

## Doing God's Work? Christian Right Influence in American Presidential Politics Since Nixon

David Cowan

**Key words:** Christian Right, America, public theology, God strategy, values debate

**Abstract:** This article examines the recent literature critical of the purported Christian Right influence upon the administration of George W. Bush from 2000 to 2008. Critics condemn the way the movement organized and manipulated to secure political influence, even to the point of implying a Christian conspiracy to make America “holy”, with Bush on a “mission from God”. The article looks at the specific claims against Bush and puts this in historical context, concluding Bush was connecting to a broader conservative concern over values in America today. In this respect, he was no different than any other president in his approach because presidential candidates better at reaching the Christian base have met with more electoral success.

Recent literature on the Christian Right influence in America is largely critical of George W. Bush, the 43<sup>rd</sup> President of the United States, and the degree of influence the Christian Right was able to exert from 2000 to 2008. Critics condemn the way the movement organized and manipulated to get influence, often to the point of implying a Christian conspiracy to make America “holy”, with Bush on a “mission from God” or theocratic<sup>1</sup>. Washington Post columnist Dana Milbank encapsulated the critical view of George W. Bush:

For the first time since religious conservatives became a modern political movement, the president of the United States has become the movement's *de facto* leader - a status even Ronald Reagan, though admired by religious conservatives, never earned.<sup>2</sup>

After the Reagan presidency, there were reports of the “rise and fall of the Christian Right”, and for critics this also happily appears to be a narrative for Bush.

---

<sup>1</sup> Kevin Philips, *American Theocracy: The Peril and Politics of Radical Religion, Oil and Borrowed Money in the 21<sup>st</sup> Century* (New York: Penguin, 2007).

<sup>2</sup> <http://www.commondreams.org/headlines01/1224-02.htm>. Common Dreams website (last accessed 9 November 2009).

*WHOSE CHRISTIAN RIGHT?*

We can start by defining what we mean by “The Christian Right”. Lee Marsden<sup>3</sup> offers a definition which arguably would command assent of the majority of critics:

...conservative evangelicals and right-wing Roman Catholics within the Republican Party whose religious persuasion determines their attitudes to political questions. The movement is evangelical in both religious and political contexts, commissioned to evangelize and convert believers of other faiths or none to a narrow version of Christianity in which a conversion experience, being born again, is the minimum requirement for entry.

Marsden is right in the first sentence quoted, but the second part has to be contested. He hits on the “born-again” aspect, especially crucial to the critique of Bush, but appears to exclude Roman Catholics at this point, who are not of the “born-again” variety. It would be fairer to say that evangelicals and Roman Catholics share faith as being primary in their life, what Marsden puts under the umbrella of “conversion experience”, and a commitment to putting this faith into practice, which Marsden calls “evangelism”. Whether this is a narrow version of Christianity, as Marsden undoubtedly believes it to be, is a matter of theological dispute. Certainly though, evangelicals and Roman Catholics have joined forces in recent decades to advance orthodox and traditional Christianity.

Green, Rozell & Wilcox<sup>4</sup>, a team that has edited studies on American presidential elections since 1995, counsel caution on drawing conclusions about the Christian Right:

The Christian Right activist corps is difficult to study. Because political activists make up only small portion of the mass public – and Christian Right activists are only a small portion of the activist corps – surveys of the citizenry do not generate samples large enough for analysis. Thus, special studies of activists are required.

While there is much of interest to study on the Christian Right, it begs the question as to why there is such a heavy critical focus on this particular group

---

<sup>3</sup> Lee Marsden, *For God's Sake: The Christian Right & US Foreign Policy* (London: Zed Books, 2008), 3-5.

<sup>4</sup> David Domke and Kevin Coe, *The God Strategy: How Religion became a political weapon in America* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2008), 23.

of activists, which appear to be not unlike other activist groups, as Green, Rozell & Wilcox<sup>5</sup> explain:

Scholars have found considerable diversity among them, such as differences among self-identified fundamentalists, Pentecostals, Charismatics, and “plain vanilla” evangelicals...In demographic terms, Christian Right activists have looked much like other activists: white, older, well-educated, affluent, and with high status occupations.

The concerns centre on what critics see as the narrowness and certainty of the Christian Right position and belief. In “With God on their Side”<sup>6</sup>, Esther Kaplan argues that the Christian Right provided Bush with a grass roots organization that got him elected, they were his base; a criticism which seems to ignore the fact that all presidents have a base. In “For God’s Sake”<sup>7</sup>, Lee Marsden’s opening salvo is

In less than three decades right-wing Christians have become major players in domestic politics to such an extent that no politician, Republican or Democrat, can afford to overlook their influence.

Again, arguably there is a need for perspective. There are many influencers in any government, and depending on their political orientation and agenda some will get a better listen than others.

Objections that the Christian Right is divisive include criticism from former insiders like John Danforth, a Republican senator and Episcopalian priest, and former speechwriters David Frum and David Kuo. Having also been deputy director of the Faith-Based Initiative, Kuo believes the administration he served in was theocratic and anti-democratic. To illustrate the religious atmosphere surrounding the Bush administration, Frum, Kuo and Kaplan reference the role and frequency of Bible Study groups<sup>8</sup> in the Bush White House, a “crime” compounded by the large number of evangelicals in his administration. Kaplan<sup>9</sup> saw this religiosity as deeply divisive, suggesting that “The gulf that separates fundamentalists and religious social moderates is

---

<sup>5</sup> Domke and Coe, *The God Strategy*, 23-24.

<sup>6</sup> Esther Kaplan, *With God on their Side* (New York: The New Press, 2004).

<sup>7</sup> Marsden, *For God’s Sake*, 1.

<sup>8</sup> I personally attended the main White House Christian Fellowship on two occasions, one of which was addressed by Mike Gerson, the President’s speechwriter, and I have to say these were not charismatic or revival meetings. They involved serious questions, and staffers who were struggling to balance the expectations of public office with the demands of private faith. This is not to deny influence; it is simply to suggest that reports are exaggerated.

<sup>9</sup> Kaplan, *With God on their Side*, 74.

now so extreme that it often eclipses differences between religions”. By which she means the coalitions of evangelicals, Roman Catholics and Jews formed around shared concerns like prolife issues and Israel.

The charge is expanded to include the claim that this influence was particularly pernicious in the Bush administration, underpinned by a Republican Congress, as Garry Wills<sup>10</sup> puts it:

Bush promised his Evangelical followers faith-based social services, which he called “compassionate conservatism.” He went beyond that to give them a faith-based war, faith-based law enforcement, faith-based education, faith-based medicine, and faith-based science. He could deliver on his promises because the agencies handling all these problems were stocked, in large degree, with born-again Christians of his own variety.

Kaplan argues that President Bush governed from the “far right” and the Christian Right had gained more political power than at any other point in its history. Her contention is that the administration embraced right-wing fundamentalism and gave access and positions to Christian activists in key areas of interest, such as on scientific advisory councils where they could push their anti-prolife measures and other agenda items. She then contends that this religious caucus silenced secular critics. In Kaplan’s<sup>11</sup> view, this is mirrored by the White House operation:

This politically driven White House employs a carefully managed set of themes and messages to shape the president’s national image, while delivering to favored constituencies cherished agenda items, unvarnished, and, when possible, below the public radar, avoiding the rough and tumble of public debate and legislative compromise through the use of private meetings, executive orders, and discretionary funds.

Apart from the obvious fact that all administrations are politically-driven, the same accusations could apply to all presidents. That said, Kaplan’s view was also, by and large, shared by what conservatives tag as “the liberal media” in America, which spurred the complaint made by Ari Fleischer<sup>12</sup>, the White House Press Spokesman in the first Bush administration:

The press often writes about the political influence of the “religious right” or “evangelical Christians”. How often do they write about the

---

<sup>10</sup> Garry Wills, *Head and Heart: A History of Christianity in America* (New York: Penguin, 2007), 498.

<sup>11</sup> Kaplan, *With God on their Side*, 77.

<sup>12</sup> Ari Fleischer, *Taking Heat* (New York: William Morrow, 2005), 107.

“religious left”? Seldom. There are liberal religious leaders who play important roles and have great political influence in the Democratic Party.

The Fleischer point is worth remembering when navigating through this issue. We can ponder whether there is in fact anything particularly different in the approach of the Christian Right from any other interest group or the Christian left in the American political process, and why it provokes such harsh criticism. We would also do well to note the comment from Danforth<sup>13</sup>:

The problem is not that Christians are conservative or liberal, but that some are so confident that their position is God's position that they become dismissive and intolerant towards others and divisive forces in our national life. The tendency toward theocracy is not monopolized by the Christian Right, and it is no advance to supplant the self-confident religious agenda of the Right with a religious agenda of the Left.

There are a number of other specific lines of criticism directed at the Christian Right in the Bush era, but these criticisms can be challenged. The first and certainly one of the most common criticisms, is that it primarily comprises white thirty-something middle-class males. However, this caricature differs little from the Christian Left; indeed much of American politics can be viewed this way. Keeping though to the Christian Left, research conducted by Charles F. Hall in 1997 suggests that in fact there is a marked similarity in age, social class and employment between the evangelicals of the Christian Left and Christian Right, and that what separates these politically diverse blocs is a difference in theological assumptions. Hall finds that both blocs are:

...equally intense in their political activism, with the Left slight more willing to participate in risky political behavior...[I]t is their religious beliefs, not their structural location, that is the potential source of differences...how they read the Bible, the nature of salvation, the role of the church, and differences in their denominational background.<sup>14</sup>

A second line of criticism is that the Christian Right is more involved in fundamentalist and new churches than the mainstream denominations, but the situation is more complex, as demonstrated by BeliefNet's useful analysis of

---

<sup>13</sup> Senator John Danforth, *Faith and Politics* (New York: Penguin, 2006), 10.

<sup>14</sup> Charles F. Hall, “The Christian Left: Who Are They and How Are They Different from the Christian Right?” in *Review of Religious Research* 39.1 (1997), 41.

“the Twelve Tribes of American Politics”<sup>15</sup>. This occurred because traditional or mainstream churches have become more liberal, causing conservative groups to break away or form new churches. Yet this also needs to be put into the perspective of the black churches which are predominantly Democratic in their support, but share certain theological similarities. We can also put this in the context of what is happening in the political sphere in other religious quarters. As Danforth<sup>16</sup> warns:

At the same hour when Republicans are speaking in predominantly white, evangelical Protestant churches, Democrats are making similar appeals in African American churches, and receiving similar kind words from the pulpit. The parties are different, and the issues have nothing in common, but the message is the same: To the extent possible without jeopardizing its tax-exempt status, this church supports this candidate. The candidate is using the church for political purposes, and the church is conforming itself to this world. It is just what Paul is telling Christians not to do...

A third criticism suggests the Christian Right is more concerned over sexual ethics than social justice, and that it responds aggressively to victimless issues such as homosexuality while ignoring real victims, such as the poor and AIDS sufferers. This criticism comes as much from Christian liberal critics as secular writers. A leading light of the Christian Left, Jim Wallis, often described as a “progressive evangelical” and founder of the Sojourners movement is a major evangelical critic of the Christian Right. He argues in “The Great Awakening” that evangelical Christians are deserting the Christian Right because their message has narrowed to two issues: abortion and gay marriage. He focuses instead on a broader set of social issues, including poverty, which he calls the new slavery. Again, this can be challenged, because younger conservative evangelicals are increasingly involved in broader social issues. Bush himself has been extremely active on issues relating to AIDS and Africa, with perhaps the most glowing endorsement coming from poverty campaigner Bob Geldof in *Time*<sup>17</sup> magazine.

A fourth criticism is the way in which the Christian Right has organized in a divisive way to get influence and become major power brokers themselves. According to Hanna Rosin of *The Washington Post*, by 2005 evangelicals had reached a position where:

---

<sup>15</sup> <http://www.beliefnet.com/News/Politics/2004/10/The-Twelve-Tribes-Of-American-Politics.aspx>. Belief Net (last accessed 9 November 2009).

<sup>16</sup> Danforth, *Faith and Politics*, 214.

<sup>17</sup> <http://www.time.com/time/world/article/0,8599,1717934,00.html>. Time website (last accessed 9 November 2009).

It's what Ralph Reed dreamed of, and now it's finally here. Christians in politics are ready to trade in their guerrilla fatigues for business suits and a day job. This year evangelicals in public office have finally become so numerous that they've blended in to the permanent Washington backdrop, a new establishment that has absorbed the local habits and mores....In Washington, the evangelicals are the new Episcopalians - established, connected, respectable and quick to blush.<sup>18</sup>

This last criticism suggests that in some *de facto* sense the Christian Right should not have had the level of influence it had in the Bush White House. Yet, in office Bush gave little more in return than Reagan. Yes, he signed legislation outlawing late-term ("partial birth") abortions, and the Unborn Victims of Violence Act. Yes, he also issued an executive order reinstating the "global gag rule" proscribing American funding for international groups that provide abortion services or abortion counseling. Yes, Bush's appointments to the federal courts have largely pleased social conservatives. However, to the disappointment of the movement, he failed to appoint stridently prolife justices such as Janice Rogers Brown or Priscilla Owen when the positions came up in the Supreme Court. Instead, the president picked justices John Roberts and Samuel Alito, both of whom said in confirmation hearings that they would be deferential to legal precedents, thus implying that they might not support overturning *Roe v. Wade*, reputedly the "litmus test". Hence, while he placed limits around abortion he fell short of confronting the issue head on.

#### *THE PUBLIC THEOLOGY OF GEORGE W. BUSH*

Two stories about Bush before he became president offer an intriguing key to understanding a divisive president and a divisive movement. First, David Aikman [2004] tells the story of the first televised debate in Iowa of Republican politicians seeking the party's presidential nomination who were asked what political philosopher they most identify with and why. Bush answered:

"Christ," said Bush without hesitation, "because he changed my heart." There was a moment of almost shocked silence. Bachman, realizing that there needed to be a follow-up, turned back to Bush. "I think the viewers would like to know more on how he's changed your heart," he added. "Well, if you don't know," Bush rejoined, "it's going to be hard to explain." His face took on an expression close to a smirk when he said this, irritating some viewers who didn't like the remark in the first

---

<sup>18</sup> Hanna Rosin, *Right With God* (6 March 2005). Available at <http://www.washingtonpost.com/wp-dyn/articles/A10508-2005Mar5.html>

place....In his follow-up, Bush elaborated, "When you turn your heart and your life over to Christ, when you accept Christ as the Savior, it changes your heart. It changes your life. And that's what happened to me."

After the stunned silence, Aikman explains that the audience erupted in a cascade of applause, despite warnings prior to the show not to display partisan applause during the debate. The event generated considerable national debate about the appropriateness of the remarks, and whether he blundered, showed political ill-manners or been politically manipulative and cynical.

Second is a story told by Eugene F. Rivers, Special assistant to the Presiding Bishop for Government and Policy of the Church of God and Christ, at a symposium hosted by the Council on Foreign Relations:

On December 10th, I think it was 2000... President-elect Bush held a meeting in Austin, Texas... There were (*sic*) a group of... religious leader types that showed up at this meeting in Austin, Texas. And Dilulio had just come on as the head of the faith-based office and we were flown out to Texas. We sit down and.... the president does a little brief talk then he says, "Well, what are some of the concerns?" And so a hand shot up and said, "President Bush, what are you going to do in Africa? Don't want to start any trouble you know, and... make this a contentious meeting but where are we on Africa?" And it was just fascinating. He said, "No, no. It's okay. That's okay. Not a problem. I'm going to make Africa a priority." And people's jaws dropped....And President Bush kept his word.<sup>19</sup>

In these two stories, we meet both the image of the smirking agent of God which the critics attacked, and the man of faith who cared about social issues, which his supporters defended. They foreshadowed a presidency which was seen as the most religiously charged in the history of American politics. From the moment Bush stepped on to the national stage it was common knowledge how he had become a Christian, and it may be dismissed as the usual evangelical model of bad boy made good or sins of the past being wiped out by a new confession, but it also gave Bush a sense that faith changes lives. In a sermon delivered as Governor for Texas in 1999, reproduced in David Aikman's book on Bush,<sup>20</sup> Bush told of his change of heart:

---

<sup>19</sup>[http://www.cfr.org/publication/14940/symposium\\_on\\_evangelicals\\_and\\_us\\_foreign\\_policy\\_session\\_ii\\_rush\\_transcript\\_federal\\_news\\_service.html](http://www.cfr.org/publication/14940/symposium_on_evangelicals_and_us_foreign_policy_session_ii_rush_transcript_federal_news_service.html). Council on Foreign Relations website (last accessed 9 November 2009).

<sup>20</sup> David Aikman, *A Man of Faith: The Spiritual Journey of George W. Bush* (Nashville: W Publishing Group, 2004), 209.



Faith can change lives. I know firsthand because faith changed mine. I grew up in church, but I didn't always walk the walk. There came a point in my life when I felt empty. And so, by chance, or maybe it wasn't chance, I got to spend a weekend with the great Billy Graham, and as a result of our conversations and his inspiration, I searched my heart and recommitted my life to Jesus Christ.

In his Inauguration Speech<sup>21</sup> January 20<sup>th</sup> 2001, Bush told the nation he pledged to bring unity to a nation divided, caused in part by the divisive counting of votes in Florida which gave him office, and thought this could happen because "we are guided by a power larger than ourselves who creates us equal in His image." Bush also believed "America, at its best, is compassionate." These two elements are core to the faith of Bush. The missing element in his speech, certainly prominent in speeches post-9/11, is the role of prayer in the life of America and the individual. Bush spends little time in his speeches explaining what faith makes him think or act, instead he talks about how it makes him feel and what it means to "people of faith".

In his view every religion is welcomed in America and all are practiced. What unites people of faith is the importance of having faith, the image of God within us and the primacy of prayer. On the National Prayer May 1<sup>st</sup> 2003, Bush explained "Prayer can lead to a grateful heart, turning our minds to all the gifts of life and to the great works of God."<sup>22</sup>

In contrast, we find that evil is a living reality for Bush, "on September 11, we saw clearly that evil exists in this world, and that it does not value life."<sup>23</sup> Notably, this was part of a proclamation made on 18<sup>th</sup> January 2002, National Sanctity of Human Life day. We can also recall his "axis of evil" speech made ten days later on 29<sup>th</sup> January.<sup>24</sup> He saw his role as president as a primary ethical duty in protecting life, both in terms of defending the country from further attack and also on sexual issues.

Christianity is always in the background of his speeches, which often quote scripture directly or draw on scripture obliquely. In his speeches he frequently reveals how he wanted to connect with all "people of faith", not just

<sup>21</sup> Both Inauguration texts in Schlesinger Arthur M. & Israel Fred L. (Eds), *My Fellow Citizens: The Inaugural Addresses of the Presidents of the United States 1789-2005*, Checkmark Books New York, 2007, 408-409

<sup>22</sup> <http://georgewbush-whitehouse.archives.gov/news/releases/2003/05/20030501-4.html> White House website (last accessed 9 November 2009).

<sup>23</sup> <http://georgewbush-whitehouse.archives.gov/news/releases/2002/01/20020118-10.html>

<sup>24</sup> <http://georgewbush-whitehouse.archives.gov/news/releases/2002/01/20020129-11.html>

Christians. He sought to make a connection with all who have come to see the world how he has, through the lens of faith. In his second Inauguration speech, Bush<sup>25</sup> stated that the:

...edifice of character is built in families, supported by communities with standards, and sustained in our national life by the truths of Sinai, the Sermon on the Mount, the words of the Koran, and the various faiths of our people.

Green, Rozell & Wilcox<sup>26</sup> see this as a means by which Bush reached out to more than just the Christian Right, to some of the more traditional Christian groups and moderate instincts:

The key to Bush's success was his ability to mobilize conservative evangelicals while also appeal to churchgoing Catholics and many moderate voters...Bush demonstrated an ability to speak to different audiences at the same time. Rather than discuss abortion directly, he used phrases such as "culture of life" to appeal to social conservatives without appearing threatening to moderates at the same time. This strategy has fit a pattern of his presidential rhetoric; he frequently has used language that connects deeply with co-religionists while flying under the radar of non-religious Americans.

Bush interpreted events through the lens of faith, including the most difficult moment of his presidency, namely 9/11, which he interpreted simultaneously in multi-faith and Christian terms at the 2002 National Prayer Breakfast:

None of us would ever wish on anyone what happened on that day. Yet, as with each life, sorrows we would not choose can bring wisdom and strength gained in no other way. This insight is central to many faiths, and certainly to faith that finds hope and comfort in a cross.<sup>27</sup>

Bush sought to touch the core faith of Americans to connect to an idea of the enlightenment truth of America. As Bush<sup>28</sup> stated in his second Inauguration:

Americans move forward in every generation by reaffirming all that is good and true that came before – ideals of justice and conduct that are the same yesterday, today, and forever.

---

<sup>25</sup> Schlesinger and Israel, *My Fellow Citizens*, 417.

<sup>26</sup> Green and Wilcox, *The Values Campaign*, 19.

<sup>27</sup> Government text at [http://bulk.resource.org/gpo.gov/papers/2002/2002\\_vol1\\_188.pdf](http://bulk.resource.org/gpo.gov/papers/2002/2002_vol1_188.pdf)

<sup>28</sup> Schlesinger and Israel, *My Fellow Citizens*, 417.

Speeches made by Bush reveal a more developed public theology than he is perhaps given credit for. His public theology is more suggestive of a president who stands in the tradition of a nondenominational American God that unites its people, rather than the dogmatic Christian God he is accused of foisting upon the people. In the 1999 sermon<sup>29</sup>, we can find an outline of the public theology of Bush:

I believe in the separation of church and state. The church is *not* the state. And the state is surely *not* the church. Anytime the church enters into the realm of politics, the church runs the risk of losing its mission – teaching the Word of God. Politics is a world of give and take, a world of polls, too many polls of the human vision. The Church is built on the absolute principles of the Word of God, not the word of man. But I want to make this clear: we will welcome, we *should* welcome the presence of people of faith into the political arena.

It is essential in his view that people of faith should be political actors and do better things, and there is much that can be done by people of faith in conjunction with government to improve the nation. He believed that government can offer money, but it is people who give hope and purpose. He had seen this working in Texas, with what he called “little armies of compassion”.

#### *FROM NIXON TO BUSH*

To put his public theology in context, it is important to examine the arc of religious thought within Us administrations stretching from Nixon to Bush. The 20<sup>th</sup> Century saw the Christian Right in America pass through three eras. First, the Christian Right of the 1920s focused primarily on evolution and was anti-communist. This period marked an end to many Christian conservatives engaging with politics after the Scopes Trial, which although the case was won by fundamentalists created a theological split between fundamentalists and evangelicals for decades after. The second era was the 1950s, a primarily anti-communist period of revivals and the emergence of Billy Graham as the “nation’s pastor”. The third period emerged in the 1970s, and represents the primary concern here.

These are not “rise and fall” stories, but a connected narrative of an evolution in three phases represented by three Republican presidents: Nixon (1969-74), Reagan (1981-89) and Bush II (2001-09). Ford (1974-1977) and Bush I (1989-93) played more the role of “night watchmen” in this respect. In

---

<sup>29</sup> Aikman, *A Man of Faith*, 207.

between the Republican presidents we had Democrats Jimmy Carter (1977-81) and Bill Clinton (1993-2001). Carter was the first president to declare himself “born again” and attracted evangelical voters, but they became disillusioned with him for reasons explicated below. Though there was never a strong connection Clinton attracted some of the evangelical vote, but what goodwill there was soon dissipated in the midst of the Monica Lewinsky scandal. Were these blips in the progression or do they confirm a bias towards the side of the Republicans amongst the Christian Right?

To understand more fully the modern Christian Right, we need to take a step back and understand the religious context within which the Christian Right believes it is operating, and what advocates believe they are fighting for. Part of the rise of the Christian Right is the reaction in America to the counter-cultural and social changes of the 1960s, a concern shared with its much vaunted political ally Neo-Conservatism, former radical leftists “mugged by reality” as neocon Irwin Setzer commented. Jeane Kirkpatrick<sup>30</sup>, the former UN ambassador appointed by Reagan:

The extremes of this counter-culture had disappeared by 1976, but the residue was more lasting. Its effects on what has been called liberal politics were profound. The counter-culture was much broader than the anti-war movement with which it was associated and, I believe, constituted a sweeping rejection of American attitudes, values, and goals. The counter-culture subjected virtually all aspects of American life and culture to criticism and repudiation.

Though Ronald Reagan is the contemporary icon par excellence of conservatives in America, the first president to raise concerns about this cultural shift was Richard Nixon. Oddly little is made of Nixon’s faith; perhaps because his presidency is just too overshadowed by Watergate and he has been merely regarded as morally toxic as a result. A Quaker by birth, like Reagan he was not a regular churchgoer. Also like Reagan, he was able to tap into conservative cultural sensibilities and the moral concerns of the Christian Right. At his Inauguration, Nixon had two family Bibles and swore his oath with the page purposely opened at Isaiah 4:2, highlighting his taking over the presidency in the midst of the Vietnam War. The passage states:

He will judge between the nations and will settle disputes for many peoples. They will beat their swords into plowshares and their spears into pruning hooks. Nation will not take up sword against nation, nor will they train for war anymore.

---

<sup>30</sup> Irwin Seltzer, *The Neocon Reader* (New York: Grove Press, 2004), 235.

Like other presidents, Nixon consulted Billy Graham<sup>31</sup>, who was the first preacher he invited to the White House and to preach at his mother's funeral. Nixon also started daily worship services in the East Wing of the White House. As the conservative Christian movement freed itself of the apolitical shackles put on after the Scopes Trial, Nixon emerged as the first presidential public theologian of the movement. He did this by raising the alarm for the Republicans and Christian conservatives alike by referring to a "culture war" resulting from the changes wrought by the 1960s. One of the defining events of the Sixties was the Vietnam War and the resulting protest movement, which had already captured the imagination of the Christian Left. Nixon was concerned about the culture and protest which appeared to conservatives as less than patriotic. Nixon inherited the war from Lyndon B. Johnson, and when it came to explaining his decision to continue with the war Nixon called on the support of what he called the "silent majority" of America in his address to the nation on the war in Vietnam on November 3, 1969:

I know it may not be fashionable to speak of patriotism or national destiny these days. But I feel it is appropriate to do so on this occasion. Two hundred years ago this Nation was weak and poor. But even then, America was the hope of millions in the world. Today we have become the strongest and richest nation in the world. And the wheel of destiny has turned so that any hope the world has for the survival of peace and freedom will be determined by whether the American people have the moral stamina and the courage to meet the challenge of free world leadership. Let historians not record that when America was the most powerful nation in the world we passed on the other side of the road and allowed the last hopes for peace and freedom of millions of people to be suffocated by the forces of totalitarianism. And so tonight—to you, the great silent majority of my fellow Americans—I ask for your support.<sup>32</sup>

In this speech one can note the image of America as the "Good Samaritan", and echoes of the ideal of America as the chosen nation, which is a fundamental building block of American public theology (which we shall return to later).

It was also Nixon who introduced the now familiar signature of "God Bless America" to sign off major speeches to the nation. On the evening of April 30, 1973, Nixon addressed the nation live from the Oval Office about the growing Watergate scandal. Towards the end of his speech, Nixon said he

---

<sup>31</sup> Bruce Mazlish, "Toward a Psychohistorical Inquiry: The "Real" Richard Nixon", *Journal of Interdisciplinary History* 1.1 (1970), 61.

<sup>32</sup> Speech text available at

[http://nixon.archives.gov/forkids/speechesforkids/silentmajority/silentmajority\\_transcript.pdf](http://nixon.archives.gov/forkids/speechesforkids/silentmajority/silentmajority_transcript.pdf)

wanted his remaining 1,361 days in office "to be the best days in America's history." "Tonight," he concluded, "I ask for your prayers to help me in everything that I do throughout the days of my presidency. God bless America and God bless each and every one of you." In his speeches, he ranged over themes of America's destiny, hope, freedom and the leadership role in the world. All of which are key themes in conservative thinking in America generally, and this is no different for conservative Christians. Nixon drew on these themes, and used religion as part of the strategy to reach out to the conservative base. While Southern evangelicals switched from Democrat to Republican inspired by Nixon, they soon became disappointed by the decision in *Roe v Wade*, in which the opinion was assigned to a Nixon appointee. Although Watergate and the profanity in the released Oval Office tapes, which included anti-Semitic words used by Billy Graham, sullied Nixon in the eyes of evangelicals, Nixon was arguably the beginning of a new conservative public theology in America.

Hence, the legacy of the Sixties for the conservative movement was a clash of values, and a generational shift in attitudes. Conservatives in 1970s America believed they were witnessing their values being washed away by the 1960s cultural change, and it was out of this cultural milieu that the New Christian Right emerged in the 1970s, focusing advocacy on being: pro-family, opposing sex education, the provision of contraception in schools and the extending of rights to gay relationships; pro-life, opposed to abortion, embryonic stem cell research and euthanasia; and, defensive, seeing evangelicals, Christianity and traditional values as under attack, responding with a need for Christian schooling and placing the Bible and faith firmly in the public square.

However, Watergate and a seemingly lacklustre successor in Gerald Ford, did not advance the agenda and opened the way for Southern Baptist Democrat Jimmy Carter to capture the Christian vote, including conservatives. When he won the presidency in 1976, Newsweek proclaimed it "the year of the evangelicals", due to a significant positive shift among evangelicals in his voting numbers. Carter was the first incumbent president to speak to the National Association of Evangelicals, and greeted as one of their own by evangelicals. However, Carter was soon perceived as a weak leader, due in large part to his "malaise" speech in July 1979, worsened by his failure in the Iran hostage debacle, and his suggestion that America was facing a crisis of confidence, flying in the face of belief in a chosen nation. He was also not too forthcoming on abortion, and seemed overly supportive of gay rights. His allowing the Inland Revenue Service to target schools like the fundamentalist Bob Jones University led to protests from evangelicals, sensing that Carter had too strict a view on the separation of church and state. While the Christian Right thought initially they might have their own man in the White House, they concluded he was not.

During the Carter administration two new organizations were developing, the Christian Voice and the Moral Majority, both founded officially in 1979. The Christian Voice was a coalition of interests working on anti-gay and anti-pornography campaigns in California, drawing support from mainly fundamentalist churches in the West and South of the country. The Moral Majority was founded by Jerry Falwell in response to others on the Christian Right, who sought access to the training, organizational structure and direct mail lists used by Falwell in his work. During the years of the civil rights movement Falwell had argued that Christians should not be engaged in political action, but by the 1970s he had reversed his position, while publicly repenting of the racism of his segregationist past. Like many conservative Christians, he was galvanized into action by the Supreme Court 1973 ruling in *Roe v Wade* legalizing abortion. If Nixon's "silent Majority" was the groundswell of conservative public opinion, then *Roe v Wade* was the catalyst for a sea change in conservative activism; and remains to this day something of a litmus test of membership of the Christian Right. The role of new media challenging established media outlets was an important component in this development, attracting more attention to the movement, and with it greater criticism. Radio and television broadcasting gave the Christian Right lobby groups a voice outside of traditional and secular media, and new computer technology automated the direct mail appeal to target populations with more refined messages than possible hitherto. The result was greater grassroots effectiveness for the movement, making it a more visible bloc on the political landscape. The way was open for a new candidate to offer a new vision to evangelicals and conservatives, and that is precisely what happened.

The new vision was offered by Ronald Reagan with a landslide win, underpinned by the Republicans taking control of the US Senate. This new conservatism left critics scratching their heads to explain this sea change in American politics. Jerry Falwell claimed his Moral Majority and others had mobilized support and achieved this by getting some four million evangelicals to vote for Reagan and the Republicans. In 1984 Falwell told supporters that Reagan's reelection would deliver two new prolife Supreme Court justices and that the Christian Right was moving toward one day overturning the *Roe v. Wade* decision that had legalized abortion. However, the perception may have been greater than the reality. Certainly the Christian Right had made inroads successfully into the Republican Party, but we have to be careful as to what this actually means. Thanks to the confusion of the left and the claims of Falwell and others, the Reagan years of the 1980s are often portrayed as an era of Christian Right dominance in American politics. While they had a high profile at the 1984 Republican Convention, that was probably the peak of their existence and influence. By the end of Reagan's second term the movement saw few policy achievements in return for their support. They could get the vote out, but they could not steer through policy decisions. While Christian

Right leaders and activists liked the president's rhetoric, they were disappointed by the lack of success in furthering their social and religious agenda.

Falwell retired from the Moral Majority, and the group went into financial decline, ultimately to become the Liberty Federation, though he remained prominent Christian Right figure. Likewise the Christian Voice folded due to lack of financial support. What remained was the airwaves. Tele-evangelists like Jimmy Swaggart, the Bakkers and Pat Robertson ploughed their theological furrows and promoted their political solutions. Out of this came a renewal from Pentecostalist quarters, giving support to the presidential ambitions of Pat Robertson. Initially successful in fund-raising and gathering support, his election hopes faded as rapidly as they surfaced; one reason being that another candidate, George H.W. Bush, got the support from Falwell and others on the Christian Right. Robertson's chances were also wrecked by many Republicans doubting his judgment due to comments he made about the Soviets hiding missiles in Cuba, his accusations that Bush was smearing Swaggart, a libel lawsuit against him, and an IRS investigation into his campaign finances.

As George H.W. Bush took office, the Christian Coalition came to the fore. Launched by Robertson after his failed presidential bid, making himself and Democrat Jesse Jackson the first clergy pair to run for president, it was headed by Ralph Reed and marked a new level of activism. They shared the basic Christian Right agenda and gathered support from leaders like Falwell, but broadened it further still, beyond abortion into other social and economic issues, including crime, government and economic freedom. However, influence waned during the administration of George H.W. Bush, and by the Clinton years there was a clear sense that the Christian Right had little real influence. The Reagan "rise and fall" narrative seemed complete.

However, Bill Clinton was canny enough to use Christian language to appeal to the movement, and targeted the movement in his campaigns, either to get support or temper opposition. His most religious speech was delivered in his State of the Union address on January 24<sup>th</sup> 1995, following the Republican success in taking majority control of Congress in the midterm elections a few months earlier. In "The God Strategy", David Domke and Kevin Coe<sup>33</sup> analyzed this speech and highlighted that Clinton "invoked faith in 49 separate instances...The centerpiece was the "new covenant," an idea that he referenced 13 times that evening." The new covenant was an echo from his convention speech of July 16<sup>th</sup> 1992, a speech that had also used faith and nation as a touchstone to reach out to America. Domke and Coe<sup>34</sup> also note a speech after the convention given at a Presbyterian church in West Virginia which:

---

<sup>33</sup> Domke and Coe, *The God Strategy*, 44-45.

<sup>34</sup> *Ibid.*, 6.



Prompted the *Boston Globe* to declare, "After years of secular squeamishness, the Clinton-Gore ticket is bringing God and country back to the Democrats". It is no coincidence that the only successful Democrat presidential candidate since 1976 was one willing and able to present himself to the public in religious terms.

### CONCLUSION: LOADING THE BASES

In the Bush era, the Christian Right agenda became considerably more extensive than it had been under Nixon and Reagan, and represents a trend of greater engagement with the political arena beyond a few pet causes. The number and influence of Christian Right organizations and media is significant, and new power brokers like Richard Land and James Dobson rose to prominence. The Christian Right in the Bush era rallied round a far greater range of issues compared to earlier Christian Right agendas. However, it was also more closely connected to an overwhelming sense among Christians and conservatives generally that post-9/11 American values are constantly under attack, not just from international terrorists but also from within America in the form of "liberals" and progressive values. In the Bush years these issues and the underpinning concern were called in shorthand "the Values Debate", which also played to other conservative groups and Republicans who might not have identified themselves as part of the Christian Right.

Whatever the specific issues in play during an election, the ability to offer a public theology as part of the package is critical to success. Domke & Coe call this the 'God strategy', used equally on both sides of the aisle. If they are correct, then the "rise and fall" narrative has to be put into perspective by separating out the reaching out to the electorate in religious terms from the level of influence the Christian Right achieves in *any* given administration. Certainly no president can completely ignore the movement, they can only find their own strategy for harnessing it the best they can.

Domke and Coe examine the way political leaders have appealed to religion, and conclude that American politics today evidences a manipulative and partisan use of religion to an unprecedented extent. This analysis is aimed at Democrats as much as Republicans.

The term "God strategy" is a useful one to codify the approach taken by politicians, because elections and holding on to power are rooted in strategy, and religion is a part of that whole. The God strategy is used by all sides of the debate as a way of tapping into the religiosity of Americans while also manipulating the political process. Campaign strategists, on both sides of the aisle, are adept at targeting different blocs, be they Christian, gay, environmentalist, black or whatever. It is part of reaching out to the voters and tapping into what they care about, namely their faith and values. Once elected, the various lobby groups are left to fight for influence over policy; they do not

make policy. Yet, this can only be part of the answer, because the strategy needs a base to reach out to. In this case a base that shares a public theology which then touches the core of conservative Christians. Bush was no different and was no more “a religious nut” than any other American president. He successfully reached out to this core base, arguably more aggressively than most, using the code language of evangelicals, but this was only part of his overall electoral strategy and did not carry over to the same degree into the policy-making process. Presidential candidates better at reaching this base have been more successful in getting elected, and yes that means President Barack Obama as well.

*David Cowan (B.Th., M.Th., Oxford and M.Litt., St. Andrews) is currently completing doctoral research into the Religious Right and US foreign policy. Before entering academia, he had a twenty-year career in journalism, communications and public affairs. He is the author of Economic Parables (Paternoster, 2007).*