For God and Country: The Religious Right, the Reagan Administration, and the Cold War

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ABSTRACT

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For God and Country: The Religious Right, the Reagan Administration, and the Cold War

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In the late 1970s, a number of prominent evangelical ministers decided to become actively involved in American politics. Dubbed the New Christian Right by some, the Religious Right or the Christian Right by others, these figures immediately became very vocal about the need to restore morality to American society and to insure that the United States retained its position as a preeminent military power in the world. This dissertation examines the Religious Right’s activism in matters of American foreign policy from the late 1970s through the end of the Cold War. It illuminates the underlying theological and political beliefs that characterized the Religious Right’s politics, and explains how the Religious Right became politicized. It also demonstrates that foreign affairs played a more prominent role in the activism of the Religious Right than many historians have realized.

The heart of this dissertation is its portrait of the political marriage between the Reagan administration and the Religious Right. By examining this relationship in terms of national defense policy, one can see not only that the Reagan administration relied on the Religious Right to get its message out on sensitive issues like the nuclear freeze movement, but also that the Religious Right was eager to gain access to the seat of national power. In seeking to maintain access to the White House, however, agents of the
Religious Right sacrificed theirs ability to maintain independent judgments about matters of foreign policy. As this dissertation demonstrates, prominent evangelicals like Jerry Falwell became loyal foot soldiers for the Reagan administration as the 1980s wore on, but gained very little in return for their loyalty. Indeed the Religious Right’s credibility as political commentators suffered as a result of its engagement in debates about Central America, South Africa, and the Philippines. Public embarrassments in these areas, coupled with the televangelist scandals of the late 1980s, cost the Religious Right in terms of its public credibility.

This dissertation ultimately presents a fresh examination of evangelicals’ involvement in debates about foreign affairs in the late stages of the Cold War. It demonstrates that evangelicals at large were more ambivalent than adamant about national defense issues in the Reagan years. Along the way, this project also explains how theology shaped the Religious Right’s view of world affairs. By studying these matters more closely, this dissertation challenges students of modern American history to re-examine evangelicals as actors in American politics.
DEDICATION

For my beloved mother, who taught me how to read. The rest, as they say, is history.
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Writing a work of this size is a long and arduous process. From proposal to defense, I have benefited from the aid of many people who have kept me believing in myself and focused on the goal of finishing. Any completed dissertation is partly the work of a dedicated advisor. I am glad that I have enjoyed the aid of Chester Pach, an earnest, patient, and thoughtful advisor as well as a deft critic of student writing. From the very beginning of this project, he encouraged me to pursue its subject with a passionate, “You can do this.” I hope the pages that follow prove that he was right. It would be difficult to offer enough gratitude to Paul Milazzo, who encouraged my work throughout my tenure in graduate school. I would also like to thank Kevin Mattson and Steve Hays, who served on my dissertation committee, and Leo Ribuffo at George Washington University, who took time out of his schedule to discuss this dissertation with me during a visit to Washington, D.C. Thanks as well to Richard Cizik, who granted an interview. My graduate student colleagues in the Ohio University History Department often proved to be reliable sounding boards for my ideas. In addition, Sherry Gillogly, Misty Milstead, Brenda Nelson, Kara Dunfee, and Connie Hunter have been helpful to me in my time at Ohio University.

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This dissertation is dedicated to my Mom, without whom it probably never would have been written. Many of the great things that have happened to me in my life would not have been possible without her incredible determination to help me in all my endeavors. This work is also for Sally Behrenwald. She not only read the entire manuscript, she also made numerous helpful suggestions in a loving way. If the pages contained within were a measure of my love for her, they would far exceed the three hundred or so that follow.
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INTRODUCTION

Religion and American foreign policy have always been closely related. Since the earliest days of the Republic, Americans have often explained their involvement in world affairs in religious terms. American exceptionalism has traditionally been based on the idea that the United States is a nation chosen and set apart by God to be an example to others, particularly in terms of religious liberty. From President William McKinley kneeling in prayer to determine whether to annex the Philippines to Woodrow Wilson’s determination to “make the world safe for democracy” to Ronald Reagan’s statement that America was a “shining city upon a hill whose beacon light guides freedom-loving people everywhere,” American leaders have cultivated American exceptionalism in rhetoric and policy.¹

Though the intersection of religion and foreign affairs has always been a feature of American politics, both the nature of American religion and of American foreign policy has changed. This dissertation examines a particular moment in the history of this relationship. In the late 1970s, a number of conservative evangelicals decided to become actively involved in American politics. Dubbed the New Christian Right by some, the Religious Right or the Christian Right by others, these evangelical leaders emerged, not coincidentally, as the number of televisions in American homes increased. In Lynchburg, Virginia, Jerry Falwell hosted the nationally syndicated program The Old Time Gospel Hour. Marion G. “Pat” Robertson, the son of a United States Senator from Virginia,

created *The 700 Club*, a national broadcast aimed at ministering to Americans’ spiritual needs while commenting on the issues of the day. Faith healers like Oral Roberts also hosted programs that were viewed across the country and increasingly came to emphasize entertainment as well as evangelism. Billy Graham’s simple, ecumenical gospel message and dynamic preaching style captivated thousands in some of the nation’s largest arenas, all while millions watched from the comfort of home.²

In 1979, recognizing the political potential embodied in these evangelical leaders, activists in the New Right movement encouraged evangelicals to become more active in politics. In June of that year, a number of prominent evangelicals formed the Moral Majority with Jerry Falwell as its leader. Pat Robertson led another organization known as Christian Voice. These and other groups spoke out on the political issues of the day, paying particular attention to controversial social issues like abortion. As J. Brooks Flippen argued in his 2011 book *Jimmy Carter, the Politics of Family, and the Rise of the Religious Right*, it was largely the failure of Democrats to respond to concerns about these issues that drove many evangelicals to the political right.³

Social issues were hardly evangelicals’ only concerns, though. As Jerry Falwell argued in his 1980 book *Listen, America!*, the United States was also in a period of

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decline in world affairs. In Falwell’s view, the failure of American policymakers to respond effectively to the growing threat of international communism was a primary contributing factor in America’s decline. In the Vietnam War, Falwell and many of his contemporaries believed, the United States had demonstrated a lack of military backbone, a fundamental unwillingness to prosecute the war against the communists of North Vietnam until full victory was attained. The great American nation had been humiliated and its ability to impose its will in the world had been diminished when, in April 1975, the South Vietnamese capital of Saigon fell to the communists from the North. If the United States was to reverse this decline, Falwell argued, it needed not only to prevent moral decay at home, but also to recover its image as a beacon of liberty and a military leviathan. The one, undeniable way to do this was to wage a virulent struggle against the growth of international communism.

The idea that the United States should oppose the spread of communism in the world was not new. Beginning with the presidency of Harry Truman, the United States sought to prevent the efforts of “totalitarian regimes” to control “free peoples” across the globe. Acting largely on ideas first articulated by George F. Kennan, policymakers tried to contain the spread of international communism.\(^4\) American officials saw communism as an international monolith emanating from the Soviet Union outward, grasping nations in its increasingly elongated tentacles.\(^5\) Unless Americans acted to contain this growth, the United States would eventually find itself surrounded and threatened by the


communists. This domino theory of the spread of communism had its roots in part in the infamous Munich Pact of 1938, where British Prime Minister Neville Chamberlain had tried to appease Adolf Hitler by granting Hitler’s desire to annex the Sudetenland in exchange for a promise that Germany would not seek further territories. As Hitler’s troops stormed across Europe on the road to World War II, there appeared to be a lesson emerging from the failed Munich agreement: failure to oppose aggression anywhere would inevitably lead to the spread of aggression everywhere. Though this argument may have seemed a slippery slope to some, its logic would come to govern America’s attempts to confront communism and would thus define American foreign policy for much of the Cold War.6

Religion also played an important role in shaping the Cold War. The very nature of the struggle between freedom and totalitarianism, capitalism and communism, suggested that a larger cosmic battle between good and evil was taking place in the world. Two disparate American Protestants, Reinhold Niebuhr and Billy Graham, integrated faith and foreign affairs in the early Cold War. Niebuhr, a professor at Union Theological Seminary in New York City, was one of postwar America’s most important public intellectuals. Niebuhr articulated a Christian doctrine of just war in an age of global conflict. The world was corrupted by sin, Niebuhr reasoned, and evil would always be a factor of human life. Christians should not allow evil to flourish, even if it meant taking up arms to defeat an enemy like Hitler. Niebuhr’s “Christian realism” applied to the growth of communism, too. An ardent anti-communist, Niebuhr gave

spiritual authority to the early American Cold War, encouraging the nation’s efforts to contain the spread of communism abroad.7

Billy Graham was a very different type of Christian authority, but his impact on shaping the early Cold War exceeded that of Niebuhr’s in many respects. Graham was the primary figure in the growth of popular American evangelicalism in the second half of the twentieth century. A native of North Carolina, Graham rose to fame as a leader in “Youth for Christ,” one of a number of organizations that sought to affect the moral lives of American youth after World War II. Speaking to large crowds gathered in Los Angeles in 1949, Graham warned of the evils of communism. The fact that the Soviet Union had detonated its first atomic bomb only days before Graham began preaching the Los Angeles revival only furthered the young evangelist’s cause. Graham’s ministry, which expanded rapidly throughout the 1950s, issued pamphlets comparing Christianity and communism. The two sides were engaged “throughout the entire world” in a struggle for “the minds of men,” the pamphlets read. The fallout from that struggle would “determine what kind of a world the next generation” would inhabit. Graham thundered from the pulpit that Americans had to decide whether to accept Christ or to accept communism. Each side promised a new birth, one to a new life in God, the other to a new life of servitude to the state.8

Graham and Niebuhr were part of the so-called Cold War consensus that defined the period between World War II and the social and cultural strife of the 1960s. The

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concept of a Cold War consensus is controversial because the extent to which such a
consensus ever existed is debatable. For the purposes of illustrating changes in the role
of religion in the Cold War, however, the concept is helpful. In essence, a bi-partisan
consensus seemed to coalesce around the American strategy of containing communism in
the early Cold War. In addition to Niebuhr and Graham, other American intellectuals
like historian Arthur Schlesinger, Jr. supported American anti-communism and the idea
of upholding the virtues of American capitalism as a counterweight to the communist
threat. In the 1950s, religion and the Cold War consensus became inseparable. President
Dwight Eisenhower, a moderate Christian at best, famously remarked that American
government “made no sense unless it is founded on a deeply felt religious faith – and I
don’t care what it is.” In 1954, Congress ordered the words “under God” added to the
Pledge of Allegiance. The next year, Congress approved the addition of the words “In
God We Trust” to American currency. As the first chapter of this project will
demonstrate, all of this religious activity lent credence to the idea that America was a
godly nation, as opposed to the Soviet Union, which was a nation of godless
communists.9

The Cold War consensus did not last. By the mid-1960s, underlying social
tensions in postwar America shattered the illusion of a united nation. The civil rights
movement, driven itself by religious sentiment, helped to usher in a new era of rights
consciousness. Congressional immigration reform in the 1960s radically changed the
ethnic composition of American immigrants by the early 1970s, ushering in an era of

9 Anne Loveland, American Evangelicals and the U.S. Military, 1942 – 1993 (Baton Rouge: Louisiana
State University Press, 1996), 212; Stephen Whitfield, The Culture of the Cold War, 2nd ed. (Baltimore:
greater diversity in American society. The Vietnam War divided the nation. The rise of the counterculture and campus unrest became a daily feature on the evening news. The social fabric of the country seemed to be coming apart in the eyes of many Americans.\textsuperscript{10}

It was in the context of these events that the Religious Right emerged. Though Ronald Reagan would ultimately become the political leader most associated with the creation of the Religious Right, conservative evangelicals also owed much to Richard Nixon. Nixon recognized the political potential embodied in the anger of white, middle-class Americans who wanted to see someone rise up and enforce law and order against out-of-control American youth. He addressed the simmering frustrations of many Americans in a memorable speech on November 3, 1969, where he asked for the support of the “great silent majority” of Americans who did not protest against Vietnam War or engage in the rebellious activities of the counterculture.\textsuperscript{11}

Evangelicals of the Moral Majority may have agreed with much of what Richard Nixon advocated, but there was one area where they stood opposite of Nixon: foreign affairs, specifically anti-communism. Nixon had been one of the most notable anti-communists of the early Cold War. In 1948, as a young California Congressman, Nixon grilled alleged communist spy Alger Hiss in hearings before the House Un-American Activities Committee (HUAC). Nixon’s performance in these hearings fortified his solid anti-communist credentials and helped to earn him the vice-presidential spot on the


Republican ticket in 1952. By the time Nixon ascended to the presidency in 1969, however, his thinking, and the Cold War, had evolved. Alongside his national security adviser and later Secretary of State, Henry Kissinger, Nixon pursued a policy of détente with the Soviet Union, seeking to ease tensions between the two superpowers with arms control agreements. He also approached foreign affairs with the mindset of a realist, visiting China in 1972 in order to normalize relations between the United States and the People’s Republic. Nixon’s China visit shifted the diplomatic balance of the Cold War by drawing China and the United States into an alignment against the Soviet Union.\[12\]

Nixon’s Cold War approach also infuriated many hardline cold warriors, as they saw the president’s willingness to negotiate with the Soviets and open diplomatic relations with the Chinese as a betrayal of America’s struggle against communism. Nixon’s policies also suggested that he did not view communism as a monolithic entity, that some communists could be considered friendly to American interests. As Nixon’s presidency ended in scandal and his successor Gerald Ford continued to pursue arms control agreements with the Soviets, this furor continued to grow. It was made much worse by America’s humiliation in Vietnam. As Saigon fell to the North Vietnamese communists in 1975, it seemed to signal a decline in America’s ability to impose its military and diplomatic will abroad, only thirty years after the mighty American nation had stood alone as the most powerful nation on Earth.\[13\]


Conservatives wanted to see American power renewed and the Cold War re-ignited. A number of prominent voices called for a rejection of détente in the late 1970s. Ronald Reagan criticized détente in his radio addresses between 1975 and 1979, and also during his failed campaign for the Republican presidential nomination in 1976. A number of prominent intellectuals, many of them Democrats, formed The Committee on the Present Danger, a foreign policy interest group designed to promote increased American military strength. These neoconservatives, as they became known, commissioned studies that suggested that the Soviet Union was gaining a substantial edge against the United States in the nuclear arms race. These reports argued that a strategic “window of vulnerability” separated American and Soviet nuclear forces. In essence, this “window of vulnerability” meant that the Soviets could strike U.S. land-based strategic missiles, rendering the United States incapable of responding to a Soviet nuclear attack. None other than Henry Kissinger remarked that unless the United States increased defense spending, the 1980s could become “a period of massive crisis” for Americans.

The Christian Right supported conservatives’ desire to reignite the Cold War and win the nuclear arms race. Jerry Falwell expressed his support for a renewed Cold War in his 1980 book *Listen, America!* Falwell defended America’s involvement in the Vietnam War. He accepted a conservative, revisionist explanation of American failures in that war. The United States had failed in Vietnam, Falwell and other conservatives

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argued, because it had not committed all of its military might to the struggle against North Vietnamese communists. Instead, the United States had fought a limited war with ill-defined objectives. They key for the United States to win the Cold War was to commit to a vision of defeating communism, not just containing it. To do this, Falwell reasoned, American policymakers needed to reject arms control agreements with the Soviets and spend the necessary money to win the arms race. Falwell sent newsletters to his followers explaining why they should oppose arms control treaties. To oppose such treaties, Falwell wrote, was to “act in accordance with the will of God.”

In *Listen, America!* Falwell wrote, “The sad fact is that [in an exchange of missiles] today the Soviet Union would kill 135 million to 160 million Americans, and the United States would kill only three to five percent of the Soviets because of [Soviet] antiballistic missiles and their civil defense.”

The Christian Right may not have been the most important group advocating increased military spending in the late 1970s and early 1980s, but its involvement in promoting a renewed Cold War at this time should not be ignored. In spite of the close relationship between religion and foreign affairs in American history, historians have not always treated this connection seriously. In the November 2006 issue of *Diplomatic History*, historian Andrew Preston addressed the peculiar absence of religion in American foreign relations historiography. As Preston pointed out, integrating religion into the history of American foreign relations has always posed a particular set of challenges for historians. Most notably, historians have struggled to integrate religion into the “cause

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16 “Why Every American Should Oppose SALT II,” Jerry Falwell, Special Report from Thomas Road Baptist Church, August 1979, A. Pierre Guillermin Library, Liberty University, Lynchburg Virginia.
and effect” methodology that often governs the study of foreign affairs. In other words, historians like to be able to point to specific, definable motivations for the actions taken by historical actors. In foreign affairs, those motivations often seem to be obvious. Primary source documents, speeches, and memoirs help to confirm historians’ judgments in these matters. Of course, any assertion of a historical figure’s motivations will always be the subject of debate, no matter how many sources seem to make their motivations clear. Religion, though, provides a particular challenge to those seeking to explain the actions of prominent figures or groups. First, religion is often a private matter. Second, religion has often been useful in shaping public support for foreign policy. While political leaders may appeal to religion to garner approval of their decisions, it is difficult to ascertain the sincerity of their devotion. Language used to cultivate the favor of religious groups may be very different than language used to gain the support of the public at large. These difficulties, combined with a general trend toward secularization in the academy, have led historians to treat religion as a separate subject from diplomacy, relegated to its own category in social and cultural history.

Separating religion from foreign affairs, as Preston noted, means that historians do not “engage historical figures on their own terms.” In his 2008 study of the impact of faith on the foreign policy of Woodrow Wilson, historian Malcolm Magee reiterated this point. “Scholars of international relations history,” Magee wrote, “continue to explain in almost exclusively secular terms the foreign policies of a man who himself

19 Ibid, 788.
insisted that faith was the foundation of all his international actions.”

In the case of Wilson, as complicated a man as any who ever held the presidency, one can certainly debate the extent to which faith defined action. Faith should not be excluded, however, from the debate. Fortunately, in recent years, historians have acted to rectify this historiographic void. Preston made a substantive contribution to this subject with his 2012 book *Sword of the Spirit, Shield of Faith: Religion in American War and Diplomacy*, a sweeping study that pays particular attention to the use of religious rhetoric in shaping foreign policy. William Inboden’s *Religion and American Foreign Policy, 1945 – 1960: The Soul of Containment*, published in 2010, examined the role that religious leaders like Reinhold Niebuhr and Billy Graham played in the Cold War, while also illuminating the private faith of policymakers like Harry Truman, Dwight Eisenhower, and John Foster Dulles. Other historians like Stephen J. Whitfield, in his 1991 book *The Culture of the Cold War*, have studied the way that religion affected American civic life during the early Cold War. By taking the study of religion seriously, all of these books have lent new insights to the historiography the Cold War.

This dissertation makes a contribution to this growing body of literature by examining the Religious Right’s involvement in foreign policy debates during the Reagan presidency. It argues first that foreign affairs played a more significant role in the activism of the Religious Right than historians have generally recognized. While foreign affairs were not as prominent as social issues to the Religious Right and its supporters, foreign affairs were central to the Religious Right’s political goals. Time and again, as

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this project will show, Jerry Falwell and Pat Robertson emphasized the need to eradicate communism and establish American global supremacy. Articles about the nuclear freeze glossed the pages in early issues of the *Moral Majority Report*, the Moral Majority’s monthly newsletter. In the late 1980s, as the *Moral Majority Report* became the *Liberty Report*, every issue featured a “Defensively Speaking” column dedicated to informing readers about national defense issues. These columns typically discussed the same issues each month, specifically the Reagan administration’s campaign to prevent the spread of leftist influence in Central America as well as the administration’s continuing efforts to better relations with the Soviet Union.

This project also argues that the Religious Right was not very good at debating foreign affairs. One could point to a number of reasons why this was so, but the most simple explanation is that the Religious Right lacked the knowledge of complex diplomatic matters necessary to engage these issues in an informed manner. Another, equally important reason, was that the Religious Right saw all global issues through the prism of the Cold War. Where some observers saw localized conflict in South Africa, the Philippines, or Central America, Jerry Falwell saw communist incursion. If this accusation makes the Religious Right seem like many other conservative groups in the 1980s, that is precisely the point. Though always operating under the pretense of being a conservative religious group, the Religious Right often brought no original, religious thought to the debates in which it participated. Instead, agents of the Religious Right, particularly those involved in the Moral Majority, often echoed the Reagan administration on foreign policy issues, even when the administration had clearly been in
the wrong. The Religious Right’s support for the Reagan administration’s policies in Central America, and Jerry Falwell’s impassioned defense of Reagan and Oliver North during the Iran-Contra scandal, stretched the credibility of the Religious Right in a time when it already had little credibility left because of the televangelist scandals of the late 1980s.

The Religious Right also struggled to reconcile its theology with its political activism. Theology played an important role in defining the Religious Right’s worldview. As the proceeding chapters will show, the dispensationalist beliefs that held sway over the intellect of the Religious Right had many evangelicals looking to the sky for the Second Coming of Christ in the 1970s and 1980s. This “Armageddon theology” of the Religious Right proved extremely popular, as Hal Lindsey’s *The Late Great Planet Earth* became a bestseller in the 1970s. Books like Lindsey’s, which talked about the coming Rapture when God would take His people out of the world, seemed to promote a fatalistic attitude toward any hope of reforming the world through politics. Yet the Religious Right emerged as a political force at precisely the moment when Armageddon theology was most popular. The Religious Right never wholly reconciled this paradox, and neither have historians. One intriguing take on the subject came in Mark Noll’s 1994 book *The Scandal of the Evangelical Mind*. Noll criticized the fundamentalists of the Religious Right for looking toward heaven for their salvation while the world around them burned. Noll had a point. The Armageddon theology popularized in the 1970s and 1980s certainly seemed to encourage an anti-intellectual impulse of the Religious Right and drove evangelicals away from applying their faculties toward solving complex social
and global issues. As this project suggests, the Religious Right drew a sharp distinction between the things of the world and the things of God, painting anyone who suggested that the world needed to be reformed through responsible arms control agreements or promoting peace in Central America as on the side of the world more than that of God.

This insight is helpful, but does not reconcile the paradox noted above. Alas, some of the beliefs and actions of the Religious Right prove inexplicable. Nonetheless, it is not unreasonable to suggest, given the narrative that follows, that the fierce religious nationalism of the Religious Right, combined with an overall desire to win political power, obscured any internal conflict with theology. The Religious Right truly had it both ways when mixing politics and the Bible. They were able to encourage evangelicals to keep one eye poised on the heavens, while also encouraging them to keep an eye out for evil forces below.

Finally, this dissertation demonstrates that while the Religious Right’s support for the Reagan administration was often fierce, it was not always simple and unwavering. Though Reagan never ceased hating communism, he also proved to be pragmatic in his long-term conduct of foreign policy. The same Reagan who spoke of an “evil empire” in March 1983 also wanted to improve relations with the Soviets in the late 1980s. As American relations with the Soviets continued to improve in the latter stages of Reagan’s presidency, it was never clear to what extent the Religious Right supported the president’s efforts at rapprochement with Mikhail Gorbachev. The evidence presented in this project suggests that while the Religious Right was hesitant to criticize Reagan’s handling of Soviet affairs, it was always wary of Gorbachev’s intentions, believing the
reform-minded Soviet premier to be a proverbial wolf in sheep’s clothing. The Religious Right continued to push for funding to develop Strategic Defense Initiative, Reagan’s proposal for a space-based missile defense system, not as a means of preventing a nuclear war with the Soviets, but as a means of winning a nuclear war. In short, the Religious Right’s foreign affairs activism in the late 1980s suggests that it was out of step with the president on the central matter of U.S.-Soviet relations. Moreover, polls conducted in the early 1980s suggested that evangelicals were an ambivalent group when it came to foreign affairs. The idea that the Religious Right effectively mobilized evangelicals behind the president in the early 1980s thus deserves further examination. By looking at these issues more closely, one can see that the Religious Right’s relationship with Reagan in foreign affairs was more complicated than historians have generally perceived.

Studies of the New Christian Right are growing, but few of these studies adequately address the foreign affairs activism of groups like the Moral Majority. In his history of the Religious Right, *With God on Our Side*, published in 1996, sociologist William Martin addressed the foreign policy activism of the Moral Majority with only one paragraph.  

21 Sociologist Steve Bruce’s *The Rise and Fall of the New Christian Right*, published in 1990, did not address foreign affairs.  

22 Other scholars have fared better. Historian Anne Loveland’s *American Evangelicals and the U.S. Military, 1942–1993*, offered a chapter on the New Christian Right’s support for Ronald Reagan’s defense policies. Still, Loveland’s book was more concerned with evangelicals’

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participation in matters related to the American military, and as a result she did not delve very deeply into any of the issues that the relationship between Reagan and the Religious Right might have raised. Historians of American religion have benefited much from the work of the late Paul Boyer, whose 1992 book *When Time Shall Be No More: Prophecy Belief in Modern American Culture* studied the way that the Religious Right often evoked Bible prophecy to explain world affairs, particularly when it came to nuclear weapons. Boyer deftly integrated his analysis with an appraisal of the role that eschatology played in shaping the relationship between Reagan and the Religious Right. More than any other scholar, Boyer suggested that this relationship might not have been static, but instead evolved with the political realities of the 1980s.

These studies are useful, but they represent fragments of a much larger story. This dissertation unites these threads, but also goes beyond them to challenge popular stereotypes of evangelicals. As the proceeding chapters will demonstrate, evangelicals may have shared similar concerns about a number of issues, but they were not ideologically monolithic. Historians have also paid little attention to the role that theology played in shaping the foreign policy activism of the Religious Right. As Chapter 1 of this dissertation will demonstrate, the social, political, and theological roots of the Religious Right can be located in the late nineteenth century, when fundamentalism emerged as a reaction to modernism, particularly to the growth of secularism in American institutions. Fundamentalism also grew out of the development

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of premillennial dispensationalist theology. The specifics of this theology will be
discussed at greater length in the first chapter. Dispensationalists believed that God had
divided world history into epochs where He granted different dispensations of Himself to
humankind. The period after the birth of Christianity was seen as the period of grace,
when Christians were supposed to evangelize in preparation for the end of the world.
The end would be preceded by the Rapture, when God would remove Christians from the
world.

The relationship between the Religious Right’s theology and their foreign policy
activism was often paradoxical. As chapter two points out, Bible prophecy populism
based in dispensationalist theology became very popular in the 1970s with the growth of
a popular evangelical consumer culture. Hal Lindsey’s *The Late Great Planet Earth* sold
millions of copies. Television evangelists, or televangelists as they came to be known,
promoted dispensationalist theology in their sermons. In the nuclear age, speculation
about the coming battle of Armageddon, the battle that would take place at the end of the
world, took on a new level of interest in the popular imagination. As Paul Boyer has
demonstrated, nuclear warfare and Bible prophecy became inextricably linked during the
Cold War. Yet as politics and theology mixed, the lines between theological beliefs and
political ambitions were blurred. While preaching that the Rapture was near, the
Religious Right also asserted the importance of supporting the Reagan administration’s
nuclear weapons buildup. Apocalyptic theology became enmeshed with messianic
politics. The world was ending, but the world also needed to be saved.
Chapter three recounts the politicization of the Religious Right. In particular, this chapter examines the role that the New Right played in encouraging evangelicals to get more involved in politics, and also the Religious Right’s disillusionment with the Carter presidency. Equally important, chapter three examines how the Religious Right came to embrace Ronald Reagan’s candidacy for President in 1980 and how it forged a relationship with Reagan in matters of national defense. This analysis carries over into chapter four, which relates the Religious Right’s involvement in debates about nuclear weapons during Ronald Reagan’s first term. In particular, this chapter describes how the Religious Right defended the Reagan administration against the nuclear freeze movement, the popular movement dedicated to curbing the escalation of the nuclear arms race between the United States and the Soviet Union. This chapter also illustrates the divisions between evangelicals over nuclear weapons, ultimately demonstrating that while some evangelicals felt strongly that Reagan’s nuclear weapons policies were essential to winning the arms race, others attacked the arms race altogether as a moral blight on the human race. These divisions ultimately led Reagan to try to cultivate support for his national defense policies, a campaign that, as chapter four will demonstrate, proved a mixed success at best.

Chapter five returns to the topic of Armageddon theology and Bible prophecy populism. As this chapter illustrates, Bible prophecy was a topic that held the interest of President Reagan and proved an area of confluence between the President and the Religious Right. Reagan’s belief in Armageddon theology was more complicated than that of the Religious Right, however. While professing interest in Bible prophecy,
Reagan nonetheless believed that Armageddon could be prevented through effective arms control policies. To this end, Reagan pursued his dream of the Strategic Defense Initiative (SDI), a space-based weapons defense system aimed at preventing a nuclear attack against the United States. SDI became one of the most controversial proposals of Reagan’s presidency, as critics charged that the program would de-stabilize the arms race and cost Americans an untold amount of money to research and development. Reagan nonetheless refused to budge on SDI, even when his insistence on developing the system led to tensions between himself and Soviet leader Mikhail Gorbachev. The Religious Right gave Reagan a tremendous amount of support for SDI. Yet as chapter five will show, it is not certain whether Reagan and the Religious Right saw similar goals for SDI. The Religious Right believed SDI would prove the military and moral superiority of the United States, offering a shield against Soviet missile attacks. Reagan, on the other hand, aimed to share the technology with the Soviets, with the ultimate aim of ending the arms race altogether.

Reagan’s involvement in Central America represented some of the darkest aspects of his foreign policy. Central America also represented some of the Religious Right’s most peculiar adventures in advocating the Reagan administration’s foreign policy. Chapter six examines the Religious Right’s support for Reagan’s policies in Central America, with a particular emphasis on the movement’s credibility. This chapter discusses Jerry Falwell and Pat Robertson’s misbegotten interventions on behalf of the government of El Salvador and the Nicaraguan Contras. An examination of these events demonstrates that the Religious Right lacked any understanding of the fundamentally
local nature of Central American conflicts, as they saw all warfare in the region solely through the lens of the global Cold War context. As the Reagan administration became ensnared in the Iran-Contra affair, the Religious Right rushed to Reagan’s defense. The result was a thorough demonstration of how far the Religious Right was willing to go to maintain their relationship with Reagan and support the cause of anti-communism abroad.

The final chapter examines the last stages of the Cold War and the decline of the Religious Right of the 1980s. As Jerry Falwell defended the apartheid government of South Africa and the leadership of Philippine president Ferdinand Marcos, a series of domestic scandals eroded the credibility of American televangelists. By 1989, Jerry Falwell decided to close the doors of the Moral Majority. Even as the Moral Majority died, Pat Robertson and the Christian Coalition ascended, demonstrating that the Religious Right had staying power in American politics, even if some agents of the movement had fallen from grace.

Before proceeding to the chapters, it is necessary to make a few notes. The first note regards terminology. Words that are used to describe religious groups can often be problematic. Though the term evangelical has been used for over a half-century to describe millions of American Protestants, it is nonetheless a moniker that requires greater clarification and specificity. This project underscores the diversity of thought within American evangelicalism. As the first chapter points out, the “evangelical” designation was first used to describe a broad section of conservative Protestants who identified with the simple, ecumenical preaching of ministers like Charles Fuller and
Billy Graham. Though many evangelicals were a part of Protestant denominations, evangelicalism transcended the denominational identity of its adherents. The erosion of traditional denominational lines would come to play a significant part in the growth of evangelicalism in the latter half of the twentieth century. Evangelicals may have been Baptist, Methodist, or Presbyterian, but they could all listen to Billy Graham and sing along with popular Christian music without fear that they would have to break ranks with their denomination. The lines between mainstream denominations – a term often used to describe the established ecclesiastical hierarchies of churches like the Lutherans, Baptists, Methodists, and Presbyterians – and evangelicalism became blurred. At one point, it may have seemed plausible to label the leadership of mainstream denominations as politically liberal and evangelicals as politically conservative. As historian David Swartz demonstrated in his 2012 book *Moral Minority: The Evangelical Left in an Age of Conservatism*, however, these designations are not so simple. 25 There were a number of evangelicals who, both before and after the rise of the Religious Right, identified themselves as liberals in the tradition of the Social Gospel that was prominent during the Progressive Era. As the chapters ahead will show, these evangelicals on the left proved a significant contrast to the Religious Right when it came to issues like the nuclear arms race during the Reagan era.

If the term evangelical is fraught with such ambiguity, one might ask, why continue to use it? One answer is that it is the term commonly used to describe a broad section of American Protestants. From the perspective of the historian, though, a more

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effective answer is that the diversity of belief and action within evangelicalism makes it all the more worthy of historical inquiry. Only by engaging the subject in the reality of the historical record can scholars begin to appreciate the diversity of evangelicalism rather than conforming to perceptions of evangelicals as an ideologically homogenous group. Andrew Preston was right that integrating religion into the study of U.S. foreign relations involves dealing with terms that are sometimes nebulous and lines of thought that are difficult to discern. This does not mean, though, that they should go unexplored.

The chapters ahead also use other terms that beg for some qualification. In particular, scholars and journalists have used the names “New Christian Right,” “Religious Right,” and “Christian Right” interchangeably to describe the group of conservative evangelical ministers that form the primary subject of this study. While I used the term “New Christian Right” in some of my previous writing about these figures, this description has typically been applied only in academic studies of the movement. The designation “Religious Right,” however, has been the most popular term used to describe evangelical leaders like Jerry Falwell and Pat Robertson. As a result, I have mostly employed the label “Religious Right” in this project, but make no distinction between it and the other terms previously mentioned.

This dissertation builds on the work of my M.A. thesis, “For God and Reagan: The New Christian Right and the Nuclear Arms Race,” completed in 2007. Chapters three through five and the conclusion are grounded in the work that I did for that thesis, and in fact represent much of the same arguments, language, and materials that I employed in the thesis. At the same time, this dissertation opens new ground by
examining the roots of the Religious Right to a much greater degree. The M.A. thesis also focused solely on the nuclear arms race, and as such it did not examine the Reagan administration’s policies in Central America or the end of the Cold War. By building on the work of my M.A. thesis, I hope to continue to demonstrate the possibilities afforded by integrating religion into the study of U.S. foreign relations.
CHAPTER 1: REVIVALISM AND THE RED MENACE

The early twentieth century marked an important turning point in evangelicals’ involvement in American politics. A series of political, social, and cultural developments fostered a feeling of discontent among conservative Protestants. These events laid the foundation for the coming of the Religious Right and shaped the assumptions with which evangelicals approached foreign affairs. Three events were notable in this regard. First, American Protestantism fractured across the course of the century. Social, political and theological matters all played a part in this division. Protestants disagreed about whether the Kingdom of God should be advanced on Earth through the Social Gospel or whether the world was hopelessly lost and could not be helped without supernatural intervention. These divisions ultimately shaped evangelicals’ political activism.

Second, mass communications dramatically altered the way evangelicals approached evangelism, leading dynamic, popular evangelists like Charles E. Fuller and Billy Graham to avoid entanglement with theological debates of the early century. Instead, Fuller and Graham laid aside complicated matters of Biblical interpretation and made their message of salvation simple and direct. The result was the creation of a much more homogenous and ecumenical form of evangelicalism that shared a common set of assumptions about the Christian faith and its relationship to the world. This popular evangelicalism was nonetheless rooted in the fundamentalism that had taken shape in the early part of the century, with deep ties to premillennial dispensationalism and its core conviction that the world would not be rescued until Christ’s Second Coming.
Finally, evangelicals preached that the United States was the only true Christian nation on Earth. Foreign forces were behind much of the evil that existed in the world. Fundamentalist preachers blamed German liberal theology for inciting World War I and unleashing the decline of Western civilization. Ultimately, however, the resentment fundamentalists felt toward the Kaiser was redirected in an altogether new vehemence and sense of urgency toward communism. The growth of worldwide communism demanded the attention of Christians everywhere. Communism was not only rooted in atheism, but also destroyed the soul of individual liberty in the name of collective solutions to social problems. Fundamentalists of the early twentieth century believed that by opposing the spread of communism, the United States was waging a spiritual war against the forces of evil.

Anti-communism drove religious conservatives to the forefront of a defining moment in American history. The rise of evangelicals as mainstream actors in American politics can only be understood in the Cold War context, for as Stephen Whitfield wrote, it was the dread and anxiety of the Cold War that made evangelicals’ promises of instant redemption and deliverance from evil both timely and alluring. With the rise of popular evangelists like Billy Graham, who cultivated close relationships with some of America’s most powerful policymakers, the relationship between evangelicalism and Cold War politics became symbiotic. National leaders conferred legitimacy on evangelicals by endorsing much of what evangelical leaders were saying in their sermons. Cold War policymakers adopted religious language to make the case for containment. In this
regard, policymakers benefited from friendships with evangelical leaders, as this supported the idea that God was firmly on America’s side.

From the earliest days of the Cold War, however, serious questions arose about the relationship between evangelicals and foreign affairs. To what extent were policymakers sincere in their desire to please their evangelical associates, and to what extent were these relationships merely a matter of political expediency? Moreover, when evangelical leaders spoke of godless Soviet communism, were they attempting to cast all people of the Soviet Union as godless, or were they merely attacking the growth of the idea of communism? These were only two of several important questions that would continue to linger over the close associations that evangelicals and American politicians forged in their efforts to prevent the growth of communism.

**Fundamentalism**

Why did American Protestantism divide so bitterly during the twentieth century? There is no simple answer to that question, but historians generally point to a number of social and theological factors. Fundamentalism grew out of rapid and profound changes in the United States around the turn of century. Rapid industrialization and urbanization wrought dramatic changes in the nature of American families. Thousands of Roman Catholic and Jewish immigrants entered the nation, altering the ethnic and religious diversity of American cities. Modern science posed serious challenges to a literal interpretation of the Bible. Many conservative Protestants came to believe that their faith was under assault.²⁶

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Changes in American education were chief among fundamentalists’ concerns. By the late nineteenth century, some prominent American universities no longer professed an explicitly Christian identity. The modern American university embraced science and its emphasis on the ability of human reason to solve complex problems. Charles Darwin’s *On the Origin of Species*, published in 1859, introduced the theory of evolution. For many observers, Darwin’s work challenged the literal interpretation of the creation story from the book of Genesis. In the Gilded Age, belief in “survival of the fittest,” or Social Darwinism, took hold among some American intellectuals. American industrial leaders poured thousands of dollars into universities to fund the growth of scientific research. Christians who subscribed to a literal, inerrant interpretation of the Bible felt threatened by these developments.²⁷

As American universities bred a burgeoning class of university educated Americans with specialized knowledge, a new bureaucratic, institutional order emerged, one that supported the increasingly urban, industrial nature of the American economy. The Christian ministry became a specialized profession in some mainline Protestant denominations, demanding or at least encouraging those in the pulpit to pursue seminary studies.²⁸ Trends in the modern university proved pervasive in American seminaries. At Princeton Theological Seminary, for instance, scholars developed a systematic approach to studying the Bible, founded in the belief that Christians needed to approach Biblical scholarship like a scientist conducting an experiment, with a sense of detachment, not

allowing one’s emotions or prejudices to alter interpretation of the Scriptures. This idea found its most thorough expression in Charles Hodge’s three-volume *Systematic Theology*, published in 1874. Princeton’s theologians seemed conflicted between traditional ways of reading the Bible, emphasizing the supernatural intervention of God in human life, and a more dispassionate approach to Scripture that was skeptical of the historical reliability of some Bible stories.²⁹

American Protestantism was divided between some who believed the Bible should be read literally as an inerrant account of God’s supernatural intervention in human affairs and those who embraced the idea that the Scriptures could be systematized and even doubted through rational skepticism. This rift in the American church led to the fundamentalist/modernist controversy, which tore the Presbyterian Church in the United States of America (PCUSA) into separate factions. In 1908, Presbyterian leaders joined other mainline denominations to form the Federal Council of Churches. This new ecumenical organization was highly sympathetic to the Social Gospel movement of the Progressive Era. Adherents to the Social Gospel believed that Christ’s Second Coming would not occur until after the millennium period prophesied in the 20th chapter of the Book of Revelation. This belief, known as postmillennialism, taught believers that fighting for social justice and doing good works would help bring about God’s will on Earth and, in turn, hasten Christ’s return.

This view of the Second Coming was sharply at odds with an increasingly popular way of understanding Bible prophecy known as premillennial dispensationalism.

Premillenialism, or the belief that Christ’s return would occur before the prophesied millennium of Revelation, was not new. Dispensationalism, however, was new. Dispensationalism was an idea made popular by a former Irish priest named John Nelson Darby, and later by American minister C.I. Scofield. The dispensationalist view held that God’s relationship to humankind was divided into separate historical periods. Understanding these divisions was essential to understanding the Bible as a whole. Darby believed that in the nineteenth century, humans were living in the period of grace, the time between Christ’s ascension to heaven and His Second Coming. It was a period where Christians were called by God to preach the Gospel across the world, imploring non-believers to repent of their sins and receive salvation.  

Dispensationalists adhered to a literal interpretation of the Bible. This outlook was particularly significant when it came to interpreting Bible prophecy. Eschatological studies were an integral feature of dispensationalist theology. Many dispensationalists believed that Jesus was coming back soon to judge the world. Beginning in 1868, church leaders associated with the dispensationalist movement met each summer in Niagara, New York for a Bible study conference. The Niagara conferences helped to popularize the study of Bible prophecy in the United States.  

In 1878, dispensationalist theologians held the First International Prophetic Conference in New York City. Conferences similar to this one convened in major

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American cities through the end of World War I.\textsuperscript{32} In 1896, C.I. Scofield, a former Confederate soldier, attorney, and associate of the popular evangelical preacher Dwight L. Moody, published \textit{Rightly Dividing the Word of Truth}, which quickly became a popular tool for teaching dispensationalist theology in the United States. “The Word of Truth,” Scofield wrote, had “right divisions,” and any study of the “Word” that ignore[d] these “divisions” would be “profitless and confusing.”\textsuperscript{33} In 1909, Scofield published an annotated version of the King James Bible that allowed readers to see how the Scriptures revealed these “right divisions.” These two works cemented Scofield’s reputation as a leading proponent of dispensationalist theology. More than any other figure, he made the dispensationalist view of Bible interpretation accessible to Americans.\textsuperscript{34}

The dispensationalist method of interpreting the Bible would, in time, have a dramatic impact on the way that many Christians thought about important matters of American foreign policy. At the turn of the century, however, its primary effect was to make the rapid changes in American life make sense for many Christians. The populist, democratic character of dispensationalism contributed to the idea that God’s people were under assault by the forces of secularism. This, in turn, fed the belief among


\textsuperscript{34} Noll, \textit{The Scandal of the Evangelical Mind}, 117, 125-27.
dispensationalists that the last days before the return of Christ were unfolding before their eyes.

Between 1910 and 1915, a series of twelve books entitled *The Fundamentals: A Testimony to the Truth* was published with the financial support of Lyman and Milton Stewart. The Stewart brothers were Presbyterian laymen and wealthy philanthropists from California who co-owned Union Oil and were also the chief architects of the Bible Institute of Los Angeles, later re-named Biola University. These books were, in many respects, an attempt to counteract the influence of the Federal Council of Churches and the theological modernism of the Social Gospel movement. Each volume contained writings from a number of staunchly conservative Christians who decried the corrosive forces of modern theology. In addition, they criticized Roman Catholicism, Mormonism and the teaching of evolution in American education. Distributed widely to churches across the United States and promoted by dispensationalist leaders like C.I. Scofield, *The Fundamentals* provided a series of common writings that fundamentalists could look to for guidance in both social and theological matters.35

The tension between fundamentalism and modern education boiled over in the summer of 1925. The trial of John Scopes in a Dayton, Tennessee courtroom drew national attention to the conflict. Scopes was a substitute high-school teacher who stood accused of teaching Darwin’s theory of evolution. Teaching evolution had been outlawed in Tennessee after fundamentalists lobbied for passage of the Butler Act, a law

that prohibited the teaching of any account of the origins of human life other than the literal Biblical account from the book of Genesis.

The special prosecutor for the trial was three-time Democratic presidential nominee and former Secretary of State William Jennings Bryan. Bryan was a member of the Presbyterian Church, one who sided solidly with the fundamentalist side of the fundamentalist/modernist controversy. Scopes’s defender was Clarence Darrow, a professed agnostic and noted attorney associated with the American Civil Liberties Union. The ensuing drama culminated in Bryan’s impassioned defense of his belief in the literal account of Biblical creation as the celebrated orator testified under Darrow’s intense cross-examination. The cross-examination of the prosecution by the defense was hardly the only unorthodox occurrence during the trial. Judge John T. Raulson excused the jury at various moments during the proceedings and allowed the lawyers to engage in a fierce debate about conflicts between science and religion. The real issue of the trial, it seemed, was whether or not one could profess belief in the literal seven-day creation of the world and still maintain intellectual integrity. In the end, Scopes was convicted and given a minor fine, and Bryan stood humiliated by Darrow’s public grilling of his religious beliefs. Exhausted from the strenuous ordeal, Bryan died five days after the trial concluded.36

The Scopes trial marked a seminal moment in the history of fundamentalism. For many observers, Darrow’s searing attack of Bryan’s beliefs in the inerrancy of the Bible

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had exposed fundamentalists’ beliefs as backward and intellectually outmoded. To some, the trial had demonstrated that science and religion could no longer co-exist. Fundamentalists would have to change or risk being marginalized in American society.

In spite of these events, fundamentalism did not fade away. Instead, its influence within American religious life continued to grow. How and why did fundamentalism continue to flourish throughout the remainder of the twentieth century? The ridicule fundamentalists endured in the national press during and after the Scopes trial hardened the separatist impulse among fundamentalists, driving home the idea that they were engaged in a struggle against the modernism of secular society. The result, as Joel A. Carpenter noted in Revive Us Again: The Reawakening of American Fundamentalism, was that fundamentalists worked much harder at defining their distinctive identity in American society. In the process, they cultivated a unique subculture through the creation of Bible schools, Christian colleges and universities, and the use of modern communications technology to preach to listeners across the country.

**Waving the Blood-Stained Banner**

Fundamentalists also embraced political activism. To understand how fundamentalists became politicized, it is necessary to understand two major developments in the first twenty years of the twentieth century. One was the rise in popularity of William Ashley “Billy” Sunday, a former professional baseball player turned evangelist whose populist, revivalist preaching attracted crowds across the United States. Sunday’s energetic, often frantic rhetorical style, combined with his simple, direct appeal to the listener’s need for salvation became a model for revivalist preachers. In
addition, Sunday’s campaign against social vices led him to become a champion of the temperance movement in the United States, which spearheaded the drive for ratification of the Eighteenth Amendment instituting prohibition in 1920.37

Fundamentalists also got involved in the domestic politics of World War I. As George Marsden has demonstrated, the war marked a defining moment in the evolution of premillennial dispensationalist theology. Prior to the war, the premillennialists generally held a positive view of Western civilization and culture. Though premillennialists believed that Christ was coming back soon, they also believed the Second Coming would result in the final salvation of the world; the world would be saved, not destroyed.38

The sudden disintegration of Europe into an orgy of death and destruction did irreparable damage to this view. The dramatic shift in premillennial theology reflected an increasing belief that the war was the result of the forces of modernity. Indeed, the dispensationalist journal Our Hope suggested that the war was a direct consequence of Germany’s “barbarism” and rationalist theology. In the view of Our Hope’s writers, the war could have been prevented if strong-willed Christians had confronted the rationalism that had infected German theology in the nineteenth century. In essence, the war quickly disintegrated the high view of Western civilization that many premillennial fundamentalists held prior to the war. The world no longer needed saving. It was corrupt

38 Marsden, Fundamentalism and American Culture, 149.
and its governments could not be trusted. The war thus exacerbated an already growing trend among fundamentalists to embrace supernaturalism whole-heartedly, teaching them to look away from the idea that the world could be reformed toward the idea that the supernatural intervention of God alone could defeat the forces of evil. Equally important, the sudden infusion of a cultural component to premillennialism merged foreign affairs with cultural concerns. The result, as Marsden wrote, was that the fundamentalist movement now had a new sense of direction and an altogether greater sense of urgency. What was at stake was no longer just theological interpretation; it was the very survival of civilization. A paradox was born: the need to save the world from the evil involved in modern life, coupled with the firm belief that there is no hope for the world save for the supernatural intervention of Christ.

Whatever inconsistencies existed in the life of fundamentalists after World War I, the war ignited a separate, domestic culture war in the United States. Fundamentalists believed that the war was the outgrowth of evil forces at work in the modern world, forces that included the teaching of evolution and faith in science and reason. The war seemed to be but a piece of the puzzle pointing to the impending apocalypse. It was up to the fundamentalists to save as many people as possible before that event took place.39

The “Old Fashioned Revival Hour”

Fundamentalists’ patriotism and use of modern communications were joined in the ministry of Charles E. Fuller. In the early 1930s, Fuller began broadcasting his preaching over local radio in Los Angeles, California. Shortly thereafter, he began broadcasting in national syndication. By 1939, Fuller’s “Old Fashioned Revival Hour”

39 Ibid, 141 – 53.
was the most popular radio program in the United States, eclipsing the audience of mainstream entertainment programs like “Amos & Andy” and “The Bob Hope Show.” Listeners could tune in to hear Fuller’s powerful voice preach and listen to popular gospel songs on 152 different stations.\(^\text{40}\)

Fuller proudly proclaimed that his program was “allied with no denomination.” Yet he also assured listeners that his preaching was fully “fundamentalist” and “premillenial.” In many respects, then, Fuller concocted the recipe for popular evangelicalism. His messages invited Christians of all theological backgrounds (Protestants, at least) to join him in the radio community. Fuller fused entertainment and evangelism in a way that cemented his cross-denominational appeal and drew scores of listeners with catchy, simple gospel tunes. He helped to turn songs like “Nothing but the Blood of Jesus” and “Jesus Saves” into evangelical standards.\(^\text{41}\)

Fuller’s use of radio to communicate with U.S. soldiers serving in World War II produced the most popular episodes of “The Old Fashioned Revival Hour” in its history. During the war, Fuller crafted his radio shows to appeal directly and personally to the American soldiers. Fuller was convinced that given the stark nature of the war, soldiers would be more willing than ever to listen to messages about spiritual matters. Indeed, many soldiers who tuned in to “The Old Fashioned Revival Hour” later reported feeling as if Fuller was personally with them in their bunker, providing them with comfort and


\(^{41}\) Goff, “We Have Heard the Joyful Sound,” 70 – 73.
encouragement. Fuller’s program also served the purpose of connecting families at home with their loved ones at war. One soldier wrote to Fuller, “My Mother always listens to your broadcast,” and as a result, “she…told me to try and get you here.” Fuller also chose the gospel songs he broadcast during the war to both embolden soldiers and unify his listeners in support of their mission. Songs like “When the Saints Go Marching In” and “I’m on the Battlefield for My Lord” resonated with listeners at home and abroad.\(^42\)

Between 1940 and 1945, Fuller’s overall radio audience more than doubled. In 1940, “The Old Fashioned Revival Hour” could be heard on 256 stations across the country. By 1945, that number had increased to 575 stations. The success of Fuller’s efforts can be seen as evidence of the potential unearthed by connecting dynamic evangelical preaching with broader concerns and fears in American society. Indeed, as Philip Goff pointed out, “‘The Old Fashioned Revival Hour’ fused two long-standing tenets of evangelicalism, namely revivalism and foreign mission.” Equally if not more important, Fuller’s program merged “war concerns to revivalism,” thus indirectly equating simple, ecumenical, evangelical faith with support for American efforts at defeating totalitarian enemies on the battlefield. The program also promoted Americanization, Goff noted, with a distinctly American revivalist outlook on Christianity complete with gospel songs that modeled popular styles of American music. This program granted evangelicals an opportunity to spread the Christian message both to the Western world and to areas where English-speaking people, especially missionaries, had a strong presence on the ground.\(^43\)

\(^{42}\) Ibid, 73.

\(^{43}\) Ibid, 69 – 71.
Spiritual Containment

In the wake of the Allied victory in World War II, fundamentalists faced a new enemy: communism. Those who had vehemently criticized German barbarism and rational theology as the source of many of the world’s troubles easily transferred and magnified those criticisms against communism. Indeed, Billy Sunday criticized Lenin and Trotsky for helping to spread liberal theology, never mind that both figures shared a strong aversion to any form of religious belief. In the minds of those who were heirs to Sunday’s revivalist legacy, the Second World War provided an impetus for seeing sinister conspiracies abroad. Soviet Communists were part of a vast effort, in concert with “Kaiserism, evolutionism” as well as “higher criticism” and “liberal theology” to stamp out true Christianity. These fears extended to the belief that communists were infiltrating American churches from the inside. Sunday and other fundamentalists believed that theological modernism and communism were closely related. Institutions like the Federal Council of Churches, a group replete with theological and social liberals, were charged with being sympathetic to communism.  

Still, conservative fundamentalists divided over how to approach foreign affairs activism. Not all conservative Christians saw communists in the pulpits of American churches. On the side that did see communists practically everywhere stood Carl McIntire, Billy James Hargis, and their fellow fundamentalists in the American Council of Christian Churches (ACCC), founded in 1941. On the other, more moderate side of the divide, the National Association of Evangelicals, founded the same year, became the cornerstone organization for the sort of principles that had defined Charles E. Fuller’s

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ministry: theological pragmatism, non-denominational ecumenicalism, and a firm belief that the Gospel needed to be preached around the world in a simple, straightforward manner. The emergence of Billy Graham as a chief proponent of these same ideas solidified the NAE’s approach to promoting evangelicalism as the defining mode of thinking about the church’s interaction with the world, both in terms of preaching the Gospel and in terms of involvement in political and social issues. Graham and the NAE were no less anti-communist than McIntire or Hargis, but the radicalism of the latter figures could not be reconciled with willingness of the former to work with public figures and Christians from mainline denominations in the Federal Council of Churches to fight the communist menace. It is telling that on more than one occasion, McIntire and his supporters lashed out at Graham and his associates for being “soft on communism.” It was this unwillingness to compromise, along with their willingness to encourage war with the Soviet Union, which drastically limited the influence of McIntire and the American Council of Christian Churches’ efforts to unite evangelicals under their own banner of virulent anticommunism.  

Consider, for instance, a November 1948 article from the Christian Beacon, the weekly newsletter published by Carl McIntire and the ACCC. Written several months before the Soviets tested their first atomic bomb, the Beacon challenged “representatives from freedom-loving nations” to engage in a “complete and frank showdown with Russia.” “For the U.S. to have the atomic bomb” and “await the hour when Russia has her bombs to precipitate an atomic war,” the article argued, was “the height of insanity.” If the United States did not join other nations in attacking the Russians first, then the

eventual nuclear destruction of the United States would be a “just punishment.” No less an authority than “Almighty God” would hold the United States and its people responsible for defending free people everywhere against the communist threat.\textsuperscript{46}

McIntire argued that liberalism was leading the United States down the road to becoming a communist country. He traced the origins of this problem back to the New Deal. As McIntire saw it, the New Deal sought collective solutions to economic and social problems, making it akin to socialism. The fact that so many Protestant clergy and government officials were sympathetic to the aims of the New Deal proved that if they were not card-carrying communists themselves, they were at least helping the communists by supporting their goals for American government. In 1944, McIntire pointed a finger at E. Stanley Jones, the noted Methodist missionary, as a “bishop of near-communism” and a “missionary for a communist new world order.” Jones, as it turned out, had been speaking to congregations in support of a proposal to form the National Council of Churches, a new ecumenical body that would represent mainline Protestant denominations who were more sympathetic to the liberal side of American Protestantism than the NAE. The National Council of Churches was nothing less than the work of Satan, McIntire believed. So was the Revised Standard Version of the Bible, a new translation of the Scriptures. There were too many communists among the Christian scholars and clergy who had worked on the translation. In addition, the World Council of Churches, a worldwide ecumenical organization that represented Christians from every background, including Anglican, Roman Catholic, and Eastern Orthodox

\textsuperscript{46} Christian Beacon, Nov. 2, 1948, 2; Jorstad, The Politics of Doomsday, 50.
Christians, was being used as a channel for Soviet espionage. In 1953, the ACCC tried to aid the House Un-American Activities Committee by providing them with information that suggested Bishop G. Bromley Oxnam of the Methodist Episcopal Church was a communist. Oxnam later appeared before the committee to defend himself after California Congressman Donald L. Jackson made those charges public.

At the same time McIntire sought to rid the church of communists, a group of ministers met in Chicago, Illinois to plan the formation of the National Association of Evangelicals for United Action, later re-named The National Association of Evangelicals (NAE). Its first formal meeting took place in St. Louis, Missouri in 1942, with 147 members present. The NAE founders promoted their new organization as an alternative to the Federal Council of Churches, albeit a far more moderate alternative to the ACCC.

In 1944, at the annual NAE convention in Columbus, Ohio, members created the National Religious Broadcasters to promote evangelicals’ efforts to preach the Gospel using modern communications. In an effort to cultivate membership, the NAE opened regional offices in Los Angeles, Minneapolis, Portland and Detroit in 1945. In spite of some early hardships getting support from denominations already pledged to the Federal Council of Churches, by 1960 the NAE included thirty-two different Protestant denominations and 1.5 million active members across the United States.

The formation of the NAE solidified the use of the term *evangelicals* to describe conservative, Bible-believing Protestants. Its members were anti-communists, but they were not red-baiters like the far-right members of the ACCC. Their mission was to contain communism by spreading the Gospel of Jesus Christ across the United States and to those countries struggling to ward off communist infiltration abroad. They practiced spiritual containment.

**Crusades Against Communism**

Billy Graham became the greatest example of this approach to fighting communism. While Charles Fuller may have laid the foundations of popular evangelicalism, it was Graham who adapted it into the Cold War era. Graham was not only a powerful speaker, but he was also a champion of evangelical involvement in politics, though his manner suggested an air of spiritual authority that remained above the fray of partisan politics. Nonetheless, Graham did as much as any other person to shape modern America’s view of evangelicalism. No other evangelical figure cultivated such close relationships with important political figures while also maintaining the widespread admiration of the American public. At the same time, Graham’s preaching retained much of the tenor of the fundamentalist, dispensationalist messages of early twentieth century preachers like Billy Sunday. He warned Americans of the evils of the modern world. He stressed the need for immediate repentance and acceptance of the Gospel message. He told his listeners that Jesus could return at any moment to judge the world. Hundreds of thousands of people attended his evangelical events, giving Graham an unprecedented opportunity to shape the worldview of millions of Christians.
In 1949, Graham was invited to lead a revival in Los Angeles, California. Graham’s appearance on Los Angeles radio, coupled with the local media’s promotion of the event, including the endorsement of Charles Fuller, helped to extend the revival from one week to eight. By the time the event had ended, estimates placed the total attendance at approximately 350,000 people. Approximately 3,000 of those in attendance made public professions of belief in Christ. Practically overnight, Graham was a sensation, leading him to continue preaching across the country, drawing thousands of attendees as well as the attention of the national media.\textsuperscript{51}

In a matter of a few years, Graham was preaching to large crowds in some of the world’s biggest cities, from Washington, D.C. to New York City to Berlin, London and Stockholm. Graham began calling his evangelistic events “crusades.” He largely avoided the pejorative connotation that the term “crusade” carried in relationship to Christian history. Graham’s crusades were crusades for souls. His messages were focused on presenting listeners with a clear dilemma: accept Jesus Christ as one’s personal Savior or face certain destruction. Indeed, to Americans who are only familiar with the elderly, white-haired, saintly and revered Graham of the late twentieth century, the Graham of the 1950s would be almost unrecognizable. Graham spoke in thunderous tones, often moving about the stage and pointing his fingers directly at members of the audience, imploring them to make a decision for Christ. His eyes were piercing, further accentuating his dark, chiseled face and giving his booming baritone voice an even greater sense of authority. He adhered to the fundamentalist, dispensationalist message,

exhorting listeners to abandon the emptiness of materialism and social vices, warning that the Second Coming of Christ could happen at any moment, asking those who came to see him whether they were ready to meet the Lord.

At the same time, Graham’s crusades were also crusades against communism. If Charles Fuller was well known for blending revivalism with war concerns, Billy Graham became equally noted for connecting revivalism with the red menace. Graham rarely preached a sermon in the early years of his ministry when he did not rail against the evils of communism. As fear of worldwide communism grew in the late 1940s and throughout the 1950s, Graham joined the chorus of American political leaders and fellow evangelicals who saw communism as atheistic, monolithic, and a direct threat to the survival of the free world. As historian Stephen Whitfield aptly noted, it is impossible to understand Graham’s incredible popularity in the 1950s without also understanding “the milieu of dread and anxiety in which he emerged.” Graham’s 1949 crusade in Los Angeles opened only days after the Soviets had successfully detonated their first atomic bomb. Graham used the anxiety created by this event to warn those in attendance that unless the residents of Los Angeles repented of their sins and turned back to God, their city would be one of the first to be destroyed by an atomic bomb, much like the destruction that visited the cities of Sodom and Gomorrah in the Old Testament.

In this sense, Graham’s preaching was effective Cold War rhetoric, not simply because he united “the fear of Armageddon with the assurance of redemption,” as Whitfield noted, but also because he connected concerns about foreign affairs with Americans’ fears about security at home, particularly the widespread notion that
communists were infiltrating American government, schools, churches, and other important public institutions. Graham was a vocal supporter of Wisconsin Senator Joseph McCarthy’s attempts to rid American government of communists. He warned his listeners that there were at least “1100 social-sounding organizations that are communist or communist operated in this country.” These organizations “control[led] the minds of a great segment” of Americans. Some of America’s greatest “politicians,” “entertainers” and “educators,” according to Graham, were under the Communist spell.52

Graham’s anti-communism was made all the more important because he cultivated close relationships with prominent American politicians. From January 13 to February 7, 1952, Graham led a crusade at Washington, D.C.’s National Guard Armory. Graham proudly boasted that the event drew somewhere between “twenty-five to forty congressmen” and about “five senators” every night.53 Though these statistics cannot be substantiated, on Sunday, February 13, as the crusade came to a close, House Speaker Sam Rayburn invited Graham to lead his final service on the steps of the U.S. Capitol building, declaring “This country needs a revival, and I believe Billy Graham is bringing it to us.” Graham’s appearance at the Capitol bolstered Congressional support for the establishment of a National Day of Prayer, an idea that Graham promoted during the Washington crusade.54 Only two months later, on April 17, 1952, President Harry Truman signed a Congressional order establishing a National Day of Prayer.

 Clearly, something significant was happening in the relationship between American evangelicalism and mainstream American politics. While maintaining a fierce adherence to many tenets of fundamentalism, particularly rejecting the evils of the material world, Graham simultaneously embraced some of the world’s most influential leaders. Graham’s immense popularity and acceptance into the mainstream of American society must be seen both in terms of the history of American evangelicalism and the history of the early Cold War. In essence, the marriage of evangelicalism and Cold War rhetoric was symbiotic. Graham benefited from the endorsement of public figures, giving his crusades an even greater degree of legitimacy, and policymakers benefited from the support that Graham’s anticommunist preaching afforded their domestic and foreign policy battles against communism. Graham helped to fashion the Cold War as something more than a global struggle for power or a battle of competing ideologies. In its essence, Graham taught, the American struggle against communism was spiritual warfare. As Stephen Whitfield pointed out, Graham preached that communism was a creation of Satan, a manifestation of the spirit of the Antichrist. The answer, for all Americans, was to turn to Jesus Christ as Savior and Lord. Graham effectively blurred the lines between Christianity and patriotism, between loyalty to the flag and loyalty to the cross. “If you would become a true patriot,” he remarked, “then become a Christian.” In an indirect way, then, Graham preached Christianity as a primary method of national defense. To protect America from the forces of inner decay and outside evil, Americans needed to turn to Christ. Then, and only then, would communism be defeated.

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55 Whitfield, *Culture of the Cold War*, 81.
The evangelical anti-communist impulse was hardly limited to Billy Graham. In a speech delivered to the 1951 annual meeting of the National Association of Evangelicals in Chicago, Illinois, Dr. Clyde W. Taylor, the executive secretary of the Evangelical Foreign Missions Association, remarked “We as Christians have the only satisfactory answer to communism.” Taylor proceeded to connect evangelical anti-communism with foreign mission. “Our answer to communism is, first of all, a mass appeal for presenting Christ to the hundreds of thousands of people that as yet know nothing about Jesus Christ and yet are now part of nations that are endeavoring to operate as democracies.” The “one basic preparation” that these nations lacked to “be able to satisfactorily operate as democracies” was Christian faith. “The masses must be pointed to Christ,” Taylor told the evangelicals gathered at the conference. “Generally as Christianity advances and Christ is preached in foreign mission fields, the people are given at least enough education to read God’s Word and they are provided with a certain amount of literature, often woefully inadequate, but at least some.”

Taylor expressed significant concern about those who might fall to the grip of communism in nations of “the Orient,” a place where communism seemed to have “the ripest fields.” The primary challenge facing those Christians who fought communism there, Taylor remarked, was that they “have never learned to know Christ, they have never been provided with adequate literature, and they have never been educated as to what communism and other isms are, and be prepared to think and act intelligently as Christians and as a free people.”

56 United Evangelical Action, May 1, 1951, 5.
57 Ibid.
These words recalled the imperialistic, paternalistic sentiments of the early twentieth century, with Theodore Roosevelt’s desire to spread civilization to the supposedly uncivilized nations abroad and Woodrow Wilson’s messianic vision to make the world safe for democracy. This was the Cold War, however. The NAE’s desire to defeat communism by spreading Christianity fit nicely into the framework of competing for hearts and minds in Third World countries. Spreading Christianity and spreading the Western, Americanized way of life had been closely connected as long as there had been American missionaries. The Cold War gave this missionary impulse an altogether new focus and importance, one that drew the Christian mission into the national mission, to contain the spread of communism abroad.

The 1960 meeting of the NAE made the anti-communist program an explicit part of the organization’s function. Meeting in Chicago in late April, the NAE members outlined a five-point plan for taking a “vigorous stand against the Red Menace.” Those five parts included 1) encouraging a revived and militant church to prayer, Bible study and evangelism, 2) providing a study guide on the basic tenets of communism and how they conflict with Christianity, 3) exposing communism by literature, lectures, films, tapes, etc., 4) publishing evangelical interpretation of communist strategy thrust, and 5) maintaining an adequate contact with national and local governments so as to provide a guide for action on issues vital to the churches. “There is no such thing as compromise with atheistic communism,” the members declared. “We cannot pursue a policy of ‘live and let live’ with hell.”

**The Source of Our Strength**

To what extent did the NAE’s vision, and that of Billy Graham, correspond with American policymakers’ plans for prosecuting the Cold War? Recent scholarship concerned with this topic has provided overwhelming evidence that some of the most important figures involved in the creation of American foreign policy in the early Cold War period conceived of the U.S. struggle with communism as nothing less than spiritual warfare, a battle of God-fearing Americans against an atheistic, monolithic menace that threatened to consume the world. Such were the sentiments expressed by the architect of containment, George F. Kennan. Speaking to the congregation of First Presbyterian Church in Princeton, New Jersey in the fall of 1953, the erudite American diplomat explained that faith in God was the most important difference between the people of the United States and the communists of the Soviet Union. Kennan exhorted the congregation not to be deceived by the nature of the communist menace. “Evil is a force of no mean quality,” Kennan told the congregation. He characterized communism as an agency of “pride” and “desperate self-respect,” and much like Ronald Reagan speaking to another group of evangelicals thirty years later, Kennan warned the congregation not to fall victim to the temptation of skirting their responsibilities to stand firm in the face of the communist threat. “We are not to be spared the fire of conscience and decision in which our fathers’ faith was forged,” he remarked. Closing his message with a prayer, Kennan prayed that those in attendance that evening would have “the power of penetration to discern the peculiar dangers” of the age and “the strength to meet them.”

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The task of implementing Kennan’s beliefs about the necessity of containment, as well as the responsibility for articulating those ideas to the American people, fell largely on the shoulders of President Harry Truman. Though often cantankerous in personality, Truman was by most accounts a genuinely devout man whose worldview was shaped by his Christian faith. In speaking to the American people about the need to contain communism during his 1948 State of the Union Address, Truman outlined the primary differences between the United States and the Soviet Union. “We are a people of faith,” Truman told listeners; “The basic source of our strength is spiritual.” The United States held fast to the idea of “the dignity of man,” the President continued. “We believe that he was created in the image of the Father of us all.” In contrast, Truman held that Soviet communists believed the Soviet people existed “merely to strengthen the state,” or to “be cogs in the economic machine.”

Truman and Kennan’s visions for the American anticommunist crusade found considerable support within the American military. After World War II, evangelicals focused their efforts at conversion on the American military. Some evangelicals believed that military service created an environment that corrupted the minds of American soldiers, encouraging everything from late-night card playing to smoking and illicit sex with prostitutes. This outlook was especially the case during the early Cold War, when the ranks of the military swelled. In the period between 1950 and 1953, as the United States waged an overseas war against communist expansion in Korea, over one million American youth were enlisted in the service through conscription. These increased numbers not only supported the idea that the military was a field ripe for evangelical

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60 Ibid, 112.
harvest, but also allowed evangelicals to focus on directing the minds of young servicemen toward American godliness and against communism.\textsuperscript{61}

Military officials aided evangelicals’ efforts. The fusion of evangelism and military education created an opportunity not just to preach the Gospel to soldiers, but also to educate them about the Christian character of the United States. John C. Broger, the deputy director (1956 – 1961) and later director (1961 – 1984) of Armed Forces Information and Education (AFIE) was particularly helpful in this regard. Broger was a World War II veteran and close friend of the Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff Arthur Radford. In addition, he served as the president of the Far East Broadcasting Company, an evangelical radio network founded after World War II to send Christian messages to nations of East Asia. In the midst of the Korean War, after reports surfaced that North Korean and Chinese communists had been brainwashing American prisoners of war, some Americans became convinced that the only way to counteract this indoctrination was to strengthen American soldiers’ patriotism. As part of that effort, Broger developed a program that he published in a pamphlet entitled “Militant Liberty.” This program taught soldiers that communism was a “dynamic ideology” that could only be defeated by a stronger, more dynamic ideology. Broger suggested that religious faith was an effective foundation for building one’s defenses against communist indoctrination. As historian Lori Lyn Bogle observed, Broger emphasized “personal evangelism in the political rather than the religious field” by weighing the virtues of American democracy’s “sensitive individual conscience” against communism’s “annihilated individual

conscience.” American life allowed the growth of the individual, the pursuit of one’s own destiny, whereas communism destroyed the spirit of the individual for the greater good of the collective. The American individual’s conscience could find this understanding in “godly precepts and principles,” the only way to truly understand the evils of the communist system. Any plan to fight communism, Broger argued, “must find its source of strength and inspiration in godly righteousness.”

In 1954, his second year as the chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff, Broger’s friend, Arthur Radford, approved “Militant Liberty” for use in military education. The program gained widespread acceptance as a tool for teaching service men and women about the differences between the American way of life and communism. By 1955, the Department of Defense actively promoted “Militant Liberty” to provide “useful and purposeful guiding principles for all members of the Armed Forces.”

Nonetheless, the implementation of “Militant Liberty” proved a mixed success for evangelicals’ efforts to fight the red menace with religion. If the enthusiastic promotion of the program by top officials demonstrated that evangelicals held some sway within the highest ranks of the U.S. military, the adverse reaction to “Militant Liberty” by many in the U.S. government also suggested that evangelicals’ influence within the military was limited. “Militant Liberty” met fierce resistance in U.S. military academies. The U.S. Marine Corps notably refused to use the program in its curriculum, fearing that its promotion of the U.S. values as a counterweight to communism would produce negative side effects in the long term. Promoting American citizenship out of anti-communist

63 Ibid.
trepidation was an inherently negative way of encouraging Marines to embrace patriotism, officials reckoned. Officials within the CIA and State Department also expressed concerns that “Militant Liberty” would fuel religious extremism in the American military.⁶⁴

**In God We Trust, In God They Don’t**

If evangelicals met resistance in some areas of their relationship with U.S. Armed Forces, the overall picture of that relationship still demonstrated growth. In 1952, when World War II General Dwight D. Eisenhower sought the presidency, he found significant support from prominent figures in evangelicalism. Billy Graham, in particular, played a key role in encouraging evangelicals to like Ike. Though Eisenhower’s religious convictions were nebulous at best, Graham and the former general were friends. On his popular radio program “The Hour of Decision,” which debuted in 1950, Graham told listeners that he was convinced that Eisenhower was the leader who could help bring a much-needed revival to America. After Eisenhower’s election and throughout the eight years of the Eisenhower presidency, Graham continued to lend much support to Eisenhower’s leadership, publicly stating his belief that the president was the leader of an ongoing spiritual revival in the United States.⁶⁵

There was considerable evidence, at least on the surface, to suggest that the United States was indeed experiencing a revival in the 1950s. As Stephen Whitfield noted, religion became a practically ubiquitous force in American life in the 1950s. Its ubiquity may have been based more on the fact that religion and American nationalism

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became “virtually synonymous” in the 1950s, but the “signs of religion” that were seemingly “everywhere” nonetheless became a useful tool for evangelists like Graham to illustrate American godliness. Church membership increased by 14 percent in the 1950s, from 55 percent of the American population to 69 percent. A series of notable decisions by Congress sought to inject American faith in God into prominent symbols of the nation’s identity. On June 14, 1954, the same day that President Eisenhower declared the first “Flag Day,” a Joint Resolution of Congress inserted the words “under God” into the Pledge of Allegiance. In 1955, Congress formally ordered that the words “In God We Trust” be added to all American currency (it had been used on American coinage since the Civil War) and one year later, Congress adopted the words as the official national motto.66

There were other telling signs of America’s preoccupation with all things godly. An evangelical consumer culture developed, as evidenced by the popularity of evangelically themed movies and books. In 1956, *The Ten Commandments*, starring Charlton Heston as Moses, opened in American theaters. The film grossed more than $65 million at the box office, making it one of the most profitable films ever made. In 1952, Norman Vincent Peale, an evangelical minister and motivational speaker from New York, published *The Power of Positive Thinking*, which spent eighty-six weeks on *The New York Times* bestseller list and went on to sell over two million copies in the 1950s alone. In 1953, Billy Graham published the widely read *Peace with God*, which was eventually translated into thirty-eight different languages and also went on to sell more than two million copies. Graham gave one of the first copies to President Eisenhower. In

66 Whitfield, *Culture of the Cold War*, 82 – 89.
1955, a Baptist minister named Alexander Haraszti, serving as a physician in his native, communist-dominated Hungary, was able to obtain a copy of *Peace with God* and translate it into Hungarian, distributing copies of the book underground at great risk to his own safety. Later, when Graham visited Hungary in 1977, Haraszti served as his personal contact, helping to clear the way for Graham to preach the Gospel in Hungary under the shadow of the Iron Curtain.67

In 1956, Graham joined fellow theologian Carl F.H. Henry to found *Christianity Today (CT)*, a periodical for evangelicals on social, political and foreign affairs. The magazine, established largely to serve as an alternative to the more liberal, mainline *The Christian Century*, quickly spoke out on the recent Suez Canal crisis, in which President Eisenhower had sent American military forces to prevent British, French and Israeli intervention in Egypt after President Gamal Abdel Nasser decided to nationalize the Canal. Eisenhower’s firm stand in the crisis, precipitated in large part by fears that the Soviet Union might use the event as justification for entering Egypt, drew support from *CT*’s writers. *CT* nonetheless criticized the President for relying too heavily on the United Nations rather than being willing to use military force, a theme that became a staple among conservatives in later years. In addition, *CT* condemned the Soviet Union for brutally suppressing an October uprising in Hungary, calling on all Christians to demand that the Soviet Union be expelled from the United Nations.68

Three years later, in 1959, Graham visited Moscow for the first time at the invitation of a friend, Los Angeles businessman Bill Grady. Unable to preach in Moscow

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68 Inboden, 81.
as he had in cities throughout Europe, Graham was officially considered a tourist during the trip, though he attended services among 3,500 others at Moscow’s only Protestant church. Graham toured the streets of Moscow, flanked by Grady and New York Times correspondent Harrison Salisbury. He sat down for tea with a group of students at Moscow University. He walked through an empty Lenin Stadium. Returning to the United States, Graham praised the people he had met in Moscow, particularly their high standards of moral integrity. “I hate communism,” Graham remarked, “but I love the Russian people and the moral purity I found among the Muscovites.”

Graham’s remarks drew sharp criticism from those who had supported his anti-communist preaching. The director of the staunchly anti-communist Research Institute of America, Leo Cherne, chided Graham while testifying before a Senate sub-committee on internal security. Graham’s opinions were “superficial, false, and damaging,” Cherne told the committee. In Cherne’s opinion, Graham failed to take into account that it was Russians who had brutally put down the Hungarian revolt in 1956.

The minor quarrel caused by Graham’s remarks foreshadowed things to come. As Graham continued to express his sympathy for the Russian people, separating his hatred for communism from his desire to reach the Russians with Gospel of Christ, other evangelists refused to make that distinction. This was especially significant by the 1960s, as Graham shared the public arena with other evangelists who made savvy use of television to influence evangelical’s opinions about politics. These were the televangelists – Jerry Falwell, Pat Robertson, and Oral Roberts – who paved the way for

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69 Martin, A Prophet with Honor, 257 – 58; Graham, Just As I Am, 378 – 383.
70 “Slams Graham For Picturing Reds as Moral” Chicago Tribune, June 20, 1959, 11; Martin, A Prophet with Honor, 258.
the rise of the Religious Right. Nothing that they accomplished would have been possible without the changes in American Protestantism discussed in this chapter. The first half of the twentieth century provided many opportunities for evangelicals to unite in their efforts to reach the world with the Christian Gospel. The work of Billy Graham and Charles Fuller showed that it was possible to create a broad, ecumenical evangelicalism undivided by the sectarian theological disputes that separated Protestant denominations from one another. Yet this broad evangelicalism did not do away with the fierce conservative impulse of fundamentalism. The history of fundamentalism in the twentieth century demonstrated that fundamentalists were a dedicated and persistent lot, willing to use modern means of communication to denounce the evils of modernism. They were at home in the popular evangelicalism of Billy Graham, but also retained their staunch conservative attitudes toward theology, politics, and society. Thus, evangelicalism at mid-century represented a paradox, at once more united than ever, yet also divided by many of the same social and theological issues that had influenced the growth of fundamentalism at the turn of the century. As the Cold War continued, and the struggle to contain worldwide communism became more controversial, those divisions became more apparent.
CHAPTER 2: APOCALYPSE SOON?

At the dawn of the Cold War, American evangelicalism lacked the shape and the leadership necessary to foment a nationwide political movement. Throughout the course of the 1960s and into the 1970s, however, a number of important events, trends, and charismatic figures laid the groundwork for the rise of such a movement and fundamentally shaped evangelicals’ political consciousness. On one hand, the growth in popularity of televangelism helped to unite geographically disparate evangelicals around the preaching of a small group of dynamic, well-funded television preachers. Televangelism, in turn, aided the growth of an evangelical consumer culture, complete with publishing houses and music labels devoted to selling popular evangelical titles. Televangelists would not remain quiet when it came to controversial issues of the day. Some of these issues, particularly a highly controversial series of Supreme Court decisions, culminating in the Court’s 1973 Roe v. Wade ruling, have been well documented in previous histories of the Religious Right. Less recognized, but also important, was the Vietnam War. Not only did the war fan the flames of popular resistance to government authority, represented most visibly by the counterculture of the 1960s, it also created a foreign policy debate that evangelicals could not ignore.

Whereas the fundamentalist/modernist controversy divided evangelicals into diametrically opposed theological camps, the war in Vietnam further divided evangelicals politically. On one side stood the peace activists of the evangelical left, spurred on by a determination to end the destruction of an unjust war. On the other side, some right-wing fundamentalists saw the war as an integral part of America’s holy war against the spread
of communism abroad. In their view, soldiers on the battlefield were doing God’s work. Ministers who stood up in opposition to the war were at best misguided, at worst a tool of the very communist menace that God was trying to stamp out through American armed forces.

While they eschewed much of the “holy war” rhetoric that characterized hardcore fundamentalists’ views on Vietnam, groups like the National Association of Evangelicals and publications like *Christianity Today* saw the war as an integral part of an unfolding struggle against a monolithic communist foe. As this chapter will demonstrate, however, it was one venerated evangelical, Billy Graham, who most symbolized evangelicals’ support for the war. Graham stood firmly on the side of the Johnson administration in the early days of the conflict, embracing the idea that the war was necessary and just. As the war continued to descend into a military and diplomatic quagmire, however, Graham found himself under fire from some evangelicals who accused him of giving the war moral justification. Hard-pressed by some to re-evaluate his position on the war with a definitive statement of opposition, but acutely aware how such a move would alienate him from the halls of American government, Graham adopted a middle ground: war was sometimes necessary, but this did not mean it was good. There would always be war in the world until Christ returned. Christians could support the efforts of government to defeat evil forces in the world without approving of war itself; the world was broken and humanity was fallen.

In this regard, Graham’s political views reflected evangelicals’ growing interest in Bible prophecy. Evangelicals’ embrace of premillennial dispensationalist theology, with
its emphasis on the Rapture, tribulation, and final battle of Armageddon, had a profound effect on their outlook on world affairs. Rampant interest in Bible prophecy in the 1970s was at the center of the rise of an evangelical consumer culture, with books, popular music, and increased viewership among popular televangelists who announced the imminent return of Christ. While this theology allowed mainstream evangelicals to refrain from taking a firm position on Vietnam, it also hardened evangelicals’ sense of solidarity as a unique American subculture, and later as a distinct American political group. Many evangelicals came to see the unfolding events of the 1960s and 70s as signs that there were lurking dangers overseas and growing persecution of Christians at home. These, in turn, were all signs that the apocalypse was nigh.

Rise of the “Electronic Church”\(^{71}\)

Television evangelism, or televangelism as it came to be known, played an integral role in laying the foundation for political activism by American evangelicals. Televangelists continued to build the popular, ecumenical evangelicalism fostered by Billy Graham and Charles E. Fuller. They also helped to shape evangelicalism into a commercial force that could not be ignored. In doing so, televangelists cultivated consumer Christianity with books, music, and even evangelical movies, and in the process, fused entertainment and evangelism in a seamless fashion. Thus, a trend ignited in the early century by evangelists like Billy Sunday and continued on the radio with Charles E. Fuller took off in an altogether new level of popularity and prominence with

\(^{71}\) The origins of the phrase “Electronic Church” are uncertain, but it has been widely used to describe televangelism in some of the more prominent secondary sources employed by this dissertation. See, for instance, Boyer, *When Time Shall Be No More*, 137.
television. Television brought popular evangelicalism into American homes in prime time.

In the years immediately following World War II, the number of televisions in American homes substantially increased. In 1946, there were only 7,000 active TV sets in the nation. By 1960, that number had risen to 50 million sets, with ninety percent of American homes owning at least one TV.72 For postwar American evangelists, the potential created by this boom in communications technology was immediately evident. Some, like Rex Humbard of Cuyahoga Falls, Ohio, utilized the new medium with alacrity. In 1949, Humbard began preaching on television. By 1952 he had a regular weekly program. His broadcasts were so successful that in 1958, Humbard’s ministry spent $4 million to construct a new church building specifically to accommodate the space demanded by his TV ministry. Hubbard’s “Cathedral of Tomorrow” seated over five thousand.73

Billy Graham also utilized television to his advantage. In 1951, Graham began broadcasting a televised version of the Hour of Decision. The program was a moderate success at best. Graham’s ability to communicate with viewers through the TV screen paled in comparison to his ability to communicate with people in person at his crusades. In 1957, however, Graham’s ministry broadcast his crusade in New York City’s Madison Square Garden in prime time television across the country on ABC. The program drew 6.5 million viewers, the highest rating ABC had drawn in its timeslot to that point. From

that point forward, Graham’s television ministry focused mostly on periodic airings of his crusades on network television.\(^{74}\)

While Graham and Humbard undoubtedly helped to create the environment in which televangelism emerged, three other evangelists cemented the rise of the TV preacher and came to embody the face of televangelism in the 1960s and beyond. Two, Jerry Falwell and Marion G. “Pat” Robertson, were natives of Virginia. The other, Oral Roberts, hailed from Oklahoma. They were dynamic but disparate personalities. Roberts and Robertson were enthusiastic believers in the immediate availability of miraculous healing. Roberts began his ministry as a healing evangelist, traveling the country holding tent revivals where hundreds of people would turn out in hopes of receiving a touch from the Divine. Robertson implored his viewers to send in prayer requests and call into his program so that their needs could be prayed for live on the air. Falwell was a fundamentalist Southern Baptist. His theology, strictly interpreted, held that the gifts of the Holy Spirit, such as divine healing, had ceased to be active with the deaths of the Apostles. Falwell was much more concerned with managing sin, individual and corporate. Like fundamentalists of the early twentieth century, he wanted to preach the Gospel straight and true. His job was to defend the faith from secular attacks and, in the process, save as many souls as possible before the Second Coming of Christ.\(^{75}\)


Jerry Falwell’s rise to fame was as unlikely as any of his televangelist contemporaries. Born in August 1933 in Lynchburg, Virginia, Falwell faced adversity within his family from an early age. His father Carey, a businessman, drank heavily. The Falwells lost a daughter to appendicitis in 1931, and later that same year, Carey Falwell shot and killed his brother Garland in a duel. Haunted by these events for the remainder of his life, Carey Falwell died in 1948 when Jerry was sixteen.76

In spite of these hardships, Falwell’s mother, Helen, remained a faithful Christian. She pushed her sons Jerry and his fraternal twin brother Gene to attend church and live a life of dedication to God. Jerry bitterly resented this imposition of faith by his mother, at least in his childhood.77 As a teenager, however, Falwell learned that there could be advantages to attending church. Advised by a friend that there were lots of attractive girls at Lynchburg’s Park Avenue Baptist Church, Falwell went there in January 1952 hoping to find a date. Instead, he found Jesus. Received into the faith that night at the age of eighteen, Falwell still managed to get the girl. The young Macel Pate, whose family attended Park Avenue Baptist, took a liking to the new convert and six years later, in April 1958, she became Falwell’s wife.78

In the meantime, Falwell went to Bible College in Missouri and studied to be a preacher. When he returned home to Lynchburg in 1956, he discovered that some members of Park Avenue Baptist were ready to split from the church to form a separate

congregation. They asked Falwell to be the new church’s minister. Reluctant at first to become the leader of a church of dissenters, Falwell nonetheless agreed to become the pastor of the new church on an interim basis. He was still leading that church when he died in May 2007. The church Falwell helped to found in Lynchburg eventually became Thomas Road Baptist Church. Its beginnings were certainly inconspicuous. The church’s first meetings were held in an abandoned building that had once belonged to the Donald Duck Bottling Company. Tagged with the title of pastor of the Donald Duck Church, Falwell overcame the church’s early obscurity by turning to radio and television to promote both the church and his own growth as a spiritual authority. The fledgling church quickly overcame its lowly status and began to grow alongside its visible, magnetic minister.79

Unlike Jerry Falwell, Pat Robertson was born into a life of privilege. Robertson was born in 1930, the son of Absalom Willis Robertson, a Democratic United States Senator from Virginia. He earned his nickname, “Pat,” from his older brother Willis, who loved to “pat” his younger brother on the cheeks.80 Like Jerry Falwell, however, Robertson was an unlikely televangelist. When he decided to pursue a career in television ministry in 1961, Robertson drew the ire of his father, who feared that his son would tarnish the family’s reputation.81 Young Pat would not be deterred. In October of that year, Robertson began operating a small UHF television station in Portsmouth, Virginia. Referring to his station as CBN, the Christian Broadcasting Network,

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Robertson gradually gained financial support from a number of viewers. In the fall of 1963, Robertson conducted the first fundraising telethon for CBN, where he petitioned for 700 viewers to form an unofficial “club” of supporters who would be willing to pledge $10 a month to the station. Robertson referred to these supporters as the “700 club,” which became the name of CBN’s flagship program. By 1965, *The 700 Club* was on the air. The program was innovative in its promotion of interaction between the viewer and the evangelist. Viewers could call the station and share prayer requests with Robertson, who would then pray for those requests live on the air. Though raised and ordained as a Southern Baptist, Robertson began to embrace a charismatic faith more closely associated with Pentecostalism. He believed, and preached, that God spoke to him directly through “words of knowledge” that would help him to discern the needs and concerns of viewers. Robertson would then speak directly to viewers of the needs that had been revealed to him by God.⁸²

Both Robertson and Falwell were assisted in their efforts by changes in federal regulations regarding religious programming. Throughout the 1950s and 1960s, in a time when television evangelists sought to carve out a niche in the American broadcasting market, the Federal Communications Commission required television stations to set aside a certain amount of broadcast time for religious programming. Most stations met this requirement by giving away free time to local churches. Some used the time to broadcast

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programs featuring popular evangelists like Billy Graham, Rex Humbard, and Oral
Roberts.\textsuperscript{83}

Roberts experienced substantial success on television in the 1950s. He had built a
reputation as a faith healer and tent evangelist who claimed to have been healed by God
of tuberculosis at the age of fifteen in 1933. By 1957, eighty percent of American
viewers could tune in to watch Roberts on TV. Roberts built a mailing list of viewers
who wrote or contributed financially to his ministry. At the end of the decade, Roberts’s
organization reached over a million American homes through direct mail.\textsuperscript{84}

In spite of his substantial success with nationwide syndicated programming,
Roberts believed there was enormous potential in broadcasting evangelical shows in
prime time. In 1968, he shocked many viewers by abandoning his popular television
program and retreating to raise money for an altogether new experiment – a series of
prime-time specials. The first of these specials aired in March 1969. Roberts designed
these shows to attract a large audience by employing entertainment as much as
evangelism. Celebrities Dale Evans, Pat Boone and Anita Bryant appeared on the
programs. Popular singer Mahalia Jackson, an icon of African-American gospel music,
also took part in some of Roberts’s specials. The World Action Singers sang and
danced.\textsuperscript{85} Approximately ten million Americans tuned in at the outset of this experiment.
This was an unprecedented audience for an evangelical television program, and it led to
further financial support for more prime time specials that garnered critical acclaim for

their elaborate levels of production and attention to artistic design. In 1971, one of Roberts’s specials received Emmy nominations for art direction, scenic design, and lighting direction. As biographer David Harrell noted, Roberts took evangelicals’ presence on American television from Sunday morning to Saturday night. In other words, Roberts blurred the line between religion and entertainment.\footnote{Harrell, Jr., “Oral Roberts: Religious Media Pioneer,” 325 – 34.}

The success of Roberts’s specials demonstrated that there was a viable market for evangelical TV shows. No longer were such programs to be thought of as mere public service programs or programs only to be broadcast in syndicated markets on Sunday morning. Many local television stations across the United States recognized that there could be significant profit in religious programming. In addition, increasing numbers of new televangelists like Falwell and Robertson saw great potential in combining the promotion of personal religious experience for viewers with commercial religious broadcasting. As television stations began charging local churches for programming time, many churches declined to pay stations to keep their programming on the air. As a result, evangelists with large fundraising bases, dynamic personalities, and loyal followings across the nation dominated the evangelical television market. Oral Roberts’s prime time TV specials, Pat Robertson’s \textit{The 700 Club} and Jerry Falwell’s \textit{The Old Time Gospel Hour} were among the most popular evangelical programs emerging with nationwide audiences in the 1970s.\footnote{FitzGerald, “A Disciplined, Charging Army.”}
Evangelicals and the Vietnam Dilemma

Televangelism emerged at a tumultuous moment in American history. The same Americans who tuned in to *The 700 Club*, *The Hour of Decision* and *The Old Time Gospel Hour* also witnessed scenes of dramatic social unrest on their television screens. In early 1963, Birmingham, Alabama law enforcement officials turned powerful fire hoses against black citizens, including children, who participated in campaigns for civil rights. Later that year, Martin Luther King, Jr. delivered his stirring “I Have a Dream” speech from the Lincoln Memorial. Five years later, King was assassinated while supporting a sanitation workers’ strike in Memphis, Tennessee. Americans saw one President assassinated in Dallas, Texas, and later, his brother assassinated while campaigning for President. In the second half of the 1960s, moreover, Americans witnessed the war in Vietnam on their television screens in a manner that no war had ever unfolded before. Not only were scenes from the war broadcast on Americans’ televisions, so were scenes of social unrest fomented by the war, particularly the unrest generated on American university campuses. After the Tet Offensive exposed the dire situation Americans faced in Vietnam in early 1968, *CBS Evening News* anchor Walter Cronkite editorialized that the United States was “mired in stalemate” in Vietnam. Clearly, Americans had never experienced war in this fashion, with some of America’s most trusted public figures speaking out against the nation’s efforts overseas as the war played out in real time in Americans’ living rooms.88

The war represented not just a political and diplomatic dilemma for Americans, but a moral dilemma as well. Evangelicals were thus faced with the task of formulating a response to the war. Given the importance of the Vietnam War to the narrative of recent American history, it is surprising that historians have paid little attention to evangelicals’ engagement in debates about the war. There are a few likely explanations. First, even though the aforementioned televangelists eventually became politically active, in the 1960s and for most of the 1970s, they focused most of their attention on developing their ministries rather than engaging in politics. Second, evangelicals’ response to the war was characterized far more by conflict than consensus. Indeed, for as much as the fundamentalist/modernist controversy of the early twentieth century divided the mainline Protestant denominations from their conservative fundamentalist counterparts, the Vietnam War illustrated the extent to which those divisions had deepened, splitting American Protestants into three groups: mainline Protestants, fundamentalists and the so-called mainstream evangelicals. Though this latter group represented the vast majority of conservative evangelicals, it has nonetheless proven very difficult to define. Certainly mainstream evangelicals shared far more in common with their fundamentalist counterparts than with theologians in the mainline Protestant denominations. They wholeheartedly rejected the theological modernism of liberals in mainline denominations. Yet they also eschewed much of the hardcore anti-intellectual attitude adopted by fundamentalists. Mainstream evangelicals were those who followed the example and teachings of Billy Graham. They believed in the infallibility of the Bible, the assurance of salvation through the cross, and the Second Coming of Christ. They did not, however,
draw a strict line between things of the world and things of God. They engaged in popular culture and did not seek to separate themselves from mainstream society.

Christians’ divide over Vietnam played out in the pages of periodicals. *Christianity and Crisis* and *Christian Century*, typically sympathetic to the liberalism of mainline denominations, published editorials opposed to the war. Meanwhile, mainline denominations, including the American Lutheran Church, the American Baptist Convention, the Methodist Episcopal Church, the United Church of Christ and the United Presbyterian Church, all issued statements in opposition to American escalation of the war. Prominent religious intellectuals like Martin Luther King, Jr. and Reinhold Niebuhr also opposed the war.\(^89\) Niebuhr’s opposition to the war was particularly notable. One of the most prominent theologians and public intellectuals of the twentieth century, Niebuhr rose to prominence in part because of his support for America’s efforts in World War II. Niebuhr articulated a defense of just war known as Christian Realism, which became a foundational doctrine of Cold War liberalism. In Niebuhr’s view, pacifists who discouraged America’s engagement in the Second World War were naïve about the harsh realities of the world. Niebuhr held fast to the traditional Christian doctrine of original sin, the idea that humans, both individually and corporately, are corrupted, and as a result, it is impossible to create a perfect world. Christians would always be forced to use distasteful means to fight evil. This, as Niebuhr articulated, was one of the “tragic necessities of history.” Yet Niebuhr also warned against the development of pride among Christians who did the fighting. The Christian would always act with an “uneasy conscience,” Niebuhr argued, “both because of the ambiguity of his cause and the

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impurity of his weapons.” Thus, it was arrogant for Christians to believe that they could ever wage a “holy war.” War was always tragedy involving the use of “terrible weapons.”

Niebuhr believed for a war to be just, it had to be connected to a clearly defined purpose tied to justice. It was on these grounds, at least in part, that Niebuhr opposed the Vietnam War. In an article in *The New Republic*, published in January 1966, Niebuhr remarked, “The analogy between our defense against Nazism and our defense of South Vietnam against the Communist North is flagrantly misleading. Nazism’s military nationalism threatened the moral substance of Western culture, the Jews with extinction, and non-German continental nations with slavery. None of these issues is involved in a civil war between two portions of a partitioned nation, one Communist and the other non-Communist.”

Evangelicals nonetheless embraced one of the central tenets of Niebuhr’s defense of World War II in their own defense of Vietnam. In mainstream evangelical periodicals like *Christianity Today, Eternity* and Billy Graham’s *Decision*, editorials and articles defended the war on the grounds that the war’s opponents, particularly those who criticized it from the pulpit, were uninformed and naïve. A February 12, 1965 editorial in *Christianity Today*, entitled “Ignorance Often has a Loud Voice,” posed the question, “What special wisdom do clergymen have on the military and international intricacies of the United States government’s involvement in Vietnam?” The answer was blunt:

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“None.” “They can indeed speak piously about our difficulties in Vietnam,” the editorial continued, “but a vocal and uninformed piety is worse than silence. Clergymen do well to preach loudly and clearly about what they know; for the rest they do best to put their hands in their mouths.” It was foolish, the piece argued, to use the Bible’s command to not kill to defend a pacifist approach to the war. “To imagine that the answer to our involvement in South Vietnam lies in a simple reference to the Sixth Commandment is also a naïve over-simplification.”

*Christianity Today*’s editorial page consistently lambasted ministers who sided with anti-war protestors. In another opinion piece, published in June 1967, the magazine’s editors asked the question “Who Speaks for the Church?” “The pulpit should not become a political sounding board nor the congregational meeting a public political forum…The zeal with which liberal churchmen pursue social action – giving it a higher priority than winning men to Christ through gospel preaching – may be traced to the current liberal tendency to regard contemporary evangelism as essentially political in nature,” the editorial argued. It concluded that “the policies that have emerged from such programs,” including “opposition to American anti-Communist policy in Viet Nam,” were similar to “those of socialist-tinged representatives.”

Fundamentalists were even more pronounced in their support for the war. In the fundamentalist periodical *Sword of the Lord*, editor John Rice wrote of the Vietnam War, “Nothing can be clearer than that God sometimes approves of people going to war for principles and that He is with them, and when they call on Him and trust Him, He will

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give them victory and deliverance.” Rice argued that God would “help” American soldiers in Vietnam. If they died “in the field of battle,” he wrote, “They will be received into the highest Heaven.” Rice and his fundamentalist contemporaries, including Carl McIntire and Billy James Hargis, believed that Vietnam was not just an important part of the American strategy of containment, it was a spiritual struggle as well, a holy war against demonic forces.94

American Protestantism thus stood divided into three factions by the Vietnam War. While some opposed it as a reckless and ill-conceived foreign endeavor, others argued that it was an unfortunate, but necessary struggle against a very real enemy. Others welcomed the struggle as a righteous mission for the cause of good. A 1968 survey of Protestant clergy in California, conducted by Public Opinion Quarterly, revealed the extent of the divide. 82 percent of Southern Baptist ministers voiced support for increasing American military efforts in Vietnam, even in the wake of the Tet Offensive, while only 18 percent of Presbyterian, 13 percent of the United Church of Christ and 9 percent of Methodist ministers supported such a move. Only 1 percent of Southern Baptist ministers believed the United States should “unilaterally stop the bombing of North Vietnam and offer to negotiate,” while 16 percent of Presbyterian, 22 percent of Methodist and 31 percent of United Church of Christ ministers believed that the United States should take these steps. Forty percent of the Methodist ministers, 40 percent of the United Church of Christ ministers and 28 percent of the Presbyterian ministers surveyed believed that the United States should not only “unilaterally stop the

94 Loveland, American Evangelicals, 121.
bombing,” but also “begin preparations for complete withdrawal.” Only 2 percent of Southern Baptist ministers agreed with this proposal.\textsuperscript{95}

**Billy Graham and Vietnam**

The dilemma Vietnam presented to evangelicals can also be illustrated by studying Billy Graham’s struggle, both public and private, to adopt a consistent public position on the war. Because Graham was the most recognized mainstream American evangelical at the time, his public statements about Vietnam took on an importance beyond those of other evangelists. According to Graham, he was first made aware of the possibility of a war in Vietnam in 1961. In a story Graham often recounted, the evangelist was playing golf with John F. Kennedy in January of that year, four days before Kennedy’s inauguration, when the conversation turned to Vietnam. “We cannot allow Laos and South Vietnam to fall to Communists,” Graham recounted Kennedy saying.\textsuperscript{96} As the war began to escalate in 1965, Graham seemed to embrace a position sympathetic to Kennedy’s words. Though Graham avoided casting Vietnam in Manichean terms, as a spiritual battle against the forces of Satan, he did speak out publicly against those Christians who opposed the war. “I have no sympathy for the clergymen who have signed ads recently, urging the U.S. to get out of Vietnam,” Graham remarked in a speech to a journalism fraternity in Denver on August 25, 1965. “The world is involved in a battle with communism.” Graham went on to remark that those who became “personally acquainted with the facts and the situation in that part of Asia


agree with the President.” Graham towed the line on one of President Lyndon Johnson’s central beliefs about the war – American credibility was at stake in Vietnam. The nation had to persist in the fight against Ho Chi Minh’s forces. The United States was dealing with “naked aggression,” Graham told the Denver audience. He continued, “If we pull out we will lose face with the people of many small countries in that part of the world and they won’t ever trust our word again.” America had a “tremendous obligation” to prosecute the war and put a stop to communism.97

Though he and Johnson were never close friends in the same manner as he had been with Eisenhower, Graham did cultivate a relationship with the President. Johnson, in turn, relied on the support of religious leaders like Graham to deflect criticism of his Vietnam policies. Johnson even attended a Billy Graham crusade in Houston, Texas on November 27, 1965. Speaking to the crowd gathered in Johnson’s home state that night, Graham continued to support the President by criticizing opponents of the war, calling them “extremists” who were not only showing disloyalty to their country, but were also unnecessarily prolonging the war by making it more difficult for the United States to achieve victory. Graham pledged his loyalty to the President even more firmly in his private correspondence, writing that he “intend[ed] to support the decisions made by our Presidents because I have confidence in his judgment,” in an April 7, 1965 letter to Johnson.98

Examples of Graham’s continuing support for the war through 1967 abound.

Perhaps most notable, Graham came as close as ever to calling Vietnam a holy war in a

98 Ibid, 43.
speech delivered to the Presidential Prayer Breakfast on February 17, 1966. Graham warned those in attendance that they ought not to think of Jesus Christ as a “genial and innocuous appeaser.” Instead, Graham quoted Jesus’s words from Matthew’s Gospel, where Jesus remarked that he had not come to “send peace, but a sword.” Graham implied, in a somewhat heavy-handed manner, that those who sought to stop America’s commitment to Vietnam were appeasing evil. The war was necessary and the cause was just, the kind of war that Jesus had taught. The sword Americans wielded overseas was the sword of righteousness of which the Lord had spoken.99

By the time Johnson left office, and Graham’s friend Richard Nixon became President, the evangelist’s thinking on the Vietnam issue had begun to shift. Graham seemed to be personally affected by sharp criticisms of his public statements about the war from other evangelical sources. In January 1967, the evangelical periodical Christian Century accused Graham of “condoning the killing, maiming and burning” going on in Vietnam by granting the war “the blessing of the gospel.” According to the Century’s staff, Graham was not only leading many evangelicals down a wayward path by supporting the war, he was also “meddling with national policy and tampering with the military.” Graham balked at these accusations. Two months later, in the March issue of Christian Century, he responded in an open letter to the Century’s staff, writing, “I have been extremely careful not to be drawn into either the moral implications or the tactical military problems of the Vietnam War.”100

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99 Ibid, 42 – 43.
100 Ibid, 47
If Graham could reasonably defend himself against accusations of “meddling” with American foreign policy or “tampering” with military operations in the field, it was harder to argue that he had not been involved in lending the war moral justification. His public statements had clearly indicated his belief that the war was a necessary evil at the very least if not a good and altogether righteous campaign. Graham’s statements surrounding his Christmas 1966 visit with American troops in Vietnam were further indicative of this idea. Graham told reporters, upon his return from the trip, that the “battle of the world” was taking place in Southeast Asia; the “stakes” involved were “much higher than” previously “realized.” He praised the high morale of American troops in the field. Two months later, in February 1967, Graham told a television audience that those who protested the war benefited from being “drafted, shipped to Vietnam, and put under discipline and authority.” Ultimately, after being set straight by the military experience, Graham suggested, a war protestor “makes a great soldier.”

It is difficult to pinpoint a precise cause for Graham’s shift in thinking about Vietnam. To some degree, as historian Richard V. Pierard has suggested, Graham’s changing rhetoric on the Vietnam issue can be seen as a result of the much larger shift in the American public’s perception of the war. In this view, Graham’s public statements regarding the war reflected the conventional wisdom about Vietnam between 1965 and 1967. After all, as Pierard pointed out, Graham had come of age during World War II. He approached Vietnam with a World War II era perspective and applied the lessons of Reinhold Niebuhr: there were tyrants overseas using naked aggression to commit evil deeds against their own people. Nonetheless, unlike Niebuhr, Graham believed that the

101 Ibid, 45.
teachings of Christian realism could be justly applied to the war in Vietnam. For Graham, the Communists in North Vietnam threatened the security of the world. They also threatened to spread the forces of evil throughout the world. The only reasonable response from the United States was to meet aggression with aggression.

By late 1967, however, and certainly after the Tet Offensive in early 1968, Graham had joined many others in questioning whether the tremendous cost of the war in terms of American lives lost truly justified America’s mission in Vietnam. Graham’s evolving position on the war was less a reversal of his previous rhetoric than an adoption of a more cautious and prudent position. In April 1968, as Graham preached a crusade in Australia, a nation whose own populace was torn over the nation’s support for America’s war efforts, Graham refused to speak out about the war to reporters. Graham told the Australian press that he had no desire to “add” his “ignorance” to the debate about the Vietnam War. “It’s a bit outside my realm,” he told reporters.\(^{102}\)

To some degree, too, Graham’s friendship with Richard Nixon complicated his public stance on the war. Graham shared a closer friendship with Nixon than any other President before or after. It is not entirely coincidental that Graham’s “political maturation,” as Pierard put it, coincided with Nixon’s soaring political comeback in 1968. Graham surely realized that his public reputation and his ability to remain close to centers of power rested on his ability to maintain that relationship while continuing to cultivate his image as both a paragon of virtue and a peacemaker. Nixon’s promise that “new leadership” would bring an end to the war boosted his 1968 Presidential campaign, particularly after some helpful reporting popularized the idea that Nixon had a “secret

\(^{102}\) Ibid, 46.
plan” to end the war, an idea that Nixon’s campaign did nothing to discourage. Nixon sought Graham’s counsel during the 1968 campaign. In particular, Nixon asked Graham for his recommendation of a running mate. Graham suggested Oregon Senator and noted war opponent Mark Hatfield, also a publicly professing evangelical. Nixon had no intention of offering Hatfield the job, but Graham’s suggestion of Hatfield is telling. If Nixon had offered Hatfield the job, and it became widely known that the appointment was a result of Graham’s campaigning, it certainly would have bolstered the idea that Graham’s position on Vietnam had shifted toward that of the doves. It would also have furthered the idea that Nixon was truly committed to ending the war.103

Did Graham feel betrayed by Nixon’s escalation of the war? When U.S. troops invaded Cambodia in April 1970, Graham expressed great personal reservations about the move, but also a deep reluctance to speak out against Nixon’s move lest he be denied further access to the White House. Knowing Nixon as Graham did, it is likely that Graham recognized the President’s penchant for declaring enemies and holding lasting grudges against those who had betrayed him. A telephone conversation between the two men in April 1971 is particularly revealing of Graham’s desire to curry favor with Nixon. Speaking to the President about the continuing public unrest about the war, Graham assured Nixon that he placed “all the blame” for the war on President John Kennedy’s shoulders. “That’s right! He started the damn thing!” Nixon quickly replied. Graham

103 Ibid, 47.
assured Nixon of his continued support, which he promised to elucidate a few days later in an editorial in *The New York Times.*

Nonetheless, Graham’s editorial, published on Good Friday, April 9, 1971, was hardly an enthusiastic vote of confidence for America’s continued involvement in the war. As Graham had told Nixon, the editorial pointed out that President Kennedy had taken significant steps toward escalating the war. Graham noted that there had already been 16,000 American troops in Vietnam when Johnson became President. As he had promised Nixon, Graham also noted that many of the Senate’s top doves, Arkansas Senator J. William Fulbright chief among them, had supported the war at the outset. Still, the editorial hardly criticized these leaders in the way Graham seemed to indicate it would when he spoke with Nixon. Instead, Graham’s writing was much more of a public sermon, a call on Americans to recognize that even if they opposed the war, that all had fallen short of the glory of God in a broken world. Referring to Lieutenant William L. Calley, Jr., who had recently been convicted of committing war crimes in the notorious My Lai massacre, Graham suggested that the moral confusion created by war often made it difficult to tell right from wrong. “Later on when tempers are cool, when passions have subdued, when objectivity has returned it may be possible to conclude under the laws of equity that the rules of war under which Calley was convicted were too narrow and too rigid in scope,” Graham wrote. “Then mercy will come into play and passion will have its day.”

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Graham’s editorial and conversation with Nixon are notable because they illustrate the dilemma that evangelical leaders were already facing during the Vietnam era and would later come to face during the Reagan years. On one hand, the Vietnam War solidified the symbiotic relationship between American policymakers and evangelical leaders. Given the tremendous advances in broadcast communications in the second half of the twentieth century, evangelists like Graham had the ability to reach millions of people with messages that could potentially alter Americans’ views of important foreign policy matters. At the same time, as Graham clearly recognized, public criticism of those in power could endanger one’s access to policymakers. Whether through sheer desire to retain ties to power or a desire to take a more pragmatic approach to his public statements on the war, Billy Graham chose a precarious middle road on the Vietnam issue as the war escalated. Graham supported his friend, even inviting Nixon to speak at a Billy Graham Crusade in Knoxville, Tennessee on May 28, 1970, an event that was marred in part by the presence of war protestors who tried to shout down the President as he spoke. While continuing to privately assure Nixon of his support for the President’s war policies, Graham remained cautious in his public statements about the war. Graham could speak out in favor of peace and still concede the necessity of war. He could follow this course because evangelical theology clearly taught that while God was sovereign, the world would continue to experience war until the Second Coming of Christ. The solution for many evangelicals, then, was to eschew the idea that the powers of Earth could solve the problems created by Vietnam. The only answers were to be found by looking above.

The End is Near

Evangelicals’ belief in premillennial dispensationalist theology took on an even greater significance during the Vietnam War. For as much as the belief that true peace would not come until the return of Christ shaped the way many evangelicals thought about the war, the social unrest and sense of impending doom the war helped to create doubtless drove the popularity of eschatological studies in the United States. Interest in Bible prophecy and the Second Coming of Christ rose dramatically in the 1970s, spurred on by the popularity of books like Hal Lindsey’s runaway bestseller *The Late Great Planet Earth*. Lindsey, a Korean War veteran, seminary student and former staffer for Campus Crusade for Christ, made the premillennial dispensationalist interpretation of Scripture come alive for American readers unlike any previous writer. *The Late Great Planet Earth* forecast the impending apocalypse, culminating in the battle of Armageddon where all of the world’s forces would converge on the battlefield of Megiddo in Israel. After this climactic event, Christ would return and unite heaven and Earth in the New Jerusalem prophesied in the 21st chapter of the book of Revelation. By the end of the decade, more than 9 million copies of *The Late Great Planet Earth* were in circulation in the United States. Only ten years later, in 1990, over three times that number were in print. *The Late Great Planet Earth* became the best-selling non-fiction book of the 1970s in the United States. Its popularity played a direct role in the explosion of interest in evangelical books during the decade. Major American publishing houses
acquired smaller evangelical publishers; Harper and Row purchased Zondervan, the publishers of *The Late Great Planet Earth*.¹⁰⁷

Lindsey’s book entered the market at a time when books and movies steeped in dark themes were numerous and popular. Many suggested that the United States and much of the free world was in an unstoppable decline, an argument that the Vietnam War did nothing to discredit. Some pointed to the eventual end of civilization as a result of overpopulation and starvation. Paul Ehrlich’s *The Population Bomb*, a runaway bestseller published in 1968, forecast just such a Malthusian crisis. The book’s popularity generated a newfound awareness of the overpopulation issue on college campuses already abuzz with social issue protests. In Louisville, Kentucky in 1971, for instance, forty-eight university students went on a fifty-four hour hunger strike to help illustrate how severe they believed the overpopulation crisis would be by the year 2000. Others argued that the coming world crises would be found in financial collapse. In 1970, libertarian economist Harry Browne published *How You Can Survive the Coming Devaluation*, a guide for financially savvy Americans who wanted to survive the meltdown of American currency. Still other writers predicted a clash between technological progress and human freedom. B.F. Skinner’s *Beyond Freedom & Dignity*, published in 1971, suggested that human beings would have to give up personal freedom if they wanted to continue allowing science and technology to improve society. The book went through seven paperback printings in a single year. All of these examples suggested a larger psychic crisis going on in American society. In fact, Alvin Toffler’s

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book, *Future Shock*, which went through seven different printings in a period of four months after its publication in 1970, argued just this point. The key to society’s ills, Toffler posited, was too much change too rapidly. When technology took American society by storm, Americans became disoriented, their mental and emotional selves unable to catch up and cope with the rapidity of the world around them. ¹⁰⁸

Americans who turned to the silver screen to escape these gloomy predictions found little encouragement. The 1970s marked a moment of particularly acute gloom in American cinema. In 1972 and 1974 respectively, Francis Ford Coppola’s *The Godfather* and *The Godfather Part II*, based on Mario Puzo’s novels, drew filmgoers into the dark underworld of organized crime. Rather than casting the Mafia in the role of villains, however, the movies made sympathetic if not heroic characters of the Corleone family, with Marlon Brando snagging an Oscar in 1972 for his iconic portrayal of Don Vito Corleone, the Godfather himself. *The Andromeda Strain*, released in 1971, told the story of a deadly virus brought to Earth by aliens, and scientists’ efforts to stop its spread. Late in the decade, films interpreting the Vietnam War began to appear in movie theaters. *The Deer Hunter*, which won Best Picture at the Academy Awards in 1978, depicted veterans trying, unsuccessfully, to move past the harsh after-effects of the war in working-class, industrial Clairton, Pennsylvania near Pittsburgh. Nineteen seventy-nine’s *Apocalypse Now*, directed by Francis Ford Coppola, was even more disturbing. Coppola’s film, often surreal, followed Captain Benjamin Willard’s up-river journey on a mission to kill the rogue General Walter E. Kurtz during the Vietnam War. The story, which featured

graphic depictions of wartime violence against the Vietnamese people, became a metaphor for the war. Just as Captain Willard descended into insanity the further he traveled on his mission, eventually coming to see the logic of Captain Kurtz’s “insanity,” the United States had also lost its way in the moral confusion of war.109

For evangelicals, fears of overpopulation, economic crises, or alien viruses were not the primary harbingers of the coming apocalypse. That distinction belonged to events going on in the Middle East in the late 1960s. In early June 1967, Israel captured the city of Jerusalem in the Six-Day War. The significance of this event to premillennial dispensationalists was immediately evident. Since 1948, when Israel became a nation, many evangelicals had anticipated an ongoing series of events leading to the Second Coming of Christ. In all three of the Synoptic Gospels, Matthew, Mark and Luke, Jesus told of a number of signs that would portend his return. In particular, he had pointed to the symbolism of a fig tree sprouting leaves as a sure sign his return was near. Jesus promised his disciples that the generation that saw the fig tree sprout leaves would not pass away until all things had been fulfilled. Many premillennial evangelicals believed that the fig tree was a symbol of Israel, and Israel’s nationhood in 1948 signaled the beginning of the generation that would see the return of Christ. The capture of Jerusalem in 1967 encouraged these beliefs, as premillennialists generally believed that this was a

necessary event on the road toward the Second Coming. Many believed that the next step would be the re-building of the Temple that had been destroyed in 70 A.D.\textsuperscript{110}

Evangelical interest in Bible prophecy increased substantially after the Six-Day War. Indeed, the war can be seen as one of the driving forces behind the success of The Late Great Planet Earth. Hal Lindsey’s book was hardly alone among Bible prophecy studies published in the immediate aftermath of the war. In 1968, Salem Kirban, an Arab by descent, published Guide to Survival: How the World Will End. The book was less an examination of how current events pointed to the Second Coming of Christ (though Kirban assured readers that “current events are already shaping up to world chaos”) than a guide to how to survive the apocalyptic events soon to occur. Richard Wolff published Israel Act III soon after the war in 1967 and advertised the book in Christianity Today. In an October 1967 advertisement for Israel Act III, Wolff claimed that his book had already sold over seventy-five thousand copies.\textsuperscript{111}

Billy Graham lent considerable credibility to the efforts of less noted authors like Wolff and Kirban by publicly proclaiming his belief that the events taking place in the Middle East were indeed signs that Bible prophecy was being fulfilled. At a 1970 press conference, Graham remarked, “History began in the Middle East and history will conclude in the Middle East, according to the Bible.” The events taking place there were “a prelude to the last events of the age, just before the coming of a new age.” Graham

\textsuperscript{111} Ibid, 153 - 55
concluded, “The Bible almost always indicates that we are to keep our eyes on the Middle East.” ¹¹²

As excitement about the prophetic significance of the Six-Day War raged, *Christianity Today* began featuring ads for tours of the Holy Land. American travel to Israel experienced a dramatic increase in the 1970s. By the 1980s, more than 70 percent of Israel’s tourism revenue stemmed from American tourists. One of those tourists, Grace Halsell, recounted her experience of taking a tour of the Holy Land, sponsored by Jerry Falwell’s ministry, in her book, *Prophecy and Politics: The Secret Alliance between Israel and the U.S. Christian Right*. In her account, written from an outsider’s perspective, Halsell claimed that, according to her research, international tourism to Israel increased by 75 percent in the decade between 1967 and 1977. ¹¹³

The premillennial impulse extended to popular evangelical music. In 1970, the popular gospel quartet and future country stars, The Oak Ridge Boys, scored their first number one song on the American gospel music charts with “Jesus is Coming Soon.” “Troublesome times are here, filling men’s hearts with fear, freedom we all hold dear now is at stake,” the song’s first verse proclaimed; “Humbling your heart to God saves from the chastening rod, seek the way pilgrim’s trod, Christians awake!” It concluded. The chorus resounded, “Jesus is coming soon, morning or night or noon, many will meet their doom, trumpets will sound! All of the dead shall rise, righteous meet in the skies,

¹¹² Ibid, 152.
going where no one dies, Heavenward bound!” In 1972, contemporary Christian artist and icon of the Christian counterculture Jesus movement, Larry Norman, released “I Wish We’d All Been Ready,” a song that mourned the fate of those left behind after the Rapture. “There’s no time to change your mind,” the song opined, “The Son has come and you’ve been left behind.”

Televangelists also jumped on the Bible prophecy bandwagon with alacrity. Few were more enthusiastic than Jerry Falwell, who preached a sermon entitled “The End of the World: How Near Is It?” at Thomas Road Baptist Church, then distributed the message via LP to interested parties. Falwell did much to fashion himself an authority on eschatological studies, releasing a series of tapes, “Jerry Falwell Teaches Bible Prophecy” in 1979. The Lynchburg evangelist also merged American Cold War concerns with events taking place in the Middle East. In a late 1976 issue of Faith Aflame, a periodical published by Falwell’s ministry, Falwell pointed to the Bolshevik Revolution of 1917 as a sign of the Second Coming. His reasoning rested on a controversial premillennialist interpretation of the 38th and 39th chapters of Ezekiel. These chapters prophesied the invasion of Israel by a leader called “Gog” who came from the “Land of Magog.” The leader’s armies would eventually be struck down by fire sent by God from heaven. Falwell supported Hal Lindsey’s view, articulated in The Late Great Planet Earth, that Gog and Magog represented Russia and its leaders. The rise of the Soviet Union as a world power was a sign that Gog and Magog were preparing for the

eventual battle where they would launch a massive assault against Israel. Gog and Magog would not attack alone, for they would be allied with other enemies of Israel, identified by premillennial dispensationalists as Arab nations. The idea that millions of Jews would emigrate from the Soviet Union to Israel was also a key part of this idea. Though the idea that Jews would return to their homeland had long been a bedrock belief of Zionism, the establishment of the Jewish state and the severing of diplomatic relations between the Soviet Union and Israel after the Six-Day War fed the belief that the influx of Soviet Jews into the homeland would somehow spark a military confrontation between the two states. The steady increase of Jewish immigration from the Soviet Union to Israel throughout the 1970s further fueled this idea and provided powerful evidence prophecy teachers could use to prove the validity of their teachings.\footnote{116}{Ibid; Lindsey, \textit{The Late Great Planet Earth}, 59 – 80.}

Both Falwell and Pat Robertson suggested that the battle between Israel, the Soviets and their Allies would be the start of a nuclear confrontation, signaling the end of the world. Indeed, in his late 1976 \textit{Faith Aflame} article “How Near Is the End?” Falwell pointed to the rapid increase in technology throughout the twentieth century as another sign of the end times. The atomic bomb was the chief example of how that knowledge would bring about Armageddon. Falwell pointed to II Peter 3: 9-13 as a prophecy of nuclear war. The noted passages foretold that the “coming of the Lord” would be accompanied with the “heavens being on fire” and “dissolved” and the “elements melt[ing] with fervent heat.”\footnote{117}{Falwell, “How Near is the End?” 3.} Pat Robertson not only endorsed this opinion in his newsletters and episodes of \textit{The 700 Club}, but also ventured into date setting in 1980,
predicting a major nuclear event by the end of 1982, a “judgment on the world” as Robertson put it.\textsuperscript{118}

Not all televangelists were as enthusiastic about predicting nuclear holocaust in connection with Bible prophecy. Oral Roberts publicly supported the idea that events surrounding Israel were leading to the Second Coming. As a charismatic preacher, though, Roberts was more likely to point to manifestations of God’s power – speaking in tongues, miraculous healings, and widespread revival – as signs that the end was near, rather than relying on contemporary events. As the 1970s wore on, however, preachers like Roberts were in the minority. Bible prophecy became an increasingly popular theme among evangelical authors and televangelists. New televangelists like Jimmy Swaggart and Jack Van Impe joined Hal Lindsey, Jerry Falwell and Pat Robertson in promoting premillennial dispensationalist theology on airwaves and in bookstores. In the words of a popular gospel song released in 1970, evangelicals were encouraged to keep their “eyes upon the Eastern sky” and “lift up” their “heads” as “redemption draweth nigh!”\textsuperscript{119}

\textbf{The Late, Great American Nation}

The growing tension between the escapism seemingly promoted by premillennial dispensationalist theology and the need for evangelicals to embrace political activism became acute by the mid-1970s. While debates about the Vietnam War and the social unrest it unleashed constituted a tremendous part of that tension, a controversial series of Supreme Court decisions in the second half of the twentieth century also suggested that troubling times were ahead for American evangelicals and also for the nation at large.

\textsuperscript{118} Boyer, \textit{When Time Shall Be No More}, 138.
The first signs of a possible shift in the Supreme Court’s attitude toward religious conservatives took shape during World War II. In *West Virginia Board of Education v. Barnette* (1943), the Court held that under the Free Speech Clause of the First Amendment, public school students were protected from compulsory acts of patriotic observance like saying the Pledge of Allegiance. The decision came as a surprise to many, in part because it represented a total reversal from a decision the Court had handed down only three years earlier. In 1940, after facing a hostile backlash for refusing to force their children to engage in patriotic acts at school, a group of Jehovah’s Witnesses asked the Court to recognize their right to refuse participation in such observances. In *Minersville School District v. Gobitis* (1940), the Court firmly disagreed with the Jehovah’s Witnesses’ position. Writing for the majority in an 8-to-1 decision, Justice Felix Frankfurter argued that “national unity” was the “basis of national security.” The school not only had the right to mandate patriotic observance, it also had a vested interest in “secur[ing] effective loyalty to the traditional ideals of democracy.”

In hindsight, it is clear that the conflict represented by these two cases laid the groundwork for *Engle v. Vitale* (1962), where the Court ruled 6-1 (Justices Frankfurter and White did not vote as part of the decision) that public schools could not force students to engage in prayer. The Court held that even if students were given the option to refrain from participation, school-sponsored prayers connoted endorsement of religious belief by the school. One year later, the Court struck another blow to evangelicals. In the

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case of *Abington Township School District v. Schempp* (1963), the Justices ruled 8-1 that compulsory Bible reading in public schools was also unconstitutional.\(^\text{121}\)

Religious conservatives were predictably outraged by the decisions, though the full force of their fury would not surface for another decade. In this sense, one can again see the effects of the Vietnam War in shaping evangelicals’ political consciousness. For many evangelicals, the Court’s rulings in *Engle* and *Abington Township* represented an attempt to eradicate God from the public sphere and completely secularize American life.

As the Vietnam War revealed a deep, bitter divide between the youth of America born after the Second World War and their parents who had lived through the war, it appeared to many religious conservatives that young Americans had lost their way. The supposed American consensus the older generation had once known, centered in God and country, did not seem to appeal to America’s youth. Instead, what the “silent majority” of Americans saw flashed across their scenes night after night on the television news was the breakdown of society perpetuated by American youth. The radical hippies and Yippies, the Students for a Democratic Society, the campus protestors occupying buildings at Columbia and elsewhere represented a decline in morals and decency.

Popular culture reflected this decline, as movies like 1967’s *Bonnie and Clyde* seemed to encourage violence. The Supreme Court had a lot to do with this moral decline in the minds of many evangelicals. They had kicked God out of American schools in the early 1960s, and as a result, Americans were reaping a bitter harvest.\(^\text{122}\)

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\(^{122}\) Perlstein, *Nixonland*, 209-12.
The controversy over the Supreme Court reached its zenith in January 1973, when the Court handed down one of the most divisive decisions in its history, the landmark 7-2 ruling in *Roe v. Wade*, holding that a woman’s right to privacy under the due process clause of the Fourteenth Amendment protected her decision to have an abortion within the first three months of pregnancy. The issue of whether a right to privacy existed in the first place had been a matter of some contention in the eight years before *Roe*. In the 1965 case of *Griswold v. Connecticut*, the Supreme Court struck down a Connecticut state law banning the use of contraceptives on the grounds that it violated a couple’s right to privacy in their marital affairs. Seven years later, in *Eisenstadt v. Baird* (1972), the Court ruled that this same right to privacy extended to unmarried couples as well. These two decisions paved the way for *Roe v. Wade* and the controversy it created, as many conservatives argued that there was no right to privacy guaranteed by the Constitution. The liberal, activist wing of the U.S. Supreme Court had clearly overstayed its legal authority in “finding” such a right embedded in the Fourteenth Amendment.\(^{123}\)

It should be noted, however, that the evangelicals who would soon constitute the New Christian Right were slow to respond to *Roe*, at least in a public fashion. Roman Catholics, more than any other group, began the march toward a faith-based response to the abortion controversy. As sociologist William Martin pointed out in his study *With God on Our Side*, Jerry Falwell did not preach a sermon on the abortion issue until 1978, shortly before the formation of The Moral Majority. To some degree, Martin argued, the reluctance of evangelicals to embrace abortion activism in its early stages may have been

based in a general reluctance to join forces with Catholics in any form. The animosity between the two sides of the Christian faith was long-standing and well documented. Still, one can also see in the abortion debate the seeds of unity between the two sides that manifest itself in The Moral Majority’s decision to embrace Catholics and Jews who were sympathetic to the group’s positions on political issues. There will be much more to say about this issue in succeeding chapters.124

Francis Schaeffer emerged as a leading figure in conservative evangelicalism in the mid-1970s, and more than any other figure, he gave the simmering anger over the Supreme Court decisions and other controversies an intellectual direction. Born in Germantown, Pennsylvania in 1912, Schaeffer attended seminary in the late 1930s and became a Presbyterian minister. In 1948, Schaeffer’s life and ministry took a radical turn as he and his family moved to Switzerland. Seven years later, in 1955, Schaeffer founded L’Abri (a French term meaning “the shelter”) in Switzerland and gained some degree of fame in evangelical circles as a result. L’Abri was neither entirely a retreat nor a seminary, but an early version of a Christian think tank where theologians and students could come to exchange ideas about the faith. The unconventional center gave Schaeffer a base in which to write and spread his thinking throughout the Christian world.125

Schaeffer was an unlikely figure to lead a conservative evangelical movement. In appearance, he was much more like the countercultural comedian George Carlin than a Southern evangelist like Jerry Falwell or Billy Graham. Still, Schaeffer held a focused and principled opposition to theological modernism and the forces that he believed were

124 Martin, With God on Our Side, 179.
turning the world away from Christianity and toward a godless view of the world known
as “secular humanism.” In Schaeffer’s view, and that of many of his evangelical
contemporaries, secular humanism posed a tremendous threat to Christians around the
world and to society in general. It threatened to undermine the very foundation of
civilization by denying the presence of the divine in civic and cultural matters. For many
evangelical leaders, it should be noted, secular humanism and communism were of the
same nature. Both ideas sought to replace God with the work of progressive ideologies
aimed at bringing utopia to Earth through the work of human beings.\footnote{126}

Schaeffer articulated these views in a book and film series entitled \textit{How Should
We Then Live? The Rise and Decline of Western Thought and Culture}, released in 1976
in the United States and widely regarded among many evangelicals as a masterwork of
Christian thought. The film series was particularly effective. In ten 30-minute segments,
Schaeffer traced the history of Western Civilization in a manner very similar to Kenneth
Clark’s popular public television series, \textit{Civilisation}. The similarity was intentional.
Schaeffer sought to offer Christians not just an intriguing series on world history, but an
alternate narrative of world history, one that heightened Christianity’s importance and
also illustrated the manner in which secular humanism had emerged as the primary threat
to Christianity around the world. In his view, series like Clark’s, funded and promoted
by public television, tended to play down Christianity’s contributions to the world. When
one considered the emerging battle between competing worldviews and cultures, it was

\footnote{126 Martin, \textit{With God on Our Side}, 159 – 61.}
imperative for Christians to be educated about the real history of Christianity’s presence in the world.\textsuperscript{127}

Schaeffer thus encouraged evangelicals to develop a political identity in opposition to the forces of “secular humanism” that threatened to tear apart the fabric of the Christian West. The evangelical worldview and political identity became a central part of the new ecumenicalism encouraged by Billy Graham and other popular evangelists. To be an evangelical was to embrace certain political beliefs: opposition to extending abortion rights, support for prayer in public schools, and a general desire to clean up the immorality promoted by American popular culture. As the next chapter will demonstrate, evangelicals also came to include support for a strong American national defense and a hawkish American foreign policy in opposition to communism.

Televangelism not only helped to promote a sense of community among American evangelicals, thus furthering the growth of the new ecumenicalism, it also helped to entrench evangelicals in these political beliefs. The popular evangelical culture that developed alongside the growth of televangelism held these beliefs as unquestioned tenets of Christian commitment.

Premillennial dispensationalism also contributed significantly to the shaping of evangelicals’ political beliefs. In her 2007 study, \textit{Millennial Dreams and Apocalyptic Nightmares: The Cold War Origins of Political Evangelicalism}, historian Angela Lahr argued that eschatology was \textit{the} defining force pushing evangelicals toward political activism. In Lahr’s estimation, the ability of premillenial dispensationalism to explain

\textsuperscript{127} \textit{How Should We Then Live?} dir. Mel White, starring Francis Schaeffer, Vision Video, DVD, 2009; Francis Schaeffer, \textit{How Should We Then Live? The Rise and Decline of Western Thought and Culture} (Ada, MI: Fleming H. Revell & Company, 1976).
the rapidly changing, dangerous world of the Cold War while simultaneously offering Christians the hope that they would escape the apocalypse fed the growth of interest in Bible prophecy and became the defining paradigm through which American evangelicals viewed the world around them. While premillennial dispensationalism may not have been the only factor uniting evangelicals in political activism, Lahr and other historians like Paul Boyer are right to acknowledge the often underappreciated role that Bible prophecy played in shaping the evangelical worldview. Perhaps most important, in the context of this study, the premillennial phenomenon drove American evangelicals to embrace nationalism with vigor. The world pictured in books like *The Late Great Planet Earth* was one where the virtuous, godly United States rose to defend the Christian faith against godless, atheistic communism. Evangelicals’ views complemented the already ardent nationalism of the Cold War and aided the growth of evangelicals as mainstream actors in American politics.

In promoting American nationalism, the premillennial dispensationalist impulse also encouraged evangelicals to think of themselves as a special, distinct group of society set apart from others. Because books like *The Late Great Planet Earth* spoke primarily to a white American evangelical audience, it is significant to note its use of race in pointing to other groups who would lead the charge toward the apocalypse. In one chapter, entitled “Sheik to Sheik,” Hal Lindsey made reference to the groups that would come against God’s people at the end of the world: “The Bible says that Egypt, the Arabic nations, and countries from black Africa will form an alliance, a sphere of power which will be called King of the South. Allied with Russia, the King of the North, this
formidable confederacy will rise up against the restored state of Israel.”\textsuperscript{128} Lindsey recounted the experience of being on a university campus during “Arab Week,” a week designed to “rally support for the Palestinian Revolution.” “Some students were wearing head-coverings, Arab-fashion, to indicate where their allegiance was. The vision was not quite like Lawrence of Arabia galloping across endless stretches of white sand,” Lindsey wrote, “but the effect was striking.” The “revolutionary movement” the students represented was, in Lindsey’s estimation, “part of the Communist movement which has supported “wars of liberation” across the world.”\textsuperscript{129}

In another chapter entitled “The Yellow Peril,” Lindsey also pointed to China as the “sleeping giant of Asia,” the cornerstone of the “kings of the East” that the book of Revelation prophesied would invade the Middle East in the last days. “This Asian horde,” Lindsey wrote, “will wipe out a third of the Earth’s population” by “fire, smoke (or air pollution), and brimstone (or melted earth).” He was obviously pointing to a Chinese nuclear attack. “Because of the Communist Chinese belief that the free world can only be overthrown by all-out war, they have for many years devoted approximately ten percent of their entire military budget for developing nuclear weapons,” Lindsey wrote. “The sobering fact that China will have ICBM’s capable of delivering H-bombs by 1980 at the latest, presents another grisly potential for fulfilling prophecy regarding this Oriental power,” he continued. “Within a decade China alone will have the power to

\textsuperscript{128} Lindsey, \textit{The Late Great Planet Earth}, 72-73.  
\textsuperscript{129} Ibid, 73.
destroy one-third of the world’s population just as John [the author of Revelation] predicted.”

Bible prophecy authorities thus contributed to the growth of populist conservatism in the United States by feeding evangelicals’ concerns about rising, powerful forces both inside and outside the United States. Not only did prophecy populism give evangelicals a sense of control over an unpredictable world, as scholars like Angela Lahr, Paul Boyer and William Martin have noted, it also shaped the certainty of future events. In spite of their confidence in God’s sovereignty over world events, however, evangelicals felt the call to responsibility in helping to bring about God’s will in the world. The complicated tension between sovereignty and free will in Christian theology pushed evangelical leaders toward political activism rather than away from it.

Prophecy populism encouraged evangelicals to view social and political turmoil – the social unrest of the 1960s, the Vietnam War, and unpopular Supreme Court decisions – as further signs that the end was nigh. The growth in popularity of televangelism, coupled with the rise of a widespread ecumenical attitude among evangelicals of disparate political, social and theological backgrounds, allowed these concerns to be consolidated in political action groups, led by popular evangelical leaders, steeped in populist conservative sentiments, and pointed in the direction of electing a political leader who shared evangelicals’ concerns about a troubled world.

\[130\] Ibid, 81 - 87.
CHAPTER 3: WITH REAGAN ON OUR SIDE

In late October 1976, Newsweek magazine proclaimed “The Year of the Evangelicals.” Pointing to statistics that showed one-third of Americans claiming to have had a “born again” experience and more than one-third, 38 percent, stating that they believed the Bible should be taken literally, Newsweek suggested that the “emergence of evangelicals into a position of influence and respect” was “the most overlooked religious phenomenon of the 1970s.”¹³¹ Newsweek’s proclamation came just days before the election of former Georgia governor and professing evangelical Jimmy Carter to the presidency. As 1976 turned into 1977, then, observers recognized that evangelicalism had arrived as a mainstream force in American society. It was hardly surprising that some political insiders also saw that evangelicals possessed tremendous potential to exercise influence in American politics.

By the 1980 presidential election, evangelicals were indeed a force to be reckoned with in American politics. The organization and growth of para-church organizations like the Religious Roundtable, Christian Voice and, most important, The Moral Majority announced the arrival of conservative Christians as a seemingly powerful and well-funded political constituency. Charismatic evangelical leaders like Jerry Falwell and Pat Robertson stood at the helm of these groups, imploring supporters of their ministries to speak out with their votes. In 1980, however, they did not encourage supporters to pull the lever for America’s most famous born-again Christian, President Carter. Instead, they supported the conservative Republican Ronald Reagan, a former Hollywood actor.

¹³¹ “Year of the Evangelicals,” Newsweek, October 25, 1976, 3.
and California governor, whose personal life and ambiguous religious identity made him an unlikely evangelical hero. How and why this happened is the focus of this chapter.

Evangelicals supported Reagan because he seemed likely to turn their beliefs into public policy. Though many evangelicals had high hopes for Jimmy Carter in 1976, Carter’s relationship with the Religious Right deteriorated throughout his presidency, as the former Georgia governor failed to speak in stark moral language about sensitive social issues like abortion, school prayer and the controversial Equal Rights Amendment. As this chapter demonstrates, though, Carter’s perceived failures as a leader on defense issues also helped to erode his support among evangelical leaders. Jerry Falwell in particular believed Carter to be blind to the threat posed by Soviet communism. Ronald Reagan, on the other hand, possessed impeccable anti-communist credentials. Reagan promised to restore America’s prestige on the world scene. Carter, meanwhile, struggled to maintain his credibility as an international leader. The rise of groups like the Committee on the Present Danger and talk of a strategic “window of vulnerability” between American and Soviet nuclear forces only fed evangelicals’ concerns about Soviet communism and Carter’s inability to confront the growing threat of a nuclear showdown with the world’s only other superpower.

**The Spirit in ‘76**

For eight nights in the spring of 1976, Billy Graham preached to capacity crowds at Seattle, Washington’s newly opened Kingdome. Approximately 434,100 people came to hear Graham’s messages across the course of the crusade. Graham spoke to the crowds on the topic “What Does It Mean to Be Born Again?” “The greatest need in the
human race is transformation,” Graham told those in attendance. “To be born again is to yield to Christ. Deny yourself and go to the cross,” he continued. “The Bible says we all have a disease.” The source of “evil terrors” came from “the heart,” Graham instructed his listeners. Sin was the source of all society’s problems.132

Graham’s Seattle crusade not only reflected the evangelist’s immense popularity, but also demonstrated the extent to which the new evangelicalism had incorporated entertainment. Norwegian contemporary artist Evie Tornquist sang a popular new song aimed at Christian youth entitled “Pass It On” at the crusade. Denver Broncos cornerback Calvin Jones took to the pulpit to talk about his own Christian experience. The deep bass of George Beverly Shea echoed throughout the arena as he sang “Ye Must Be Born Again.” Graham’s music director Cliff Barrows led the crowd in singing “Amazing Grace.”133

The “born again” theme exemplified by the crusade was particularly timely. In 1976, Charles Colson, the former White House counsel for Richard Nixon and convicted Watergate conspirator, published Born Again, a memoir of his Christian conversion experience. During the Watergate crisis, Colson began attending prayer meetings in Washington as a means of coping with the pressures imposed by the scandal. Colson, the man who had once famously remarked that he would “step over his grandmother if necessary” to get Richard Nixon re-elected President, converted to Christianity. Shortly thereafter, Colson served a seven-month prison sentence at the Maxwell Correctional Facility in Alabama for obstruction of justice in connection with attempts to influence the

133 Ibid.
jury in the trial of Daniel Ellsberg, the former Pentagon staffer who had become famous for leaking the “Pentagon Papers” to The New York Times. It was during this time that Colson began writing *Born Again* on a set of yellow legal pads.\(^{134}\) When the book was published in 1976, it received a great deal of attention from mainstream media. Colson appeared on *The Today Show* in an interview with Barbara Walters to talk about his conversion. *Newsweek* printed excerpts from *Born Again* in its October 25, 1976 issue. “Something began to flow in me – a kind of energy,” Colson wrote. He spoke of this “strange sensation” like such: “water was not only running down my cheeks, but surging through my whole body as well, cleansing and cooling as it went. They weren’t tears of sadness nor of joy – but tears of release.” Colson reported that his conversion had caused him to forget about the “machismo,” “pretenses” and “fears of being weak” that had characterized his tenure in the Nixon White House. “Something inside me was urging me to surrender…For the first time in my life I was not alone at all.”\(^{135}\)

Colson was hardly alone in speaking openly about his experience of being “born again.” As *Newsweek* reported, the “born again” experience was something evangelicals were increasingly likely to report as part of their personal conversion story. The Black Panther leader Eldridge Cleaver, for instance, spoke of “looking up at the moon” and seeing his face reflected there. “Then I saw the face was not mine but some of my old heroes. There was Fidel Castro, and there was Mao Tse-tung… While I watched, the

\(^{134}\) Memorandum for White House Staff from Charles Colson, August 28, 1972, Charles Wendell Colson papers, Collection 275, Series I, Box 17, Billy Graham Center archives, Wheaton, Illinois. Colson’s prison notes for the memoir can be found in the Charles Wendell Colson papers, Collection 275, Series I, Box 10, Folder 6, Billy Graham Center archives, Wheaton, Illinois.

face turned to Jesus Christ.” Cleaver said that he “began to cry” and “didn’t stop.” “I got on my knees and said the Lord’s Prayer. I remembered that, and then I said the 23rd Psalm because my mother had taught me that too. It was like I could not stop crying unless I said the prayer and the Psalm and surrendered something.” Cleaver later converted to Mormonism. Country singer turned evangelical preacher Jimmie Snow said, “I’d had enough of show business – women, liquor and pills were destroying me. I went at it hard. I went to the front yard in the middle of the night and asked God to take me back. I knew right away then I wanted to be a preacher.” Newsweek noted that Snow kept a picture of the “spot in the yard where he was reborn” on his desk. On the other hand, Oregon Senator Mark Hatfield spoke of “an ongoing transformation” in his life that did not reflect the “mystical experience” others reported. Hatfield said he had made a “choice” after years of drinking and gambling, that he needed to accept not just the theology of his Baptist upbringing, but also its emphasis on self-denial. “I began to pray and read an hour every night – the Bible and the books of C.S. Lewis,” Hatfield stated. “It was gradual displacement of ego, a moving away from the desire to serve just myself. I am still moving.”

The most notable born again Christian in 1976, however, was not Charles Colson, Jimmie Snow, or Eldridge Cleaver. That honor fell to Jimmy Carter, the Democratic Party’s nominee for President. Carter hailed from the small town of Plains, Georgia. In addition to serving as the state’s governor from 1971 to 1975, Carter was also a peanut farmer and a Sunday school teacher. His image as a rural Southern Baptist and a Washington outsider boosted his political appeal, especially in the wake of Watergate. In

one fabled incident during the 1976 campaign, Carter’s Christian morals superseded his good political sense. In an interview with Playboy magazine, Carter reflected on the Bible’s command against committing adultery. “Christ said, I tell you that anyone who looks on a woman with lust has in his heart already committed adultery,” Carter remarked. “I've looked on a lot of women with lust. I've committed adultery in my heart many times.... This is something that God recognizes, that I will do and have done, and God forgives me for it,” he continued. “Christ says, don't consider yourself better than someone else because one guy screws a whole bunch of women while the other guy is loyal to his wife. The guy who's loyal to his wife ought not to be condescending or proud because of the relative degree of sinfulness.”137

This candid language would be remembered more as an infamous gaffe than a moment of humble honesty. Still, Carter’s candidacy brought the connection between faith and politics to the forefront of American politics. As a Newsweek article suggested, Carter’s candidacy not only made him “the best-known Baptist deacon in America,” but also “focused national attention on the most significant and overlooked religious phenomenon of the 1970s: the emergence of evangelical Christianity into a position of respect and power.”138

Carter’s Republican opponent, President Gerald Ford, was hardly a born-again evangelical. Ford was an Episcopalian and a devout Christian according to many who knew him, but he also believed that politicians should not use their religious faith to get

138 “Born Again! The Year of the Evangelicals,” Newsweek, October 25, 1976, 68; Loveland, American Evangelicals, 212.
elected. Thus, while both Carter and Ford were referred to as “born again Christians” during the campaign, Carter superseded Ford in every way as the image of born again evangelicalism. Ford nonetheless tried to cultivate the evangelical vote in his favor. Ford met with Jerry Falwell and other religious broadcasters in the White House. Speaking in an interview for *Faith Aflame*, the Falwell ministry’s periodical, Ford stated, “I have said on several occasions, when asked, that I have a commitment to the Christian faith and I have a relationship with Jesus Christ through my church and through my daily life.” “Prayer is very important to me,” Ford noted. “As a Christian, I strive to live up to the moral code as set forth in the Ten Commandments and in the teachings of Jesus.”

In June 1976, Ford became the first U.S. President to address the Southern Baptist Convention. Speaking to the convention crowd gathered in Norfolk, Virginia, Ford noted that the Bible had been “a steady compass and a source of great strength and peace” throughout his “career in public service.” In addition, Ford praised the contributions that Baptists had made to American history, while noting that his Episcopalian heritage distanced him from traditional Baptist beliefs. “Although our religious denominations are different,” Ford remarked, “I have long admired the missionary spirit of Baptists and the fact that you strive to keep the Bible at the center of your lives.” In closing his speech, Ford noted that there was a “rekindling of religious conviction,” a “new appreciation for Biblical teaching” in America in 1976. This religious reawakening held the promise of a time when Americans might “come to know peace not as the mere


140 “Tell Us, Mr. President,” *Faith Aflame*, November-December 1976, 6.
absence of war, but as a climate in which understanding can grow and human dignity can flourish.”  

Ford’s remarks were emblematic of the religious spirit that characterized the growing connection between evangelicalism and American politics. The source of peace in a troubled world lay in seeking God and repenting of sin. Without the guidance of the Bible, evangelical leaders suggested, the years ahead would most certainly be years of immense crisis and judgment from the divine.

“I Love America”

Some prominent evangelicals suggested an even more bold approach to solving society’s ills: evangelicals needed to take an active role in American politics. In a 1976 pamphlet entitled “Can the Tide Be Turned?” Graham warned of the dire consequences that lay ahead for the United States if evangelicals failed to participate in the political arena. “Too many are content to sit back and bemoan the gathering storm clouds that threaten our country. Too many of us are too caught up in our narrow lives to see that the fabric of our society is being torn apart.” Graham suggested that Christians should “get involved in the political process.” He wrote, “I have heard that ten dedicated, hardworking people can influence any precinct in America and that 300 people can be decisive in any Congressional race; and that 1000 dedicated people can be decisive in any Senate race…The three great powers that you have as an individual in keeping America free are: first, repentance of national and individual sins; second, prayer; and third, the ballot box!” Graham’s counsel was not partisan. He advised “responsible Christians” to participate in the “political process” regardless of whether they were “liberal or

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conservative, Republican or Democrat.” The great sin of evangelicalism was indifference rather than wrong beliefs.¹⁴²

No evangelical figure took more advantage of the election year than Jerry Falwell. Falwell’s involvement in national politics represented a profound turnabout for the Lynchburg evangelist. In Falwell’s early years as a minister in Lynchburg, he was an outspoken advocate of segregation and an opponent of the civil rights movement. In his noted “Ministers and Marches” sermon from the pulpit of Thomas Road Baptist Church, Falwell declared that he would not quit “preaching the pure saving gospel of Jesus Christ” to get involved in politics. In the same sermon, Falwell lambasted Martin Luther King, Jr. and King’s supporters. The leaders of the civil rights movement were nothing more than leftists who were aiding the growth of communism in the United States, Falwell told his parishioners. “It is very obvious that the communists, as they do in all parts of the world, are taking advantage of a tense situation in our land, and are exploiting every incident [in the civil rights movement] to bring about violence and bloodshed,” Falwell argued. As the future leader of a mass movement made up of conservative Southern whites, and one who had once publicly stated that the “true Negro” did “not want integration,” Falwell would not easily shake the ghost of his racist past.¹⁴³ In criticizing the civil rights movement from the pulpit, Falwell was very much involved in politics. By swimming against the moral tide created by the movement, however, Falwell

did not represent a moral majority. He was a regional, rather than a national political figure.

By the late 1970s, Falwell had repented of his earlier remarks about civil rights. In addition, the issues that would animate the growth of the Religious Right – particularly the 1973 *Roe v. Wade* decision – had helped to create the potential to unite evangelicals. Their increased visibility in 1976, the “Year of the Evangelical” also aided Falwell’s efforts to get evangelicals involved in politics. In 1976, Falwell crisscrossed the nation holding “I Love America” rallies in over one hundred American cities. The rallies were designed to exhibit Falwell’s patriotism, promote the various arms of his ministry, including Liberty Baptist College, and raise money to support those ministries. The rallies also helped to draw attention to Falwell as a figure of authority in American evangelicalism, thus laying the groundwork for his rise to political prominence as the head of the Moral Majority. Like Billy Graham’s crusades, the “I Love America” rallies combined dynamic preaching with colorful theater. Falwell preached and people came forward to make professions of faith in Christ, between 100-500 a night according to *Faith Aflame*. Falwell’s “altar calls,” the traditional part of an evangelical service when listeners are given the opportunity to come forward and accept Christ, contained a twist. His usual rally message was entitled “Last Call for America,” an opportunity not just to accept the Gospel message, but also to stand up and be accounted as one who stood for revival across America. Falwell’s messages were accompanied by patriotic and Gospel
songs performed by special singers as well as a choir of Liberty Baptist College students.\textsuperscript{144}

The central event in the “I Love America” rally series took place on July 4, 1976, in Lynchburg, Virginia with a large bicentennial celebration and dedication of “Liberty Mountain.” In 1972, Liberty Baptist College had come into possession of a large tract of land in Lynchburg. Falwell, in the guise of an Old Testament prophet, proclaimed that the land would one day become the site of a great expansion for the College. That project hit a significant snag in 1973, when the Securities and Exchange Commission (SEC) sued Thomas Road Baptist Church, claiming that the church had committed fraud in the sale of $6.5 million in bonds to 1,732 investors. Accountants at Thomas Road erred badly in keeping records of the transactions, and by 1973, they could no longer offer accurate reports of what had happened to the money. While the church would eventually be absolved of much of the most serious charges, Falwell’s ministry nonetheless emerged from its legal troubles in debt and in need of a much more widespread financial campaign than it had ever undertaken to that point. The “I Love America” rallies served a much larger function in Falwell’s ministry, then, than simply promoting patriotism and preaching the Gospel. They also raked in millions of dollars for Falwell’s ministerial campaigns. By the end of the year, in 1977, the ministry was taking in approximately $23 million a year. Only three years later, in 1980, that number had increased to $51

\textsuperscript{144} “I Love America Plays to Overflow Crowds,” \textit{Faith Aflame}, 1976.
million. In the mid-1980s, at the height of Falwell’s popularity as a televangelist, the annual fundraising of Falwell’s ministry stood at approximately $100 million.\textsuperscript{145}

The “Liberty Mountain” project played an integral role in Falwell’s fundraising in the mid-1970s. Supporters were invited to “stake their claim” to a share of Liberty Mountain.\textsuperscript{146} At the July 4 celebration in Lynchburg, Virginia Senator Harry F. Byrd, Jr. addressed the crowd. The “I Love America” choir sang. Members of Falwell’s staff unveiled an exact replica of the Liberty Bell to be displayed at the new campus buildings being constructed at the Liberty Mountain property. An estimated 23,000 supporters turned out to participate in the event.\textsuperscript{147}

As the presidential election neared, Jerry Falwell spoke out about evangelicals’ responsibilities at the ballot box in a far more candid manner than Billy Graham. In the pages of \textit{Faith Aflame}, Falwell told readers, “This simply must be the most important election ever conducted in this country…The communists are spreading their influence around the world like a cancer. I sincerely fear that our children may not know the liberties and the freedoms which you and I have known as Americans.” Then, Falwell shifted his previous opinion on the Christian minister’s responsibility in engaging political issues. Falwell, who has famously proclaimed in 1965 that he “would find it impossible to stop preaching the pure saving gospel of Jesus Christ, and begin doing anything else – including fighting communism,” now told readers that as he “interpret[ed] the Word of God,” he felt that it would be “wrong for God’s men to fail” to

\textsuperscript{146}“Have You Staked Your Claim on Liberty Mountain?” Advertisement in \textit{Faith Aflame}, March 1976, 7.
\textsuperscript{147}“The Summer of 1976,” \textit{Faith Aflame}, August-September 1976, 6-7.
speak out about politics.\textsuperscript{148} The former remark concerned Falwell’s reluctance to endorse ministers’ participation in the civil rights movement. The latter came at a time when evangelical leaders were up in arms about a different crisis: the decline of Christian America. While Falwell cautioned that “a pastor or Christian leader must be very careful about endorsing candidates or supporting particular parties,” he nonetheless asserted his “conviction” that “preachers and Christian leaders need[ed] to take” a “stand on issues that affect the moral fiber of this nation and that endanger the freedoms we have to live, serve, and preach for the Lord Jesus Christ.” “The people of God have every right,” Falwell wrote, “to stand firmly together against every issue and action that threatens the Christian image and perpetuity of this nation.”\textsuperscript{149}

Though Falwell did not endorse a specific candidate for President, he was once again much more explicit than Graham in outlining what he wanted in a President. “I want a President who will openly declare war on sin and tell us what he believes ‘SIN’ is,” Falwell wrote to readers of \textit{Faith Aflame}. “I would like to hear this candidate and his wife openly declare their strong position against premarital and extra-marital sex…I want my candidate to prove his opposition to drugs by kicking liquor out of the White House and all official functions. Liquor is the worst drug of all.” Falwell spoke out once again about the menace of communism. “I would support a President who would take a strong and uncompromising stand against communism,” he wrote. “I want my candidate to look eyeball to eyeball with the Kremlin and draw a line. We need a President who will tell

\textsuperscript{149} Falwell, “A Crucial Year for This Republic,” 1.
the communists – “This far and no farther…I had [sic] rather be dead than Red and believe most Americans would. We have got to stop these monsters somewhere.”

Falwell also articulated ideas that would become cornerstones of conservatives’ beliefs about national defense, namely that the United States had become weak in the face of the communist threat and needed to increase defense spending in order to keep up militarily with the Soviets. “We have lost every war since the Second World War,” Falwell wrote. “We have lost in Korea, Vietnam, and lately in Angola,” he continued, referring to his belief that the United States had not intervened forcefully enough in the Angolan civil war. “God only knows where we will fail next…I want my candidate to begin immediate and drastic moves toward balancing our budget and at the same time, increase our defense budget to whatever it takes to exceed that of the Soviet Union,” Falwell told readers. “This may sound paradoxical and impossible. I think not. If we would substantially reduce or totally eliminate most of our foolish welfare programs at home and abroad, we would have ample funds to defend this country and provide for the people within it.” He concluded, “As Christians, we are certainly in favor of providing for the aged, the sick and the helpless. But we certainly need to get away from these giveaway programs which are producing a generation of “bums” in our society. Paul said “if a man will not work, neither shall he eat.” [italics his]

On Election Day, Jimmy Carter captured the presidency in a narrow victory. The man who had returned to teach Sunday school in Plains, Georgia the Sunday after accepting the Democratic nomination for President won 50.1 percent of the popular vote

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151 Ibid.
to Gerald Ford’s 48 percent. The Electoral College vote stood at 297 for Carter, 240 for Ford. As the fury of the campaigns faded into history, it was clear that the aftermath of Watergate had made the election an uphill battle for Ford. Ford’s decision to pardon Nixon shortly after taking office cast a shadow over any goodwill the new President may have received upon taking office. In addition, in the summer of 1976, viewers flocked to theaters to watch *All the President’s Men*, Alan J. Pakula’s thrilling film about Bob Woodward and Carl Bernstein’s investigation of the Watergate affair, starring Robert Redford and Dustin Hoffman as the two reporters. The film helped to stir up memories of Nixon’s last days in office at the most inopportune time for Ford’s campaign. Ford’s exit helped to exorcise the last of the Watergate demons from the White House. It remained to be seen, however, whether Jimmy Carter would prove to be the kind of evangelical President Jerry Falwell wanted to see in office.¹⁵²

**Rise of the New Right**

Even as Jimmy Carter prepared to assume the presidency, forces were taking shape that would dramatically reshape the American political landscape in the late 1970s. These forces changed the Republican Party, making conservatives ascendant, drawing some Democrats into the conservative fold, and mobilizing evangelicals in a previously unseen manner. Détente and *realpolitik* were on the outs; tough talk against the Soviets was in. This is not to say that a complete revolution pushed moderates and pragmatists out of the party. As we will see, tensions between these groups shaped elections and policy battles within the party throughout the 1980s. Nonetheless, it was hard to deny, as

Ronald Reagan became the standard bearer for Republicans, that something significant had not happened. Conservative commentator George F. Will later remarked, in a 1998 commentary mourning the death of Barry Goldwater, that conservatives had actually won the 1964 Presidential election, but “it just took 16 years to count the votes.”

In hindsight, historians would see Goldwater’s crushing defeat in the 1964 Presidential election as the first indication of a rising conservative tide in American politics. The abrasive Arizona Senator, who famously remarked during his nomination acceptance speech that, “extremism in defense of liberty is no vice,” garnered less than 40 percent of the popular vote in his loss to Lyndon Johnson, who utilized his tremendous political skills and sympathy for John Kennedy’s assassination to win election in his own right. Two years later, Ronald Reagan won the California’s governor’s office, defeating incumbent Edmund G. “Pat” Brown in what many considered an upset. Reagan’s candidacy had its origins in the Goldwater campaign. Reagan, who had hosted General Electric Theater on CBS until 1962, took to the air to deliver a speech entitled “A Time for Choosing” in support of Goldwater’s presidential bid in 1964. Later labeled “The Speech,” Reagan’s discourse laid out his conservative political philosophy, lambasting the tax burden placed on average Americans, decrying interference by the federal government in the private sector, and exhorting Americans on the need to persist in the battle against the communist enemy abroad. America was the last bastion of freedom in the world, the only hope for those seeking escape from the forces of tyranny.

Reagan continued to work for conservative causes after he left the California governor’s office in 1975. That year, Reagan began traveling across the United States

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giving speeches, writing newspaper columns and perhaps most important, delivering brief radio messages on politics and foreign policy every week on nearly 300 American stations. Reagan’s radio broadcasts continued until 1979, when he left the job to run for President, pausing only briefly in 1976 when he challenged Gerald Ford for the Republican nomination for President. In his radio addresses, Reagan sharply criticized détente, the chief foreign policy of the Nixon and Ford administrations toward the Soviet Union. Détente, literally meaning “relaxation,” sought to ease tensions between the two superpowers through a series of arms control agreements. The most important of these was the Strategic Arms Limitations Treaty, or SALT I, signed in May 1972 by Nixon and Soviet Premier Leonid Brezhnev. For conservatives like Reagan, the terms of the SALT agreements did not matter as much as the fact that American leaders were willing to negotiate arms control agreements with the Soviets in the first place. Reagan loathed communism, as did his conservative peers. In their mind, the Soviets were willing to lie in order to gain an advantage at the negotiating table. The key to defeating the Soviet Union in the Cold War was not negotiation, but strength. Reagan believed, and forcefully argued in his radio addresses, that negotiations implied that the United States was weak. The two superpowers were not equal. Communists were moral inferiors of Americans, and should be thought of as such when it came to crafting Cold War foreign policy. Treaties would not lead to peace.

In the mid-1970s, CIA officials commissioned a study of American intelligence regarding Soviet military intent based in large part on charges that American intelligence had underestimated the strength of the Soviet military to a significant degree. The team
of experts commissioned for this study, including Cold War policy veteran and former
deputy defense secretary Paul Nitze, Harvard historian Richard Pipes, and State
Department insider Paul Wolfowitz, came to be known as Team B. Team B’s report
confirmed what some officials had suspected: American intelligence had indeed
underestimated the strength of the Soviet military buildup. For those who accepted the
report’s conclusions, it was immediately evident that détente had been a catastrophic
blunder in American foreign policy. The report also raised the specter of a strategic
“window of vulnerability” that would make U.S. strategic land-based missiles susceptible
to a preemptive Soviet first strike. Analysts feared that even if the Soviets did not exploit
this window with a military attack, they might still use the window to place diplomatic
pressure on the United States. Americans who had stood by and watched as Saigon fell
to the communists in April 1975 now feared that the loss of American prestige in
Vietnam signaled a much greater problem: the United States was also losing the ability to
control its own destiny in the Cold War.\textsuperscript{154}

In response to the Team B report, a prominent group of ex-Democratic foreign
policy intellectuals, including Paul Nitze, Irving Kristol, Norman Podhoretz, and Eugene
Rostow, formed the Committee on the Present Danger (CPD) as a means of promoting
increased American defense spending. These intellectuals came to be known as
neoconservatives, former Cold War liberals who believed that their party had gone soft
on defense. The CPD, whose existence became public only a week after Jimmy Carter’s

\textsuperscript{154} Julian Zelizer, “Conservatives, Carter and the Politics of National Security” in Bruce J. Schulman and
118 - 38.
inauguration, published reports arguing that a strategic “window of vulnerability” existed between American and Soviet nuclear forces. In their statement of purpose, CPD members argued, “Our country is in a period of danger, and the danger is increasing. Unless decisive steps are taken to alert the nation, and to change the course of its policy, our economic and military capacity will become inadequate to assure peace and security. The Soviet Union had amassed “an unparalleled military buildup…in part reminiscent of Nazi Germany’s rearmament in the 1930s,” CPD reports warned readers. The purpose of this buildup was clear. The Soviets were preparing to “fight, survive, and win a nuclear war.”

At the same time that the CPD mobilized to push for increased defense spending, other conservatives organized to become a force in electoral politics. While the Goldwater defeat had seemingly left conservatives in an inferior position within the Republican Party, Ronald Reagan’s two terms as California governor energized them about the possibilities of success at the national level, if they managed to find the right candidates to carry the conservative banner. Reagan may have been a supporter of Goldwater, but he was in many respects the anti-Goldwater when it came to campaigning. Rather than alienating moderate voters with extreme rhetoric, Reagan drew moderates with his affable, grandfatherly image, his warm, inviting baritone voice, developed in his days as a baseball play-by-play man for the Chicago Cubs in the 1930s, and his broad, sweeping rhetoric that painted a picture of an optimistic future. This is not to say that Reagan always spoke in soft, optimistic tones. Reagan was also popular

among conservatives because he talked tough to war protestors on California’s campuses. He also used harsh rhetoric when talking about communism. He challenged the idealism of American liberalism’s reliance on government programs to promote the common good. In short, by striking a balance between the optimism of a brighter future for America and harsh criticisms of the left, Reagan became the man to carry the conservative banner by the late 1970s.

The Goldwater campaign left behind a significant framework for raising money and supporting conservative causes. A young conservative named Richard Viguerie, the executive director of Young Americans for Freedom, recognized that there was great potential in direct mail, one of the Goldwater campaign’s chief means of raising support. After the 1964 election, Viguerie lobbied Goldwater’s staff to obtain their mailing lists, records of over 12,000 addresses of those who donated $50 or more to the Goldwater campaign. After Viguerie obtained these lists, he established his own group, the Richard A. Viguerie Company, or RAVCO, to raise money for the conservative cause through direct mail.\footnote{Laura Kalman, Right Star Rising: A New Politics, 1974 – 1980 (New York: W.W. Norton & Company, 2010), 25.}

In 1973, Viguerie partnered with Paul Weyrich, another aspiring young conservative, to found the Heritage Foundation. The two men lobbied fellow conservative Joseph Coors of the famous Coors Brewing Company to donate $250,000 to the project. The Heritage Foundation was only one of a number of groups organizing to promote conservative causes at this time. In addition, there was Viguerie’s Young Americans for Freedom, the National Conservative Political Action Committee
(NCPAC), the American Conservative Union and the Conservative Caucus. In 1975, Richard Viguerie began publishing *Conservative Digest*, a periodical devoted to promoting conservative ideas. All of this organizing by conservatives did not go unnoticed by observers. In 1974, another conservative activist, Kevin Phillips, coined the phrase “New Right” to describe this new breed of hungry conservatives organizing en masse to create powerful changes in American politics.\(^{157}\)

Direct mail was a key to the New Right’s success. Direct mail not only allowed conservative activists to reach thousands of Americans in a manner not utilized by other political groups, it also reinforced the populist character of the New Right’s politics. According to New Right activists, it was necessary to use direct mail to bypass traditional media because a powerful liberal establishment controlled mainstream sources of information. Direct mail also aided conservatives in promoting the apocalyptic consequences of allowing liberals to continue controlling American government. In particular, direct mail helped to spread the same ideas promoted by the CPD. If liberals got their way, some mailings argued, taxpayers’ money would continue to be used to fund “communists, anarchists, and other radical organizations.”\(^{158}\) Direct mail demonstrated conservatives’ resentment toward America’s loss of military prestige following the Vietnam War. Mailings warned Americans that the consequences of continued negotiations toward further SALT agreements would be catastrophic for Americans. As the Ford and later Carter administrations prepared to present SALT II for ratification by the United States Senate, conservatives warned through direct mail that

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ratification of the treaty would mean that the United States was “waving a white flag of surrender.” Surveys of American voters demonstrated the effect of these campaigns by direct mail and CPD reports. Polls conducted in 1975 showed 18% of Americans believed that the United States was spending “too little” on defense. By 1980, as the Presidential election between Jimmy Carter and Ronald Reagan loomed in Americans’ minds, 60% of Americans reported that they believed the United States was spending “too little” on defense.\footnote{Frum, \textit{How We Got Here}, 344.}

\textbf{Moral Majority}

Though Jimmy Carter may have been the most prominent evangelical in the United States in 1976, his relationship with his conservative evangelical counterparts was never strong. Much of Carter’s falling out with evangelicals stemmed from his unwillingness to employ strong moral language in discussing social issues. The battle over ratifying the Equal Rights Amendment (ERA), passed by Congress in 1972, was indicative of this conflict. The Amendment, the wording of which simply stated, “Equality of rights under the law shall not be denied or abridged by the United States or by any State on account of sex,” had the strong backing of women’s rights groups like the National Organization of Women (NOW), but drew the ire of many conservatives who believed its underlying purpose was to fundamentally alter the traditional idea of the family in American life. As debates about the ERA heated up throughout the 70s, Phyllis Schlafly, a veteran of grassroots conservative politics and a tireless organizer on behalf of conservative causes, began to speak out forcefully against the ERA. In 1977, the National Women’s Conference convened in Houston, Texas, featuring many prominent
women’s rights advocates as speakers. The conference approved a list of aims for American women to be presented to the White House as guidance on social policy. Carter appointed Democratic congresswoman and leading women’s rights advocate Bella Abzug to chair a commission on women’s issues that helped to plan the conference.\textsuperscript{160}

Carter proved more ambivalent than adamant in his thinking about women’s issues and the ERA. Still, his failure to speak out in favor of the traditional family and against the ERA, as well as his support for the liberal principles embraced by Bella Abzug and the National Women’s Conference, proved to many evangelicals that Carter could not be trusted to carry the banner of evangelical causes. Pat Robertson was particularly candid in his denunciation of Carter’s leadership on women’s issues. “I wouldn’t let Bella Abzug scrub the floors of any organization I was head of,” Robertson remarked, “but Carter put her in charge of all the women of America, and used our tax funds to support that convention in Houston.” Jerry Falwell labeled the conference as both “anti-God” and “anti-family,” not to mention “anti-America.” To Falwell, those who supported the ERA were backing “a delusion” that was clearly contrary to “God’s laws.”\textsuperscript{161}

Carter fared no better with evangelicals in matters of foreign policy or national defense. While the new President chose to continue negotiations with the Soviets on a SALT II agreement, he ultimately decided to make human rights the cornerstone of his foreign policy. Carter hoped that by focusing on human rights, conservatives would see


\textsuperscript{161} Martin, \textit{With God on Our Side}, 166-67.
him as an ardent anti-communist, sympathetic to abuses of freedom behind the Iron 
Curtain. In the late 1970s, the topic of human rights abuses in the Soviet Union was 
timely. In June 1978, the Soviet dissident Aleksandr Solzhenitsyn delivered the 
commencement address at Harvard University. Solzhenitsyn had drawn more attention to 
Soviet labor camps than any other person with the publication of his epic *The Gulag 
Archipelago* in 1973. Solzhenitsyn’s commencement address did as much to point 
fingers at the morally vacuous nature of Western culture than the culture of his homeland. 
Still, Solzhenitsyn and his work became powerful symbols of human oppression in the 
Soviet Union.\(^{162}\) Nuclear scientist Andrei Sakharov was also an outspoken critic of the 
Soviet Union, and he earned the Nobel Peace Prize in 1975 after years of speaking out 
against nuclear proliferation in the arms race between the United States and the Soviet 
Union. Later in the decade, Sakharov was exiled internally to an apartment in Gorky 
after he spoke out against the Soviet Union’s invasion of Afghanistan. He was not 
allowed to leave the Soviet Union in 1975 to receive his Nobel Peace Prize.\(^{163}\)

Any hope of reconciling conservatives to a human rights-based foreign policy was 
undermined by the work of groups like the CPD. The CPD made it clear to conservatives 
that the answer to détente was not a balance of humanitarian work alongside a healthy 
dose of *realpolitik*. There was only one answer to the problems confronting U.S.-Soviet 
relations: strengthen American defenses. Examples like that of Solzhenitsyn and 
Sakharov only served to harden conservatives in this position. So did Carter’s

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\(^{163}\) David E. Hoffman, *The Dead Hand: The Untold Story of the Cold War Arms Race and its Dangerous 
Legacy* (New York: Doubleday, 2009), 278.
controversial decisions to cancel funding for the B-1 bomber and give control of the Panama Canal to Panama. From Carter’s perspective, these decisions were based in rational, pragmatic calculations of U.S. interest and budgetary concerns. Carter hoped to use funding from cancellation of the B-1 bomber, an aging weapon in America’s arsenal, to construct a new cruise missile system. Likewise, the Panama Canal decision represented an attempt by the Carter administration to build better relations in Latin America. The Canal, once considered vital to American defense interests in the Western Hemisphere, had been rendered less useful by the construction of large American naval vessels after the Second World War. In giving control of the Canal back to Panama, the United States still retained the right to defend the Canal if necessary. Nonetheless, these two decisions represented something far more than careful calculation of interests for many conservatives. As noted earlier, conservatives saw the post-Vietnam period as a time when the United States stood perilously close to an irreversible decline in power. Jerry Falwell criticized both decisions, as did Ronald Reagan in his radio addresses. In doing so, they helped to make Carter himself a symbol of America’s declining prestige.

Carter’s handling of nuclear weapons policy confirmed this image in the minds of conservatives. In June 1979, as Carter traveled to Vienna, Austria to meet with Soviet leader Leonid Brezhnev and sign the SALT II treaty, he faced heavy criticism from Jerry

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165 Martin, *With God on Our Side*, 211.
Falwell. In August 1979, Falwell sent supporters a “Special Report” entitled “Why Every American Should Oppose SALT II.” On its cover, a political cartoon featured a caricature of Carter, looking like a hapless, boyish buffoon, handing Brezhnev a sword, symbolizing American military power. On the other side, Brezhnev stood ready to receive the sword with one hand, all the while holding a large handful of nuclear missiles behind his back with the other hand. The message of the cartoon was abundantly clear.

Not only was Carter giving away the Cold War by negotiating an arms control treaty with Brezhnev, but also he was too incompetent to realize that he was doing so. Inside the newsletter, the bold headline “Communism is Godlessness” led readers to an article that forecast impending doom for the United States. With the ratification of SALT II, Falwell warned readers, the Soviet Union would “demand” that the United States “capitulate” to its demands. “Everything that is dear and precious to the American people would be eliminated,” Falwell predicted. “Churches would be closed; free elections would be history, and the right of parents to rear their children as they see fit, to love God and the Bible, would cease to be.” To speak out in protest against SALT II was not simply good foreign policy, Falwell told his readers, but also to “act in accordance with the will of God.” “The survival of America is now at stake,” Falwell warned. “SALT II could lock the United States into its present military inferiority.” It would most certainly “make the lopsided advantages” the Soviets “obtained under SALT I permanent.”

In 1979, mainstream news agencies issued reports that supported the CPD’s assertion that a “window of vulnerability” existed between the United States and the

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166 “Why Every American Should Oppose SALT II,” Jerry Falwell, Special Report from Thomas Road Baptist Church, August 1979, A. Pierre Guillermin Library, Liberty University, Lynchburg Virginia.
Soviet Union in the arms race. In a November 1979 editorial in *U.S. News & World Report*, assistant editor Joseph Fromm told readers that America’s nuclear weapons policies had been woefully mistaken about Soviet aims in the 1970s. The Soviets were planning to stockpile nuclear weapons and overtake the Americans in the nuclear arms race all along. American policymakers had underestimated Soviet military strength. Adding credence to his argument, Fromm quoted former Secretary of State Henry Kissinger, one of the chief architects of détente, who remarked that Soviet military strength could make the 1980s “a period of massive crisis.”

As Jerry Falwell later remarked, by 1979, it had become clear that “something had to be done” to get evangelicals more actively involved in national politics. Evangelicals on the right could no longer trust Jimmy Carter to support what they viewed as moral, Biblical positions on a number of pressing issues. Falwell and his contemporaries in the world of conservative evangelicalism shifted the focus of their political activism toward the formation of “para-church” organizations designed to organize evangelicals into a reliable voting bloc for conservative causes. These organizations gave evangelists the ability to unite a number of geographically separated and sometimes theologically disparate evangelicals for political action. They also gave televangelists an opportunity to use their sizeable, loyal television audience to another end: making televangelists public authority figures on political matters. Statistics derived from a 1979 survey of The 700 Club’s audience demonstrated the potential embodied in this phenomenon. The survey of over one-third of The 700 Club’s viewers found that

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In 1978, Reverend Robert Grant of Pasadena, California founded the first major political para-church organization, Christian Voice. Though most of Christian Voice’s supporters were located in the Western United States, the organization also drew a great deal of its financial and moral support from Pat Robertson and The 700 Club. Robertson promoted Christian Voice on his program, and in the process, helped to raise money for the organization’s campaigns. At the same time, televangelist James Robison joined Ed McAteer, a wealthy salesman and executive with Colgate-Palmolive, as well as a Baptist layman, to form the Religious Roundtable, the group that would ultimately rally evangelicals around the cause of electing Ronald Reagan president. The Religious Roundtable sought to organize ministers across the country, men and women who supported televangelists’ political beliefs but did not have access to television and radio, to support conservative political causes.\footnote{Richard G. Hutcheson, Jr., God in the White House: How Religion Has Changed the Modern Presidency (New York: Macmillan Publishing Company, 1988), 160; “Edward McAteer, Who Empowered Christian Right, Dies at 78,” Margalit Fox, New York Times, October 10, 2004, Accessed September 10, 2011, http://www.nytimes.com/2004/10/10/national/10mcateer.html.}

By far the most visible political para-church organization belonged to Jerry Falwell. The Moral Majority became the most well-organized and funded of these groups due in no small part to Falwell’s popularity as a television personality and equally
important, the backing of New Right activists. In 1979, Falwell’s “Old Time Gospel Hour” reached an estimated 18 million people across the nation, leading him to boast to reporters that he was “more widely distributed than the Johnny Carson show.” His ministry’s annual revenue stood at approximately $30 million. Recognizing in Falwell the potential to unite evangelicals in support of conservative candidates, New Right activists Richard Viguerie, Paul Weyrich and Howard Phillips traveled to Lynchburg in May 1979. There, they petitioned Falwell to become more politically active. Acting on the New Right’s encouragement, in June 1979, Falwell met with fellow evangelists Charles Stanley, D. James Kennedy, Tim LaHaye and Greg Dixon. At that meeting, the group decided to back Falwell in founding The Moral Majority.

The Moral Majority was actually a conglomerate of four different organizations operating under the same banner. Moral Majority, Inc. was the primary organization that dealt with organizing evangelicals into political action. Structured as a 501(c)4 tax-exempt, non-profit organization, Moral Majority, Inc. printed newsletters, including its flagship publication *The Moral Majority Report*, organized pastors’ seminars, rallies, regional and national conventions, as well as meetings designed to train prospective political candidates in how to win elections. A second organization, the Moral Majority Political Action Committee, raised money to support campaigns against what it deemed “amoral legislation.” It also raised funds to “assist pro-moral candidates” and “promote moral legislation.” Brochures distributed in the early days of The Moral Majority reminded supporters that gifts to the Moral Majority Political Action Committee could be


“claimed as tax credits” so long as they were “within allowable limits.” A third organization, Moral Majority Foundation, was “a 501(c)3 organization dedicated to educate, inspire, and inform pro-moral citizens with special emphasis on ministers.” Contributions to this organization were tax-deductible. Finally, the Moral Majority Legal Defense Foundation, also a 501(c)3 organization, aided “individuals, families, and pro-moral organizations who [were] attacked by the godless, amoral forces of humanism.” This last organization, Moral Majority literature noted, was “designed to be the pro-moral counterpart of the humanist-American Civil Liberties Union,” devoted to “design[ing] Constitutional Amendments prohibiting abortions and pornography,” as well as “legally establish[ing] Humanism as a religion” so it could be “expelled from the public schools.”

Pamphlets and brochures announcing the formation of The Moral Majority told readers that the United States was “rapidly turning into a 20th Century Sodom and Gomorrah,” the result of “a few influential amoral humanists” who had assumed “the most influential positions in our nation.” “Self-appointed individuals have taken over public education, the media, and to a large extent our government,” one pamphlet warned. Only a “coalition of the Bible-believing churches led by their pastor shepherds who are willing to serve as the conscience of America” could help to bring about a change in the nation’s direction. The Moral Majority was “pro-life,” “pro-family,” “pro-moral,” and pro-American.” Its leaders would challenge the “situation ethics” and “amoral emphasis on no absolutes” that defined humanism, which “challenge[d] every

172 “Your Invitation to Join The Moral Majority,” pamphlet, Collection Mor 1-1, Folder 2, MM Brochures & Pamphlets, A. Pierre Guillermin Library, Liberty University, Lynchburg, Virginia.
moral principle on which America was founded” and “advocate[d] abortion-on-demand, recognition of homosexuals, free use of pornography, legalizing of prostitution, gambling, free use of drugs, etc.”\textsuperscript{173}

Brochures also promised that The Moral Majority would speak out about the threat posed by the spread of communism. “The free enterprise system is endangered by the advent of Socialism,” one pamphlet noted. “Our national defense is virtually nonexistent in the face of the super Soviet arms build-up,” it continued. “The refusal of elected leaders and bureaucratic mercenaries to acknowledge the commitment of international Communism to world conquest jeopardizes our national security.”\textsuperscript{174}

Later pieces of Moral Majority literature attempted to assuage critics’ concerns about the organization. The Moral Majority was not “a political party” and did not “endorse political candidates.” They were not attempting to “elect born-again candidates,” “control the government,” promote “censorship,” or “deprive homosexuals of their civil rights as Americans.” While they did not believe that the Equal Rights Amendment was the appropriate “vehicle with which to obtain equal rights for women,” the organization did believe in “equal rights for women.” Moreover, Moral Majority, Inc. was fully committed to supporting the state of Israel and defeating the forces of anti-Semitism. One Moral Majority brochure proclaimed, in bold letters, “No anti-Semitic influence is allowed in Moral Majority, Inc.” One could not be a part of The Moral

\textsuperscript{173} Ibid.
\textsuperscript{174} Ibid.
Majority “without making the commitment to support the state of Israel in its battle for survival and to support the human and civil rights of Jewish people everywhere.”\footnote{175 “What is the Moral Majority?” brochure, Collection Mor 1-1 Folder 2, Moral Majority Brochures & Pamphlets, A. Pierre Guillermin Library, Liberty University, Lynchburg, Virginia.}

One might have seen Falwell’s assurances that the Moral Majority did not endorse candidates as cynical and disingenuous. If the organization did not place an official stamp of approval on candidates, it certainly suggested which candidates were the most “pro-moral” and definitely which ones were the most amoral. By the time the 1980 election season was in full swing, it had become abundantly clear that if Falwell and his contemporaries in the New Christian Right did not believe Jimmy Carter was necessarily amoral, they did believe his unwillingness to take Manichean positions on certain issues meant he was appeasing evil. What is also clear now, based on documents published in recent years, is that Carter held the evangelical right in as much contempt, if not more, than they held him. In his White House Diaries, published in 2010, Carter referred to Jerry Falwell and his contemporaries as “religious nuts” whose appearance on a television program with Bill Moyers, in September 1980, represented a “disquieting moment.” Moyers, Carter fumed, had given the evangelical right “fifty minutes of uninterrupted bragging on themselves.” Carter’s diaries also reveal the extent to which the President’s understanding of the vocabulary of the evangelical right was limited. In an August 7, 1980 entry, Carter reflected on a particular incident when Dr. Bailey Smith of the Southern Baptist Convention asked Carter for his thoughts about secular humanism. As the President recounted, he was forced to confess to Dr. Smith that he had never heard of the term. Carter mused that the term “must be a part of Jerry Falwell’s
right-wing group.” He then recorded his frustrations with Falwell, writing that the Lynchburg evangelist had lied by reporting an Oval Office conversation where Carter had told Falwell that he had to hire homosexuals to serve in his cabinet, as they needed to be represented in the White House. Not only had Carter never said such a thing to Falwell, he wrote in his diary, Falwell had never even met with the President in the Oval Office.  

The relationship between Carter and the New Christian Right was beyond repair. 

“I Endorse You!”

If Carter could no longer be counted on to bear the torch of evangelicals’ political concerns, at least from the perspective of the right, it remained to be seen who would become the candidate of conservative evangelicalism. In mid-1979, with the Moral Majority in place as an institutional base for his political activism, Jerry Falwell hit the road, speaking at churches across the country, encouraging evangelicals to join him in becoming outspoken political activists. The earlier Falwell of “Ministers and Marchers,” the man who had sworn he would never quit preaching the Gospel to jump into the political arena, was gone. The new Falwell renounced that earlier proclamation as a “false prophecy.” Falwell not only resumed his nationwide tour of “I Love America!” rallies, he also wrote a political manifesto, Listen, America!, published in 1980. In the book, Falwell noted that the failure of many evangelicals to get involved in politics was “one of the major sins of the church today.” As he traveled across the country speaking at churches, Falwell told ministers that their primary duty was to get people “saved, baptized, and registered to vote.”

177 Jerry Falwell, Listen, America!, 257-63; Martin, With God on Our Side, 201.
Falwell’s “I Love America!” rallies drew much media attention to the Moral Majority. They also helped to form a nationwide network of local church support for the group. After his rallies and speaking appearances, Falwell invited local ministers to a complimentary luncheon where he discussed ways that ministers could get their congregations involved in supporting Moral Majority causes. Falwell also made liberal use of direct mail, the tool that had been most helpful to New Right activists in garnering grassroots support for conservative causes. As Falwell’s “Why Every American Should Oppose SALT II” newsletter illustrated, direct mail gave Falwell an opportunity to package his messages in a visually attractive and persuasive manner. Through his connections with supporters of “The Old Time Gospel Hour,” Falwell held the addresses of approximately seven million families. Falwell not only used these addresses to fuel his own direct mail campaigns, he also gave the addresses to Richard Viguerie, who employed them in distributing New Right literature in support of conservative causes. In short, by the time the 1980 election season got under way, a vast and well-funded apparatus was in place to campaign for conservative candidates, one that rivaled anything previously seen in American politics. The grassroots movement that had begun with the Barry Goldwater campaign in 1964 had slowly grown into a political juggernaut, one driven now by a fury directed at the forces that were hastening America’s decline. Jimmy Carter was enemy number one for this movement. Scores of evangelical voters were directed to turn against one of the most visible and openly evangelical men to ever occupy the Oval Office.
Mainstream media dubbed this growing movement the New Christian Right, a reference no doubt to the grassroots connections between evangelicals’ political organizing and that of the New Right.\textsuperscript{178} The New Christian Right turned their attention toward Ronald Reagan in hopes that he might become the man to lead evangelicals into the political Promised Land. In many respects, Reagan was an unlikely candidate for the job. Reagan’s public persona was developed in Hollywood, the city often vilified by evangelicals for its hedonistic contributions to American culture. Reagan was divorced from his first wife, actress Jane Wyman. His relationship with his two youngest children Patti and Ron, Jr., both born to Reagan’s wife Nancy, was rocky at best. As governor of California, moreover, Reagan signed the Therapeutic Abortion Act, an attempt to end the practice of so-called “back alley” abortions in the state, but one which granted state sanction to the expansion of abortion as a legitimate, state-approved medical procedure.

For all of this baggage that Reagan brought to his candidacy for President, however, he also carried a number of assets that bolstered his chances of winning over evangelical voters. Perhaps the most important of these was Reagan’s penchant for playing the role of a religious candidate with verve. This is not to say that Reagan did not have genuine religious sympathies. Throughout his life, Reagan continued to be influenced by his mother Nelle’s devotion to a simple Christian faith, forged and developed in the local Disciples of Christ church in Reagan’s hometown of Dixon, Illinois. Baptized into the church in 1922, Reagan remained at least somewhat connected to his religious roots for most of his life. Reagan’s ability to identify with the simple message of salvation articulated by twentieth-century evangelists like Charles Fuller and

Billy Graham helped him immensely in his efforts to win the approval of evangelical leaders. As William Martin recounted in his book *With God on Our Side*, when D. James Kennedy asked Reagan during the 1980 campaign if he knew he would go to heaven if he died, and what justification he would give God for letting him in, “Reagan dropped his eyes, looked at his feet, and said, ‘I wouldn’t give God any reason for letting me in. I’d just ask for mercy, because of what Jesus Christ did for me at Calvary.”

Reagan’s political reputation was also aided in no small part by what biographer Lou Cannon called “the conventional description of Ronald Reagan’s political evolution.” As Cannon noted, Reagan benefited from the idea, promoted heavily throughout his campaign, that he was the ideal embodiment of the myth of the “self-made American,” the product of small-town Midwestern values and a strict Protestant work ethic. This visionary biographical portrait allowed Reagan, a wealthy citizen of Hollywood and two-term governor of the Golden State, to nonetheless become the champion of a populist right wing fed up with the excesses of American liberalism. Reagan himself had been “a liberal Democrat” in the days of FDR, but he “awakened to the communist menace while participating in the post-war labor and political struggles in the film industry.” He “gradually realized that the federal government was encroaching upon individual freedoms,” Cannon wrote. It was then that “he became a conservative.”

Evangelical leaders like Jerry Falwell were particularly drawn to the idea that Reagan would toe a tough line against Soviet communism. After all, Reagan did not

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mince words in talking about communism as a menace to the world. In an August 1980 speech to the Veterans of Foreign Wars in Chicago, for instance, Reagan articulated his beliefs about defending the United States against the red menace, the beliefs that would eventually be known as “peace through strength.” The way to neutralize the threat of Soviet communism, Reagan suggested, was to make America’s military power strong again. As Reagan told the assembled veterans that day, “Our best hope of persuading [the Soviets] to live in peace is to convince them that they cannot win a war.”

Anti-communism played a prominent role in shaping evangelicals’ political rhetoric during the 1980 campaign. Indeed, the first chapter of Jerry Falwell’s *Listen, America!* focused not on domestic moral issues, but on national defense. As he wrote, “The sad fact is that [in an exchange of missiles] today the Soviet Union would kill 135 million to 160 million Americans, and the United States would kill only three to five percent of the Soviets because of [Soviet] antiballistic missiles and their civil defense.”

At a national affairs briefing for evangelicals in 1980, attendees watched a film entitled “The SALT Syndrome,” which reiterated the essential messages promoted by the Committee on the Present Danger: The United States was militarily weak and vulnerable to a nuclear attack by the Soviet Union. Speakers, both evangelical leaders and outsiders sympathetic to evangelical causes, used the opportunity to argue that military preparedness for war against the communists was not just a matter of practical necessity in national defense, but also a “moral imperative” made clear in the “Judeo-Christian heritage” of the United States “as told in the Bible.” The future of America’s national

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182 Falwell, *Listen, America!*, 98.
defense was in the hands of evangelicals, who bore the responsibility of electing leaders who would fight. As retired Air Force General Albion Knight told those gathered at the national affairs briefing, it was going to be up to Christians “to put a spine down the back of America.”

Reagan certainly embodied the image of a candidate with a strong spine. Whereas Jimmy Carter spoke about a need for Americans to tighten their financial belts and learn to live with less, Reagan spoke of a proud America whose most prosperous days was still ahead. Reagan’s conservatism taught Americans to expect greater prosperity. The federal government was an enemy to such prosperity. High income taxes stood in the way of Americans’ ability to achieve their God-given financial destiny. Reagan wanted to unleash American business from the burdensome chains of federal regulations. Reagan often couched his rhetoric about American greatness in religious terms. Like Jerry Falwell, he loved to quote 2 Chronicles 7:14 in speeches. “If my people, who are called by my name, will humble themselves and pray and seek my face and turn from their wicked ways, then I will hear from heaven, and I will forgive their sin and will heal their land,” the popular passage read. America’s prosperity waspredicated on Americans’ faith in divine providence, Reagan and his conservative evangelical followers believed. The world, moreover, was looking to the United States to lead. This was a theme Reagan often returned to in his broad, sweeping rhetoric about American greatness. In a speech delivered to the first meeting of the conservative political action caucus in January 1974, Reagan quoted John Winthrop, the Puritan lawyer who had been instrumental in the founding of the Massachusetts Bay colony, when he spoke of the

183 “Christians on Right and Left Take up Ballot and Cudgel.” York Times, September 21, 1980, 20E.
United States as a “city on a hill.” As Reagan reminded listeners, Winthrop had spoken of the need to remain faithful to God in order to prosper as a nation. “The eyes of all people are upon us,” Reagan quoted Winthrop, “so that if we deal falsely with our God in this work we have undertaken and so cause Him to withdraw His present help from us, we shall be made a story and a byword throughout the world.” When Reagan famously returned to Winthrop’s remarks in his 1984 Republican convention speech, he added the word “shining” to Winthrop’s description of the new nation. The United States was, in Reagan’s assessment, “a shining city upon a hill,” a beacon of liberty for the world at large.¹⁸⁴

Reagan augmented his appeal to conservative evangelicals by supporting many of their positions on controversial social issues as well as national defense. As a presidential candidate in 1980, Reagan was able to distance himself from his support for a 1967 abortion bill in California. The bill had come before the 1973 Roe v. Wade decision that brought the abortion issue into the national consciousness. More important, Reagan argued that doctors in California had deceived him into believing that the bill would not permit abortions for any woman who sought one. Reagan effectively argued that he never believed that the bill would increase the number of abortions in California, though approximately one million abortions were performed under the terms of the bill. In 1980, Reagan pledged his support for a constitutional amendment that would have banned abortion except in cases where the mother’s life was in jeopardy.¹⁸⁵ Evangelicals

¹⁸⁵ Cannon, President Reagan, 729.
believed that Reagan had come to see the abortion issue much more clearly than he had in 1967. In the same 1974 speech in which he characterized the United States as a “city on a hill,” Reagan spoke of the way that America had turned its back on God by kicking Him out of public schools. Many evangelicals saw Reagan as a strong proponent of restoring legalized compulsory prayer in public schools. Reagan also seemed poised to appoint conservative justices to the Supreme Court, ones who would be willing to reconsider controversial rulings like *Engle v. Vitale* or *Roe v. Wade*. In short, Reagan embraced a particular vision of national defense that appealed to evangelicals’ worldview. America’s national defense was not just dependent on building up arms, though that was important. It was also predicated on Americans’ continuing reliance on God in their personal and civic lives. If Americans turned away from God, the Almighty could and likely would judge the nation, threatening its standing as a political, military and economic leader among the nations of the world. More than any other presidential candidate in the 1980 race, Reagan understood how to articulate this idea in clear, visionary terms to the average American.

Evangelical leaders thus embraced Reagan with alacrity. Jerry Falwell referred to Reagan and his running mate, George H.W. Bush, as “God’s instruments in re-building America.” Reagan, in turn, went as far as reasonably possible to show his support for his evangelical followers. The most notable example of this took place at the same August 1980 National Affairs Briefing where Albion Knight challenged Christians to “put a spine down the back of America.” With Jerry Falwell, Pat Robertson, and numerous other prominent evangelicals in the audience, Reagan appeared to speak, introduced by
Dr. D. James Kennedy, pastor of Coral Ridge Presbyterian Church in Fort Lauderdale, Florida, as a man who believed in the teachings of the Bible and who “trust[ed] in the living God and his Son Jesus Christ.” Speaking to the enthusiastic crowd at the briefing, Reagan remarked, “I know you cannot endorse me, but I want you to know that I endorse you!”

On Election Day, Reagan handily won the presidency, taking 50.1 percent of the popular vote and routing Carter in the Electoral College, 489 to 49 votes. Reagan’s message of smaller government, lower taxes and a strong national defense had clearly resonated with voters who felt the sting of economic turmoil and weakening American prestige in the Carter years. On the surface at least, it seemed that evangelical voters had followed the lead of televangelists like Jerry Falwell in helping to sweep Reagan into office. For years afterward, Falwell and others pointed to their relationship with Reagan as a sign that the Religious Right held sway within the ranks of Reagan’s administration. Many observers certainly believed this to be true, at least initially. In a May 1981 article in *The New Yorker*, for instance, writer Frances FitzGerald argued that though the televangelists of the New Christian Right did not mold evangelicals into a separate political party, they nonetheless led many of their followers to believe that issues like abortion, school prayer and national defense were important enough to change their normal voting patterns to support Republican candidates. Conservative, Bible-believing evangelicals were a part of Reagan’s core constituency, the backbone of his support on Election Day.

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In hindsight, it is clear that Reagan’s support among conservative evangelicals was hardly as strong as leaders like Falwell would have liked to believe. Statistics compiled by the National Election Service demonstrated that though Carter lost some support among conservative evangelical voters in the years between 1976 and 1980, he retained a majority of votes among his own denomination, the typically conservative Southern Baptists. In 1976, Carter defeated Ford among Southern Baptists with 59 percent of the vote to Ford’s 37.6 percent. In 1980, the vote among Southern Baptists read 50 percent for Carter, 46.6 percent for Reagan. While Reagan did defeat Carter in votes among evangelicals, 58 percent to 34.8 percent, Reagan ultimately bested Carter by a greater margin among mainline Protestants, members of denominations like the Presbyterian, Lutheran and Methodist Churches. Reagan received 62.8 percent of the vote among mainline Protestants, while Carter received only 29.6 percent. Among Roman Catholics, Reagan received 51 percent of the vote, while Carter received 39.5 percent. It should be noted, moreover, that among those who claimed “no religion,” or self-identified as atheists or agnostics, Reagan won by a significant margin as well, with 50 percent of the vote to Carter’s 27.9 percent.

A study of the Religious Right’s involvement in the 1980 election, published in the Journal for the Scientific Study of Religion in 1982, concluded that the Christian Right had little to no effect on the outcome of the 1980 election. What did matter in 1980, the study’s authors concluded, was Americans’ concerns about inflation and unemployment. If evangelical voters swung to the right for Reagan in 1980, so did most of the rest of the country. There was little evidence to suggest that the efforts of
televangelists had forged a permanent coalition of voters for the Republican Party. As the authors pointed out, when Protestant voters were asked if they advocated greater political involvement by the church, it was mainline Protestants, particularly African Americans, who responded affirmatively. In 1980, African Americans voted 95 percent in favor of Carter.188

Adding further credence to these numbers, a Gallup poll conducted in December 1980 revealed that only 40 percent of respondents had heard of the Moral Majority. A mere 26 percent of those who had heard of the Moral Majority considered themselves “informed” about the organization. Among those 26 percent, 13 percent disapproved of the group while 8 percent registered approval and 5 percent remained undecided.189 The results of this study, coupled with the results of the 1980 election, support the idea that though televangelists like Jerry Falwell and Pat Robertson held significant television viewing audiences in 1980, coupled with equally impressive fundraising coffers, they had yet to translate their political efforts into widespread recognition or influence.

It would be a mistake, however, to discount the rise of the New Christian Right between 1979 and 1980 as historically unimportant. Clearly, something significant happened. The ability of Christian leaders to unite geographically and theologically disparate evangelicals in political action through the medium of television was a fledgling, but developing phenomenon. If evangelical leaders had yet to spread their message to a majority of Americans, the fact remained that their preferred candidate, Ronald Reagan, had been elected. A question remained: in choosing to support Reagan

over Carter, what had evangelicals gained? “If evangelicals were looking for a born-again Christian candidate in the 1980 campaign, they only had one choice – Jimmy Carter,” *Christian Century* editor James Wall once remarked. “If they were looking for ideology,” he continued, “their choice was Reagan.” It remained to be seen whether President Reagan would translate evangelicals’ ideas into public policy.

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190 Hutcheson, Jr., *God in the White House*, 172.
As Ronald Reagan raised his hand to take the presidential oath on January 20, 1981, it remained to be seen what influence, if any, evangelicals would wield in the Reagan White House. The new President surrounded himself with a staff of distinguished but diverse individuals, some of whom were staunch hardline conservatives and some who took a pragmatic approach to executive governance. Some evangelicals like James Robison quickly grew frustrated with the new administration, demanding immediate satisfaction from the Reagan White House. Others, particularly Jerry Falwell, took a more cautious approach, fearful that evangelicals’ relationship with Reagan might sour if evangelicals publicly denounced the administration. The result of this uncertainty was a slow-growing political marriage, one where evangelical leaders looked for areas where they could work to support the Reagan administration rather than sitting on the sidelines and expressing dissatisfaction with the administration’s failure to act quickly enough on social issues like abortion.

National defense proved an ideal area of political coordination between the Reagan administration and evangelicals. If Reagan failed to act on many of the social issues that concerned evangelicals, he did not fail to talk tough about Soviet communism. The early years of the Reagan presidency marked a dramatic turning point in U.S.-Soviet relations, away from Mutually Assured Destruction or détente toward a more confrontational approach to the Soviet Union. The Reagan administration’s Soviet policies involved challenging the validity of the Soviet system and building up American nuclear forces. As a result of these policies, observers wondered whether Reagan was
irresponsibly inciting the Soviets into a possible nuclear showdown, or worse, whether
Reagan actually wanted such a confrontation.

In the context of debates about these policies, evangelists of the New Christian
Right offered alacritous support for Reagan’s anti-communism. The politics of nuclear
weapons shaped the foreign affairs activism of the New Christian Right more than any
other issue during Reagan’s presidency. As such, it deserves an extended treatment in
this dissertation, one that will require more than one chapter. This chapter will examine
the Religious Right’s support for Reagan’s national defense policies in his first term, in
particular their defense of Reagan’s nuclear policies amid the growth of the nuclear
freeze movement. Leading authorities of the Religious Right, particularly Jerry Falwell,
spread the message that the freeze movement was lying to the American people and that
any form of a nuclear freeze would damage the United States while benefiting the Soviet
Union. Falwell had the support of Ronald Reagan, who used tough language when
talking about the Soviets during his first term. The joint efforts of conservative
evangelicals and the President came together in one notable instance in March 1983,
when Reagan delivered a controversial speech to a meeting of the National Association
of Evangelicals. Calling on evangelicals to oppose the nuclear freeze movement, Reagan
referred to the Soviet Union as an “evil empire” whose “aggressive impulses” should not
be ignored.191

The nuclear freeze movement represented a high point in the relationship between
the Religious Right and the Reagan administration. The two sides collaborated more

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closely in fighting the freeze than in any other major public policy issue. Yet the Religious Right’s campaign against the freeze also demonstrated the limits of their reach. When opportunities arose to debate the freeze issue with other evangelicals, particularly with those who were sympathetic to the freeze, the Religious Right deferred. The Moral Majority failed to provide a consistent, coherent message to the public, arguing that the freeze represented a severe threat to national security, but also that the strength of the freeze movement had been overstated by the media. At the same time, the Religious Right faced an uphill battle in trying to convince evangelicals to oppose the nuclear freeze movement. As this chapter will demonstrate, this was not because evangelicals were enthusiastic supporters of the freeze. Rather, evangelicals proved an ambivalent group when it came to nuclear weapons.

“Just Because Reagan Has Won…”

In December 1980, Christianity Today editor Kenneth Kantzer warned evangelicals not to think that “the battle for righteous and sane government” had somehow been just won just because Reagan had been elected president. To be sure, evangelicals had played an important role in helping Reagan get elected, Kantzer argued, but they also needed to be reminded that America was a pluralistic nation. “Right-wing evangelicals must prepare themselves for a letdown as evil forces continue to show their clout in government,” Kantzer wrote. He concluded, “Scandals are not all in the past – nor are imprudent, ultra-statesmen like decisions.”

Kantzer’s words were prescient. Though Reagan had campaigned by appealing to socially conservative groups like evangelicals, his administration was nonetheless divided

between hardliner conservatives who sympathized with evangelicals’ desire to implement immediate and radical change in public policy, and pragmatists who, while not necessarily disagreeing with evangelicals, focused the administration’s attention on a different set of goals they believed were more crucial and achievable. This latter group was most notably defined by the Reagan administration “troika,” three advisors who shaped the early agenda of Reagan’s presidency. The troika consisted of White House Chief of Staff James Baker, Deputy Chief of Staff Michael Deaver, and presidential counselor Edwin Meese. Christian Right leaders had a mixed relationship with these men. Though Jerry Falwell held a deep affinity for Meese, he clashed with Deaver, particularly after Deaver was quoted in the Washington Post stating that the Religious Right would be “welcome in the White House, but they’d need to come in the back door.” Deaver later apologized personally to Falwell and claimed that the Post had misquoted him, but the incident certainly did not help the two men to develop a cozy or even cordial relationship.193

Reagan’s pragmatic advisors were nonetheless determined to avoid many of the mistakes of the previous administration. Specifically, Baker and Deaver were convinced that Carter and his staffers had erred seriously by trying to accomplish too many goals too quickly during their first months in office. As a result, they believed, Carter had appeared to lack focus and a clear set of priorities. This lack of focus had given the American people a sense that Carter was out of touch with what was most important to them. Carter had never entirely been able to shake this image. The solution to avoiding this problem, the pragmatists held, was to focus on one or two key issues, thereby

193 Martin, With God on Our Side, 223.
avoiding the pitfall of sending Congress a “flurry of proposals” that lacked a clear, unifying theme. The new administration believed that the American economy was clearly the most important issue that needed to be addressed. Reagan had campaigned with a message of cutting federal income taxes. His inaugural address largely focused on economic themes, as Reagan promised the American people he would “curb the size and influence of the Federal government” and provide the nation with a “healthy, vigorous, growing economy that provides equal opportunities for all Americans.”

Focusing on the economy nonetheless meant that the Reagan administration would ignore the concerns of social conservatives, at least in the early days of Reagan’s presidency. Evangelical leaders, obviously disappointed with the new administration’s decision to snub them in the legislative arena, looked to other decisions within the Reagan White House as a means of defining their influence there. One obvious way to gauge their influence was to look at the number of evangelical figures Reagan had appointed to prominent positions in government. In this regard, early signs were promising. Reagan appointed the Reverend Robert Billings, one of the founding members of the Moral Majority, as assistant Secretary of Education. For evangelicals who saw the public schools as one of the most important arenas in which to combat the influence of secular humanism in America, this appointment was especially pleasing. Richard Schweiker and C. Everett Koop, both known as unwavering opponents of abortion, were appointed to respective positions as Secretary of Health and Human Services and Surgeon General. Marjory Mecklenburg, one of the founders of the

National Right to Life Committee, joined Schweiker in the Department of Health and Human Services as Deputy Assistant Secretary for Population Affairs. Dr. James Dobson, a rising star in Christian psychology and founder of Focus on the Family, a socially conservative Christian organization devoted to promoting traditional family values, earned appointments to a half-dozen government panels dealing with issues like abortion, pornography and teenage pregnancy.\textsuperscript{196} In addition, James Watt, an enthusiastic evangelical and member of the Assemblies of God, earned an appointment as Secretary of the Interior.\textsuperscript{197}

Reagan’s evangelical supporters nonetheless remained unsatisfied. For those evangelical leaders who believed the support of the Christian right had been essential to Reagan’s election, it seemed that the new President was throwing them leftover scraps from the table. Morton Blackwell, who later served as the Reagan administration’s liaison to evangelicals, and a member of Reagan’s presidential transition team, defended the administration’s decision to hire only a few prominent evangelicals to positions of power. In Blackwell’s words, “There were very few people who were available for appointment whose resumes indicated they could run a major department or agency.” As Blackwell noted, Reagan could hardly “fill an entire administration with people who [had] never managed large staffs or handled huge budgets.”\textsuperscript{198}

Evangelical discontent with Reagan’s hiring practices became particularly acute in the summer of 1981, when Reagan made his first nomination to the Supreme Court,

\textsuperscript{197} Martin, \textit{With God on Our Side}, 222.
\textsuperscript{198} Ibid, 221 – 30.
the moderate conservative Sandra Day O’Connor of the Arizona Court of Appeals. Reagan appointed O’Connor in part because of a campaign promise; Reagan had vowed that one of his first Supreme Court appointments would be a woman. For evangelical activists, though, the Supreme Court was the central battleground in the struggle to overturn *Roe v. Wade*. Far from convinced that O’Connor would vote to overturn *Roe* if given the opportunity, some evangelicals publicly lambasted the nomination. Texas televangelist James Robison, a supporter of evangelicals’ political activism, organized rallies in Dallas to protest against O’Connor’s confirmation. Robison later bragged about having called Ed Meese to “holler and scream” at him over the O’Connor nomination.  

Jerry Falwell adopted a more pragmatic approach to the O’Connor nomination, as well as to his public approach to criticizing Reagan. Falwell later recounted that Reagan called him personally while the Falwell family was on vacation in Myrtle Beach to discuss the O’Connor matter. In Falwell’s account, Reagan asked the noted televangelist to allow the O’Connor nomination to proceed without criticism. It was for this reason, Falwell claimed, that he did not speak out in a forceful manner about O’Connor’s appointment to the Court. While it may have looked like Falwell had abandoned his principles in order to accommodate Reagan, Falwell’s approach to the O’Connor nomination was consistent with his “wait and see” tactic at the outset of the Reagan presidency. The Moral Majority issued press releases expressing “substantive concerns” about O’Connor, but did not oppose the nomination in any significant way. All the while, Falwell cautioned supporters about publicly expressing disappointment with

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200 Ibid.
Reagan. After all, he reminded them, evangelicals had never enjoyed anything close to the political influence or visibility that Reagan’s election afforded. Falwell told evangelicals it would be foolish to turn against the only President who had ever shared their vision for the United States. It was far too soon to conclude, as some evangelicals already had, that the Reagan administration would offer them no more support than had Jimmy Carter. The keyword was patience.201

Falwell also had larger concerns at the time. In addition to his television ministry and his role as the head of The Moral Majority, Falwell also worked hard on building a private post-secondary institution in Lynchburg. Conceived as Lynchburg Baptist College in 1971, Falwell’s school continued to grow throughout the 1970s. By 1972, the school had developed an athletic program with a basketball team and employed twenty-six full-time professors offering a total of 150 different courses. In 1975, the college changed its name to Liberty Baptist College, and in 1976 it recorded an enrollment of 1,569 students studying under the direction of 80 faculty members. Falwell and his associates remained unsatisfied with the school’s status as a mere college. For Falwell, Liberty Baptist College was part of a larger project that included The Old Time Gospel Hour and the Moral Majority’s political activism. Falwell was building an evangelical empire, a series of institutional tools aimed not just at spreading the Gospel around the world, but also combating the forces of secular humanism in the United States and abroad. In 1985, Liberty Baptist College became Liberty University. At this time, the school boasted a fully accredited master’s program in teacher education, a band that had

played in the Macy’s Thanksgiving Day Parade in 1983, and forty-six separate campus buildings spread across 4,400 acres of land.  

The Moral Majority also continued to grow. In March 1980, the organization began publishing *The Moral Majority Report*, a monthly newspaper that interpreted political issues from a conservative, evangelical perspective. In the span of a few months, the distribution of the *Report* skyrocketed, so that by October 1980, approximately 482,000 readers a month received the *Report* in their mailboxes. An additional quarter million readers received the *Report* through direct church distribution. Between 1980 and 1985, the newspaper doubled in length and developed a consistent writing staff of commentators on political issues. Its aesthetic features also evolved, as hyperbolic headlines often warned readers about the need to act on imminent crises that threatened their families.

**Taking a Hard Line against the Soviets**

While evangelical activists had to adopt a “wait and see” approach with the Reagan administration when it came to social issues, they did not have to wait long to see results in foreign affairs. As Reagan advisor Martin Anderson later wrote, the new President came to office in 1981 with a few well-defined priorities. Strengthening American defense was one of those priorities. As Anderson noted in *Revolution*, a memoir of his year in the Reagan administration, Reagan’s policy toward the Soviets amounted to an unarticulated “grand strategy.” One of the primary principles of this

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strategy was the idea that the Cold War was not a permanent international condition to be managed. It was an ideological, geopolitical struggle that could be won. Reagan believed that much of America’s previous Cold War strategy had been wrong. As he had articulated in his 1970s radio addresses, Reagan was particularly appalled by the policy of Mutual Assured Destruction, or MAD, the brainchild of Robert McNamara, who had served as Secretary of Defense under John F. Kennedy and Lyndon Johnson.204

Proponents of MAD maintained that the United States needed only to invest in maintaining a sufficient rather than a superior nuclear arsenal in comparison to the Soviet Union. Should the Soviets attack with a nuclear weapon, Americans could then respond with an attack of their own, inflicting unacceptable losses on the Soviets. McNamara and others believed that maintaining this “second-strike” capability would prevent a first strike by the Soviets, as the Soviets would see that the cost of such a strike against the United States would be too high.205

Reagan brought other ideas about U.S.-Soviet relations with him to Washington. He hated communism, but held no affection for the idea of a war with the Soviets. He wanted to prevent a nuclear war, but believed that the only way to do this was pursuing an aggressive foreign policy that firmly asserted American strength and American moral superiority to the Soviet system. These were the cornerstone beliefs of “peace through strength,” Reagan’s goal of ratcheting down the Cold War by strengthening American defense so he could confront the Soviets from a position of strength.

204 Cannon, President Reagan, 254.
Reagan pursued this goal in three ways. First, he surrounded himself with foreign policy advisors who shared his views about the Cold War. Alexander Haig, the temperamental chief of staff during the last days of the Nixon presidency, became Secretary of State. Caspar Weinberger, who had worked as director of finance for Reagan in California, took the helm at the Pentagon as Secretary of Defense. Reagan appointed his 1980 campaign manager, William Casey, a staunch anti-communist, to the position of CIA director. Richard Allen, a former member of Richard Nixon’s national security staff, became Reagan’s national security advisor. Richard Perle, a neoconservative, joined the staff of the Pentagon as assistant secretary for international security policy. Jeane Kirkpatrick, a former Democrat turned Republican and an ardent Cold Warrior, was appointed Ambassador to the United Nations. Richard Pipes, the Harvard historian of the Soviet Union who had served as a member of Team B, joined the National Security Council as director of East European and Soviet affairs.206

Reagan also moved quickly to increase American spending on defense. Though early battles over the national budget put Defense Secretary Weinberger at odds with other Reagan administration officials, particularly David Stockman, the director of the Office of Management and Budget, Weinberger overcame Stockman’s opposition to increased defense spending. When it became clear that dramatic increases in defense spending might jeopardize another one of Reagan’s primary goals, a balanced federal budget, Reagan sided with defense over the risk of budget deficits. The Reagan administration began the largest peacetime military buildup in American history.

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Weinberger’s previous experience as a finance director for Reagan in California proved an asset as he lobbied Congress for more defense spending. The new administration secured increased spending on the MX intercontinental ballistic missile, capable of carrying ten independently targeted warheads to a Soviet target. Reagan decided to continue funding the construction of B-1 bombers, costing approximately $280 million per plane, while also spending $44 billion on the development of the B-2 bomber, which became popularly known as the stealth bomber for its ability to remain undetected by anti-aircraft technology. The U.S. Navy spent $80 billion to build more ships with the goal of developing a 600-ship fleet. In short, by 1985, as Reagan prepared to take the oath of office for a second term, he had succeeded in essentially doubling American defense spending. The Pentagon’s budget stood at approximately $294.7 billion. 207

Finally, Reagan employed harsh rhetoric when talking about the Soviet Union. Reagan clearly established that the tough talk on Soviet communism he had exercised during the campaign would continue into his presidency. At the president’s first news conference in January 1981, when ABC reporter Sam Donaldson asked if achieving détente with the Soviets remained a possibility for the Reagan administration, Reagan replied that détente had “been a one-way street that the Soviet Union has used to pursue its own aims.” “The only morality they recognize,” Reagan continued, “is what will further their cause, meaning they reserve unto themselves the right to commit any crime,

to lie, to cheat, in order to attain that, and that is moral, not immoral, and we operate on a different set of standards.”

Speaking in a commencement address to the University of Notre Dame in May 1981, Reagan argued that the Soviet system would eventually fail, while Western democratic capitalism would continue to prosper. “The West won’t contain communism,” Reagan announced, “It will transcend communism.” The West would “dismiss it as some bizarre chapter in human history whose last pages are even now being written.” “Marxism-Leninism,” Reagan told the British Parliament in June 1982, would ultimately lie on the “ash-heap of history.” “It is the Soviet Union that runs against the tide of history by denying human freedom and human dignity to its citizens,” Reagan argued.

In advancing tough policies against Soviet communism, Reagan signaled his desire to move America’s Cold War policy beyond containment. Between 1981 and 1984, Reagan administration officials developed the policies that governed Reagan’s confrontational approach to U.S.-Soviet relations. In February 1982, Reagan issued National Security Study Directive (NSSD) 1-82, which called for a broad assessment of America’s “national security objectives.” In May 1982, drawing on the findings of this study, the Reagan administration issued National Security Decision Directive (NSDD) 32, formally outlining the “global objectives” of America’s new “national security policy.” The United States would not simply “contain” Soviet expansion throughout the

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world, it would also “reverse” it. In addition, the directive stated that the United States would join with its allies to “foster…restraint in Soviet military spending.” The Soviets would be forced to “bear the brunt” of their “economic shortcomings.” The United States would seek to promote dissent among the Soviet people by “encourage[ing] long-term liberalizing and nationalist tendencies within the Soviet Union and allied countries.”

Drawing on this NSDD and the earlier NSSD 1-82, the Reagan administration issued NSDD-75 in January 1983. “U.S. policy toward the Soviet Union will consist of three elements,” the directive stated, “External resistance to Soviet imperialism, internal pressure on the USSR to weaken the sources of Soviet imperialism, and negotiations to eliminate, on the basis of strict reciprocity, outstanding disagreements.” NSDD-75 again called for the modernization of American strategic forces and the elimination of any transfer of American technology that could help improve the Soviet military capabilities. The United States would in no way subsidize the Soviet economy or offer economic aid that would decrease pressure for “change in the Soviet system.” Instead, the United States would apply both overt and covert pressure on the Soviets to reform that system and abandon communism.²¹⁰

Just War?

Reagan’s buildup of nuclear weapons brought debates about the ethics and dangers of nuclear war to the forefront of American social discourse. This debate was hardly new. Religion, moreover, had always played an important role in this debate. As historian Paul Boyer noted in his book *By the Bomb’s Early Light: American Thought and Culture at the Dawn of the Atomic Age*, nuclear weapons evoked religious sentiment.

before the world was ever aware that the atomic bomb existed. “The atomic age opened with prayer,” Boyer wrote, as a “chaplain” prayed for God’s blessing over “the crew of the Enola Gay” as it left Tinian Island on its fateful flight toward Hiroshima. Likewise, prominent Americans did not hesitate to offer thanks to the Almighty for the contribution the bomb had made to the end of the war. “We thank God that [the atomic bomb] has come to us, instead of our enemies,” President Harry Truman declared in a radio address on the evening of August 9, 1945, only hours after the second atomic bomb fell on Nagasaki; “We pray that He may guide us to use it in His ways and for His purposes.”

The atomic bomb represented a dilemma for American Christians. On one hand, the bomb reinforced long-held notions of American exceptionalism. Truman’s address was emblematic of this attitude: God had chosen the United States to possess the bomb before any other nation, trusting that Americans would have the moral prudence to use it only for the sake of good. Moreover, the bomb was clear evidence that the United States was endowed with scientific ingenuity and technological superiority that other nations only envied. In a few short years, of course, that sense of scientific superiority would be dealt a severe blow when the Soviets detonated their own bomb. At the moment, however, the bomb demonstrated the unprecedented power wielded by the United States at the end of the Second World War.

On the other hand, the bomb also evoked feelings of moral revulsion among many Christians, particularly America’s most prominent Protestant theologian, Reinhold

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Niebuhr. For Niebuhr, America’s decision to drop the bomb on Hiroshima and Nagasaki represented a stark example of the pride of the human heart, “a nauseating self-righteousness” rooted in the idea that “a more ideal social structure” could emerge from the ashes of war. Niebuhr drew inspiration from the same view of “just war” expressed by Catholic theologians, the view articulated in the theology of St. Augustine. Among other tenets, this view held that war could only be justified if the cause was just, it was practiced with moral restraint, and it was not waged against civilians. The development of “total war” in the twentieth century, with mass bombing of major cities from the air, raised the possibility that just war might never be waged again. The atomic bomb, with its unavoidably indiscriminate killing of civilians, multiplied the horrors of this prospect in a grim fashion.\(^{212}\)

In the thirty-five years between the dropping of the first atomic bomb and the election of Ronald Reagan to the presidency, these moral tensions hardly abated. In the years leading up to the Reagan presidency, groups like the Quaker pacifist organization American Friends Services Committee (AFSC) and the interfaith peace society Fellowship of Reconciliation (FOR) called for the United States to issue a unilateral moratorium against the production of nuclear weapons.\(^{213}\) These groups’ opposition to nuclear weapons, given their strong pacifist leanings, was not surprising. Conversely, the identity of some anti-nuclear critics was. In March 1979, Billy Graham appeared on an episode of the CBS Evening News, where he argued that the “total destruction of nuclear

\(^{212}\) Boyer, By the Bomb’s Early Light, 214, 218

arms” was “the teaching of the Bible.” In an August 1979 issue of *Sojourners*, a periodical of liberal evangelical thought, Graham expanded his position on the nuclear arms race. “Is a nuclear holocaust inevitable if the arms race is not stopped?” Graham asked; “Frankly, the answer is almost certainly yes.” He continued, “I know not everyone would agree with this, but I honestly wish we had never developed nuclear weapons. But of course that is water under the bridge. We have nuclear weapons in horrifying quantities, and the question is, what are we going to do about it?” For Graham, the answer was obvious: oppose the expansion of the nuclear arms race. In his view, Christians carried a particular responsibility to speak out about the threat of nuclear war. “I believe that the Christian especially has a responsibility to work for peace in our world,” Graham remarked, adding, “The issues are not simple, and we are always tempted to grasp any program which promises easy answers. Or, on the other side, we are tempted to say that the issues are too complex, and we cannot do anything of significance anyway. We must resist both temptations.”

As we will see, Graham’s opinions separated him from his contemporaries in the Religious Right when it came to matters of national defense. Nonetheless, Graham and other preachers of peace added the moral authority of their faith to a growing chorus of anti-nuclear activism. The widespread movement to end the arms race, composed of both religious and secular groups, came to be known as the nuclear freeze movement. In time, the movement became a very visible and highly vocal opponent of the Reagan administration’s nuclear buildup. It should be noted, though, that the broad spectrum of

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214 “Billy Graham Drops the Bomb.” *Christianity and Crisis*, April 30, 1979, 111.
groups and individuals who participated in the movement meant that there were a number of disparate goals being sought under the banner of nuclear freeze. Some activists sought an immediate bilateral freeze on the production, testing, and deployment of nuclear weapons between the United States and the Soviet Union. Others advocated a series of discussions between American and Soviet officials to produce verifiable arms control agreements. Still other, more radical activists petitioned government officials for an immediate unilateral freeze on the production of nuclear weapons by the United States, coupled with the destruction of existing American arsenals, regardless of whether the Soviet Union complied with a similar disarmament policy. In essence, the freeze movement sacrificed internal consistency for both size and visibility.216

The rise of a popular movement in favor of a nuclear freeze had a significant impact on some evangelicals’ efforts to halt the arms race. With the advent of the freeze movement, evangelicals were finally able to connect their concerns about nuclear war to a growing populist campaign. Two groups took the lead in representing evangelicals’ concerns about nuclear issues. On one side was Ronald J. Sider’s Evangelicals for Social Action (ESA). On the other stood Jim Wallis’s Sojourners, who published Sojourners magazine. These two groups initially were divided in their goals for anti-nuclear activism. While the Sojourners advocated unilateral American disarmament, ESA dissented from this view, believing it to be radical and ultimately irresponsible.

Nonetheless, by the early 1980s, the two groups had reconciled in their common opposition to the Reagan administration’s nuclear buildup.217

Throughout the early 1980s, articles in *Sojourners* magazine decried the American obsession with anti-communism, labeling it a “state religion” that only served the interests of turning American pride into arrogance. The real danger in American anti-Communism, *Sojourners* writer Danny Collum argued, lay in adopting a Manichean view of the Cold War, one that painted the United States as entirely good and the Soviet Union as entirely evil. The truth, Collum argued in a November 1982 article, was that both nations were corrupted by sin. Christians’ real allegiance was not “to either superpower,” he concluded, “but to the transnational body of Christ and to the victims of suffering and oppression in both East and West.”218

Collum’s article struck a common chord for liberal evangelicals: Americans’ concerns with winning the arms race not only proffered arrogance, they also obscured the plight of those suffering under Soviet rule. In the same November 1982 issue of *Sojourners*, Joseph Allegretti implored readers to reject the Christian Right’s portrayal of the Soviet Union as a “godless society.” “What we seek is to separate the Soviet system of government, which we distrust, from the Russian people. We need to love the latter, not the former,” Allegretti wrote. As such, Allegretti encouraged evangelicals to learn as much as possible about the Russian people and their culture. In addition, Christians could take an active interest in the work of Soviet dissidents and their suffering. “Writing

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letters to dissidents, asking émigrés to speak to our church groups, even watching a
Russian movie if it comes to town,” Allegretti argued, were all ways that evangelicals
could come to know their “brothers and sisters” living in the Soviet Union.\(^{219}\)

By 1982, concerns about the prospect of nuclear war began to resonate throughout
mainstream Protestant churches. In that year alone, the United Methodist Church, the
Episcopal Church, the Lutheran Church, and the usually conservative Southern Baptist
Convention all issued statements denouncing American escalation of the nuclear arms
race. A survey conducted by researcher Donald Davidson at this time further indicated
that concerns about nuclear war were widespread among American Christians.
Donaldson’s survey of twelve major Protestant denominations and the National
Conference of Catholic Bishops reflected “significant concerns for nuclear arms control
and limitation.” The survey was not all bad news for the Reagan administration. All of
the groups supported some form of nuclear deterrence based on balance or parity with the
Soviet Union while stopping short of advocating nuclear disarmament. Nonetheless,
there was little support among the groups for the idea that the United States should seek
nuclear superiority over the Soviets. Eight of the groups favored a policy of “no first
use” of nuclear weapons by the United States, and ten of the thirteen favored ratification
of the SALT II Treaty.\(^{220}\)

In November 1982, the National Conference of Catholic Bishops met in
Washington, D.C. to consider issues of morality and nuclear war. The bishops’ concern
for these issues was in many respects a product of the Catholic Church’s greater

\(^{220}\) Donald L. Davidson, *Nuclear Weapons and the American Churches: Ethical Positions on Modern
engagement with social issues after the Second Vatican Council. Called by Pope John XXIII in 1962, the Council debated how the Church should respond to the myriad challenges posed by the modern world. The Council opened on October 11, 1962, only three days before a U-2 spy plane snapped photographs of Soviet missiles in Cuba, igniting the Cuban Missile Crisis and placing the world on the brink of nuclear war. It was hardly surprising, then, that Church leaders at the Council issued a strong statement regarding nuclear weapons, stating, “Any act of war aimed indiscriminately at the destruction of entire cities or extensive areas along with their population is a crime against God and man himself. It merits unequivocal and unhesitating condemnation.”

The 276 bishops who met in Washington in November 1982 largely echoed the concerns expressed by the Second Vatican Council. A committee of the bishops, headed by Archbishop Joseph Bernardin of Chicago, drafted a formal pastoral letter on nuclear war. The bishops’ letter encouraged policymakers to “build a barrier against the concept of nuclear war as a viable strategy for defense.” “Under no circumstances,” the letter read, “may nuclear weapons or other instruments of mass slaughter be used for the purpose of destroying population centers or other predominantly civilian targets.” The letter nonetheless noted the morally problematic nature of using nuclear weapons in any fashion. “One of the criteria of the just-war tradition is a reasonable hope of success in bringing about justice and peace. We must ask whether such a reasonable hope can exist once nuclear weapons have been exchanged,” the bishops wrote. The bishops’ letter also

noted other problems with reconciling nuclear weapons and social justice. The cost of maintaining a nuclear arsenal diverted money that could have cared for the poor, for instance. In a more proactive sense, the bishops recommended that the United States continue to pursue “disarmament agreement with Moscow.” The letter also indicated the bishops’ support for the nuclear freeze movement.\textsuperscript{223}

The bishops’ pastoral letter was \textit{Time} magazine’s cover story on November 29, 1982. The letter came at the end of a year when the Reagan administration’s nuclear policies came under fierce attack from nuclear freeze advocates. In March 1982, Senator Edward Kennedy (D) of Massachusetts and Senator Mark Hatfield (R) of Oregon introduced the Kennedy-Hatfield Nuclear Freeze Resolution in the United States Senate, calling for an immediate bilateral freeze of the arms race.\textsuperscript{224} The next month, Democratic Representative Clement Zablocki of Wisconsin submitted his own freeze resolution in the House of Representatives. Zablocki’s resolution was narrowly defeated in August 1982 by 204 to 202 votes.\textsuperscript{225}

The public protest of Reagan’s nuclear policy also grew outside the walls of Congress. On June 12, 1982, between 500,000 and 700,000 protestors lined the streets of Manhattan to show their support for the nuclear freeze movement. The protestors marched from the United Nations Plaza to Central Park in a rally that coincided with the United Nations Special Session on Disarmament. The protest was not only the largest peace protest in American history, but also benefited from the participation of a broad

\textsuperscript{223} Ibid.  
\textsuperscript{225} Hogan, \textit{The Nuclear Freeze Campaign}, 122.
cross-section of American society. Though religious and peace groups played the most prominent roles in the rally, it nonetheless saw the participation of anti-religious groups of communists, and anarchist organizations, all marching alongside school children, labor unions, and many others, including prominent celebrities like Orson Welles.  

The year of nuclear protest culminated in the success of a number of statewide elections in November 1982. In Massachusetts, Michigan, Montana, New Jersey, North Dakota, Oregon, and Rhode Island, freeze resolutions passed by significant margins. A freeze resolution also narrowly passed in California. Only in Arizona did voters reject a call to halt the arms race.

The “Blackmail of America”

Evangelicals of the Religious Right, in particular Jerry Falwell and The Moral Majority, became some of the Reagan administration’s most steadfast defenders against the nuclear freeze movement. *The Moral Majority Report* served as the primary instrument of the organization’s opposition to the freeze. In an August 1982 article in the Report, writer Deryl Edwards reiterated one of the Religious Right’s primary tenets of support for the Reagan administration’s hawkish defense policies. “Although in theory, the idea of a freeze on nuclear weapons seems to diminish somewhat the possibilities of a nuclear war,” Edwards argued, “in reality, it will lock the Soviets into a position of ultimate superiority and lead to nuclear blackmail and surrender of the United States.” In essence, articles in the Report reasserted the positions held by members of groups like

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The Committee on the Present Danger: America’s Cold War nemesis was as dangerous and strong as ever, bent on worldwide communist revolution. “The real threat to American lives is the ideological, often declared goal of Soviet world domination by any means possible,” Edwards warned the Report’s readers.  

The nuclear freeze movement was not only capitulation to the Soviet threat, Edwards admonished, but also a tool of the Soviets, used to gain control of American minds and dupe American officials into accepting inequitable arms control agreements. Though “Soviet connections with the freeze movement” were “well hidden” before the movement gained momentum in the United States, Edwards noted that “members of American disarmament groups” had “made excursions to Moscow at the invitation of the Soviets.” In addition, according to Edwards, there was considerable evidence to suggest that the Soviet conspiracy was working. In 1981, facing political pressure from European allies while preparing for the administration’s arms control talks in Geneva, President Reagan pledged that the United States would “cancel deployment of Pershing II and ground-launched cruise missiles” into Europe if the Soviets [would dismantle] their SS-20, SS-4, and SS-5 missiles there.  

These were intermediate, or medium-range missiles. Observers viewed these agreements as an attempt by the Reagan administration to gain leverage for future arms control talks. Moreover, Reagan’s aides did not expect the Soviets to fully agree with the proposal. Nonetheless, Edwards argued that the proposal was evidence that the Reagan administration was being lured into disarming while the Soviets continued to fortify their own nuclear arsenals. The Soviet threat was

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229 Ibid.
230 FitzGerald, Way Out There in the Blue, 178-79.
growing. Their “SS20 missiles were already in place” in Europe, Edwards pointed out, while American “Pershing II and cruise missiles [were] yet to be deployed.”

Edwards’s message was contradictory. While arguing that the nuclear freeze movement was connected to a larger Soviet conspiracy to undermine American national security, he asserted that the effects of the movement had been grossly exaggerated and “trumped up by the media.” While many of its proponents may have been genuine in their desire to achieve peace with the Soviets, they were nonetheless being “led in many cases by a small contingent of radical leftists and Marxist-leaning 60s leftovers” whose primary motivation was to bring about “the eventual end of the capitalist system in America.” Thus, the freeze movement was both an imminent and overblown threat at the same time.

These contradictions aside, Reagan and members of his administration saw the freeze movement as a very real domestic threat to the continued success of their defense policies. They also believed that evangelicals, as much as any other group, played a vital role in securing domestic support for those policies. It was hardly an arbitrary decision, then, that Reagan’s most visible response to the freeze movement came at the annual meeting of the National Association of Evangelicals in Orlando, Florida in March 1983.

Since its heyday as a leading anti-communist voice for American evangelicals of the 1940s and 1950s, the NAE had faded into the background of American politics, obscured by the much more visible groups of the Religious Right. The NAE’s chief political liaisons Richard Cizik and Robert Dugan, Jr. saw a speaking invitation to

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232 Ibid.
Reagan as a means of establishing a symbiotic relationship between the NAE and the Reagan administration. The NAE, which had never invited an American President to speak at one its annual meetings, would benefit from the media attention garnered by Reagan’s address. The President, meanwhile, would gain exposure to a broad spectrum of evangelical leaders to make the case for his national defense policies. While the NAE may have counted many conservative evangelicals among its supporters, the group was hardly an ideological monolith. Many mainline Protestant denominations, which counted some of the most ardent supporters of the nuclear freeze among their members, were also prominent members of the NAE. Three and a half million evangelicals, distributed across 36,000 member churches, made up the NAE.

In extending the invitation to Reagan, Robert Dugan suggested that the President could use his appearance at the NAE Conference to address national defense issues. In letters to Reagan, James Baker, Michael Deaver, and speechwriter Anthony “Tony” Dolan between December 1982 and February 1983, Dugan reiterated his support for Reagan’s leadership and the administration’s policies. In writing to Baker in particular, Dugan noted that many evangelicals “were not yet firmly positionalized [sic] on the nuclear freeze issue.” Dugan sought to reassure Baker that he was working “behind the scenes to counteract” evangelicals’ “drift toward the nuclear freeze position.” In a February 1983 letter to Tony Dolan, the primary author of Reagan’s speech at the NAE

233 Author’s telephone interview with Richard Cizik, February 28, 2012.
conference, Dugan again noted that in light of the enhanced attention the freeze movement had received in government and social circles, the President’s speech would provide an ideal opportunity for Reagan to speak out against opponents of his nuclear policies.236

In spite of Dugan’s enthusiasm for an anti-freeze address at the conference, some members of Reagan’s staff feared the backlash such a speech would inevitably bring. Pragmatic advisors like Director of Communications David Gergen argued against the use of stark moral rhetoric in Reagan’s speech. A year earlier, when Reagan addressed the British Parliament, Reagan’s advisors and State Department officials removed a line where Reagan was to have called the Soviet Union “the focus of evil in the modern world.” Yet in March 1983, despite the heightened awareness of nuclear issues raised by the freeze movement, Tony Dolan believed it was time to bring the word “evil” back into Reagan’s pronouncements against the Soviets. Though Cizik and Dugan had suggested that Reagan speak about Cold War issues, the President’s speech at the NAE Conference received little attention from State Department officials. Reagan’s speech was largely expected to court the continued support of evangelicals by speaking out about issues like abortion and school prayer. It was supposed to be a relatively low-key affair.237

For these reasons and others, Reagan’s speech, later dubbed the “evil empire” speech, landed with a mighty thud on March 8, 1983. Standing in front of 1,200 evangelicals gathered at the Sheraton Twin Towers Hotel in Orlando, Florida, Reagan

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employed the most moralistic rhetoric of his presidency, exhorting the audience to “beware the temptation of pride” and the “temptation of blithely declaring” themselves “above it all” by considering both sides of the Cold War equally at fault for the continued proliferation of the nuclear arms race. To do this, Reagan argued, would be “to ignore the facts of history and the aggressive impulses of an evil empire,” namely the Soviet Union. In addition, Reagan criticized evangelicals who thought of the arms race as a “giant misunderstanding.” To do this, Reagan asserted, was to remove oneself “from the struggle between right and wrong.” In conclusion, Reagan labeled the nuclear freeze movement a “dangerous fraud” that would only create “the illusion of peace.” The only way for Americans to achieve a satisfactory outcome to the Cold War, the President noted, was “peace through strength.” If Americans did not want to “abandon” their cherished freedoms and their “belief in God,” Reagan suggested, then “the nuclear freeze solutions proposed by some” had to be rejected. In many respects, Reagan’s words echoed those of his supporters from the evangelical right, who often suggested that America’s moral failures would weaken the nation’s ability to confront the Soviet threat.238

As Reagan left the stage, the sounds of the hymn “Onward Christian Soldiers” echoed throughout the Citrus Ballroom at the Sheraton. Though the speech seemed to have been a rousing success, greeted by over a dozen standing ovations as Reagan spoke, not all members of the NAE were pleased with the tone of the address. NAE President Arthur Gay, Jr., who had introduced Reagan to the crowd, refused to applaud Reagan’s

remarks about the nuclear freeze movement. Nonetheless, Reagan’s words resonated with his supporters in the evangelical right. Reagan had once again demonstrated that he was willing to speak about the Cold War in Manichean terms. As historian Anne Loveland noted, when Reagan spoke of the Soviet Union as an “evil empire,” his supporters did not believe that he was speaking metaphorically.

Reagan’s speech attracted a torrent of criticism from a variety of sources. Editorials in major American newspapers denounced his use of religious rhetoric in speaking about international affairs. In the *New York Times* on March 10, 1983, Anthony Lewis lambasted Reagan’s address. “If there is anything that should be illegitimate in the American system,” Lewis wrote, “it is such use of sectarian religiosity to sell a political program.” Lewis argued that there was only one word to describe Reagan’s speech: “primitive.” Reagan had conjured up visions of William Jennings Bryan, a comical figure in Lewis’s view. “But it is not funny,” Lewis wrote; “What is the world to think when the greatest of powers is led by a man who applied to the most difficult human problem a simplistic theology – one in fact rejected by most theologians?”

Arthur Schlesinger, Jr., noted historian, advisor to John F. Kennedy, and bedrock intellectual of the early Cold War consensus, joined Lewis in criticizing the President. In “Pretension in the Presidential Pulpit,” an opinion piece published in the March 17, 1983 issue of *The Wall Street Journal*, Schlesinger expressed concern that Reagan had engendered a “fervent revival of the interpretation of the Cold War as a holy war.”

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many observers, Schlesinger was troubled most by Reagan’s use of the word “evil” to describe the Soviet Union. “The way his conception of the Cold War as a holy war implies not only that the other side is the ‘focus of evil’ but that we are the focus of virtue,” Schlesinger wrote. “The doctrine of original sin,” he continued, “means that the ‘focus of evil’ lies, not in the Soviet Union or in any other particular group of institution, but in the human soul itself and its estrangement from God.” In these words, Schlesinger echoed his fellow intellectual of the early Cold War Reinhold Niebuhr, who died in 1971. But he also echoed Billy Graham, whose stance against the arms race was predicated on fear that religious faith coupled with fierce nationalism could swell the pride of American Christians in a way that would blind them to the harsh realities of world affairs.

The “Great, Undecided Group”

Reagan’s speech clearly exacerbated the underlying tensions among American evangelicals concerning the nuclear issue. Letters written to the White House in the wake of the Orlando conference revealed the divide. In a letter to Presidential counselor Edwin Meese, dated March 14, 1983, twenty Lutheran pastors expressed their “strong exception” to Reagan’s speech. “We will not use our pulpits to preach partisan politics – not even for the President,” the pastors wrote. “We must obey God rather than men.” In urging evangelicals to “beware the temptation of pride,” the pastors noted, Reagan had

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“failed to see the potential for evil in his own administration. He would do well,” they concluded, “to heed his own warning to beware the temptation of pride.”

Reagan’s supporters from the Religious Right wrote to express their approval of the President’s strong words. In a March 28, 1983 letter to Reagan from Bill Bright, the Campus Crusade for Christ founder praised the President for standing firm in the face of opposition. “As one who has contact with a broad representation of Americans in both the Christian world and the secular world, I can assure you that your actions are applauded wherever I go,” Bright wrote. In an open letter to Reagan, dated April 11, 1983, Carl McIntire remarked, “God has used you in a very unique way not seen before. Your message of March 8th in Orlando has shaken the Communist world…You take your place, Mr. President, with that speech of March 8, alongside Winston Churchill in his address in Fulton, Missouri, March 5, 1946…Churchill looking at the sweeping action of the Soviets, told the world that now we have an ‘iron curtain,’ and in these 33 years you have described to the world that what that curtain has generated is an ‘evil empire.’”

Two other notable events, taking place in the immediate wake of the Orlando speech, further revealed the depth of the evangelical division over the nuclear issue. On May 25-28, 1983, the NAE joined several other evangelical groups in sponsoring the Church and Peacemaking in the Nuclear Age conference in Pasadena, California. Over two thousand evangelicals participated in the event, which featured a number of lectures and workshops on topics ranging from “Will I Grow Up? The Psychological Impact of

244 Letter from Lutheran Church in America to Edwin Meese, March 14, 1983, SP 729, Box 192, Folder 073173 (End), Ronald Reagan Presidential Library, Simi Valley, California.
245 Open letter to Ronald Reagan from Carl McIntire, April 11, 1983, SP 729, Folder 073173, Box 192, Ronald Reagan Presidential Library, Simi Valley, California.
the Threat of Nuclear War on Children” to “Has God Used the Threat of Nuclear Weapons to Keep the Free World Free?” and “The Medical Effects of Nuclear War.” A press release prior to the conference touted the conference’s “unique emphasis” on providing a “balanced educational approach.” The release promised, “Differing responses to the nuclear arms race will be presented by leading evangelicals who represent conflicting political persuasions…The Church and Peacemaking in the Nuclear Age…has every potential of being a major watershed in evangelical thought regarding faith issues raised by the nuclear arms race.”

Despite the conference organizers’ assurances of a “balanced approach,” however, there were few notable representatives of the Religious Right in attendance. Only a few advocates of Reagan’s “peace through strength” policies managed to attend, among them Edward Robb of the Institute for Religion and Democracy and Republican Senator William Armstrong of Colorado. Robert Mathis, a former vice-chief of staff for the United States Air Force, also attended and defended Reagan’s policies from a military perspective. These Reagan administration apologists took their place at the conference alongside Jim Wallis and his contemporary Ronald J. Sider, as well as noted minister John R.W. Stott and others. The absence of notable figures from the Religious Right largely went unnoted in press reports that followed the event. Nonetheless, it is not unreasonable to surmise that Reagan’s chief supporters in the Religious Right, like some within the Reagan White House, chose not to participate in the conference because they believed it would ultimately favor the cause of the nuclear freeze movement. Prior to the

event, conference organizer Jim Brenneman sent Morton Blackwell, one of the Reagan administration’s chief liaisons to evangelicals, information concerning the conference, petitioning the White House to provide suggestions and promote awareness of the event. Blackwell wrote to fellow Reagan staffer Sven Kraemer of the conference, “While there are a few people on the list who are likely to be strongly pro-defense, I get the distinct impression that it is unbalanced to the left.”

While some evangelicals traveled to Pasadena to debate the merits of nuclear weapons, others were hard at work attempting to discern exactly where evangelicals stood on the nuclear issue. In May 1983, the NAE commissioned a Gallup poll of evangelicals concerning nuclear issues. NAE officials interviewed 1,540 evangelical adults 18 and older in more than 300 communities across the United States over a three-day period. When the group identifying themselves as evangelicals was excluded from the general pool and asked their opinion of Reagan’s nuclear defense policies, 61 percent stated their approval of the President. When the general public was added to the pool of respondents, 41 percent of evangelicals said they approved of Reagan’s actions, and 43 percent of the general public approved. More telling was a question about the possibility of a nuclear freeze. Fifty percent of evangelicals, and 75 percent of the general public, said they favored “an agreement between the United States and the Soviet Union for an immediate verifiable freeze on the testing, production, and deployment of nuclear weapons.”

248 Loveland, American Evangelicals, 235.
The results of this poll proved ambiguous. The staff of the *Moral Majority Report* determined that the poll demonstrated a clear preference for “peace through strength” among evangelicals. The August 1983 issue of the *Report* trumpeted this conclusion with a headline reading “Evangelicals Favor Peace Through Strength.” An early July article in *The Washington Post*, however, drew a different conclusion, arguing that the poll demonstrated evangelicals’ support for at least some form of a nuclear freeze. In the July 1983 issue of the NAE’s newsletter *NAE Insight*, Robert Dugan, Jr. came to the defense of evangelical freeze opponents, stating his belief that the *Post* had misrepresented the results of the poll. It should have been clear to any conscientious reader, Dugan argued, that evangelicals were clearly on Reagan’s side when it came to matters of nuclear defense.²⁴⁹

Perhaps *Christianity Today* offered the most accurate reading of the poll, however, with a headline that read, “Evangelicals Are of Two Minds on Nuclear Weapons Issues.” The subsequent article noted, “Most evangelicals approve of President Ronald Reagan’s promilitary policies on nuclear arms, yet they would support a nuclear freeze if the conditions were right.” These “somewhat contradictory results,” the magazine opined, only proved what many NAE officials suspected when they invited Reagan to speak at their conference – evangelicals constituted the “great undecided group” on the nuclear arms debate.²⁵⁰

The Orlando speech had clearly proven a mixed success at best. On one hand, the Reagan administration and the NAE had drawn significant attention to the nuclear issue and had challenged evangelicals to engage the issue in an unprecedented manner. On the other hand, the speech had infuriated many of Reagan’s chief opponents, both secular and religious figures, who saw the speech as the worst kind of political grandstanding. Clearly, Reagan and his staff had much work to do to convince evangelicals to back the President’s nuclear policies.

White House officials turned to Jerry Falwell to help drive the effort against the nuclear freeze. Moral Majority officials, in particular Vice President for Communications Cal Thomas, had been petitioning the White House for a meeting between Falwell and Reagan since December 1982. In early February 1983, White House officials scheduled the meeting for March 15, one week after Reagan’s visit to Orlando. The timing proved opportune for the administration to petition Falwell for support in opposing the freeze movement. At the meeting, Reagan expressed his bewilderment to Falwell that so many evangelicals failed to see the long-term consequences of a potential nuclear freeze. In turn, Falwell suggested that Reagan’s struggles were due at least in part to the complicated nature of the nuclear issue, and in the words of reporter Haynes Johnson, Reagan’s “case hadn’t been boiled down into language the average citizen, the farmers and laborers of America, could understand.” Falwell told Reagan that if members of the White House staff could supply the offices of

Moral Majority with information necessary to make the case, Falwell and his associates would get to work on behalf of the president, winning support for Reagan’s nuclear defense policies from evangelicals across the nation.

Reagan and his staff gladly accepted Falwell’s offer. A few days after his meeting with Reagan, Falwell received a briefing from Reagan’s aides in the National Security Council. Among other materials, the aides provided Falwell with a series of charts and graphs that demonstrated the president’s arguments for “peace through strength” in “layman’s” terms. Falwell quickly went to work using these materials. In April 1983, the Moral Majority sponsored a series of full-page ads in newspapers across the country, impugning the integrity and patriotism of the “freeze-niks,” “ultralibs,” and “unilateral disarmers” who supported the nuclear freeze movement and therefore threatened Reagan’s defense policies. “We cannot afford to be number two in defense!” the ads asserted, “But sadly, that’s where we are today. Number two. And fading!”

Falwell and his aides also composed a “Special Briefing Opposing an Immediate Nuclear Freeze” to send to supporters, illuminating topics like “Why a Nuclear Freeze is Dangerous to the United States,” “How U.S. Deterrence Capability Would Be Damaged by a Nuclear Freeze,” “A Nuclear Freeze is Phony Arms Control,” and “Why a Nuclear Freeze Would Not Be Completely Verifiable.” The pamphlet included a cartoon drawing of a Popsicle labeled “Nuke Freeze Pop” in the flavor of “Kremlin Cream.” The cartoon was captioned, “Popsicle Today…Hammer and Sickle Tomorrow!”

252 Loveland, American Evangelicals, 223;
253 “Special Briefing Opposing an Immediate Nuclear Freeze,” file 1 of 4, Box 7, OA 9079, Series I: Subject File Morton Blackwell Files, Ronald Reagan Presidential Library, Simi Valley, California.
Moral Majority Report’s April 1983 edition was almost solely dedicated to articles opposing the nuclear freeze movement. With a front-page headline proclaiming “Nuclear Freeze: The Big Lie,” the Report’s writers further sought to assuage readers’ concerns about a possible nuclear freeze. “The freeze movement is based on certain assumptions,” Report writer Robert E. Baldwin wrote: “That a nuclear war is not survivable; that both the United States and the Soviet Union are roughly equivalent in nuclear capacity; that the Soviet Union is as concerned about the arms race as America and is willing to seriously negotiate a mutually acceptable and verifiable agreement.”

The truth, Baldwin suggested, was that none of these statements was true. As he warned readers, with the Soviets’ advantage in terms of stockpiled weapons, they could potentially lose “less than 20 million” people in a nuclear showdown between the superpowers. That, Baldwin reminded readers, was less than the number of Soviets “killed in World War II.” Baldwin’s article also attacked the integrity of previous arms control agreements like SALT I and SALT II, arguing that these agreements were “unfairly slanted toward the Soviets.” “Freeze advocates do not seem to realize,” he concluded, “that it would take two or three years to negotiate a freeze. All the while, the Soviets would continue to deploy new weapons and new systems.” In a final, dire warning, Baldwin added, “Freeze advocates, however, expect the U.S. to stop immediately deploying any new weapons in anticipation of the freeze. The momentum of the Soviet buildup alone during those two or three years would probably be all the Soviet Union would need to be assured of a first strike capability.”

255 Ibid, 3.
Jerry Falwell also appeared on the popular *Donahue* television talk show to
discuss the nuclear freeze movement with host Phil Donahue. Falwell’s appearance
proved to be his only public debate with the Reagan administration’s critics on matters of
national defense. Alabama Senator Jeremiah Denton, a Republican and former prisoner
of war (POW) in Vietnam, joined Falwell on the *Donahue* stage. On the other side of the
aisle, Representative Edward Markey, a Democrat from Massachusetts, and Randall
Forsberg, founding figure of the freeze movement and director of the Institute for
Defense and Disarmament Studies, defended the cause of the freeze. Given the
politically polarized guests and the general nature of the *Donahue* program, the debate
was predictably heated. At one point during the discussion, Denton shouted at Markey,
“You’re not a politician, you’re a demagogue!”  In spite of the jeers of the audience,
Denton boldly proclaimed that a nuclear freeze would greatly increase the chances that
the United States would soon be either “Red or dead.”  If Americans did not maintain a
minimum standard of nuclear parity with the Soviet Union, he asserted, then Americans
“would have…to surrender or we would be dead.”  

Falwell agreed with Denton’s warnings concerning the freeze movement. When
an audience member protested that billions of dollars spent on nuclear weapons would be
better spent feeding the poor in cities like Chicago and Detroit, Falwell replied, “They are
also starving in Afghanistan, they are starving in Mozambique, Angola, and Yemen. In
the Soviet Union they are starving today, and they, by the way, don’t have their
freedoms. There are some things worse than starvation, and the absence of liberty is one

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of them.” The headline of the *Moral Majority Report* article detailing the engagement read, “Markey, Forsberg Lose Freeze Debate with Falwell, Denton.” The article contained fifteen direct quotations from Falwell and Denton and one from Markey and Forsberg, noting only that the latter figures had proclaimed the arms race “lunacy.”

**The Day After**

The Moral Majority’s efforts to oppose the nuclear freeze movement continued throughout the remainder of 1983. On March 2, 1983, Democratic Representative Clement Zablocki of Wisconsin introduced a “joint resolution calling for a mutual and verifiable freeze on and reduction in nuclear weapons.” This was not the first time Zablocki had introduced a freeze resolution in the House. This time, Zablocki was more successful. On May 4, 1983, Zablocki’s resolution gained approval in the House by a vote of 278 to 149. This was the only freeze proposal ever to pass a congressional vote and signaled at least a moral victory for supporters of the nuclear freeze.

Still, there was reason for the freeze movement to be discouraged by the success of the Zablocki resolution. The resolution was only able to gain passage after heavy amending. Amendments added to the resolution by Republican Representative Henry Hyde of Illinois and Democratic Representative Elliot Levitas of Georgia called for the freeze to be achieved only through negotiations rather than immediate bilateral action. As one of the resolution’s supporters, Democratic Representative Tony Coelho remarked,

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the amendments had taken “the guts out of” what the resolution was originally intended to accomplish.259

Partly as a result of these amendments, the *Moral Majority Report* claimed that not only had the Reagan administration achieved a major victory in passage of the Zablocki resolution, but also that the Moral Majority’s lobbying had played a part in forcing representatives to pass a “weakened version” of the resolution. With a headline reading “Reagan Wins Freeze Battle in House,” the June 1983 edition of the *Report* noted that the “full-page newspaper ad campaign warning Americans of the dangers of an immediate freeze at present levels was successful in generating widespread opposition to the freeze.” With the passage of this “weakened” version of the resolution, the *Report* noted, “The freeze proponents’ hopes of enacting a nuclear freeze untied to arms reductions” were “shattered.”260

The ambiguous outcome of the Zablocki resolution helped to set the stage for a tumultuous remainder of 1983. On September 1, 1983, the Soviet Union shot down a Korean commercial airliner, Korean Air Lines Flight 007, which had veered into Soviet airspace. At the time, Soviet officials believed that the airliner was on a spying mission. All 269 passengers on board, including Democratic Representative Larry McDonald of Georgia and sixty other American citizens, were killed. An investigation of the crash would later reveal that the pilot of the KAL flight had dramatically veered off of his intended flight route and into Soviet airspace. The error was likely due to a failure on the part of the pilot to operate the plane’s autopilot in the correct mode. In addition,

260 Ibid.
investigations of the incident revealed that the pilot of the Soviet interceptor plane had warned the KAL plane of the impending danger, to no avail.\textsuperscript{261}

At the time of the incident, however, these facts were not known. Uncertainty concerning the Soviets’ motives directly contributed to international outrage at their actions, particularly in the United States. In spite of the mitigating circumstances surrounding the affair, the Soviets had clearly known that they were shooting down a commercial airliner. The willful downing of a passenger airliner seemed to confirm what President Reagan and his supporters in the Religious Right had long been saying about the Soviet Union’s militaristic attitude and its threat to American national security. Yet the incident also lent tremendous credibility to those on the other side of the freeze debate. Ronald Reagan’s harsh condemnation of the Soviets’ actions seemed to suggest that the Cold War nations were as close to nuclear war as they had been since the Cuban Missile Crisis. Reagan labeled the Soviet decision to down the airliner a “wanton, barbaric act” that “violated the most basic principle of international law and morality – the sanctity of human life.” He concluded, “The Kremlin is on notice. When it comes to responding to its aggression, there are no Republicans or Democrats – only Americans, united and determined to protect our freedom and secure the peace.”\textsuperscript{262}

By the fall of 1983, talk of a possible nuclear showdown between the United States and the Soviet Union was seemingly ubiquitous in American public discourse. In addition to the lingering fallout of the KAL affair, Americans could tune in with their television sets and watch the dramatization of a nuclear strike against the United States.

\textsuperscript{261}“Target Destroyed,” \textit{Air Disasters}, Smithsonian Channel, June 24, 2012.
On Sunday evening November 20, 1983, nearly 100 million Americans watched the American Broadcasting Company (ABC)’s showing of *The Day After*, a film that depicted the effects of a Soviet nuclear strike against the city of Lawrence, Kansas. The audience was, at the time, the largest adult audience ever to watch a made-for-TV movie. Indeed, *The Day After* was not only a movie, but also a national public event. ABC set up toll free telephone numbers for viewers to call and share their thoughts and anxieties about nuclear war. The network also distributed one half million “viewer’s guides” across the nation to educate the audience about nuclear issues. Members of the Reagan administration participated in helping viewers understand the film’s messages. Secretary of State George Shultz appeared on screen before the film aired to assure Americans that a nuclear war between the United States and the Soviet Union was not imminent. Before the film even aired, it should be noted, ABC offered private screenings not only to President Reagan, but also to the Joint Chiefs of Staff. In short, *The Day After* did much to add plausibility to a fictional scenario by inviting the participation of the public in a sobering debate about nuclear war, and making America’s most prominent leaders a part of that debate.

Reagan administration officials worked to counter *The Day After*’s powerful anti-nuclear message. Even before the film aired, White House aides recognized the role that churches would play in educating the public about the film’s content. As Director of White House Office of Planning and Evaluation Bruce Chapman wrote to David Gergen...

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on November 3, 1983, “Teach-ins in church basements all over the country and media echo effects will heighten the political fallout [of The Day After] for us.” Moral Majority activists sought to ensure that those “church teach-ins” would instruct churchgoers of the motives behind The Day After. In a press release to pastors a week before The Day After aired, Jerry Falwell tried to persuade ministers across the United States to dissuade their congregations from watching The Day After and becoming victims of the pro-freeze “propaganda” that the film represented. In the note, Falwell criticized The Day After as “a blatant attempt to undermine President Reagan’s desire to achieve lasting peace and avoid nuclear war through a policy of strength leading to mutually assured survival.” Falwell petitioned pastors to remind their parishioners “that, not only does the film offer only two alternatives – annihilation or capitulation – but at a time of threatened natural disaster, not a single person is shown praying for help or deliverance from death.” Falwell further criticized The Day After’s portrayal of religious faith. “The only ‘religious’ element of the movie,” he wrote, “is a scene where a peace-nik preacher speaks to a small group of survivors in a bombed out church.” Falwell concluded, “It is cheap propaganda, and I hope it backfires on ABC.”

The December 1983 edition of Moral Majority Report featured an article attacking The Day After. Under a headline reading “Day After TV Film Scares U.S.,” the Report opined, “The showing by the American Broadcast [sic] Company of its made-for-TV editorial against nuclear arms does more than scare the living daylights out of viewers. It raises the hackles of conservatives who have charged ABC with attempting to

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smear American and its incumbent President.” The article proceeded to note that Moral Majority supporters “[had] called on the network to donate time under the fairness doctrine to present contrasting views on the controversial issue of public importance.”

The Battle Between Right and Wrong, Good and Evil

As the next chapter will demonstrate, the Moral Majority and other pro-Reagan evangelical groups spent the remainder of 1983, and indeed much of the remainder of Reagan’s presidency, defending an alternate vision for America’s nuclear policies, namely the Strategic Defense Initiative, or SDI, Reagan’s controversial plan to build a space-based anti-ballistic missile shield. Nonetheless, the first three years of Reagan’s presidency clearly illustrated one of the most important roles that evangelical groups played in the Reagan White House – as defenders of the President’s national defense policies. Recognizing the inherently moral nature of debates about nuclear weapons, the Moral Majority gave Reagan’s policies the weight of their moral authority. On one hand, this allowed the Moral Majority to gain access to power and influence, as evidenced by Falwell’s meeting with Reagan and National Security Council officials. On the other, the Moral Majority risked losing its independence from the Reagan administration, as well as its ability to critique the morality of the administration’s policies.

Some observers at the time recognized this danger. In the January 1983 issue of Sojourners, Jim Wallis prophesied that evangelicals’ efforts to engage in serious debates about nuclear freeze would be overshadowed by what Wallis called the “Reagan personality.” Wallis feared that nuclear freeze advocates would prove no match for Reagan’s gregarious, charming personality and his ability to win supporters for his
administration’s policies. Wallis’s words were prescient. The nuclear freeze movement ultimately lost steam following Reagan’s landslide re-election in 1984, as the movement’s holistic vision and populist support failed to generate continued interest from the American public.

Still, Reagan’s efforts to cultivate evangelicals’ support for his nuclear policies should be seen as a mixed success at best. As the Gallup poll commissioned after the NAE Conference illustrated, evangelicals were a divided group when it came to nuclear issues. In spite of the Moral Majority’s assertion that evangelicals backed the Reagan administration, the very public divide between figures like Billy Graham and Jerry Falwell suggested this unity was far from certain.

The division between Falwell and Graham suggested even deeper rifts on Cold War issues. In early May 1982, Billy Graham traveled to Moscow, where he preached to a state-approved audience of KGB agents, reporters and peace conference delegates at the Church of Evangelical Christian Baptists. Echoing his earlier words about the dangers of nuclear war, Graham warned the congregation that the world had the option of creating a “paradise” or “destroy[ing] the world in the matter perhaps of one hour.” Perhaps Graham’s most controversial remarks in relation to the Moscow trip, though, came when the noted evangelist said that there was religious freedom behind the walls of the Iron Curtain. This assertion, coupled with Graham’s unwillingness to confront Soviet officials on his journey, drew sharp criticism from numerous sources.265 In a *New York Times* editorial published on May 17, 1982, conservative columnist William Safire

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censured Graham for preaching the “wrong word” in Moscow. “The person who purports to represent Truth with a capital T has a special responsibility to bear the embarrassing burden of truth and to turn no blind eye to the reality and extent of a religious persecution,” Safire wrote.\textsuperscript{266} The most stinging indictment of Graham, though, may have come from his contemporary Jerry Falwell. Like many Reagan supporters, Falwell believed that Graham had been used by the Soviets to promote pro-communist propaganda abroad. If Graham truly believed that there was religious freedom in the Soviet Union, Falwell stated, he was either sorely mistaken or “incredibly naïve.” “I sincerely hope he was misquoted or taken out of context because there is no religious liberty in the Soviet Union,” Falwell concluded.\textsuperscript{267}

Falwell and Safire joined the chorus of Graham’s critics that included officials in the State Department, who feared that Graham’s visit would interfere with ongoing attempts to secure arms reductions from the Soviets.\textsuperscript{268} In spite of these criticisms, Graham’s visit to Moscow revealed the celebrated evangelist’s desire to reconcile the incredible Cold War tensions between the super powers. For Graham, the international animus that had defined the Cold War was not a reflection on the Soviet people, who Graham saw as industrious, kind, and welcoming to his willingness to preach the Gospel in their country. Though it is uncertain the extent to which Falwell saw the Soviet people as reflecting the communist ideals of their country’s leaders, it is clear that Falwell, like many in the Reagan administration, believed that the Cold War was an ongoing struggle between models of civilization, and extending a hand of reconciliation to an “evil

\textsuperscript{268} Martin, \textit{A Prophet with Honor}, 499.
empire” was tantamount to cooperating with that evil. This is why, in the view of Falwell, his contemporaries, and many in the Reagan White House, supporting the nuclear freeze movement was not only to “blithely declare” oneself “above it all” and “label” the United States and Soviet Union “equally at fault” for the arms race, it was also to “remove” oneself “from the struggle between right and wrong and good and evil.”

CHAPTER 5: AWAITING ARMAGEDDON, AVERTING ARMAGEDDON

In many respects, secular critics and supporters of the Reagan administration’s nuclear policies shared similar concerns with the administration’s religious critics and supporters. Both sides ultimately feared the threat of a nuclear war, albeit from different perspectives. Reagan’s supporters in the Religious Right held a particular interest in nuclear war due to their beliefs about Bible prophecy. This belief in “Armageddon theology,” as some scholars have dubbed it, separated evangelical conservatives from their non-evangelical counterparts in the Reagan White House and inflamed the withering criticism of Reagan’s nuclear policies from the left. In essence, televangelists like Jerry Falwell and Pat Robertson believed that the proliferation of nuclear weapons heralded the coming of the end of time and the battle of Armageddon, a time when the world would be drawn into a final showdown between good and evil and Christ would return to Earth. Given the portrait of this battle that emerged from Scripture, it seemed all too evident to televangelists of the right that nuclear war would be the catalyst for the battle of Armageddon.

If these beliefs had been exclusive to the Religious Right, they might have garnered little interest in the popular press. What alarmed many observers, however, was the acceptance of these views by prominent officials in the White House, most notably by Ronald Reagan himself. Reagan, as it became clear during his presidency, held more than a cursory interest in Bible prophecy. He articulated his beliefs in public, stating his conclusion that the battle of Armageddon could be near. In this case, Billy Graham
joined the President, examining the connection between contemporary events and the book of Revelation in his 1985 book *Approaching Hoofbeats: The Four Horsemen of the Apocalypse*. When one takes into account the aforementioned clamor over nuclear war in 1983, it is easy to see how these events would only have exacerbated Americans’ fears that the nations’ leaders would gladly launch a nuclear strike against the Soviets if provoked, and in fact that they welcomed provocation.

Thirty years after these events, however, it is clear that the connection between Reagan, the Religious Right, and Armageddon theology was a more complicated one than it seemed at the time. On March 23, 1983, only days after delivering his controversial address to the National Association of Evangelicals, President Reagan appeared on television to address the nation on matters of national defense. In this speech, Reagan proposed a new nuclear defense strategy for the United States, one that would focus on the development of a space-based nuclear missile shield that would protect the United States against an incoming nuclear missile attack from the Soviet Union. Strategic Defense Initiative (SDI) or “Star Wars,” as it came to be popularly known, usually with a pejorative connotation, further polarized supporters and critics of the President. Critics decried the potential cost of research and developing the new shield while also pointing to its lack of feasibility. Others noted that the program could destabilize U.S.-Soviet relations and violate previous defense treaties between the two nations. Reagan’s supporters in the Religious Right, meanwhile, took to defending the idea with alacrity. For that group, SDI represented another example of American exceptionalism. It would not only be a practical shield, but a spiritual one, protecting
Americans from nuclear conquest by the evil Soviet communists. Yet messages from the Moral Majority also proved contradictory, as the *Moral Majority Report* warned readers of the imminent development of a Soviet version of SDI while also asserting that the Soviets lacked the scientific ingenuity to build such a system.

Debates about the nature of SDI and Reagan’s vision for it have persisted. Some writers like Frances FitzGerald have argued that SDI demonstrated the reckless nature of Reagan’s leadership. This line of reasoning points to Reagan’s fascination with movies and their tendency to sway the President’s thinking on matters of national defense. Others have defended SDI as a bold move, an element of grand strategy that ultimately forced the Soviets to capitulate to Americans’ demands in arms control agreements.

While these debates have their place, this chapter focuses on the implications of SDI for Reagan’s belief in Armageddon and his relationship with the Religious Right. While Reagan’s religious supporters clearly saw SDI as a tool that Reagan employed to win the Cold War, the president saw SDI as a way to prevent nuclear war altogether. Reagan believed that ultimately, the United States could share the technology with the Soviets, a proposal that the Religious Right abhorred. In essence, studies of Reagan’s personal beliefs about the battle of Armageddon, coupled with the release of new evidence such as Reagan’s personal diaries, have pointed to Reagan’s desire to avoid the coming of Armageddon, not to hasten it. This portrait of Reagan as a nuclear abolitionist raises the question of just how compatible Reagan’s beliefs about Bible prophecy were with those of his supporters in the Religious Right. As this chapter will demonstrate, Ronald Reagan may have been interested in Armageddon, but he never wavered in his
belief that nuclear war was an evil that could be prevented. The beliefs of the Religious Right concerning Armageddon were less clear. What is clear, in hindsight, is that politics, as much as theology, played a defining role in shaping the Religious Right’s public statements about Armageddon in the 1980s.

Armageddon and the Coming War with Russia

Popular interest in Bible prophecy, discussed at length in chapter two, continued to grow in the early 1980s. As concerns about a possible nuclear confrontation between the United States and the Soviet Union escalated, Bible prophecy teachers turned to the Cold War to explain the meaning of nebulous prophetic passages. “Dr. Jerry Falwell Teaches Bible Prophecy,” the set of cassette tapes produced by Falwell’s ministry in 1979, soon included a pamphlet entitled “Armageddon and the Coming War with Russia,” published in 1980. In this pamphlet, Falwell argued that the Soviet Union was the land of Magog described in the Book of Ezekiel, a land that in the last days would invade Israel. Falwell also used the pamphlet to promote his views regarding rearmament. The growth in Soviet military strength, coupled with the Soviet invasion of Afghanistan in December 1979, presented persuasive evidence that the last days were unfolding. Soon, Falwell suggested, the Soviets would move into the Middle East to obtain the area’s natural resources. By taking hold of Israel, the Soviets would control a land bridge from Asia into Europe and south into Africa. This would be a major step on their road to worldwide domination, and would ultimately become a primary catalyst for Armageddon.²⁷⁰

²⁷⁰ “Dr. Jerry Falwell Teaches Bible Prophecy” and “Armageddon and the Coming War with Russia,” Lynchburg, Virginia: The Old-Time Gospel Hour, 1979.
In March 1981, Falwell continued to espouse his belief that Armageddon was only a short time away. Speaking to *Los Angeles Times* reporter Robert Scheer, Falwell also continued to tie Cold War concerns with Middle Eastern politics. “We believe the Russians, because of her [sic] need of oil – and she is running out now – is [sic] going to move in on the Middle East,” Falwell stated, “and particularly Israel, because of their hatred of the Jew, and it is at that time when all hell will break out.” Falwell’s statement was misinformed to say the least; the Soviet Union was by no means “running out” of oil. Nonetheless, this vision of a Russian invasion of Israel preceding the battle of Armageddon became a staple of Bible prophecy belief. Indeed, Hal Lindsey’s *The Late Great Planet Earth*, still a popular prophecy book in the early 1980s, played an important role in propagating this belief. In the book, Lindsey argued that the Soviet Union was “the beast” mentioned in the book of Revelation, as well as the evil force coming from “the north” referred to as the evil Gog and Magog that God destroyed in the book of Ezekiel. When the battle of Armageddon finally took place, Lindsey argued, Russia would be defeated alongside the Arabs. A gigantic confrontation between the West and the Chinese would follow, which would precipitate a thermonuclear blast that would destroy the whole world.

Pat Robertson also preached this vision of Armageddon. In Robertson’s view, it was likely that the Soviet Union was planning a two-pronged attack that would lead to the dominance of Europe and Africa, using Israel to stage both attacks. “Israel is the

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land-bridge needed for a two-pronged thrust – one aimed at the Arabian Peninsula, the other aimed at Africa,” Robertson wrote to his supporters in 1977. He concluded, “As God sees it, this Soviet power grasp will be His opportunity to rescue Israel and destroy the pretension of atheistic communism. As the Soviet mouth opens to seize the bait, God says he will put hooks into their jaws.”

In addition to predicting the exact nature of Armageddon, prophecy populists also engaged in prophetic date setting. Pat Robertson saw a major climatic event coming by the end of 1982. “The onrush of events toward the end of the year may see the world in flames,” Robertson proclaimed. On a May 1982 episode of The 700 Club, Robertson stated explicitly, “I guarantee you by the end of the year there is going to be a judgment on the world.” Other prophecy teachers speculated about the identity of the Anti-Christ, the evil figurehead described by the book of Revelation. In the early 1970s, David Webber, pastor of the Southwest Radio Church, publicly stated his belief that Henry Kissinger was the Anti-Christ. In her book When Your Money Fails...The 666 System is Here, which sold over 300,000 copies in 1981 alone, Mary Stewart Relfe argued that Egyptian President Anwar Sadat was a likely candidate to be the Anti-Christ, given what Relfe claimed was Sadat’s affinity for Adolph Hitler and “swastika-decorated neckties.” Hal Lindsey did not name a particular person as the Anti-Christ, but he did argue that the Anti-Christ was a “passionate humanist” who was “living somewhere in Europe.” Even Ronald Reagan was not immune from accusations, given his desire to

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produce sweeping economic reforms and the fact that his full name, Ronald Wilson Reagan, featured six letters in each name.²⁷⁵

In short, the connection between prophecy and world affairs continued to interest evangelicals in the early 1980s. If anxiety over nuclear war continued to drive interest in Bible prophecy, concerns about events in the Middle East did as well. The Camp David Accords of September 1978, negotiated by Jimmy Carter and signed by Sadat and Israeli Prime Minister Menachem Begin, drew the world’s attention back to the prospect of a peaceful settlement of the long-standing Israeli-Palestinian conflict. Sadat’s participation in the talks nonetheless precipitated his assassination in October 1981, after Mary Stewart Reife had named him as the likely Anti-Christ. Pat Robertson, Hal Lindsey, Jerry Falwell and others continued to defend the state of Israel and encouraged American leaders to stand with the Israelis. “I firmly believe God has blessed America,” Falwell wrote in Listen, America!, “because America has blessed the Jew.” “If this nation wants her fields to remain white with grain, her scientific achievements to remain notable, and her freedom to remain intact,” Falwell noted, “America must continue to stand with Israel.”²⁷⁶

“Hooked on Armageddon”

Ronald Reagan shared many Americans’ fascination with Bible prophecy. He joined the millions of Americans who read The Late Great Planet Earth and according to those close to him at the time, Reagan found Lindsey’s arguments compelling. Friends and acquaintances of the President recounted their conversations with Reagan concerning

²⁷⁶ Falwell, Listen, America!, 107.
matters of eschatology. In an August 1985 issue of San Diego magazine, former President pro tem of the California Senate James Mills wrote of a 1971 conversation he had with Reagan. According to Mills, Reagan remarked, “For the first time ever, everything is in place for the battle of Armageddon and the second coming of Christ.” According to Mills, Reagan’s remarks were based on the arguments presented by Hal Lindsey in The Late Great Planet Earth, particularly Lindsey’s interpretation of the “Gog and Magog” story from Ezekiel chapters 38 and 39. “It can’t be much longer now,” Mills remembered Reagan remarking; “Ezekiel says fire and brimstone will be rained upon the enemies of God’s people. That must mean they’ll be destroyed by nuclear weapons.”

Most notable, Mills recalled Reagan’s words about the role the Soviet Union would play in the battle of Armageddon. “Now that Russia has set itself against God…it fits the description of Gog perfectly,” Reagan remarked to Mills.277

The extent to which Reagan sincerely believed Lindsey’s arguments, and the extent to which conversations like these were recounted with accuracy, remain a matter of conjecture. Nonetheless, it is clear that Reagan’s interest in Bible prophecy extended into his presidency. Reagan mentioned it during the 1980 campaign. Appearing on Jim Bakker’s PTL Network while running for President, Reagan told the audience, “We may be the generation that sees Armageddon.” Reagan biographer Lou Cannon described the fortieth President as “hooked on Armageddon.” The Revelation narrative held a natural appeal for Reagan. Staffers were often mystified at the way that movies influenced Reagan’s thinking. A product of Hollywood himself, Reagan was often swayed more by

dramatic images than complex arguments. During the tense budget battles of the early Reagan presidency, David Stockman became exasperated when Defense Secretary Caspar Weinberger used a large map featuring a Soviet tank factory on top of Washington, D.C. to sway Reagan’s thinking against cuts in the national defense budget. The Revelation narrative and the battle of Armageddon certainly did not lack for colorful, dramatic images. Cannon recalled a 1989 conversation with Reagan in which the former President described the way that “strange weather things” were signs of Armageddon. “Speaking as if he were describing a movie scene,” Cannon wrote, Reagan related an episode from the Armageddon story in which an invading army from the Orient was destroyed by a plague. Reagan believed this “plague” was “a prophecy of nuclear war” and that the passage had foretold the dropping of an atomic bomb on Hiroshima. Reflecting on that exchange with Reagan, Cannon noted that he understood why so many of Reagan’s closest aides worried that the president’s beliefs about Armageddon would become a political liability, especially when Reagan sought re-election in 1984.

Whether or not Reagan believed in a strict interpretation of the book of Revelation was not an issue for many of his critics. What truly mattered to those in the public square was whether or not Reagan would allow his beliefs to affect his public policies, particularly in regards to nuclear weapons. If Reagan believed Armageddon was an inevitable event, one that would happen sooner rather than later, then he might adopt a fatalistic attitude towards nuclear arms reductions, or worse, be eager to engage in a

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278 Cannon, *President Reagan*, 123.
279 Ibid, 248.
nuclear conflict. These concerns were exacerbated by a conversation Reagan had with Thomas Dine, executive director of the American-Israel Public Affairs Committee, on October 18, 1983. Reagan phoned Dine to express his appreciation for Dine’s support of Reagan’s decision to keep American Marines stationed in Lebanon. A transcript of the recorded conversation revealed Reagan telling Dine, “You know, I turn back to your ancient prophets in the Old Testament and the signs foretelling Armageddon, and I find myself wondering – if we’re the generation that’s going to see that come about. I don’t know if you’ve noted any of those prophecies lately, but believe me, they certainly describe the times we’re going through.”

Two months later, People magazine obtained a transcript of this conversation. As a People reporter interviewed Reagan a short time later, the conversation turned to Armageddon. When pressed about his statements regarding the connection between Armageddon and contemporary events, Reagan replied, “I’ve never said that publicly. I’ve talked here with my own people because theologians, quite a while ago, were telling me that never before had there been a time when so many prophecies were coming together. There have been times in the past when we thought the end of the world was coming, but never anything like this.” The reporter inquired, “So you’ve mused about this?” Reagan replied, “Not to the extent of throwing up my hands and saying, well, it’s all over. No, I think whenever that time comes, the generation that is here will have to go on doing what they believe is right.”

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Reagan’s response was vague, and in that sense, it was emblematic of his overall beliefs regarding Armageddon. While not denying his interest in Armageddon theology, Reagan also rejected the idea that his beliefs were fatalistic. In his impromptu speech before the 1976 Republican National Convention, Reagan spoke of the need to rid the world of the threat of nuclear war. Speaking to the crowd gathered in Kansas City, Reagan spoke of writing a letter for a time capsule that would be opened a hundred years later. “We live in a world in which the great powers have aimed and poised at each other horrible missiles of destruction, nuclear weapons that can in a matter of minutes arrive at each other’s country and destroy virtually the civilized world we live in,” Reagan remarked. He concluded, “Those who read this letter a hundred years from now will know whether those missiles were fired.” Reagan charged his fellow Republicans to meet the challenge of preventing nuclear war.282

Though it would hardly seem so at the time, the Strategic Defense Initiative (SDI) proposal would further muddy the waters of Reagan’s beliefs about nuclear war. On March 23, 1983, Reagan appeared on national television to deliver an address to the nation on national defense. It was in this address, to the surprise of some of Reagan’s advisors, that the President first announced his plans to promote the development of SDI. Speaking of “a vision of the future which offers hope,” Reagan told viewers that it was time to “embark on a program to counter the awesome Soviet missile threat” by turning

to “the very strengths that spawned our great industrial base and that have given us the quality of life we enjoy today.” Reagan believed that American scientists could develop a space-based defense system that would shoot down Soviet missiles before the missiles could reach an American target. The specific details of this plan were not a part of Reagan’s address. Reagan instead focused on selling the big picture of SDI and convincing Americans that it was worth the financial investment to make it work. In spite of the ill-defined nature of the proposal, Reagan argued that it was worth “every investment necessary to free the world from the threat of nuclear war.”

Reagan’s supporters in the Religious Right agreed. To understand both their support for SDI and Reagan’s vision for the program, it is prudent to pause and consider how Reagan’s vision for SDI materialized prior to 1983, as well as how evangelical leaders envisioned the potential for a shield against Soviets missiles. Reagan scholars have traced the President’s initial interest in SDI to his July 31, 1979 visit to the North American Aerospace Defense Command (NORAD) at Cheyenne Mountain, Colorado. During this visit, Air Force General James Hill told Reagan that in the event the Soviet Union launched a missile at an American city, the most that NORAD could do was track the missile and give officials ten to fifteen minutes of warning before the missile landed. Reagan was astonished that American military technology had yet to develop a reliable defense against a Soviet missile attack. “We have spent all that money and have all that

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equipment,” Reagan told Martin Anderson on the flight back to Los Angeles after the visit, “and there is nothing we can do to prevent a nuclear missile from hitting us.”

It should be noted that Reagan was not alone in his vision. In March 1979, Pat Robertson championed the development of a missile-defense system in his newsletter, *Pat Robertson’s Perspective*. “On our side,” Robertson wrote, “there should be a crash program to develop anti-ballistic missiles, or better still, laser beams capable of destroying aggressive weapons or missiles.” Robertson later reiterated his support for an SDI-like missile defense system in his 1986 book *America’s Dates with Destiny*. Referring to Ronald Reagan’s inauguration as one of the greatest dates in American history, Robertson noted that while Reagan “worked for peace” and maintained the hope of a “day when nuclear weapons are banned from this earth forever,” he nonetheless “refused to disarm unilaterally or to take lightly the Soviet threat.” SDI, in Robertson’s view, would “deter war, in the heavens and on the earth.” Robertson echoed Reagan’s optimism about SDI and his belief that time and money should not hinder its development. “When the critics claimed SDI would take too long to develop,” Robertson wrote, “he [Reagan] answered, ‘Then let’s get started.’”

Though Robertson certainly seemed to support Reagan’s vision for SDI, this does not mean that both men approached the idea of missile defense with the same philosophy. Robertson’s words should be seen in light of his earlier remarks about nuclear arms policy. Throughout the late 1970s and early 1980s, Robertson often made fatalistic

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statements about hopes for peace between the United States and the Soviet Union. In the same issue of *Pat Robertson’s Perspective* in which he argued in favor of missile defense, Robertson also wrote about the futility of pursuing SALT II negotiations, noting, “The Soviets have never kept any agreements under which there is no self-enforcing mechanism. They laugh at treaty obligations…We have unilaterally disarmed while they have amassed the most formidable military machines in history.” In *Answers to Life’s Most Probing Questions*, Robertson wrote that Soviet “persecution of innocent people” in forced labor camps was a “manifestation of supernatural inhumanity.” In 1986, Robertson told a reporter, “The only intelligent policy for the United States is the total elimination of communism.” Like his contemporaries, Robertson hated Soviet communism and wanted the United States to take every measure possible to prepare for victory in the event of a nuclear conflict.²⁸⁷

In 1983, nonetheless, the extent of any differences between Reagan’s vision for SDI and that of his evangelical supporters was unclear. What was clear, however, was that Reagan’s proposal was highly controversial. SDI drew a torrent of criticism from a variety of sources. Critics labeled the proposal “Star Wars,” a reference to both the popular film and to the notion that Reagan’s plan was nothing more than a fantasy that could not plausibly be brought to fruition. The real “Star Wars,” it seemed, took place in the halls of universities and government institutions where scientists and government officials tried to assess the feasibility of SDI. A Defense Technologies Study Team chartered by the Pentagon shortly after Reagan’s SDI speech proposed a research project

aimed at ascertaining what types of technologies SDI would employ. The cost of this program alone was estimated at between eighteen and twenty-seven billion dollars over five years. In terms of developing the conclusions of this study into an actual working system, experts estimated the cost would reach into the realm of a trillion dollars. The work of the Defense Technologies Study Team, only one of three groups commissioned by Defense Secretary Caspar Weinberger to investigate SDI, ignited considerable debate among scientists and defense experts, many of who were skeptical about whether the money spent on researching SDI would ever produce an actual working system capable of deterring a missile attack against the United States.288

Concerns about the costs and feasibility of SDI were not the only reservations leveled at the program by critics. Many scientists and defense experts also believed that SDI would have an “extremely dangerous and destabilizing” effect on nuclear diplomacy between the superpowers, dealing a fatal blow to attempts to stem the tide of the nuclear arms race and greatly exacerbating the already potent threat of nuclear war. Equally troubling, SDI threatened to extend the arms race into outer space. The specter of the Manhattan Project of the 1940s and its work on the first atomic bomb still cast a perilous shadow over the American scientific community in the early 1980s. As Dr. Wolfgang Panovsky of Stanford University told the New York Times, it was “somewhat spiritually troubling” to think that the scientific community could potentially be drawn into another massive nuclear research project, the effects of which would be uncertain at best. Perhaps Defense Secretary Robert McNamara, who had opposed the development of a nuclear defense system during his tenure at the Pentagon, offered the most astute

288 FitzGerald, Way Out There in the Blue, 243-55.
assessment of SDI in its infancy. SDI was far too ambiguous an idea to develop, McNamara argued. It was nothing more than Reagan’s “pie in the sky.”

“A Bullet-Proof Vest”

Just as evangelical authorities had defended the Reagan administration against the nuclear freeze movement, so also did these figures defend SDI against its critics. Groups like the Moral Majority employed retired members of the American military who used “military expertise” to explain the benefits of the Reagan administration’s national defense policies. These military figures were hardly new to the evangelical community. They included former Army Brigadier General Albion W. Knight, Jr., who had exhorted evangelicals to “put a spine down the back of America” in 1980, as well as retired U.S. Coast Guard aviator G. Russell Evans. In 1982, Evans collaborated with C. Gregg Singer, a professor of church history and theology at the Atlanta School of Biblical Studies, to publish *The Church and the Sword: An Examination of the Religious Influence in America on Pacifism and Disarmament*. Knight and Evans were disillusioned with both American national defense policies in the late 1970s as well as mainline Protestant denominations’ participation in promoting those policies. In *The Church and the Sword*, as well as in the pages of *Moral Majority Report*, Evans argued that the mainline denominations were “hell-bent” on promoting “atheistic communism.” These groups were at the “forefront of pacifist movements for disarming America and resisting military service, all in the name of universal peace.”

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290 Loveland, *American Evangelicals*, 247 – 54; Russell Evans and C. Gregg Singer, *The Church and the Sword: An Examination of the Religious Influence in America on Pacifism and Disarmament* (Fletcher,
Retired Army Lieutenant General Daniel O. Graham was also a source of support for Reagan’s policies and a contributor to *Moral Majority Report*. Like the aforementioned military leaders, Graham was disillusioned with mainline denominations when it came to matters of defense. Graham served as chair of the High Frontier group, an assembly of prominent scientists, government, and military officials who encouraged Ronald Reagan to pursue the development of SDI. In this position, Graham served as an advisor to both evangelical groups and organizations associated with the New Right. In *The New Right: We’re Ready to Lead* (1981), for instance, Richard Viguerie described Graham as “the New Right’s top national security expert,” as well as “one of the three or four most important leaders in our thus-far successful fight against Senate ratification of SALT II.” Graham continued his campaign against advocates of American arms reductions in the early years of the Reagan presidency. After *The Day After* aired, Graham wrote letters to White House officials, encouraging the administration to pursue the development of television programs that would promote the merits of SDI and counter the fatalistic message that the film seemed to promote.\(^{291}\)

In December 1983, the same month that *Moral Majority Report* carried front-page headlines denouncing *The Day After*, the *Report* also included a story about Graham’s promotion of “High Frontier,” a term Graham used to refer not only to the group he chaired in promoting SDI, but also to SDI itself. Graham’s defense of SDI was based on American exceptionalism. His argument was simple: American technological ingenuity was superior to that of the Soviet Union. The United States should pursue SDI because

the Soviets could not. “Technology is one of the few areas where we have maintained an advantage over the Soviet Union,” Graham argued; “We should utilize it to protect our best interests.”292 In addition, Graham turned his attention to critics of SDI, who in his view were foolish for arguing that the new technology would destabilize the arms race and increase the chances of a nuclear war. “That’s strange logic from any quarter,” Graham wrote, “since it seems to say that a bullet-proof vest is more provocative than a shotgun aimed at one’s head.”293

For all the controversy created by this potential “bullet-proof vest,” the Reagan administration did not submit a funding request for SDI to Congress until March 1985, shortly after Reagan sailed to a landslide re-election over his Democratic opponent Walter Mondale.294 As this first funding request landed on the desks of Congressional leaders, Moral Majority Report increased its coverage of issues related to missile defense. In some of these articles, the Report defended SDI by arguing not only that it would strengthen national defense, but also that it would demonstrate the moral superiority of the American system. In this sense, American exceptionalism again defined the Religious Right’s advocacy for SDI. In a May 1985 issue of Moral Majority Report, Daniel O. Graham returned to defend SDI from this perspective. “They [the Soviets] dread the prospect of the United States using its superior technology in a way that would bring our military strategy in line with the Christian view of military preparedness,” he wrote. As Graham explained, the previous policy of Mutual Assured Destruction “ran

294 FitzGerald, Way Out There in the Blue, 243.
somewhat against the grain of the Christian view of things in that it is difficult for us to accept the notion that our only defense is our ability to kill Soviet citizens.” Graham argued that the best way to change this policy and defend the United States from communist infiltration was to strengthen the morality of American national defense. “The Soviets know that there is an inherent contradiction between our ethics and our military system. The last thing the Soviets want is to see the United States and its allies adopt a military policy that is fully in line with our ethical system, because they know it will not only strengthen our military but it will strengthen our moral fiber…that is why High Frontier is a sort of terrifying thing for them.”

In another article from the May 1985 issue of *Moral Majority Report*, writer Don Feder tried to defuse critics’ assertions that SDI would inevitably destabilize the nuclear arms race. SDI, Feder posited, was an inherently defensive, not offensive, technology. In Feder’s view, expressions like the “militarization of space” and “killer satellites” were meant to obscure the inherently defensive nature of SDI. “The military technology” of SDI, Feder wrote, “cannot be used offensively.” In proffering this argument, Feder cited Dr. Robert Jastrow, a respected American astronomer and founder of NASA’s Goddard Institute for Space Studies. As Jastrow told Feder, “The Russians will do almost anything to oppose our development of High Frontier precisely because they wish us defenseless. Their game plan has always been to achieve a first-strike capability themselves, so they can win a limited engagement or blackmail us into surrender.” According to Jastrow, the Soviet Union opposed development of SDI “for a very simple

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reason:” the United States had the capability to make SDI a reality and the Soviets did not.**

Jerry Falwell and *Moral Majority Report* writers also managed to offer unconditional support to SDI without entering the fray of debating its cost by continuously pointing out the left-leaning tendencies of SDI’s critics. When the Council on Economic Priorities criticized SDI by calling it a program of “questionable value and astonishing cost,” *Moral Majority Report* quickly fired back. “Our ever vigilant media somehow neglected to inform us that the Council on Economic Priorities, which sounds like another innocuous think tank, is, in fact, an integral part of the domestic surrender lobby. It’s closely connected with the left wing Institute for Policy Studies,” Don Feder wrote. Feder also noted that the Union of Concerned Scientists, whose 1984 report on SDI estimated the cost of the program at 2.4 trillion dollars, “boogie[d] to the beat of the nuclear freeze band.” The “Concerned – but not terribly precise Scientists,” Feder wrote, offered “politically inspired scientific evaluations” to Americans.**

**“The Survival of the Free World”**

The religious debate over SDI extended beyond the advocacy of the Religious Right. In late 1985, a coalition of religious leaders joined the American Friends Services Committee to issue a “We Have No Faith in Star Wars” statement. The leaders involved included Bishop Thomas Gumbleton of the Roman Catholic Archdiocese of Detroit, Joseph Lowery of the Southern Leadership Conference, and William Sloane Coffin of Riverside Church in New York City. On the right, evangelical leaders formed the

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297 Ibid, 25.
Religious Coalition for a Moral Defense Policy in early 1986. The Coalition’s members included Jerry Falwell, D. James Kennedy, Jimmy Swaggart, Jim Bakker, Bill Bright, and prophecy expert Tim LaHaye. Ben Armstrong, executive director of the National Religious Broadcasters, also joined this group. In its founding statement, the coalition argued that SDI “offer[ed] the real prospect of providing a morally and perhaps also militarily superior policy…designed to save lives rather than avenge them.” Coalition members also called on Americans to observe a day of prayer, “to seek God’s intercession, guidance and wisdom” and to pray that peace talks between the two superpowers would shift from negotiating over offensive weapons to negotiations concerning defensive systems. Jerry Falwell followed these actions in 1986 by founding the Liberty Federation as a second religious organization devoted to pressuring policymakers into funding the development of missile defense. As the *Moral Majority Report* changed its name to *Liberty Report* that same year, Falwell’s flagship publication increased its coverage of the campaign to secure money for SDI.  

In one respect, then, the debate over SDI exacerbated pre-existing divisions between evangelicals over nuclear issues. The religious leaders who signed the “We Have No Faith in Star Wars” statement came from the same mainline Protestant denominations that had supported the nuclear freeze movement during Ronald Reagan’s first term. They also criticized SDI along similar lines. For these ministers, SDI represented the worst aspects of America’s military culture. The astronomical cost of developing and implementing missile defense would take money away from underfunded

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social programs that served the needs of the poor. Moreover, these ministers expressed concerns that SDI would only offer a “technological quick fix to the moral problems of nuclear weapons.” In their view, the Reagan administration was only escalating the arms race by pursuing SDI. American leaders had obviously failed to grasp and confront the myriad moral issues presented by the continuing proliferation of the arms race. In discussing these issues, United Church of Christ policy advocate and “No Faith” statement supporter James Wenekam argued that SDI could never be a purely defensive tool. “The cannon was invented as an offensive weapon; armor was invented to defend against attack,” Wenekam remarked in an April 1986 issue of Christianity Today. “But when you get the two together, you have a tank, which is an attack vehicle. Likewise, when you put defensive weapons together with offensive weapons, you have something like a sophisticated tank – it can be used to attack.”

At the same time, debates about SDI constituted a very different kind of conundrum for evangelical leaders than had the nuclear freeze movement. The proverbial devil was in the details. The nuclear freeze debate was largely based on established facts, albeit facts that were often selectively chosen by advocates from both sides of the debate. SDI, on the other hand, was at best a nebulous proposal, especially when it came to determining the costs involved in developing the defense system. In spite of this, when evangelical SDI advocates discussed Reagan’s idea, they presented it as a clear-cut plan that would be relatively easy to implement and far less expensive than many critics had charged.

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299 Ibid.
As evangelical leaders continued to defend the cause of SDI, then, some of the most perplexing characteristics of their national defense advocacy became even more apparent. While many prominent religious leaders from mainstream denominations limited their remarks about SDI to broadly defined arguments about the morality and cost of the program, evangelicals on the right nonetheless employed scientific and technical specifics when discussing SDI with their supporters. This approach proved highly problematic. There were few experts within evangelical circles who could adequately explain and debate the highly complicated scientific and technical facets of missile defense. As a result, evangelical leaders came to rely almost exclusively on the expert opinions of scientists who were closely associated with the secular New Right and highly sympathetic to the Reagan administration’s national defense policies. Ultimately, this marriage between the secular New Right and the Religious Right undermined the credibility of the Religious Right in debates about national defense issues, if only because it demonstrated the extent to which evangelists of the Religious Right had stepped out of their own area of expertise to support the cause of SDI.

Articles in The Liberty Report also contradicted earlier assertions about SDI that had been delivered by figures like Daniel O. Graham. As these articles emphasized the urgency of developing SDI on the American side, they backed away from the idea that the Soviet Union was incapable of building their own missile defense system. Indeed, the pages of The Liberty Report carried a dire message: not only were the Soviets capable of developing missile defense, they were only a short time away from actually doing it. In a May 1986 Liberty Report article entitled “Soviet Military Threat Goes Unchallenged,”
for instance, defense issues reporter Richard Alvarez charged that Soviet objections to Reagan’s SDI program were “hypocritical,” as they were spending “$40 billion a year on their own strategic efforts, of which $25 billion went into their own SDI program.” Alvarez thus warned readers that the “survival of the free world” was dependent on American development of SDI. The United States had at most “ten years to remain a free republic” unless Congress immediately funded the creation of SDI “to counter the rapidly growing Soviet military build-up.”

The Liberty Report again turned to noted scientist Robert Jastrow to substantiate Alvarez’s claims. “The Soviets are outspending us in SDI research by a margin of 10 to 1,” Jastrow remarked. “By the mid-1990s, the Soviets will have their fifth generation missile arsenal in place on top of their fourth generation, which is already stronger than ours. They will also have a nationwide anti-missile defense system and will be able to detect our submerged submarines,” Jastrow continued. He concluded, “At this time…they would have nothing to prevent them from moving.” Liberty Report writer Michael Johns offered this ominous warning: “Should the Soviets beat the United States in the race to deploy SDI, our nation will be placed in the most strategically vulnerable situation of our history. With the West’s nuclear capabilities neutralized, the Soviet Union will have achieved a global monopoly on nuclear weapons that it will be free to use in backing up conventional aggression around the world.”

Reykjavik

These articles were wrong. The extent of their errors would become clearer in October 1986, when Ronald Reagan met Soviet Premier Mikhail Gorbachev in

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Reykjavik, Iceland to discuss nuclear weapons reductions. The Reykjavik Summit marked an important turning point in U.S.-Soviet relations during the Reagan presidency. It would have been impossible, however, without a remarkable series of developments that preceded it, developments that transformed U.S.-Soviet relations in the latter half of the 1980s and hastened the end of the Cold War. Ultimately, these developments were predicated on cooperation and conciliation between the superpowers rather than confrontation. And it was Ronald Reagan, as much as any other figure, who made the first moves toward establishing a more cooperative relationship.

Reagan’s posture toward the Soviet Union, and his thinking on U.S.-Soviet relations, began to change in early 1984. In an address to the nation from the East Room of the White House on January 16, 1984, Reagan articulated his belief that “1984 [found] the United States in the strongest position in years to establish a constructive and realistic working relationship with the Soviet Union.” He continued, “If the United States and the Soviet Union are to rise to the challenges facing us and seize the opportunities for peace, we must do more to find areas of mutual interest and then build on them.” Reagan outlined three broadly defined policy goals for the two superpowers to achieve greater cooperation. First, Reagan noted, the two nations had to “find ways to reduce, and eventually to eliminate, the threat and use of force in solving international disputes.” Second, the nations should “find ways to reduce the vast stockpiles of armaments in the world.” Finally, the President noted, the two nations had to “establish a better working relationship with each other, one marked by cooperation and understanding.” In Reagan’s view, these proposals would create the possibility for greater arms reductions
between the superpowers, and would ultimately pave the road to peace. “People want to raise their children in a world without fear and without war,” Reagan concluded. “They want to have some of the good things over and above bare subsistence that make life worth living. They want to work at some craft, trade, or profession that gives them satisfaction and a sense of worth. These common interests cross all borders.”

Reagan’s speech was a far cry from the “evil empire” speech he had delivered to the National Association of Evangelicals less than a year earlier. Though the two speeches were delivered to different audiences with different purposes, it is nonetheless striking to note the differences in tone toward the Soviets between the two speeches, and indeed to consider the January 1984 speech in light of many of Reagan’s earlier remarks. In January 1981, Reagan had voiced his unabashed opinion that the Soviet Union would not negotiate in good faith with the United States, as the Soviets only recognized “morality…that [would] further their cause, meaning they reserve unto themselves the right to commit any crime, to lie, to cheat.” In early 1984, though, Reagan seemed to suggest that his administration would seek to do just that – negotiate peace with the Soviets.

Historians and other scholars of the Reagan presidency have focused great attention on explaining this shift. Political scientist Beth Fischer notably referred to it as The Reagan Reversal in a book with that title. Supporters of Reagan have pointed to Reagan’s policy of “peace through strength” in arguing that the shift was a result of a

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grand strategy that Reagan had planned to implement since the beginning of his first term. The United States would sharpen its rhetoric toward the Soviets, build up its nuclear arsenal, and negotiate arms control reductions from a position of strength. Others have argued that Reagan’s policy toward the Soviet Union was far more ambivalent and represented anything but a “grand strategy” in the years between 1981 and 1984.304

For purposes of this chapter, it is less important to assess the internal coherence of Reagan’s policies than to determine what they have to say about his views on Armageddon and nuclear war. It is clear that as the tumultuous 1983 drew to a close, Reagan remained concerned about the threat posed by the increasingly hostile relationship between the superpowers. To be sure, Reagan’s advisors hoped that the President’s controversial hardline policies would not come back to haunt him on Election Day in 1984. Reagan’s wife Nancy also privately urged her husband to pursue a more conciliatory approach to U.S.-Soviet relations. These factors undoubtedly played some role in shifting Reagan’s rhetoric toward the Soviets. As Campbell Craig and Fredrik Logevall noted in their book America’s Cold War: The Politics of Insecurity, Reagan was also deeply troubled by events in 1983 that indicated the potential for nuclear war was greater than even he had realized. The first was Able Archer 83, a nuclear preparedness exercise conducted by NATO in November 1983. Over the course of ten days, NATO forces simulated an escalation of tensions between the West and the Soviet Union, culminating in a nuclear strike. Shortly after the conclusion of the exercise, reports surfaced indicating that Soviet officials had taken Able Archer far more seriously than

anyone in the White House had realized and that some Soviet officials believed the exercise was more of a dry run for a real nuclear showdown than a military preparedness drill. As Reagan mulled these reports in early 1984, according to later reports, he openly discussed their implications in light of his beliefs about Armageddon.\textsuperscript{305} Reagan undoubtedly recalled the nightmarish scenarios he had encountered in a Pentagon briefing the month before. In October 1983, American military officials briefed Reagan regarding the United States’ Single Integrated Operational Plan (SIOP), the American plan for a potential nuclear war. This briefing, taking place only a few days after ABC aired \textit{The Day After}, drove home to Reagan the grim reality that a nuclear war could culminate in the veritable destruction of the planet.\textsuperscript{306}

Though Reagan talked tough about communism and speculated about Armageddon, he was not a fatalist. His January 1984 speech to the nation demonstrated a willingness to compromise and alter the course of his diplomacy with the Soviets while never compromising his core convictions about communism. Reagan’s willingness to compromise became even more important in March 1985, as the death of Konstantin Chernenko brought Mikhail Gorbachev into the office of General Secretary of the Communist Party of the Soviet Union. Only age fifty-four when he assumed the office, Gorbachev stood in sharp contrast to his predecessors, particularly Chernenko and Yuri Andropov, who had both died after serving only a little more than a year in office.


\textsuperscript{306} Campbell and Logevall, \textit{America’s Cold War}, 329-30; Fischer, \textit{The Reagan Reversal}, 120.
only reason I’d never met with General Secretary Gorbachev’s predecessors is because they kept dying on me,” Reagan later famously quipped.\textsuperscript{307}

In Gorbachev, Reagan saw the potential for negotiation. In November 1985, Reagan traveled to Geneva, Switzerland for an initial meeting with the new Soviet leader. Addressing the nation before leaving for this meeting, Reagan expressed optimism about the state of relations between the superpowers. “A nuclear war cannot be won and must never be fought,” Reagan told listeners. The two nations would seek to “reduce the suspicions and mistrust” that had “led” both to “acquire mountains of strategic weapons.” The Geneva Conference would “seek not just to avoid war, but to strengthen peace” as well as to “prevent confrontation and remove…sources of tension.” “The whole world would benefit,” Reagan remarked, “if we could both abandon these weapons altogether and move to nonnuclear defensive systems that threaten no one.”\textsuperscript{308}

The success of the Geneva Summit opened the door for further meetings between Reagan and Gorbachev. Thus, in October 1986, the two leaders traveled to Reykjavik, Iceland to discuss nuclear weapons reductions. An escalating series of arms reductions proposals led to Gorbachev making a startling proposition: the total elimination of all nuclear weapons by both nations by 1996. To the astonishment of his aides, Reagan took the suggestion seriously. Nonetheless, Gorbachev predicated this idea on one condition: the United States had to confine its research on SDI to the laboratory. Confining SDI would have effectively killed any chance that the new technology would be deployed. In


Reagan assured Gorbachev that confining SDI to the laboratory was unnecessary, as he fully expected that the United States would share the technology with the Soviets. With both nations possessing SDI technology, the need for maintaining stockpiles of weapons would be null. Reagan refused to compromise on SDI. As a result, the talks broke down and both leaders left the Reykjavik summit disillusioned.\textsuperscript{309}

The exact nature of the events of the Reykjavik Summit has become a matter of debate among scholars. For Reagan supporters, Reykjavik represented a watershed moment in U.S.-Soviet relations that hastened America’s victory in the Cold War. By refusing to budge on SDI, they have argued, Reagan effectively convinced the Soviets that they could not win the arms race.\textsuperscript{310} Many of Reagan’s aides at the time, both hawks like Richard Perle and more pragmatic figures like Secretary of State George Shultz, saw Gorbachev’s offer of total arms reductions as Soviet propaganda. By making such an outrageous offer, knowing that the United States would ultimately reject the offer, Gorbachev could convince the world media that the United States was the aggressor in the arms race. Others saw Reagan’s willingness to bargain America’s nuclear arsenal away on the tenuous hope of missile defense as the epitome of foolishness. In an early 1987 issue of \textit{Foreign Affairs}, former Secretary of Defense and Energy James Schlesinger sharply criticized Reagan on this point. Reagan had stood on the cusp of negotiating America’s strategic nuclear arsenal away based on an idea that was “nothing

\textsuperscript{309} Craig and Logevall, \textit{America’s Cold War}, 332-34.

more than a collection of technical experiments and distant hopes,” Schlesinger argued.\textsuperscript{311}

Regardless of where one stands on the Reykjavik Summit, some things appear certain in hindsight. First, James Schlesinger’s concerns about the feasibility of missile defense were prescient. Even the most optimistic officials in the Reagan administration, including the President himself, recognized that SDI would not be implemented until sometime after Reagan left office. There was little in terms of concrete evidence to demonstrate that the system could or would work in practice. Writers like Frances FitzGerald have pointed to SDI as evidence that Reagan was out of touch with reality and unfit to be negotiating on behalf of the United States on such important matters of national defense. Yet judging the events of Reykjavik with the benefit of hindsight risks obscuring some important points. The case for SDI winning the Cold War for the United States may often be overstated, but its impact on U.S.-Soviet relations after Reykjavik should also not be understated. SDI may not have forced the Soviets into a spending war with the United States, but it did force Gorbachev and others to face the gap in technology between the superpowers. In a political climate where Gorbachev was trying to reform the Soviet economy by ratcheting down Soviet defense spending, there was little chance that the Soviet premier could champion research into a similar missile defense system for his country.

Beyond this, the conciliatory relationship between Reagan and Gorbachev had not undone decades of mistrust between the two nations. Even if Reagan had accepted

Gorbachev’s radical proposal at Reykjavik, it is unlikely that Gorbachev’s associates in the Kremlin would have accepted such a proposal, fearing that the United States would not honor their side of the bargain. Likewise, it is unlikely that Reagan’s aides and Congress would have allowed the president to so easily negotiate America’s nuclear arsenal away. In short, the Reykjavik Summit was less important for what it accomplished that for the clarity it brought to the Cold War. By pushing both nations to the brink of radical disarmament, Reagan and Gorbachev had shown their proverbial cards in a high-stakes poker game. In the future, both sides had a vested interest in pursuing further arms control negotiations and ending the long and expensive period of mistrust between their respective nations.

“One of the most dangerous treaties…”

Reagan’s evangelical supporters watched the events in Iceland with great interest. In assessing the intense negotiations at Reykjavik, articles in the Liberty Report stuck to their guns about SDI: the Soviets were spending billions to develop their own missile defense, but ultimately they were terrified of SDI. While defending Reagan against his “liberal critics” who had chastised the president’s willingness to walk away from massive arms control agreements for the sake of SDI, Liberty Report writer Richard Alvarez called the Reykjavik summit “sort of a negative victory” in that Reagan “didn’t give anything away.” Alvarez implied that Reagan had nearly been duped into capitulating to Gorbachev’s demands concerning SDI. As Jim Hackett, editor of National Security Research told Alvarez, Reagan had “finally realized” the Soviets’ “motives” and “walked away from any agreement” with Gorbachev. Nonetheless, Alvarez pointed out, “Killing
Mr. Reagan’s plan for a space-based anti-missile defense system stands as the number one foreign policy goal of the Soviet Union.” The Soviets were determined to convince the Reagan administration to back away from SDI in order to have nuclear dominance over the United States.312

It was with tremendous concern, then, that the Religious Right watched Reagan march toward further arms control agreements with the Soviets. Throughout the remainder of 1986 into 1987, Soviet and American officials continued to press beyond the seeming stalemate of Reykjavik. Both Reagan and Gorbachev, too, worked to convince the people of their countries that Reykjavik had represented an important point along the road to serious arms control agreements. “We made progress at Reykjavik,” Reagan told the American people in an address from the Oval Office on October 13, 1986, “And we will continue to make progress if we pursue a prudent, deliberate, and above all, realistic approach with the Soviets.” A New York Times poll commissioned shortly after this address demonstrated that a preponderance of Americans agreed with Reagan’s cautious, gradual approach to arms control negotiations. Seventy-two percent of Americans, according to the poll, believed that Reagan was handling U.S.-Soviet relations successfully.313

In December 1987, Mikhail Gorbachev traveled to Washington, D.C. for a summit meeting with Reagan and the signing of an Intermediate-Range Nuclear Forces (INF) Treaty, designed to eliminate American and Soviet short-range ground-based missiles and launchers from Europe. On December 8, Gorbachev and Reagan signed the

313 Cannon, President Reagan, 691-92.
treaty. Though the INF Treaty represented a small step in arms control agreements compared with the proposals levied at Reykjavik, the elimination of INF forces by both nations marked the first time that the superpowers had agreed to the elimination of a class of nuclear weapons rather than mere limitations on their production. Beyond this, the INF Treaty also created provisions for both nations to verify the elimination of weapons. This latter provision led to one of the more memorable moments of the Reagan-Gorbachev summits. “We have listened to the wisdom of an old Russian maxim,” Reagan remarked as Gorbachev stood beside him in the East Room of the White House. “The maxim is dovoryai no provoryai – trust but verify,” Reagan concluded. “You repeat that at every meeting,” Gorbachev replied, to the laughter of many in the audience. “I like it,” Reagan retorted, again to laughter.314

Reagan’s evangelical supporters did not like it. A June 1988 article in the Liberty Report, published one month after the United States Senate ratified the INF Treaty, referred to the agreement as “one of the most dangerous treaties for Western security in the history of arms control.” The Report charged that the treaty would make “Western Europe almost defenseless to Soviet attack and greatly diminish the strength of the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO).” Moreover, the Report questioned whether the provisions for verification could actually be implemented as Reagan had claimed. In advancing this latter point, the Report asserted one of the basic principles of conservatives’ Cold War beliefs: the Soviets could not be trusted to keep arms control

agreements. As in previous agreements, the Soviets would exploit the INF Treaty to achieve nuclear strength while the Americans disarmed.315

Setting aside the particulars of these points, the Liberty Report’s take on the INF Treaty rested on the same assumptions with which the Report had approached the Reykjavik Summit. Gorbachev’s attitude of political reform was only posturing. The Soviets were as much the “evil empire” as they had been in March 1983, when Ronald Reagan had spoken those notorious words in Orlando. In a February 1988 article in the Liberty Report, for instance, the newsletter’s national security staff ruminated on why Gorbachev had been eager to sign the INF Treaty. “Despite the superficial fairness of the treaty,” the Report noted, “there is a serious danger that Mr. Gorbachev has emerged the victor from these negotiations.” In the Report’s view, “the Soviets may have outmaneuvered” Americans “by making generous concessions” for nefarious purposes. “We must realize that from the perspective of Soviet ideology, all questions are ultimately political. Military strategy is no exception,” the article posited. What were Gorbachev’s political goals in pursuing the INF Treaty? According to the Report, Gorbachev wanted to create a “mood of overconfidence” within the nations of NATO that would lead them to back away from their military alliance with the United States. By signing the INF Treaty, Gorbachev and the Soviets would “convince Europeans of their peaceful intention,” thus fooling Western European leaders into believing they were no longer under the threat of Soviet domination. “The price of the treaty for the Russians is small,” the Report argued, but the “dangers ahead” were “clear.” The removal of American missiles from Western Europe could convince “our European allies to doubt

the seriousness of our commitment to defend them.” “Even more frightening,” the article warned, “is the possibility that the Europeans and possibly even the Americans will be duped into believing that the Soviet leadership has reformed and now only wants peace.” “Should this happen,” the article concluded, “the democracies would abandon their will to bear the burden of maintaining a strong national defense. At that point, the free world will be at the mercy of the ‘evil empire.’”

Clearly, Reagan and his evangelical supporters disagreed over the INF Treaty. Nonetheless, conservative evangelical leaders remained some of the fiercest advocates of SDI. Throughout 1986 and into 1987, Jerry Falwell’s *Listen America Radio Report* devoted over a dozen episodes to promoting missile defense, encouraging Americans to support increased Congressional funding for SDI research. In a May 28, 1987 broadcast, Congressman Jim Courter told listeners that the Soviet Union was spending over three times as much as the United States on missile defense. “The Reagan Administration must recapture the SDI program from the Congress,” Courter remarked. In January 1987, Charlie Judd told listeners, “Mikhail Gorbachev does have an ulterior motive in opposing SDI. He’s got his own SDI that he wants to fully implement before we can deploy ours.” He continued, “Why do the Soviets have all these defensive systems? So they can survive a nuclear exchange with the United States.” Because the United States had “absolutely no defense against nuclear attack,” Judd asked listeners, “Who do you

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suppose would come out on top in a nuclear exchange?”318 This report followed an August 1986 episode of the Radio Report where Judd told listeners that SDI “could intercept anywhere between 80 to 95 percent of all Soviet missiles fired at America.” While the idea of a nuclear weapon striking the United States was “not a very desirable scenario,” Judd noted, SDI would at least mean the United States could survive to retaliate against a Soviet nuclear strike. “One nuclear bomb cannot destroy America,” Judd reassured listeners.319

Articles in the Liberty Report also continued to champion SDI. In the May 1987 issue, an article entitled “Nuclear Nightmare” imagined a horrific scenario for the year 2002 if Congress cut off funding for SDI. In the scenario, Arab states planned a massive assault aimed at obliterating Israel using Soviet weapons. As the Report imagined, the United States would be unable to assist the Israelis because the Soviets would threaten to use their Intercontinental Ballistic Missiles (ICBMs) against Americans if they moved against the Arab states. The result would be America held hostage by Soviet-Arab nuclear hegemony. “The Soviets are opposing our SDI program because they want to see a world in the 1990s in which they would have a first strike arsenal, complete protection against our retaliation and we have no protection against their missiles,” Dr. Robert Jastrow remarked in the May 1986 issue of the Report.320

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Lacking in Resolve?

While the Religious Right maintained enthusiasm for increasing defense spending in Reagan’s second term, the American people remained ambivalent about the massive expenditures required to fund programs like SDI. A December 1986 Gallup poll found that 52 percent of Americans surveyed believed “the United States should try to develop a space-based ‘Star Wars’ system” to protect against a potential nuclear attack. Forty percent of those surveyed, on the other hand, believed that the projected costs of SDI outweighed its benefits. The results of another Gallup poll from April 1986 were more troubling from the perspective of Reagan’s evangelical supporters. That poll found that 54 percent of Americans believed that the United States had achieved nuclear parity with the Soviet Union. Even late into the 1980s, however, the Religious Right maintained its belief that the Soviets were bent on worldwide communist domination. In 1984, a Reagan campaign ad had warned viewers of a “bear in the woods.” “Some people say the bear is tame,” the ad intoned, “Others say it is vicious and dangerous.” “Since no one can really be sure who’s right, isn’t it smart to be as strong as the bear, if there is a bear?” “The bear” was a thinly veiled reference to the Soviet Union. Yet after five years of massive increases in defense spending spurred on by the Reagan administration, Gallup polls clearly indicated that a sizeable number of Americans no longer believed that the Soviet Union was superior to the United States, and not all of those who did were afraid of “the bear.”

322 Ibid, 78 – 79.
In the pages of the *Liberty Report*, Richard Alvarez correlated Americans’ willingness to support increased defense spending with America’s resolve to fight communism. A February 1986 article in the *Report* displayed a large chart tracing America’s sizeable increases in defense spending between 1976 and 1986, but questioned whether these increases in spending had actually translated into greater willingness on the part of Americans to wage a protracted struggle against the communist menace. In the article, Edward Luttwak, Senior Fellow at the Georgetown Center for Strategic and International Studies, told Alvarez, “There is a perception that Americans are full of good will, but they are not ready to make the sacrifices needed to match the military thrust of the Soviet Union. So the United States is seen as lacking in resolve.” In addition, Alvarez continued to assert that the Soviet Union held a “massive” edge over the United States in nuclear weapons, and that it “could not meaningfully respond to a Soviet attack” against any American ally. “Because of Soviet nuclear superiority,” Dr. Robert Jastrow told Alvarez, “They’ve got a free hand and we could do nothing more than complain and bluster.”324

Though Alvarez and others complained about decreasing support for defense spending, it is worth noting that the decline came at the end of a period of unprecedented military spending in a time without a major war. By 1986, the Reagan administration had successfully cultivated a culture of support for strong, sustained national defense spending. A *Gallup Poll* report published shortly after Reagan left office in 1989 noted that public opinion regarding defense spending had been “remarkably stable” since 1982. Between 1982 and 1988, *Gallup Poll* results consistently demonstrated that a significant

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number of Americans believed that the United States was spending “too much” or “just the right amount” on defense. While these numbers seemed to indicate shaky support for national defense spending at first glance, the numbers actually pointed to a significant shift in public opinion from similar polls conducted in 1981, when 51 percent of Americans polled stated that they believed defense spending was inadequate, while only 15 percent thought defense spending was excessive, and 22 percent found defense spending to be about right.\(^{325}\)

In short, Luttwak’s assertion that Americans lacked the resolve to support increases in defense spending appear specious when one considers them in the light of the overall picture of defense spending during Reagan’s presidency. In Reagan’s first term, his supporters in the Religious Right certainly helped Reagan to promote the idea that American defense spending was inadequate, a campaign that the administration largely won. Given a 1988 *Gallup Poll* that showed 42 percent of Americans supporting the stabilization of defense spending at the current levels, and only 35 percent calling for reduced spending, conservative evangelicals could rest comfortable in the knowledge that though the support for funding SDI was still tentative, the campaign to increase defense spending in the 1980s had been successful.\(^{326}\) In other words, if Americans in the late 1980s thought that the Reagan administration was spending too much on defense, it was only because the administration had achieved its goals of significantly increasing American defense spending during Reagan’s first term. The Religious Right played no small role in promoting increases in defense spending.

\(^{326}\) Ibid, 107.
The Politics of Armageddon

It would be easy, in hindsight, to criticize the Religious Right’s failure to understand the changing tides of U.S.-Soviet relations during the latter stages of the Cold War. The collapse of the Soviet Union in 1991, followed by the opening of Soviet archives and other revelations about the inner workings of the Soviet Union, have demonstrated that the Religious Right’s perceptions of Soviet strength in the late 1980s were largely mistaken. Take, for instance, the assertion by articles in the *Liberty Report* that the Soviets were only a short time away from constructing a working missile defense system in the vein of SDI. Certainly, SDI mystified Soviet leaders, and the Religious Right was correct in its assessment that the Soviets feared the ultimate implications of an American missile defense system. Nonetheless, the Soviets were never close to developing a missile defense system of their own.\(^{327}\)

In his Pulitzer Prize-winning 2010 book *The Dead Hand: The Untold Story of the Cold War Arms Race and Its Dangerous Legacy*, journalist David E. Hoffman recounted the struggle within the ranks of the Soviet leadership to respond to the challenge of SDI. In mid-1985, as Gorbachev settled into his role as General Secretary, military officials presented Gorbachev with a plan to counter SDI with a Soviet missile defense system. Their proposal suffered from a number of flaws, however. The most pressing of these flaws was the sheer cost of their proposal, which would have amounted to tens of billions of rubles. In addition, as Hoffman noted, the Soviet military’s proposal lacked focus, as it included large numbers of differing research projects, some of which had been in production years before 1985 and which lacked any concrete results to suggest that they

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\(^{327}\) Hoffman, *The Dead Hand*, 213 – 16.
would produce a working system. Ever the reformer, Gorbachev was aware of the Soviets’ increasing economic vulnerability and chose to demonstrate his resolve to end the arms race by refusing to sign off on the massive spending increases that would have been necessary to support the development of a Soviet version of SDI. The work of Soviet physicist Evgeny Volikhov, who not only questioned the wisdom of committing large amounts of Soviet resources to missile defense, but like many American physicists, questioned whether the United States would ever be able to develop a working missile defense system of their own, bolstered Gorbachev’s thinking on this issue. Gorbachev thus championed an “asymmetrical response” to SDI, using diplomacy to dissuade the United States from continuing the pursuit of SDI, a move that Gorbachev and others in the Soviet Union believed would ultimately destabilize the arms race.328

If the Religious Right was wrong, though, one could say it was in good company. Evangelical conservatives’ view of the Soviet Union was based on the assessment of Soviet military strength endorsed by the Committee on the Present Danger. Even in the early 1980s, studies conducted by the CIA’s Office of Soviet Analysis (SOVA) revealed that the Soviet Union’s military spending was growing at a rate of 4 to 5 percent each year. Though these reports were later discounted, the idea that the Soviets were spending enormous amounts of money to defeat the United States in the arms race never faded. Prominent members of the Reagan administration, including Secretary of Defense Caspar Weinberger and CIA Director William Casey, believed that the Soviets were incapable of internal reform, particularly in foreign affairs. Even after Gorbachev took the helm of the Soviet government, these officials maintained their position that the Soviets could not be

trusted in arms control agreements. Like the Religious Right, hardliners in the Reagan White House saw the Soviets’ conciliatory gestures as propaganda. As Lou Cannon aptly noted, conservatives were none too happy to see the Cold War come to an end. After Reykjavik, even some of Reagan’s most ardent supporters questioned his ability to toe the conservative line in arms control negotiations. As Reagan approached the INF Treaty signing with Gorbachev, New Right leader Paul Weyrich called Reagan a “weakened President” who was “not in a position to make judgments about Gorbachev at this time.”

What is one to say of the Religious Right’s relationship with Reagan on these issues, though? It is clear that Reagan and the Religious Right shared a number of common beliefs about Soviet communism. Both detested everything for which communism stood. There were key differences, though, in how both sides viewed the conduct of U.S.-Soviet relations. Reagan never stopped talking tough about communism, but he also saw that compromise, negotiation, and diplomacy were important if the two superpowers were to end the decades of mistrust that had animated the arms race. In short, where the Religious Right often dehumanized Soviet communists, painting them as the mere purveyors of monstrous evil, Reagan humanized the Cold War by seeking to find common human interests between the two sides. In his January 1984 speech in particular, Reagan spoke of the common “ambitions and hobbies” shared by U.S. and Soviet citizens, famously comparing “Ivan and Anya” with “Jim and Sally,” a Soviet and an American couple having a conversation about their common interests. This

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hypothetical meeting was maligned by some as naïve and banal, but its central point – that Cold War tensions could be lessened by emphasizing similarities between the American and Soviet people – shifted Cold War rhetoric away from both amoral realism and overt moralistic posturing. Reagan’s diplomatic rapport with Gorbachev cemented this shift in a way that changed U.S.-Soviet relations for the remainder of the Cold War.

In conclusion, then, it is prudent to revisit the question of both Reagan’s and the Religious Right’s view of Armageddon. In writing about the INF Treaty, Lou Cannon remarked, “Unlike many of his ideological soul mates, Reagan genuinely feared a conflict with the Soviet Union. He literally viewed the INF Treaty as a step away from Armageddon.” In negotiating the INF Treaty with the Soviets, in other words, Reagan believed he was acting to prevent Armageddon, not to hasten it. In the years since Reagan left office, scholars have increasingly recognized that Reagan’s hatred of nuclear weapons – and his desire to rid the world of the threat of nuclear war – were not aberrations from his religious beliefs. Instead, they were deeply rooted in Reagan’s religion, particularly his faith in divine providence. Writing in his diary on April 11, 1981, only days after an assassin’s bullet almost ended his life, Reagan reflected on his brush with death and survival, which he credited to the work of God. “Whatever happens now I owe my life to God and will try to serve Him in every way I can,” Reagan wrote. One of the ways he sought to live out that desire was ending the threat of nuclear war between the superpowers. In his memoirs, published in 1990, Reagan reiterated this conception of nuclear abolition as a personal mission. “For the eight years I was

331 Cannon, President Reagan, 700.
President,” Reagan wrote, “I never let my dream of a nuclear-free world fade far from my mind.” It would not be overstating the point, as Paul Lettow noted in his study of Reagan and nuclear abolitionism, to say that Reagan’s desire to end the threat of a nuclear war was a “personal religious mission.”

Reagan’s vision for SDI reflected his desire to prevent nuclear war. His willingness to propose sharing the technology with the Soviets further demonstrated his readiness to work with the Soviets to eradicate the threat of a Soviet nuclear attack, rather than to achieve total nuclear domination of the Soviets. It is less certain, however, that Reagan’s evangelical supporters saw SDI in the same way. Talk of having a “bullet-proof vest” against a Soviet nuclear attack, plus the constant emphasis on acquiring missile defense technology before the Soviets, showed the extent to which the Religious Right wholly distrusted Soviet intentions in arms control negotiations. Even as Reagan and Gorbachev made substantial progress in arms control negotiations, the Liberty Report sought to convince its readers that the Soviets had not reformed, nor did they want peace between the nations. They were as much the imperialistic, expansionistic, aggressive power as they had been when George F. Kennan composed the Long Telegram and articulated the idea of containment in 1946.

Given the Religious Right’s firm belief in the inevitable battle of Armageddon, and the fixed, immutable nature of Bible prophecy, one would expect that conservative evangelicals would have disagreed with Reagan in the President’s belief that Armageddon could be prevented. In spite of many fantastic and seemingly fatalistic statements about the coming end of the world, however, evangelical leaders largely sided

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333 Reagan, An American Life, 550; Lettow, Ronald Reagan and His Quest to Abolish Nuclear Weapons, 6.
with Reagan’s view that Armageddon could be prevented, or at least delayed. In a 1984
interview concerning the Armageddon issue with journalist Ronnie Dugger, published in
*The Washington Post*, Jerry Falwell remarked, “He [Reagan] made it very clear to me
that he in no way was approaching the presidency with fatalism and in no way was he
going to allow his theological convictions and personal beliefs to adversely affect his
performance in office.” In addition, Falwell backed away from earlier statements he had
made predicting the destruction of Russia. He insisted that he had only predicted the
destruction of Russian military might, not the nation itself. The fall of Russia’s military,
Falwell, concluded, would only come at the hands of “the Lord Jesus Christ,” who
“[would] not use military means” to achieve this end. Dugger concluded that by 1984,
Jerry Falwell no longer believed that a nuclear war between the United States and the
Soviet Union was inevitable.334

This was a sentiment Pat Robertson also adopted. In 1985, Robertson told *The
Wall Street Journal* he no longer thought it was possible to make the sort of doomsday
predictions he had made in 1982. Elsewhere, he remarked, “There is no way I feel I’m
going to help the Lord bring the world to an end. God doesn’t want to incinerate the
world. Armageddon is an act of God Almighty that has nothing to do with human
abilities whatsoever.” Robertson asserted his belief in dominion theology, or the idea
that God had given human beings the task of exercising responsible stewardship over all
creation. Christians, in particular, were to take hold of worldly institutions in order to

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have appropriate dominion over them. Preventing nuclear war was an integral part of Robertson’s dominion theology.\textsuperscript{335}

Politics played no small role in shaping the public debate about Armageddon, and the role that both Ronald Reagan and his evangelical supporters played in it. Just as evangelicals had defended the Reagan administration in the battle over a nuclear freeze, evangelicals also assisted Reagan when it came to issues related to the connection between Armageddon theology and nuclear weapons policy, even if it sometimes came at the cost of sacrificing consistency for the sake of political expediency. As historian Paul Boyer tried to make sense of the hyperactivity surrounding Armageddon theology in the late Cold War, he noted, “The insistence of countless postwar prophecy writers on the futility of efforts to limit the arms race or to ease Cold War tensions had obvious policy implications.” Even though Boyer concluded that these policy implications were “subterranean and indirect,” he nonetheless observed that the impact of Armageddon theology on American politics was not. By shifting positions on Armageddon, Jerry Falwell and Pat Robertson were able to maintain their long-held belief that Armageddon would happen while also preaching a message that was politically palatable to voters: Americans could join President Reagan in helping to prevent nuclear war.\textsuperscript{336}

\textsuperscript{335} Boyer, \textit{When Time Shall Be No More}, 137-39.
\textsuperscript{336} Ibid, 140 – 46.
CHAPTER 6: BODY AND SOUL

In some respects, Ronald Reagan’s foreign policy was paradoxical. While Reagan’s approach to the nuclear arms race was innovative and optimistic, his approach to preventing the spread of communism in the Third World represented the same covert manipulation of other nations that had characterized some of the darkest moments of U.S. foreign policy during the Cold War. Nowhere was this manipulation more evident than in the administration’s involvement in Central America. Reagan came to office determined to prevent the spread of socialist governments in Latin America. The President and many of his advisors applied the domino theory to Central America. They believed that unless the United States stopped the spread of socialist aggression in Central America, communism would take hold and spread across the region, eventually threatening American national security. In a September 1980 campaign speech, Reagan remarked, “I think it’s time the people of the United States realize…that we’re the last domino.”337 Like his predecessors, Reagan believed the United States could not afford another Cuba.

The specter of Vietnam nonetheless hung over Reagan’s Central American policies. Reagan knew that Americans would not support direct U.S. commitment of troops and resources to a protracted struggle in Nicaragua. As a result, Reagan had to support the anti-communist forces, or “freedom fighters,” as he referred to them, with covert aid. This covert effort, when coupled with Congress’s efforts to prevent continued

military aid to Nicaraguan Contras and Reagan’s loose management of his subordinates, would ultimately produce the most damaging scandal of Reagan’s presidency, the Iran-Contra affair, raising questions about the ethics and legality of America’s covert war in Nicaragua and Reagan’s control over his own presidency.

The Religious Right had no reservations about the President’s efforts to prevent the spread of communism in Latin American nations. It accepted Reagan’s dichotomy of the region’s conflicts as “freedom fighters” vs. evil communists at face value. Like Reagan, the Religious Right believed that no effort was too great to prevent a Soviet-controlled communist revolution in Latin America. The majority of what the Religious Right had to say about Latin America simply parroted back the President’s beliefs. When Reagan said that the Contras’ efforts were comparable to the struggles of colonists during the American Revolutionary War, the Religious Right repeated it. Ultimately, the Religious Right’s involvement in the Latin America policy debates of the 1980s represented less engagement than propaganda.

The Religious Right’s efforts to promote the Reagan administration’s Latin American policy took two basic forms: encouraging Americans to support further aid to those opposing socialist governments in Latin America and defending the Reagan administration against its critics. It was in this latter effort that the Religious Right stretched its credibility the most. As the Reagan administration’s culpability in the Iran-Contra affair became increasingly obvious, Jerry Falwell engaged in passionate attempts to defend the scandal’s most visible villain, Lieutenant Colonel Oliver North, who had been charged with formulating the plan to divert funds from selling arms to Iran to the
Contrás in Nicaragua. To Falwell and Reagan, North was a hero, an example of America’s most valiant leadership in the war against communism. Falwell went as far as comparing North to Jesus Christ, who was also, in Falwell’s words, “indicted” by the authorities and later crucified.338

The Religious Right strained its credibility as authorities on Latin America in other ways. Jerry Falwell and Pat Robertson understood far less about the complexities of Central American politics than their counterparts in the Roman Catholic Church, whose involvement with the people of the region was much more extensive. Catholic leaders argued that the conflicts that tore the region apart were much more local than international and that Reagan’s propensity to view these conflicts solely through the lens of the Cold War exacerbated the suffering of people living in the midst of perpetual military strife. If Reagan did not see past the Cold War context in Central America, neither did his supporters in the Religious Right.

“The Most Important Place in the World”

The history of American relations with Central American nations is long, complicated, and filled with far more twists and turns than can be adequately addressed here. Nonetheless, some context is necessary for understanding the political and diplomatic situation the Reagan administration encountered in Central America beginning in 1981. From 1936, when Anastasio Somoza García seized power, until 1979 when Anastosio Somoza Debayle, the second of his sons to rule the nation, was overthrown by the Sandinista National Liberation Front, the Somoza dynasty ruled the nation of Nicaragua. Though American presidents were largely uncomfortable with the

ruthless nature of the Somoza dynasty, the general stability that the Somozas brought to Nicaragua prevented American leaders from intervening in the nation’s affairs. Franklin Roosevelt was reported to have said the elder Somoza was “a son of a bitch, but he’s our son of a bitch.” In the Cold War context, Somoza remained America’s SOB. In the view of American policymakers, the right-wing Somoza government prevented the intrusion of pro-communist leftists into the nation’s government, thus keeping one more nation from falling into the Soviet sphere of influence.

American policy toward Central America changed in the late 1970s. The 1950s and 60s proved an era of general economic growth in Central America. Expectations grew among Central Americans that the 1970s would continue this trend. However, economic problems emerged early in the decade. In 1973, the oil shock that also shook the United States hit Central America particularly hard. Central American nations had little domestic oil to fall back on in a time of global shortage. In addition, two massive earthquakes, one in Nicaragua in 1972 and one in Guatemala in 1976, devastated the populations of both nations. In Nicaragua’s capital city of Managua alone, four hundred thousand people were left homeless by the quake. An estimated twenty thousand people died in the Nicaraguan quake, and another twenty-five thousand died in the Guatemalan disaster.

These disasters took place against a backdrop of increasing political strife. The situation in El Salvador was particularly bad, as a civil war raged between members of

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339 The veracity of this quote remains a matter of debate. Many modern scholars argue that it is a myth. See Andrew Crawley, Somoza and Roosevelt: Good Neighbor Diplomacy in Nicaragua, 1933 – 1945 (New York: Oxford University Press, 2007), 152 – 53.

the Salvadoran right-wing government and members of the Farabundo Marti National Liberation Front (FMLN), a left-wing organization with Marxist sympathies. As the war erupted in 1979, the Salvadoran government began taking drastic, violent measures to suppress civil unrest. In the late 1970s, Salvadoran security forces fired on crowds of protestors. In one particular incident in January 1980, those forces fired randomly into a crowd of over two hundred thousand political protestors in the capital city of San Salvador, killing sixty-seven people and injuring another two hundred fifty. Repression of the Roman Catholic Church in El Salvador was intense. On March 24, 1980, Archbishop Oscar Romero was murdered while celebrating Mass in a San Salvadoran hospital. The murder shook the nation and drew attention to human rights abuses in El Salvador. While no one was ever prosecuted for the murder, a general consensus emerged among observers that Salvadoran security forces were behind the assassination.341

Another murder in 1979 altered the relationship between the Somoza leadership and the United States. On June 20, 1979, the Nicaraguan National Guard, or Guardia, murdered ABC News reporter Bill Stewart and his Spanish interpreter, Juan Francisco Espinosa, while Stewart was in the country reporting on the country’s civil war. ABC cameraman Jack Clark, who was traveling with Stewart and Espinosa, filmed Stewart’s murder from a distance. The tape of the brutal slaying was broadcast on American news

networks later that evening, prompting widespread revulsion and anger toward the Somoza regime.\textsuperscript{342}

Jimmy Carter was determined to change the direction of U.S. foreign policy away from the amoral realism of the Nixon administration and the cynical fatalism that had often defined the nuclear arms race. In his first major foreign policy address, delivered at the University of Notre Dame commencement on May 22, 1977, Carter spoke of the need to reassert “America’s commitment to human rights as a fundamental tenet of our foreign policy.”\textsuperscript{343} Though the exact nature of a human rights-based foreign policy was unclear, one aspect of that policy was to question America’s commitment to brutal right-wing regimes in the name of preventing the spread of communism. In the immediate wake of the Vietnam War, and with the legacy of CIA-backed coups casting a dark pall over America’s Cold War behavior, human rights provided an ideal way for Carter to cultivate domestic political support for his foreign affairs leadership while simultaneously separating himself from the legacies of his predecessors.\textsuperscript{344}

The Somoza regime represented a stark example of the right-wing governments that Carter had in mind. After the murders of Stewart and Espinosa, Carter withdrew his support for Somoza. Losing the war to maintain his hold over the Nicaraguan government, Somoza was forced to resign on July 17, 1979. Somoza ultimately found exile in Paraguay, where Sandinista forces assassinated him on September 17, 1980.\textsuperscript{345}


\textsuperscript{344} Craig and Logevall, \textit{America’s Cold War}, 292 – 96.

As the Reagan administration moved into the White House in January 1981, it shifted U.S. Central American policies away from the human rights emphasis of the Carter administration. While Reagan asserted that human rights played an important part in American foreign policy, he refused to make anti-communism subordinate to human rights concerns. In a March 1981 interview with CBS News anchor Walter Cronkite, Reagan criticized Carter for punishing pro-Western authoritarian regimes while “claiming détente with countries where there are no human rights.” “The Soviet Union is the greatest violator today of human rights in all the world,” Reagan remarked. “Cuba goes along with it, and yet, previously, while we were enforcing human rights with others, we were talking about bettering relations with Castro’s Cuba. I think we ought to be more sincere about our position of human rights,” the President concluded.346

Reagan’s talk of “authoritarian” regimes reflected the views of his ambassador to the United Nations, Jeane Kirkpatrick. A staunch anti-communist, Kirkpatrick had made waves in the world of international relations in November 1979 when she published an article entitled “Dictatorships and Double Standards” in Commentary magazine. In this essay, Kirkpatrick criticized the Carter administration for opposing autocratic regimes that were friendly to American interests while simultaneously ignoring communist regimes. She argued that the United States should assist authoritarian governments that were friendly to American national security aims, particularly when those aims were to prevent the infiltration of communism. By working with authoritarian governments that were friendly to American interests, Kirkpatrick concluded, the United States might

eventually lead them to embrace democracy. At worst, the United States would maintain an ally in the fight against its real enemy, international communism. As Kirkpatrick moved into her new role as United Nations ambassador, Central America became the litmus test for her ideas. “Central America is the most important place in the world for the United States today,” Kirkpatrick remarked in 1981.347

Ronald Reagan saw the potential of communist growth in Central America through the lens of the Cold War. The President saw the infiltration of leftist, Marxist regimes in Central America as a direct result of the influence of the Soviet Union in the Western Hemisphere. “Let us not delude ourselves,” Reagan remarked in 1983, “The Soviet Union underlies all the unrest that is going on.” Using a popular metaphor, Reagan noted that the Soviets were “engaged in a game of dominoes” that created “hot spots in the world” where civil unrest flourished.348 Central America was one of the hottest spots for communist infiltration. The growth of Marxist regimes in Central America was made much easier, Reagan surmised, by Cuba’s alliance with the Soviets. In his eyes, Havana had joined forces with Moscow to create a direct threat to American national security in Central America.349

Reagan recognized that Americans would not support the direct commitment of American forces to conflicts in Central America so soon after the Vietnam War. Though Reagan did not believe that intervention in Vietnam had been an error – like many other

349 Westad, The Global Cold War, 344 – 45.
conservatives, he thought that the Johnson and Nixon administrations had failed to aim for victory – he was nonetheless constrained by the political realities that the Vietnam War created. Still, Reagan believed that the Soviets’ proxies in Central America could not be reformed. The Sandinistas of Nicaragua and the FMLN in El Salvador were a direct threat to American national security. As Walter LaFeber noted in his book *Inevitable Revolutions*, Reagan did not want to simply contain these groups; he wanted to destroy them.\(^{350}\) If Americans failed to flex their military muscles, Reagan believed, the Soviet Union would see the United States as a nation cowered by the Vietnam experience. The perception of American weakness would only feed the ongoing Soviet desire to knock over more dominoes in the march to worldwide communist domination.\(^{351}\)

How was Reagan to destroy them, though? Opinions within the early Reagan White House differed. Predictably, the split between hardliners and conservatives defined the Central American debate as much as it had debates about the Soviet Union. Secretary of State Alexander Haig, the uncompromising anti-communist, took an especially tough stance on Central America. The former general saw immediate military action as a way to draw a proverbial line in the sand against communist governments in Central America. Intervention in El Salvador, Haig believed, would provide an opportunity for the administration to show what it could accomplish swiftly and with great power. The linchpin of Haig’s plan was an American blockade of Cuba, preventing

aid from Fidel Castro’s government from reaching leftist groups in El Salvador and Nicaragua.\textsuperscript{352}

If some members of the Reagan administration believed John Kennedy’s statement about Latin America being the most “dangerous area in the world” to be accurate, they nonetheless did not want to reenact the Cuban Missile Crisis by blockading the island. Haig’s idea was a non-starter. The military were not enthusiastic about exercising military force in Central America. There were greater concerns created by the Central American dilemma. The most pressing of these was the danger that intervention in Central America posed to Reagan’s early economic agenda. This is where the pragmatists, particularly the “troika” of Baker, Deaver, and Meese, came into play. While not persuading Reagan to abandon intervention in Central America, the three advisors nonetheless convinced the President to delay aggressive action related to Central America until after he had unveiled his economic plan, which Reagan did on February 18, 1981 in a speech before a joint session of Congress. Five days later, on February 23, Reagan approved an increase in aid to the Salvadoran government, sending military supplies and increasing the number of American military advisors in the region to fifty-five. On that same day, the State Department issued the so-called “White Paper,” a lengthy document purporting to illuminate the connections between Marxist guerillas in El Salvador and the Soviet and Cuban governments. The paper would, in time, draw withering criticisms from a variety of sources, all of whom decried the evidence the White Paper provided of these diplomatic ties. Nonetheless, the administration would

\textsuperscript{352} Cannon, \textit{President Reagan}, 162 -63.
continue to stand by its insistence that the turmoil in El Salvador was the product of an ongoing, worldwide communist conspiracy.\textsuperscript{353}

El Salvador thus became an early flashpoint in debates about Reagan’s Central American policies. In the March 1981 interview with Walter Cronkite, Reagan defended the presence of American military advisors in the country. When Cronkite asked Reagan if sending advisors to El Salvador was similar to America’s early involvement in Vietnam, Reagan was quick to draw a distinction between the two. As Reagan argued, the advisors in El Salvador were there to “help against the import or the export into the Western Hemisphere of terrorism, of disruption.” In essence, they were there to help protect against the overthrow of the Salvadoran government by rebel guerillas. They were not there to accompany the Salvadoran military into battle or “advise on strategy and tactics.” In Reagan’s view, American military training in El Salvador was no different than the training that soldiers from American allies received at West Point.\textsuperscript{354}

The situation in El Salvador became enmeshed with political turmoil in Nicaragua. Reagan saw the FSLN (the Sandinista National Liberation Front, or Sandinistas) as a threat to the security of El Salvador and Guatemala. The Sandinistas were internationalists who aimed to spread their leftist revolution outward. As in El Salvador, however, Reagan realized that his options for intervention in Nicaragua were limited. In 1981, the Reagan administration employed diplomacy as a means of holding the Sandinistas at bay. These efforts proved unsuccessful. Daniel Ortega, leader of the


Sandinistas, declared that the Sandinistas had great interest in seeing guerrilla revolutionaries succeed in El Salvador and Guatemala. “It makes our revolution safer,” Ortega told Assistant Secretary of State Thomas Enders.\(^{355}\)

As diplomacy with the Sandinistas failed, Reagan looked for other ways to prevent the government of Nicaragua from spreading its leftist revolution. As Lou Cannon noted, “Since nuclear war could neither be won nor fought and since conventional warfare required an improbable consensus, covert action was the only remaining military alternative for opposing the advance of Soviet-style regimes in the Third World.”\(^{356}\) In January 1982, Reagan signed National Security Decision Directive 17 (NSDD – 17). In addition to pledging $250 to $300 million in aid to Central American and Caribbean countries in 1982 and “tightening economic sanctions against Cuba,” the directive also pledged that the United States would “support democratic forces in Nicaragua.”\(^{357}\) Between 1981 and 1982, the United States provided $19 million in covert aid to the Contras, rebel groups of fighters who opposed the Sandinista government. American aid to the Contras helped to increase their ranks by the thousands. By 1982, the Contras boasted a fighting force of approximately 4,000 fighters, up from a few hundred the year before. That number would only continue to increase, until by 1986, the Reagan administration had helped to create a force of 15,000 Contras.\(^{358}\)


\(^{356}\) Ibid, 302.


American covert aid to the Contras did not remain secret for long. In February and March 1982, reports in the *New York Times* and *Washington Post* revealed details of the Reagan administration’s covert plan. These reports drew attention to what was already one of the Reagan administration’s most unpopular policies. A March 1982 poll published in the *Post* reported that 60 percent of Americans believed the administration had already gotten too involved in Central America by sending military advisors to El Salvador.\(^{359}\) Reports that the administration was supporting the overthrow of another government threatened to become a political powder keg. The March 11, 1982 editorial in the *Post* argued that matters in Nicaragua were “getting out of hand.” “Mr. Reagan is moving rapidly toward the outer limit of the support he can reasonably expect from the American people and from this country's friends in the hemisphere,” the editorial read. The idea of taking down the Sandinista revolution may be “seductive,” the editorial concluded, “but it would be dangerous and wrongheaded to do so,” especially in light of America’s reputation as the “Great Intervenor” in Latin American affairs.\(^{360}\)

Massachusetts Democrat Edward Boland, chairman of the House Intelligence Committee, feared that the administration and the CIA were waging a war without Congressional approval. Boland acted to circumvent the Reagan administration’s covert war, first in a classified CIA authorization bill and later in a Defense Appropriations Bill passed in December 1982. The first “Boland Amendment” as it came to be known, was passed as a rider on the Defense bill. Boland’s Amendment prohibited the use of federal funds “for the purpose of overthrowing the government of Nicaragua or provoking a war


between Nicaragua and Honduras.” The specific nature of the amendment’s language ultimately made it ineffective. The Reagan administration could skirt the intention of the act by claiming that money sent to the contras was not specifically intended to overthrow the government of Nicaragua; the administration only intended to prevent the spread of aggression from Nicaragua into El Salvador, as Reagan had told Walter Cronkite in March 1981.361

“God’s Army”

The Religious Right was sympathetic to all of the President’s beliefs about the threat to American security brewing in Central America. Like Reagan, Jerry Falwell and Pat Robertson both saw Central American affairs solely through the lens of anti-communism. They were determined to assist the President in preventing any dominoes from falling in the region. Like Reagan, too, they saw Central American intervention as a propitious way to shed the lingering stigma of Vietnam from the American psyche. In his 1980 political manifesto *Listen, America!* Falwell summed up his feeling about the legacy of Vietnam. Vietnam, Falwell argued, had been a “no-win war with limited political objectives.” American soldiers had fought with “one hand tied behind their backs,” which was “a miserable way to fight a war.” In conclusion, Falwell quoted former Defense Secretary James Schlesinger, who remarked that America lost in Vietnam because “it did not use the power it had.” The only way for the United States to remedy this sad situation was to eschew the doctrine of limited war Vietnam represented and make victory, not containment, its primary Cold War objective. “Americans have been fooled by communists long enough,” Falwell wrote. America’s no-win policy and lack

361 “Excerpts from an Interview with Walter Cronkite of CBS News.”
of guts to fight communism came not from the American military or the people of the United States, but from politicians in Washington. Now, with a strong-willed anti-communist in the White House, Falwell, Robertson, and their counterparts had high hopes that the United States would aggressively confront the communist menace in Central America. The only problem remained getting official Washington to vote in favor of funding assistance to the men and women waging battle with leftist forces in the region.362

Falwell and Robertson decided to pitch in to convince Congress to fund the Contras in Nicaragua and to aid the government of El Salvador. One of the most effective ways to engage in this effort, for both, was to travel to the region on fact-finding missions, then report their findings back to their followers. With permission and encouragement from the White House, Jerry Falwell made a trip to El Salvador in mid-September 1983. Nonetheless, Falwell’s trip was hardly an exhaustive effort to study the political state of El Salvador. Falwell spent only seven hours on the ground in El Salvador and then returned to Lynchburg. For Falwell, though, the trip had provided sufficient insight. He concluded that the United States had to do more to help the government of El Salvador. “I think they are fighting for their freedom and our freedom,” he told the congregation at a Wednesday night meeting at Thomas Road Baptist Church. On a separate occasion shortly after the trip, Falwell argued, “The domino theory is a reality in Central America…The Soviets are trying to pick a plum

362 Falwell, Listen, America!, 99.
here.” There was no doubt in his mind that “the security of the United States” was “at stake in El Salvador” and “time” was “of the essence.”

Falwell’s visit to El Salvador drew moderate publicity. In news reports about the event, Moral Majority Vice President and communications agent Cal Thomas praised the White House for supporting Falwell’s efforts to draw attention to El Salvador’s attempts to resist the FMLN. “The White House is very solicitous about our going,” Thomas remarked. They are helping with contacts and interviews.” Thomas also noted that as with the nuclear freeze debates, the Reagan administration and the Moral Majority both thought that only one side of the story was being presented in El Salvador. “We have been led to believe that the real problem there is 55 American advisers, while there is little condemnation for the Soviet military pipeline that foments unrest in Central America.”

In a November 1983 article in the *Fundamentalist Journal*, entitled “El Salvador’s Fragile Democracy Threatened by Communist Guerillas,” Cal Thomas painted the picture of a bucolic nation whose government was beginning to develop a market economy that would spread prosperity through the ownership and cultivation of private property. “Salvadorans like democracy,” Thomas wrote. They were threatened, however, by communist guerillas. In Thomas’s view, these guerillas were practicing diabolical deception to win the support of the Salvadoran people. “While the guerillas recruit supporters by saying they are fighting for freedom and democracy,” Thomas noted, “One wonders when the last election was held in Nicaragua, Cuba, and the Soviet

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Union.” He concluded, “Military assistance and increased economic aid are necessary to allow the Salvadorans to repair their economy and elevate their lifestyle so that communism will no longer be attractive to some of its people. A conflict of this type is not won by just killing guerillas.” Americans needed to throw their financial support behind the Salvadorans with a “balanced strategy” of both “military aid” and “humanitarian assistance.” Unfortunately, Thomas pointed out, the United States was only contributing a “paltry $241.5 million in economic aid and only $81.3 million in military assistance to the Salvadoran government” that year. Thomas failed to mention that the $241.5 million is economic aid made El Salvador the largest recipient of American assistance in Latin America, and one of the largest recipients of American aid in the world.365

Pat Robertson’s direct involvement in Central America was far more extensive. Robertson’s relationship with religious and political leaders in the region had grown out of the extensive advancement of charismatic, Pentecostal Christianity in Central America in the latter half of the twentieth century, particularly after the 1976 earthquake in Guatemala. One charismatic figure who remained active in both religion and politics, Efrain Rios Montt, was a friend of Robertson’s. Montt, an ordained minister in Gospel Outreach, a charismatic church based in California, rose to the presidency of Guatemala following a bloodless coup in March 1982. He held on to power for a year and a half, falling victim himself to a coup in August 1983. Montt asserted that his presidency was a direct result of God’s intervention in Guatemalan affairs. Robertson praised Montt on

episodes of *The 700 Club*, which was very popular on Guatemalan television. Only a week after the coup in 1982, Robertson traveled to Guatemala to interview Montt for an episode of the show. In 1984, Robertson wrote the foreword to *Efrain Rios Montt: Servant or Dictator?*, a biography intended to defend Montt against his critics. In Robertson’s view, Montt was exactly the type of leader Central America needed. He was in touch with God’s vision to promote the welfare of his nation while simultaneously defending it against communist subversion. To his critics, Montt was the prototypical right-wing Central American dictator – ruthless, narcissistic, and all too happy to manipulate conservative forces in the United States to maintain his power. Still, to Robertson, he was a Christian, and the forces seeking to overthrow him were communists. Robertson preferred a Christian to a communist any day.366

Robertson’s reach extended beyond Guatemala. The *700 Club* host also traveled to Central America in 1983, where Robertson spent a week touring Nicaragua, El Salvador, Guatemala, and Honduras. In addition to visiting again with Montt, Robertson spoke to refugees at a camp in Honduras and met with military leaders of the Salvadoran national security forces. Robertson echoed the sentiments expressed by Jerry Falwell and Cal Thomas: the picture being painted of El Salvador in the American news media was inaccurate. “The press has shown to the American people a totally false picture of El Salvador,” Robertson told viewers. “[T]he left,” he remarked, “is as guilty of massacres as the right.”367

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Robertson reported back to viewers of The 700 Club concerning the efforts of the Contras, who Robertson referred to as “God’s Army.” Robertson refused to pay mere lip service to aiding the Contras in Nicaragua. Instead, Robertson’s Operation Blessing International, a division of CBN designed to provide humanitarian relief to impoverished people across the globe, provided food, medicine, clothing, and shelter to the Contras. A New York Times article, published in July 1984, estimated that private groups had donated approximately $17 million in various ways to aiding the Contras in the year and a half preceding the article’s publication. Among those groups, Robertson’s CBN was the largest donor, with over $7 million spent in the effort. These supplies, moreover, reached Central America by the U.S. Air Force and the American Navy, acting at the behest of the White House. Robertson later threatened to sue Sojourners magazine for publishing an article alleging that his aid to the Contras included weapons. Though no substantive evidence has ever been produced to prove that Robertson’s group funneled weapons to the contras, the sheer amount of aid that Operation Blessing sent to Nicaragua allowed the Reagan administration to focus more of their efforts on military supplies rather than basic human necessities.368

In late October 1983, as debates about Reagan’s nuclear policies raged at home, the president’s Central American policy received a sudden boost in the form of a brief but successful invasion of the tiny Caribbean island of Grenada. From 1979 to 1983, the leftist government of Maurice Bishop ruled Grenada. Reagan viewed Bishop as a threat to American security interests in the region. In the four years Bishop was in power, Grenada became a Marxist state and began collaborating with Cuba, raising the specter

that the Soviet Union might use its influence in both countries to control air and shipping lanes in the Caribbean. The construction of a large runway for an airport in Grenada, with help from Cuban workers, concerned the President, who saw the airport as evidence of the “Soviet-Cuban militarization” of Grenada. Grenadan officials denied these charges, pointing out that the airport had been financed by a number of nations, including Canada and Mexico, and that both American and British contractors were involved in the project. The primary purpose of the airport, they noted, was to benefit tourism in Grenada.369

The construction of an airport was insufficient justification for direct U.S. military intervention in Grenada. Reagan’s thinking concerning Grenada changed, however, after October 13, 1983, when Grenadan military forces, under the direction of Deputy Prime Minister Bernard Coard, deposed Bishop in a coup and seized control of the country. Coard’s leadership lasted a total of five days before the People’s Revolutionary Army, led by General Hudson Austin, took over. Instability created by the overthrow of the Bishop government generated concern in Washington. On October 25, American forces used the airport as a staging ground for an invasion of Grenada, ostensibly to rescue American medical students studying at St. George’s School of Medicine. Nicknamed Operation Urgent Fury, the Grenadan invasion made quick work of resistance from the People’s Revolutionary Army and Cuban forces that joined in the effort to defend the island. By December, American forces left the island in the hands of a democratic, pro-

American government. It had been perhaps the most “splendid little war” the United States had been involved in since the Spanish-American War. The Americans had suffered only nineteen casualties. The Reagan administration had flexed American muscle in opposition to communism.370

Jerry Falwell praised Reagan’s leadership in launching the Grenada invasion. “Grenada rebuilt the image of America and its resolve to stop Soviet-Cuban expansionism in this hemisphere,” Falwell remarked in an interview.371 Indeed, many observers, like Falwell, saw the Grenada invasion as a symbolic gesture that helped to rebuild American military morale in the aftermath of Vietnam. As historian Bruce Schulman observed, the idea that Reagan was the tough guy leader pulling America out of its post-Vietnam rut found expression not only in the concrete policies Reagan implemented, but also in popular culture, most notably in the Rambo films starring Sylvester Stallone. In Rambo: First Blood, Part II, the film’s title character, John Rambo, is imprisoned in an Oregon labor camp when he is approached by an old friend from the Army. The friend offers Rambo the opportunity to take part in a covert operation in Vietnam. Rambo agrees, but asks with a sneer, “Do we get to win this time?” The answer, for supporters of Reagan, was that yes, America got to win with Reagan, a leader who had the vision and the guts to fight for victory. Posters with Reagan’s head on Stallone’s body declared a new nickname for the President: “Ronbo.”372

371 Winters, God’s Right Hand, 207.
Not everyone supported the ongoing American intervention in Central America, though. Since the early days of the administration’s covert aid to the Nicaraguan Contras, opposition to American support for the Contras had been building in Congress. Despite moderate gains in support for Reagan’s Central American policies among the general public (Gallup polls indicated that support for Reagan’s handling of Central American issues increased four points in the spring of 1983, from 21 percent to 25 percent), Congress prepared to debate legislation aimed at limiting covert aid to the region. By July 1983, with Reagan’s support among American voters having declined to around 21 percent approval, the House of Representatives passed a bill aimed at cutting off funding for covert wars in Central America. Sponsored by Edward Boland and Wisconsin Democrat Clement Zablocki, the bill passed the House in late July by a vote of 228 to 195. The bill predictably stalled when it reached the Republican Senate. Not to be deterred, however, the House took up the matter again in October, once again passing the bill, this time 227 to 194, and making covert aid an issue in debates about American military funding. Congress approved $24 million in funding to the Contras for 1984, with the understanding that it was to be applied only to interdicting weapons from Nicaragua to El Salvador.  

In late 1983, the CIA assisted the Contras’ efforts to conduct air strikes on the Sandino airport, located near Managua. Then, a Wall Street Journal investigation uncovered evidence that the CIA had mined Nicaraguan harbors, resulting in severe damage to a number of ships. In October 1984, Congress acted to re-assert and

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strengthen the restrictions placed on the administration by the original Boland Amendment. A second and more consequential Boland Amendment, passed and signed into law by Reagan on October 12, 1984, prevented any “funds available to the Central Intelligence Agency, the Department of Defense, or any other agency or entity of the United States involved in intelligence activities” to be “obligated or expended” with the intent of “supporting directly or indirectly, military or paramilitary operations in Nicaragua by any nation, group, organization, movement or individual.” In short, the second Boland Amendment sought to remove any loopholes from the first that might have allowed the Reagan administration or the CIA to continue waging covert war in Nicaragua. Yet loopholes remained. One was the possibility that groups like Pat Robertson’s Operation Blessing could continue to send money and supplies to the Contras. The other was that the administration could funnel money to the Contras through government agencies that were not involved directly in intelligence-gathering or military activities.374

Reagan turned his attention to exploiting the latter of those two loopholes. The National Security Council, created by the National Security Act of 1947 during the Truman administration, proved the most opportune agency for the administration to use in continuing to funnel money to the Contras. Reagan’s national security adviser, Robert “Bud” McFarlane was given the task of implementing the continued covert effort. McFarlane turned to Lieutenant Colonel Oliver L. North, a Marine working for the National Security Council. McFarlane purportedly told North that Reagan wanted the

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374 Cannon, President Reagan, 337 – 38.
Contras held together “body and soul.” The wheels of the greatest scandal of Reagan’s presidency, the Iran-Contra affair, started to turn.\textsuperscript{375}

**Liberation Theology**

Not all American Christian groups saw eye to eye with the Religious Right when it came to Central America. As historian David Swartz wrote in his 2012 book *Moral Minority: The Evangelical Left in an Age of Conservatism*, “No issue more dramatically underscored the continuing diversity of evangelical politics in the 1980s than the debate over covert U.S. military action in Nicaragua.”\textsuperscript{376} Like Jerry Falwell and Pat Robertson, evangelicals on the left believed that the most effective activism involved traveling to Central America to meet with officials on the ground there. The Evangelical Committee for Aid and Development (CEPAD), a nongovernmental Nicaraguan relief agency that represented 80 percent of the nation’s 400,000 Protestants, invited delegations from the National Association of Evangelicals, Evangelicals for Social Action, Sojourners, and *Christianity Today* to come to Nicaragua in the early 1980s. There, the evangelical groups met with Dr. Gustavo Parajón, a Baptist physician and president of CEPAD, who took representatives of the respective groups to areas of Nicaragua that had been damaged by the Contras. These groups, the Sojourners in particular, used the trip to Nicaragua as an impetus to campaign against the Reagan administration’s support for the Contras. In the pages of *Sojourners*, Jim Wallis argued that while the Sandinistas were far from perfect, they were not the “true oppressors” of Nicaragua. The “true oppressors” were Ronald Reagan, the Contras, and the leaders of the Religious Right. After the 1983

\textsuperscript{375} Ibid, 335; Draper, *A Very Thin Line*, 33.

Grenada invasion, Parajón persuaded Jim Wallis to draw up a “Pledge of Resistance” for evangelicals to sign, declaring their opposition to the Reagan administration’s Nicaraguan policies. Between 1983 and 1986, the “Pledge” garnered approximately 80,000 signatures.377

Reports of atrocities committed by the Contras seemed to confirm the evangelical left’s concerns. On April 29, 1985, Newsweek published photographs taken by Northwestern University student Frank Wohl, an ardent anti-communist activist who was traveling with a group of Contra soldiers when the soldiers captured an unarmed civilian and accused him of being an informer for the Sandinistas. The Contras forced the man to dig his own grave. Then, they slit his throat. Wohl sold his photographs of the incident to Newsweek. Though Reagan administration officials initially denied the validity of the photographs, and Reagan himself never believed they were authentic, the photographs were not staged and depicted a very real killing.378 The publication of Wohl’s photographs followed on the heels of two separate, independent reports that recorded multiple acts of violence committed by the Contras. Former New York assistant Attorney General Reed Brody published the results of an independent investigation into the activities of the Contras. The Brody Report was based on one hundred forty-five sworn affidavits from witnesses documenting, in often horrific detail, twenty-eight separate instances of human rights abuses, including “attacks on civilian targets,” acts of “rape, beatings, mutilation and torture,” and “kidnappings” of individuals and groups.

378 “Execution in the Jungle,” Newsweek, April 29, 1985, 43; “Nicaragua Photos Focus Attention on NU Student,” Chicago Tribune, April 24, 1985, 2; LeoGrande, Our Own Backyard, 416.
Both the *New York Times* and CBS News investigated the validity of Brody’s affidavits and found them to be accurate.\(^{379}\)

Another report by Americas Watch demonstrated a significant number of human rights violations committed by the Sandinistas and the Contras. The Contras, the report concluded, were the more violent group. While abuses by the Nicaraguan government had declined after 1982, the report stated, the aggression and violence of the Contras had continued. America’s Watch reported many of the same activities noted by the Brody Report, specifically writing that the Contras had “tortured and mutilated prisoners…taken hostages,” and even committed acts of rape. The Contras had not distinguished between civilians and combatants. The general population of Nicaragua had suffered at their hands as much as the Sandinistas.\(^{380}\)

Billy Graham steered clear of Central America and debates about America’s policies there. In part, Graham’s intense focus on preaching in places where the Christian church was oppressed meant that he did not spend time on Latin America, where the presence of the Catholic Church was strong. Graham’s previous forays into Latin America had not gone well, in large part because of anti-American sentiment in the region. In 1962, only one year removed from the American attempt to unseat Fidel Castro in the Bay of Pigs invasion, Graham encountered political resistance on his tour of South America. The Graham crusades also represented a “turf war” between the evangelist and local Catholic clergy who jealously guarded their ecclesiastical territory. The archbishop of Paraguay organized a campaign against Graham’s presence in his

\(^{379}\) LeoGrande, *Our Own Backyard*, 414.

country, encouraging his parishioners not to attend Graham’s crusades. The mayor of Barranquilla, Colombia, prompted by local Catholic priests, refused to allow Graham to speak in the city’s baseball stadium. Rowdy protests against Graham’s visit erupted in Maracaibo, Venezuela, forcing Graham and his team to retreat under the threat of violence. Though Graham continued to encourage the growth of evangelicalism in Latin America, his visits to the region after 1962 consisted of a pair of trips to Brazil in the 1970s, a trip to Mexico in 1981, to Argentina in 1991, and a couple of trips to Puerto Rico in 1967 and 1995.\footnote{Aikman, \textit{Billy Graham: His Life and Influence}, 106; Martin, \textit{A Prophet with Honor}, 284 – 85; Graham, \textit{Just As I Am}, 736 – 39.}

Given the Catholic Church’s strong presence in Central America, it is not surprising that some Catholic agencies opposed the Reagan administration’s Central American policies, particularly when it came to El Salvador. The National Conference of Catholic Bishops, the same agency that had questioned the wisdom of nuclear weapons in the 1983 “Challenge of Peace” pastoral letter, was very active in this regard. Jerry Falwell, meanwhile, accused Catholic priests in Central America of collaborating with the communists. The tense and sometimes bitter struggle between these two sides can only be understood in light of the rise of liberation theology in late twentieth-century Latin American Catholicism. Here, some background is instructive. Just as the Second Vatican Council encouraged many Catholics to participate more actively in struggles against nuclear war, the Council also implored its leaders to become more actively engaged with issues of social justice. In particular, Catholics were encouraged to become
more aware of the plight of the poor. Catholic bishops in Latin America were particularly sensitive to economic repression of the poor by powerful elites.\textsuperscript{382}

A meeting of Latin American Bishops in Medellin, Colombia in September 1968 produced the guiding Medellin document, intended to aid the Church in organizing and promoting social justice in Latin America. The Medellin Conference also helped to encourage the growth of Bare Ecclesiastical Communities (BEC) in Latin America. BECs were small neighborhood churches that met in people’s homes, often without an ordained priest or other official church personnel. The BEC movement became a means of overcoming the lack of ordained priests and other church servants in Latin America. In this way, the Church could organize to enact social change in local communities, feeding and educating the poor while also raising awareness of important issues.\textsuperscript{383}

Together, the Medellin Document and the BEC movement became the basis for the growth of liberation theology. Peruvian priest Gustavo Gutierrez articulated the basic tenets of liberation theology in his 1971 book \textit{A Theology of Liberation}.\textsuperscript{384} In essence, liberation theology saw God as a champion of the struggle of poor people everywhere to find freedom from oppression. The God of the Old Testament had led the Jews out of Egypt and out of the grasp of powerful social and political elites. In this same way, Latin American Church leaders saw the concentration of power in the hands of wealthy elites


who exploited the resources of the land at the expense of the majority of the people. Liberation theology thus sought to encourage the poor to rise up and foment change in their nations by refusing to go along with the status quo. To be liberated was not just to become free from spiritual struggles, but also from economic struggles. Liberation theology did not see the Kingdom of God as a far-away dream to be experienced after death, but as a present reality to be brought to the Earth through struggles against social evil.\(^\text{385}\)

Liberation theology carried obvious political implications. The emphasis that this theology placed on communal equality among its adherents looked to some outside observers, particularly ardent anti-communists, to be akin to Marxist ideology. For Jerry Falwell, Catholic priests who spread liberation theology were guilty of spreading communist doctrine. Falwell said as much on the February 11, 1986 broadcast of the *Listen America Radio Report*, as he told listeners that liberation theology justified “collaboration with the communists.”\(^\text{386}\)

The growth of liberation theology in Nicaragua did nothing to quell the belief that it was nothing but Marxism masked as religion. Throughout the 1970s, BECs grew rapidly in Nicaragua and became a vehicle for protest against the Somoza regime. Contact between priests and members of the FSLN helped to fan the flames of revolution among church members and ultimately aided in bringing Somoza down.\(^\text{387}\) BECs also grew in El Salvador. As they grew there, however, they became targets of the Salvadoran

\(^{385}\) Williams, “Liberation Theology.”


\(^{387}\) Williams, “Liberation Theology.”
death squads. Pro-government propaganda was circulated equating violence against the church with loyalty to the state. Some of the pamphlets circulated in El Salvador read, “Be a Patriot, Kill a Priest”. The ensuing violence culminated in the previously noted assassination of Archbishop Oscar Romero, who had become a very visible and outspoken advocate for the poor in the months leading up to his death.\textsuperscript{388}

In February 1981, Father J. Bryan Hehir of the Catholic Bishops testified before the Foreign Operations Subcommittee of the House Appropriations Committee. Hehir, the chairman of the U.S. Catholic Conference (USCC), the public policy agency of the U.S. Catholic Bishops, criticized the internationalization of the civil strife in El Salvador. Conflicts in Central America were much more local than international, Hehir argued. By seeing the Salvadoran struggle through an “East-West” prism, he noted, the United States ignored the plight of the poor in the region while propping up an oppressive right-wing regime. While not denying the involvement of international communism in the region, Hehir nonetheless concluded that the involvement of either superpower was “detrimental to the self-determination of the El Salvadoran people.”\textsuperscript{389} Hehir testified again a year later, this time before the Senate Foreign Relations Committee. “Military assistance strengthens that element of the Salvadoran junta which is most suspect in the minds of the citizenry,” Hehir told the committee on March 11, 1982. The Salvadoran “security” forces were the most responsible for committing atrocities against the people of the nation. Moreover, Hehir argued that American military assistance reduced the “leverage”

\textsuperscript{388} Ibid.
that the Catholic Church held to promote “human rights reforms.” Hehir concluded, “The present pattern of the war is a violent, vicious cycle in which thousands die each year in a country of less than 5 million people.”

1986

Reagan believed that 1985 would prove a turning point in overcoming previous Congressional opposition to his agenda for Central America. While the President did not campaign on increased aid to the contras in 1984, he nonetheless made support for anti-communist groups an important part of his 1985 State of the Union address, as he stated that the United States should not “break faith with those” who were “risking their lives…to defy Soviet-sponsored aggression and secure rights which have been ours from birth.” In the April 1, 1985 edition of *Time* magazine, columnist Charles Krauthammer referred to this pronouncement as the “Reagan Doctrine,” a label that the administration had not intended but which nonetheless stuck. This statement only helped to intensify debate over Reagan’s Central American policies throughout the year. Twenty-eight separate church groups, including the United Methodist Church, the National Council of Churches, the Presbyterian Church, the American Baptist Church, and the American Friends Service Committee, in addition to the National Conference of Catholic Bishops, banded together to oppose further American aid to the Contras. Events out of these groups’ control nonetheless proved problematic for their cause. In the spring of 1985,

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Sandinista leader and Nicaraguan President Daniel Ortega paid a much-publicized visit to Moscow. While it was not Ortega’s first visit to the Soviet Union, it was nonetheless a visit that was poorly timed when seen in the light of the American debate over contra aid. Ortega’s trip to seek economic aid from the Soviets seemed to verify Reagan’s long-standing claims about the connections between the world’s leading communist nation and its collaboration with the Sandinistas. Ortega thus indirectly weakened the case for opposition to Reagan’s policies. Congressional Democrats eventually sought a compromise with the President that saw $27 million in “non-lethal” aid approved for the contras for the following year.392

This compromise did nothing to forestall the struggle to define American policy toward Nicaragua. For Reagan, 1986 rather than 1985 would prove the defining year in this debate. On February 25, 1986, Reagan submitted a request to the House of Representatives for $100 million in aid to the contras. Reagan asked that the aid carry no restrictions that stated it could only be used for non-lethal purposes.393 As the House prepared to vote on the aid, the Listen America Report noted the atrocities of the Sandinistas in an effort to paint a portrait of the contras as heroes battling a ruthless band of evil men. “There is no regime more barbaric, no regime that violates human rights in a manner more constant and permanent than the Sandinista regime,” Charlie Judd told listeners on the March 17, 1986 broadcast of the Report. Two days later, Judd spoke of how the Sandinistas had celebrated the January 1986 explosion of the Space Shuttle

392 LeoGrande, Our Own Backyard, 420-28.
393 Ibid, 443.
Challenger. According to Judd, the Sandinistas had labeled astronauts Francis Scobee and Michael Smith, who had served in Vietnam, as war criminals.\footnote{Moral Majority: Listen America Radio, February 25, 1986, March 17, 1986, March 19, 1986, Collection MOR 3-1, Folder 2, A. Pierre Guillermin Library, Liberty University, Lynchburg, Virginia.}

On March 20, the House defeated the President’s proposal by a vote of 222 to 210. Neither Reagan nor the Religious Right saw the House’s vote as a definitive impediment to further aid to the Contras. The President vowed to continue to push for the increase in legal, unfettered funds.\footnote{LeoGrande, \textit{Our Own Backyard}, 456 – 57; “Reagan Defeated in House on Aiding Nicaraguan Rebels; President Turns to Senate in Fight for Bill,” \textit{New York Times}, March 21, 1986, 1.} As Reagan’s campaign continued, so did that of his evangelical supporters. The \textit{Listen America Radio Report} focused a number of its April 1986 broadcasts on demonizing the Sandinistas. Representative Dan Burton, a Republican from Indiana, appeared on the \textit{Report} to tell listeners that the Soviets were arming the Sandinistas and that “Managua” had become “a haven for international terrorism.” If the United States did nothing to stop the Sandinistas, Burton continued, they would never change their attitudes or behaviors. The Sandinistas “will continue to supply the Communist guerillas in El Salvador with weapons coming from the Soviet bloc,” Burton warned. In mid-April, Rabbi Samuel Dresner of Chicago, a prominent Jewish supporter of conservative causes, told listeners of the \textit{Report} that the Sandinistas persecuted Jews in Nicaragua and that they were supported by Libyan dictator Muammar Gaddafi, believed to be responsible for the bombing of a discotheque in Berlin earlier that month that killed two American servicemen and injured scores of others. In early May, New Right activist Paul Weyrich hosted the \textit{Report} and criticized those members of Congress who “would not give one penny to help the freedom fighters in Nicaragua.” If
the United States was willing to help the freedom fighters, Weyrich argued, the nation could defeat communism without fighting an “all-out nuclear war” with the Soviets. Representative Robert Dornan, a Republican from California, also spoke out on the Report in May 1986, discussing the Sandinistas’ oppression of the free press. The religious left in the United States, Dornan told listeners, was actively supporting the brutal, oppressive Sandinista regime, a regime that held four times as many prisoners in Nicaragua as the Somoza regime had held.396

This campaign on the part of the Moral Majority coincided with Ronald Reagan’s energetic personal campaign to overturn the House’s March rejection of contra aid. That campaign ultimately proved successful. On June 25, only three months after voting down Reagan’s aid proposal, the House approved the measure by 221 to 209 votes. On August 13, the U.S. Senate approved the measure by a vote of 53 to 47.397

Reagan’s triumph in the Contra war was brief. On November 3, 1986, two Lebanese newspapers published stories alleging that the Reagan administration had sold weapons to Iran in exchange for the release of hostages-held by Iranian allies in Lebanon. Reagan initially denied the veracity of these charges. As the month of November progressed, however, even more sinister charges emerged, specifically allegations that officials within the administration had overseen the funneling of proceeds from this deal to the contras in Nicaragua in blatant violation of the Boland Amendment. Lieutenant Colonel Oliver North of the National Security Council, who had allegedly been told to

397 LeoGrande, Our Own Backyard, 470 – 73.
keep the Contras together “body and soul,” emerged as a primary offender in this effort. Despite North’s attempts to cover up evidence of this illegal diversion of funds, a “smoking gun” memo surfaced that confirmed the charges were true. In a November 25, 1986 press conference, Attorney General Edwin Meese acknowledged the illegal funneling of money to the Contras. The President fired Oliver North and accepted the resignation of Admiral John Poindexter, his fourth National Security Adviser, who had overseen the operation. Reagan continued to deny having knowledge of the scheme, but accepted responsibility for trading arms for hostages. He deferred matters related to the Contra funds to the investigation of an Independent Counsel and the Congressional committees who would hold public hearings regarding the scandal.398

The Religious Right continued to support Ronald Reagan in the Iran-Contra matter, but the bulk of their political activism at this time was devoted to defending Oliver North. No other figure defended North with as much zeal as Jerry Falwell. The Liberty Report did not hesitate to use the word “hero” to describe the man who agents of Falwell’s ministries believed had been wrongly persecuted for aiding the cause of democracy and freedom in Central America. In May 1988, Jerry Falwell wrote a personal commentary on Oliver North for the Report entitled “A Hero’s Story.” North was “a Christian, a hero, a patriot and an anti-communist” in Falwell’s words. Attempts to hold him legally responsible for his actions in the Iran-Contra affair were nothing more than a “political witch hunt” the likes of which Falwell had never seen. “The reason Colonel North” was the target of prosecution, Falwell alleged, was that he “opposed the

liberal policy of retreat in Central America.” North had been presented with the dilemma of “walking a tight rope with congressionally sponsored statutes, or allowing the brave freedom fighters to die in the jungles at the hands of Soviet assault helicopters.” North had “made the correct decision. He saved the lives of the freedom fighters.” Falwell asked his readers, “Can anyone fault him for that?”

In the same issue of the *Liberty Report* that featured Falwell’s commentary, an ad appeared with the title “20th Century David Battles Government Goliath,” featuring a picture of North in military uniform. The ad reported that the Independent Counsel’s office had spent $7 million investigating Iran-Contra. Under a heading reading “Your Tax Dollars at Work,” the ad reported that Walsh’s “publicly funded Washington offices are amongst the most expensive in Washington, renting at $80,000 a month.” North would have to “raise millions in private funds” to fight the charges against him, the ad noted, and encouraged readers, at the urging of Jerry Falwell, to send money to a defense fund set up to help North pay his legal expenses. Another ad appeared in the April 1988 edition of the *Liberty Report* urging readers to appeal to President Reagan for a pardon for North. The ad had a pre-written form letter that readers could sign and mail so Falwell could deliver them to the President.

The most noted instance of Falwell’s defense of North came at the Liberty University commencement in 1988. At Falwell’s invitation, North appeared as Liberty’s commencement speaker on May 2, 1988. Speaking to the graduating class of 1988, North embraced his role as the persecuted martyr of the Iran-Contra scandal. He had not

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intended to become the central figure in what he saw as a dispute between Congress and
the President, North told the audience. “Nor did I ever dream that I would have to endure
the largest investigation in the history of our republic,” North continued. “An
investigation that has probed every aspect of my professional and personal life and that of
my family.” He concluded, “Well, I’ve been accused of helping the brave young men
and women of the Nicaraguan Resistance in their struggle for the very liberties that we
claim as birthright. I’ve been accused of trying to rescue American hostages held captive
and of trying to prevent other terrorist attacks.” To the response of a standing ovation,
North replied, “Those accusations are not a brand, they are a badge of honor.”

In defending his decision to invite North to Liberty, Jerry Falwell remarked, “We
serve a Savior who was indicted, convicted and crucified. And there have been a lot of
men and women down through the years who have courageously stood, willing to pay a
great price for what’s right and good. In this case, freedom.” For a gift of $25 or more,
an ad in the Liberty Report announced, one could receive a VHS copy of North’s
commencement address, “Jerry Falwell Presents: Ollie North, Liberty: An American
Hero” in the mail.

**Sticking to Nehemiah**

As Ronald Reagan’s presidency drew close to the end, Reagan’s evangelical
supporters continued to defend the need to fund the Contras in Nicaragua, even in the
wake of the Iran-Contra affair. The Iran-Contra scandal had been nothing more than an
“inquisition,” Charlie Judd told listeners to the Listen America Radio Report on April 20,

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402 Ibid, 19.
1988. This “inquisition” was really about who controlled American foreign policy, Judd argued; the Boland Amendment had been primarily a matter of partisan politics. “Should the United States abandon freedom fighters in their quest to restore democracy in Nicaragua, thereby ensuring the Sandinistas will consolidate Soviet influence in Nicaragua and incite Communist revolution throughout Latin America?” Michael Johns asked readers of the Liberty Report in September 1987. “It would only seem logical that the United States should support those brave men and women who are risking their lives for the restoration of democracy,” Johns wrote. “After all, were it not for French support, the American minutemen of 1776 might not have been able to force out the British to establish representative democracy.” Johns portrayed the Contras as helpless without American assistance. His own time in Nicaragua, Johns noted, had convinced him the Contras were “religious and committed to the foundations of western democracy.” What the Contras could not understand, he concluded, was the “Washington politics” that held their struggle at bay.403

In February 1988, the House of Representatives voted down a request for $36.25 million in American aid to the Contras.404 As Congress turned away further requests for aid to the contras, the Liberty Report focused its ire on those representatives who, in Michael Johns’s words, were “send[ing] an unmistakable signal to the rest of the world that America is losing its resolve in the defense of democracy.”405 In a March 1988 article from the Liberty Report, Johns suggested that in voting down the Contra aid,

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Congress was betraying America’s founding principles. “In Nicaragua, Tom Paine would have wanted us to support the Contras,” an April 1988 article in the *Liberty Report* read.406

Still, Falwell and his contemporaries remained distinctly in the minority of public opinion concerning Reagan’s handling of relations with Nicaragua. A Gallup poll conducted in 1988 showed more than half of the respondents, 55 percent, disapproving of Reagan’s handling of the Contras, while only 26 percent voiced approval of the President’s actions. Attempts to defend Oliver North also proved ineffective, at least temporarily, as the former Marine was convicted on three counts, including the destruction of documents, impeding a Congressional investigation, and accepting illegal funds. North received a suspended prison sentence, a fine, and was ordered to perform 1,200 hours of community service, but his convictions were ultimately overturned on the grounds that his testimony before Congress, prior to his criminal trial, may have unfairly influenced his later conviction.407

Ultimately, the Religious Right’s willingness to support Ronald Reagan’s Central American policies, no matter what, demonstrated a fervent loyalty to the President that superseded good judgment. Jerry Falwell was “an expert on Nehemiah, not Nicaragua,” Falwell biographer Michael Sean Winters wrote. The Lynchburg evangelist may have possessed remarkable skills when it came to connecting the Bible to current events, but he nonetheless lacked the “international framework,” as Winters noted, to properly

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evaluate the situation on the ground in Central America. His claim to have evaluated the situation in El Salvador, after having spent less than one day inside the country, only added to the superficial nature of Falwell’s engagement with Central American issues.\textsuperscript{408}

By accepting, at face value, the simplistic, good versus evil narrative that Reagan himself promoted, the Religious Right also failed to engage the deeper moral questions raised by the Reagan’s administration’s covert war in Central America. In characterizing the liberation theology of Central American Catholics as inherently communist, Falwell, Robertson and others ironically failed to grasp the heart of that theology, that the people of Central America were perpetually oppressed by the greed and manipulation of powerful elites. Those powerful elites were not limited to local factions. Outside forces used Central America as a pawn in a larger international struggle. Father J. Bryan Hehir understood this complicated situation far better than his counterparts in the Christian Right. In essence, Hehir recognized that while the international context of the Central American struggles of the 1980s should not have been ignored, neither should have the fundamentally local nature of the conflict. Reports of violence committed by both the Contras and the Sandinistas illustrated that the local story was more complicated than the larger international story that Reagan and the Religious Right were trying to tell. Jerry Falwell’s ministries, in particular, continuously played up the virtues of the Contras and the evils of the Sandinistas. By ignoring reports that demonstrated atrocities committed on both sides, Falwell acted as little more than an agent of propaganda for the Reagan administration’s policies.

\textsuperscript{408} Winters, \textit{God’s Right Hand}, 206 – 9.
Because the Religious Right did not engage the local issues involved there in any substantive way, it failed to educate conservative evangelicals about both the nature of America’s involvement in Central America and the ongoing suffering of the people there. As William LeoGrande recorded, during the Reagan administration’s covert struggle in Nicaragua, 30,000 Nicaraguans died. In proportion to Nicaragua’s population, this was a heavier casualty toll than the United States suffered in the Civil War, World War I, World War II, Korea, and Vietnam combined. This staggering loss of life was accompanied by a monumental economic downturn, as wages in Nicaragua fell 90 percent in the 1980s, unemployment gripped one-third of the nation’s workers, and inflation spiraled out of control. In El Salvador, 80,000 people died in the civil war, all while the government failed to control the rebellion by the FMLN. Most of those who died, it should be noted, were civilians. Still, in both of these situations, the Reagan administration and the Religious Right might have gleaned some satisfaction. In 1990, after Reagan left office, Nicaragua held free elections, elections that saw the Sandinistas forced from power. In El Salvador, though the guerilla resistance never toppled the government, a negotiated settlement ending the civil war gave the FMLN no share of political power. Historians and others have continued to debate the extent to which the Reagan administration’s policies helped to hasten these events, or perhaps to prevent a less costly settlement earlier in Reagan’s presidency.409

The Religious Right had little interest in asking these questions. Instead, in Central America, the Religious Right once again surrendered an opportunity to gain public credibility in debates about an important matter of international policy. If the full

409 LeoGrande, Our Own Backyard, 582 – 83.
acceptance of the Reagan administration’s claims about the nature of battles in Nicaragua and El Salvador might be excused as politically naïve, Jerry Falwell’s impassioned defense of the administration in the midst of Iran-Contra could not. As the most serious presidential scandal since Watergate, Iran-Contra raised important questions about the White House’s ability to skirt the constitutional authority of Congress, as well as the President’s active engagement with the conduct of his own administration. At no point did any figure in the Religious Right ask whether these questions were legitimate. Nor did they ask whether Congressional concerns about funding for the Contras were valid. They did not ask whether Oliver North had acted inappropriately in diverting funds to the Contras outside of the purview of his authority. Those were questions for other figures in other agencies. Falwell, Robertson, and their contemporaries were satisfied that Reagan, North, the Contras, and the Salvadorans were on the side of the angels.
CHAPTER 7: A NEW WORLD ORDER

The world changed dramatically in the late 1980s. Improved relations between the United States and the Soviet Union brought about the end of the Cold War. The Berlin Wall fell in 1989, and the Soviet Union collapsed in 1991. As these events unfolded, Jerry Falwell and Billy Graham approached engagement with world affairs in two very different ways. While Falwell traveled to South Africa and the Philippines, voicing his concerns about possible communist subversion in those countries, Billy Graham continued to engage the Soviet Union by traveling to Moscow, meeting with Soviet officials, and preaching in churches. These two different paths proved consequential as the Cold War ended. As his public credibility declined, Falwell stepped away from politics altogether. Meanwhile, Billy Graham reaped the harvest of his engagement with the Soviet people in the 1980s, preaching to thousands in Moscow’s Olympic Stadium in 1992.

To be sure, foreign affairs were not the only reason the Religious Right lost credibility in the 1980s. An embarrassing scandal drew Jerry Falwell into a thankless struggle to save Jim Bakker’s PTL ministry. Bakker’s private sexual dalliances, as well as those of Jimmy Swaggert, became the subject of public ridicule. Still, foreign affairs did not help the Religious Right gain credibility. Jerry Falwell’s support for South Africa’s apartheid government and Pat Robertson’s assertion that there were still Soviet missiles in Cuba demonstrated that the Religious Right’s most prominent figures were out of touch and ill-informed about important matters of foreign policy.
As the Cold War ended, so did the Moral Majority, as Jerry Falwell dissolved his creation in 1989. Conservative evangelicals faced the reality of a new world order without an obvious enemy. Pat Robertson predicted the rise of a one-world government and lambasted the growth of the liberal welfare state as Americans’ new enemies. The Christian Coalition, Pat Robertson’s new evangelical activism group, sought to continue the work of organizing evangelicals that the Moral Majority had begun. Evangelicals had been chastened, though, by the experiences of the 1980s. Failure to learn from mistakes and adapt to new circumstances hindered evangelicals’ attempts to engage the new post-Cold War world.

“He’s a Phony”

In 1985, Jerry Falwell got involved in a domestic debate about apartheid, the system of racial segregation that had divided South Africa since the late 1940s. Several conservatives who usually supported the Reagan administration in foreign policy broke ranks with the President by calling for economic sanctions to be imposed on South Africa. Representatives Jack Kemp of New York and Newt Gingrich of Georgia, both Republicans, joined a number of their colleagues who hoped to force the government in Pretoria to end apartheid by disinvesting American dollars in the country’s resources. Jerry Falwell disagreed with Kemp, Gingrich and their colleagues. As usual, Falwell saw the South African debate solely in the Cold War context. Falwell believed that if Americans withdrew economic support for the South African government, the nation would ultimately be weakened and would become susceptible to Soviet incursion and communist takeover. Not satisfied with merely lending his voice to this debate, Falwell
traveled to South Africa in August 1985. On his return to the United States, Falwell addressed the media concerning his trips. He told reporters that South African businesses were eager to work with American investors. He encouraged Americans to buy South Africa’s gold coins and to continue to do business with companies that supported the nation. None of these remarks would be remembered, however, in light of one of Falwell’s other statements. Speaking of Anglican Bishop Desmond Tutu, one of South Africa’s most prominent ministers and opponents of apartheid, Falwell remarked, “If Bishop Tutu maintains that he speaks for the black people of South Africa, he’s a phony.”

Falwell’s ill-considered remarks drew a torrent of criticism. Bishop Tutu, winner of the 1984 Nobel Peace Prize, was widely admired as an agent of reconciliation and social justice in South Africa. By labeling Tutu “a phony,” Falwell had given plenty of ammunition to his critics. The Reverend Jesse Jackson, prominent racial activist, protégé of Martin Luther King, Jr., and candidate for the Democratic Party’s presidential nomination in 1984, was an especially harsh critic of Falwell’s position on South Africa. “Anyone who would choose [P.W.] Botha over Tutu would choose Bull Connor over Martin Luther King, would choose Hitler over the Jews, would choose Herod over Jesus, and would choose Pharaoh over Moses,” Jackson remarked. New York City Mayor Ed Koch suggested that Falwell would “soon regret membership in the new moral minority.”

411 Ibid. P.W. Botha was State President of South Africa from 1984 to 1989.
Falwell had also demonstrated to some conservatives who might otherwise have supported his positions on foreign policy that he was out of touch with racial issues. Richard E. Sincere, Jr., assistant to the president of the Ethics and Public Policy Center and a conservative, also opposed sanctions against the South African government, but on the grounds that they might strengthen the right wing in South Africa, not because it would leave the nation vulnerable to the Soviet Union. “I think Jerry Falwell was acting without real knowledge, or with only a very superficial knowledge of what’s going on in South Africa,” Sincere noted in a *New York Times* article. “He did not talk to as wide a range of people as he could have.” In Sincere’s view, Falwell was only using South Africa for the sake of making “domestic political points.” The most stinging denunciation of Falwell’s controversial assertion came from President Reagan, who noted that it had been an unfortunate choice of words, even if Falwell was merely trying to say that Bishop Tutu did not speak for all the people of South Africa.

Falwell ultimately apologized for labeling Tutu “a phony,” arguing that he only meant that Tutu did not represent all of the black population of South Africa. “However,” Falwell remarked, “I totally disagree with his conclusion that the best way to help the oppressed nonwhites of South Africa is to starve them to death.” In speaking of Tutu’s character, Falwell noted, “I don’t believe he is a phony as a Christian or a servant of God. I think he is a good man.”

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412 Ibid.
414 Falwell was speaking here of Tutu’s support for economic sanctions against the South African government.
have been acceptable to some, including Ronald Reagan, the damage to his public image and credibility had been done. From both the left and the right, Falwell’s entry into the South African debate was seen as the effort of a man with little experience in or knowledge of the matters at hand.

One might have expected Falwell to give more careful thought to his involvement in foreign affairs in light of the South Africa debacle. In November 1985, however, Falwell traveled to the Philippines in another excursion that would prove a public relations disaster. Falwell visited the Philippines at a moment of great turmoil for the nation. President Ferdinand Marcos was widely seen as a corrupt leader, one who had played a role in the assassination of his foremost political competitor, Benigno Aquino, Jr., in August 1983. The popular Aquino’s brutal murder was captured on film and broadcast around the world. His body lay in state in an open casket with no cosmetic restructuring of his bullet-scarred face. Aquino became a martyr for the public cause of overthrowing Marcos. By the time that Falwell visited Marcos in November 1985, members of the Philippine legislature had already begun to gather support for an attempt at impeaching Marcos. Still, Falwell was undeterred. He had come to the Philippines to offer his support for Marcos. His reasoning was much the same as it had been in South Africa. Falwell feared that if Marcos fell, a communist insurgency might take over the nation and make it a Soviet ally. His fears were largely unsubstantiated. Though there was widespread domestic opposition to Marcos, the majority of the opposition belonged to the Catholic Church, as 85 percent of the Philippines’ residents were Catholics.  

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Marcos and his wife, Imelda, hosted Falwell at a dinner in the Malacanang Palace, the presidential estate of the Philippines. Falwell addressed the gathered guests with warm remarks about Marcos’s leadership. “I don’t think any fair person can deny the fact that had it not been for the Marcos family, the chances are that the freedoms you now enjoy would not be here,” Falwell remarked. The Philippines was a “paradise,” he confidently asserted.\(^\text{417}\) On returning to the United States, Falwell called on the United States to throw unwavering support behind the Philippine government. Marcos’s American critics needed to “stop belly-aching and get behind” their leader, Falwell argued. “I can’t believe that any congressman who has spent some time here could go back to the U.S. with an impression other than that this is a great land and a free country.”\(^\text{418}\)

Falwell was one of only a few Americans who held this belief. An editorial by Carl T. Rowan, published in The Pittsburgh Press shortly after the Philippine trip, suggested that Falwell had become a “peripatetic embarrassment.” “Rev. Falwell is possessed by a demonic notion that no regime, however evil, must be disavowed if there is even a remote chance that communists will then come to power,” Rowan wrote.\(^\text{419}\) Peggy Billings, chair of the United Methodist General Board of Ministries’ World Division, questioned Falwell’s activities. “Concerned Christians cannot help but wonder about Mr. Falwell’s habit of turning up where serious and glaring abuses occur,” Billings

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\(^{417}\) Ibid.

\(^{418}\) “Falwell Urges Aid to Marcos,” The Palm Beach Post, November 13, 1985, D14.

wrote, especially when one considered that Falwell was implicitly granting his approval to some of the worst human rights abusers in the world.\textsuperscript{420}

Falwell’s efforts in both South Africa and the Philippines ultimately proved fruitless. Ferdinand Marcos fell from power in February 1986, replaced in a free election by the widow of Benigno Aquino, Jr., Corazon Aquino. Marcos and his wife Imelda fled to Hawaii with President Reagan’s permission, where Marcos remained until his death in 1989. In the years after Marcos’s presidency ended, the level of his corruption became apparent. Marcos embezzled as much as $5 billion from the Philippine treasury in his time in office, funneling the money to private bank accounts in multiple locations outside the Philippines, including Switzerland. The most notorious example of Marcos’s material decadence, however, came in the form of Imelda Marcos’s shoe collection, which numbered approximately 1,220 pairs according to reports released after the Malacanang Palace was seized.\textsuperscript{421}

In addition, apartheid ended in 1994, after South African President F.W. de Klerk released anti-apartheid activist Nelson Mandela, who Cal Thomas had characterized as a “terrorist” and a “Marxist,” from prison. Between 1989 and 1994, de Klerk oversaw negotiations to end apartheid. As this process unfolded, the Berlin Wall fell, the Soviet Union dissolved, and the threat of worldwide communist revolution, to the extent that it had ever existed, abated. Nelson Mandela was elected South Africa’s President in 1994,

\textsuperscript{420} Winters, \textit{God’s Right Hand}, 289 – 90.
and the complicated process of reconciling the long-standing racial animosity by apartheid began.\footnote{Winters, \textit{God’s Right Hand}, 288.}

Despite these failures in public relations, Falwell appeared to be at the height of his power and influence in American religion and politics. With a headline reading “Thunder on the Right: The Growth of Fundamentalism,” Falwell appeared on the cover of \textit{Time} magazine on September 2, 1985. Falwell’s South Africa trip may have drawn much criticism, the article suggested, but what ultimately mattered was the level of Falwell’s reach. Falwell spoke to the media on his return from South Africa, but he did not have to do so in order to get his message out; he had become the leader of an evangelical media empire. Falwell and his contemporaries had made themselves prominent cultural authorities, particularly to the approximately 13 million Americans who tuned in to conservative evangelical television programs every week. Dallas Theological Seminary professor Norman Geisler predicted that the power and influence of the Christian Right would only continue to grow in the years after 1985. “As soon as the Evangelicals and Fundamentalists learn how the system works, and they are learning now,” Geisler argued, “They will be a very, very powerful force--if they maintain their coalition.”\footnote{“Jerry Falwell’s Crusade: Fundamentalist Legions Seek to Remake Church and Society,” \textit{Time}, September 2, 1985, 48 – 58.}

\textbf{PTL}

Ultimately, the \textit{Time} article represented the apex of Falwell’s power and influence. Certainly, his misadventures abroad had something to do with the decline of his image. Falwell suffered the most, however, from the fallout of a scandal that
involved Jim Bakker. Bakker and his wife Tammy Faye operated an evangelical media ministry of their own in Charlotte, North Carolina. The Bakkers began their venture into televangelism in the late 1960s, working alongside Pat Robertson on *The 700 Club*. Their popularity as on-air personalities led to the development of the Bakkers’ own program, *The Jim and Tammy Show*, and later to the creation of *The PTL Club*, the Bakkers’ nationwide television program, in 1974. PTL stood for both “Praise the Lord” and “People that Love.” Like Pat Robertson, the Bakkers also discussed important public issues on their show, entertained guests, and prayed for the requests of viewers. The Bakkers departed from Robertson in other ways. Jim and Tammy Faye developed a distinctive approach to television ministry built on the foundation of prosperity theology, the idea that through faithfulness to God, Christians could be blessed with material prosperity. The Bakkers’ show featured lavish set pieces. Tammy Faye Bakker wore layers of garish makeup.\(^{424}\)

The Bakkers’ overt materialism defined their style and ultimately helped lead to their downfall. In March 1987, Jim Bakker resigned as head of the PTL ministry as a result of revelations about his private sexual dalliances. Twenty-seven year old Jessica Hahn charged that in 1980, Bakker had drugged and raped her while she was serving as a church secretary. Bakker disputed these charges, claiming that he had been manipulated into a sexual encounter with Hahn for purposes of blackmail. At the same time, Tammy Faye Bakker confessed on the air to suffering from drug dependency. She sought treatment at a clinic in Palm Springs, California. As both the Bakkers tried to repair their

personal lives, they called on Jerry Falwell to salvage their professional lives. Falwell stepped in as the chair of the PTL Ministries, charged with preventing the collapse of the Bakkers’ ministry.\(^{425}\)

Falwell faced an insurmountable challenge. In June 1987, three federal agencies – the IRS, the Postal Service, and the Justice Department – opened inquiries into the PTL Ministry’s financial accounting practices.\(^{426}\) Investigators examined Jim Bakker’s fundraising efforts, looking for evidence of fraud. The government found an ally in *The Charlotte Observer*. In a series of reports that would eventually net the paper a Pulitzer Prize, the *Observer* helped to uncover a web of fraud at PTL. In 1978, the Bakkers had opened a Christian theme park, Heritage USA, in South Carolina. Bakker sold thousands of “lifetime memberships” to the park that promised buyers a three-night stay every year at the park’s hotel in exchange for a $1,000 one-time fee. Heritage USA’s hotel facilities could not accommodate all the memberships that Bakker sold. An even more damning revelation, however, was that one of Bakker’s associates had arranged a payment of $265,000 to Jessica Hahn in an attempt to buy her silence. That money, plus the $3.4 million in bonus money Bakker had kept for himself, came out of the money raised by the Heritage USA memberships. Jim Bakker was later indicted, convicted of multiple fraud charges, and sent to federal prison.\(^{427}\)

As the scandal unfolded, Jerry Falwell worked to save the embattled PTL organization. He did so against public opposition from the Bakkers. In appearances on

\(^{425}\) Ibid, Martin, *With God on Our Side*, 275 – 76.


television talk shows, Jim Bakker charged that Falwell had manipulated him to gain control of the PTL Network. In Bakker’s view, Falwell had only been asked to manage PTL until the Bakkers could return as heads of the organization. A public feud between Falwell and the Bakkers commenced. Falwell publicly accused Bakker of being mentally ill and engaging in homosexual acts. In addition, Falwell lambasted Tammy Faye Bakker for demanding hundreds of thousands of dollars in retirement money from PTL, royalty payments from PTL books, a mansion, and two cars that the Bakkers had owned while at the helm of PTL.428

Ultimately, PTL’s fiscal calamities, particularly its $68 million debt, were too much to overcome. In October 1987, exasperated by the scandal’s impact on his public image, Jerry Falwell gave up on his attempt to save PTL. He did not go out, however, without one final, memorable attempt to raise enough money to pay off PTL’s debts. In September 1987, as part of a PTL fundraising drive, Falwell pledged to plunge down the “Killer Typhoon” water slide at Heritage USA if 1,000 donors donated $1,000 each by Labor Day. Having raised over $20 million in the summer of 1987, Falwell took a ride down the 53-foot water slide while wearing a complete suit. The publicity stunt received widespread coverage, and a picture of Falwell in the midst of his slide, with his arms folded over his chest as if lying in a casket, came to define both the failure of Falwell to save PTL and the circus-like nature of much of the PTL scandal.429

428 Bruce, The Rise and Fall of the New Christian Right, 142 – 44.
Scandals involving televangelists were not limited to the Bakkers and PTL. In January 1987, Oral Roberts told viewers that he had received a message from God. Unless he raised $4.5 million in funds for medical missionaries by March 31, Roberts reported, God was going to “call [him] home.” The widely derided pronouncement ultimately helped Roberts to raise the money. A 79-year old owner of dog tracks in Florida contributed $1.3 million to Roberts in late March.430 In late February 1988, televangelist Jimmy Swaggart, who had labeled Jim Bakker a “cancer on the Body of Christ” the previous year, tearfully confessed on his own program to committing sins against God. Though not offering specifics as to the nature of his sins, Swaggart took leave from the pulpit. It was later revealed that Swaggart had been photographed while meeting with prostitutes at a motel.431

Exasperated by the toll of his struggle to save PTL, Jerry Falwell stepped down as head of the Moral Majority in November 1987. “I am now rededicating my life to the preaching of the Gospel,” Falwell told reporters at a news conference in Washington, D.C. Falwell pledged to stay away from the political activities of the Religious Right, including working on behalf of specific candidates, though Falwell noted that he favored Vice President George Bush in the 1988 Presidential election. “Eight years is a long time,” Falwell noted. “There’s no need now for Jerry Falwell to walk point and be the lightning rod. Sometimes you get tired of being the lightning rod.”432

The Search for Peace

Billy Graham also knew what it was like to be a lightning rod. The criticism Graham had drawn for his 1982 remarks about religious freedom in the Soviet Union undoubtedly weighed on the evangelist’s mind as he prepared to travel behind the Iron Curtain for a second time in September 1984. Nonetheless, Graham did not shy away from repeating similar remarks during his second preaching tour of the Soviet Union. “Many churches [in the Soviet Union] are open and active…as long as they abide by the Government’s requirements,” Graham noted in a New York Times article about his Soviet tour. “At the same time, the Soviet Union does not allow churches to be a rallying point for what it considers anti-Soviet activities.” When asked if he feared being used by the Soviet government as a tool of propaganda, Graham mused, “I think it’s worth taking a risk for peace in the world, worth taking a risk to preach the Gospel.”

From September 9 – 21, 1984, Graham traveled across the Soviet Union preaching the Gospel and discussing peace. In what Graham would later remark were the “most unforgettable and fascinating” days of his ministry, he appeared in Leningrad, Tallinn, Novosibirsk, and Moscow. Because he could not preach in a large, public venue, as he was accustomed to doing, the number of those who could hear Graham’s sermons was limited. Still, the crowds were sizeable, especially given the limitations Graham faced. Two thousand people packed Leningrad’s Baptist hall to hear Graham’s message. In Moscow’s Russian Orthodox Church of the Resurrection, congregants wept openly at Graham’s words, even as KGB agents stood watch in the church’s

aisles. In Estonia, Graham spoke of the need for the people of the world’s superpowers to work together. “I know the Soviet government is officially atheist, but we live on the same planet...those of us who believe must live in peace with you who do not believe...I believe in my heart we can come together,” Graham told the approximately 300 worshippers at the Cathedral of Alexander Nevsky. Another 4,500 people heard Graham preach in one of Tallinn’s Baptist churches. Graham disavowed any political motives in his preaching. He had come “primarily as an ambassador of the Lord Jesus Christ,” in his own words, and it was not his “purpose to become involved in political issues.” Nonetheless, when asked if he agreed with Ronald Reagan’s assessment that the Soviet Union was “the focus of evil in the modern world,” Graham replied that evil was a product of the devil, not of any country or political system.

While in Moscow, Graham met with Boris Ponomarev, Chief of the International Affairs Department for the Central Committee of the Communist Party and a member of the Politburo. In a cordial conversation, Graham related to Ponomarev that he wanted to “make some contribution to the search for peace in our world.” Graham emphasized many of the same points he had made while preaching to crowds across the nation. “We must learn to coexist, and even be friends,” Graham argued. Most important, Graham emphasized the need for greater religious freedom within the Soviet system. The differences between religious freedom in the United States and religious freedom in the Soviet Union represented a “deep gulf” between the two nations, Graham told

437 Martin, A Prophet with Honor, 522.
Ponomarev. It was one of the major reasons that the American public did not support closer ties with the Soviet Union. In leaving the conversation with Graham, Ponomarev only remarked, “We will discuss this among ourselves.”

In his travels to the Soviet Union, Graham sought to bridge the social and cultural gap between Americans and the Soviets, to demonstrate that a prominent American evangelist could come preaching not only salvation, but also peace. In making this gesture toward the Soviet people, Graham emphasized the common interest that both the Americans and the Soviets had in achieving a more conciliatory relationship between their nations.

Graham’s work as an ambassador of peace to the Soviet Union and Eastern Europe continued between 1985 and 1988. By the time Graham traveled to Romania in September 1985, Mikhail Gorbachev was the new General Secretary of the Communist Party. “I think Gorbachev and Reagan are going to feel world pressure like no one has felt before,” Graham remarked in an interview regarding his Romanian visit. “In the atomic age, we have to live with these people.” Graham noted that he sensed “a tremendous spiritual hunger among the young people in Eastern Europe.” Indeed, Graham’s appearances in Romania were the largest religious events in the nation’s history. Over 150,000 people heard Graham preach, and hundreds of thousands more clamored for spots where Graham’s words were audible. After leaving Romania, Graham went to Hungary. In Pecs, twenty thousand gathered outside a Roman Catholic Church and watched Graham preach on a large screen, the first outdoor public religious

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meeting that the country had seen in the postwar era. In Budapest, Graham preached to

In June 1988, the Russian Orthodox Church celebrated the 1,000th year of
Christianity in Russia. Officials of the Russian Orthodox Church invited Billy Graham to
attend the anniversary celebration. Graham commenced a third preaching tour inside the
Soviet Union during his 1988 visit, speaking in Moscow, Zagorsk, and Kiev.\footnote{Billy Graham Crusade Statistics, Accessed January 14, 2013, 
http://www.billygraham.org/assets/media/pdfs/festivals/BGCrusadeChronology.pdf.}

Graham’s visit to the Soviet Union was overshadowed, however, by Ronald Reagan’s
journey to Moscow the previous month. Reagan’s Moscow visit was significant for its
symbolism and its substance. The President of the “evil empire” speech declared that
those words had represented “another time” and “another era” as he answered reporters’
questions while standing on the grounds of the Kremlin. On May 31, 1988, Reagan
spoke to students at Moscow State University. Standing beneath a giant bust of Lenin,
Reagan praised “freedom of thought, freedom of information,” and “freedom of
communication” as the keys to economic progress. Moreover, Reagan extolled the
virtues of religious freedom, describing the “dozens of churches, representing many
different beliefs” that dotted the landscape of “any American town.” In addition to
speaking openly about religious freedom, the President met with ninety-six Soviet
dissidents during his stay. Reagan also went to the Danilov Monastery, an Orthodox
monastery in Moscow, where he spoke to religious leaders. “We in our country share
this hope for a new age of religious freedom in the Soviet Union,” the President declared.
American churches felt a “special kinship” with “fellow believers” in the Soviet Union—“Protestant, Catholic, Jewish, Orthodox, and Islamic,” he noted. “Our people feel it keenly when religious freedom is denied to anyone anywhere,” Reagan told the religious leaders, “and hope with you that soon all the many Soviet religious communities that are now prevented from registering, or are banned altogether…will soon be able to practice their religion freely and openly and instruct their children in and outside the home in the fundamentals of their faith.”

Ronald Reagan and Billy Graham traveled similar paths in their relationship to the Soviet Union. Both men built reputations by talking tough against communism. Both never wavered in their belief that communism represented a dark blight on the human condition. Yet both eventually came to separate the Soviet people from the political ideology that governed their state. Both Reagan and Graham rode a careful middle path in relating to the Soviets, appealing to the plight of Soviet dissidents while simultaneously courting the cooperation of the government officials who were responsible for oppressing them. Both men’s willingness to emphasize the common human interests of American and Soviet citizens – and to couch their appeals to Soviet leaders in terms of peace – helped to build the diplomatic bridges necessary to establish a better relationship between the two superpowers.

Pat for President

In the latter stages of Reagan’s presidency, the Soviet presence in Afghanistan continued to be a point of contention for the Religious Right. In the August 1987 issue of
the *Liberty Report*, Michael Johns argued that the Afghanistan occupation demonstrated that the Soviets of 1987 still operated under the Stalinist impulse of world domination. Johns praised the mujahideen, the “brave fighters” of the Afghan resistance who had kept fighting the Soviets “against seemingly insurmountable odds.” These Muslim opponents of the Soviets were also “freedom fighters” who had benefited from American willingness to fund their efforts at defeating the Soviets. Ultimately, however, the Afghanistan experience would come to be known as the Soviets’ Vietnam. The Soviet occupation there demonstrated the limits of Soviet imperial ambitions rather than the dangers of Soviet power. Recognizing the perils of a continued Soviet presence in Afghanistan, Mikhail Gorbachev announced his intent to withdraw Soviet troops from Afghanistan in February 1988. The withdrawal began shortly before Reagan’s visit to Moscow that May and continued into early 1989.

The *Report* also continued to question Mikhail Gorbachev’s true intentions in reforming the Soviet government. In the April 1988 article “Perestroika: Is This Mikhail Gorbachev’s Voice of Reason, or His Voice of Treason?” Stephen Witham noted that Gorbachev faced a dilemma in his quest to reform the Soviet economy. In admitting the financial peril the nation faced, Witham argued, Gorbachev risked the possibility of suggesting that Marxist-Leninist principles had failed to produce the utopian society envisioned by Lenin. Yet according to Witham, Gorbachev had no plans to abandon socialism. “Perhaps the most important revelation made [in Gorbachev’s book

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"Perestroika],” Witham wrote, “is the fact that Mikhail Gorbachev is still firmly committed to Marxist principles.” Americans still had many reasons to be suspicious of Gorbachev’s intentions, according to Witham’s analysis.445

Americans did not agree. A July 1987 Gallup poll revealed that 54 percent of Americans held a favorable view of Gorbachev.446 In 1988, Gorbachev was one of the three most admired men among Americans, according to Gallup, the first Soviet leader ever to appear on such a list. Gorbachev made the list of most admired men once again in 1989, and became Time magazine’s “Man of the Decade” in January 1990.447 Americans no longer feared the Soviet military menace as they once had. In 1987, a Gallup poll revealed that 76 percent of respondents believed that chances for peace between the two superpowers had greatly improved.448

These statistics contrasted sharply with Americans’ views of the Religious Right. A Gallup poll published in July 1987 found that 62 percent of Americans held an unfavorable opinion of Jerry Falwell. Oral Roberts fared worse, with 72 percent holding an unfavorable opinion of him. Perhaps predictably, Jim Bakker registered a 77 percent unfavorable rating, and 56 percent of those surveyed held an unfavorable view of Jimmy Swaggart, seven months before Swaggart’s televised confession of his sins.449 Other Gallup polls taken in 1987 showed that 63 percent of those surveyed believed that

445 Stephen Witham, “Perestroika: Is This Mikhail Gorbachev’s Voice of Reason, or His Voice of Treason?” Liberty Report, April 1988, 8.
televangelists were “untrustworthy,” while only 23 percent stated that they believed televangelists were “trustworthy.”

One televangelist emerged from the scandals of 1987 largely unscathed. Pat Robertson, who had never considered himself a televangelist, spent much of 1987 preparing for the next chapter in his political life. In September 1986, Robertson held a press conference in Washington, D.C.’s Constitution Hall. Standing in front of a large, cheering crowd, Robertson declared, “If, by September 17, 1987…three million registered voters have signed petitions telling me that they will pray – that they will work – that they will give toward my election, then I will run as a candidate for the nomination of the Republican Party for the office of President of the United States of America.”

Robertson’s candidacy was no joke. By September 1987, the host of *The 700 Club* had collected three million signatures. At another rally in Virginia Beach, Virginia, Robertson formally announced his intention to seek the Republican nomination for President. That same month, Robertson achieved a surprising victory. The Iowa straw poll, an informal vote conducted months before the Iowa caucus, swung decisively in Robertson’s favor. The “invisible army” of Robertson supporters, as Vice President George Bush’s chief strategist Lee Atwater called them, turned out in droves to support their candidate. Robertson won 1,293 votes to Senator Robert Dole’s 958 votes and Vice President George Bush’s 846 votes. The straw poll may have been a largely inconsequential affair – supporters had to pay $25 to vote – but it did demonstrate that Robertson’s campaign had organizational prowess. It also suggested that though many

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prominent figures in the Religious Right had lost credibility, conservative evangelicals were still a force to be reckoned with in 1988. When the actual Iowa caucus was held in January 1988, Pat Robertson finished second, behind Dole but ahead of the Republican front-runner Bush, whose campaign was frustrated in the early stages by Robertson’s attempts at playing spoilsport.452

Robertson’s lack of concrete policy experience and his proclivity for making bold pronouncements based on his faith proved a political liability. In one notable instance, during a February 14, 1988 debate in New Hampshire, Robertson claimed that some Soviet missiles placed in Cuba during the Cuban Missile Crisis were still there. His source for this claim was a former aide to North Carolina Senator Jesse Helms, who had told Robertson that Cuban refugees on the island had hidden the missiles in caves. The White House and the Pentagon acted quickly to dispel these accusations, which proved damaging to Robertson’s foreign policy credibility.453 Robertson’s credibility took another hit late in February 1988, when he claimed that the Christian Broadcasting Network had been aware of the location of American hostages being held in Lebanon “at one time,” and that the hostages “could have been rescued.” Again, the White House, in this case President Reagan himself, quickly disputed Robertson’s claims. “If he thought he knew” of the hostages’ locations, Reagan remarked, “he kept it to himself.”454

The second place finish in Iowa proved to be the high point of Robertson’s presidential campaign. Robertson floundered in New Hampshire and proved no match

452 Ibid, 134 – 35.
453 Ibid, 152.
for Vice President George Bush once the primary season reached Super Tuesday. While Robertson’s campaign ended, his drive to organize evangelicals did not. In 1989, Billy McCormack, a Louisiana pastor and the state’s director for Americans for Robertson approached Pat Robertson with an idea. McCormack proposed that Robertson use the mailing lists he had compiled from his presidential bid to organize a new evangelical political group in the vein of the Moral Majority. Robertson pondered the idea. Then, while attending George Bush’s inaugural dinner in 1989, Robertson met Ralph Reed, a twenty-seven year old conservative activist with a Ph.D. in American history from Emory University. Reed confronted Robertson and outlined what he felt were the failings of Robertson’s campaign. Impressed with Reed’s political acumen, Robertson decided to appoint Reed as the head of his new group, called the Christian Coalition. Reed took the helm of the Coalition in September 1989. Over the next three years, he helped to bring the new organization from 2,000 members in the fall of 1989 to 250,000 members by the next presidential election year in 1992. The group created separate coalitions operating out of each state and obtained, at least temporarily, tax-exempt status from the IRS.455

The Christian Coalition filled a void created by the demise of the Moral Majority. In June 1989, Jerry Falwell announced that the Moral Majority was shutting down. In announcing this decision, Falwell argued that the mission of the Moral Majority – to “train, mobilize, and electrify the Religious Right” – had been accomplished. Given the aura of scandal that surrounded evangelicals in the late 1980s, however, the demise of the Moral Majority seemed much more a sign of failure than success.456

455 Marley, Pat Robertson, 204 – 6.
Ralph Reed and his associates sought to be many things that the Moral Majority had not been. The delegation of authority to state chapters meant that while the Christian Coalition had a director and a central office, Reed did not dictate strict orders to the local arms of the Coalition. More important, the Christian Coalition shed the idea that politically organized evangelicals represented a majority of Americans. The Christian Coalition was not created to be a “Moral Majority” imposing its beliefs on the minority through force. Instead, the Christian Coalition would appeal to grassroots evangelical populism, cultivating the idea that evangelicals were a minority persecuted by powerful liberal elites. Evangelicals needed to take control of America at the polls. The Coalition distributed voter scorecards that illuminated how politicians had voted on various issues. Christians were urged to support politicians who had voted in line with what the Coalition saw as Christian beliefs.  

New Enemies, Old Enemies

The Christian Coalition differed from the Moral Majority in one other important aspect: it did not concern itself with foreign affairs. The decline in tensions between the United States and the Soviet Union left conservative evangelicals without an obvious villain to oppose. The remarkable events that unfolded between 1989 and 1991 continued to demonstrate that the Cold War was over. In November 1989, the Berlin Wall fell. The next year, Americans were drawn into a conflict in the Middle East after Saddam Hussein’s forces invaded the tiny nation of Kuwait, seizing Kuwait’s oil fields. Both the United States and the Soviet Union condemned the invasion. In January 1991, having exhausted diplomatic options in negotiations with Iraq, the United States led

457 Ibid, 206 – 7; Harrell, Jr., Pat Robertson, 125 – 34.
coalition forces from Great Britain, France, a reunited Germany and a number of other nations in a war to push Iraq out of Kuwait. Though the Soviets had not been a part of the formal coalition against Iraq, Gorbachev tried to broker a peace agreement that would have prevented the war. Iraq, which had been a consistent ally of the Soviet Union throughout the Cold War, could no longer rely on the Soviets as a counterweight against the United States. The Gulf War demonstrated both that the United States and the Soviet Union could stand on the same side of a geopolitical crisis and that Soviet power had dramatically declined in international affairs.  

Evangelicals on the left and right rejoiced at these changes in world affairs. Billy Graham traveled to Berlin in March 1990, where he preached at the Brandenburg Gate. Pat Robertson also traveled to Berlin, where he interviewed Graham for The 700 Club. Like most evangelicals, Robertson and Graham remained less concerned with celebrating the wall’s demise than with the new evangelistic opportunities that had been created. “Now is the time for the Christians in America…to pray and to work because we might not have much time to take advantage of this incredible opportunity,” Robertson remarked as he closed his interview with Graham. Oregon Senator Mark Hatfield joined President Bush in suggesting that the United States should move beyond the containment of the Cold War toward a more optimistic policy of “global reconciliation” between the Soviets and the United States. In the pages of Christianity Today, Hatfield argued that

458 Patterson, Restless Giant, 228 - 38; Graham E. Fuller, “Moscow and the Gulf War,” Foreign Affairs, Summer 1991, 55.
the American military should aim to take the “confrontational tools of our foreign policy” and turn them into instruments of peace by finding “humanitarian roles” for military groups like the Green Berets. At the same time, Hatfield suggested that Americans should not join those who were celebrating “the triumph of Western values over communism and arrogantly declaring the "end of history,"” a phrase that Francis Fukuyama would later make famous with his 1992 book *The End of History and the Last Man*.461 On one point, at least, Robertson, Graham, and Hatfield agreed: evangelicals should see the fall of the Berlin Wall as the beginning of a new era of opportunity to change the world.

George Bush acknowledged this new state of affairs in his 1991 State of the Union address. What was at stake in the Gulf War, Bush remarked, was “more than one small country.” It was “a big idea – a new world order, where diverse nations are drawn together in common cause to achieve the universal aspirations of mankind: peace and security, freedom, and the rule of law.”462 Pat Robertson used Bush’s words in the title of his 1991 book *The New World Order*. In the book, Robertson explained how changes in world affairs would usher in a new set of threats to global security. The new world order, in Robertson’s view, would bring about the last days before the Second Coming of Christ. As Robertson argued, the extensive coalition of nations working together against Iraq demonstrated that it was possible to create a one-world government that would

supersede American sovereignty. Robertson further noted that the growth in power of the European Union, the supranational organization of European states, would eventually create a United States of Europe that would serve as a counterbalance against the power of the United States. The creation of a one-world government would lead to the coming of the Antichrist, the one-world ruler in the Biblical book of Revelation.\textsuperscript{463}

Even as Robertson’s book went to press, events in the Soviet Union altered his perceptions of world affairs. In August 1991, a group of hardline Soviet communists attempted to take control of the nation’s government in a coup. The coup ultimately failed, but helped to weaken Mikhail Gorbachev’s control over the unity of the Soviet state. As Pat Robertson saw it, the coup had been orchestrated in an attempt to demonstrate to the Western world that democracy had triumphed in the Soviet Union, thus encouraging anti-Soviet Cold War nations to let down their guard. This, in turn, would encourage them to pump money into the democratized Soviet Union. All of this, in Robertson’s view, would lay the groundwork for the coming of the new world order, as it would make Soviet socialists more acceptable to Americans and leaders in the United Nations. In Robertson’s view, the world was being duped into thinking the Soviets had reformed.\textsuperscript{464}

Robertson’s book went to press before December 1991, when the Soviet Union formally dissolved as Mikhail Gorbachev stepped down from power. When the paperback edition of \textit{The New World Order} was published in 1992, the publisher noted, in a new preface, that the collapse of the Soviet Union had made the book’s arguments

\textsuperscript{464} Ibid, xiii – xvii.
more relevant than ever. The United Nations was now the vehicle through which the one world order would come. As the U.N. sent its peacekeeping forces to Yugoslavia and other areas of the world in 1992, this new edition suggested, it was foreshadowing the creation of an “elite central government that exercises supervision and control by means of its massive army of so-called peacekeeping forces.”

Robertson’s New World Order was emblematic of the Religious Right’s attempts to create a new framework for thinking about foreign affairs after the end of the Cold War. Not surprisingly, Robertson and others returned to a familiar theme to explain the monumental events taking place in the world between 1989 and 1991. The premillennial dispensationalist message that appealed to fundamentalists at the turn of the twentieth century still held sway at the end of the century. In 1994, over a quarter century after the publication of The Late Great Planet Earth, Hal Lindsey published Planet Earth 2000 A.D.: Will Mankind Survive? In this new book, Lindsey argued that the events of the past quarter century had only proven his predictions from The Late, Great Planet Earth to be true. While some readers might have pointed to Lindsey’s predictions about the Soviet Union’s role in the coming of Armageddon as evidence that Lindsey had been off the mark in his original predictions, others might have noted Lindsey’s work as evidence of the continuing appeal of Bible prophecy populism in American culture. Just as he had in 1973, Lindsey predicted that the Second Coming of Christ would happen very soon, perhaps around the beginning of the new millennium. Like Pat Robertson, Lindsey

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believed that American power would decline in the twenty-first century as unfolding events brought about a one-world government and the rise of the Antichrist.\(^{466}\)

Evangelicals remained interested in Bible prophecy. *The New World Order* reached the number four spot on the *New York Times* bestseller list.\(^{467}\) Nonetheless, it was much harder to connect world events in the 1990s to any of the comprehensive interpretations that authors like Robertson and Lindsey offered to their readers. Concerns about the rise of a one-world government were much closer to conspiracy theories than thoughtful analysis of world events. Though *The New World Order* was popular, its actual impact on American policymakers was minimal. The days when the Religious Right could echo the words of the President in decrying the impulses of an “evil empire” were no more.

If evangelicals missed the Cold War, they were in good company. “Gosh, I miss the Cold War,” President Bill Clinton mused in an October 17, 1993 article in *The Washington Post*. Clinton’s words came at a moment of frustration in American foreign policy. Earlier that month, eighteen Americans had been killed in a failed military operation in Mogadishu, Somalia. This shocking military failure not only flustered American policymakers, it also portended a frightening possibility, that the same nation that had emerged victorious from the Cold War might still be unable to exert its will


abroad. Books like *The New World Order* at least offered the solace of an explanation for the harrowing possibilities facing Americans in the post-Cold War era.

The end of the Cold War turned the Religious Right inward, as it did much of the rest of American society. In his 1992 address to the Republican National Convention, Pat Robertson blamed Democrats for creating a “more benign but equally insidious plague” than communism “that [had] fastened itself upon the families of America.” That plague was the liberal welfare state. “When Bill Clinton talks about family values,” Robertson charged, “I don’t believe he’s talking about either families or values. He is talking about a radical plan to destroy the traditional family and transfer many of its functions to the federal government.” Robertson may have identified the welfare state as America’s great enemy in the 1990s, but for many conservative evangelicals, the enemy was Bill Clinton himself. Clinton and his wife Hillary came to represent the persistent, growing secularism of American society in the eyes of the Religious Right. At the same convention where Robertson delivered his fiery attack on Clinton, Pat Buchanan spoke of a “cultural war” taking place in American society, “a religious war going on in our country for the soul of America.” These culture wars gave new energy to the Religious Right. The post-Cold War activism of conservative evangelicals was tempered, though, by the experience of the Moral Majority. The new evangelical activists were not a majority seeking to impose their will on American society. Instead, the Religious Right of the 1990s saw itself as embattled and persecuted by liberal elites. The Christian

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Coalition and its supporters sought to reverse a half-century of liberal victories in domestic policy.\(^{470}\)

This was an uphill battle, a reality that was not lost on Ralph Reed. In an essay published in the summer 1993 issue of *Policy Review*, Reed pointed to polls that showed only 12 percent of voters had indicated that abortion was a deciding factor in the way that they voted in the 1992 election. Only 16 percent had reported that family values were an important factor in their vote. If evangelicals wanted to win electoral victories in the future, Reed wrote, they would have to appeal to voters’ concerns about bigger issues like taxes, crime, and the safety of American schools. “The key to success for the pro-family movement is to discuss a broader issues agenda in the language of the target-audience – churchgoers and families with children,” Reed noted. “In doing so, a social movement until now composed largely of white evangelicals can win natural allies among Catholics and racial minorities.”\(^{471}\)

Reed’s “wider net” message was a hard sell. Some prominent supporters of the Religious Right were offended by the idea that abortion should be de-emphasized in evangelicals’ activism. North Carolina Senator Jesse Helms, a darling of religious conservatives, wrote an angry letter to Pat Robertson in response to Reed’s remarks, telling Robertson that if Ralph Reed were “going to be in charge of Christianizing the Republican Party he can count me out.” Helms concluded, “If he wants to try to

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secularize the Republican Party, that’s his business – but he ought to leave the word Christian out of his sales pitch.”

When the Christian Coalition was credited with helping Republicans win a majority in the House of Representatives in the 1994 midterm elections, Reed tried to position his group to work with the new Congress. While the Congress sought to implement its “Contract with America,” a series of proposals that provided details of how Congress would act on a conservative agenda, the Christian Coalition unveiled its “Contract with the American Family.” The Coalition’s “Contract” included a number of proposals aimed at securing legislative victories that evangelicals had sought since the Reagan years. The contract included an appeal for a Religious Equality Act that legalized the organization of prayer in public places. In the spirit of Reed’s “wider net” approach, the contract also proposed a tax credit for families earning less than $200,000 a year. Yet the Coalition found itself shunned by members of Congress who were usually supportive. Senator Rick Santorum of Pennsylvania, a fervid social conservative, argued that Americans were more concerned about the budget than about the social issues raised by the Coalition’s Contract. Gary Bauer, president of the Family Research Council, a conservative evangelical organization, stated his belief that there was “nothing new” in the Contract, and as a result it would probably fail to win much support in Congress.

Mainstream media outlets were more receptive to Reed’s new message. Reed appeared on the cover of the May 15, 1995 issue of Time magazine with a headline reading “The Right Hand of God.” The 33-year old Reed was “on a crusade to take over

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472 Harrell, Jr., Pat Robertson, 146.
473 Marely, Pat Robertson, 224.
U.S. politics,” the front page read, and it was a crusade that was working. Ultimately, Gary Bauer was right. The Coalition’s efforts in the new Republican Congress proved fruitless, and when Bill Clinton was re-elected in 1996, the Coalition faded into obscurity. Ralph Reed left his job at the helm of the group, and donations fell precipitously. In 1996, the Coalition received $26 million in contributions. In 2000, the group received only $3 million, even as evangelicals grew energized by the presidential candidacy of Texas Governor George W. Bush.

As the Christian Coalition fought the new domestic villains of the Religious Right, Billy Graham embraced the old ones. At age 72, Graham returned to the Soviet Union for a fourth time in July 1991. The government of Mikhail Gorbachev had continued to loosen restrictions on the exercise of religion in the three years since Graham’s last visit to the country. In this final visit before the collapse of the Soviet Union, Graham led an evangelism training conference sponsored by the Billy Graham Evangelistic Association. Nearly 5,000 Protestant pastors from the Soviet Union attended the conference, held inside a state-owned sports arena. During his five-day stay in Moscow, Graham met with Russian president Boris Yeltsin and then with Mikhail Gorbachev in Gorbachev’s office, an event covered widely on Soviet news programs.

When Graham returned to Moscow in 1992, the Soviet Union was no more. In October of that year, Graham spoke to a capacity crowd at Moscow’s Olympic Stadium. Over the course of three days, approximately 155,000 people attended Graham’s Moscow

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475 Marley, Pat Robertson, 230 – 34, 247.
476 Graham, Just As I Am, 550 – 53; Martin, A Prophet with Honor, 529.
crusade, labeled Renewal 92. The event featured the typical fare for a Billy Graham crusade: special singing followed by Graham’s preaching followed by an invitation to come to Christ. In this case, the music was as notable as the message. On Saturday, October 24, the Russian Army Chorus performed at the crusade, singing not only a number of Russian songs, but also the “Battle Hymn of the Republic.” The Chorus, which had been known primarily for Soviet propaganda during the Cold War, now sang the lyrics that included the phrase “our God is marching on” before a crowd of thousands at the Olympic Stadium, the same stadium built for an Olympics that were boycotted by the United States a little over a decade before the 1992 crusade.  

In reflecting on the remarkable nature of these events, journalist David Aikman wrote that the 1992 Graham crusade provided a “fitting epitaph” for the Cold War. Whether one agrees with Aikman’s assessment or not, Graham’s appearance in Moscow’s Olympic Stadium was certainly emblematic of the new world order that emerged in the last decade of the twentieth century. It was also, in many respects, an implicit commentary on the role that religion played in the Cold War. While religion often shaped American attitudes toward the Soviet Union, the Cold War was also an age of increasing religious pluralism rather than uniformity. The Religious Right that emerged from this pluralism characterized itself as a moral majority, but cast a net too small to bring a plurality of Americans into the fold. As historian Henry Steele Commager observed at a Conference on Church and State at Baylor University in 1982, the Religious Right involved “themselves not with public sin but with private vice, or

477 Graham, Just As I Am, 553 – 56; David Aikman, Billy Graham: His Life and Influence (Nashville, Thomas Nelson, 2007), 175.
478 Aikman, Billy Graham, 175.
what they conclude is vice – especially the sins of the flesh and of infidelity, which they interpret by their own standards.” At the same time, Commager remarked, the Religious Right had “very little if anything to say about the kind of world children will be born into or anything about the rightful inheritance of natural resources.” \(^{479}\) When televangelists’ own private vices became front-page news, their credibility vanished. In diplomacy, Jerry Falwell’s adventures in South Africa and the Philippines demonstrated a lack of recognition and concern for human rights abuses in those countries. Thus, even as the Religious Right might have been vindicated by the collapse of Soviet communism, it was nonetheless betrayed by their insistence that the Soviet Union was a strong military power still lead by communists bent on world domination. In condemning the sins of the Soviets, the Religious Right became poor diplomats. In embracing the Soviets in spite of their sins, Billy Graham became an unofficial agent of American diplomacy who separated himself from many of his contemporaries in the Religious Right. The message of judgment proved weak where the message of peace was not.

CONCLUSION

On May 15, 2007, Jerry Falwell died suddenly of a heart attack while working in his office at Liberty University. In the weeks that followed Falwell’s passing, commentators reflected on the late evangelist’s legacy and the larger legacy of the Religious Right. One assessment of Falwell’s political life came from Reagan biographer Lou Cannon. “Jerry Falwell…would no doubt be pleased that so many obituaries gave him credit for putting Ronald Reagan in the White House. Mr. Falwell encouraged this view of his influence, as well as the related notion that he and Mr. Reagan were cut from the same conservative cloth,” Cannon wrote. However, Cannon also argued, “The record does not support either claim.” As noted in chapter three, there is little evidence to suggest that the 1980 election represented an uprising of conservative evangelicals who swept Reagan into office. To the contrary, as Cannon pointed out, Ronald Reagan’s overwhelming victory in 1980 can be attributed to Americans’ belief that Reagan’s agenda of tax cuts and increased defense spending would provide an effective antidote to Jimmy Carter’s lackluster leadership. If many evangelicals voted for Reagan, so did many atheists and agnostics, half of whom supported Reagan according to post-election polls. Even Falwell’s claims to share a working relationship with the President seem dubious in hindsight. Falwell merited a total of three mentions in the eight years of the Public Papers of the President compiled during Reagan’s terms in office. In his presidential diaries, published only seven days after Falwell’s death, Reagan mentioned Falwell only twice, writing that Falwell was “a good friend & highly supportive” in

To think of Falwell as a wholly ineffective leader, though, would be a mistake. As this dissertation has demonstrated, Jerry Falwell and the Religious Right provided substantial support to the Reagan administration in foreign affairs. Reagan cultivated their support in his struggle against the nuclear freeze movement, using the Moral Majority to lead a campaign against the freeze. The Religious Right rallied behind Strategic Defense Initiative and the Reagan administration’s policies in Central America. The Religious Right may not have been responsible for getting Reagan elected, and Reagan himself may not have regarded the Religious Right with the importance with which it regarded itself, but that does not mean they were insignificant. In the eight years Reagan was in office, the Religious Right sought to unite conservative evangelicals around the causes espoused by Reagan. The Reagan administration, in turn, granted the Religious Right access to the Oval Office, albeit sporadically and for brief moments at a time. As Reagan had promised evangelicals in 1980, he did indeed “endorse” them in his eight years in office.

That endorsement did not translate into public policy victories on the social issues that had motivated the organization of the Religious Right in the first place. Indeed, any scholar who attempts to assess the impact of the Religious Right on American politics faces a seeming paradox. For all of the attention paid to the influence of the Christian
Right on national politics since the 1980s, evangelicals have been unable to translate that influence into consistent gains in the legislative arena. The Religious Right of the early 1980s believed that Ronald Reagan would help them to attain swift victories on issues like abortion and school prayer. They were mistaken. As president, Reagan had to please a multitude of constituencies. He also had to deal with ideological divisions between pragmatists and hardline conservatives within his own administration. Reagan’s detached management style complicated this struggle. In short, the Religious Right’s conception of Reagan as a single-minded executive leader firmly in control of his administration and shaping policy to meet the desires of his constituents was both inaccurate and naïve.

Within this conception of Reagan, though, one can clearly see one of the Religious Right’s most important contributions to contemporary American political culture. By placing so much hope in Reagan’s ability to enact their agenda, the Religious Right indirectly endorsed the cult of the American presidency, placing the President squarely at the center of America’s contemporary culture wars. To be sure, the Religious Right was not alone in shaping this phenomenon, but it played a significant part in convincing evangelicals that to win in the arena of moral issues, Americans first had to put a champion of morality in the White House. Evangelicals later groused over the sexual dalliances of Bill Clinton and welcomed the presidency of George W. Bush, whose evangelical “born again” faith was a foundational part of his political identity. “George W. Bush almost certainly would have failed to win the presidency in 2000 without Mr. Falwell’s evangelical foot soldiers,” Lou Cannon wrote. “So the obituaries
were quite right in crediting Mr. Falwell for putting a Republican in the White House. He just wasn’t Ronald Reagan.”

The Religious Right’s view of Reagan as a strong moral leader made much more sense in foreign affairs than domestic policy. Reagan clearly came to office with a fixed set of principles for conducting relations with the Soviet Union. Reagan and the Religious Right believed that communism was morally abhorrent and a threat to American national security. Ultimately, however, Reagan demonstrated that his beliefs about how to manage relations with the Soviets were far more nuanced than those of his evangelical supporters. To the end of his presidency, Reagan never ceased to talk tough about communism. He remained consistent in his belief that communism represented a blight on the human history that would ultimately fail as a system for governing the Soviet Union. At the same time, Reagan also recognized that the Soviet people and Soviet communism were distinct entities. He referred to the Soviet Union as an “evil empire,” but he did not say that the Soviet people were a “godless society” as Falwell once did. Instead, Reagan used the presidential pulpit to campaign for freedom from oppression for the Soviet people. In June 1987, Reagan delivered one of the most notable speeches of his presidency at the Brandenburg Gate in Berlin, where he called on Mikhail Gorbachev to “tear down” the Berlin Wall. Reagan remained consistent in his desire to free the Soviet people from a system that operated “against the tide of history by denying human freedom and human dignity to its citizens,” as Reagan remarked in his

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481 Cannon, “How Church and State Made Their Match.”
1982 address at Westminster. In this sense, his beliefs were much closer to those of Billy Graham than Jerry Falwell.

In considering the ideological differences between Reagan and the Religious Right, it is also prudent to examine both sides’ belief in Armageddon theology. As noted in chapter five, many of Reagan’s critics feared that Reagan’s belief in Armageddon theology would make the President indifferent to the dangers of the nuclear arms race. In spite of these concerns, there is no evidence that Bible prophecy ever played an actual role in the Reagan administration’s nuclear weapons policies. Equally important, there is ample evidence to suggest that Reagan’s interest in Bible prophecy did more to drive his desire to end the arms race than to carelessly prosecute it. Reagan’s eschatological beliefs were not fatalistic. Faced with two seemingly irreconcilable ideas – the inevitable coming of Armageddon and his belief in the basic goodness of humanity – Reagan chose to focus his administration’s attention on the aspects of the nuclear arms race that he could control. With the development of technologies like SDI, Reagan believed, the human race could delay the coming of Armageddon and free the world from the threat of nuclear war.

The exact nature of the Religious Right’s beliefs about Armageddon and nuclear war were never so clear. Armageddon theology became an area of confluence between Reagan and the Religious Right, but it also proved to be an area where the Religious Right compromised their beliefs for the sake of political expediency. By seeking positions of influence in the Reagan White House, the Religious Right not only conceded

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its ability to criticize the Reagan administration’s decisions in foreign affairs, it also became subservient to the administration, adopting the administration’s positions almost wholeheartedly. In Central America, this was a simple endeavor, as the Religious Right and Reagan saw eye to eye. Other areas of foreign policy, particularly relations with the Soviets, remained in flux throughout Reagan’s presidency, particularly in the second term. When Reagan took office, the Religious Right preached that Armageddon was inevitable and the United States should build up its nuclear arsenal to prepare for a nuclear showdown with the Soviets. As Reagan sought re-election in 1984 and faced scrutiny for his relationship with the Religious Right on the Armageddon issue, conservative evangelists shifted their beliefs about Armageddon and began to preach a more moderate message, arguing like Reagan that Armageddon could be delayed if the United States pursued responsible arms controls like those sought by the Reagan administration. As Reagan continued to pursue the development of SDI, the Religious Right endorsed the President’s view of American scientific ingenuity, arguing that the United States should develop SDI because the Soviets did not have the technical capability to build their own version of missile defense. Later, however, as SDI became an increasingly important factor in arms reduction talks with the Soviets, articles in the Liberty Report argued that the United States should not compromise on the development of SDI, as the Soviets were only a few years away from developing their own version of the system.

All the while, as the National Association of Evangelicals’ 1983 survey suggested, evangelicals remained divided and ambivalent about the nuclear arms race.
This ambivalence was not entirely unique to the period covered in this project. The moral and ethical questions created by the possession and use of nuclear weapons divided many religious groups after the first use of atomic bombs at the end of World War II. The very public division of popular evangelical leaders over nuclear issues, especially Billy Graham’s explicit support for a nuclear freeze, gave further credence to the idea that nuclear issues deserved further study and a careful balance of moral thinking versus the strategic priorities of American national defense. Nonetheless, it is reasonable to suggest that inconsistency in the beliefs of the Religious Right helped to create an air of fear and misinformation that made it difficult for evangelicals to make informed decisions about nuclear issues.

As Reagan sought rapprochement with the Soviet Union, the Religious Right struggled to maintain their unabashed support for the president’s nuclear defense policies. Because the Religious Right’s beliefs about the arms race were preconditioned by the idea that the Soviet Union was inherently expansionistic and that the Soviets held nuclear superiority over the United States, the Religious Right could not understand why Ronald Reagan would ever enter into arms control negotiations with the “evil empire.” After all, in his first press conference, Reagan had explicitly stated that the Soviets had never honored arms control agreements in the past. Articles about nuclear weapons issues declined in the Liberty Report during Reagan’s second term, as writers commented only occasionally on Reagan’s relations with Gorbachev and the administration’s attempts to secure funding for SDI. Instead, most articles on foreign policy issues in Liberty Report
focused on Reagan’s support for the “freedom fighters” in Central America, an area where Reagan’s opinions more closely resembled those of his evangelical supporters.\textsuperscript{484}

In his perceptive 2012 book \textit{Bad Religion: How We Became a Nation of Heretics}, \textit{New York Times} columnist Ross Douthat drew a distinction between the “apocalyptic” and “ messianic” beliefs of religious groups that get involved in politics. Douthat primarily applied his analysis to the presidency of George W. Bush. Critics of the Bush administration, he pointed out, used Bush’s identification with the Religious Right to argue that because Bush presumably believed in the Rapture, he did not care about the threat of global climate change. After the Bush administration pursued the “War on Terror” in the wake of the September 11, 2001 attacks against the United States, Bush’s critics again pointed to the President’s apocalyptic beliefs to argue that Bush was carelessly rushing the world headlong toward Armageddon. As Douthat aptly noted, however, it was not the apocalyptic nature of Bush’s beliefs that was so troubling, but their messianic nature. Messianism, in this case, represented a seemingly unending optimism about the ability of the United States to spread democracy abroad. Unlike apocalyptic beliefs, which look to the end of the world, messianic beliefs reflect the desire to do God’s will in the here and now, to begin the world over again as Ronald Reagan said, quoting Thomas Paine. Bush’s messianism was similar to that of Woodrow Wilson, whose desire to “make the world safe for democracy” played a significant role in shaping American foreign policy in the twentieth century. If there was any doubt about the Wilsonian nature of Bush’s foreign policy, Bush’s second inaugural address, wherein the forty-third President declared that it was “the policy of the United States to seek and

support the growth of democratic movements and institutions in every nation and culture, with the ultimate goal of ending tyranny in our world,” left no doubt.

The Religious Right of the 1980s never reconciled its apocalyptic beliefs with the messianism that it endorsed in Ronald Reagan. To be fair, though, contemporary evangelicalism as a whole has never been able to completely balance these two perspectives. On one hand, evangelicals’ fascination with apocalyptic prophecies persisted after the end of the Cold War. The incredible success of the *Left Behind* series of apocalyptic novels, co-authored by Falwell associate Tim LaHaye and published between 1995 and 2007, demonstrated the continuing appeal of eschatology in American popular culture. In 1998, the first four books in the series were the top four books on the *New York Times* bestseller list, even though the *Times* did not count sales from Christian bookstores in creating its list. In other words, the books, which were based on a premillennial dispensationalist interpretation of the end times, sold well enough in mainstream bookstores to top the bestseller list.485

At the same time, other evangelists have risen to positions of prominence in the Religious Right and have continued to promote apocalyptic literature. John Hagee, pastor of the 20,000-member Cornerstone Church in San Antonio, Texas, has published a number of books about Bible prophecy, including *From Daniel to Doomsday: The Countdown Has Begun*, published in 1999, *Financial Armageddon*, published in 2008, and *Can America Survive? 10 Prophetic Signs that we are the Terminal Generation*,

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His *Attack on America: New York, Jerusalem, and the Role of Terrorism in the Last Days*, published after the September 11, 2001 terrorist attacks against the United States, connected the attacks to Bible prophecy, predicting that they would trigger a series of conflicts in the Middle East that would ultimately lead to Armageddon. All the while, Hagee echoed many of the same ideas that had animated Jerry Falwell. The 9/11 attacks had happened, Hagee told readers, because America’s enemies perceived that the United States was a weak nation that lacked the will to fight. “We committed our military forces to Vietnam for twelve years and were not able, even with our massive military resources, to defeat a nation the size of Vermont. Simply stated, America’s politicians were not committed to victory.” Hagee has also continued Pat Robertson’s emphasis on the coming new world order, preaching a sermon entitled “Obama’s New World Order” at Cornerstone Church, warning his parishioners that Barack Obama intends to turn the United States into a socialistic state that will become part of a one-world government.

Other evangelicals have turned away from involvement in conservative politics. In international affairs, the National Association of Evangelicals has focused much of its activism on human rights issues, particularly human trafficking, climate change, and

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torture as a means of interrogation in the War on Terror. California Pastor Rick Warren, whose book *The Purpose Driven Life* has sold approximately 30 million copies, has focused attention on fighting AIDS in Africa. Warren is head of the P.E.A.C.E. plan, a global alliance of 162 Christian ministers dedicated to solving problems like global poverty, illiteracy, and disease.

These examples illustrate that evangelicals continue to be a diverse lot, difficult to accurately define but potent in their cultural, if not political influence. American evangelicalism has proven to be an evolving rather than a static entity. For these and other reasons, evangelicals continue to be a subject worthy of historical inquiry. Future historians of evangelicals’ role in American politics would do well to pay careful attention to the social, cultural, and theological nuances that define the diversity of American evangelicalism. Historians should also pay attention to the way that evangelicals have embraced apocalyptic beliefs alongside the messianic tendencies of American politics. In the Cold War, it was possible for the Religious Right to escalate scenarios of imaginary horror, in large part because there will little actual cost involved. A nuclear war never materialized. In the age of the War on Terror, however, America’s

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enemies have been much more difficult to define, and the violence involved in battles against terrorists is very real. How evangelicals respond to the challenges of the twenty-first century world – whether it is embracing the apocalyptic preaching of John Hagee, the humanitarian impulse of Rick Warren, or some hybrid of the two – will determine much about the character of American evangelicalism for the foreseeable future. There is little room for disagreement, however, that conservative evangelicals have much to learn about the possibilities and pitfalls of political engagement from the Religious Right of the 1980s.
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**Dissertations and Theses**


Multimedia


