

UNIVERSITY OF CANTERBURY

‘He’ll do the right thing’

*A discussion of Jimmy Carter and Ronald Reagan’s
relationship with the Evangelical community*

This dissertation is submitted in part fulfilment of the requirements for the degree of BA Honours in History at the University of Canterbury. This dissertation is the result of my own work. Material from the published or unpublished work of other historians used in the dissertation is credited to the author in the footnote references. The dissertation is approximately 8,875 words in length.

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Abstract

Historiographical scholarship of previous presidents is never short in supply. James Earl Carter and Ronald Wilson Reagan are no exception to this assertion and have been extensively studied by historians. Similarly, the role of religion in politics in the United States is rarely neglected by historians. The role of the Religious Right in politics and the explanation for its emergence has also been well documented by academics. There is however a surprising lack of investigation into the specific issue of how Reagan, the arguably less religious man, became more commonly identified with the Religious Right than Carter.

Using both a mixture of primary and secondary sources this paper attempts to answer the question of why Carter's electoral success with Evangelicals was so short-lived. Utilizing remarks from the Presidents, their former advisors, debates and prominent Evangelical leaders this dissertation seeks to offer a new insight into why the support for Jimmy Carter was so ephemeral.

This dissertation will offer a rather simple resolution to the complex question of why Evangelicals shifted their support to Reagan. The Religious Right were not just interested in the election of a pious President but wanted to transform the governance of a nation after two decades of growing secularism. Ultimately it appears that Carter's decision to campaign on little more than his moral image propelled him into the White House as this title of this thesis suggests because voters and most specifically Evangelicals believed, 'he'll do the right thing.' When Carter failed to deliver on unrealistic expectations, Evangelicals looked to a man who offered not just personal piety but to introduce piety into political policy; Ronald Reagan.

Contents

Introduction and the Rise of the Religious Right.....	4
Jimmy Carter and the Evangelicals	16
Reagan’s challenge to Carter	27
Conclusion.....	35
Bibliography – Primary Sources.....	38
Bibliography – Secondary Sources.....	41

Introduction and the Rise of the Religious Right

We want to have faith again. We want to be proud again. We just want the truth again.

-Jimmy Carter's acceptance speech at the Democratic National Convention in 1976.¹

The 1970s and 1980s were a time of enormous political change in the United States. As the liberal consensus held together by the New Deal coalition collapsed, the nation saw its first major modern military defeat in Vietnam, and the Watergate scandal led to the resignation of President Richard Milhous Nixon. Following a decade of social upheaval in the 1960s and scandal in Watergate two years earlier, the American public welcomed James Earl Carter's campaign as a Washington outsider promising a return to morality, with open arms. Carter was empowered to articulate a morality based vision due to his status as the first Evangelical president and he brought with him the support of multitudes of Evangelical voters. However, just four years later, Evangelicals would no longer support Carter but his Republican opponent and fellow 'born-again' Christian Ronald Reagan. These series of events shook the core foundations of American governance and politics. Simultaneously, the Evangelical community became increasingly involved in the field of politics and formed what is commonly referred to today as the 'Religious Right' or the 'Christian Right'. Into this new political dynamic entered two Presidents, Jimmy Carter and Ronald Reagan, whose relations with the Evangelical demographic fundamentally altered American politics to the present day. Both Presidents openly declared themselves 'born-again Evangelical Christians', yet it was Reagan, not Carter who became commonly associated with the rise of the Religious Right.

¹ Jimmy Carter: 'Our Nation's Past and Future: Address Accepting the Presidential Nomination at the 1976 Democratic National Convention.' Last accessed 5 September 2013, <http://www.presidency.ucsb.edu/ws/?pid=25953#ixzz2gRMlixKA> .

Jimmy Carter's presidential run in 1976 was unprecedented, not only in his becoming the first president from Georgia, but because of his position as the first openly 'born-again' president of the United States. Yet it was not until another born-again Christian, Carter's challenger, Ronald Reagan, ran for President in 1980 that the Evangelical Christian base rallied so firmly behind a particular candidate. Both used Christian themes in their speeches and both attempted to rally Christians behind their political aims. Reagan utilized faith in the public sphere in his fight against liberal secularism and the arms race against the 'Evil Empire' of the Soviet Union, while Carter fought against the scandal that plagued the Nixon/Ford administrations and consumerism during the energy crisis. To explain this apparent irony of Reagan, not Carter, being associated with the Religious Right, it is necessary to examine the traditional relationship between religion and politics in the United States.

Religion and politics in many senses seem like odd bedfellows, especially in the American context. The German philosopher, Jürgen Habermas, in establishing the theory of the public and private spheres religion seems to be naturally confined to the private sphere. Religion or demonstration of faith seems the most plausible and vivid example of the private sphere; faith is inherently individualistic and differs from person to person. Politics (at least in a democracy) seems the most obvious example of the public sphere given that it is under constant media scrutiny and is a discourse that happens entirely in a public arena. Additionally in the American context the First Amendment to the United States constitution prevents any law reflecting the establishment of religion, while Article VI, paragraph 3, specifically states that 'no religious test shall ever be required as a qualification to any office or public trust under the United States.'² However, Habermas, in describing this relationship, articulates that it is not a simplistic balance of a separation of religion and politics instead,

² 'The Constitution of the United States', <http://www.archives.gov/exhibits/charters/constitution.html> .

‘[t]he parties themselves must reach agreement on the always contested delimitations between a positive liberty to practice a religion of one’s own and the negative liberty to remain spared from the religious practices of the others.’³ The role of government concerning religion ensures not only that the government cannot establish a national religion, but additionally, that the state has an obligation not to inhibit religious communities from practicing their religion. This separation of church and state has resulted in a system in which candidates for public office have commonly used their religion to demonstrate their individual morality and principles to the electorate.⁴ Consequently, it has not been uncommon in the history of the United States for religion to enter the public sphere.

Since the establishment of the Republic, religion has always played a significant role in politics. Ninety-five percent of Americans say they believe in a deity while over seventy percent would not vote for an atheist. Seventy percent also believe that Jesus is the divine Son of God.⁵ Religion, although intrinsically private and individualistic, has been intertwined in the public sphere of American politics. In the eighteenth century for example, support for the abolition of slavery was inherently intermingled with theological disputes. Quakers led the campaign for abolition of slavery while in the 1920s Evangelicals (primarily evangelical Baptists) led the charge for prohibition.⁶ Thus from the Third Party system onwards the two main political parties often became defined by their religious affiliations; the Democrats with Catholicism, Episcopalians and Lutherans and the Republicans with Northern Baptists,

³Jürgen Habermas, ‘Religion in the Public Sphere’, *European Journal of Philosophy*, 14 (2006), 4.

⁴Ibid, 1.

⁵Richard John Neuhaus, ‘Appendix: Facts and Figures on Unsecular America’, in George M. Marsden, *Religion and American Culture* (San Diego: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich Inc., 1990), p. 1.

⁶Marsden, *Religion and American Culture*, p. 23, Ann-Marie E. Szymanski, *Pathways to Prohibition: Radicals, Moderates & Social Movement Outcomes* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press), p. 184.

Congregationalists, Quakers and Evangelicals.⁷ Nathan Miller demonstrates the strong historical interaction between religion and politics when writing of the 1920s', 'If the average man is a Democrat, he is likely to be a Methodist; if a Republican, he is probably a Baptist.'⁸ Politicians would therefore often cater their campaign to winning over certain religious groups. Meanwhile the Cold War environment saw a renewed religious fervour in politics as the United States set to distinguish itself from its atheistic communist enemy, the Soviet Union. As the religious temperament of the United States began to change, so did its political makeup. A growing decline of traditional denominations coincided with an 'Evangelical revival' meaning that the Evangelical vote became increasingly important. Spearheaded in the early 1970s by Evangelicals, the start of the cultural backlash of the 'Silent Majority' to the social liberalism of the previous decade began.⁹

The Evangelical Establishment moved to the Right over the 1970s. Perhaps the best demonstration of the Religious Right's attempt to influence politics was in respect to abortion. Francis Schaeffer in his 1976 book entitled, *How Should We Then Live?* is credited by Religious Right leaders (like Ralph Reed) as making abortion a central issue for Evangelical Christians.¹⁰ The book and the documentary of the same name attracted widespread attention in the United States, gaining audiences of over five thousand in some screenings.¹¹ Schaeffer's book coincided with H. Edward Rowe's, *Save America*, which offered a scathing critique of secular humanism and became a book that was undeniably

⁷Paul Kleppner, *The Third Electoral System 1853-1892* (Chapel Hill, NC: University of North Carolina Press, 1979), p. 182.

⁸Nathan Miler, *New World Coming: The 1920s and the Making of Modern America* (Cambridge, MA: Da Capo Press, 2004), p. 172.

⁹ Rick Perlstein, *Nixonland-The rise of a president and the fracturing of America* (New York: Scribner, 2008), p. 489.

¹⁰Deal Wyatt Hudson, *Onward Christian soldiers: the growing political power of Catholics and Evangelicals in the United States* (New York: Threshold Editions, 2008) p. 54.

¹¹Daniel Williams, *God's Own Party: The Making of the Christian Right* (New York: Oxford University press, 2010), p. 142.

associated with the social conservatism of the American Right.¹² *Save America* was intended to politically mobilize the Evangelical Right against the Secular Left writing. It stated, ‘This vast resource of Christian manpower is a sleeping giant which needs to be aroused.’¹³ This maxim of conservatism proved all too correct in the changes to the Southern Baptist Convention in the 1970s.

Jimmy Carter’s own church and the protestant church most associated with the Evangelical movement in the nation, the Southern Baptist Convention, underwent a radical change during the 1970s as a decades-long struggle between moderates and conservatives came to the fore. Baptists had historically championed a firm separation of religion and politics. After facing persecution in Europe, the early Baptist settlers to North America were some of the strongest champions of the separation of church and state.¹⁴ In 1774, Isaac Backus, an early Baptist leader, led a campaign against requiring citizens to pay an ‘ecclesiastical tax’ and prevented the establishment of any one religion.¹⁵ The American Baptist tradition of a narrow interpretation of the First Amendment remained in place for two centuries. As late as 1971, the SBC passed a resolution that called upon the legalisation of abortion ‘for incidents of rape, incest, clear evidence of severe foetal deformity, and carefully ascertained evidence of the likelihood of damage to the emotional, mental, and physical health of the mother.’¹⁶ Jerry Falwell, the Baptist most associated with the rise of the Religious Right, declared in 1965, ‘I would find it impossible to stop preaching the pure saving gospel of Jesus Christ, and begin doing anything else – including fighting

¹² Williams, *God’s Own Party*, p. 142.

¹³H. Edward Rowe, *Save America* (Old Tappan, NJ: Fleming H. Revell, 1976), p. 56.

¹⁴ Marsden, *Religion and American Culture*, p. 19.

¹⁵Randall Balmer, *Thy Kingdom Come* (New York: Basic Books, 2006), p. 43.

¹⁶Ibid, p.12.

Communism or participating in civil-rights reforms.’¹⁷ In 1976, the SBC again voted down an attempt to overturn the pro-choice position but simultaneously adopted their first resolution against homosexuality demonstrating the beginnings of creeping conservatism.¹⁸ During the 1970s there was a fundamental shift in how Evangelicals approached abortion, and by the late 1970s Evangelicals had shifted to a pro-life position, following the Supreme Court’s decision in *Roe v. Wade* and numerous campaigns by pro-life groups. Jerry Falwell and other prominent right-wing Christians aligned with Catholics in the pro-life movement in an attempt to unite Christians for a Republican cause. Instead of just portraying abortion as a human rights issue though, Falwell portrayed the pro-life campaign as that against feminism and sexual immorality, two issues that were already well understood as sin within the Evangelical community.¹⁹ Conservatives utilized the new opposition to the abortion issue as a ‘stick of dynamite’ to claim the executive.²⁰ Adrian Rogers, a vocal conservative, was elected as the head of the SBC in 1979 and used his administrative powers to roll back the prior strict interpretation of the separation of church and state. Falwell summed up the new conservative agenda of the Religious Right: ‘Number one, get people converted to Christ; number two, get them baptized; number three, get them registered to vote.’²¹

During the 1960s and 1970s there was a fundamental shift in the way Evangelicals approached politics and were a fundamental part of the backlash of the ‘Silent Majority’. The 1960s had seen the landmark Civil Rights legislation and the sexual revolution. Politically, the liberal left had promised that the ‘Great Society’ programmes instituted by the Johnson

¹⁷ Williams, *God’s Own Party*, p. 96.

¹⁸ *Ibid*, p. 155.

¹⁹ *Ibid*, p. 156.

²⁰ *Ibid* p. 157.

²¹ Marjorie Randon Hershey, *Running for office: the political education of campaigners* (London: Chatham House Publishers, 1984), p. 15.

administration would solve society's ills. The failure of these programmes to eliminate poverty and racial inequality fuelled conservative arguments that the government was not the appropriate vehicle for solving poverty in the United States.²² Cynicism towards the political left was therefore at an all-time high and their embrace of secular liberal values antagonised Evangelicals. This undoubtedly led to conflict with the 'Evangelical Right', who disagreed with the new era of permissiveness and perceived immorality.

Evangelicals did not necessarily condemn the sixties entirely but wanted to 'strictly limit-the social, political, and cultural transformations of the era.'²³ In fact the study of young Evangelicals in the 1960s has shown their willingness to institute radical social change, however this radical revolutionary change was to be instituted on the foundation of 'revolutionary spirit of Jesus' not the social programmes that the Democrats instituted.²⁴

Richard Hofstadter observed this phenomenon as early as 1964:

Ascetic Protestantism remains a significant undercurrent in contemporary America and... its followers have found new-fangled ways of reaffirming some of their convictions. They cannot bring back Prohibition or keep evolution entirely out of the school. They have been unable even to defend school prayer or prevent Life magazine from featuring the topless bathing suit. But they can recriminate against and punish the new America that outrages them, and they have found powerful leaders to echo their views.²⁵

The social conservative backlash coincided with a changing political environment that enabled Evangelicals to launch a moral crusade to institute Evangelical policy in government.

The elections of Jimmy Carter and Ronald Reagan coincided with new Evangelical political power. The fight against the Equal Rights Amendment (ERA) embodied this new unbridled political power. The ERA drew sharp ideological lines between social conservatives and the liberal left, who saw the legislation as an attempt to achieve a greater

²² Alan Brinkley, *Liberalism and Its Discontents* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1998), p. 306.

²³ Axel R. Schäfer, *American Evangelicals and the 1960s* (Madison, WI: University of Wisconsin Press, 2013), p. 63.

²⁴ *Ibid*, p.73.

²⁵ Richard Hofstadter, *The Paranoid Style in American Politics* (New York: Vintage, 2008), p. 79.

degree of gender equality, and those in the religious community, who saw it as an affront to the traditional family.²⁶ The anti-ERA movement was particularly influential as it united a broad group of traditional Protestants, Evangelicals and Catholics. Indeed, ninety-eight percent of the anti-ERA members were regular church attendees.²⁷ This broad coalition of religious groups would be the fore runner to such organizations as the Moral Majority.

The 'New Right' was more than willing to accommodate its new supporters. Conservative Republicans were looking for a new standard bearer following Barry Goldwater's crushing defeat in 1964. Traditionally, the 'Old Right' had emphasised fiscal and foreign policy issues.²⁸ After the fiscal issues had failed to make electoral gains materialize, a new generation of conservatives tried a new tactic. As Paul Weyrich, a leader of the right-leaning Committee for the Survival of a Free Congress adeptly put it, 'The New Right is looking for issues that people care about. Social issues, at the present, fit the bill.'²⁹ Weyrich politically capitalised on social issues at just the right moment. He utilized the Supreme Court's decision that removed the tax-exempt status of Christian Bob Jones University for its segregation policies as an attack on Christian morality, and credits the decision as being the 'Genesis' of the Religious Right. Weyrich, despite his personal Catholicism, successfully convinced Jerry Falwell to launch the Moral Majority in 1979 and bring Conservative Republican issues, such as abortion and homosexuality, to the attention of Evangelicals.³⁰

²⁶ Kent L Tedin, 'Religious Preference and Pro/Anti Activism on the Equal Rights Amendment Issue,' *Pacific Sociological Review*, 28(1978), 55.

²⁷ Kenneth J. Heineman, *God is a Conservative: Religion, Politics, and Morality in Contemporary America* (New York: NYU Press, 2005), p. 70.

²⁸ *Ibid*, p. 79

²⁹ Richard John Neuhaus and Michael Cromartie, *Piety and Politics: Evangelicals and Fundamentalists Confront the World* (London: University Press of America, 1987), p. 79.

³⁰ Williams, *God's Own Party*, p. 132.

The Republicans won every Presidential election from 1968 to 1988, barring Carter's 1976 win. Kevin P. Phillips', *The Emerging Republican Majority*, demonstrated that due to demographic changes, the Republicans were moving from the minority to the majority party during this era.³¹ To explain the anomaly of Democratic success in 1976, we must therefore look to the broader historical context. The 1970s were a particularly turbulent period in politics. Watergate, in particular, shattered the faith Americans had in the executive office in a time when Americans had seen significant change in the other aspects of the nation. The military had seen its first defeat in Vietnam, which shattered the pride of the electorate that believed in American exceptionalism and the Republicans, who had tried to explain the defeat as due to moral decay, the filth, the crime, the communists, which were all a product of 'liberalism', were in disarray.³² Spiro Agnew's resignation, combined with Watergate, created a culture in which the electorate was disturbed by Republicans' moral lapses.³³ The Republicans had effectively given up their monopoly on representing morality in politics. Evangelical voters in particular, therefore, became influential in the 1976 election, as traditional Republican voters, who were particularly concerned about morality issues and were an influential force in the 1976 and 1980 Presidential elections.

The moral crises created by the loss in Vietnam and the scandal of Watergate led to a culture of distrust amongst the American populace towards Washington and central government. This coincided with a shift to political prominence of Evangelicals in politics. As a social liberal agenda pushed the ERA and the legislation of abortion in *Roe v. Wade* it led to a social backlash from the Evangelical community. Evangelicals turned to what they could ultimately trust to determine a candidate's morality – religion – and thus turned to the

³¹Kevin P. Phillips, *The Emerging Republican Majority* (New York: Arlington House Publishers, 1969), p. 3.

³² Gerard De Groote, 'Reagan's rise,' *History Today*, 45 (1995), 31, Rick Perlstein, *Nixonland-The rise of a president and the fracturing of America* (New York: Scribner, 2008), p. 75.

³³ Heineman, *God is a Conservative*, p. 66.

Georgian governor and fellow Evangelical, James Earl Carter. Unfortunately for the thirty-ninth president, the support he received was tepid and would eventually evaporate as Evangelicals turned to Ronald Reagan to represent them in 1980.

The historiography on the precise number of Evangelicals and their voting patterns varies widely between scholars. Albert J. Menendez states that around one-third of American adults have claimed to have a ‘born-again’ experience; this equates to about fifty million Americans (fifty-one percent of Protestants and eighteen per cent of Catholics), while Norton and Slosser put the figure closer to forty million.³⁴ Historians and historical accounts differ even more widely on Evangelical voting patterns in the 1976 and 1980 elections. Albert J. Menendez’s *Evangelicals at the Ballot Box*, is frequently quoted in historical scholarship as gospel. However, his analysis is not transparent or precise, the book lacks footnotes and rather than using exit poll data it estimates the Evangelical vote by their prevalence in each county.³⁵ Although this, may possibly, provide more accurate results than exit polls there is much room for statistical error, such as the prospect that non-Evangelical results are not independent of the number of Evangelicals in each county. Menendez states that Carter won forty percent of Evangelicals, a twenty percent increase on McGovern’s result four years earlier.³⁶ In contrast, J. Brooks Flippen (one of the few that does not quote Menendez) claims that: ‘In 1976 Carter increased the [Democratic share of the] Evangelical vote by fifty percent.’³⁷ Dan F. Hahn states more vaguely that he is ‘[c]ertain that it [Carter’s faith] cut

³⁴Albert J. Menendez, *Evangelicals at the Ballot Box* (New York: Prometheus Books, 1996), p. 129., Howard Norton and Bob Slosser, *The Miracle of Jimmy Carter* (Plainfield, N.J.: Logos International, 1976), p. 10.

³⁵Menendez, *Evangelicals at the Ballot Box*, p. 129.

³⁶ *Ibid*, p.128.

³⁷J. Brooks Flippen, *Jimmy Carter, The Politics of Family, and the Rise of the Religious Right* (Athens, GA: University of Georgia Press, 2011), p. 8.

into the Republican evangelical vote [and] helped win the [1976] election.³⁸ Louis Field attests that with the exclusion of the Evangelical vote Carter would have won the popular vote in the 1980 election by one percent.³⁹ A *Time* article immediately after the election suggested as much as two-third of Reagan's margin was due to the shift of white Fundamentalists.⁴⁰ An exit poll from the Associate Press reported that born-again Christians moved from a 50-37 Carter-Ford split in 1976 to a 56-39 Reagan-Carter vote a mere four years later.⁴¹ Jerry Falwell claimed that 'two-thirds of our people voted for Carter [in 1976]'⁴², while historian Mark A. Noll asserts that Carter won a plurality of Pentecostals in both 1976 and 1980.⁴³ Despite the wide variety in claims by scholars over the exact figures, the universal consensus among intellectuals is that Carter's evangelical support was ephemeral in supporting him in 1976 and had shifted firmly against him by the 1980 election.

Religion has always played a significant part of American politics and the 1970s and 1980s were no exception. The events of Watergate, Vietnam and perceived moral failures of government in fact pushed the electorate closer to religious rhetoric at a time of greater secularization. As the public discourse shifted back towards the importance of morality and religion, the Evangelical community became increasingly concerned with politics.

Evangelicals were therefore one of the key voter demographics up for grab in the 1976 and 1980 elections. The degree and level of support Carter and Reagan got from the Evangelical

³⁸Dan F. Hahn, *One's (Re)Born Every Minute; How Carter Suckered our votes in 1976* (Washington, D.C.: ERIC Clearinghouse, 1978), p.1.

³⁹Balmer, introduction to *Thy Kingdom Come*, xvii.

⁴⁰Neuhaus and Cromartie, *Piety and Politics*, p. 84

⁴¹Donald M. Rothberg, 'Born-Again Christians go Reagan,' *Associated Press in Boca Raton News*, November 6, 1980, 7A.

⁴²J. Brooks Flippen, *Jimmy Carter, The Politics of Family, and the Rise of the Religious Right* (Athens, GA: University of Georgia Press, 2011), p. 7.

⁴³Mark A. Noll, *Religion and American Politics: From the Colonial Period to the 1980s to the present* (London: Oxford University Press, 2007), p. 375.

community differed the consensus is that Evangelicals shifted towards Carter in 1976 but decisively moved against him in 1980. To understand the dramatic shift in support away from Carter we must look at his relationship with the Evangelical community.

Jimmy Carter and the Evangelicals

A journalist, after hours of trying to determine Jimmy Carter's success as a dark horse candidate finally remarked, 'Faith, he has faith! The kind of faith it takes to move mount [...] no, not to move mountains – that's for Reagan and his Panama Canal problems. This man Carter has got the faith that moves voters- millions of them.'⁴⁴ Jimmy Carter was indeed a deeply religious man. When his aides were pressed over and over again about what made him run, they answered with one word, 'Religion.'⁴⁵ Carter read the Bible frequently and declared himself a 'born-again Evangelical Christian' and that his religion was, 'as natural to me as breathing.'⁴⁶ The Carter Family's long serving pastor clarified his faith, 'I have discovered that you can never adequately grasp Jimmy Carter himself unless you see his Christian faith, along with its standards and principles, as being the framework on which all the rest is built.'⁴⁷ Carter taught Sunday school frequently, during the campaign itself and during his presidency.⁴⁸ It was somewhat unsurprising, amidst the scandal and corruption that was characterizing Washington D.C. surrounding Spiro Agnew's resignation and Watergate, that Carter made his honesty and most importantly his faith, as a central issue of his campaign. He told an audience in Buffalo, New York during the Democratic primary that, 'I believe I can be a better President because of my faith.'⁴⁹ During Carter's term, shortly after a meeting

⁴⁴ Norton and Slosser, *The Miracle of Jimmy Carter*, p. 2.

⁴⁵ Ibid, p. 42.

⁴⁶ Ibid, p. 11, 13.

⁴⁷ Dan Ariail and Cheryl Heckler-Feltz, *The Carpenter's Apprentice: The Spiritual Biography of Jimmy Carter* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 1996), p. 46.

⁴⁸ Williams, *God's Own Party*, p. 133. , Carter, 'Jimmy Carter interview'.

⁴⁹ Norton and Slosser, *The Miracle of Jimmy Carter*, p. 13.

with Pope John Paul the Second the Pontiff declared, ‘You know, after a couple of hours with President Carter I had the feeling that two religious leaders were conversing.’⁵⁰

Amazingly, the historiography of 1970s politics often does not offer explanation on two key issues. Historians do not explain how a more secular socially liberal party nominated an Evangelical candidate from the Deep South. Nor have historians offered a comprehensive summation on why Reagan, a divorced man who legalized abortion in California and infrequently attended church, is most associated with the rise of the Religious Right. Jon Butler has aptly described this problem with American historiography as the ‘Jack in the Box’ phenomenon. Historians, although recognizing the importance of religion, have often been unable to explain its apparent prevalence in some historical events over others.⁵¹ A few, like Dan F. Hahn, have claimed that the Democrats’ nomination of Carter was simply a matter of political strategy and that the Democrats ‘suckered’ the votes of Evangelical Republicans.⁵² Pat Robertson, among other Evangelical leaders, credited his own influences, notoriously stating that he did, ‘everything this side of breaking FCC regulations’ in getting Carter the Democratic nomination.⁵³ Others have simply claimed that with the growing strength of the Evangelical movement, Evangelicals wanted finally to have ‘one of their own’ in the Oval Office.⁵⁴ The first, more cynical explanation that Carter was nominated simply due to some sort of master political strategy seems unlikely as the Democrats passed over more moderate (and quite probably more electable) candidates in 1972 and 1984. Robertson and other prominent religious leaders’ support came fairly late in the campaign (and a few

⁵⁰Zbigniew Brzezinski, *Power and Principle: Memoirs of the National Security Adviser 1977-1981* (New York: Farrar, Straus, & Giroux, 1983), p. 27.

⁵¹Jon Butler, ‘Jack-in-the-Box Faith: The Religion Problem in Modern American History’ *The Journal of American History*, 90 (2004), 1360.

⁵²Hahn, *One's (Re)Born Every Minute*, p.1.

⁵³Balmer, introduction, xvi.

⁵⁴Hahn, *One's (Re)Born Every Minute*, p.6.

flipped their support to Ford after the *Playboy Interview*) by which time Carter was already the front runner to win the nomination. Ultimately, it appears Carter was a product of his times and in particular, Watergate.

The 1960s and 1970s had seen the failure in some of the United States' most trusted institutions. In the aftermath of Watergate and the perceived moral crises facing the nation, Americans looked increasingly to something that the population had been able to depend on for their moral compass, religion. The substantial majority of the American electorate were Christians, regardless of whether or not they were Evangelical; they still understood Carter's religious imagery and terminology. Carter's Evangelicalism gave voters' faith in his moral compass and that he would represent their values. This was displayed in an early Time-Yankelovich poll which found that thirty-two percent of the voters found his faith a strength to his campaign while only eight percent did not.⁵⁵ Carter's faith became a major tenet of his campaign and over a hundred articles about Carter's religion had been written by May 1976.⁵⁶ Carter's campaign made few promises and set out few policy specifics. The one promise that gained him much ridicule from his fellow Democratic primary opponents and later the Republicans was that he would, 'never tell a lie.'⁵⁷ Such a pious declaration may have hindered a candidate's election chances in another era, but not in 1976. *Time* and *Newsweek* both declared 1976 as, 'The Year of the Evangelical', on Carter's nomination and the rise of evangelicalism nationally⁵⁸. Carter, running merely on his Christian values could afford to be all things to all people. When a voter asked him in New Hampshire whether he

⁵⁵Hahn, *One's (Re)Born Every Minute*, p. 7.

⁵⁶J. Brooks Flippen, *Jimmy Carter, The Politics of Family, and the Rise of the Religious Right* (Athens, GA: University of Georgia Press, 2011), p. 6.

⁵⁷ Anonymous, 'Jimmy Carter: Not Just Peanuts' *Time*, 107(1976), 19.

⁵⁸Menendez, *Evangelicals at the Ballot Box*, p. 128.

was a conservative, moderate or liberal he responded, ‘I don’t have to choose, so I won’t.’⁵⁹ Furthermore, the Democratic nominee was careful to balance his Evangelical appeal with the mostly secular Democratic platform, frequently quoting Luke chapter twenty, verse twenty-five (Render unto Caesar the things that are Caesar’s and unto God the things that are God’s) and stating; ‘It does not say you have to live two lives. It doesn’t say you have to be two people.’⁶⁰ Carter was also careful on the campaign trail about when it was appropriate to make his faith an issue. At a dinner of supporters in Florida he frequently mentioned God, but in the more secular Harvard-Radcliffe Democratic club references to his Christian faith were absent.⁶¹ The blind faith many voters placed in Carter is best represented by a focus group where shortly before the election, a thirty-three year old waitress was disappointed Carter had not denounced bussing, but added that she would support him anyway because, ‘he’ll do the right thing’.⁶² Voters extrapolated their own personal views onto Carter and were therefore disappointed when he did not live up to them. In a telling interview with a fellow Evangelical Carter was asked, ‘You are saying, in effect, then: ‘Trust me and I will do these things?’, ‘Yes’ Carter replied.⁶³

Perhaps one of the best indications of the importance of Carter’s faith to the 1976 campaign was the public reaction to his notorious *Playboy* interview. The Carter campaign had seen a thirty-three point lead in July 1976 evaporate to a point behind the incumbent Ford by late October.⁶⁴ Carter was attempting to reach traditional secular Democrats, who viewed

⁵⁹Norton and Slosser, *The Miracle of Jimmy Carter*, p. 6.

⁶⁰Ibid, p.12.

⁶¹Helen Dudar, *The Attentive Eye* (Bloomington,IN: Xlibris Corporation, 2002), p. 129.

⁶² Norton and Slosser, *The Miracle of Jimmy Carter*, p. 10.

⁶³Ibid, p. 97.

⁶⁴James E. Campbell, *The American Campaign, Second Edition: U.S. Presidential Campaigns and the National Vote* (College Station, TX: Texas A&M University Press, 2008), p. 12.

him as too pious. In the otherwise fairly uneventful interview he used the term ‘screw’ and admitted that he ‘had committed adultery in his heart many times.’⁶⁵ The interview backfired and it just seemed to add fire to sceptics, ‘Mr Carter is the only politician who talks dirty in public to cover up the fact that he talks clean in private.’⁶⁶ The public response was almost universally negative. Douglas Brinkley, a historian, said it was impossible to underestimate the damage the *Playboy* interview did to the Carter campaign, ‘It almost derailed the entire Carter campaign. They were in havoc over it.’⁶⁷ It simultaneously led to a backlash from the Evangelical community with the Reverend W.A. Criswell, the leader of the Southern Baptist Convention, switching his support from Carter to Ford in response to the interview.⁶⁸ Carter himself said in the Presidential Debate with President Ford, ‘In retrospect I would not have given that interview [...] If [...] in the future [I decide] to discuss my deep Christian beliefs and condemnations and sinfulness, I’ll use another forum.’⁶⁹ The fact that many other prominent individuals had given an interview in *Playboy* without the same backlash demonstrates how much the Carter campaign depended on Carter’s ‘clean’ and ‘moral’ image in assuring electoral victory.

The *Playboy* interview best represents the balancing act Carter would have in office, attempting to appease the broad Democratic coalition that swept him to victory in 1976. Carter needed to both appease the secular liberal base that often provided fundraising and campaign contributions but to win re-election needed to maintain Evangelical support. Carter or any Democrat that gained support from the Evangelical Right seemed predetermined to

⁶⁵Robert Scheer, ‘Playboy Interview with Jimmy Carter’, *Playboy*, 23(1976), 193.

⁶⁶Hahn, *One's (Re)Born Every Minute*, p.2.

⁶⁷ Douglas Brinkley speaking as part of the programme ‘Jimmy Carter: American Experience’, *American Experience* (PBS), http://www-tc.pbs.org/wgbh/americanexperience/media/uploads/special_features/download_files/carter_transcript_pdf.pdf .

⁶⁸ Heineman, *God is a Conservative*, p. 82.

⁶⁹ Jimmy Carter, ‘Third Presidential Debate with President Ford’ (CBS Network), <http://www.debates.org/index.php?page=october-22-1976-debate-transcript> .

fail. Carter had a fundamentally different outlook on the role of Government, ‘Christian leaders ... form[ed] a union with the conservative wing of the Republican Party. Such a political marriage is in conflict with my own belief in the separation of church and state-I would feel the same even if the marriage were with Democrats.’⁷⁰ Due to the challenge from the left of Senator Ted Kennedy in 1980; Carter had to shift to the left to shore up his base and in the process further alienated Evangelicals.⁷¹ Carter’s proposed ‘White House Conference on the Family’ demonstrated this shift to the left, the WHCF was initially proposed to appease Evangelicals but ended up accommodating homosexuals and de facto relationships that Evangelicals saw as an affront to the traditional family.⁷²

Ultimately Carter lost support from the Evangelical community and the electorate because on the whole, he did not live up to their expectations. Carter expected those that supported him would simultaneously support his world view as demonstrated in a 2011 interview on *The Rachel Maddow Show*. When asked how the Religious Right originated Carter responded, ‘They turned against me when I was in office.’⁷³ Pat Robertson, a conservative Evangelical, perhaps best represents the shift against Carter. As previously mentioned Robertson in 1976 utilized his *The 700 Club* network to make a direct appeal to Evangelical voters on behalf of Carter. Robertson firmly believed in the role of the state to implement morality, as did most Evangelicals and wrongly assumed that Carter did too.⁷⁴ Both Carter and Robertson opposed abortion, however but while Carter’s position was one of

⁷⁰ Jimmy Carter, *Our Endangered Values: America’s Moral Crisis* (New York: Simon and Schuster Paperbacks, 2005), p. 39.

⁷¹ Robert Freedman, ‘The Religious Right and the Carter Administration’, *The Historical Journal* 48(2005), 246.

⁷² *Ibid*, 245.

⁷³ Jimmy Carter speaking as part of the programme ‘Jimmy Carter interview with Rachel Maddow’ *The Rachel Maddow Show* (MSNBC), http://www.nbcnews.com/id/44548682/ns/msnbc-rachel_maddow_show/t/rachel-maddow-show-thursday-september-th/#.UfN3cY0Q5i8 .

⁷⁴ David John Marley, *Pat Robertson: An American Life* (Lanham, MD: Rowman & Littlefield Publishers, 2007), p. 42.

pragmatism and flexibility, Robertson refused to give any ground.⁷⁵ As the election neared, *Christianity Today* published an editorial on whether Christians should vote for a Christian, thus creating a psyche that Carter owed the election to them and therefore, he should represent their interests.⁷⁶ Bob Slosser, a frequent presenter on the Christian Broadcasting Network and a prominent Evangelical, co-wrote a glowing New York Times bestseller book with Howard Norton. Entitled *The Miracle of Jimmy Carter*, it provided commentary on Carter's faith and was released shortly before the general election.⁷⁷ Slosser wrote about the fact that Carter campaigned on little other than Christian values, writing that Carter offered, 'honesty, morality, frugality and Christianity in the oval office', insinuating that voters would project their own values onto Carter. Ironically Slosser himself made several false assumptions about the candidate. Slosser suggested that Carter would abolish food stamps in his first year in office and that he was 'staunchly conservative on fiscal issues'.⁷⁸ Slosser also suggested he wanted to tighten abortion restrictions and that if Jimmy Carter were elected president, 'This country is in for some surprises'.⁷⁹ Indeed Slosser was correct, however the surprise was the fact that Carter was not the president Evangelicals had envisaged which led to Slosser, Robertson and others also supporting Reagan in 1980.⁸⁰

The Southern Baptist Convention's relationship with the Carter administration is the perfect example of the Evangelical shift towards and then against Carter. The SBC is the largest Protestant denomination and at the time of his presidential campaign was where Carter held his church membership. Carter's aunt, Emily Dolvin, told a Maryland audience,

⁷⁵ David John Marley, *Pat Robertson*, p. 42.

⁷⁶ Ibid, p. 44.

⁷⁷ Norton and Slosser, *The Miracle of Jimmy Carter*, p. 1.

⁷⁸ Ibid, pp.7, 19, 6, 75.

⁷⁹ Ibid, p.111.

⁸⁰ Bob Slosser, 'Reagan Inside Out: The President', https://www.cbn.com/spirituallife/biblestudyandtheology/discipleship/slosser_reaganpresidency.aspx .

‘If all you Baptists vote for him, he’ll [Carter] get in there because there are more Baptists than anyone.’⁸¹ Carter’s targeting of the Baptist movement paid dividends. It is estimated he won fifty-five percent of Baptists, a gain of thirty-three percent from his Democratic predecessor.⁸² However, like its high profile members, Robertson, Falwell and Slosser, the general congregation moved firmly against Carter in 1980. The aforementioned new focus on abortion, homosexuality and the ERA saw a subsequent shift in the support of the general congregation of the SBC – Carter’s new focus did not sit well with the church community. Carter himself credits the SBC as playing an essential role in the establishment of the Religious Right stating that the SBC ‘formed an ... unbroken [alliance] since then with extremely conservative elements in the Republican Party and extremely conservative elements in the Christian evangelical community.’⁸³

The Carter administration frequently misunderstood the electorate’s religious convictions, reducing the dwindling support from the Evangelical community even further. Robert Maddox, Carter’s special assistant for religious matters, noted that his administration staff did not understand as early as 1978 ‘what deep trouble he was in with these religiously-orientated issues’.⁸⁴ The predominantly secular administration believed that due to Carter’s personal evangelism his support among the Evangelical community remained solid. Maddox, however, noted that in a meeting shortly after his appointment with several Southern Baptist Pastors they displayed a great degree of hostility towards the Carter White House, noting that under Johnson or Nixon they had got a greater degree of influence and access.⁸⁵ Carter was

⁸¹Howard Norton and Bob Slosser , *The Miracle of Jimmy Carter*, p. 7.

⁸² Menendez, *Evangelicals at the Ballot Box*, p. 129.

⁸³Carter, ‘Jimmy Carter interview with Rachel Maddow’.

⁸⁴ Robert Maddox, ‘Exit Interview (with Marie Allen)’
<http://www.jimmycarterlibrary.gov/library/exitInt/Maddox.pdf>, 12.

⁸⁵Maddox, ‘Exit Interview(with Marie Allen)’, 7.

seen as indistinguishable from secular Eastern social liberals. To Evangelicals, the clear absence of Evangelicals from his cabinet as well as his open campaigning for the ERA, all heightened distrust.⁸⁶ This was ironically due to Carter's firm belief in the Baptist tradition of separation of church and state. Unlike his predecessors, he seemed uncomfortable about mixing administration with politics, despite a willingness to do so on the campaign trail. Carter fundamentally believed that Christian based values should be in politics but should not dictate policy. Carter did not promote any Evangelicals of prominence to his administration, which caused great anguish to the Evangelical community.⁸⁷ To put into perspective the level of discontent in the American Evangelical community towards Carter, the man who once declared that 'Jesus Christ comes first in my life, even before politics' was being described by some as 'not even a Christian.'⁸⁸

Maddox stated that in his view many of the religious leaders did not support Carter in 1976. In fact Falwell and other prominent born-again Christians had openly supported Ford.⁸⁹ There was also a distinct divergence in the community over Carter's abortion decision, claiming the fact that he was against a constitutional amendment to ban abortion demonstrated that he was supportive of abortion, regardless of his numerous statements to the contrary.⁹⁰ Maddox emphasised that the general congregation and the conservative clergy leadership 'were really set against Jimmy Carter. The TV preachers, the religious broadcasters, particularly the radio broadcasters, tend to be very conservative, and they were

⁸⁶ Neuhaus and Cromartie, *Piety and Politics*, p. 79.

⁸⁷ Maddox, Exit Interview(with Marie Allen), 10.

⁸⁸ Howard Norton and Bob Slosser , *The Miracle of Jimmy Carter*, p. 36., Maddox, Exit Interview(with Marie Allen), 10.

⁸⁹Ibid

⁹⁰Ibid, 11.

screaming about secular humanism. They were talking about abortions.’⁹¹ The great irony Maddox pointed out was that Carter himself led to the mobilization of the Evangelicals, his candidacy had brought Evangelical Christianity into the Public Sphere. These same Evangelicals now asked if ‘He [Carter] can be political why can’t we?’⁹²

Carter’s clearest use of religious imagery during his presidency, in his televised *Crisis of Confidence* speech, addressed to the nation concerning energy use, did not gain Evangelical support. Oil prices had increased drastically during the Carter administration causing increased inflation, unemployment and stagflation to the American economy. Carter approached the speech like an evangelical sermon, recognition of a problem, retreat to contemplation, decision of whether to commit, declaration of renewal.⁹³ Carter used biblical references to epitomize the energy crisis as not just an economic crisis but a spiritual one as well. He referred to his cabinet members as, ‘Disciples’, stated that the United States was facing the ‘Moral equivalent of war’ and that ultimately Americans were ‘confronted with a moral and a spiritual crisis’ that meant the nation was threatened by a ‘Crisis of Confidence.’⁹⁴ Carter was in fact calling for a spiritual renewal stating that ‘too many of us now tend to worship self-indulgence and consumption’ and finished the speech, ‘With God’s help and for the sake of our nation, it is time for us to join hands in America.’⁹⁵ Often dubbed ‘Malaise Speech’ by his opponents, it later haunted his presidency. Although initially well

⁹¹Maddox, Exit Interview(with Marie Allen), 11.

⁹²David R. Swartz, ‘Left Behind: The Evangelical Left and the Limits of Evangelical Politics’ (PhD thesis, Notre Dame, 2008), 489.

⁹³Dan F. Hahn, ‘Flailing the Profligate: Carter’s Energy Sermon of 1979’, *Presidential Studies Quarterly*, 10(1980), 583.

⁹⁴Jimmy Carter, ‘Crisis of Confidence’, <http://www.pbs.org/wgbh/americanexperience/features/primary-resources/carter-crisis/>.

⁹⁵ Carter, ‘Crisis of Confidence’.

received, his opponents later successfully characterised the speech as shirking his responsibilities by blaming the American people.⁹⁶ Ronald Reagan in using similar religious metaphors was well received by the Evangelical community stating instead that he ‘finds no national malaise’ and that the United States quoting John Winthrop’s *Model of Christian Charity*, (itself based on the Sermon on the Mount), ‘stood as a shining city upon the hill.’⁹⁷

Carter’s presidency perhaps best represents the peculiar relationship between religion and politics in the United States. Jimmy Carter undoubtedly held very deep religious convictions and Christian morality. Carter’s morality had been welcomed at a time when there was deep distrust towards Washington D.C. However, the thirty-ninth president did not fully appreciate that running a campaign on the premise of being an ‘outsider’ and a moral crusader would problematize his relationship with the Evangelical electorate when he did not meet all their expectations. Carter did not recognize that it was simply not enough for Evangelicals to have ‘one of their own’ in public office; they expected policy transformation based on Judeo-Christian principles. It was not enough to articulate religious values in the *Crisis of Confidence* speech but Evangelicals expected action on abortion, the ERA and homosexuality. Fundamentally, Carter believed in the now archaic Baptist tradition of a wall of separation between church and state, while a new generation of Evangelicals no longer held the same conviction. Ultimately this group would turn to a candidate who unequivocally declared that he endorsed their values, Ronald Reagan.

⁹⁶Kevin Matterson, ‘A Politics of National Sacrifice.’ *American Prospect* 20 (2009), 16.

⁹⁷Ibid, 17.

Reagan's challenge to Carter

Now, I know this is a non-partisan gathering and so I know that you can't endorse me, but I only brought that up because I want you to know I endorse you and what you are doing.⁹⁸

Ronald Reagan

Reagan announced his endorsement to deafening applause in a gathering of Evangelical leadership shortly before the 1980 election. The gathering held in Dallas, Texas, heard a series of speakers denouncing homosexuality, feminism and abortion immediately before Reagan's address.⁹⁹ Reagan was the only candidate to turn up to the event; Carter and John Anderson were also invited to the gathering but refused to attend. Reagan was therefore the man of the hour as he promised to represent the Religious Right in the cultural wars, or in the words of one biographer, 'Rather than bringing himself to church, President Reagan brought the church to his presidency.'¹⁰⁰

Despite Reagan's public declarations of faith, there was a fundamental discord between his proclaimed religion and his personal actions. When asked as late as 1976 whether he was 'born-again', Reagan seemed confused by the question and in the 1984 Presidential debate, declared in 'church, we did not use that term, 'born again,' so I don't know whether I would fit that.'¹⁰¹ In the same debate Reagan dodged the question of why he did not attend church, claiming that he would put others at risk and that he regularly attended

⁹⁸Howell Raines, 'Reagan Backs Evangelicals in Their Political Activities', in Phillip Michael Pantama, *America-A Purpose-Driven Nation* (The Woodlands, TX: Xulon Press, 2007), p. 135.

⁹⁹Robert S. McElvaine, *Grand Theft Jesus: The Hijacking of Religion in America* (New York: Crown Publishing Group, 2008), p. 17.

¹⁰⁰Stephen Goode, 'The Christian Faith of Ronald Reagan', *Insight on the News*, 20(2004), 42.

¹⁰¹Ronald Reagan, 'First Reagan-Mondale Presidential debate 1984', <http://www.debates.org/index.php?page=october-7-1984-debate-transcript> .

church prior to becoming president.¹⁰² This was a stretch of the truth at best and ignores Carter's regular church attendance as president.¹⁰³ Furthermore, the Fortieth President had irregularly attended church prior to his presidency.¹⁰⁴ Reagan was a divorced man, gaining fame via the irreligious, liberal institution known as Hollywood. His daughter, Patti, even posed for *Playboy*.¹⁰⁵ His wife, Nancy, was infatuated with new-age spiritualism and reportedly did not allow Reagan to travel on days that her astrologer suggested the President's life would be in danger.¹⁰⁶ As Governor of California, Ronald Reagan also signed into law one of the most liberal abortion laws in the nation. Although he would, in the election campaign of 1980, claim to be a 'born-again' Christian, it is important to note that so did Carter and the independent, John A. Anderson.¹⁰⁷ Although the faith and beliefs of an individual are impossible to determine by another, the evidence seems fairly conclusive that Jimmy Carter was certainly more 'devout' than Reagan. However, we should not make the false assumption that Reagan was irreligious or that his faith did not play an important role in his life. Paul Kengor has written extensively on Reagan's faith in, *God and Ronald Reagan*, demonstrating a case that Reagan's religiosity played a central tenet in his life. Reagan frequently quoted C.S. Lewis as well as other Christian scholars.¹⁰⁸ Kengor, however, ignores Reagan's wife, Nancy, and her fascination with new-age spiritualism as well as saying little on Reagan's divorce. Furthermore, Kengor's partisanship as a Conservative Republican is

¹⁰²Ronald Reagan, 'First Reagan-Mondale Presidential debate 1984', <http://www.debates.org/index.php?page=october-7-1984-debate-transcript> .

¹⁰³David Lynn Holmes, *The Faiths of the Postwar Presidents: From Truman to Obama* (Athens, Georgia: University of Georgia Press, 2012), p. 181.

¹⁰⁴ Ibid.

¹⁰⁵ Ibid, p. 190.

¹⁰⁶ Joan Quigley, *What Does Joan Say?: My Seven Years As White House Astrologer to Nancy and Ronald Reagan* (New York: Birch Lane Press, 1992), p. 86.

¹⁰⁷ Balmer, Introduction, xvii.

¹⁰⁸Paul Kengor, *God and Ronald Reagan: a spiritual life* (New York: Reagan Books, 2004), p. 106.

evident in explaining his selective use of evidence and attempt to arguably articulate Reagan as more religious than he actually was.¹⁰⁹

On paper, Reagan may have represented much the Religious Right claimed to abhor, yet what the fortieth President may have lacked in Evangelical credentials he more than compensated for with proposed policy and rhetoric. Reagan's personal indiscretions were willing to be over looked in return for a man who would promote a Religious Right agenda. Jerry Falwell in summing up the mission of the Moral Majority declared, 'We are not attempting to elect 'born-again' candidates ... Our support of a candidate is based upon ... the commitment of the candidate to the principles we espouse.'¹¹⁰ After four years of disappointment in Carter, Evangelicals opted for a new president to put their faith in. Reagan and a new generation of socially-conservative Republicans promised a new Evangelical agenda in government. Evangelicals had felt shut out by the Carter administration, firstly in the absence of Evangelical cabinet appointments, in the continued secularization of policy and most importantly to the leadership lack of access to the White House. Billy Graham had been granted significant access to the Nixon White House, which Nixon in turn used to build an Evangelical coalition whereas Evangelical leadership visits with Carter personally had been near non-existent.¹¹¹ The Evangelical leadership in contrast responded positively to Reagan. The rallying behind Reagan is demonstrated by considering *Christianity Today* – during the Carter administration there had been eight articles decrying divorce; after the inauguration of the divorced President, however, this dropped to zero.¹¹²

¹⁰⁹ Goode, 'The Christian Faith of Ronald Reagan', 42.

¹¹⁰ Neuhaus and Cromartie, *Piety and Politics*, p. 116.

¹¹¹ Williams, *God's Own Party*, p. 132.

¹¹² Balmer, *Thy Kingdom Come*, p. 11.

On issues where Carter was seen as being pragmatic or dithering, Reagan was absolute. Reagan campaigned on a constitutional amendment that would ban abortion, was firmly opposed to the ERA and criticized the Carter administration.¹¹³ Carter claimed, ‘I don't see homosexuality as a threat to the family, I don't feel society through its laws, ought to abuse or harass the homosexual’, while Reagan during his governorship, after learning of a homosexual group operating in Sacramento remarked, ‘My God, has government failed?’¹¹⁴ Reagan also publically aligned himself with the likes of Anita Bryant who had a lead a public campaign against local legislation to prevent discrimination on the basis of homosexuality. The officially non-partisan Moral Majority also saw its first executive director leave the organization to run Reagan’s Evangelical outreach campaign in 1980.¹¹⁵ Jimmy Carter may have been the candidate that was most personally aligned with Evangelicals but Reagan was the candidate who offered policy progress for the Evangelical community.

Reagan was the first Republican nominee to place the issues of the Religious Right at a centrepiece of his campaign. The Party of Rockefeller, Nixon and Eisenhower was not initially convinced a shift to the right on social issues would lead to electoral victory. As late as 1978 with the mid-terms approaching, Paul Weyrich, while advising the Republicans to appeal to Evangelicals, claimed that the Republican National Convention Chairman, Bill Brock, ‘didn't understand what I was talking about [...] it was so foreign to him that it didn't make any sense.’¹¹⁶ The Republican platform of 1980 reflected the outreach to Evangelicals. They dropped support for the ERA and supported a ‘human life’ (anti-abortion) constitutional

¹¹³Balmer, *Thy Kingdom Come*, p. 11.

¹¹⁴ Williams, *God's Own Party*, p.149, Robert Dalleck, *Ronald Reagan: The Politics of Symbolism* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1994), p.49.

¹¹⁵ Maddox, ‘Exit Interview(with Marie Allen)’, 11.

¹¹⁶ Freedman, ‘The Religious Right and the Carter Administration’, p. 243.

amendment. It was the first time a party had nominated a pro-life candidate since the legislation of abortion in *Roe v. Wade*.¹¹⁷

Demonstrating the fundamental discord between support for policy and individual piety at the 1980 election was the Religious Roundtable. The Roundtable was an Evangelical organisation that gave out ‘morality ratings’ based on a candidate’s position on a number of issues including school prayer, the ERA and abortion.¹¹⁸ The focus on policy rather than politics meant that a number of progressive congressmen who were committed church members received zero ratings, while a Florida Congressman embroiled in a bribery scandal received a perfect one hundred rating.¹¹⁹ Evangelicals had grown tired of what they saw as empty rhetoric from the Carter administration; it was not enough simply to articulate Evangelical positions but not act on them. The Republican nominee offered strong rhetoric in regards to the issues Evangelicals were most concerned about. Reagan’s statements on abortion during the 1980 campaign undoubtedly won him support from Christian fundamentalists who had a growing opposition towards abortion. Reagan declared in the presidential debate with John Anderson (Carter refused to attend): ‘I’ve noticed that everybody that is for abortion has already been born.’¹²⁰ Reagan also subtly endorsed the concerns of the Religious Right in the campaign, ‘I think that I have found a great hunger in America for a spiritual revival. For a belief that law must be based on a higher law.’¹²¹ Reagan however did not just confine his religious outreach to the debates. In his acceptance speech to the Republican National Convention Reagan was not afraid to use religion, ‘Can

¹¹⁷Ronnie Dugger, *On Reagan: the man and his presidency* (New York: Mcgraw-Hill, 1983), p. 231.

¹¹⁸ James Reichley, *Religion in American Public Life* (Washington, D.C.: Brookings Institution Press, 1985), p. 322.

¹¹⁹ Ibid, p. 322.

¹²⁰ Ronald Reagan, ‘Presidential Debate in Baltimore (Reagan-Anderson)’ <http://www.presidency.ucsb.edu/ws/index.php?pid=29407#ixzz2gBXkr5YM> .

¹²¹ Ibid.

we doubt that only a Divine Providence placed this land, this island of freedom here as a refuge for all those people in the world who yearn to breathe freely.’¹²² Reagan then brought his speech to a close by offering a moment of prayer; in the midst of the political debate over prayer in public schools in a nationally televised address to millions of Americans, it left no doubt in the mind of Evangelicals which side of the culture wars Reagan would support.¹²³

The Evangelical leadership in turn did what they could to support and promote Reagan. Unlike other voting groups based on; ethnicity, family income or political affiliations, Evangelicals met once a week as a collective at church. This enabled a much greater degree of unity and solidarity in voting than other political groups and made leadership much more influential. This worked fundamentally to Reagan’s advantage, as the liberal pastors who may have been supportive of Carter did not believe in preaching politics from the pulpit. Falwell and other Reagan supporters did not have the same qualms. During the 1980 campaign the Moral Majority and other Christian conservatives pushed an increased voting registration. Right-leaning pastors conducted an exercise in the months before the 1980 election in which they asked congregation members who were not registered to vote to stand and then proceeded to lecture them on the importance of voting. Falwell and others promised to repeat the exercise until Election Day; it resulted in an estimated two million more Evangelicals voting.¹²⁴

Perhaps the clearest indication of the distinction between Carter and Reagan’s use of religion in politics is in Reagan’s *Evil Empire* speech in contrast to *Carter’s Crisis of Confidence* televised address. Jimmy Carter generally avoided speaking to organizations

¹²² Ronald Reagan, ‘Address Accepting the 1980 Presidential Nomination at the Republican National Convention in Detroit’, <http://www.presidency.ucsb.edu/ws/?pid=25970#ixzz2ghboiCVR> .

¹²³ Kengor, *God and Ronald Reagan*, p. 154.

¹²⁴ Reichley, *Religion in American Public Life*, p. 321.

representing the Religious Right, whereas Reagan embraced them, Reagan's 1983 address to the National Association of Evangelicals is one of the most renowned speeches of his presidency. Where Carter alluded to religious themes, Reagan explicitly stated them. In the *Evil Empire* speech Reagan states that the Government contains, 'God-fearing, dedicated, noble men and women in public life, present company included.'¹²⁵ Carter was seen as 'preachy' and 'self-righteous' and lecturing the public, while Reagan delivered his speech exclusively to an Evangelical audience and showered them with praise. Reagan openly addressed the rise of the Religious Right, 'The principles that brought us into the public arena in the first place. The basis of those ideals and principles is a commitment to freedom and personal liberty that, itself is grounded in the much deeper realization that freedom prospers only where the blessings of God are avidly sought and humbly accepted.'¹²⁶ Here, Reagan again associated his personal hallmark with the Religious Right through the use of pronoun, 'us', as well as critiquing the general narrative that the Evangelical Right wants to protect religious liberty and freedom. The speech perhaps better than anything else reflects the balancing act of the Reagan coalition in that it was simultaneously an appeal to social conservatives and foreign policy hawks. In discussing the nuclear freeze proposals Reagan said '[I]n your discussions of the nuclear freeze proposals, I urge you to beware the temptation of pride ... label both sides equally at fault ... to simply call the arms race a giant misunderstanding and thereby remove yourself from the struggle between right and wrong and good and evil.'¹²⁷ Reagan successfully but subtly equated both the Cold War arms race and the fight against secular liberal 'immorality' as issues the Religious Right was campaigning against. The anti-Soviet rhetoric also struck an accord with the Religious Right.

¹²⁵ Ronald Reagan, 'Evil Empire speech', <http://voicesofdemocracy.umd.edu/reagan-evil-empire-speech-text/> .

¹²⁶ Ibid.

¹²⁷ Ibid.

The Evangelicals were particularly concerned with defeating the Soviet Union due to it being an atheistic state that was openly hostile to religious freedom.¹²⁸ In equating the struggle against secular humanism as part of the greater struggle against the Soviet Union Reagan successfully managed to rally Evangelical support behind his political agenda.

Reagan's open embrace of Evangelical policy despite his perceived lack of personal piety was instrumental in winning him Evangelical support. Religious Right leaders had been disappointed with the Carter administration in both policy and access. The Evangelical community had firmly decided that there was little point in having one of their own in the White House if he was not going to address their policy priorities. Reagan, in contrast, offered to represent Evangelicals in the culture wars, to work with their leadership and address the policy issues like abortion and the ERA. Furthermore, the support for Reagan from the Evangelical leadership was instrumental in registering Evangelicals to vote and to vote for Reagan. Reagan's *Evil Empire* speech further demonstrated Reagan's ability to articulate the concerns of Evangelicals in language they could understand.

¹²⁸ Kengor, *God and Ronald Reagan*, 144.

Chapter 4- Conclusion

Ultimately the 1976 and 1980 Presidential campaigns were not necessarily about the faith of the candidates but the faith the public placed in them. Following scandal in Washington and the failure of wide-sweeping liberal reforms, the electorate wanted a candidate whom they thought would represent their values. The public and, more specifically Evangelicals, wanted a restoration of Judeo-Christian morality and the prospect of having one of their own in the White House initially rallied excited support behind Carter. Carter's campaign based on his morality and vague policy promises gave voters the conjecture that this man would represent their values. Carter failed to live up to expectations and consequently Evangelicals placed their faith in a new candidate; Ronald Reagan.

Religion has always played an important role in American politics and there are few periods in history where it has been more evident than the 1970s and 1980s. The simultaneous change in the political and religious environment fundamentally altered the relationship between the two. Jimmy Carter's image as a Washington outsider and a devout Christian offered the public just the candidate they were looking for. During Carter's administration, however, there was a significant shift in how the religious community approached politics. The 1960s had seen a shift away from traditional cultural values and provoked a backlash from the Evangelical community. Seeing Carter use religion in the public sphere demonstrated to Evangelicals that religious expression could be freely used in politics and they began to promote their own agenda.

Evangelicals had shifted to the right on social issues and this resulted in an electoral support groundswell of support for the Republicans. The opposition, first to the ERA and later the Internal Revenue Service's decision to deregister the Evangelical Bob Jones' University brought a large coalition of social conservatives together, consolidating the

formation of the Religious Right. Unlike other demographic groups, religious groups had the foundational structure to establish organizations which could profoundly influence the national political agenda. As the Carter administration began to support traditional secular Democratic policy, the Religious Right mobilized against him. Robertson, Slosser and other Evangelicals leaders all made false assumptions that Carter was as conservative as they were and their shift of support from Carter to Reagan represented the loss of wider transient support for Carter among the Evangelical community.

Jimmy Carter's relationship with the Evangelical community during his presidency was complex. Carter entered a rapidly changing political dynamic, as long-term traditional Democratic support was declining while the Republicans' were embroiled in scandal surrounding Watergate. The political conditions created the perfect environment for a man known for his morality as the Evangelical candidate. It is difficult to imagine Carter gaining the Democratic nomination, let alone the presidency, had it not been for the events of Watergate. Carter's campaign focus on his moral image as a Washington outsider meant that he could be all things to all people. The backlash from the *Playboy* interview in particular, highlighted the importance of Carter's honest image to the strength of his campaign and demonstrated the problems he would face both in office and his attempt at re-election in 1980. Carter faced the unenviable task of trying to appease the traditional secular Democrats, as well as the Evangelicals that he won over in the 1976 campaign. Furthermore, the *Playboy* interview and the *Crisis of Confidence* speech were arguably Carter's two most vivid use of religion throughout his campaign and presidency, yet they fell flat politically. Carter's speech was interpreted as a sermon to the American public and a holier-than-thou approach to governing.

Evangelicals wanted a president who would institute policy in office, not someone who believed in the now archaic Baptist tradition of a strict separation of Church and State.

Ronald Reagan offered to fit the bill. Despite being an infrequent churchgoer and a divorced man, Reagan picked up significant Evangelical support. Reagan offered policy progress to Evangelical's who had felt shut out by the Carter White House. The Republican nominee moved the Republican platform to the right on abortion and the Equal Rights amendment, two crucial issues that had been of fundamental importance in establishing the Religious Right.

Reagan spoke to Evangelicals in the language they understood. In Reagan's *Evil Empire* speech, he did not address all Americans but specifically the Evangelical community. Reagan's use of religious rhetoric in his speech articulated his vision that the fight for school prayer and the fight against abortion were as much a fight against evil as the fight against the Soviet Union in the Cold War. Furthermore, rather than call on national sacrifice to fix the issues the United States was facing, Reagan identified the nation's problems as a result of secular liberalism. Essentially it offered a direct contrast to the *Crisis of Confidence* speech; Reagan was able to place blame solely on his political enemies, while Carter alienated multitudes of his enemies and supporters by reprimanding the entire nation.

The Carter and Reagan presidencies would forever alter the role Evangelicals played in presidential politics. Despite the initial attraction of having a fellow Evangelical in the White House, the Religious Right realized that they could accomplish more than getting one of their own elected, in that they could elect a President who would advocate for their legislative agenda. Evangelicals in 1980 therefore placed their faith and trust in a new president that promised to promote their agenda, Ronald Reagan.

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