

ABSTRACT

GEORGE W. BUSH'S FAITH-BASED INITIATIVE

by Christopher M. Kromer

This paper examines the Bush administration's introduction of the federal faith-based initiative program, a funding and service delivery scheme that combines the resources of the federal government with the social and institutional authority of faith communities. In an attempt to explain the genesis and popularity of the faith-based movement, this paper endeavors to show that, when both the personal faith of George W. Bush and the history of religious engagement in American political discourse are considered, the faith-based initiative is neither novel nor surprising. Instead, it represents the latest effort to combine the power of government with the appeal of religion, a trend that has continued into the Obama administration.

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Christopher Kromer
“George W. Bush’s Faith-Based Initiative”

Introduction

In his campaign for the presidency in 2000, Texas governor George W. Bush promised voters he would be a “compassionate conservative,” a commander-in-chief who would combine traditional conservative devotion to law and order with a softer, more personal appeal to faith. Many voters wondered, however, what it truly meant to be a compassionate conservative. If elected, how would Bush translate his pledge into tangible action? And how would his own Christian journey—from beer and wild oats to born-again evangelical—inform his style of governance?

A large portion of Bush’s answers to those questions centered on the “faith-based initiative,” a legal-political mechanism through which government would partner with faith-based and community organizations to deliver crucial social services. Through this new arrangement, Bush also wished to create a “level playing field” for faith-based groups to compete for government funding. Although Bush’s plans were never fully realized, the administration did achieve several of its faith-based goals, including the creation of the White House Office of Faith-Based and Community Initiatives. The survival of the office into the Obama administration—albeit under the slightly modified name “White House Office of Faith-Based and Neighborhood Partnerships”—indicates that Bush may have succeeded in giving faith-based groups a permanent seat at the table at the highest levels of government and in “institutionalizing” the faith-based structure into the presidency.¹

As historians begin to make sense of the Bush faith-based initiative, and as President Obama carries on the faith-based/government partnership inaugurated by his predecessor, the present time seems an ideal moment for scholars of both religion and government to examine the intent, scope and effectiveness of Bush’s faith-based initiative. Specifically, it will be instructive to take a closer look at the role of faith communities in partnering with government to deliver services such as Temporary Assistance for Needy Families and Food Stamps, and to evaluate to what extent the utilization of faith-based organizations has improved social welfare. The recent work of the Rockefeller Institute’s Roundtable on Religion and Social Welfare Policy, as well as the Pew Forum on Religion & Public Life, will provide the most up-to-date data on faith-based initiatives.

Although the Bush faith-based initiative forms the proper focus of the current study, it will also be necessary to place the forty-third President’s efforts in the larger context of faith and presidential politics in the twentieth century. Bush’s faith-based initiative needs to be understood as the most recent development in the presidential politics of religion, rather than as an isolated phenomenon. While the election of Catholic John F. Kennedy to the presidency in 1960 brought the issue of faith into sharp electoral focus for the first time in the modern era, presidential faith remained largely unimportant throughout the 1960s and early 1970s. The 1976 election of “born again” Jimmy Carter brought presidential faith—particularly of the evangelical variety—into the political

¹ Hult, *Empowering the White House*, 8.

mainstream for the first time. Carter's subsequent failure to appease the evangelical voters who put him over the top in 1976 led to the election of Ronald Reagan in 1980, an event that also helped to trigger the now well-established alliance between evangelicals and the Republican Party. While Reagan did not deliver on many key evangelical policy concerns, his administration did succeed in retaining evangelical support. Reagan's legacy as a champion of evangelical causes was only enhanced after his two immediate successors, Republican George H.W. Bush and Democrat Bill Clinton, engaged less in the discourse of evangelical Christianity than did Carter or Reagan. This "interregnum," as Randall Balmer calls it, allowed George W. Bush to gain support in 2000 from many Americans who waited in anticipation of a candidate who would pick up the evangelical mantle where Reagan had left it. Thus, while the faith and presidency of George W. Bush form the proper focus of the current work, it will also be critical to examine the Carter and Reagan faith dynamics as necessary precursors to George W. Bush's more explicit commingling of personal faith and policy.

Among the seminal works in this literature of faith in presidential politics is Randall Balmer's *God in the White House*, which tracks the phenomenon of presidential piety from the Kennedy era to the present. Balmer's work will help to provide the appropriate social and political backdrop for the story of Bush and his faith-based initiative.

In addition to the more general overview cited above, another work focusing specifically on George W. Bush will also be consulted. Stephen Mansfield's *The Faith of George W. Bush* will provide the reader with the requisite background to understand the connection between the former president's personal faith and his policy goals. Additionally, *Tempting Faith*, the highly critical tell-all account of the faith-based initiative by former Bush White House staffer David Kuo, will illustrate the alleged links between religion and political maneuvering in the Bush administration.

Aside from the above-cited studies, this project will also examine Bush's own words, taken from speeches and White House documents.

Finally, the project will also examine the Obama administration's approach to the faith-based experiment. Special attention will be paid to the administration's decision to use faith as a catalyst for policy formulation, not merely as a service delivery partner. Through newspaper accounts and other periodical sources, the project will document President Obama's stated vision for the White House Office of Faith-Based and Neighborhood Partnerships, taking note of where Obama's vision differs from that of his predecessor.

The point of this endeavor is to persuade the reader of two viewpoints. First, the Bush faith-based initiative is both the culmination and continuation of the growing influence of religion in presidential politics. Second, the study will seek to persuade the reader that Bush, by virtue of his own experience of the transformative potential of personal faith, was uniquely suited to bring faith into the machinery of the presidency in this way. It cannot fail to strike the reader that the journey from John F. Kennedy's campaign in 1960 to the White House Office of Faith-Based and Community Initiatives in 2001 has signaled a sea change in the way presidents approach the subject of religion.

Chapter 1: From the Margins to the Halls of Power: Faith in the Modern Presidency from JFK to Clinton

Although the faith-based initiative brought religion and politics into unprecedented proximity to one another, President Bush's efforts to link government with faith groups in public-private partnerships is but the latest in a series of key moments in the unfolding drama of religion in American presidential politics. While religion as an electorally significant issue is a relatively recent phenomenon, the interaction of faith and American politics is as old as the Republic itself.

From the beginning, disparate religious groups endeavored to leave their own mark on stretches of American land—Puritans in New England, Catholics in Maryland and Quakers in Pennsylvania. Regardless of creed or sect, those who came to the new world sought to render the new nation, in Puritan John Winthrop's phrase, as a "city upon a hill," a shining example of religiosity for the rest of the world.

Fervent religious activism soon engendered constitutional difficulties in a secular, democratic nation. The first steps toward a coherent approach to matters of religion and politics came in the form of the First Amendment to the new United States Constitution. Among the many provisions of the First Amendment were clauses prohibiting the establishment of an official national religion and limitations on the free exercise of religion. Although the Amendment did not overturn the right of states to establish their own religions—as many colonies had done before the Revolution—it did set in motion a series of events that resulted in the absence of any state-sponsored religion by the mid-nineteenth century.²

The abolition of officially sanctioned religion did not extricate issues of faith completely from America's political life. On the contrary, those of strong religious faith simply redoubled their efforts to shape the political culture according to their personal convictions. The nineteenth century saw the growth of "voluntary" religious movements, or those that sought to influence the course of American culture through voluntary efforts, rather than through state-sponsored directives. These efforts were most dramatically embodied in the prohibition movement and the "Benevolent Empire," a conglomeration of voluntary religious organizations working for social and cultural change. Likewise, many of the twentieth century's most important religious developments—including the 1925 Scopes Trial and the emergence of the Religious Right—were born of the Christian desire to influence the political process.

While many Christians—especially those of the evangelical variety—sought to make their mark on the political process, religion as an electoral issue was not a common campaign theme until the 1960 presidential campaign. Prior to that year's race, candidates rarely encountered questions regarding the specifics of their personal faith. (One exception, Alfred E. Smith, the Democratic Party's 1928 candidate and a Catholic, did face questions about his faith, but his was the last candidacy to draw such attention until Kennedy). The entry of Massachusetts senator John F. Kennedy into the Democratic primary competition irreversibly altered that trend.

A Roman Catholic of Irish extraction, Kennedy employed his family's wealth and political clout to rise quickly through the ranks of the Democratic Party. Despite his

² Williams, *America's Religions*, 183.

popular appeal, the 43-year old Kennedy soon faced probing questions about his personal faith. Many feared that Kennedy's obedience to the Pope would give the pontiff a curious and dangerous power over the presidency. Others envisioned American Catholics as communist conspirators, determined to remake America and align it with Rome. Such fears were not simply instinctive reactions to Kennedy's entry into the race. Rather, the anti-Catholic sentiment had deep roots in American history, stretching back to colonial times. Anti-Catholic fears likely reached their apex in the nineteenth century, when evangelical movement began to spread across the country. While Kennedy's nomination may have awakened some anti-Catholic feelings among contemporary Americans, it is important to note that for others, Kennedy's appearance on the political scene merely allowed long-held prejudices to resurface.

In order to dispel these and other fears, Kennedy sought to confront the religious issue directly. This strategy produced one of the campaign's signature moments—a September 12 Kennedy speech to the Greater Houston Ministerial Association.³ Kennedy's opening salvo clearly communicated his recognition of the religious question as an important issue and his determination to neutralize it however possible.

While the so-called religious issue is necessarily and properly the chief topic here tonight, I want to emphasize from the outset that I believe that we have far more critical issues in the 1960 campaign...But because I am a Catholic, and no Catholic has ever been elected president, the real issues in this campaign have been obscured—perhaps deliberately...So it is apparently necessary for me to state once again—not what kind of church I believe in, for that should be important only to me—but what kind of America I believe in.⁴

Not only did the “religious issue” force Kennedy to speak more openly about his faith than any previous presidential candidate, but it also dictated which primaries the young candidate needed to enter. Kennedy competed in the May 10 West Virginia primary to demonstrate to skeptical Democratic voters that he could command a majority in a heavily Protestant state.⁵ Kennedy's victory in West Virginia calmed some Democratic fears about his electoral viability, and Kennedy went on to capture both the nomination and the presidency.

Despite the scrutiny of Kennedy's faith during the 1960 campaign, religion seems to have played very little role in the Kennedy administration. It is likely that Kennedy was uneasy about giving Americans the impression that his Catholic faith—a minority faith in America—governed his decision-making. It is also probable, however, that Kennedy was not strongly influenced by his Catholic faith. It was not until Kennedy's successor Lyndon Johnson assumed the presidency that the nation's commander-in-chief allowed personal convictions to influence public decisions.

Lyndon Johnson, who assumed the presidency following Kennedy's assassination in 1963, was reared in the Disciples of Christ movement.⁶ Central to Johnson's faith was

³ Balmer, *God in the White House*, 7.

⁴ *Ibid*, 176.

⁵ *Ibid*, 19.

⁶ *Ibid*, 50.

a belief in the responsibility of those with power to care for the powerless. As Johnson once told a biographer, his devout mother was the source of his spiritual nourishment.

At the center of my mother's philosophy was the belief that the strong must care for the weak. From the early days when she knew that I was to be the strongest of the five—with the most ambition and self-discipline and the most successful—she made me feel responsible for the weaker ones in the family.⁷

Johnson's belief in the necessity of those in power lifting up the disenfranchised served as an informing paradigm, both in his private faith and in his policy goals. The two domestic hallmarks of Johnson's presidency—the amalgamation of legislative proposals aimed at creating the "Great Society" and the push to augment the civil rights of minorities—were both influenced by Johnson's personal faith. As Randall Balmer explains, the more subtle intricacies of Christian theology may have eluded the crass, unlearned Johnson, but the importance of Christian virtue did not escape him.

[The Great Society and civil rights legislation] derived from his understanding of the faith. Johnson could hardly be accused of theological sophistication, but he had gleaned from his parents at least the rudiments of a kind of "golden rule" Christianity.⁸

Johnson's outward piety and ability to couch legislative goals in religious language gained him the support of the National Council of Churches in his quest to abolish segregation. While Johnson enjoyed the favor of evangelist Billy Graham and other prominent religious leaders in his attempts to create the Great Society through economic and educational empowerment, many of the same clergy disagreed bitterly with the President's prosecution of the Vietnam War. Many Catholic critics, including Philip and Daniel Berrigan, who gained notoriety for their objections to the war, expressed their disappointment in Johnson. The Protestant-controlled National Council of Churches also began to reconsider its previous support of Johnson as the president began his second term.

Under increasing pressure to seek a negotiated peace in Vietnam, Johnson decided not to run for the Democratic Party's presidential nomination in 1968. Shortly after Johnson made his famous television address announcing his decision to the country, he received a telegram from Billy Graham. An avowed conservative who had supported Barry Goldwater, Johnson's Republican foe in the 1964 election, Graham had nonetheless courted Johnson with some success.⁹ Under Johnson's successor, Republican Richard Nixon, Graham's political star would continue to rise, a development that would forever alter the course of religious-political interaction.

Graham's closeness to Nixon soon became apparent, evidenced by his presence both at Nixon's inauguration and at the first of the White House worship services begun by Nixon. As Balmer points out, however, Nixon's relationship with Graham would soon raise suspicions of political maneuvering.

The worship services in the White House...quickly devolved into political theater. Early on, Charles W. Colson, Nixon's assistant, received an "action memo" urging him to act quickly on the "President's request that

⁷ Woods, *LBJ*, 38.

⁸ Balmer, *God in the White House*, 52.

⁹ *Ibid*, 62.

you develop a list of rich people with strong religious interest to be invited to the White House church services.”¹⁰

Despite his outward displays of piety, Nixon’s professed Quaker faith seems to have held little sway over his actions in the White House. Nixon’s paranoia and insecurity led, among other things, to the effort to discredit Democratic rival George McGovern in the 1972 campaign and to the Watergate episode.¹¹ Coupled with his hawkish and aggressive prosecution of the Vietnam War, Nixon’s covert political machinations painted a picture of a president who fell far short of moral integrity by any measure.

As Nixon’s role in the Watergate cover-up emerged, the president fought desperately to protect audio recordings of White House conversations that allegedly linked him to the Watergate operation. When the tapes were released, Nixon’s friend Billy Graham was not so much distraught over the “smoking gun” of the taped conversations; rather, evangelist Graham was more disappointed by Nixon’s use of profanity.¹²

When a disgraced Nixon finally resigned, he was succeeded by Gerald Ford, a mild-mannered, conciliatory leader and a practicing Episcopalian. Ford’s succession to the nation’s highest office continued Nixon’s precedent of a president maintaining a close personal relationship with an evangelical preacher. This time, religious advisor was Billy Zeoli, a strong conservative from Grand Rapids.¹³

Zeoli began to exert his influence on the Ford White House. As Balmer notes, Zeoli’s presence had a profound effect not only on the president’s personal faith, but also on the professional lives of other members of the Ford administration.

Zeoli...sent letters and telegrams to Ford’s senior staff members offering political advice, requesting appointments with Vice President Nelson Rockefeller or Secretary of State Henry Kissinger, or demanding that a car be sent to pick him up at a Washington hotel. Zeoli signed his missives “In His love and mine.” By the fall of 1974, just weeks into Ford’s presidency, the *St. Louis Post-Dispatch* published an article quoting Zeoli as saying that he had noticed “a definite Christian growth” in Ford over the previous nine months.¹⁴

Although Ford was much less polarizing than his predecessor, his pardon of Nixon led many voters to suspect that the embattled former president had made a deal with Ford to secure his own immunity. Despite Ford’s insistence to the contrary, many Americans began to associate Ford with Watergate and the practice of “dirty politics.” Such a link signaled a new role for religious faith in the political process.

From the Kennedy presidency to the Ford administration, religion had functioned as both an electoral factor of growing importance and as an occasional indication of the policy preferences of commanders-in-chief. Following the disillusionment of the Watergate debacle, the American political landscape was ripe for a candidate who could combine the growing political power of overt religiosity with a down-home innocence.

¹⁰ *Ibid*, 64.

¹¹ *Ibid*, 65.

¹² Martin, *With God on Our side*, 431.

¹³ Balmer, *God in the White House*, 69.

¹⁴ *Ibid*, 71.

Americans got such a candidate in the 1976 election in the unlikely form of a peanut farmer from Georgia who promised to restore trust in government.

In the 1976 election campaign, former Georgia governor and Democratic presidential nominee Jimmy Carter helped push the issue of personal faith into the political mainstream for the first time in American history by openly discussing his spirituality and actively courting the “religious vote.” A Southern Baptist Sunday school teacher, Carter caught the attention of many conservative religious leaders who hoped to capitalize on the political inroads made by Billy Graham. Aided by strong evangelical support in the South—a region hitherto a Republican stronghold—Carter captured a narrow election victory over Gerald Ford.

Carter’s emergence onto the national political scene had a profound effect on the growing relationship between religious attitudes and political involvement. Thanks in part to Carter’s candidacy and victory, *Time* magazine labeled 1976 the “year of the evangelical,” allowing that particular brand of Christianity to achieve mainstream status for the first time in modern America.¹⁵ It also brought preachers like Pat Robertson into the wider political discourse for the first time. The son of a Democratic congressman and future leader of the ultra-conservative “Religious Right,” Robertson in the mid-1970s was relatively neutral politically.¹⁶ Founder of the Christian Broadcasting Network and a popular televangelist, Robertson has long credited Carter with raising the political awareness of evangelicals like himself: “Carter was the one who activated me and a lot of others. We had great hopes...[He was] like our champion.”¹⁷ Part of Carter’s appeal to evangelicals lay in his proclivity to identify himself as “born-again,” a biblical term referring to the necessity of Christians to be reborn in Christ before entering the kingdom of heaven.

Riding into the White House on a wave of evangelical support, Carter’s election victory left him indebted to conservative religious leaders. His use of strong religious language on the campaign trail led to high expectations for the Carter administration among evangelicals. As the events of the next four years unfolded, evangelical excitement gave way to disappointment, disillusionment and, eventually, to a shift of electoral support away from Carter in his 1980 reelection bid.

While prominent evangelicals generally welcomed Carter’s campaign, a well-publicized slip of the tongue foreshadowed future troubles long before election day. Carter had granted *Playboy* magazine an interview for its November 1976 issue, a forum he used to further explain his religious beliefs to American voters. When asked by a reporter to explore the possibility that his firm faith could create a damaging perception of moral superiority over the American people, Carter replied that he had “lusted in his heart” many times.¹⁸

Just as Carter’s pre-election interview pushed some evangelicals away, his failure to appoint highly visible evangelicals to Cabinet and other administration positions further eroded support among the religiously conservative. Such appointments play an important role in the American political process, serving to reward key constituencies for their electoral support. The evangelical community’s unprecedented backing of Carter’s

¹⁵ Lambert, *Religion in American Politics*, 199.

¹⁶ Lindsay, *Faith in the Halls of Power*, 17.

¹⁷ *Ibid*, 17.

¹⁸ *Jimmy Carter The Playboy Interview*.

candidacy created a tacit expectation that such supporters would find their way into positions of prominence in government. Instead of drawing from the ranks of the religious, Carter relied heavily on the Trilateral Commission and the Council on Foreign Relations—neither of which were particularly evangelical—as sources of his appointments. Carter aide Alonzo McDonald later admitted that, despite the strong religious tone of the campaign, hardly anyone spoke of their faith in the Carter White House.¹⁹

As Carter settled into the presidency, it soon became apparent to evangelicals that his shortcomings were not confined to inexplicable interviews or disappointing government appointments. Carter's stances on several policy issues also invoked the ire of evangelicals who were surprised at the president's liberal tendencies. An initial key disappointment came in 1978, when the Internal Revenue Service threatened to revoke the tax-exempt status of Christian schools due to *de facto* segregation.²⁰ The issue reignited age-old debates about the separation of church and state and helped popular religious leaders like Robertson, Jim Bakker and James Dobson to coalesce their various followings into a united, identifiable political movement.

Carter disappointed many when he failed to act in favor of the Christian schools. Although the IRS revocation plan later disappeared, Carter's inaction did not go unnoticed by evangelicals. Doubt began to grow about Carter's credentials as spokesperson for and defender of the evangelical movement, and his seeming apathy helped ignite the formal organization of the conservative religious right into a political force. According to Paul Weyrich, co-founder of The Heritage Foundation, a conservative think-tank, this was the moment evangelicals began moving permanently into the conservative camp. The IRS threat to Christian schools smacked of government interference in religious matters, evoking evangelical fears that they were losing their right to raise their children as they pleased. In coming years, this alliance between evangelicals and conservatives, both of whom opposed government intervention, continued to grow. Both Ronald Reagan, Carter's future opponent and eventual successor, and George W. Bush capitalized on this merger with great success.²¹

Another ongoing issue that complicated Carter's relationship with the evangelical right was the Equal Rights Amendment, an initiative first introduced in 1923 that sought to protect equal rights and to eliminate discrimination based on gender. Carter supported the amendment, which many evangelicals decried as a violation of the divine order of male/female relationships. Tim LaHaye, an author and early proponent of the conservative religious alliance with the Republican Party, recalled when he first learned of Carter's support for the ERA. Not only did LaHaye withdraw his support from the President, he also prayed to God to mobilize the evangelical movement to ensure Carter did not return to the White House for a second term.²²

Perhaps the final blow that severed the link between Carter and the evangelical community came in 1980, at the White House Conference on Families. Carter had promised to convene such a meeting during the 1976 campaign.²³ When Carter did

¹⁹ Lindsay, *Faith in the Halls of Power*, 17-18.

²⁰ *Ibid*, 18.

²¹ Martin, *With God on Our Side*, 173.

²² *Ibid*, 189.

²³ Lindsay, *Faith in the Halls of Power*, 18.

organize the event, however, his decision to include homosexuals in the conference's discussions infuriated evangelicals. The inability of the conference participants to agree on a definition of "family" underscored the deep divisions that had developed between Carter and the evangelical community, while also exposing the extent to which Carter's liberal Democratic values clashed with those of the conservative evangelical movement.

One of Carter's most vociferous critics was Jerry Falwell, a preacher who would later gain notoriety as leader of the Moral Majority. Falwell's campaigning against Carter in the 1980 election symbolized the incumbent's falling out with the evangelical community. In his autobiography, Carter recalls seeing Falwell on the campaign trail, falsely attacking him for his positions on social issues. "[Falwell] has lied...by claiming that he met with me in the Oval Office, and that I told him I had to have homosexuals on my staff because there were homosexuals in the United States who needed representation in my inner circle."²⁴ Falwell and others succeeded in characterizing Carter as a social liberal who did not represent the views of mainstream Americans.

While many prominent religious leaders had hoped that Carter's election would produce an administration that governed according to its spiritual lights, Carter's liberal stances further disappointed evangelicals who had long felt relegated to the margins of American political life. Although Carter's administration dashed such hopes, many historians regard the Carter presidency as a turning point in the history of American political-religious interaction. Unlike President Kennedy, who sought to evade questions focused on personal faith, those who succeeded Carter would feel an implicit pressure to state their personal beliefs on the campaign trail, just as Carter had done.

At the same time that the evangelical movement was lamenting its disappointment with Jimmy Carter during the 1980 election, it found what it thought would be its savior in California governor and Republican presidential nominee Ronald Reagan. An economic and social conservative, Reagan had noted the evangelical community's disillusionment and sought to capture this portion of the electorate.

Reagan's first public overture toward the evangelical community came in Dallas in August 1980. At a breakfast sponsored by the conservative Christian group the Religious Roundtable, Reagan gained favor among those in the crowd by quipping, "I know you cannot endorse me, but I endorse you."²⁵ This act of outreach, made all the more powerful by Carter's refusal to attend the meeting, brought many of those present into Republican circles for the first time. Reagan's open endorsement of the evangelical viewpoint ignited conservative Christian hopes that Reagan would deliver where Carter had failed.

At first glance, Reagan might have appeared to be the least likely candidate to take up the mantle of the evangelical cause. A former actor who had divorced and remarried, Reagan's affiliation with Hollywood culture—often the object of evangelical scorn—might have made him a target for conservative Christians. Additionally, his soft stance on abortion and his support for homosexuals during his tenure as governor of California certainly fell outside of the established evangelical norms.²⁶ An infrequent churchgoer, Reagan's religious credentials were dwarfed by those of Jimmy Carter.

²⁴ Carter, *Keeping Faith*, 562.

²⁵ Lindsay, *Faith in the Halls of Power*, 18.

²⁶ Martin, *With God on Our Side*, 208.

After Reagan defeated Carter in the 1980 election, evangelicals began to hope that Reagan would restore their faith that the occupant of the White House actually shared their concerns and values. Reagan's initial Cabinet appointments demonstrated that he would not repeat the mistakes Carter made in not giving evangelicals a voice in his administration. Two high-level Reagan appointees, James G. Watt and C. Everett Koop, were familiar names in the evangelical movement.

Named surgeon general in 1981, C. Everett Koop was a leading opponent of abortion in the United States. Koop's strong pro-life stance led many in Congress to oppose his nomination. Hoping to draw on evangelical support, Reagan refused to back down, instead bringing the abortion issue front and center in Koop's nomination process.²⁷ Reagan's Secretary of the Interior, James G. Watt, was likewise a hero among evangelicals. Watt was not shy about his faith. In testimony before the House Interior Committee in 1981, for example, Watt stated, "I do not know how many future generations we can count on before the Lord returns; whatever it is, we have to manage with a skill to leave the resources needed for future generations."²⁸ The appointments of Koop and Watt demonstrated early that the Reagan administration would give a voice to those who spoke openly about their faith. (It is important to note, however, that neither of these two key appointments worked out well for Reagan. Koop was a controversial Surgeon General from the start, making well-documented comments about AIDS and sex education that alienated Americans of all political stripes. Watt, who served as Secretary of the Interior, also was noted for making racially insensitive and even apocalyptic comments).

Although Reagan might have gained favor with evangelicals for his early Cabinet appointments, his inability to tackle important social issues in the first year of his presidency disillusioned many conservative Christians. Faced with a faltering economy, Reagan contended that he had to focus intently on economic issues before moving on to tackle evangelical hot-button issues like abortion and school prayer. Many leading evangelicals like Paul Weyrich excoriated Reagan for mismanaging his priorities. A rift in the emerging Religious Right opened up on this issue, with Weyrich chastising other leading Christian conservatives for easing up on Reagan because of the country's economic plight. "No, you settle matters that pertain to God first—that's the proper order," Weyrich told a group of pastors who acquiesced to the President's insistence on dealing with economic issues first.²⁹

Weyrich recalled the joy many evangelicals felt at having access to the White House in the early Reagan years. Their happiness sometimes blinded them to the fact that, in Weyrich's view, their priorities were being subordinated.

What overshadowed all their concerns was simply their pleasure in being able to get in even the back door of the White House. They didn't want to do anything to jeopardize that. They were willing to put aside what minimalistic ideas they had on their so-called "agendas"—and with the exception of their pro-life position, they were trivial—to safeguard meaningless access.³⁰

²⁷ Lindsay, *Faith in the Halls of Power*, 20.

²⁸ *Ibid*, 19.

²⁹ Martin, *With God on our Side*, 222.

³⁰ *Ibid*, 223.

Despite Reagan's zealous conservative rhetoric, many perceived an element of truth in Weyrich's "back door access" notion. Part of the problem from the evangelical point of view was White House Deputy Chief of Staff Michael Deaver. Preoccupied more with keeping Reagan electable than with appeasing the evangelical faction, Deaver once remarked that the Religious Right was welcome at the White House, but "they'd need to come in the back door."³¹

Even when evangelicals did manage to land invitations to White House events, they were often ignored or relegated to less visible roles than they would have liked. Faith Whittlesey, director of the White House Public Liaison office for the Reagan administration, notes that evangelicals were placed at the very back of presidential motorcades. Senior staff members often persuaded Reagan not to attend events arranged by evangelical leaders. The president feared that the rest of the electorate would view evangelicals as a group of fringe zealots, a perception that could become electorally damaging.³²

Another problem that served to diminish the standing of evangelicals in the eyes of some Reagan staffers was the group's lack of political experience. As a social group that had only come to national prominence in the 1970s, evangelical Christians had not yet participated in government at the highest levels. The failure of the Carter administration to appoint evangelicals to high-ranking positions only aggravated the problem. The result was that, in the early days of the Reagan administration, key staffers found that there were not many qualified evangelicals.³³ While staffers looked on evangelicals as not possessing the skills necessary to operate in government, evangelicals might have perceived this claim as another tactic to shut them out of the halls of power.

If evangelicals were disappointed at their relegation to second-class status by the Reagan White House, they were infuriated over the president's lack of overt support for a 1981 bill designed to overturn *Roe v. Wade*. The Human Life Statute was authored by two Republican pro-life champions, Senator Jesse Helms of North Carolina and Illinois Congressman Henry Hyde. The duo's previous efforts had helped to reduce abortions funded with federal money in the late 1970s. Now, Helms and Hyde took aim at the *Roe v. Wade* case.

As part of the landmark 1973 case, Supreme Court Justice Harry Blackmun admitted the Court had failed to satisfactorily determine the question of the beginning of life. In Blackmun's opinion, if a fetus could be proved to be a person, the law would protect its right to life. Helms and Hyde made use of this gap by contending that human life began at conception. For this bill to become law, an event that would equate abortion with murder, a simple majority vote in both houses of Congress was required.

Encouraged by the prospect of the bill's passage, evangelicals were disappointed when Reagan offered only nominal support. The bill failed, with many blaming Reagan for failing to speak out on an issue so central to the evangelical soul.³⁴

Despite evangelical disappointment at Reagan's failure to support the Helms-Hyde bill, the administration did attempt to resolve the IRS tax exemption for schools issue that had flared up and disappeared under Carter. Conservative Christian schools in

³¹ *Ibid*, 223.

³² *Ibid*, 224.

³³ *Ibid*, 221.

³⁴ *Ibid*, 227.

the South, including Bob Jones University in South Carolina, were among those whose tax exempt status was challenged due to *de facto* segregation. In early 1982, the Reagan administration prompted the Treasury and Justice Departments to nullify the IRS's annulment of tax exempt status for Bob Jones University. The move, intended to shore up support from evangelicals whose belief in Reagan's values might be wavering, ignited a firestorm of criticism.³⁵ Reagan's policy was decried as racist, using taxpayer money to enforce segregation in American schools.

Caught in the dilemma of trying to appease conservative Christians but also make amends for his perceived segregationist policy, Reagan subsequently announced that he would submit a bill to Congress that would prohibit tax exemptions to organizations that discriminate on a racial basis. Reagan tried to deflect claims that he was backpedalling on his earlier show of support for Bob Jones University, saying instead that the IRS did not have the authority to establish conditions for tax exemptions.³⁶ Regardless of his explanation, the new policy angered evangelicals, who saw the legislation as a form of government interference.

Reagan attempted to regain evangelical favor later in 1982 by calling for a constitutional amendment legalizing school prayer. The campaign to institute the policy was a showcase in the dramatic confrontation between the sacred and the secular in America. Led by Jerry Falwell, students from the evangelical Liberty Baptist College formed a human chain stretching between the Capitol and the Supreme Court to publicize the school prayer issue.

When the proposal stalled in Congress in 1983, the President made mention of the amendment in his 1984 State of the Union address. Reagan's reminder helped to speed up Senate consideration of the measure. When the Senate did vote on the school prayer amendment in the spring of 1984, it fell eleven votes short of the required two-thirds majority needed.³⁷ The issue further frustrated evangelicals who saw Reagan's overtures to religious conservatives as nothing more than token efforts to maintain their electoral support. Following the prayer amendment failure, which many blamed on Reagan's seeming indifference, Moral Majority executive director Ron Godwin wondered aloud why Reagan moved only in symbolic gestures, rather than trying to effect real change for which evangelicals had hoped.³⁸

Although many criticized Reagan for making merely symbolic efforts to address evangelical concerns, conservative Christians maintained their support for him in his successful reelection bid in 1984. Abiding evangelical support for Reagan suggests that, despite disappointment, many religious leaders felt Reagan was still their best hope. Had the Christian Right rebuked Reagan too strongly, they might have lost what moderate influence they had gained. When viewed from a long-term political perspective, many evangelicals saw the Reagan presidency as the beginning, not the culmination of, their influence in the White House.³⁹

³⁵ Haberman, *Into the Wilderness*, 243.

³⁶ *Ibid*, 245.

³⁷ Martin, *With God on Our Side*, 233.

³⁸ *Ibid*, 234.

³⁹ Haberman, *Into the Wilderness*, 247.

Others seemed content to have played a role in shaping the political agenda. Ed Dobson, one of Jerry Falwell's aides, summed up the evangelical experience of the Reagan presidency, rendering a mixed verdict.

Did we have access? Yes. Did we have influence? Yes. Did the president and vice president attend our events? Yes. Were we invited to theirs? Yes. Very little (of the evangelical social agenda was accomplished), other than that they have become points of discussion in every election, which was a positive. As far as significant political change, there really hasn't been a lot of that.⁴⁰

The final verdict from evangelicals seems to be that, while Reagan did more than Carter to give voice to evangelical concerns, he was too preoccupied with winning the Cold War and righting the country's economy to offer anything more than symbolic support for evangelical issues.⁴¹ Although disappointed with Reagan's actual accomplishments, many evangelicals like Jerry Falwell believed that Reagan's presidency was crucial in laying the foundation for future progress.

Following the disillusionment with the Reagan years, conservative Christians endured a period of much cooler relations with presidents George H.W. Bush and Bill Clinton. Bush, a lifelong Episcopalian, did not speak openly about his faith and appeared awkward and stilted when he attempted to do so. Clinton, on the other hand, was a Baptist who seemed to relish religious discourse as much as Reagan. His brand of religion, however, was more akin to the liberal social gospel of Lyndon Johnson than the conservative agenda of Reagan. This switch left evangelicals in the political cold, wondering if a future candidate could seize upon Reagan's momentum. Although he appeared an unlikely choice at the time, George W. Bush would eventually become that candidate.

Chapter 2: The Spiritual Life of George W. Bush

Although the preceding survey of religion and presidential politics in the twentieth century demonstrates an undeniable trajectory moving in the direction of closer affiliation between the two, George W. Bush's spiritual story needs to be understood in its own context, apart from the larger American political narrative of which it is a part. While Bush's faith-based initiative seems a logical outgrowth of the growing collusion between faith and politics in the late twentieth and early twenty-first centuries, Bush's unique spiritual narrative makes him the most likely candidate to strengthen the bonds between church and state. As many—including Bush himself—have noted, there is an indissoluble link between the forty-third President's own religious life and his political and policy goals.

⁴⁰ Martin, *With God on Our Side*, 236.

⁴¹ Wilcox, *Onward Christian Soldiers?* 89.

Early in his life, the younger Bush felt the pressure of living up to his legacy. Son of a privileged political family, Bush was haunted early on by his perceived inability to secure his father's approval. The younger Bush began traveling down his father's road in 1961, when he enrolled at the prestigious Phillips Academy, Andover.⁴² In his sympathetic spiritual biography of George W. Bush, Stephen Mansfield relates an anecdote that is telling of the younger Bush's struggle to fit into the glamorous world of his father.

As he settled into his schoolwork, he encountered a problem that has possibly plagued him all his life. He was given an assignment to write about a strong personal emotion, and he chose his grief at the death of his sister, Robin. Deciding that the word *tears* was too unsophisticated for Andover, he used a thesaurus his mother had given him and chose as a substitute the word *lacerates*. Obviously, he had chosen the wrong sense of *tears*. The teacher returned the paper with a zero and the words "Disgraceful: See me immediately." Bush turned to his friends and said, "How am I going to last a week?"⁴³

After Bush completed his studies at Andover, he continued to follow his father's path, this time to undergraduate study at Yale. Bush's college years proved to be more of the same frustration that plagued his time at Andover. Often intimidated by the intellectual snobbery he found so ubiquitous at Yale, Bush longed to return to his beloved Texas, far from the blue-blood entitlement of the Ivy League crowd.

Bush's post-Yale life is characterized by a series of failed business ventures that led him to question his place in life. Although he had earned degrees from Yale and Harvard, he still felt like a failure. A growing addiction to alcohol compounded his problems, and led many to conclude that the younger Bush was squandering his legacy.

Even at this stage of his life, though, there are hints of the more spiritually-inclined George W. Bush that would emerge as governor and president. The first glimmer of Bush, the future politician so attuned to the strategic importance of religion, came in 1978, when the 31-year-old Bush ran for Congress in Texas' 19th District. While Bush's opponent, Kent Hance, succeeded in painting Bush as an elite Ivy League frat boy who was not sufficiently "Texan," Bush also learned a difficult lesson about the political value of religion.⁴⁴ Hance began mailing campaign materials to future constituents with the greeting line "Dear Christians" at the top. In a close race, Bush realized that ceding the religious vote to his opponent made the difference in the election contest. Never again would Bush run a campaign without injecting religious language into his political rhetoric.

Before Bush could become the Christian politician many Americans know today, he had to sort out his own beliefs and tame his love of alcohol. Three encounters mark Bush's incremental evolution from lost soul to Bible-quoting Christian-in-chief. Each anecdote is important to Bush's later political thinking about religion, for each shows the power of religious faith to work as a transformative agent in the lives of those who are struggling. It is this vision of religion as agent of change that later informed Bush's

⁴² Mansfield, *The Faith of George W. Bush*, 42.

⁴³ *Ibid*, 43.

⁴⁴ *Ibid*, 54.

devotion to faith-based initiatives as a set of policy tools uniquely capable of reaching out to the addicted, the hungry and the aimless.

The first encounter that began the Bush transformation came at a party hosted by friends. There, Bush was reintroduced to Laura Welch, a devout Methodist who was George W.'s elementary school classmate. Welch and Bush married after a brief three-month courtship.⁴⁵ To friends and observers, Bush's marriage to Laura transformed him in a number of ways. His lifestyle began to change, and with his new marriage came an embrace of Laura's Methodism. Although Bush was raised in an Episcopal family, he began accompanying Laura to Methodist services. Mansfield, who refers to Laura as "a gentle Texas lady, the reader he never was, and a methodical public school librarian," claims that many of Bush's closest friends noted the change in George W.'s life after marriage. His drinking slowed and eventually ended, he curtailed his use of foul language and he began to raise a family.

The second encounter that propelled Bush to new spiritual insight occurred in 1984. With his oil company failing, Bush again appeared to be drifting aimlessly, unable to live up to his family's lofty name. He had become a regular church attendee, but longed for a more genuine experience that would open his heart. At that time, evangelist Arthur Blessitt was winning souls in Texas with his born-again Christianity. At a Holiday Inn in Midland, Texas, Bush and a friend met with Blessitt to discuss Bush's spiritual longings. During the conversation, Blessitt reportedly asked Bush what his relationship with Jesus was. Bush replied that he was not sure. Bush also informed Blessitt that he was not certain that if he died at that moment, he would go to heaven. Blessitt and Bush then prayed together, with Bush agreeing to accept Jesus into his life as his savior. In classic born-again language, Blessitt explained to Bush that his life had now changed and that he had been "saved."⁴⁶

While Bush's conversation with Blessitt opened the door for Bush to examine his beliefs more closely and to participate in Bible studies with others who had been "saved," he appears to have remained unsatisfied after the Blessitt encounter. Evidence of this enduring emptiness comes in the form of an oft-cited meeting between Bush and Billy Graham, world-famous evangelist and spiritual adviser to Bush's father and other leading politicians, that took place a year after Bush's encounter with Blessitt. In 1985, during a family vacation in Kennebunkport, Maine, Bush and Graham took a walk together on the beach. During the exchange, Graham put to Bush many of the same questions that Blessitt did, inquiring into Bush's relationship with Jesus and his certainty of his own salvation. Bush replied with uncertainty. The rest of the conversation is shrouded in mystery, but Bush would later claim that the walk with Graham "planted a mustard seed in my heart."⁴⁷ Though it is unclear to many why the Blessitt conversion of the previous year left Bush desiring more spiritual fulfillment, Mansfield hypothesizes that the Graham encounter held more validity for Bush, as it reinforced his family's long relationship with Graham. Bush might also have felt that receiving the blessing of his father's spiritual adviser exorcised some of the inferiority demons that plagued the younger Bush for most of his early life.

⁴⁵ *Ibid*, 53.

⁴⁶ *Ibid*, 65.

⁴⁷ *Ibid*, 68.

After the Graham encounter, faith became an inextricable part of Bush's life, both public and private. It is also important to note that, having consulted with Graham, who enjoyed close ties to many presidents, most notably Richard Nixon, may have placed Bush on the political radar of other conservative Christians. At this time, Graham was viewed as something of a *de facto* chaplain to Republican politicians, and Bush's affiliation with him could only serve to help Bush politically.

Bush's first entrée into Christian politics came during his father's successful 1988 presidential campaign. The younger Bush served as the campaign's liaison to the emerging Religious Right. Serving in this role allowed Bush to garner media attention at a time when the Republican Party's link to religious conservatives was solidifying. It also allowed George W. to gain experience speaking about his faith to large groups of political supporters, a habit that would later come to define his own presidency.

After serving as co-owner of the Texas Rangers baseball team, Bush decided to run for governor of Texas in 1994. Religion figured prominently in the race, as the contest featured two distinct brands of Methodism, Bush's evangelical variety and incumbent Ann Richards' more liberal version.⁴⁸ Bush won in a close contest, and began to think of ways of combining his evangelical faith with his policy goals.

One of the most influential figures in Bush's governorship was Marvin Olasky, a conservative author who met with Bush early in his first term to discuss methods of combining Christian compassion with sound public policy. Eventually, Bush lobbied the Texas legislature to modify requirements for licensure of faith-based institutions, freeing them to operate social service programs as they wished.⁴⁹ With the faith-based seed now planted in his mind, Bush began to run with the idea, as Olasky recalls.

He issued an Executive Order making Texas the first state to establish the option of using private and religious charities to deliver welfare services. He set up a level playing field for both religious and nonreligious groups for Texas social service contracts, abstinence education grants, and poverty-fighting initiatives. He made Texas the first state to permit a state prison unit to be operated by a ministry. He established alternative licensing procedures for many faith-based programs. He created a pilot program establishing Second Chance group homes for unwed teen welfare mothers run by faith-based and other private groups. He proposed and signed a Good Samaritan law that gives liability protection to health professionals who donate charitable care to needy Texans. He recommended and signed a law requiring governmental agencies to develop welfare-to-work partnerships with faith-based groups in a way that respects those groups' unique religious character.⁵⁰

This flurry of legislative activity put Texas on the map as a laboratory for faith-based experimentation. The central role played by faith-based proposals in Bush's 1995-2000 governorship allowed him to further court religious conservatives and gain political allies who shared his evangelical faith.

As Bush's name began to circulate as a possible contender for the 2000 Republican presidential nomination, it appeared that the timing of a Bush candidacy was

⁴⁸ *Ibid*, 95.

⁴⁹ *Ibid*, 101.

⁵⁰ *Ibid*, 101.

ideal. Political observers noted that the nation, grown weary of the prevarications and half-truths of the scandalous Clinton years, would respond positively to a candidate who cast his political plans in decidedly religious language. Additionally, many felt that Bush could pick up the conservative agenda where Reagan had left it. At the beginning of 1999, Bush seemed destined to follow his father's footsteps once again, this time in pursuit of the White House.

Chapter 3: Bush and the Faith-Based Initiative

As evangelicals lamented their relative loss of influence in the post-Reagan years, George W. Bush became a likely candidate to resurrect the conservative Christian policy platform and once again bring it into the political mainstream. With the 2000 presidential election drawing near, religious conservatives began to court Bush to run for the Republican nomination. There were two primary reasons for the conservative pursuit of George W. Bush. First, as governor of Texas, Bush had encouraged faith-based organizations in his state to assist government in providing social services to the neediest Texans.⁵¹ Second, as his own ambition for the presidency grew, Bush openly couched his political plans in religious language.

As he prepared to run for president in 1999, he summoned a group of prominent pastors to the governor's mansion in Austin to "lay hands" on him. Bush assured them that he felt "called" to run for president. And on December 13, 1999, during a debate sponsored by the *Des Moines Register* in advance of the Iowa precinct caucuses, Bush, in answer to a question, declared that Christ was his favorite philosopher, "because he changed my life."⁵²

As governor, Bush had taken advantage of certain provisions of the Personal Responsibility and Work Opportunity Reconciliation Act of 1996 to create partnerships with faith groups.⁵³ Conceived as a massive overhaul to the existing welfare system, Congressional Republicans teamed with the Clinton administration to pass the PRWORA, a statute that envisioned a more efficient system of delivering need-based services. As part of the PRWORA, states were permitted to contract with religious organizations to provide services such as Temporary Assistance for Needy Families, Food Stamps, Medicaid and Supplementary Security Income.⁵⁴ The PRWORA further stipulated that states could not exclude faith-based organizations from private contracts merely on the basis of their religious status. Additionally, the act allowed those religious organizations who did provide services to maintain their religious identity, to keep their religious symbols and objects intact within their buildings, and to base hiring decisions on the religious faith of applicants. Together, these portions of the act became known as the "charitable choice" provisions.⁵⁵

⁵¹ Wright, *Taking Stock*, 15.

⁵² Balmer, *God in the White House*, 145.

⁵³ Wright, *Taking Stock*, 12.

⁵⁴ *Ibid*, 13.

⁵⁵ *Ibid*, 12.

In exchange for this ability to partner with government, however, faith groups had to agree not to utilize any government funding for sectarian worship, proselytization, or any other inherently religious activity.⁵⁶ This provision of PRWORA became a nebulous aspect of faith group/government partnerships, eventually requiring the intervention and interpretation of the Supreme Court of the United States. In 2000, the Supreme Court's ruling in *Mitchell v. Helms* placed responsibility for the non-sectarian use of grant funding squarely on the shoulders of the government. The Court's three main conclusions stated that the permissibility of certain religious activities on the part of grant recipients must be clearly stipulated, the government must ensure that grantees comply with any non-sectarian criteria established, and the government must continually monitor grantee conduct to prevent breach of the non-sectarian criteria.⁵⁷

As a governor who had employed the new provisions of PRWORA to help needy Texans, Bush emerged in 1999 as a clear favorite among leading evangelical politicians. In fact, as Clyde Wilcox points out, it was Bush's outspoken faith that led many prominent preachers to support him, a phenomenon that may have won the election for him.

During the campaign, Bush appealed openly to the Christian Right and received substantial support in key states such as South Carolina. Pat Robertson's active work on behalf of Bush drew an angry rebuke from Senator John McCain...In South Carolina, Bush spoke at Bob Jones University and did not use the occasion to chasten the school for its openly anti-Catholic message nor its policies on interracial dating. Thus, ultimately it was moderate Bush who appealed most strongly to Christian conservatives and won because of their support.⁵⁸

Thus, it came as no surprise that one of Bush's first acts as the 43rd president of the United States was the issuance of an executive order creating the White House Office of Faith-Based and Community Initiatives on Jan. 29, 2001.⁵⁹ (It is telling that Bush's electoral rival, former Vice President Al Gore, had also pledged to facilitate the involvement of faith groups in federal service delivery programs, a statement that demonstrates the extent to which both sides had begun to pay attention to the political power of faith groups). The highly partisan environment that dominated the nation's capital after the bitterly contested 2000 election, however, prevented the President's faith-based legislative program from moving forward. Following the attacks of Sept. 11, 2001, Bush's focus shifted towards foreign policy, an orientation that would remain with him throughout his eight years in the White House.

Despite his failure to win passage of a faith-based legislative program in his first term, Bush's proposals alone were watershed moments in the history of religious-political interaction in America, venturing into collaborative efforts hitherto unseen in American government. For example, the Community Solutions Act of 2001 focused on expanding opportunities for faith-based groups to participate in federal service programs, as well as incentivizing charitable giving to such groups. The bill also sought to bolster efforts to ensure that faith-based organizations had equal access to federal grant programs, while also protecting the right of faith organizations to hire on the basis of religious orientation

⁵⁶ *Ibid*, 13.

⁵⁷ *Ibid*, 15.

⁵⁸ *Ibid*, 81.

⁵⁹ Wright, *Taking Stock*, 15.

without jeopardizing their federal grant funding. After passing out of the House of Representatives, the bill did not reach the Senate floor before adjournment late in 2001.

Following the failure of the Community Solutions Act of 2001 to be considered by the Senate, Senators Joseph Lieberman and Rick Santorum proposed the Charity Aid, Recovery and Empowerment Act—or CARE Act—of 2002. The bill sought to rescue several of Bush's faith-based plans, as well as to give the Senate a chance to weigh in on Bush's proposals. Specifically, the CARE Act attempted to gain broader bipartisan support by eliminating the contentious religious hiring provisions contained in the Community Solutions Act of 2001.⁶⁰ The bill also called for equal treatment of religious organizations in competitions for federal funding. Additionally, the Lieberman-Santorum bill also set up a \$150 million Compassion Capital Fund to assist smaller community and faith-based organizations in establishing working relationships with the government. Although the bill was generally viewed as being less contentious than the 2001 proposal, support failed to materialize, preventing a vote on the Senate floor before the end of session.

Determined to provide a legislative foundation for President Bush's faith-based initiatives, Santorum and Lieberman reintroduced the CARE Act in January 2003. In this iteration of the bill, all language explicitly supporting the activities of faith groups was removed. The bill maintained its provisions establishing the Compassion Capital Fund, encouraging charitable giving and allocating over \$1 billion in block grants for states to provide need-based social services. This pared-down version of the CARE Act passed the Senate, but the House could not offer its opinion on the bill before the 2003 session ended.⁶¹

With his legislative proposals stymied by a skeptical Congress, Bush continued to expand his faith-based apparatus through executive order. In December 2002 and June 2004, Bush issued executive orders that broadened the scope of the White House Office of Faith-Based and Community Initiatives and established faith-based offices within several federal agencies.⁶² As Bush fought to expand on his public-private partnership vision, he often felt the need to explain his unwavering support for such controversial measures. In December 2002, for example, Bush explained that while government aid could help those in need, only faith could alter their lives.

The days of discrimination against religious groups just because they are religious are coming to an end. We've reformed welfare in America to help many, yet welfare policy will not solve the deepest problems of the spirit...No government policy can put hope in people's hearts or a sense of purpose in people's lives. That is done when someone, some good soul, puts an arm around a neighbor and says, "God loves you, and I love you, and you can count on us both."⁶³

Despite his public statements to the contrary, many political observers began to wonder if Bush's faith-based initiative was mere political rhetoric. David Kuo, special assistant to President Bush during the first two years of his presidency, charts his own journey from enthusiasm to skepticism for the faith-based initiative in his

⁶⁰ *Ibid*, 20.

⁶¹ *Ibid*, 21.

⁶² *Ibid*, 16.

⁶³ *Ibid*, 17.

autobiographical account of his tenure in the White House, *Tempting Faith*. Like many others who supported Bush, Kuo had spent years working for elected officials and political consultants who felt a deep sense of commitment to religious issues, but had yet to find a real audience for such matters at the highest levels of government. Although many in the Bush White House were devout Christians themselves, Kuo reveals that, from an early point in the Bush administration, the White House Office of Faith-Based and Community Initiatives' more subtle political import began to shine through.

The White House wanted to put the office and its agenda out of business while still receiving political benefits from religious leaders and voters. What the *New York Times* had come to label the president's "religion initiative" wasn't selling with mainstream voters. "Compassionate conservatism" had become a core tenet of Bush's 2000 campaign in no small part because of its appeal to suburban women. But now religion was turning them off even as religion excited religious conservatives. The only way to solve that problem was to minimize the office while maximizing its perception in the Christian community.⁶⁴

Kuo's tell-all account of the approach to the faith-based initiative in the Bush White House raises an interesting question: how dedicated was Bush to the passage and implementation of the proposals he claimed to hold so dear? On second glance, perhaps Bush's failure to win legislative support for his early faith programs was due more to his own unwillingness to expend valuable political capital on issues that appealed only to a small group of the electorate than an intransigent Congress. Once Bush realized that his new faith-based office might actually be a political liability, did he begin to distance himself from the office? Given the record of legislative failure associated with Bush's faith-based initiative in his first term, such an explanation is hardly implausible.

After winning a second presidential term in 2004, Bush was determined to continue building a permanent faith-based infrastructure, with or without legislative approval. Having learned that portions of his faith-based initiative were too contentious to pass a divided Congress, Bush sought to attach his faith-focused proposals to other legislative actions in Congress. According to David J. Wright, faith-based provisions in the second Bush term focused on three key areas: incentivizing charitable giving through tax deduction statutes, providing broader authority for government to partner with faith-based organizations, and initiating new programs to draw on the service delivery expertise of faith groups.⁶⁵

To pursue the first end—providing added incentives for individuals to give to charities—Bush resurrected the charitable giving portion of the CARE Act legislation. In August 2006, Bush signed into law the Pension Protection Act of 2006, a bill containing the remains of the CARE Act legislation proposed four years prior. As passed by Congress, the bill allowed Americans to make donations from their individual retirement accounts without paying income tax on the distribution. Additionally, the pension legislation provided larger tax write-offs for donations of food to charitable organizations and expanded the charitable tax deduction for book donations.⁶⁶ These provisions were later renewed through 2009. Although none of the faith-based provisions contained in the

⁶⁴ Kuo, *Tempting Faith*, 178.

⁶⁵ Wright, *Taking Stock*, 21.

⁶⁶ *Ibid*, 22.

pension bill were able to pass on their own, their inclusion in a non-faith-based piece of legislation demonstrates the shrewdness with which Bush acted to ensure passage of the charitable contribution portion of his initiative.

In order to achieve his second goal—broadening authorization for faith groups to partner with government—Bush employed a similar strategy. In February 2006, the President took advantage of a \$40 billion spending cut bill to gain legislative approval for this portion of his faith-based vision. As Wright points out, this measure can be counted as a unique victory for Bush, as the President “was able to sign into law the first and only bill during his presidency containing the core provisions of his Faith-Based and Community Initiative” (30). The bill reauthorized the original “charitable choice” provisions of the Personal Responsibility and Work Opportunity Reconciliation Act of 1996, protecting faith groups from discrimination from state contracts based on their religious status. The 2006 bill also reiterated statutory protection for faith-based service providers to maintain the religious symbols and effects in their buildings, as well as to keep religious references in their names. Additionally, those receiving services provided by faith groups could not be required to participate in religious activities as a condition of their receipt of services. The bill also contained reiterations of the ban on using federal funding to sponsor proselytization or religious instruction, as well a restatement of the right of faith groups to base hiring decisions on an applicant's religious status.

Bush's third goal—an increased reliance on faith-based groups in the delivery of need-based services—took many forms throughout his time in the White House. Programs such as the Healthy Marriage Initiative, the Responsible Fatherhood Initiative, and the Mentoring Children of Prisoners program were authorized as addenda to annual appropriations bills, not through separate, standalone pieces of legislation.⁶⁷

As Wright points out, Bush's inability to gain passage of unique pieces of legislation dedicated to faith-based activities sums up the mixed record of his faith-based experiment. Bush was able to direct some money to faith groups interested in government partnerships, but his success was muted by the necessity of tucking away these faith-based measures in larger, unrelated pieces of legislation. As Bush's second term came to a close, several Democrats, notably Rep. Danny K. Davis of Illinois, expressed the viewpoint that Bush's faith-based initiative was gratuitous and ineffective. “Any program that could be funded under the faith-based initiative could be funded without the faith-based initiative, as long as they agree not to discriminate in employment” a skeptical Davis explained. “It's difficult for me to rationalize the need.”⁶⁸

As the Democratic candidate for the presidency in 2008, Illinois Senator Barack Obama ran on a platform of change, a message that seemed to resonate with voters grown weary after two consecutive eight-year administrations. One of the first changes Obama made was to alter the name of the faith-based office he inherited from Bush. The new name—the White House Office of Faith-Based and Neighborhood Partnerships—gives the office a more grassroots orientation, a possible reflection of Obama's previous experience as a community organizer.

The extent of Obama's changes for the office did not stop there, however. First, Obama appointed 26-year-old Pentecostal pastor Joshua DuBois director of the office.⁶⁹

⁶⁷ *Ibid*, 31.

⁶⁸ *Ibid*, 32.

⁶⁹ Boorstein, *DuBois*, 26, to Head Faith Office.

DuBois, who had previously conducted religious outreach for the Obama campaign, represented a change in leadership style from Bush's two appointed leaders. Don Willett and John DiIulio, two men who served as directors of the office in the Bush administration, brought legal and academic experience to the office. DuBois, however, brought a faith background to the office that was unmatched during Bush's tenure.

In addition to the appointment of an ordained pastor, Obama also planned to make substantive changes to the role the office would play in his administration. Shortly after his inauguration, Obama spoke of the greater role religious groups could play in healing the nation's wounds.

The particular faith that motivates each of us can promote a greater good for all of us. Instead of driving us apart, our varied beliefs can bring us together to feed the hungry and comfort the afflicted; to make peace where there is strife and rebuild what has broken; to lift up those who have fallen on hard times. This is not only our call as people of faith, but our duty as citizens of America, and it will be the purpose of the White House Office of Faith-Based and Neighborhood Partnerships.⁷⁰

In June 2009, Obama convened the first meeting of his 25-member faith-based advisory council that included several pastors, academics, and nonprofit executives (Wan). Obama planned to employ the office in the development of policy, as well as to continue administering service delivery grants.

At the advisory council's first meeting, Obama divided the group into six task forces: poverty reduction, responsible fatherhood, interfaith outreach, faith-based office reforms, climate change, and global poverty reduction. The mission of each group clearly demonstrated a shift in focus from the previous administration; the office's primary role of disbursing grants would be augmented by its role in policy formulation.

Members of the group charged with reducing poverty would do so by raising awareness of existing government benefits such as income tax credits and food stamps among those in poverty. Additionally, the Obama administration planned to meet with government officials from Ohio to learn more about the Ohio Benefit Bank, an online, counselor-assisted access point for need-based services such as heating assistance, free tax preparation and food stamps. The Obama administration also considered taking the "level playing field" approach a step further by granting special contracting advantages to faith-based groups, similar to provisions in place for minority-owned businesses.

The second task force sought to raise awareness of the importance of responsible fatherhood by establishing mentoring programs that allow fathers to learn effective parenting approaches from more experienced fathers. Additionally, the task force planned to devise strategies to address domestic violence, including encouraging males to hold each other more accountable for domestic and family violence.

As a move towards greater foreign policy success, Obama planned to rely on his third task force to promote broader religious understanding and cooperation, both within the United States and abroad. This group would work with faith communities in other countries to tackle international issues such as malaria eradication. Obama also stressed further engagement with the Islamic world.

Hoping to avoid some of the contentious issues that stalled many of his predecessor's faith-based endeavors, Obama's fourth group would take a closer look at

⁷⁰ The White House, *Remarks of President Barack Obama*.

the legal precedents and policies inherited from the Bush administration. In particular, this group sought to examine executive orders and other Bush policy documents in order to formulate uniform policies that would outline regulations for faith-based interactions throughout the government. Joshua DuBois also stated that, through the Justice Department, the administration would review the legal precedents surrounding the controversial religious hiring issue.⁷¹

Obama planned to deploy his fifth task force to pursue a key policy goal of his administration—greater awareness of climate change. In particular, this group would work to develop ways for government to partner with faith groups to perform environmental work. The task force would also push for the increased energy efficiency of places of worship, as well as providing environmental literacy materials to faith groups.

The final group, charged with the reduction of global poverty, would explore the efficacy of foreign aid programs that provide American resources to portions of civil society in other countries. Instead of traditional intergovernmental aid, for example, the task force plans to examine opportunities for governments to grant aid to faith communities abroad. Part of the group's mission centered on persuading the American people to support foreign aid initiatives of all varieties.

Although Obama's early plans for the office have been widely praised, portions of his vision drew criticism.⁷² Part of the office's stated overall mission is to decrease the number of unplanned pregnancies, to reduce the need for abortions, and to promote adoptions. While DuBois admitted that this goal could spell political trouble for the office, the administration remained committed to the endeavor.⁷³ It is reasonable to assume that groups such as the American Civil Liberties Union and Planned Parenthood will take issue with the Obama administration's stated goal of reducing abortions.

⁷¹ DuBois, *Government Partnerships With Faith-Based Organizations*.

⁷² *Pick for faith-based office earns praise*.

⁷³ DuBois, *Government Partnerships With Faith-Based Organizations*.

Conclusion: What to Make of the Faith-Based Initiative

Now that the faith-based experiment has passed from one administration to another, it seems an ideal time to examine its effectiveness and to provide some predictions for the future. On a political level, the mere fact that Bush's faith-based experiment has survived into the administration of a successor of the opposite party demonstrates that the faith-based initiative has been formally “institutionalized” into the presidency.⁷⁴ This in itself is a remarkable political achievement for a president whose legacy is often defined using terms like “polarization” and “partisanship.”

Another way to measure a policy's success is through the lens of public opinion. Given the controversial nature of Bush's faith-based plans, as well as the nation's long-held division of church and state, public opinion is especially important on this issue.

One important measure of the effectiveness of faith-based services is the number of people involved in delivering them. A recent Independent Sector study reported that about 23 percent of Americans said they volunteer for a faith-based organization. Other investigations have also shown that about 74 percent of American congregations supply volunteers to a faith-based organization.⁷⁵

On the service delivery side, a 2007 survey by the Rockefeller Institute's Roundtable on Religion and Social Welfare Policy showed that nearly 70 percent of American congregations provide some form of social service to their communities and/or congregations. Perhaps most tellingly—and most encouraging for supporters of the faith-based initiative—more than 80 percent of congregations also said they support the idea of public-private partnerships to assist government in delivering need-based services.⁷⁶

These findings were corroborated by a 2008 Pew Forum on Religion & Public Life survey, which found that 67% of Americans favored allowing religious groups to apply for government funding to provide social services. The survey also indicated, however, that the thorny issue of religious hiring decisions has not gone away. Of those surveyed, 73 percent said those organizations that receive federal funding should not be allowed to make hiring decisions based on an applicant's religious status.⁷⁷ This sentiment stands in opposition to the current judicial precedent, an issue the Obama administration has promised to re-examine.

Apart from public opinion polls, very little empirical evidence exists to judge the effectiveness of faith-based service delivery. A 2006 Roundtable on Religion and Social Welfare Policy analysis of 99 federal programs over a three-year stretch showed that the relative amount of funding going to faith groups remained the same, hovering around 17 percent in 2002, 2003, and 2004.⁷⁸ Even those intimately involved with the Bush faith-based initiative admit the lack of empirical data remains a hindrance to further expansion. Former faith-based office director John DiIulio has remarked: “We do not yet know...whether America's religious armies of compassion, local or national, large or small, measurably outperform their secular counterparts.”⁷⁹

⁷⁴ Hult, *Empowering the White House*, 8.

⁷⁵ Wright, *Taking Stock*, 70.

⁷⁶ *Ibid*, 71.

⁷⁷ *Faith-Based Aid Favored—With Reservations*.

⁷⁸ Wright, *Taking Stock*, 74.

⁷⁹ *Ibid*, 75.

So what must Obama do to grow the faith-based initiative and to avoid some of the pitfalls of his predecessor? First, Obama must show that his most controversial proposals, including his oft-stated desire to reduce teen pregnancies and his faith-based foreign policy overtures, are grounded in strong policy consensus. He must demonstrate that his proposals will serve a defined policy need, rather than simply allowing faith-based groups to flex their muscles in the political arena. If, for example, Obama can demonstrate that faith groups have been effective in reducing unintended pregnancies, or that faith-based foreign policy emissaries can truly build common ground that makes diplomatic work easier, he may avoid several of the church-state debates that plagued the Bush experiment.

Secondly, Obama will inevitably have to confront the issue of faith-based hiring. Obama has said that he will defer such matters to the Justice Department for closer scrutiny. Regardless of the Justice Department's investigations, however, it will be politically necessary for Obama to disclose his position on the issue. As the Pew survey cited above indicates, faith-based efforts enjoy strong support in America, but the religious hiring question remains a problem. If Obama continues to exempt groups who receive federal funds from equitable hiring policies, he risks giving the appearance that he is merely toeing the Bush line.

Finally, for the faith-based initiative to attain a permanent place in government, the Obama administration must show that members of the advisory council and those who direct the faith-based office have the necessary qualifications to serve in government. If those appointed by Obama lack the appropriate skills and competencies, the President's faith efforts will smack of political maneuvering. If, however, those surrounding Obama combine strong political acumen with religious knowledge and service commitments, the current administration can help to overturn the daunting perception that the faith office is a means of wresting religious Americans into the Democratic camp.

Much of the legacy of America's faith-based experiment remains to be written. Although President Bush failed to secure passage of many of his standalone faith-based policies, he did succeed in laying the groundwork for a service-delivery apparatus that continues to function today. In trying to redefine the office's role and give it greater authority over matters of policy, President Obama has already begun the process of further embedding the faith-based office in the permanent machinery of the presidency. The extent to which he succeeds in demonstrating the need for, and the effectiveness of, the White House Office of Faith-Based and Neighborhood Partnerships will be a crucial factor in determining the nature of future efforts.

In the broader context of American religion and politics, Bush played a pivotal role in the growing collusion between the two. It has been argued that Bush was uniquely suited to bring the issue of religion to the forefront of presidential politics. His personal journey was guided and propelled by a vision of religion as an agent of change. Bush sought to apply this hard-earned insight as a tool of public policy. Although his desire to do so seems a logical result of the growth of religion's presence in the public square, it is nonetheless a remarkable distance from the prevailing separation of church and state dogma that Kennedy advanced in 1960. Perhaps the phenomenon of the faith-based initiative could best be described as one of enduring change, a government tool that is at the same time unprecedented and yet consistent with the religious motives of the early

colonists. The initiative proves that presidents, like their Puritan ancestors, continually strive to make America a more perfect union, and to render it a shining city upon a hill.

Beyond the mere political posturing and public opinion polls associated with the faith-based initiative, a few important questions have remained largely unasked. First, how will future faith-based efforts address the overwhelmingly Protestant nature of the endeavor up to this point? The very inclusion of the term “faith” in the title denotes a movement that is more likely to appeal to evangelicals than to Catholics and other Christian denominations. This insistence on couching the initiative in evangelical terms reinforces the criticism that, in creating the associated office, Bush merely sought to placate evangelical voters who could put him over the top electorally in 2000 or 2004. The extent to which President Obama can expand the office’s work to downplay its past reliance on solely evangelical support will be crucial to the initiative’s continued survival.

Second, as the United States becomes a more diverse nation, how will the initiative seek to build bridges with non-Christian groups, those for whom “faith”—in the Christian sense of belief in Jesus Christ as the Savior—does not resonate as strongly, or at all? Up to this point, the initiative has been driven by Christian presidents, staffed by Christian appointees and utilized mostly by Christian organizations to gain a foothold in the terrain of government grantmaking. Scholars of religion, as well as public policy experts, would do well to encourage future presidents to expand the initiative’s aims to other faith groups—and to those with no faith profession—if the project is to avoid the continued accusations of church-state violations.

Finally, what does the continued presence of the faith-based initiative mean for the greater age-old debate about the mixture of religion and public policy? Clues to the general mood of the country in relation to church-state issues continue to arise in the form of judicial decisions, as the Supreme Court annually hears many cases dealing with religious displays and language in public places, religious practices in schools and funding for religious-based education. Although many look to the Court’s current dockets to take the political temperature of the country, it is important to note that the Court’s past precedents on church-state cases reveal very little consistency. Instead, Court rulings seem to merely indicate the viewpoints and preferences of those who happen to sit on the benches of the highest court at the time. Like the faith-based initiative itself, the Supreme Court’s church-state jurisprudence remains a work in progress, constantly being shaped and reshaped as the actors involved come and go.

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