

The Historian's Pickaxe

Uncovering the Racist Origins of the Religious Right

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The Religious Right's most cherished and durable myth is its myth of origins. According to this well-rehearsed narrative, articulated by Jerry Falwell, Pat Robertson, and countless others, after nearly half a century of electoral quiescence evangelical leaders were shaken out of their political complacency by the United States Supreme Court's *Roe v. Wade* decision of January 22, 1973. Falwell even recounted (albeit fourteen years later) his horror at reading the news in the January 23, 1973, edition of the *Lynchburg News*. "The Supreme Court had just made a decision by a seven-to-two margin that would legalize the killing of millions of unborn children," Falwell wrote. "I sat there staring at the *Roe v. Wade* story growing more and more fearful of the consequences of the Supreme Court's act and wondering why so few voices had been raised against it." The myth of origins has Falwell and other evangelical leaders emerging like a mollusk out of their apolitical stupor to fight the moral outrage of legalized abortion. Some even went so far as to invoke the moniker "new abolitionists" in an effort to ally themselves with their antebellum evangelical predecessors who sought to eradicate the scourge of slavery.¹

¹ Jerry Falwell, *Strength for the Journey* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1987), 334-335.

I was a student at an evangelical college and seminary for most of the 1970s, and so I had some personal recollections of the era during which the Religious Right emerged as a political force. As a pastor's son, I had spent my entire life in the cocoon of what I would later identify as the evangelical subculture, the interlocking network of congregations and denominations, Bible camps and Bible institutes, mission societies and publishing houses. So when I learned, retroactively, that *Roe v. Wade* had been the catalyst for evangelicals moving into politics, I raised an eyebrow. That's not how I remembered it, not at all. But I was far removed from that world by the early 1980s, immersed in graduate school and the study of American colonial history, so I paid it little mind. Besides, if preachers like Falwell and Robertson and a host of others said it was abortion that drew them into politics, who was I to dispute them?

In November 1990, however, for reasons that I still cannot discern, I was invited to a small conference in Washington, D.C. Not knowing what to expect, I almost begged off at the last minute, but I decided to attend. I soon found myself in a conference room with the likes of Richard Land, Donald Wildmon, Ralph Reed, Carl F. H. Henry, Ed Dobson, and Paul Weyrich, the architect of the Religious Right. I quickly picked up that this gathering was meant to be a ten-year celebration of the election of Ronald Reagan as well as a retrospective – again celebratory – of the Religious Right. Having refused to celebrate the election of Ronald Reagan for the previous decade, I was in no mood to begin then, but, having made the trip to Washington, I saw no harm in listening in to the conversation.

In the initial session, someone made passing reference to the standard narrative that the *Roe v. Wade* decision of 1973 had served as the catalyst for the Religious Right. I tuned in. Weyrich forcefully disputed that assumption, recounting that ever since Barry Goldwater's run for the presidency in 1964, he had been trying to enlist evangelicals in conservative political causes, but it was the tax exemption for religious schools that finally caught the attention of evangelical leaders. Abortion, he said, had nothing to do with it. That comment, apparently, got others thinking. "The Religious New Right did not start because of a concern about abortion," Ed Dobson, formerly Jerry Falwell's lieutenant, added. "I sat in the non-smoke-filled back room with the Moral Majority, and I frankly do not remember abortion being mentioned as a reason why we ought to do something." During the ensuing break in the proceedings, I pulled Weyrich aside to be certain I had heard him correctly, that *Roe v. Wade* did not precipitate the Religious Right. He was emphatic. Abortion, he repeated, had nothing whatsoever to do with the rise of the Religious Right.²

Thus began my decades-long quest to ascertain the true origins of the Religious Right. It was a journey that took me to denominational records, magazine sources, the archives at such institutions as Liberty University, Bob Jones University, the presidential libraries of Gerald Ford, Ronald Reagan, and Jimmy Carter, and the American Heritage Center in Laramie, Wyoming, the improbable location of Paul Weyrich's papers.

² Quoted in *No Longer Exiles: The Religious New Right in American Politics*, ed. Michael Cromartie (Washington, D.C., 1993), 52.

The initial step was to dispel what I call the abortion myth, the fiction that the Religious Right emerged directly from *Roe v. Wade*. Indeed, the abortion myth collapses quickly in the face of historical scrutiny. In 1970, the United Methodist Church General Conference called on state legislatures to repeal laws restricting abortion, and in 1972, the same gathering that Jimmy Carter addressed as governor, the Methodists acknowledged “the sanctity of unborn human life” but also declared that “we are equally bound to respect the sacredness of the life and well-being of the mother, for whom devastating damage may result from unacceptable pregnancy.” Meeting in St. Louis, Missouri, during the summer of 1971, the messengers (delegates) to the Southern Baptist Convention passed a resolution that stated, “we call upon Southern Baptists to work for legislation that will allow the possibility of abortion under such conditions as rape, incest, clear evidence of severe fetal deformity, and carefully ascertained evidence of the likelihood of damage to the emotional, mental, and physical health of the mother.” The Southern Baptist Convention, hardly a redoubt of liberalism, reaffirmed that position in 1974, the year after the *Roe* decision, and again in 1976.³

³ Quoted in Mark Tooley, *Methodism and Politics in the Twentieth Century* (Anderson, Ind.: Bristol House, 2012), 222, 224-225; *Annual of the Southern Baptist Convention, 1972* (Nashville, Tenn.: Executive Committee, Southern Baptist Convention, 1972), 72. On the reaffirmations of the 1971 resolution, see *Annual of the Southern Baptist Convention, 1974* (Nashville, Tenn.: Executive Committee, Southern Baptist Convention, 1974), 76. The 1976 resolution was more measured, calling on “Southern Baptists and all citizens of the nation to work to change those attitudes and conditions which encourage many people to turn to abortion as a means of birth control”; but it also affirmed “our conviction about the limited role of government in dealing with matters relating to abortion, and support the right of expectant mothers to the full range of medical services and personal counseling for the preservation of life and health.” *Annual of the Southern Baptist Convention, 1976* (Nashville, Tenn.: Executive Committee, Southern Baptist Convention, 1976), 58.

When the *Roe* decision was handed down, W. A. Criswell, former president of the Southern Baptist Convention and pastor of First Baptist Church in Dallas, Texas, expressed his satisfaction with the ruling. “I have always felt that it was only after a child was born and had a life separate from its mother that it became an individual person,” one of the most famous fundamentalists of the twentieth century declared, “and it has always, therefore, seemed to me that what is best for the mother and for the future should be allowed.”⁴

While a few evangelical voices, including *Christianity Today* magazine, mildly criticized the ruling, the overwhelming response on the part of evangelicals was silence, even approval; Baptists, in particular, applauded the decision as an appropriate articulation of the line of division between church and state, between personal morality and state regulation of individual behavior. “Religious liberty, human equality and justice are advanced by the Supreme Court abortion decision,” W. Barry Garrett of *Baptist Press* wrote. Floyd Robertson of the National Association of Evangelicals disagreed with the *Roe* decision, but he believed that legal redress should not be a priority for evangelicals. “The abortion issue should also remind evangelicals that the church must never rely on the state to support its mission or enforce its moral standards,” he wrote in the summer 1973 issue of the organization’s newsletter, *United Evangelical Action*. “The church and state must be separate. The actions

⁴ Quoted in “What Price Abortion?” *Christianity Today*, March 2, 1973, 39 [565].

and conduct of Christians transcend the secular community for which the state is responsible.”⁵

The real origins of the Religious Right, it turns out, are rather more prosaic and less highminded. In May 1969, a group of African-American parents in Holmes County, Mississippi, filed suit to prevent three new whites-only academies from securing tax exemption from the Internal Revenue Service (IRS); each of the schools had been founded to evade desegregation of the public schools. In Holmes County, the number of white students enrolled in the public schools had dropped from 771 to 28 during the first year of desegregation; the following year, that number fell to zero. The court case, known as *Green v. Kennedy*, won a temporary injunction against the “segregation academies” in January 1970, and later that year Richard Nixon ordered the IRS to enact a new policy that would deny tax exemptions to segregated schools. In July 1970, the Internal Revenue Service announced that, in accordance with the provisions of the Civil Rights Act of 1964, which forbade racial segregation and discrimination, it would no longer grant tax-exempt status to private schools with racially discriminatory policies. Such institutions were not – by definition – charitable organizations, and therefore they had no claims to tax-exempt status; similarly, donations to such organizations would no longer qualify as tax-deductible contributions. On November 30, 1970, the IRS sent letters of inquiry to schools in question in an effort to ascertain whether or not they discriminated on the basis

⁵ “Abortion and the Court,” *Christianity Today*, February 16, 1973, 32 [502]; quoted in “What Price Abortion?” *Christianity Today*, March 2, 1973, 39 [565]; Floyd Robertson, *United Evangelical Action*, Summer 1973, 8-11 [quotes from 11].

of race. Bob Jones University, a fundamentalist school in Greenville, South Carolina, responded that it did not admit African Americans.⁶

Meanwhile, the *Green v. Kennedy* suit was joined with a similar suit to become *Green v. Connally*. On June 30, 1971, the United States District Court for the District of Columbia issued its ruling in the *Green v. Connally* case: “Under the Internal Revenue Code, properly construed, racially discriminatory private schools are not entitled to the Federal tax exemption provided for charitable, educational institutions, and persons making gifts to such schools are not entitled to the deductions provided in case of gifts to charitable, educational institutions.”⁷

Paul Weyrich saw his opening. Ever since Goldwater’s campaign, Weyrich had been trying to organize evangelicals politically. Their numbers alone, he reasoned, would constitute a formidable voting bloc, and he aspired to marshal them behind conservative causes. “The new political philosophy must be defined by us in moral terms, packaged in non-religious language, and propagated throughout the country by our new coalition,” Weyrich wrote in spelling out his vision. “When political power is achieved, the moral majority will have the opportunity to re-create this great nation.” Weyrich believed that the political possibilities of such a coalition were unlimited. “The leadership, moral philosophy, and workable vehicle are at hand just waiting to be blended and

⁶ For a superb review of the circumstances surrounding the *Green v. Kennedy* case, see Joseph Crespino, “Civil Rights and the Religious Right,” in *Rightward Bound: Making America Conservative in the 1970s*, ed. Bruce J. Schulman and Julian E. Zelizer (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 2008), 90-105. Crespino correctly identifies this case, together with *Green v. Connally*, as the catalyst for the Religious Right.

⁷ *Green v. Connally*, 330 F. Supp. 1150 (D. D.C.) aff’d sub nom. *Coit v. Green*, 404 U.S. 997 (1971).

activated,” he wrote. “If the moral majority acts, results could well exceed our wildest dreams.”⁸

But Weyrich’s dreams, still a hypothetical coalition which he already referred to as “moral majority” (lower-case letters), needed a catalyst – not simply an event or issue that would ignite all the indignation that had been accumulating, but also a standard around which to rally. For nearly two decades, Weyrich, by his own account, had tried various issues to pique evangelical interest in his scheme, including pornography, school prayer, the proposed Equal Rights Amendment to the Constitution, and abortion. “I was trying to get these people interested in those issues and I utterly failed,” Weyrich recalled in 1990. “What changed their mind was Jimmy Carter’s intervention against the Christian schools, trying to deny them tax-exempt status on the basis of so-called de facto segregation.”⁹

Because the *Green v. Connally* ruling was “applicable to all private schools in the United States at all levels of education,” Bob Jones University stood

⁸ “The Moral Majority,” undated paper, Box 19, Paul M. Weyrich Papers, American Heritage Center, University of Wyoming.

⁹ Quoted in William Martin, *With God on Our Side: The Rise of the Religious Right in America* (New York: Broadway Books, 1996), 173. As early as February 1979, several months before the formation of an organization by that name, Howard Phillips was using the term “moral majority”; see Letter, Howard Phillips to Jerry Falwell, February 27, 1979, Evangelist Activism, Box 15, Paul M. Weyrich Papers, American Heritage Center, University of Wyoming. According to historian Robert Freedman, “The Supreme Court’s banning of public school prayer (1962) and legalization of abortion (1973) outraged many evangelicals and fundamentalists. However, few decided to participate actively in politics as a result.” He adds: “Weyrich believes that the Carter administration’s policy toward Christian Schools was the turning point.” Robert Freedman, “The Religious Right and the Carter Administration,” *Historical Journal*, 48 (March 2005), 236. Michael Lienesch writes: “The Christian conservative lobbyists were originally concerned with protecting the Christian schools from Internal Revenue Service investigations over the issue of racial imbalance.” Michael Leinesch, “Right-Wing Religion: Christian Conservatism as a Political Movement,” *Political Science Quarterly*, 97 (Autumn 1982), 409. On the importance of schools to the nascent Religious Right, see also J. Charles Park, “Preachers, Politics, and Public Education: A Review of Right-Wing Pressures against Public Schooling in America,” *Phi Delta Kappan*, 61 (May 1980), 608-612.

directly in the IRS crosshairs. Founded in Florida by arch-fundamentalist Bob Jones in 1926, the school had been located for a time in Cleveland, Tennessee, before moving to South Carolina in 1947. In response to *Green v. Connally*, Bob Jones University admitted a married black man, a worker in the school's radio station, as a part-time student. He dropped out a month later. Out of fears of racial mixing, the school maintained its restrictions against admitting unmarried African Americans until 1975. Even then, however, the school stipulated that interracial dating would be grounds for expulsion, and the school also promised that any students who "espouse, promote, or encourage others to violate the University's dating rules and regulations will be expelled."¹⁰

The Internal Revenue Service pursued its case against Bob Jones University and on April 16, 1975, notified the school of the proposed revocation of its tax-exempt status. On January 19, 1976, the IRS officially revoked Bob Jones University's tax-exempt status, effective retroactively to 1971, when the school had first been formally notified of the IRS policy. As Bob Jones University sued to retain its tax exemption, Weyrich pressed his case. Evangelical leaders, especially those whose schools were affected by the ruling, were angry, construing the decision as government intrusion in religious matters. Weyrich used the *Green v. Connally* case to rally evangelicals against the government. When "the Internal Revenue Service tried to deny tax exemption to private schools," Weyrich said in

¹⁰ "Most Unusual': No Time for a Change," *Christianity Today*, December 17, 1971, 34. Bob Jones 3rd insisted that, "there was no connection between the enrollment of this one black student and the major threats facing the university."

an interview with *Conservative Digest*, that “more than any single act brought the fundamentalists and evangelicals into the political process.”¹¹

Inadvertently, in the course of the Carter administration the Internal Revenue Service poured fuel on the embers of evangelical resentment. Although there is no evidence to suggest that the Carter White House participated in drafting the regulations, and Carter himself was unaware of them, Jerome Kurtz, the IRS commissioner, on August 22, 1978, proposed that schools founded or expanded at the time of desegregation of public schools in their locality meet a quota of minority students or certify that they operated “in good faith on a racially non-discriminatory basis.” The regulations, in effect, shifted the burden of proof from the Internal Revenue Service to the schools. A number of evangelicals interpreted the IRS proposals as an unwarranted violation of the sanctity of their subculture, a network of alternative institutions they had constructed as a shelter from “worldliness” in the decades following the Scopes Trial of 1925. Evangelicals flooded the IRS with letters of protest, more than 125,000 in all. The proposed regulations “kicked a sleeping dog,” Richard Viguerie, one of the founders of the New Right, said. “It was the episode that ignited the religious right’s involvement in real politics.” When *Conservative Digest* catalogued evangelical discontent with Carter in August 1979, the Internal Revenue Service regulations headed the list. Abortion was not mentioned.¹²

¹¹ Paul Weyrich, “The Pro-Family Movement,” *Conservative Digest*, 6 (May-June 1980), 14.

¹² Freedman, “Religious Right and the Carter Administration,” *Historical Journal*, 48 (March 2005), 238, 240; Wilfred F. Drake, “Tax Status of Private Segregated Schools: The New Revenue Procedure,” *William and Mary Law Review*, 20 (1979), 463-512; “Jimmy Carter’s Betrayal of the Christian Voter,” *Conservative Digest*, August 1979, 15; Michael Sean Winters, *God’s Right Hand: How Jerry Falwell Made God a Republican and Baptized the American Right* (San Francisco: HarperOne, 2012), 110; Crespino, “Civil Rights and the Religious Right,” in *Rightward*

Although the Internal Revenue Service backed away from many of the proposals, the fires of resentment flared. “To impose student and faculty quotas on private schools is a treacherous intervention into a Constitutionally protected activity,” John Ashbrook, Republican member of Congress from Ohio, wrote to Carter. “Its arbitrary formula for student and staff recruitment will place Federal bureaucrats at the helm of policy formation for private schools.” Ashbrook’s House colleague, Robert Dornan of California, warned that Americans “are sick and tired of unelected bureaucrats engaging in social engineering at the expense of our cherished liberties.” Weyrich encouraged Robert Billings, an evangelical, to form an organization called Christian School Action as a vehicle for building on evangelical discontent, an organization Weyrich came to regard as a “tremendous asset” to his hopes for politicizing conservative evangelicals. Billings, who had earlier founded the National Christian Action Coalition to thwart what he characterized as “an attempt by the IRS to control private schools,” quickly mobilized evangelical ministers. Billings later declared, “Jerome Kurtz has done more to bring Christians together than any man since the Apostle Paul.” Even Anita Bryant, who had been goaded into activism by gay rights, recognized the centrality of the school issue. “I believe the day of the comfortable Christian is over,” Bryant declared. “Maybe it hasn’t reached everybody in the rural areas, but

Bound, ed. Schulman and Zelizer, 99-100. For a look inside the evangelical subculture, see Randall Balmer, *Mine Eyes Have Seen the Glory: A Journey into the Evangelical Subculture in America*, 5th ed. (New York: Oxford University Press, 2014).

it's a battle in the cities to keep them from taking over and reaching private and religious schools."¹³

In ramping up for political activism, evangelicals portrayed themselves as defending what they considered the sanctity of the evangelical subculture from outside interference. Weyrich astutely picked up on those fears. "What caused the movement to surface was the federal government's moves against Christian schools," Weyrich reiterated in 1990. "This absolutely shattered the Christian community's notions that Christians could isolate themselves inside their own institutions and teach what they pleased." For agitated evangelicals, Weyrich's conservative gospel of less government suddenly struck a responsive chord. "It wasn't the abortion issue; that wasn't sufficient," Weyrich recalled. "It was the recognition that isolation simply would no longer work in this society."¹⁴

Although leaders of the Religious Right in later years would seek to portray their politicization as a direct response to the *Roe v. Wade* ruling of 1973, Weyrich and other organizers of the Religious Right have been emphatic in dismissing this abortion myth. *Green v. Connally* served as the catalyst, not *Roe v. Wade*. Although many evangelicals certainly felt troubled by abortion and viewed it as part of the broader problem of promiscuity in American society, most of them regarded it as a "Catholic issue" in the realm of politics until the late 1970s. (Falwell acknowledged as much when he preached out against abortion for the first time on February 26, 1978, from his pulpit at Thomas Road Baptist

¹³ Freedman, "Religious Right and the Carter Administration," *Historical Journal*, 48 (March 2005), 240-241, 242; Duane Murray Oldfield, *The Right and the Righteous: The Christian Right Confronts the Republican Party* (Lanham, Md.: Rowman & Littlefield, 1996), 100.

¹⁴ Quoted in *No Longer Exiles: The Religious New Right in American Politics*, ed. Michael Cromartie (Washington, D.C.: Ethics and Public Policy Center, 1993), 26.

Church.) Evangelical leaders, prodded by Weyrich, chose to interpret the IRS ruling against segregationist schools as an assault on the integrity and the sanctity of the evangelical subculture, ignoring the fact that exemption from taxes is itself a form of public subsidy. And that is what prompted them to action and to organize into a political movement. “What cause the movement to surface,” Weyrich reiterated, “was the federal government’s moves against Christian schools,” which, he added, “enraged the Christian community.”¹⁵

More recently, another conservative activist, Grover Norquist, has confirmed that the *Roe v. Wade* decision did not factor into the rise of the Religious Right. “The religious right did not get started in 1962 with prayer in school,” Norquist told Dan Gilgoff, of *U.S. News & World Report*, in June 2009. “And it didn’t get started in ’73 with *Roe v. Wade*. It started in ’77 or ’78 with the Carter administration’s attack on Christian schools and radio stations. That’s where all of the organization flowed out of. It was complete self-defense.”¹⁶

The actions of the Internal Revenue Service especially affected Bob Jones University, goading those associated with the school into political activism. Elmer L. Rumminger, longtime administrator at the university who became politically active in 1980, remembered that the IRS case “alerted the Christian school community about what could happen with government interference” in the

¹⁵ Quoted in *No Longer Exiles*, ed. Cromartie, 26; quoted in William Martin, *With God on Our Side: The Rise of the Religious Right in America* (New York: Broadway Books, 1996), 173. Falwell declared in his sermon: “The Roman Catholic church is to be commended for their diligent and persistent battle against abortion. They have done far more to my knowledge than any other one segment of our society, to try to stop abortion.” Jerry Falwell sermon (transcript), “Abortion-on-Demand: Is It Murder,” Genesis 1:26, 27, February 26, 1978, SE-126, Liberty University Archives.

¹⁶ Quoted in *No Longer Exiles: The Religious New Right in American Politics*, ed. Michael Cromartie (Washington, D.C., 1993), 52; Dan Gilgoff, “Exclusive: Grover Norquist Gives Religious Conservatives Tough Love,” June 11, 2009, *God & Country: On Faith, Politics, and Culture*, www.usnews.com/blogs/god-and-country (accessed September 30, 2009).

affairs of evangelical institutions. “That was really the major issue that got us all involved to begin with – at least it was for me.” What about abortion? “No, no, that wasn’t the issue,” he said emphatically. “This wasn’t an anti-abortion movement per se. That was one of the issues we were interested in. I’m sure some people pointed to *Roe v. Wade*, but that’s not what got us going. For me it was government intrusion into private education.”¹⁷

The IRS pursuit of Bob Jones University and other schools may have captured the attention of evangelical leaders, but Weyrich was clever enough to realize that the political mobilization of evangelical and fundamentalist leaders represented only half of the equation. Unless these leaders could enlist rank-and-file evangelicals, Weyrich’s dream of a politically conservative coalition of evangelicals would remain unfulfilled. And here is where abortion finally figures into the narrative.

In the 1978 mid-term elections, the Democratic Party suffered a net loss of three seats in the Senate and fifteen seats in the House of Representatives. Though not unexpected for the party in power – Republicans suffered far greater losses in the previous bi-election year of 1974, the year of Nixon’s resignation – those reading the election returns could see that abortion had the potential to emerge as a political issue.

In Iowa, for example, polls and pundits expected that the incumbent Democratic senator, Richard C. “Dick” Clark, would coast easily to reelection; no poll heading into the November balloting indicated that Clark held a lead of fewer

¹⁷ Elmer L. Rumminger, telephone interview with the author, July 17, 2010.

than 10 percentage points. Six years earlier, Clark had walked across the state to call attention to his grassroots, upstart challenge to Jack Miller, the two-term Republican incumbent, and Clark prevailed with 55 percent of the vote. He remained a popular figure in the state. Pro-life activists, however, had targeted Clark, and on the final weekend of Clark's reelection campaign opponents of abortion (predominantly Roman Catholics) distributed approximately 300,000 pamphlets in church parking lots. Two days later, in an election with very low turnout, Roger Jepsen, the Republican pro-life challenger, defeated Clark. An Election Day survey by the *Des Moines Register* indicated that about 25,000 Iowans voted for Jepsen because of his stand on abortion. "I personally believe that the abortion issue was the central issue," Clark told Bruce Morton of CBS News. The senator's campaign manager agreed. "It comes right down to those leaflets they put out," he said.¹⁸

Christianity Today noted Clark's unexpected defeat, and the magazine also credited pro-lifers for the Republican trifecta in Minnesota, where Republican candidates who opposed abortion captured both Senate seats (one for the unexpired term of Hubert Humphrey) and the office of governor. "Anti-abortionists figured in the collapse of Minnesota's liberal Democratic-Farmer-Labor Party," the magazine reported, adding that the campaign of Albert Quie,

¹⁸ Douglas E. Kneeland, "Clark Defeat in Iowa Laid to Abortion Issue," *New York Times*, November 13, 1978; Dick Clark, interview with Bruce Morton, CBS News, November 13, 1978. See also Hedrick Smith, "A Pattern of Stability: With Incumbents Faring Well, Results Indicate that Fears of Voter Revolt were Exaggerated," *New York Times*, November 8, 1978. Allegations later emerged that the white government of South Africa may have illegally contributed money toward Clark's defeat because of his strong stand against apartheid. Wendell Rawls Jr., "South African Role in Iowa Voting Charged," *New York Times*, March 22, 1979.

the governor-elect and ally of Charles Colson, “distributed 250,000 leaflets to churchgoers throughout the state on the Sunday before election day.”¹⁹

None of this was lost on Paul Weyrich. Earlier that year, Weyrich, head of the Committee for the Survival of a Free Congress, had received a check in the amount of twenty-five dollars from Georgia G. Glassman, of Gravity, Iowa.

“Please make Good use of the proceeds,” she wrote, “as soon as we hear that a good Republican, a Lawyer I hope, has announced his candidacy for the U.S. Senate, we Republicans will try to ‘Hang Sen. Dick Clark on a telephone pole!’”²⁰

Weyrich could barely contain his delight with the 1978 election returns, especially the Senate elections in Iowa and in New Hampshire, where Gordon Humphrey had ousted Thomas J. McIntyre, another Democratic incumbent. “The election of Roger Jepsen and Gordon Humphrey to the U.S. Senate is true cause for celebration, especially in view of the fact that two of the most liberal senators went down to defeat,” Weyrich wrote. Even more notable, however, was how it happened: with the support of politically conservative evangelicals. Weyrich immediately set about fortifying the nascent coalition. On December 5, just a month after the election, Weyrich brought Humphrey, the senator-elect from New Hampshire, and his wife to a gathering of evangelical activists. The following day, Robert Billings penned an exultant letter to Weyrich, praising him for his “wise remarks” and congratulating him on the “smashing success” of an evening. “Paul, we did something that no-one has done in years – we brought together the three main factions of the fundamentalist community,” Billings wrote. “I believe

¹⁹ “Religion at the Polls: Strength and Conflict,” *Christianity Today*, December 1, 1978, 40-41.

²⁰ Letter, Georgia Glasman to Paul Weyrich, January 26, 1978, Box 3, Paul M. Weyrich Papers, American Heritage Center, University of Wyoming.

something was started last night that will pull together many of our ‘fringe’ Christian friends.” Billings concluded his handwritten letter: “Thank you for your important part. God bless you! ²¹

The 1978 had election provided the opening that Weyrich had been seeking. The previous year, Weyrich had appealed to the head of the Republican National Committee to court evangelical and fundamentalist voters, but the appeal fell on deaf ears; the chair of the committee “didn’t understand what I was talking about,” Weyrich said, “it was so foreign to him that it didn’t make any sense.” Undeterred, Weyrich resolved to “go out and elect some improbable people in the ’78 elections.” Although Weyrich highlighted the schools issue, the defeat of Dick Clark in Iowa and the triple win for pro-life Republicans in Minnesota suggested that abortion might very well be the issue that would galvanize grassroots evangelicals and fundamentalists into a cohesive political movement. Recall Robert Billings’s letter to Weyrich a month after the mid-term elections: “Paul, we did something that no-one has done in years – we brought together the three main factions of the fundamentalist community.”²²

In persuading evangelicals that abortion was a moral issue that demanded their political activism, Weyrich received help from an unlikely source, Francis A. Schaeffer, a Presbyterian minister. Schaeffer, considered by many the intellectual godfather of the Religious Right, began to weigh in about the pervasiveness of

²¹ Letter, Paul Weyrich to Daniel B. Hales, December 31, 1978, Box 3, Paul M. Weyrich Papers, American Heritage Center, University of Wyoming; Letter, Robert Billings “Bob,” Christian School Action Inc., to Paul Weyrich, December 6, 1978, Box 3, Paul M. Weyrich Papers, American Heritage Center, University of Wyoming.

²² Freedman, “Religious Right and the Carter Administration,” *Historical Journal*, 48 (March 2005), 243; Letter, Robert Billings to Paul Weyrich, December 6, 1978, Box 3, Paul M. Weyrich Papers, American Heritage Center, University of Wyoming.

what he called “secular humanism” in American society. He lamented the loss of “basically a Christian consensus” and said that, “we now live in a secularized society.”²³

By the late 1970s, Schaeffer was beginning to cite abortion as one consequence of a troubling cultural shift away from the mores of evangelical Christianity and toward the reviled “secular humanism.” Schaeffer viewed abortion as the inevitable prelude to infanticide and euthanasia, and he wanted to sound the alarm. When Schaeffer visited Fulton J. Sheen, the famous Roman Catholic bishop, in the late 1970s, Sheen applauded Schaeffer for his attempts to engage Protestants on the abortion issue. “The problem is,” Sheen said, “that abortion is perceived as a Catholic issue. I want you to help me change that.” Schaeffer did so through his writings and lectures, but he also teamed with C. Everett Koop, a pediatric surgeon, to produce a series of five films, collectively titled *Whatever Happened to the Human Race?* These films, produced by Billy Zeoli, Gerald Ford’s religious adviser, financed in part by Richard De Vos of Amway, and directed by Schaeffer’s son, Frank, found a wide audience among evangelicals when they appeared in 1978. Although Francis Schaeffer died in 1983, and Frank Schaeffer now claims that his father was appalled at the machinations of Religious Right leaders, the films, together with a companion book by the same title, served to introduce abortion to evangelicals as a moral concern. “By the end of the *Whatever Happened to the Human Race?* tour,” Frank Schaeffer recalled, “we were calling for civil disobedience, the takeover of the Republican Party, and even hinting at overthrowing our ‘unjust pro-abortion

²³ Philip Yancey, “Schaeffer on Schaeffer, Part II,” *Christianity Today*, April 6, 1979, 25.

government.’ ” Years later, Robert Maddox, Jimmy Carter’s liaison for religious affairs, recounted his only encounter with Schaeffer, who was visiting the office of Alonzo McDonald, an evangelical who served as Carter’s deputy chief of staff. “I think you’ve caused a great damage here with this abortion stuff,” Maddox said. Schaeffer’s quiet response, according to Maddox: “Could be.”²⁴

Weyrich’s prescience about expanding abortion from a preponderantly “Catholic issue” into an evangelical preoccupation was nothing short of brilliant. His success in blaming Carter for the IRS action against Christian schools may also have been brilliant, but it was also mendacious because Carter bore no responsibility for that. After years of warnings, the Internal Revenue Service finally rescinded the tax exemption of Bob Jones University on January 19, 1976, because of its persistent racist policies. That date, January 19, 1976, was a notable one for Jimmy Carter – but not because he was in any way responsible for the action against Bob Jones University. Carter won the Iowa precinct caucuses on January 19, 1976, his first major step toward capturing the Democratic presidential nomination. He took office as president a year and a day later.

Weyrich and the Religious Right, however, persuaded many evangelicals that

²⁴ Frank Schaeffer, *Crazy for God: How I Grew Up as One of the Elect, Helped Found the Religious Right, and Lived to Take All (Or Almost All) of It Back* (New York: Carroll & Graf, 2007), 283, 259, 293; Maddox, interview with the author, Bethesda, Md., December 6, 2012. According to his son, Francis Schaeffer had initially balked at bringing up abortion because he didn’t “want to be identified with some Catholic issue.” Frank Schaeffer, *Crazy for God*, 266. The companion volume for the film series is Francis A. Schaeffer and C. Everett Koop, *Whatever Happened to the Human Race?: Exposing Our Rapid Yet Subtle Loss of Human Rights* (Old Tappan, N.J.: Revell, 1979). For a profile of McDonald, see Mark Oppenheimer, “From One Benefactor, Diverse Seeds in Theology,” *New York Times*, July 16, 2010. On the ubiquity of “secular humanism,” see Tim LaHaye, *The Battle for the Mind* (Old Tappan, N.J.: Fleming H. Revell, 1980). LaHaye dedicated the book to Schaeffer. In his paean to Schaeffer, Cal Thomas declared, “No man contributed as much to the conservative side of the ideological battle than did Dr. Francis Schaeffer, who died of cancer last month at the age of 72.” Cal Thomas, transcript, *Moral Majority Report*, June 28, 1984, Liberty University Archives.

Carter, not Gerald Ford who was then president, was somehow responsible for this unconscionable “assault” on Christian schools. In Weyrich’s words, “Jimmy Carter’s intervention against the Christian schools, trying to deny them tax-exempt status on the basis of so-called de facto segregation” prompted preachers like Jerry Falwell to mobilize against him.²⁵

For politically conservative evangelicals in the late 1970s, Jimmy Carter’s refusal to seek a constitutional amendment banning abortion came to be seen as an unpardonable sin, despite his longstanding opposition to abortion and the efforts of his administration to limit the incidence of abortion. Carter, in fact, had a longer and more consistent record of opposing abortion than Ronald Reagan.

The 1980 presidential election would test the mettle of this new coalition crafted by the hands of Weyrich, Falwell, Billings, and others. The nascent Religious Right courted several candidates in advance of the 1980 Republican primaries, including Philip Crane and John Connally, the former governor of Texas and former secretary of the treasury. The meeting was going smoothly until one of the preachers asked Connally’s views on secular humanism. No one, apparently, had briefed the former governor that the term *secular humanism* was Religious Right code language for everything amiss in America. “Well, I don’t know much about it,” Connally declared, “but it sounds good to me!”²⁶

²⁵ Quoted in William Martin, *With God on Our Side: The Rise of the Religious Right in America* (New York: Broadway Books, 1996), 173.

²⁶ Robert Freedman, “The Religious Right and the Carter Administration,” *Historical Journal*, 48 (March 2005), 249. According to some accounts, the leaders of the Religious also considered Philip M. Crane, U.S. representative from Illinois, Howard Baker, U.S. senator from Tennessee, and Jesse Helms, U.S. senator from North Carolina. See, for example, Memorandum, Anne Wexler and Bob Maddox to Phil Wise, October 22, 1979, “Religious Matters,” Box RM-1, WHCF-

The leaders of the Religious Right settled on Reagan. And the rest, as they say, is history.

Subject File-General, Jimmy Carter Library. Falwell also confirmed that Connally was under consideration. See Cal Thomas and Ed Dobson, *Blinded by Might: Can the Religious Right Save America?* (Grand Rapids, Mich.: Zondervan, 1999), 270. When Tim LaHaye caught wind that some conservatives were considering Connally, he objected vigorously. Writing to Weyrich about Connally, LaHaye said: “He is no born again Christian, is unelectable and has little or no conservative following in his home state.” Note, Tim LaHaye to Paul Weyrich, March 2, 1980, Paul M. Weyrich Papers, Box 4, American Heritage Center, University of Wyoming.