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# Jimmy Carter: The Re-emergence of Faith-Based Politics and the Abortion Rights Issue

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*This article will extend the current re-evaluation of the Carter presidency through a detailed examination of the enduring impact of his evangelical Christian faith upon modern American political discourse. Carter successfully reawakened faith-based politics but, because his faith did not exactly mirror the religious and political agenda of the disparate groups that make up the religious conservative movement within the United States, that newly awakened force within American politics ultimately used its power to replace him with Ronald Reagan, a president who more carefully articulated their agenda. As this article will show, the key issue that marked the intrusion of highly contentious religious-cultural issues into the political debate was abortion. This issue was emblematic of both the engagement of religious conservatives in political life in this period and of the limitations of Carter as their authentic political agent.*

Since 1985 there have been clear transdisciplinary efforts to revise understanding of the Carter presidency. The first wave of revisionist scholarship was based upon the Oral History Project carried out by the White Burkett Miller Center at the University of Virginia. These efforts were given further impetus in 1987 with the opening of the Carter Presidential Library in Atlanta, Georgia. Such work calls for an approach that transcends the Neustadt paradigm that defines presidential power as “the power to persuade.” Instead, it calls for Jimmy Carter to be seen as a “non-political politician,” in Erwin C. Hargrove’s phrase, a “trusteeship president” in that of Charles O. Jones, or even, in the words of John Dumbrell, a “presidential Robert Pirsig” (Neustadt 1990,

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29; Hargrove 1988, 164; Jones 1988, 2; Dumbrell 1995, 3).<sup>1</sup> Essentially, it presents Jimmy Carter as a figure marking a departure in modern presidential politics. The following work extends this approach through highlighting the centrality to Carter's presidency of his deeply pious religious faith.

So far initial appraisals of this key phenomenon have been limited. Nielsen (1977) and Ribuffo (1989) have either largely focused on Carter as an evangelical candidate rather than upon the Carter presidency as a whole, or they have taken only partial steps toward marshalling primary sources in tracing Carter's relationship with religious conservatism. To date the most detailed analysis is Ribuffo's "God and Jimmy Carter," where he argues "Carter's religion affected the image of his presidency more than his substantive policies" (1989, 150). Here and elsewhere, Ribuffo emphasizes contemporary commentary describing Carter as "weird," "strange," and "quirk[y]" and links this to his faith.<sup>2</sup> Instead, this article argues that far from being superficial or primarily an issue connected to image, Carter's religion had a key impact upon policy, most significantly in terms of what it prevented him from doing. Rather than being weird or incomprehensible, Carter was in fact acting as president in a manner consistent with the precepts of his Southern Baptist faith. His Christianity played a significant role in his electoral success in 1976; however, delving into Carter's presidential papers, his public statements and his private memoranda show that his religion was also a factor leading to his rejection by the American electorate in 1980, alongside more obviously fundamental factors such as the stagflation economy, the USSR's invasion of Afghanistan, the awakening of religious fundamentalism in Iran, and fragmentation within the Democratic Party.

By placing Carter within the context of the rightward shift in the American body politic during the late 1970s, this article shows that his presidency was a catalyst for the re-emergence of Christian conservatism as a dynamic political force in the late twentieth century. Carter was a Southern Baptist Christian and to varying extents, his faith influenced his policies as well as his relationships with key Democratic Party constituents including the leftist evangelical black civil rights movement and the women's liberation movement; it also impacted upon his foreign policy, particularly his approach to the Middle East, the Panama Canal, and human rights more generally. However, the specific focus of this article is the emblematic issue of abortion rights, an issue to which Carter responded according to the specifics of his faith and not according to the expectations of Christian conservatives. Abortion powerfully brings into focus Carter's seemingly contradictory commitments, on the one hand to old-time religious values and their importance in the political arena, and on the other to the maintenance of constitutional separation between the affairs of church and state.

## The 1970s, Spiritual Malaise, and the Carter Candidacy

In 1970s America, Carter's religious fervor and its association with old-time traditional American values had great political resonance. However, what is significant is

1. See also Brinkley (1996) and Strong (2000).

2. See Ribuffo (1989; 1997).

that by the 1970s, religious issues had re-entered mainstream politics even though conventional indicators register that the 1970s were a less religious decade than the 1920s or even the 1950s. As E. J. Dionne has noted, both mainline and fundamentalist churches were “too busy growing” in the 1950s to be heavily engaged in politics (1992, 217). The failure of the utopianism of the 1960s meant the nation turned inward and the 1970s became, in Tom Wolfe’s phrase, the “Me Decade.” A narcissistic preoccupation, which Roof (1993, 89) called “the flight into self,” fostered a growing interest in personal spirituality as America experienced its “third great awakening,” a wave of religious revivalism to match that of the mid-eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries (Wolfe 1983, 265). Lasch wrote that the American people “seem to wish to forget not only the sixties, the riots, the new left, the disruptions on college campuses, Vietnam, Watergate and the Nixon presidency, but their entire collective past,” a desire, he suggested, that “proves on closer analysis to embody the despair of a society that cannot face the future” (1979, 5).

“New Age” religions gained in popularity, but so too did more traditional forms of worship. As conservative political commentator and former presidential speechwriter David Frum (2000, 147) suggests, “The truly big news in American religion in the 1970s was not the rise of outlandish new religions but the shifting balance of power among the old.” Schulman (2001, 100) notes how the Jewish faith became more conservative and Catholicism joined the search for “privatized spirituality.” Most markedly, Protestant evangelical Christianity, defined by an intensely personal preoccupation with salvation not of the collective but of the self and with the formation of a highly intimate relationship with Jesus Christ as savior, appealed to an increasing number of Americans.

Schulman (2001) has linked the tendency for introspection within American society with the evangelical born-again experience. Rather than a communal or congregational religious conversion, a “rebirth in Christ” was intensely personal, an experience of deliverance that came about through acceptance of Jesus as spiritual redeemer. Furthermore, fears over modern America’s precipitous downward spiral of morality were matched by evangelical eschatology that foresaw an impending Armageddon and an imminent Second Coming of Christ. Thus, the 1970s saw a dramatic shift in the balance of denominational power as evangelical congregations swelled at the expense of their mainstream rivals (Frum 2000, 153). One much quoted Gallup poll conducted in 1976 showed that 48 percent of American Protestants and 18 percent of American Catholics considered themselves to have undergone a “born-again” religious conversion (Ribuffo 1989, 143). And evangelicalism spread beyond its traditional southern and western homelands and took root across the country, part of what Egerton (1974) observed as the “southernization of America.”

During the 1970s, born-again evangelicalism represented more than the acceptance of salvation through Christ. It translated into a strict moral code and conservative positions on religious-cultural “family” issues. This diverse range of social and gender issues included the availability of abortion, the place of religious activities in public schools, sex education and creationism within the school curriculum, homosexuality, pornography, and the Equal Rights Amendment. Deeply concerned with what they interpreted as a loosening of traditional social standards and the resulting hedonism,

sexual promiscuity, materialism, and moral relativism, Christian conservatives called for the nation's moral and spiritual parameters to once again be defined by a strict adherence to Biblical absolutes. Though many Christian conservatives harked back to the 1950s, the high-water mark of American religious piety, they looked further back into history for inspiration to reverse the modern-day decline. They believed America to be a Christian nation blessed by divine providence as one "nation under God" suffering under the yoke of the immoral ideology of "secular humanism." America's renewal would be realized only through reaffirmation of both the nation's historic Judeo-Christian heritage and its covenant with God.

Jimmy Carter brought Christian conservatism back to the political center in 1976, retrieving evangelicalism from the political hinterland to which it had retreated at the end of the 1920s. As a self-proclaimed born-again evangelical, he brought an overt Biblical spirituality into the American political discourse. As Shogan (2000) has noted, although both Carter and John Kennedy used their character as a background for their candidacy, the Georgian was the first to use his character explicitly expressed through his religious faith as a direct reason for voting for him. This is not to say that Carter was the first president to co-opt religion as a means of enunciating his vision or to deny that Gerald Ford also used evangelical themes in 1976, albeit in a less intimate and forceful manner.<sup>3</sup> A Christian faith had previously been an unspoken presidential prerequisite and presidents had always used Biblical symbolism in their political rhetoric to varying degrees. However, no previous president so personalized nor so ostentatiously articulated their religiosity as a facet of their political vision as Carter. He openly announced his belief that "I'll be a better president because of my deep religious convictions," and freely admitted that what he called "My deep and consistent religious faith" was "the most important thing in my life" (cited in Pippert 1978, 117).<sup>4</sup>

Carter's 1976 electoral campaign was not based on specific issues or, given his status as a political outsider, even on partisan loyalty. As Skowronek puts it, it was an "autobiographical campaign" (1993, 374). A vote for Carter was not a vote for the agenda of the Democratic Party; it was a vote for who Carter was and what he personally represented. What he was, was a man of Christian faith whose public pronouncements reverberated with Biblical undertones. And Jimmy Carter was not just any Christian. According to Tom Wolfe (1983, 271), he was a member of the "Missionary lectern-pounding Amen ten-finder C-major-chord Sister-Martha at the Yamaha-keyboard loblolly piney-woods Baptist faith in which the members of the congregation stand up and 'give witness' and 'share it, Brother' and 'share it, Sister' and 'praise God' during the service." Carter actively identified himself with "born-again" evangelicalism.<sup>5</sup> He

3. See Ribuffo (1989, 144).

4. For early explorations of Carter's religious faith, see Kucharsky (1976); Norton and Slosser (1976); Holifield (1976); Nielsen (1977); Hefly and Hefly (1977); and Pippert (1978). For a retrospective examination of the importance of Carter's faith to both his presidency and post-presidential career written by fellow evangelicals, see Ariail and Heckler-Feltz (1996). Carter (1996, 1997) has written extensively on the importance of his faith in his life.

5. The necessity of becoming "born-again in Christ" to be able to enter heaven derives from John (3:3): Jesus warned Nicodemus, a Jewish religious leader, "Except a man be born again, he cannot see the Kingdom of God."

established his Christian credentials with thinly veiled rhetorical nods tailored to the sensibilities of evangelical voters that called for love, compassion, service, and faith. His campaign emphasized the link between his small-town upbringing and his traditional principles nurtured by his Southern Baptist beliefs. Unsurprisingly, his candidacy inspired the evangelical community. "Surely the Lord sent Jimmy Carter," said Daddy King to the Democratic Party convention in 1976 "to come on out and bring America back where she belongs" (cited in Kucharsky 1976, 135).

Evangelical Christians expected Carter's presidential politics to be profoundly shaped by his religious convictions and much of the blame for those perceptions must be attributed to Carter himself. Time and again during the 1976 campaign Carter went out of his way to raise their aspirations. Interviewed by fellow evangelical Pat Robertson on the televangelist's own Christian Broadcasting Network during the 1976 campaign he discussed the imperative "to assure that secular law is compatible with God's laws" with the proviso that if a conflict developed between the two, "we should honor God's law." Questioned about his Christian faith and its role in his candidacy he told a reporter, "I'd like to exemplify as president, I hope in a humble way and a constantly searching way, the kind of life I would like to live as a member of a church or as a Christian." Two months later in June 1976 he also told reporters at Plains Baptist Church that "We have a responsibility to try to shape government so it does exemplify the teaching of God" (cited in Pippert 1978, 106, 112, 117-18). Carter also often cited the work of the theologians Paul Tillich and Reinhold Niebuhr and showed special fondness for Niebuhr's declaration that it was the "sad duty of politics to establish justice in a sinful world" (1994, viii).<sup>6</sup>

The conviction that Carter represented both a validation of their faith and the opportunity to realize their social agenda led those evangelicals who did participate in the political process to desert their traditional support for the Republican Party in 1976. Also, many who had never voted before did so for the first time. It seemed that the prayers of conservative evangelicals had been answered. A Christian group calling itself Citizens for Carter took out a full-page advertisement in the evangelical magazine *Christianity Today* to ask, "Does a dedicated evangelical belong in the White House?" Observing that "America's problems are the result of a spiritual crisis at its heart" and calling for "a return to decency and integrity in government," the advertisement lauded Carter's "abiding sense of the importance of morality in our national life." It urged evangelicals to "play an important part in this restoration of confidence."<sup>7</sup> The Reverend Bailey Smith, a popular evangelical preacher, announced, "This country needs a born-again man in the White House. . . . And his initials are the same as our Lord's"

6. Reinhold Niebuhr sought to understand the constraints on Christian morality in the political arena. He believed that the primary goal for individual Christians was the achievement of complete *agape*—the sacrificial love inspired by Christ. However, as a "Christian Realist," he cautioned that this Christian love was not a practicable political objective because society could not reflect the morality of the individual but rather a collective selfish impulse. Thus, the most that a Christian could expect from a democratic society was the institution of simple justice. Carter concurred with Niebuhr; in a 1976 campaign interview he announced that if he was elected, one of his major responsibilities would be the "elimination of injustice" (cited in Richardson 1998, 13).

7. *Citizens for Carter* advertisement: *Christianity Today*, July 1976.

(MacPherson 1976, A1). But despite being a committed member of the evangelical community, politically Carter was never, as Wills (1990, 119) put it, "an authentic representative of their grievances." In fact, opposition to the linkage of political authority to religion lies at the core of Carter's own Baptist faith; it is a defining commitment that goes right back to the foundation of the first Baptist church in America by Roger Williams.<sup>8</sup> As Carter himself told the readers of *Playboy* magazine in his infamous 1976 interview, "One thing the Baptists believe in is complete autonomy. . . . The reason the Baptist church was formed in this country was because of our belief in absolute and total separation of church and state" (cited in Richardson 1998, 57).

A president whose entire political philosophy was molded centrally by his own personal religiosity was an open violation of the doctrine of separation of church and state. Once elected, Carter upheld his own church's historical commitment to the exercise of religion free from state involvement, reminding voters of Christ's admonition to "Render unto Caesar the things that are Caesar's; render unto God the things that are God's."<sup>9</sup> This led contemporary commentators to characterize Carter as unpredictable, complex, and even untrustworthy. Even while announcing his 1976 presidential election victory to be a "political miracle," *Time* commented upon the Carter "enigma" (Atwater 1977, 7). Noting his fondness for quoting Kierkegaard that "every man is an exception," *Time* said it was "a view that certainly fits him" (1977, 9). Subsequent analysts have also tended to interpret Carter's separation of his religion and politics as evidence of inconsistency and paradox. While White (1983) observed that Carter's personality had two intersecting layers, Strong (1986) quipped in response that this "probably short-changes him." Mazlish and Diamond (1979) felt that Carter fought "his own private wars" and that he had a "basic need to embrace contradictions." Those same contradictions led William Lee Miller to entitle his biography of Carter "The Yankee from Georgia" (1978). Miller was left wondering how Carter could be "liberal on Mondays, Wednesdays, and Fridays, conservative on Thursdays and Saturdays, mixedly moderate on Tuesdays." According to another observer, Carter had "more positions than the Kama Sutra" (White 1983, 269; Strong 1986, 649; Mazlish and Diamond 1979, 231; Miller 1978, 4; Carroll 1990, 189).

## Religion and Its Limits Within the Carter Presidency

Evangelical Christians helped secure the election of the most avowedly devout president in the nation's history in 1976 and notably, Carter's vision for America in his inaugural address concerned itself much more with faith than policy. *The New York Times* called the speech "less rallying cry than sermon" (Smith 1977, A1), as Carter embraced

8. Roger Williams challenged early American Protestant colonists who sought to impose religious orthodoxy through the institutions of the state. Instead, he insisted on church-state separation, rejecting the right of civil authorities to intervene or legislate in individual matters of faith. Banished from Massachusetts Bay in 1636, he founded the first Baptist church in America in Rhode Island in 1639. For an analysis of how he relates specifically to Carter's Christian faith, see Hefly and Hefly (1977).

9. Matthew (22:21). As Malcolm Muggeridge observes in his introduction to Kucharsky (1976), this held a special challenge for Carter, because deciding what is due Caesar and what is due to God is particularly difficult when it is yourself who has become Caesar.

the evangelical vision of moral and spiritual renewal and presented a reaffirmation of old-time American values. In one of the shortest inaugurals ever, he admitted that he had “no new dream to set forth” but instead wanted to generate “fresh faith” in the existing American dream. Invoking the nation’s “inner and spiritual strength,” he recited the admonition of the Old Testament prophet Micah (6:8): “He hath showed thee, O man, what is good; and what doth the Lord require of thee, but to do justly, and to love mercy and to walk humbly with thy God.”<sup>10</sup> Carter declared that America was “the first society openly to define itself in terms of . . . spirituality.” The nation needed once again learn to “work together and pray together,” to renew its “search for humility, mercy, and justice.” America, he said significantly, had learned “that ‘more’ was not necessarily ‘better’” (Carter 1977a, 956). This was truly revolutionary, repositioning a spiritual impetus at the core of American civilization and renewing the spiritual values held to be central to both its foundations and future.

Religion did more than just inspire Carter’s presidential rhetoric; Biblical allegory and the meta-language of born-again Christianity were fundamental to his speeches. Unsurprisingly, the most memorable speech of his presidency was also the one where religion was most evident. Carter delivered his infamous “Crisis of Confidence” address in the midst of a catastrophic oil crisis. July 1979 saw him remove himself and his cabinet from Washington to the seclusion of the presidential retreat at Camp David, Maryland. After ten days, Carter ended his soul-searching in the wilderness and addressed the nation, as one biographer put it, like Moses descending from Mount Sinai (Bourne 1997, 445). America’s problem, Carter maintained, was not a shortage of fuel at all, but instead a failure of faith. Grim faced, he warned that the energy shortage was not the cause, only a symptom, of a “much deeper” problem: a paralyzing “crisis of the American spirit.” It was observable, he said, in the “growing doubt about the meaning of our own lives,” it crippled “the very heart and soul and spirit of our national will.” Carter chastised the American people for their “mistaken idea of freedom” that meant “too many” self-centered Americans searched for instant gratification “worshipping self-indulgence and consumption.” Addressing the emptiness of modern consumer materialism he warned, “Identity is no longer defined by what one does, but by what one owns.” However, “piling up material goods cannot fill the emptiness of lives which have no confidence or purpose.” America was at a point of “moral and spiritual” crisis and only a rekindling of faith could surmount it. “With God’s help . . . for the sake of our Nation, it is time for us to join hands in America . . . with our common faith we cannot fail.” “We are at a turning point in our history,” Carter said, and it was “time to stop cursing and start praying” (Carter 1979, 1235-41). As Vice-President Mondale observed, he scolded the American people, “like sinners in the hands of an angry God” (cited in Gillon 1992, 263).

Carter’s presentation of the energy crisis as a failure of the American spirit owed everything to his religious faith. The July 15th speech was an attempt to synthesize religion and presidential leadership while his seclusion at Camp David signaled Carter’s dis-

10. Micah (6:8). For his inaugural address Carter had planned to cite the warning from II Chronicles (7:14), “If my people, which are called by my name, shall humble themselves, and pray, and seek my face, and turn from their wicked ways; then will I hear from heaven, and will forgive their sin, and will heal my land.” Concerned that the admonition might seem too harsh, he substituted the milder verse.



illusionment with the secular political process in Washington. According to Dan F. Hahn (1992, 394), Carter's conduct represented "the typical sequence of the born-again experience: identification of the problem, retreat to meditation, decision to commit, announcement of rebirth." Similarly, biographers Mazlish and Diamond (1979, 161-62) have found an unequivocal connection between Carter's style of presidential leadership and the perceptions of leadership typical of the Southern Baptist Church where leadership "is built upon charismatic qualities that attract a following and win spontaneous support." Baptists consider it vitally important "that a leader be seen to be "worthy of the people's trust and constantly reassure them of this." It was this need for a revitalization of trust in his presidency that Carter was seeking to address. Motter (1992, 468) concurs, observing that "Carter sought a symbiosis of people and leaders in which leaders drew strength from the organic goodness of people, and people demonstrated their goodness when leaders offered them ethical leadership." During his election campaign, Carter (1996, 83) had promised a government "as good as its people." In effect, he was promising not only a moral renewal of the presidency but also pledging to lead as a Baptist would, with a moral purity derived directly from those he led.<sup>11</sup>

In practice, however, Christian conservatives quickly became disillusioned with the Carter presidency. His advocacy of the Equal Rights Amendment and gay rights, and his failure to support mandatory prayer in public schools or to move to ban abortion were all anathema to their religious principles. On the international stage, his efforts toward arms control and the Panama Canal Treaty smacked of misplaced idealism at best and unholy accommodation with godless Communism at worst. As early as 1978, evangelicals began to feel disillusionment with the Carter White House. By 1979, they had coalesced as the New Religious or Christian Right and were actively campaigning for his removal from office.

Archival evidence suggests that the Carter White House failed to recognize or successfully respond to the growing alienation of what should have been the president's most natural constituency, the evangelical Christian community. This happened in spite of repeated advice from within the community itself. In January 1977, Reverend Robert Maddox, a Southern Baptist minister from Calhoun, Georgia, contacted the White House advising the president of the growing need to build bridges between the administration and the conservative Christian constituency. He recommended himself as a liaison to act as a "lightning rod" for contact between the two. The president personally dismissed the suggestion, telling Maddox, "thanks but no thanks."<sup>12</sup> When the White House finally realized the need to appoint an adviser for religious affairs and brought Maddox into the administration in 1979, the evangelicals were already beginning to turn against Carter. By then Maddox observed, Carter was "in pretty bad trouble with a lot of religious people." In particular he was inundated with complaints from evangelical groups, even

11. For analysis of the part played by Carter's Southern Baptist faith upon his presidential leadership, see Speer (1994).

12. Jimmy Carter Library (JCL): Letter, Robert Maddox to Jimmy Carter, September 1, 1978, White House Central File, Box: Religious Matters 1, File: 1/20/77-12/31/78; Letter, President Carter to Reverend Bob Maddox, October 3, 1978, White House Central File (WHCF), Box: Religious Matters 2, File: RM 10/1/78-5/31/79. JCL, Robert Maddox, Interview, December 8, 1980, White House Staff Exit Interviews, Audiotape.

Southern Baptists. They were angered by what they perceived as the “insensitivity to the point of animosity from the administration.” Their biggest complaint was the lack of access to the White House. “Under Johnson and Nixon they could get in and get things done,” recalls Maddox, “but they couldn’t find anyone to work with in the Carter White House.” Many had expected that Carter would bring Christians into influential positions in government, but Maddox recalls that they were angry that there were “no evangelicals other than Carter in the government. The perception was [that] all the people who he [Carter] had surrounded himself with were Godless. They couldn’t speak the language of the Bible.”<sup>13</sup>

The Carter White House’s unwillingness to reach out to the religious community, especially those on the political right, was a serious error with long-term electoral consequences. Ironically, that failure was a response to criticism over close involvement with Southern Baptists early in the presidency that had left Carter open to the stinging charge that he was blurring the line between religion and politics. Carter’s private correspondence reveals that he became progressively more uncomfortable with being perceived as allowing his religion to influence his actions as president. Early in his presidency, he had invited leaders of the Southern Baptist Convention to meet at the White House for a conference during which a more aggressive proselytizing strategy for the church’s missionary program was discussed. Carter urged the Convention to create an international missionary corps. A week later, the SBC voted to adopt Carter’s suggested strategy as its policy and mission program for the following five years. Carter was immediately accused not only of church-state interference but also of undue denominational favoritism. Perhaps aware of the difficulties even fellow evangelicals had experienced in getting access to the president, Jack U. Harwell, editor of the *Christian Index* and a friend of Carter’s, wrote to the president’s son Jack with an urgent warning that he wanted to be sure reached the president. He warned of his “grave concern” that Carter would be “accused of establishing some kind of Baptist Vatican on the Potomac.” He reminded the president that Southern Baptists had fought hard against the election of John Kennedy “because they thought he would do with the Roman Catholic hierarchy just this very thing.” He reminded Carter that Baptists have historically stood as “absolute champions of religious liberty and separation of church and state,” calling it “our greatest contribution to Christendom.” Harwell feared that “to call the denominational leadership into the White House and to discuss details of missionary strategy and for the President to make concrete suggestions which become denominational policy, throws you and Southern Baptists open to some extremely serious criticism.” Chastised, a concerned Carter admitted, “perhaps a meeting place outside my public home (in a hotel perhaps) would have been better.” Reaffirming his belief in church-state separation, he vowed “not to use my authority to violate this in any way” because “obviously, I realize that I, as President, have a special influence.” Pledging to consult his own pastor, he promised to ensure “that Baptists have no reason to be concerned about my actions in future.”<sup>14</sup>

13. JCL, Robert Maddox, Interview.

14. JCL, Letter, Jack Harwell to Jack Carter, 23 June [1977]; Letter, Jack Harwell to Jimmy Carter, 23 June [1977]; Letter, Carter to Harwell, 11 August 1977, White House Central File, Box: Religious Matters 1, File: RM 3 7/1/77-12/31/77.

Thereafter, Carter did not allow himself to be overtly politically linked to the evangelical Christian community; in a sense, he overcompensated at the expense of the Christian conservatives, rejecting their overtures so as to signal that he was a president who happened to be a Southern Baptist, not a Southern Baptist president beholden to the edicts of religious fundamentalism. After all, his office as president was defined by the Constitution, not by the Southern Baptist faith and message. This manifested itself in Carter's approach to a number of so-called "hot button" Christian conservative issues, in particular abortion rights. Because he felt constrained by the Constitution, he was unwilling to use the executive office to advocate a tightening of abortion laws. For Christian conservatives, it was this issue that brought Carter's failure to uphold religious imperatives most starkly into focus.

### Abortion, Religion, and the Carter Presidency

The tension between Carter and Christian evangelicals over the abortion issue was ironic in that it had been the Carter candidacy that had done most to politicize abortion as an issue for evangelicals in the first place. Though the word "abortion" does not appear in the Bible, opposition to abortion was always an issue of faith for evangelicals, with a basis in Scripture.<sup>15</sup> Critchlow has observed that up to and beyond *Roe v. Wade* in 1973, political opposition to abortion rights "remained primarily a Catholic issue," with an anti-Catholic bias keeping evangelical Protestants from involvement in the pro-life campaign (1999, 208). Involvement would also have required an abandonment of their political non-interventionist position to challenge the United States Supreme Court, the ultimate authority of legal jurisprudence in a nation evangelicals perceived to have been built around the tenets of their Protestant faith.

The Carter candidacy was critical in changing their perception. He was not alone in catalyzing abortion into a political issue, but the candidacy of a born-again Southern Baptist brought it to the forefront of presidential politics and greatly energized evangelical involvement. Specifically it drew evangelical denominations, especially fundamentalist Independent Baptists and the Pentecostal Assemblies of God, into the pro-life movement. After observing that the 1976 election re-enfranchised evangelical Christians and brought them into the political arena with gusto after years of political apathy, O'Connor points out, "Carter and his administration's handling of abortion provided an impetus for further anti-abortion organization," an impetus that spread nationally to the point where "the evangelical Christian Right's opposition to abortion was embraced in the highest places in Washington" (1996, 74).<sup>16</sup>

A further irony was that Carter was in fact personally extremely conservative on the abortion issue. During the 1976 primary and presidential campaigns, Carter made

15. See Exodus (20:13 and 21:22-23); Jeremiah (1:5).

16. For analysis of the abortion issue and the coalescence of the Christian Right, see Jaffe, Lindheim, and Lee (1981); Rubin (1987); Tribe (1990); Craig and O'Brien (1993); O'Connor (1996); and Critchlow (1999).

his conservative personal views on the issue obvious to anti-abortion groups. Calling abortion "wrong," he announced that abortion rights as they stood after *Roe v. Wade* were "one instance where my own beliefs were in conflict with the laws of our country" (cited in Pippert 1978, 103, 111). Meeting with Catholic bishops in Washington later that month, he declared that he would not try to block an amendment prohibiting abortion. He went out of his way to add that any citizen was entitled to lobby for an amendment to overturn the *Roe v. Wade* decision (Califano 1981, 51). His conservative views on the issue led Carter to clash with pro-choice feminists at the 1976 Democratic convention. Disavowing the official, pro-choice party platform that declared a constitutional amendment to overturn the Supreme Court decision on abortion to be "undesirable," he reaffirmed his belief that "abortion is wrong" (cited in O'Connor 1996, 73).

Once in office, Carter named Joseph A. Califano, a veteran of the Kennedy and Johnson administrations and a devout Catholic, as his Secretary of Health, Education, and Welfare. The HEW was the department responsible for overseeing Medicaid, the health cost assistance program for the poor, and this included the public funding of abortion. Carter told Califano that he wanted a "good Catholic" to advance his anti-abortion policy. Califano, who believed that Carter's stand on abortion was sincere and a critical factor in his 1976 election victory, held strongly pro-life sentiments. Califano argued against the use of federal funds to pay for abortion and believed his view to be shared precisely by the president. "Carter never asked my views on the subject and I never expressed them," recalled Califano; the two men "simply assumed complete agreement" (1981, 49-50).

Given the nomination of Califano and the sincerity of Carter's evangelical faith, it is unsurprising that Carter's oft-repeated promise that he would be bound by the *Roe v. Wade* decision received little attention from the evangelical community. Certainly his promise that he would remain "within the framework of the decision of the Supreme Court" on abortion, made during his 1976 *Playboy* interview, was unlikely to have been widely read by evangelical Christians (cited in Richardson 1998, 53). Blinded by their religious expectations, evangelical voters either failed to notice Carter's theological peculiarities or disregarded them as necessary electoral expediency.<sup>17</sup>

As a result, abortion became a highly contentious political issue for Jimmy Carter. Moreover, according to Reverend Robert Maddox, abortion became "the flag issue" for religious conservative groups. Maddox observed that the inevitable clash was one the Carter White House "walked into."<sup>18</sup> Christian conservatives viewed the availability of abortion as indicative of the erosion of modern America's moral consensus over the traditional role of the family. Likewise, federal protection of abortion rights was evidence of the depraved influence of secular humanism in Washington. The president's unwillingness to negate the pro-abortion advances represented by *Roe v. Wade* fundamentally alienated evangelicals. To them, it made his professions of Christian piety ring false.

17. Carter's struggle with the abortion issue is covered in accounts of the 1976 presidential campaign. See Witcover (1977); Schram (1977); Stroud (1977); and Wooten (1978).

18. JCL, Robert Maddox, Interview.

Their perception of the Carter White House was worsened further by the appointment of the high-profile pro-choice advocate, Margaret "Midge" Costanza, as a presidential assistant. The feisty and outspoken Costanza was the first woman to hold the post and she held aggressively feminist views. It is possible that Carter made the appointment in an attempt to placate pro-abortionists infuriated by the nomination of Califano. Whatever the reasoning behind her appointment, Costanza's position proved troublesome in that it internalized dissent for the president's position on abortion within the administration.

This internal opposition crystallized after the president made clear in 1977 his support of the Hyde Amendment prohibiting Medicaid financing of abortion except when necessary to preserve the mother's life, prevent severe and long-lasting physical health damage, or when the pregnancy resulted from rape or incest. Carter was concerned that the Hyde Amendment's regulations be strictly enforced so that women were not able to use the rape and incest exemption to obtain an abortion deceitfully. At Carter's behest, Califano was indeed strict in his implementation of the amendment. Jaffe, Lindheim, and Lee (1981, 59) bemoaned the fact that under Califano's leadership, "Indifference to and avoidance of the implications of legalization of a critical, widely sought health service were replaced by open hostility on the part of the pre-eminent public health official and agency in the United States."

The Hyde Amendment prevented many poor women from obtaining abortions given that it effectively made abortions available only to those who could pay for the procedure themselves. When questioned during a press conference that took place after the Supreme Court had upheld the Amendment and ruled that federal funding for abortion was not a woman's constitutional right, the president announced that the ruling "ought to be interpreted very strictly." Carter felt that federal financing of abortion "was an encouragement to abortion and its acceptance as a routine contraceptive means." When the president was reminded of the inequity of this position he was dismissive, replying simply that "there are many things in life that are not fair, that wealthy people can afford and poor people can't." It was not the place of the federal government to attempt to make "opportunities exactly equal, particularly when there is a moral factor involved" (1977b, 1237).

The president's position and his apparent insensitivity to the plight of poor women incurred outrage from the pro-choice movement as a whole and concern from pro-choice advocates within his own administration. Costanza informed the president the day after the press conference of the "overwhelming number of phone calls from public interest groups, individuals and White House staff members and agency staff members expressing concern and even anger over your remarks." She suggested that by expressing his personal views on abortion Carter had "provided negative guidance to legislators and governors and interfered in a State process in an unfair way." Costanza asked Carter to "reconsider your position and support the use of Federal funds for abortions when "medically necessary." Tellingly, archives reveal that Carter wrote "no" next to this request and that he also noted acidly in the margin, "If I had this much influence on state legis [latures] ERA would have passed." At the end of the memo, Carter scrawled "My opinion

was well defined to the U.S. during (the) campaign." He concluded, "My statement is actually more liberal than I feel personally."<sup>19</sup>

Costanza proceeded to organize an extraordinary protest meeting of some 40 high-level pro-choice female administration members. Notes from the July 18, 1977 meeting reveal that the participants "expressed their dismay" with the president's position and wanted to "get a message to the President to express their disappointment." Contrasting Carter's personal approach to abortion to his comprehensive and detailed evaluation of other complex decisions, such as defense spending, the attendees were concerned that he had failed "to ask the best experts on the issue for information like he did on the B-1 bomber." On abortion they believed he was guilty of "legislating his personal views."<sup>20</sup> They suggested that a meeting be set up "composed of poor women—the women affected by the President's decision." Carter remained resolute. "If the forty women had listened to my campaign statements they should know my position," he told the Cabinet (cited in Califano 1981, 66).

Costanza and the flourishing feminist and women's liberation movements of the era can be forgiven for not quite comprehending Carter's position. To win the 1976 presidential election Carter had made a point of courting the liberal women's vote, creating a bond between himself, a small-town Southerner, and a traditional Democratic constituency. He accepted, for example, an invitation to address the Women's Agenda Conference held in Washington in October 1976. He told them, "There have been few political developments in America in recent years that have impressed me more than the movement of women toward equal rights." Accusing the Ford administration of having "only paid lip service to women's rights," of offering them only "vetoes, indifference" and "empty rhetoric," he urged them to be "tough and militant and eloquent . . . and aggressive." Alluding to the central theme of his presidential campaign, a call for renewed trust in the nation's political leadership, Carter declared, "We cannot expect America's women to have faith in a government that ignores your legitimate needs and aspirations and excludes you." Carter promised "to be the president who will implement your agenda" (Carter 1996, 168-75).

Feminist leaders like NOW founder Betty Friedan and New York Congresswomen Bella Abzug were won over. Abzug announced, "I think women can expect a real commitment (from Carter)," while Friedan believed that Carter "would do something for women . . . unless he's an absolute liar" (Stroud 1977, 326; Glad 1980, 274). Jimmy Carter's strong and independent female relatives also impressed the movement. His mother Lillian had been an outspoken integrationist in a small town once rigorously segregated by Jim Crow legislation; his sister Ruth was a best-selling author and a figure of national renown long before her brother; and his wife Rosalynn was both a business

19. JCL, Memo ("Staff and Interest Group Reactions to President's Abortion Statements") from M. Costanza to the President, 13 July 1977, Box 38, PHF (folder, "7/15/77 (3)"). Memo, from Jan Peterson to Margaret Costanza, July 26 1977, Office of Public Liaison, Costanza, Box 1, File: Abortion, 1/77-12/77 (O/A 5772).

20. JCL, Memo ("Notes on the Abortion-'Pro-Choice' Meeting July 18") from J. Peterson to M. Costanza, Box: Office of Public Liaison (Costanza). Abortion, 1/77-12/77 (O/A 5772) through (Audiotapes) (n.ds) (O/A 5674) Box 1, File: Abortion, 1/77-12/77 (O/A 5772).

partner in the family farm and a full partner in her husband's political ambitions. When Betty Friedan was asked why she was so impressed by Carter during the 1976 campaign, and so sure that he would be committed to the cause of women's rights, she replied, "I had a feeling. It was the way he spoke about his mother and his wife working . . ." (cited in Stroud 1977, 327). Given that the 1976 presidential election was one of the closest in American history, the support of the women's movement undoubtedly had value.

In his defense, once in power, Carter's administration did actively seek to include women's perspectives in policy making, and not just on direct women's issues. Carter worked energetically in support of the ERA and one of the notable achievements of the Carter presidency was the appointment of more women to his administration than any previous president.<sup>21</sup> However, Carter's inflexibility on the abortion issue fundamentally damaged the relationship between the Carter administration and the women's movement. Carter was stung by criticism from women activists that he had not done enough to advance their cause in making female appointments or in working toward ratification of the ERA. After she organized the protest meeting over abortion Costanza was first ostracized and then forced to resign.<sup>22</sup>

Carter chose as Costanza's replacement Dr. Sarah Weddington, a lawyer whose most famous case had been as lead attorney for Jane Roe in the *Roe v. Wade* case. Because Weddington was considered pro-abortion rights, it was now the Christian conservatives' turn to feel cheated. They had been led to believe that instead, Carter would bring Christian conservatives into government. Carter had promised exactly this when interviewed on Pat Robertson's Christian Broadcasting Network during the 1976 campaign. With Carter's consent, Robertson and other leading evangelicals had produced a list of qualified evangelical candidates that was hand-delivered to the new president. Reverend Maddox recalls that the list included some "great people" who were "not only Christians but were well qualified." However, when the time came, Carter chose none of these evangelicals for appointments within the administration. Just like members of the women's movement, religious conservatives, Maddox said, felt "burnt up," that they had been taken advantage of for political gain.<sup>23</sup>

How can Carter's behavior concerning abortion be explained? Carter revisionist John Dumbrell (1995, 3) compares Carter to Robert Pirsig, whose popular book of the time, *Zen and the Art of Motorcycle Maintenance*, focused on harmonizing the conflicts present in contemporary American society. Certainly Carter wanted to transcend political ideology and idealistically, he refused to be constrained in an easily defined political pigeonhole. He said in 1976, "I am not an ideologue and my positions are not predictable" (cited in Richardson 1998, 34). In Jones's phrase, he acted "to do what is right, not what is political" (1988, 6). But instead of finding the political middle ground, he succeeded only in alienating both sides of the political spectrum. This was especially

21. For analysis of the relationship between feminism, public policy, and the Carter administration, see Hartmann (1998).

22. See Walsh (1978); Bachrach (1978); and Barbash (1978a; 1978b). See JCL, Memo to the President from H. Jordan, undated ("Re Midge Costanza"), Box 34, Staff Offices: Chief of Staff: Jordan (folder, "Midge Costanza").

23. JCL, Robert Maddox, Interview.

clear during the debate on abortion in which each side remained utterly adamant that theirs was the only conceivably humane position. The key fact is that Carter was not prepared to actively use the office of the presidency to constitutionally suppress abortion rights, but neither was he prepared to support federal funding for it. This was a nuanced position and one entirely in keeping with his faith. Dumbrell (1995, 71, 72) points out that it was in fact “logically and constitutionally sound” and furthermore, had been made “abundantly clear” during the election campaign. Unfortunately, in a debate governed by emotive Biblical rhetoric, constitutional adherence carried little weight. Carter’s non-interventionist approach to presidential power, and his vision of the president’s role as being above politics, was untenable on volatile issues around which neither side could be reconciled. Like Christ, Carter required faith in his leadership from his flock and for them to exercise right-thinking of their own free will, rather than at the behest of an all-powerful authority. Far from being a post-1960s Zen harmonizer, Carter’s presidential politics were intrinsically Christian, and modeled not on Eastern spiritualism but on a Southern Baptist interpretation of God’s leadership of a fallen world and the example of his son, Jesus Christ.

Anti-abortion Christian conservatives found Carter’s position unsatisfactory. Califano (1981, 54) recalled that pro-lifers were suspicious because “Carter’s colors blurred on the litmus test of supporting a constitutional amendment outlawing abortion.” Despite Carter’s unequivocal personal disapproval of abortion, his refusal to back a constitutional amendment, coupled with his appointment of high-profile pro-choice presidential assistants such as Costanza, Weddington, and Anne Wexler, meant that, as Maddox recalled, Carter soon got into “deep trouble” with Christian conservatives. “There was no dealing with them . . . they were gonna get him on abortion,” said Maddox; it was “an out and out hatchet job.”<sup>24</sup>

### Carter and the Rise of the New Christian Right

Six key memoranda of 1979 plot the Carter White House’s deteriorating relationship with the forces of Christian conservatism. They show Carter unable to retain or capitalize upon the support of evangelical Christians after the 1976 election, even though members of the administration warned of the dire consequences that would result. In a memo dated July 27, Religious Liaison Reverend Maddox told Carter, “A vast chunk of Christendom that past administrations have overlooked is the conservative, fundamentalist group. Independent Baptists, Methodists, many Pentecostal groups and a huge ‘television’ church congregation make up this 40 million constituency. . . . Their politics tend to be very conservative, even rightist. Careful, constructive contact . . . needs to be developed.” Though Maddox pointed out their political incompatibility with the administration, he observed, “Most are genuinely concerned about people and the nation.” Contact between them and the administration, he felt, “could soften their political rhet-

24. Ibid.



oric and tap their strengths to help realize some of President Carter's transcendent goals for the country."<sup>25</sup>

A second Maddox memorandum, sent in late August 1979, once again strongly urged Carter to engage with religious conservative leaders. By now, evangelical preachers such as Jerry Falwell were openly voicing their disillusionment with the president on their popular syndicated television shows. Of even greater concern, Maddox warned the president of a new development: disparate conservative religious groups were beginning to agitate politically. "The coalescing of conservative, evangelical, religious groups for political action," he told the president, "is one of the most important political phenomenon [sic] of our day." He told the president that religious leaders felt Carter had legitimated political engagement for evangelical Christians: "The left/liberals have been politically active for decades, now the conservatives are gathering. The Carter Presidency with its emphasis on religion has been a spur to bring these folks together." They were beginning to ask, Maddox said, "If *he* can be political, why can't we?" Maddox warned that conservative religious groups were rallying around concerns over pro-family issues such as abortion, the ERA, and gay rights and foreign policy issues such as superpower competition with the Soviet Union. Religious activists who had mobilized on these diverse issues were beginning to form into more unified pressure groups and "at least two groups among several are emerging: Christian Voice and Moral Majority." With an eye on the 1980 election, Maddox told the administration:

As a group they have been to [prospective presidential candidate John] Connally's ranch in Texas but by their own word came away unimpressed. They plan to talk with other Republican leaders. They are fervently anti-Kennedy [Massachusetts Senator Ted Kennedy, another prospective candidate] at this time. If I am a judge they are Republican in sentiment but so far no Republican has emerged whom they could freely support. Even though they have serious reservations about the President—SALT, Prayer in Public Schools, Panama Canal, etc., my feeling is they would *like to be able* [emphasis in original] to support the President.

Were the administration to actively engage Christian conservative leaders, whose religion Maddox observed was "near the President's own faith," they would be "much more inclined to look to him, not only for 1980, but to get behind some of the crucial Administration programs right now." The leaders Maddox urged the president to contact included Jerry Falwell (described by Maddox as the "Unofficial leader of the group"), Dr. Pat Robertson (host of a popular Christian television chat show, later candidate for the Republican Party presidential nomination), Dr. Adrian Rogers (whom Maddox said was "conservative, but reasonable"), and Bob Jones III, president of an ultrafundamentalist university (described by Maddox as "Extremely conservative on every issue). Maddox concluded by warning, "Several of the men have huge TV audiences . . . they have money

25. JCL, Memo ("Religious Liaison") from R. Maddox to J. Rafshoon and G. Schneiders, July 27, 1979, Box: Staff Office Files, Speechwriters, Subject File: Regulatory Reform 3/1/79-3/31/79 BA through SALT II 1/1/78-3/31/80 RH, Box: 26, File: Religious Liaison/Religion 7/1/79-3/31/80.

and an eagerness to become politically involved. My very strong feeling is that the President should talk to these men.”<sup>26</sup>

Still the White House refused to act. On October 5, 1979, an increasingly desperate Maddox wrote to the president and the First Lady. Conservative religious leaders, he warned again, “are moving into the political arena” and now they brought with them “grave misgivings” about Carter’s policies. Maddox wrote, “Most of them will eventually endorse a candidate using their television programs as a forum. . . . If they sufficiently mobilize their forces along their stated lines, they will be a significant factor in the 1980 election.” Maddox feared that “they will set up a ‘Christian Party Line’ insisting that all born-again Christians have to buy into a set of political stands.” Despite their concerns, Maddox stressed, “Most of them want to support the president” and that “Careful but sustained contact with . . . conservative leaders needs to be maintained.”<sup>27</sup>

In a fourth memorandum dated October 22, Maddox and Presidential Assistant Anne Wexler renewed the request that the president and evangelical leaders meet “to discuss several issues of importance to the men and their constituents.” The most pressing issues were abortion, prayer in public schools, and the tax status of private Christian schools. Christian conservatives were adamant about the need to put evangelicals in the White House. Maddox and Wexler asked, “Would the President seek a politically qualified and clearly identifiable evangelical to be on his senior staff?” They admitted that the meeting was a risk, writing “We take our chances of legitimatizing these men with a Presidential visit. They can go away saying ‘We saw the President and told him a thing or two.’”<sup>28</sup> Yet the two advisers warned Carter that the evangelical leaders were meeting with other leading presidential candidates, one of whom was Ronald Reagan, and that time to build support among the evangelical community was growing short.

Carter finally agreed to talk to prominent televangelists including Jerry Falwell, Oral Roberts, and James Bakker at a short White House breakfast meeting on January 22, 1980. Far from building ties, the meeting only reinforced the depth of estrangement between the president and Christian conservatives, and any political benefits that did accrue for the Carter White House were overshadowed by the controversy that flared soon after. Jerry Falwell, the founder of the largest of the Christian Right organizations, the Moral Majority, publicly attacked Carter for his stance on gay rights and accused him of attempting to woo homosexual voters by giving public approval of their “sinful” lifestyle. At a Moral Majority rally in Alaska soon after the White House breakfast meeting, Falwell fabricated a conversation with Carter he claimed had taken place there. He said he had asked the president, “Sir, why do you have practicing homosexuals on your senior staff at the White House?” According to Falwell, Carter had replied, “I am

26. JCL, Memo (“Meeting with Ad Hoc Group of Conservative Religious Leaders”) from R. Maddox to P. Wise and A. Wexler, August 28, 1979, White House Central File, Subject File: Religious Matters 1, File: RM 1/20/77-1/20/81.

27. JCL, Memo (“Religious Liaison”) from R. Maddox to The President and Mrs. Carter, October 5, 1979, WHCF, Subject File IV (Invitations), “IV/1980/FG 114, 1/20/77-1/20/81, General,” Box IV-7.

28. JCL, Memo (“Meeting with Evangelical Leaders”), from A. Wexler and R. Maddox to Phil Wise, October 22, 1979, WHCF, Box: RM 1 Religious Matters, Confidential, RM 1/20/77-1/20/81 through Executive, RM 3, 7/1/77-12/31/77, File: 1/20/77-1/20/81.

the president of all the American people and I believe I should represent everyone.” Falwell said, “I said why don’t you have some murderers and bank robbers and so forth to represent?” The actual transcript of the meeting reveals that the conversation never took place. Falwell had actually asked Carter, “Is it fair to say that your definition of a family would not include the marriage of homosexual men or lesbians?” The president’s response was not recorded, but Falwell replied, “Thank you—thank you very much.” When the White House protested over Falwell’s misrepresentation, the fundamentalist preacher suggested that the whole affair had been planned by the administration “as an attempt to discredit evangelical ministers who disagree with him [Carter]” (Castelli 1980; Clendinen 1980).

By late 1980, Maddox saw his role within the administration as primarily being one of “putting out fires” in the relationship between the White House and the Christian Right. Desperate to rectify matters, in August he tried another tack. He sent Rosalynn Carter a memorandum about the urgent need to develop a “Religious Strategy.” His recommendations included planning a “Grass Roots People’s Meeting,” an interview with religious television, and a “Briefing and Presidential drop by with major religious weekly and monthly magazines and journals.” Maddox advised that these “could be an opportunity for them to get his views on the ‘flag moral issues.’” Realizing that Carter had lost the support of religious conservatives, Maddox stressed the importance of allowing “the Christian community to get a clearer idea of *who* the President is and *why* he has taken certain positions.” In particular, Maddox advised that the president attend a prayer breakfast of labor and management representatives. He noted their, and perhaps his, sense of frustration with the administration: “They have tried for three years to get the President.”<sup>29</sup>

On September 8, a final memorandum on the same topic was sent to the president and this time, someone from Carter’s inner circle had begun to listen. With the presidential election just weeks away, Wexler, Maddox, and Press Secretary Jody Powell, one of Carter’s closest and most trusted advisers, urged the president to shore up his support among the evangelical community by conducting an interview with a religious television channel. They advised the president that “Conservative Christians need to hear your views accurately and will not without such an interview.” They also recommended that Jim Bakker and Pat Robertson should “sit in on the interview.” Even though the two high-profile evangelical preachers were not going to directly participate, by associating Carter with Bakker and Robertson, the presidential advisers felt that “their presence on camera would add great strength to the interview.” Perhaps because he had belatedly recognized the importance of his reaching out to the by now flourishing Religious Right, Carter ticked his approval of the suggestion.<sup>30</sup>

29. JCL, Robert Maddox, Interview. Memo (“Religious Strategy”), from R. Maddox to Mrs. Carter, August 22, 1980, WHCF, Subject File: PR (Public Relations), “PR 16-1, 12/21/79-1/20/81, Executive,” Box: PR-86.

30. JCL, Memo (“Interview for Religious Television”), from J. Powell, A. Wexler, R. Maddox to The President, September 8, 1980, WHCF, Subject File: PR (Public Relations), “PR 16-1, 12/21/79-1/20/81, Executive,” Box: PR-86.

## Carter “Unborn” Again

Back in 1976, Carter's profile as a man of sincere and serious faith held great currency for the growing American evangelical community. His candidacy and presidency had galvanized the political mobilization of evangelical Christians through articulation of his own deeply held religious faith and his interjection of openly spiritual themes into the body politic. He had tapped into the rapidly expanding evangelical constituency, acting as a catalyst for their widespread re-entry into politics for the first time since the 1920s. Unfortunately for Carter, after having drawn them into politics, he failed to retain evangelicals' support. It became apparent that Carter's understanding of the relationship between Christianity and politics bore little resemblance to their own. By 1980 it was obvious to Christian conservatives that a Democratic president, whether a fellow evangelical or not, was not enough to ensure promotion of their agenda on the national political stage. The more the Carter administration had refused to reverse the liberal advances of the previous decade, the more the Christian Right as an organized force mustered political strength.

Carter was unwilling to exploit the blurring of the church and state boundary upon which his presidential candidacy had been built. “The religious [Christian] community belonged to Carter,” close Carter friend Bert Lance observed, but “They were the first to abandon him” (cited in Bourne 1997, 466). Carter was simply not the president they believed they were voting for in 1976. Carter was far more politically liberal than he had led them to believe, and he refused to use the presidency as a pulpit from which to enforce a conservative social agenda. Therefore, Christian conservatives' initial feelings of kinship with the president faded quickly and, as Dionne (1992, 226) puts it, they “felt sold out by Carter.” Eventually they came to perceive him as having been “unborn again,” as having abandoned his Christian principles in favor of “a deep-seated secular humanism” (Ariail and Heckler-Feltz 1996, 42). Their bitterness, Maddox recalled, led Christian conservative leaders to denounce Carter “as the anti-Christ,”<sup>31</sup> and when newspaper columnist Bob Novak attended a conference of conservative preachers in 1979, he observed minister after minister declaring “I was part of Carter's team in 1976. I delivered my congregation for Carter. I urged them all to vote for Carter because I thought he was a moral individual. I found out otherwise, and I'm angry.” At that point Novak realized, “Jimmy Carter's goose was cooked” (Martin 1996, 207).

The conservative evangelical community, now politically activated as the Christian Right, instead turned to Ronald Reagan in 1980, a candidate who more carefully articulated their agenda. This was despite the fact that Reagan's nominal religious credentials bore no comparison to Carter's genuine piety. Reagan did not regularly attend religious services. He was associated with liberal Hollywood, both he and his wife were divorcees, and he had no record of commitment to cultural-religious issues of evangelical concern. Indeed, as governor of California, he had signed into law the nation's most liberal abortion bill. However, his 1980 campaign literature, circulated to conservative congregations, openly courted the religious vote. It declared his support for private

31. JCL, Robert Maddox, Interview.

Christian schools and school prayer while attacking both homosexuality and abortion. Revitalizing the fundamentalist crusade of the 1920s, he openly questioned the theory of evolution and asserted the necessity of teaching the biblical story of creation in public schools. "The time has come," Reagan declared, "to turn to God and reassert our trust in Him for the healing of America" (Evans and Novak 1980, A15).<sup>32</sup>

Most significant of all, whereas Carter admonished the American people for their lack of faith, Reagan did the opposite and rekindled American optimism in the moral certitude of their providential mission. Carter's religious philosophy mirrored that of theologian Paul Tillich, who held that once man stopped searching for a greater commitment to Christ he lost his religion and became proud, self-satisfied, and superior. Thus, Carter focused on pride as the greatest sin and suggested that it led to American hubris and overconfidence. By comparison, Ronald Reagan displayed none of Carter's doubts over America's ordination as the New Jerusalem. Unlike Carter, he placed no emphasis upon the effort required from the American people to live up to God's message. It worked. In the 1980 election, a disaffected conservative evangelical community deserted Carter in droves, even in the South, once the home of his strongest support. As the *Washington Post* put it, he had been "Belted in the Bible Belt" (Evans and Novak 1980, A15).

Reagan was not elected solely by the religious conservative vote and, of course, no single reason cost the Democrats the White House in 1980. The faltering American economy and Soviet aggression in Afghanistan hampered Carter's reelection campaign and Islamic fundamentalism in Iran and the ensuing hostage crisis were crucial to Carter's reelection failure. Yet the desertion of the Christian vote was a major factor in the Democrats' defeat, and the religious right knew it. They did not hide their glee. Falwell called the 1980 election "My finest hour," while James Dobson, another Moral Majority leader, recalled, "Had we not been Baptists we would have danced in the streets" (Falwell cited in Fitzgerald 1981, 189; Shogan 2002, 183). E. J. Dionne points out that the same white born-again Christians who had supported Carter in 1976 went nearly two to one for Reagan in 1980. Christian conservatives made "an enormous difference," according to Phillips, who cites pollster Louis Harris's estimate that white, fundamentalist, Moral Majority-type voters accounted for two thirds of Reagan's surprise 10-point margin over Carter, with the same thing happening with county-level electoral data (Dionne 1992, 227; Phillips 1982, 191). Secondary analyses have suggested that such initial conclusions were overestimates; however a third, extended round of analyses re-emphasized the importance of Christian conservatives in the 1980 election and prioritized their "unique impact" (Miller and Wattenburg in Reichley 1987, 85). Arguably, Reagan could have won in 1980 even if he had not had Christian conservative votes, but as William Martin in his recent analysis of the American religious right makes clear, "Their enthusiastic support was part of the wave that bore him upward and moved other voters to take him seriously" (1996, 220).

32. For a comparison of Reagan's optimistic brand of Christianity and Carter's Calvinistic approach, see Wills (1990).

## Conclusion

Presidential politics today reflects the change in the American political discourse caused by Carter's unprecedented insertion of religiosity into the electoral process. Prior to 1976, Christian evangelicalism had been patronized as obscurantist and parochial. As Dionne (1992, 226) observed, in 1976, political commentators and critics had tried to explain Jimmy Carter's born-again religion to each other as if it "were as alien to American culture as a Balinese cockfight." Back then, one campaign adviser had even warned that Carter's faith leant his candidacy a "weirdo factor" that risked alienating voters (Witcover 1977, 270). But today the opposite is true. By altering the secular political media's stereotype of evangelicalism, Carter brought the vocabulary of born-again salvation permanently into America's political consciousness. Moreover, far from a political liability, a devout faith has become an asset to be exploited. A public profession of a sincere Christian faith has now become almost a requirement for public office. For example, in 2000, George W. Bush unabashedly declared his favorite political philosopher to be Jesus Christ, while his Democratic opponent Al Gore confided that he decided important policy questions by asking himself W. W. J. D?, shorthand for "What would Jesus do?" It was as if, Ted Olsen reported in *Christianity Today*, the two candidates were trying to "out Jimmy Carter each other" (Murphy 2000, B1; Carter 2001, 69; Olsen 1999, xi).<sup>33</sup>

Carter brought evangelical concerns to the heart of American politics, but abortion was one of a series of key issues that revealed the contradictory imperatives affecting a Southern Baptist president. As an evangelical Christian, he was personally opposed to abortion but as a Southern Baptist he was also committed to the principle of church-state separation. Because Carter was not prepared to compromise his Southern Baptist adherence to that doctrine, he inevitably disappointed the sleeping giant of evangelical Protestantism his presidency had awakened. Since Carter's presidency, the social agenda of the American evangelical Christian community has had to be addressed by successive presidents. However, none of his successors has asked so much of the American people in Christian terms. Rather than simply invoking the rhetoric of evangelicalism, Carter actively confronted America with the fundamental demands at the heart of most interpretations of the Christian faith: demands for social justice, humility, and moral action that require personal and collective sacrifice. Carter's successors have emphasized Christian rectitude and moral certainty, but they have proved unwilling to impose or even articulate the humble and self-sacrificing demands at Christianity's core.

## References

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33. Although the born-again Christian vote was one of the most supportive constituencies for Republican candidate George W. Bush in the 2000 presidential election, Vice-President Gore proved surprisingly popular with born-again voters, polling better than predicted among members of non-mainline Protestant churches.

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