations from working to elect candidates. The suit alleged that the organization produced and distributed voter guides and acted in consultation with the Bush campaign in 1994. While this proved a lesser charge than the FEC could have charged, it still provoked anger from opponents of the Christian Coalition.<sup>38</sup>

Based on complaints from the Democratic National Committee, the FEC formally filed a civil lawsuit in July of 1996, alleging the Christian Coalition illegally aided various Republican candidates in the 1990, 1992, and 1994 elections. The FEC further claimed the organization acted in cooperation with the leaders of these campaigns. While a serious blow, the FEC did not push forward with the second and more serious allegation that the Christian Coalition's primary purpose proved partisan. These charges hung over the Christian Coalition during the 1996 presidential campaign and opposition organizations attacked.

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<sup>37</sup> Brown, *For a Christian America*, 187.

<sup>38</sup> "Nonpartisan or not so nonpartisan?" *U.S. News and World Report*, 12 August 1996, volume 121, Issue 6, pg 8; Brown, *For A Christian America*, 186-187.

Americans United for Separation of Church and State promoted the notion that churches distributing Christian Coalition voter guides risked losing their own tax-exempt status. Despite threats, many churches agreed to give out the voter guides, though accurate numbers are impossible to produce.<sup>39</sup>

Opponents of the Christian Coalition and Robertson took every opportunity to attack the organization on this issue. A pro-gay and lesbian magazine, *The Advocate*, accused Robertson of increasing verbal attacks on homosexuals as a ploy to raise funds after the IRS scandal. Robert Boston, the spokesman for Americans United for Separation of Church and State, felt that the Christian Coalition returned to its core issues and abandoned issues like religious persecution overseas in order to amass monetary donations.<sup>40</sup>

Further setbacks in the last years of the Clinton Administration weakened the Christian Coalition greatly. Membership numbers and financial contributions fell rapidly after 1997, and the official Christian Coalition magazine ceased publication. In 1997 and 1998 the Christian Coalition ranked seventh in *Fortune* magazine's annual list of the most powerful lobbying organizations; the organization ranked thirty-fifth by 1999. Despite these failures and still affected by the loss of Reed, Robertson announced an ambitious plan for the 2000 presidential and congressional elections. He challenged members to raise \$21 million, distribute fifty million voter guides, and elect a Congress that would support their agenda.<sup>41</sup>

Much like the Moral Majority, those who predicted the end of the religious conservative movement because of the challenges faced by the Christian Coalition greatly underestimated the strength of the movement. Under the Bush and Clinton administrations,

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<sup>39</sup> Watson, *The Christian Coalition*, 59.

<sup>40</sup> Bull, Chris. "Onward Christian Soldiers: Tax Troubles and Funding Woes add Fuel to the Antigay Campaign at Pat Robertson's Christian Coalition," *The Advocate*, 26 May 1998, Issue 760, pg 69.

<sup>41</sup> Brown, *For A Christian America*, 188.

the Christian Coalition had grown into a powerful and professional lobbying organization and while loosing many of his objectives, Reed introduced an array of technologies and new channels of communication into the Christian lobbying interests. Throughout the 1990s the Christian Coalition clashed with the public media, moderate Republicans, Democrats, and federal regulators, but managed to survive the ordeals. The candidacy of Republican Governor George W. Bush harkened back to the days of Reagan, as Bush in 2000 re-energized the base of religious conservatives. Bush re-instated many of the restrictions lifted by Clinton and found support among religious conservatives.

## **Chapter Five: Institutionalization of the Social Agenda**

Under the George H.W. Bush and Bill Clinton Administrations, the agenda of religious conservatives advanced, though slowly. While Ronald Reagan and Bush, Sr. pushed some of their social agenda into federal policies, Clinton reversed some of the advancements in his two terms. His embarrassing affair with Monica Lewinsky strengthened moral outrage against him, though federal prosecutors failed to remove him from office. After months of media saturation, Americans wanted to move beyond the scandal so that by the end of his term Americans began looking for a candidate with strong credentials as a moral leader. With the shadow of Clinton's behavior hanging over the 2000 elections, it was no surprise that social conservatism became a central element of the campaign.

Many political candidates sought to gain credibility as moral conservatives. Republican presidential candidate George W. Bush often invoked moral imperatives and sought voters in religious conservative organizations. Every presidential candidate since Jimmy Carter has openly courted these votes, but few moved beyond courting votes for more than the social agenda. Bush represented, however, the culmination of the infusion of the religious right into the Republican Party. As Governor of Texas, Bush adopted "compassionate conservatism," his own brand of a religious and conservative social agenda. When campaigning, he proclaimed not only his status as a "born again Christian," but also his personal, life changing relationship with Jesus Christ. Once in office, Bush pushed forward socially conservative policies that he believed reflected a Christian ideology. As president, Bush sought to convert his religious convictions into federal political policy. He did not succeed in pandering to both religious conservatives and secular voters as successfully as Reagan, nor did he connect to voters in the charismatic manner of Clinton, but he followed his personal convictions whether they coincided with religious conservatives.

George W. Bush well understood the stresses that fall upon a president. As the eldest son of George H.W. Bush, he remembered vividly his father's tenure in the White House and his re-election defeat by Clinton. While his father never developed a warm relationship with the Christian Coalition

or with religious conservative organizations, Bush struck an easy report with them, but while the religious conservatives liked Bush, they were not ready to support his presidential bid at the time of his announcement. His well publicized past of alcoholism created a barrier between him and the support of religious conservatives, which he worked to rectify.

George W. Bush had attended Phillips Academy at Andover and Yale University. After graduating from Yale and briefly returning to Texas, Bush attended Harvard Business School. During his days at Yale and Harvard Universities, Bush, by his own admission, drank too much. Many of his cohorts remembered him as a borderline alcoholic and his drinking continued well into his forties. He returned to Texas after graduating from Harvard and entered business. Four years after returning to Houston, police arrested Bush for driving under the influence of alcohol. He lost his driving privileges temporarily and received a fine, but the incident failed to gather much attention from the media at the time. The story surfaced repeatedly after his father became the vice-presidential nominee in 1980 and intensified after his father became president<sup>1</sup>

Retreating into business, the younger Bush avoided politics for over a decade. In 1989, he and several others purchased the Texas Rangers baseball team. Bush's political connections made his acquisition of the baseball club proceed smoothly and he easily gained approval by the American League owners. At the time of purchase, Bush's father had just entered the White House as president and Bush began considering a political career for himself. Putting himself in the public spotlight with the Texas Rangers eased the way for Bush to become Texas governor. Pundits began watching Bush more carefully after the purchase of the baseball team, expecting him to run for governor in the 1990 campaign.<sup>2</sup>

Bush eventually did fulfill their expectations. In 1993 he announced his intention to run for governor. He made the announcement in Houston, Texas, and received national coverage from the

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<sup>1</sup> Sammon, Bill. *The Evangelical President: George Bush's Struggle to Spread a Moral Democracy Throughout the World*. (Washington, D.C.: Regnery Publishing, 2007) 19; Kessler, Ronald. *A Matter of Character: Inside the White House of George W. Bush*, (New York: Sentinel, 2004) 35.

<sup>2</sup> "A Bush in Baseball?" *New York Times*, 22 January 1989, sec. S, p. 10.

beginning of his campaign. His parents campaigned for him often, but refrained from weighing in on difficult political issues. He faced no serious competition for the Republican nomination and defeated the incumbent Governor Ann Richards.<sup>3</sup>

As governor, Bush got his first introduction to politics and difficult moral decisions. Of the most controversial, the execution of Karla Tucker provoked ire from religious conservatives and liberals alike. Tucker, convicted of a pickax murder and sent to death row, began an international campaign to convince Governor Bush to commute her sentence. Tucker, in part, relied on her new found status as a born again Christian and model prisoner to convince Bush to pardon her. He refused to pardon her and angered Christian conservatives along with opponents of the death penalty.

After three years as the governor of Texas, Bush set his political aspirations on the White House. With Clinton's scandal still fresh in the mind of voters, contenders for the 2000 presidential elections needed to present themselves as moral and trustworthy, so Bush and his campaign team understood the need to underscore his differences with the Clinton administration. Following Clinton's assertion that special prosecutor Ken Starr caused his problems, Bush ran a re-election ad as Texas governor. In the television commercial, Bush said he believed in accountability and responsibility. "For too long we've encouraged a culture that says, 'if it feels good, do it, and blame somebody else if you've got a problem.'" Though Bush's strategist claimed he planned the ad before Clinton's accusations, there is no doubt whom the ad attacked. Bush knew he could easily win re-election as governor, so these ads were understood to be part of a pre-presidential campaign.<sup>4</sup>

As early as 1998 Bush's name surfaced as a possible Republican contender for the 2000 election. In his gubernatorial re-election campaign, Bush adopted the term "compassionate conservatism" when discussing social issues. By committing himself to improving the state of public schools, Bush attempted to demonstrate that a "tax-cutting Republican can be compassionate" and responsive to the needs of women and minorities. Education became the central issue in the Texas

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<sup>3</sup> "Bush's Oldest Son to Enter Contest for Texas Governor," *New York Times*, 6 November 1993, sec. A, p. 8; "South," *New York Times*, 9 November 1994, sec. B, p. 6.

<sup>4</sup> Pooley, Eric. "Is This What We Expect?" *Time*. 31 August 1998.

election and Bush connected with voters. He ended the campaign with 69 percent of the total vote; one of three Democrats voted for him and half the Hispanics did as well. Even though Bush seemed poised to bound onto the national stage, he still did not have the full support of religious conservatives.

Bush informally announced his candidacy for presidency in June 1999 and he indirectly spoke to religious conservatives. Though he refrained from outright declarations of faith in his announcement, his wording resonated with evangelical overtones. He spoke about “rallying these armies of compassion,” in reference to faith based groups, adopting Robertson’s metaphor of religious conservatives as God’s army. He promised as president to lift the regulations restricting the actions of faith based groups into the areas of after-school care, maternity homes, drug treatment centers, and prison ministries. Without explicitly naming religious conservative groups, he indicated his support for their agendas. He also expounded on the notion of compassionate conservatism and how he planned to implement it as social policy: “It is conservative to reform welfare by insisting on work. It is compassionate to take the side of charities and churches that confront the suffering which remains. It is conservative to confront illegitimacy. It is compassionate to offer practical help to women and children in crisis.” Compassionate conservatism essentially meant removing federal involvement from these social issues and replacing it with private, mostly religious based, organizations.<sup>5</sup>

A turning point for religious conservatives came in 1999, when two different events helped switch the support of the religious right to Bush. First, Senator John Ashcroft dropped out of the Republican nomination race. As a devout Pentecostal and a standard bearer for social conservatives, Ashcroft had been the favorite of the Christian Coalition and other religious conservative organizations. With Ashcroft gone, their support began to shift towards Bush. In a Republican debate, Bush cemented their support to his campaign when asked to name his favorite philosopher, Bush

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<sup>5</sup> Bush, George W. Remarks Announcing Candidacy for the Republican Presidential Nomination. 12 June 1999, available from [http:// www.presidency.ucsb.edu](http://www.presidency.ucsb.edu).

responded with “Jesus Christ, because he changed my heart.” In that one answer, Bush put himself in a position to receive the support of religious conservatives and undercut the campaigns of his rivals.<sup>6</sup>

With Ashcroft out of the race, Bush and John McCain remained the two frontrunners for the Republican nomination. Religious conservatives feared McCain as being too liberal and the Christian Coalition threatened to pull their votes away from the Republicans if McCain received the nomination. For the most part, Robertson realized this to be an empty threat. Though his organization might boycott the primaries, in the general election they would have to support the Republican candidate, whoever that might be. While Bush needed these primary votes, he could not risk courting the Christian Coalition too openly. Though the Christian Coalition diminished in political power during Clinton’s presidency, it still held influence over a sizable number of Republican voters.<sup>7</sup>

Other Republican candidates quickly joined Bush in discussing religion on the campaign trail. John McCain ran a television ad in which a fellow prisoner of war described the Christmas sermon McCain gave while captured in North Vietnam. Candidates Gary L. Bauer and Senator Orrin G. Hatch also cited Jesus Christ as their favorite philosophers. This followed the release of several national surveys that declared a growing number of Americans viewed religion as meaningful in their personal lives. Obviously, these candidates attempted to connect with voters on a personal and religious level.<sup>8</sup>

Republican candidates did not have exclusive rights to discuss religion with the American public. Vice President and Democratic candidate Al Gore knew he needed to distance himself from the Clintons and the ongoing scandal. He claimed to be a born-again Christian with daily religious activities. In an interview with the *Washington Post*, Gore declared that he often asked himself “W.W.J.D.- for a saying that’s popular now in my faith, ‘What would Jesus Do?’” Recognizing the

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<sup>6</sup> Wells, John W. and David B. Cohen. “Keeping the Charge: George W. Bush, the Christian Right, and the New Vital Center of American Politics.” In ED. Rozell, Mark J. and Gleaves Whitney. *Religion and the Bush Presidency*. (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2007) 129-135.

<sup>7</sup> Reaves, Jessica. “Bush Needs Help- But Maybe Not From Here,” *Time*. 14 February 2000.

<sup>8</sup> Berke, Richard L. “Religion Takes Center Stage in Presidential Race.” *New York Times*, 15 December 1999, sec. A, p. 20.

success of Clinton in connecting with voters through religion and understanding the potential success of Bush connecting with religious conservatives, Gore attempted to reach out to the religious community.<sup>9</sup>

Bush received the Republican nomination and ran a close race with Gore in the general election. Election Day did not produce a clear winner, and amid accusations of miscounted, uncounted, and missing votes, the election results became delayed. Eventually the Supreme Court decided the outcome of the campaign, awarding Bush the White House. In his acceptance speech he returned to the theme of compassionate conservatism, and then asked Americans to “pray for this great nation. . . I have faith that with God’s help we as a nation will move forward together as one nation, indivisible.”<sup>10</sup>

His inaugural address continued along the same themes. He called for an united and compassionate America “guided by a power larger than ourselves who creates us equal in His image.” He also called on churches, pastors, and synagogues to lead Americans in humanitarian causes and pledge that these institutions “will have an honored place in our plans and in our laws.” Unlike Reagan, Bush Sr., and Clinton, the new president promised to listen and respond to religious organizations when crafting policy. He encouraged Americans to be good Samaritans, not to pass to the other side when they see “that wounded traveler on the road to Jericho.” Bush clearly intended for his presidency to reflect his personal values and planned to be guided by Christian principles. For religious conservatives, Bush appeared as a welcome change.

As president, Bush advanced the social agenda of religious conservatives. He set the tone for his Administration early in his tenure. On his first day in the Oval Office, he called for a day of prayer and also cut federal funding for abortions. Obviously Bush planned for his faith to play a critical role in his presidency and intended to shape policy to his religious convictions. He wasted no time in setting the new tone. Bush realized many of the goals of the Christian Coalition and openly embraced

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<sup>9</sup> Dowd, Maureen. “Playing the Jesus Card.” *New York Times*, 15 December 1999, sec. A, p. 23.

<sup>10</sup> Bush, George W. “Address in Austin Accepting Election as the 43rd President of the United States.” 13 December 2000, available from <http://www.presidency.ucsb.edu>.

their support. He understood that much of his support came from conservatives, and that religious conservatives proved a large part of this demographic. He made former Christian Coalition executive director Ralph Reed a senior member of his 2004 campaign team. More than Reagan, Bush gave religious conservatives a voice.<sup>11</sup>

In the first six months of his presidency, Bush addressed several “right to life” issues and attempted to indirectly limit abortions. Because of the increasing use of invitro fertilization (IVF), thousands of human embryos remained frozen in laboratories and completely unused. Many couples donated their unused embryos to the medical community, usually for the purpose of stem cell research. Scientists using stem cells, which can only be found in embryos, believed their research might lead to new therapies for Parkinson’s disease, juvenile diabetes, Alzheimer’s, spinal cord injuries, and heart disease. Unfortunately, extracting the needed cells destroys the embryos and many religious conservatives equated this with the destruction of human life.

In his first address to the nation, Bush discussed the stem cell debate and emphasized the humanity of these embryos. The issue he directly confronted revolved around using federal funds to support stem cell research. He asked the American public, “Are these frozen embryos human life, and therefore, something precious to be protected?” He believed they represented the first stage of human life, so destroying them constituted murder or abortion. Given this rationale, Bush could not allow federal funds to support this continuing research. He permitted embryos collected before his announcement to still be used for research, though the vast majority of these proved unviable. While not attacking *Roe v. Wade* directly, Bush clearly signaled his intentions to limit its impact. Given opportunity, the president planned to contradict the Supreme Court’s ruling in this landmark case whenever possible.<sup>12</sup>

The Christian Coalition supported Bush’s limited use of stem cell research. The official statement of the organization cited the commitment to the “right to life” philosophy as justification.

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<sup>11</sup> Nagourney, Adam. “Bush Looking to His Right to Shore Up ‘04 Support,” *New York Times*, 30 June 2003, sec. A, p. 14.

<sup>12</sup> Singer, Peter. *The President of Good and Evil: The Ethics of George W. Bush*. (New York: Dutton, 2004) 34-36.

Harming embryos amounted, in their eyes, to abortion, and banning the procedure remained a cornerstone issue in their social agenda. Instead of supporting human embryonic stem cell research, the Christian Coalition wanted increased funding for adult stem cell research. Minutes after the president's announcement, a few well known religious conservatives appeared on CNN and praised Bush for his monumental decision. They believed he kept his promise that no federal money would be spent destroying human embryos in the name of research.<sup>13</sup>

Major religious conservative organizations applauded Bush's decision, but by no means did a consensus develop from religious denominations. The Unitarian-Universalist Association, a liberal organization, provided a pro-research criticism, as did Catholics Bishops. The Episcopal Church, the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America, the United Methodists, and the Church of Latter-day Saints all refused to issue public statements in either support or opposition of Bush's decision. The disagreement among religious groups demonstrates the controversial nature of Bush's decision.<sup>14</sup>

Bush further attacked *Roe v. Wade* with his ban on late term abortions. Unlike Reagan, Bush supported the religious conservatives with rhetoric and actual policy. Bush and his Administration moved away from the legality of abortion and framed the issue around "late term" abortions. Late term abortions often involve partial birth before the procedure is completed and many amount to a brutal, ghastly removal. Clinton twice vetoed a ban of late-term or partial-birth abortions because the legislation gave no consideration to the health of the mother. Bush signed the ban which meant any doctor who performed the procedure risked up to two years of prison time.<sup>15</sup>

Opposing this type of abortion signaled to religious conservatives that Bush favored their stance against *Roe v Wade*, but allowed him not to alienate more moderate voters. Graphic descriptions of the late term abortion procedure and the state of the fetus at time of removal caused over two-thirds of Americans to favor the ban, so Bush did not fear a large political fallout from

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<sup>13</sup> Goldstien, Laurie. "Abortion Foes Split Over Plan on Stem Cells," *New York Times*, 12 August 2001, sec. A, p. 1; Mansfield, Stephen. *The Faith of George W. Bush*, (New York: Penguin Group, Inc, 2003) 96.

<sup>14</sup> Niebuhr, Gustav. "Religions Ponder the Stem Cell Issue," *New York Times*, 27 August 2001, sec. A, p. 12.

<sup>15</sup> Sammon, *The Evangelical President*, 175.

signing the legislation. Statistically, few abortions occur this late in pregnancy, so Bush's ban changed very little but the importance of this ban proved symbolic. While he could not outright outlaw abortions, his Administration attempted to limit the procedure and produce a political culture in which policy followed religious rhetoric.

Appointments in high government posts also pointed to Bush's sincerity in pursuing a Christian conservative agenda. One the first and most controversial was his appointment of John Ashcroft to the position of Attorney General. Liberals feared Ashcroft's positions on abortion, the death penalty, and federal judgeships. They accused him of racial profiling and questioned his commitment to enforcing civil rights laws. His positions on social issues, while causing anxiety in liberals, drew support from religious conservatives. Robertson delivered a recorded telephone message to half a million Americans in support of Ashcroft. Robertson intended to raise grassroots support for Ashcroft and carry his confirmation through the Senate. Other religious conservative organizations followed Robertson's example and began internet campaigns and news conferences in support of the nomination.<sup>16</sup>

Soon after taking office, Bush turned one of the themes of his inaugural address into political policy. Bush had promised churches and synagogues his attention when crafting policies and he intended to keep this promise through the introduction of federal faith-based charities. A key part of his compassionate conservatism, Bush wanted legislation that allowed religious organizations to receive government funding. He argued that past government treatment of these organizations proved unfair and that they provided assets to their communities. These organizations provided food, job assistance, after-hours daycare, and other charities.<sup>17</sup>

Opposition sprang up around the possible violations of separation of church and state. Bush attempted to assure critics that he did not plan to subsidize religious activities, only charitable activities. He argued that some social needs were better fulfilled by religious than secular

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<sup>16</sup> Mitchell, Alison and Robin Toner. "Lott and Conservatives Rallying Behind Ashcroft for Justice Post," *New York Times*, 11 January 2001, sec. A, p. 1.

<sup>17</sup> Singer, *The President of Good and Evil*, 93.

organizations. His proposed legislation included a provision that religious activities offered to those seeking assistance from these groups must be voluntary. Critics raised another concern in that giving federal funds to religious agencies might lead to discrimination in hiring practices; religious organization must only hire those of their own religion. Congressional opposition slowed the legislation, but did not stop it.<sup>18</sup>

Eventually Bush signed an executive order allowing federal funding for religious based charities. He invited a diverse group to the signing ceremony, including Catholic, Jewish, Protestant, and Muslim organizations. Bush presented the order in broad terms, claiming, “As long as there are secular alternatives, faith based charities should be able to compete for funding on an equal basis and in a manner that does not cause them to sacrifice their mission.” He commended those present for their efforts in transforming American neighborhoods into real communities and praised the common goal of creating a better nation. Bush actually signed two executive orders: one clearing away “bureaucratic barriers” and the other creating the White House Office of Faith-Based and Community Initiatives. He directed his new office to report directly to him.<sup>19</sup>

Bush furthered the agenda of religious conservatives again with his rhetoric supporting the protection of traditional marriage. Canada and the state of Vermont both recognized same-sex unions as a civil union, which gave homosexuals the same legal status as married heterosexual couples. Religious conservatives, long fearing the influence of homosexuals on America, avidly opposed these unions. Bush refused to comment on the unions as a candidate, but as president stated that “marriage is between a man and a woman.” Until elected, Bush referred to the issues as one of states’ rights. After his ascension into the White House, the Bush Administration began considering federal legislation to define marriage as between one man and one woman.<sup>20</sup>

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<sup>18</sup> “Mr. Bush’s Faith Based Agenda,” *New York Times*, 8 July 2001, sec. WK, p. 10.

<sup>19</sup> Bush, George W. “Remarks on Signing Executive Orders with Respect to Faith-Based and Community Initiatives,” 29 January 2001, available from <http://www.presidency.ucsb.edu>.

<sup>20</sup> Singer, *The President of Good and Evil*, 72.

Some Republican leaders endorsed a constitutional ban against same-sex marriages and called for the legal definition of marriage to be between one man and one woman. While Bush at first stopped short of openly supporting the ban, he signaled that he might support expanding the 1996 Defense of Marriage Act. The act allowed states to ignore same-sex unions performed outside of their boundaries and did not require legal recognition of the unions.<sup>21</sup> Interestingly, Bush showed more unity with religious conservatives on this issue than with members of his own party.

As the issue gained momentum, Bush and his Administration felt the need to speak out in support of their position. While Bush said gays should be treated in a respectful and welcoming manner, he remained firmly opposed to legal marriages of homosexuals. Bush stated his opposition in religious rhetoric and called for Christian tolerance, but not legal acceptance. "I am mindful that we're all sinners, and I caution those who may try to take the speck out of their neighbor's eye when they've got a log in their own." He paraphrased Christ's message of tolerance in the Sermon on the Mount in an effort to soften his next statements. He told reporters that he found no reason to compromise on issues such as marriage. "I believe marriage is between a man and a woman, and I believe we ought to codify that one way or the other."<sup>22</sup>

The issue climaxed with the 2003 ruling by the Massachusetts Supreme Judicial Court authorizing gay marriage in the state. The ruling left it to the state legislature to determine exactly how to grant gay couples the rights and benefits of marriage, whether through civil unions or absolute recognition of marriage itself. The ruling by the Massachusetts court set off a firestorm of controversy across the nation. In response to the decision, lawmakers in other states began drafting constitutional amendments to their state constitutions that would outlaw gay marriage. Prominent Republicans and a

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<sup>21</sup> "Bush Vows No Compromise in Opposing Same-Sex Marriage," *The Washington Post*, 3 August 2003, sec. A, p. 3.

<sup>22</sup> Lewis, Neil A. "Bush Backs Bid to Block Gays from Marrying," *New York Times*, 3 July 2003, sec. A, p. 1.

few Democrats in Massachusetts spoke out in favor a constitutional amendment that would override the court's decision.<sup>23</sup>

The proximity of this issue to the 2004 elections helped Bush remain in step with religious conservatives and the Christian Coalition. With elections only one year away, the organization began producing and distributing literature that supported Bush's stance on same-sex marriages. Although Democratic candidate John Kerry openly opposed legal recognition of same-sex marriage, he supported legal civil unions as an alternative to marriage. In response to these statements, a Christian Coalition pamphlet claimed he supported both abortion and same-sex marriage.<sup>24</sup>

While Bush's Administration represents the fulfillment of many of the Christian Coalition's social priorities, ironically the organization declined in power during his tenure. This may seem a contradiction, but upon closer inspection, it is quite understandable. The Christian Coalition continues to exist today, but in a greatly reduced form and with much less influence on national level politicians. Two major incidents drastically reduced the political power of the Christian Coalition, which previously survived financial tangles with the Internal Revenue Service, the loss of Ralph Reed, and attacks from liberal organizations. The Christian Coalition crumpled from the inside as much of its social agenda fell into place.

In the chaos and confusion that followed the infamous 9-11 attacks, many Americans turned to religious organizations for guidance, support, and comfort. Unfortunately for the Christian Coalition, Jerry Falwell ruined any chance of connecting with people over the tragedy. Robertson continued to host the *700 Club* and invited Falwell to speak two days after the attacks. Falwell stated on the air that blame for the attacks did not rest just with terrorists, but with those that tried to secularize America. Speaking about God's coming judgments in relation to the terrorist attacks, Falwell said:

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<sup>23</sup> Belluck, Pam. "Gays' Victory Leaves Massachusetts Lawmakers Hesitant," *New York Times*, 20 November 2003, sec. A, p. 29.

<sup>24</sup> McFadden, Robert. "On the Final Sunday, Sermons Pulse with the Spiritual Power of Suggestion," *New York Times*, 1 November 2004, sec. A, p. 22.

“The abortionists have got to bear some blame in this because God will not be mocked. When we destroy forty million little innocent babies, we make God mad. I really believe that the pagans, and the abortionists, and the feminists, and the gays and the lesbians who are actively trying to make that an alternative lifestyle, the ACLU, People for the American Way, all of them who have tried to secularize America, I point the finger in their face and say, ‘You helped this happen.’”

He continued to say that the ACLU, along with abortion providers, gay rights proponents, and federal courts that banned school prayer weakened the United States spiritually to the point that God permitted the attacks to occur. Robertson nodded during Falwell’s rant and offered words of agreement, which angered many of those watching.<sup>25</sup>

The following day Robertson posted a statement on the Christian Broadcasting Network website asserting that “pornography, rampant secularism, the occult, abortion, the absence of prayer in schools and insults to God” had lifted the protection of God from America. His further criticism of America’s “self-indulgence, pursuit of financial gain and focus on wealth” came just as news of his gold-mining venture in Liberia broke. In 1998 Robertson formed Freedom Gold, an offshore company registered in the Cayman Islands, but based out of Virginia Beach. He signed an agreement with Charles Taylor for gold-mining in Liberia, a country torn apart by civil war and corruption. Taylor began his career as a ruthless warlord and seized power in Liberia. Robertson assured his *700 Club* that planes sent to Liberia contained relief supplies for victims of violence in the region, but failed to mention that the planes also contained materials needed for mining. An investigation by the state of Virginia concluded that Robertson used ministry donations for Freedom Gold. With his controversial statements, this latest news fanned the anger of Americans against him.<sup>26</sup>

The backlash for the Christian Coalition came almost immediately; the media quickly reprinted Falwell’s words and Robertson’s agreement. Robertson’s endorsement of his judgment

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<sup>25</sup> Goldstien, Laurie. “Finding Fault: Falwell’s Finger-Pointing Inappropriate, Bush Says,” *New York Times*. 15 September 2001, sec. A, p. 15; Niebuhr, Gustav. “U.S. ‘Secular’ Groups Set Tone for Terror Attacks, Falwell Says,” *New York Times*, 14 September 2001, sec. A, p. 18.

<sup>26</sup> King, Colbert I. “Pat Robertson’s Gold,” *The Washington Post*, 22 September 2001, sec. A, p. 29.

however brought quick and angry public scrutiny. Bush distanced himself from such bigoted views. Through a White House spokesperson, Bush indicated that he believed only the terrorists were responsible for the attacks. Falwell and Robertson immediately issued clarifications, but not apologies. Falwell said his statements had been taken out of context, which he described as a long theological discussion. Robertson also issued a press release, saying that “God almighty is lifting his protection from” America, owing to Americans turning away from the correct moral path. These press releases hardly quieted the anger and resentment over the original statements.<sup>27</sup>

The second major blow for the Christian Coalition came with Robertson’s retirement. Saying that he wanted to focus his energies on his television show and his ministries, Robertson vowed to leave the grassroots organization and legislative lobbying to others. Robertson stated that he planned to “continue to comment sometimes on political affairs” in his daily television show, but that his main focus needed to shift to the Christian Broadcasting Network. The announcement came in December of 2001, only a few months after his media bashing over Falwell’s comments. Robertson named his executive vice president, Roberta Combs, as his successor.<sup>28</sup>

Robertson claimed his organization shaped American politics. “Without us, I do not believe that George Bush would be sitting in the White House or that Republicans would be in control of the U.S. House.” His organization and Christian conservatives definitely appeared active at the grassroots level during the elections and influenced the policy platform of the Republican Party. Opponents of the Christian Coalition and even its members understood Robertson’s resignation stemmed from the fallout over Falwell’s comments. The executive director of Americans United for Separation of Church and State equated Robertson’s retirement to a captain abandoning a sinking ship.<sup>29</sup>

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<sup>27</sup> Goodstien, Laurie. “Finding Fault: Falwell’s Finger-Pointing Inappropriate, Bush Says,” *New York Times*, 15 September 2001, sec. A, p. 15

<sup>28</sup> Drummond, Ayres B. “Robertson Resigns from the Christian Coalition,” *New York Times*, 6 December 2001, sec. A, p. 20.

<sup>29</sup> Edsall, Thomas B. “Robertson Quits Political Port- Christian Coalition Leader to Refocus on Ministry,” *The Washington Post*, 6 December 2001, sec. A, p. 2.

Some conservative Christians regarded Robertson's resignation as good news for their agenda. They felt that Robertson's identification of God's will with the electoral success of the Republican Party limited the success of the Christian Coalition. While Robertson gained media attention for his organization, he also was a divisive figure. Reed worked to create an organization with a wide base of conservative Christian activists, a concept that Robertson never fully embraced.<sup>30</sup>

Robertson had built the Christian Coalition from the ground up. He supplied the motivation behind the grassroots organizations, and, with his television show, maintained regular communication with members. He became one of the best known evangelicals in the country. Combs came into the organization with little recognition and did not command Robertson's political power. Almost immediately, political commentators began predicting the end of the Christian conservative movement. Critics cited statistics showing that the organization lacked its once impressive funds, that it had declined in importance in mainstream politics, and that declining membership numbers were proof of the eminent demise of the Christian Coalition. These same predictions occurred after Falwell left the Moral Majority, and they proved correct. These dire predictions ignored the strides made by Christian conservatives and the continuing allegiance of the president to the agenda, if not the flagship organization.

Under Bush, many of Robertson's and the Christian Coalition's objectives became institutionalized by the federal government. The Christian Coalition built their organization on pro-family, anti-homosexual, and traditional values. Bush emphasized all these in his first term both with rhetoric and with policies. He fought in the anti-abortion struggle. He limited abortions, cut federal funding to abortion clinics, and extended protection to frozen embryos, all out of pro-life considerations and within the first six months of taking office. He put Ashcroft into the Justice Department based in part on his beliefs, and hired former Christian Coalition executive Ralph Reed to run his election campaign. Bush obviously felt some solidarity with the movement or he would not have pushed for these two individuals to be part of his team. In accordance with the Christian

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29 Dionne, E. J. "Pat and Politics," *The Washington Post*, 7 December 2001, sec. A, p. 41.

Coalition stance on homosexuality, Bush fought to define marriage as between one man and one woman. This definition protected the “sanctity” of marriage by denying that right to gays and lesbians. He also pushed forward federal funding for faith-based initiatives, which allowed religious organizations to continue charities with governmental backing.

In several ways Bush’s presidency underscored the values of the Christian Coalition. Ironically, just as their agenda became institutionalized they began declining in political power. The Christian Coalition did not fade into oblivion as some predicted or hoped; it exists in the political arena today, though it is much less influential. Bush’s personal beliefs often complimented those of the Christian Coalition, and religious conservatives were aware that he owed much of his political support to their organizations. He deviated from them only when necessary politically. For most of his first term, Bush remained committed to the values of the Christian Coalition and religious conservatives remained loyal to him.

**Conclusion:  
The Rise of the Christian Conservative Voting Bloc**

American politics and religion have never been separated, despite intentions by the Founders. The colonies began with religious establishments and influenced the newly created United States. Throughout the twentieth century, religious conservative activists attempted to shape social policy through civic organizations. The emergence of the Moral Majority and the Christian Coalition must be understood as a continuation of the ongoing entanglement of Christianity and politics. The political influence of conservative Christians in the last three decades is most apparent when considering presidential politics.

Jimmy Carter opened the door for modern evangelical Christians to enter the White House and influence public policy. Though Carter proved liberal once he assumed the presidency, he campaigned as a “born again Christian” and as an alternative to the Nixon administration. Carter openly discussed his status as a devout follower of Jesus Christ, with sincerity and credibility. He brought religion to the forefront of presidential campaigns in ways that no other modern president had attempted. Carter legitimized the discussion of religion within presidential politics, and he mobilized a previously marginalized voter base. Before the 1976 election, personal and intimate discussions of religion rarely reached the public; Carter’s victory revolutionized the way politicians approached religion.

During Carter’s years in the White House, Jerry Falwell and his associates founded the Moral Majority and began to see success at the state level. This furthered the push of religion into presidential politics. By organizing at the grassroots level and supporting conservative politicians, the Moral Majority mobilized a base of Christian voters in opposition to Carter and liberal Democrats. The unfortunate performance of Carter as president and his liberal social policies further pushed religious conservatives into the

Republican Party. Falwell's organization understood the success of Carter in reaching out to religious conservatives, but they attempted to reach out to them in a systematic and professional way. The Moral Majority marks the first nationwide and professional attempt at Christian conservative lobbying in the modern political realm.

The Moral Majority helped to develop a series of cornerstone issues, designed to return Americans to traditional values, for Christian conservatives. The Christian Coalition later adopted the same policy stances and both organizations wanted their social agenda institutionalized through policies and legislation. They both developed a strong stance against abortion and wanted to overturn *Roe V. Wade* or greatly limit the number of legal abortions. This remained the most consistent issue for both organizations. They also sought to restrict the rights of homosexuals, in particular, marriage rights. They wanted to restrict the definition of marriage as between one man and one woman. For them, this was a matter of protecting traditional values, not a matter of restricting the rights of others. Carter's failure in the presidency and the increasing mobilization of Christian conservatives created an atmosphere in which the Moral Majority and the Christian Coalition could greatly influence politicians.

Recognizing a political opportunity, Ronald Reagan courted religious conservatives dissatisfied with Carter in the 1980 presidential elections. Reagan understood exactly how to speak to Christian conservatives, incorporating their rhetoric into both his campaign speeches and into the Republican Party platform. Under Reagan, the Republican Party and the Moral Majority developed a mutually beneficial relationship. The Moral Majority supported conservative Republican candidates in exchange for them supporting a conservative social agenda. Though Reagan worked to cement the relationship of the Christian group to the

Republican Party, he did not go as far as Falwell would have liked. Reagan always stopped short of instituting unpopular social conservative policies in fear of alienating moderate voters. In rhetoric, Reagan sought out the Moral Majority and conservative Christian voters, but rarely followed through with legislation. Shortly before Reagan's tenure ended, Falwell left the Moral Majority and it subsequently disbanded. Reagan's interaction with the Christian conservatives and his charisma helped to cement religious rhetoric and pandering into presidential politics. The failure of Carter might have signaled the end of evangelical presidential discussions, had Reagan not perfected the balance between rhetoric and inaction.

The conservative Christian movement reorganized and found a new leader in Pat Robertson and his Christian Coalition. During George H.W. Bush's presidency, the Christian Coalition became the first professional conservative Christian lobbying organization. Under the direction of Ralph Reed, the Christian Coalition used technology and professional lobbying techniques to pass their social agenda. Though Bush did not prove to be the most responsive candidate, the Christian Coalition supported him over a Democratic alternative. Under Reagan and Bush, the social agenda of the Moral Majority and the Christian Coalition influenced public policies to a limited degree. The Christian Coalition became the first professional and effective Christian lobbying organization. Under the leadership of Reed and with the funding of Robertson, the Christian Coalition combined technology with lobbying techniques. While retaining a grassroots base, Robertson and Reed created a legitimate organization with real political influence.

Bill Clinton's Administration immediately set about undoing many of the regulations supported by the Moral Majority and the Christian Coalition. Though Clinton campaigned as a "born-again" Christian, he found little support among conservative Christians. In the first

years of his presidency, Clinton removed the limitations on abortion set by Bush and Reagan and began supporting equal rights for homosexuals. The Christian Coalition supported a Republican Congress to balance the president.

The presidency of George W. Bush offers an interesting intersection between the conservative Christians and political actors. While the Christian Coalition suffered a series of setbacks, stemming from Robertson's statements made on the *700 Club*, their agenda found a receptive audience in Bush. He pushed many of their key issues, with little regard to the political consequences. Though by 2004 the Christian Coalition lost most of its political influence, its cornerstone platform had become institutionalized.

The Moral Majority and the Christian Coalition are the modern incarnates of a continual entanglement of religion and politics. Though Americans have mixed religion and politics since the founding of the colonies, the Moral Majority and the Christian Coalition were unique in their nationwide memberships and public influence. Their use of technology combined with grassroots activism spread their message to millions across the nation. No other conservative Christian groups managed to maintain such a base membership for as long. Both also capitalized on their celebrity-preacher leaders. Falwell built the Moral Majority from a small base to millions and used his recognition to garner media attention. His outrageous statements only increased media attention. His organization thrived on controversial positions and statements, until he faced unbearable debts from the Internal Revenue Service. Pat Robertson used his failed presidential campaign and name recognition to build the Christian Coalition. He maintained a daily conservative Christian talk show, which increased Robertson's base and allowed for constant communication with them. The actions of Robertson following the 9-11 attacks dramatically decreased the political power of

the Christian Coalition, however, and forced his retirement. Though the Moral Majority failed in a decade and the Christian Coalition remains a shell of its former self, both organizations reminded politicians of the power Christian conservative still holds in the electorate.

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## VITA

Misty Nicole Wilson was born December 5, 1982 in Fort Worth, Texas. She is the daughter of Richard and Cheryl Wilson. A 2001 graduate of Southwest High School in Fort Worth, Texas, she received a Bachelor of Arts degree with a double major in Political Science and History from the University of Texas at Arlington, in 2006. In August of 2007, she enrolled in graduate study at Texas Christian University pursuing a Master of Arts in History.

## ABSTRACT

### THE RISE OF THE CHRISTIAN VOTING BLOC

by Misty Nicole Wilson, MA, 2009  
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Kenneth Stevens, Professor of History  
Steve Woodworth, Professor of History

Following the election of Jimmy Carter as president, the profession of born again evangelical faith became a requirement for presidential candidates. Ronald Reagan pushed conservative Christian voters, especially in the form of the Jerry Falwell's Moral Majority, into the Republican Party. When the Moral Majority declined as the flagship conservative Christian organization, the Pat Robertson's Christian Coalition took up the cause. Under the presidency of George W. Bush, much of the social agenda of the conservative Christian movement became governmental policy, even as the Christian Coalition declined in political power. Bush's presidency represents the institutionalization of the conservative Christian movement despite its failures in leadership and public scandals.