

George W. Bush, God, and Politics¹

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Abstract: The paper surveys George W. Bush's political thinking, his election strategies, and the domestic policy initiatives that have been pursued. Although there are claims that the character of the Bush White House has been dictated by the president's deep religious faith and his associations with the "Christian right," there are significant theological and political differences between Bush and religious conservatives. Instead, the roots of Bush's thinking are to be found in the forms of conservatism that were pioneered and developed by Republican state governors during the latter half of the 1990s. In contrast with both the Congressional Republicans and the Christian right who had often adopted abrasive forms of discourse, gubernatorial conservatism talked of "inclusion," addressed longstanding Democratic issues such as education, and emphasized the proactive role that government could play. This allowed the Bush-Cheney ticket to make electoral inroads among groupings that had traditionally been loyal to the Democrats.

Key words: George W. Bush – religion – Christian right – conservatism – Congress – remoralization – governors – elections

Much has been made of George W. Bush's relationship with God. Despite the strictures of the First Amendment, which prohibited the passage of federal law "respecting the establishment of a religion," all presidents have professed their faith and played their part as "high priest" in the American "civil religion" that binds America's history, character and destiny together with representations of God's purpose. However, Bush seems to speak of that purpose and Jesus Christ in more open, personal, and committed terms than many of his predecessors. When asked by a

1. Some of the themes discussed in this article are explored further in my forthcoming book, *George W. Bush, Sex and the Moral Agenda* (Manchester University Press, 2006).

reporter during the 2000 election campaign about his favorite philosopher, he replied: "Christ, because he changed my heart."²

To an extent, Bush's affirmations of faith recall President Jimmy Carter's words and statements. Carter's victory in the 1976 Democratic primaries and subsequent capture of the White House created substantial press interest in evangelical forms of worship and the Southern Baptist Convention. As the *Baptist Standard* has noted, Carter, a devout Baptist, introduced the term "born again" into the vocabulary of politics.³ However, there is a significant difference between Carter and Bush. Evangelical Protestantism seemed to add a sense of innocence to representations of Jimmy Carter's character and personality. Many of the news reports were tinged with a degree of condescension and some amusement. Carter's comment in his November 1976 interview with *Playboy* that he had committed adultery in his heart many times by looking at women other than his wife seemed to be the remark of a political and moral innocent.⁴ In contrast, George W. Bush's ties with the evangelical tradition have almost always portrayed in a more threatening way.

Prophetic Spokesman

Bush, it is said, is driven by messianic notions of faith. Indeed, some have suggested that in contrast with earlier presidents who have spoken as petitioning supplicants, Bush represents himself "as a prophetic spokesman for God."⁵ His statements seem to be underscored by a belief that he can not only discern but express God's will. Those who talk in these terms were quick to seize upon claims by Nabil Shaath of the Palestinian Authority that Bush had been guided by God when he ordered the

2. Quoted in John Dickerson (2005), "God vs. geeks: GOP evangelicals fight intellectuals over Harriet Miers," *Slate*, October 5, www.slate.com/id/2127492/

3. Greg Warner (2000), "Jimmy Carter says he can 'no longer be associated' with the SBC," *Baptist Standard*, October 23, www.baptiststandard.com/2000/10_23/pages/carter.html

4. *Playboy.com* (2005), *The Playboy Interview: In Their Own Words*, www.playboy.com/worldofplayboy/interviews/

5. David Domke and Kevin Coe (2004), "How Bush's God-talk is different," *Beliefnet*, www.beliefnet.com/story/159/story_15962_1.html

March 2003 invasion of Iraq.⁶ Some European observers have employed particularly harsh tones, tying Bush's faith to a broadening and deepening of the American "civil religion":

The United States of America no longer needs to call upon God; it is God, and those who go abroad to spread the light do so in the name of a celestial domain ... The presidency is turning into a priesthood. So those who question George Bush's foreign policy are no longer merely critics; they are blasphemers.⁷

Although comments such as this are principally directed towards the administration's pursuit of the "war on terror," there have been suggestions that domestic strategy has also been guided by religious considerations. From this perspective, White House policy towards issues such as abortion, sex education, and gay rights, and the nomination of federal judges have been largely dictated by faith:

To see what's new and dangerous about Bush's approach to religion, you have to look beyond the president's copious prayers and exhortations ... From school-prayer guidelines issued by the Department of Education to faith-based initiatives to directives from virtually every federal agency, there's hardly a place where Bush *hasn't* increased both the presence and the potency of religion in American government.⁸

Rededication

At first sight, there is much in all of this. Bush's personality and character, or at least their public constructions, have been shaped around themes that have close associations with evangelical Protestantism. Although Bush himself has generally shrunk from using the phrase "born again," and his embrace of a deeper faith was more a staggered process than a defining moment, the president's life story seems to rest upon a narrative that is structured around a repudiation of the past and a time of redemption.

6. BBC News (2005), "White House denies Bush God claim," *BBC News*, October 6th, <http://news.bbc.co.uk/2/hi/americas/4317498.stm>. Nabil Shaath's claim was denied by the president's press spokesman.

7. George Monbiot (2003), "America is a religion," *The Guardian*, July 29, www.guardian.co.uk/comment/story/0,,1007741,00.html.

8. Chris Mooney (2003), "W.'s Christian Nation: How Bush promotes religion and erodes the separation of church and state," *The American Prospect*, January 6, www.prospect.org/print/V14/6/mooney-c.html

Bush was always a churchgoer. After being raised in his parents' Episcopal tradition, he joined a Presbyterian congregation, and then when he and Laura Bush were married in 1977 he became a member of the United Methodist Church. However, notwithstanding this, the most widely circulated accounts of Bush's youth stress stories of drink, allegations of drug abuse, the frequent use of coarse language, a violent temper, a seemingly sporadic commitment to service in the Texas Air National Guard, and failed business efforts. There have been frequent questions about the seriousness of his early church membership. It certainly did little to curb the personal excesses for which he was known. According to a sympathetic portrait, Bush "acted like a wretch, blind to grace."⁹

His talks with Billy Graham, the crusading evangelist, during the mid-1980s were pivotal. As Bush himself later recalled: "Reverend Graham planted a mustard seed in my soul, a seed that grew over the next year ... It was the beginning of a new walk where I would recommit my heart to Jesus Christ."¹⁰ Alongside Graham's ministries, Bush's participation in a community Bible study (CBS) group was also important. It led him to abandon alcohol, curb his former indulgence and rededicate his life:

It was a scriptural boot camp: an intensive, yearlong study of a single book of the New Testament, each week a new chapter, with detailed reading and discussion in a group of 10 men ... The CBS program was a turning point for the future president ... CBS was ... part of what has since come to be called the "small group" faith movement. It's a baby-boomerish mix of self-help, self-discipline, group therapy ... and worship. Whatever, it worked ... It was "goodbye Jack Daniels, hello Jesus," said one friend from those days.¹¹

The extent of Bush's earlier hedonism has perhaps been exaggerated.¹² However, it serves an important purpose insofar as only those who have fallen can be redeemed. Redemption through self-development, dedication, a disciplined striving for improvement and personal experience of God's forgiveness ties Bush to the evangelical denominations.¹³ As

9. Paul Kengor, *God and George W. Bush* (New York: ReganBooks, 2004) 24.

10. Quoted in Alex Johnson (2004), "Bush – born again, or not? The president has never clarified his conversion narrative," *MSNBC*, September 28, <http://msnbc.msn.com/id/6115719/>

11. Howard Fineman, "Bush and God," *Newsweek*, March 10, 2003.

12. Bush himself suggests that many of the reports are only "rumormongering" (George W. Bush, *A Charge to Keep* [New York, William Morrow, 1999]133).

13. *Beliefnet* (2000), *A Library of Quotations on Religion and Politics by George W. Bush*, www.resource.beliefnet.com/story/33/story_3345_1.html

Charles W. Colson, a Nixon White House aide who, following his turn towards evangelical faith, led Prison Fellowship Ministries put it: “I think most of us recognize him as a guy who sure has the same orthodox beliefs we do.”¹⁴

Politics

As Howard Fineman noted in a *Newsweek* portrait, Bush’s turn towards faith also offered distinct political advantages:

Bush turned to the Bible to save his marriage and his family. But was he also thinking of smoothing his path to elective office? We’ll never know for sure. But he knew the political landscape of his near-native Texas. He knew that, by 1985, the South had risen to take control of the GOP, and that evangelical activism and clout was rising with it – indeed had been instrumental in making it possible. He also knew that his father’s way – Episcopalian reserve, moderation on cultural issues, close ties to back East – was a tough sell.¹⁵

The path that Bush followed allowed him to construct a working relationship with the Christian right, the network of culturally conservative individuals and groupings that was largely, but not exclusively, built around white evangelical Protestants and was from about 1980 onwards an important political constituency and, at times, the Party’s kingmaker. In his father’s 1988 presidential election campaign, Bush was, together with Doug Wead, a former Assembly of God minister, an associate of televangelists Jim and Tammy Faye Bakker and a member of the Amway products network, responsible for liaison.¹⁶ As Wead later recalled, “his father wasn’t comfortable dealing with religious types … George knew exactly what to say, what to do.”¹⁷ As his political career developed, Bush continued to talk in terms that had a resonance with evangelicals and the activists of the Christian right. As *The New York Times* later noted, Bush

14. Alan Cooperman (2004), “Bush leaves specifics of his faith to speculation,” *MSNBC News*, September 16, <http://msnbc.msn.com/id/6014570/>.

15. Howard Fineman, “Bush and God,” *Newsweek*, March 10, 2003, 22.

16. Bill Minutaglio, *First Son: George W. Bush and the Bush Family Dynasty* (New York: Random House 1999) 212-13.

17. Fineman 22.

had an intuitive understanding of the words, phrases and forms of discourse that had a particular meaning for evangelicals and far-reaching significance for the Christian right.¹⁸

The process of political courtship paid dividends. With the backing of many associated with the Christian right, Bush won the South Carolina primary in February 2000. His victory in the Palmetto state created an all-important sense of momentum that left his principal rival, Senator John McCain, far behind. As John White has recorded, Christian right organizations and their grassroots supporters, many of whom saw moral values as the principal campaign issue, helped Bush consolidate his hold over the nomination during the later Republican primaries and caucuses. In Georgia, for example, 37 per cent of primary voters saw moral values as the most important issue. Bush won with 70 per cent of the vote.¹⁹ The relationship between Bush and the Christian right continued to be close after Inauguration Day and was strengthened still further after the September 11 attacks amidst suggestions that Bush had been "chosen" to lead during a period of exceptional turmoil. Faith structured the working life and culture of the White House. David Frum has recalled that the very first words that he heard, on joining the White House as a presidential speechwriter in 2001, were "missed you at Bible study." Attendance at these gatherings, he has recorded, was "if not compulsory, not quite *uncompulsory*, either."²⁰ There have also been impromptu acts of worship. According to an account by Stephen Mansfield, a Palm Sunday service was organized on Air Force One as it returned from El Salvador:

There were nearly forty officials crammed into the plane's conference room. Condoleezza Rice, an accomplished classical musician, led the worship. Karen Hughes gave the lesson, and the entire affair ended with the singing of "Amazing Grace" and hugs and kisses as a sign of Christian fellowship.²¹

Furthermore, some individuals drawn from the Christian right were rewarded with administration positions. For example, Kay Coles James, who served formerly as a dean at Regent University (which was estab-

18. David D. Kirkpatrick (2005), "The crisis of the Bush code," *The New York Times*, October 9, www.nytimes.com/2005/10/09/weekinreview/09kirk.html?ex=1129521600&en=fc3ca77e96e5dd69&ei=507

19. John Kenneth White, *The Values Divide: American Politics and Culture in Transition* (New York, Chatham House Publishers, 2003) 89-90.

20. David Frum, *The Right Man: The Surprise Presidency of George W. Bush* (New York: Random House, 2003) 3-4.

21. Stephen Mansfield, *The Faith of George W. Bush* (New York: Jeremy P. Tarcher, 2003) 119.

lished to offer “Christian leadership” and where Pat Robertson, one of the ‘founding fathers’ of the Christian right, serves as Chancellor) and as senior vice president of the Family Research Council, was appointed director to the federal government’s Office of Personnel Management.²² Tim Goeglein from Indiana and a member of the Lutheran Church – Missouri Synod, was appointed as White House deputy director of the Office of Public Liaison so as to provide communication between the White House and the Christian right organizations. He works closely with movement figures such as Jay Sekulow of the American Center for Law and Justice, who through daily radio show and internet appeals commands a regular audience of about 1.5 million.²³

Subtleties

Although Bush employed the language and discourse of the Christian right and built upon his associations with them, his relationship with Christian conservatives has not, however, always been as straightforward as it may at first sight appear. While serving as Texas governor, Bush had often disappointed many pro-life activists. Indeed, as the 2000 presidential election approached, there was uncertainty about his prospects of winning the movement’s support.²⁴ One very experienced observer, John C. Green of the University of Akron, was initially skeptical about Bush’s chances:

I don’t think that George W. Bush would be the favored candidate of the Religious Right under any circumstances ... He’s too moderate for them. He could be their second choice, or their third or fourth or fifth.²⁵

22. Chris Mooney (2003), “W.’s Christian Nation: How Bush promotes religion and erodes the separation of church and state,” *The American Prospect*, January 6, www.prospect.org/print/V14/6/mooney-c.html.

23. Lorraine Woellert (2005), “Inside Bush’s Supreme team: in fight for the courts, behind the scenes players are uniting the right,” *Business Week*, April 25, www.businessweek.com/magazine/content/05_17/b3930120.htm

24. Bush had, however, won Pat Robertson’s implicit backing at an early stage. During the 1996 Republican national convention, he told an interviewer: “Our people think he’s absolutely marvelous ... He would make a super president. He really would. We’d be thrilled to see somebody like that hit the ticket one of these days.” (Quoted in Wayne Slater, “Hitting his stride: Texas governor’s high visibility makes impression in San Diego,” *The Dallas Morning News*, August 14, 1996, 19A)

25. Quoted in Stephen Mansfield, *The Faith of George W. Bush* (New York: Jeremy P. Tarcher, 2003) 112.

Green's forecast proved mistaken. Nearly all the most influential names on the Christian right threw their weight behind Bush in the contest to secure the Republican presidential nomination. Nonetheless, the comment highlights the differences between Bush and the Christian right. Bush's faith has a more subtle, temperate, and restrained character than that of many on the Christian right. It lacks the theological discipline and certainty or the associations with politics that characterize the beliefs of those most closely involved with the movement. While echoing their vocabulary, and sharing some of their more immediate goals, he has distanced himself, as both Texas governor and US president, from some of the Christian right's defining principles. Whereas President Ronald Reagan committed himself to the overturning of the 1973 *Roe* ruling that established abortion, in at least certain circumstances, as a constitutional right, Bush instead spoke in more elliptical terms about a "culture of life." He only backed legislative measures, such as the ban on "partial-birth abortion" that commanded majority public support. Similarly, in contrast with much of the Christian right, Bush endorsed the legal provision of civil unions and domestic partnerships for same-sex couples while stressing the sanctity of marriage as a union of a man and a woman. Although the campaigning efforts of the Christian right played an important part in securing Bush's November 2004 re-election victory, he quickly stated that the proposed Federal Marriage Amendment, which would incorporate a prohibition of same-sex marriage in the US Constitution, had no prospect of passage through Congress and therefore had no place on his policy agenda.²⁶ There were also significant differences between much of the Christian right and the foreign policy initiatives adopted by the White House. Despite the absence of religious freedom in China and the country's policy of coerced abortions, the Bush administration sought a continued improvement of trade relations. While many on the Christian right had deep reservations about the prospect of an Israeli withdrawal from the Gaza strip and the West Bank, the White House encouraged territorial concessions.²⁷ In October 2005, the nomina-

26. *The Washington Post* (2005), Transcript of Bush Interview, January 16, www.washingtonpost.com/wp-dyn/articles/A12570-2005Jan15_3.html

27. *CBS News* (2003), "Zion's Christian soldiers," June 8, www.cbsnews.com/stories/2002/10/03/60minutes/main524268.shtml

tion of White House counsel Harriet Miers to the US Supreme Court had to be withdrawn in the wake of anger among conservative opinion formers.

Faith

Despite his associations with the movement, there is therefore some distance between Bush and the Christian right. How, then, should his faith be understood? Firstly, there is a belief in Providence. In Bush's comments and statements, events serve a purpose and are following a path that is guided by God:

I have moments of doubt, moments of pride, and moments of hope. Yet, my faith helps a lot ... "Thy will be done," is life's guide. In this hectic world, there is something incredibly reassuring in the belief that there is a divine plan that exceeds all human plans.²⁸

Indeed, Bush spoke of being called to seek the presidency. He is said to have told James Robison, a minister: "I've heard the call. I believe God wants me to run for President."²⁹ Notions such as these gained particular currency in the aftermath of the September 11 attacks. Bush's supporters, and the President himself, appeared to suggest that he had been placed in office by God to take the nation forward during a critical period of its history. Lt. General William "Jerry" Boykin, who was promoted to deputy undersecretary of defense in the summer of 2003, spoke in certain terms:

Why is this man in the White House? The majority of Americans did not vote for him. Why is he there? And I tell you this morning that he's in the White House because God put him there for a time such as this.³⁰

At times, Bush himself seemed to share these sentiments. According to a *Time* magazine report, "Privately, Bush talked of being chosen by the grace of God to lead at that moment."³¹

28. Quoted in Paul Kengor 36.

29. Quoted in Steven Waldman (2004), "Heaven sent: does God endorse George Bush?", *Slate.com*, September 13, www.slate.com/id/2106590/

30. Lisa Myers and the NBC Investigative Unit (2003), "Top terrorist hunter's divisive views," *MSNBC*, October 15, www.msnbc.com/news/980764.asp

31. Quoted in Waldman.

However, remarks such as this should be set in context. Bush has also spoken in more humble terms and has been less certain about the will of God than many observers suggest. According to Richard Land of the Southern Baptist Convention, Bush said to him: "I believe that God wants me to be president, but if that doesn't happen, it's OK."³² These comments are tied to a more generalized sense of uncertainty. When asked about gays and homosexuality, the president distanced himself from many associated with the Christian right by refusing to make a moral judgment. Citing the New Testament he said:

I am mindful that we're all sinners, and I caution those who may try to take the speck out of their neighbor's eye when they got a log in their own.³³

Bush also invariably emphasizes the limits to knowledge and the inability of humanity to understand events and processes. Furthermore, although much has been made of Bush's belief in a "divine plan," trust in Providence extends far beyond Bush. Indeed, it is in some respects a defining characteristic of the American experience. Other, perhaps most, presidents (and figures such as Martin Luther King) have portrayed the US as a nation particularly blessed by God and the country's victories and progress as a sign of this.

Secondly, although there have been seemingly unguarded comments, such as the time when he appeared to suggest that heaven was not open to Jews and those of other faiths, Bush has generally expressed his commitment to faith in broad, non-sectarian and ecumenical terms. Indeed, in an interview with NBC, he pulled back from his earlier remarks:

My religion says that you accept Christ and you go to heaven. That was a statement that some interpreted that I said that I get to decide who gets to go to heaven. Governors don't decide who gets to go to heaven ... God decides who gets to go to heaven.³⁴

As Paul Kengor concludes, Bush is on doctrinal questions, "much more a liberal Methodist than an inflexible fundamentalist."³⁵ Indeed, he often talks of his faith in generic terms. While often described as an "evangel-

32. Quoted in Waldman.

33. Quoted in Kengor 107.

34. Alan Cooperman (2004), "Bush leaves specifics of his faith to speculation," *MSNBC News*, September 16, <http://msnbc.msn.com/id/6014570/>.

35. Kengor 63.

ical," Bush has not defined his faith. Furthermore, even before the efforts to court moderate Islamic opinion in the wake of the September 11 attacks, he ventured beyond the Judeo-Christian tradition and, in at least some of his remarks, placed Islam on an equal footing with Christianity. In his 2001 inauguration address, he referred to mosques alongside churches and synagogues.³⁶

Thirdly, in contrast with many associated with the Christian right, Bush has always distanced himself from proselytizing or the taking of faith beyond defined bounds. The role played by Billy Graham in Bush's turn to God may perhaps be significant. Although he was an evangelist with close ties to the political process, Graham never enrolled in the ranks of the Christian right.³⁷ Albeit with hindsight, Graham regarded his earlier forays into politics and his ties to President Richard Nixon as a mistake. Indeed, Graham insisted upon a distinction between being an evangelical and "evangelism," which he saw as his calling. He associated himself with the American "civil religion" that tied faith together with the history and destiny of the US but eschewed more sectional forms of campaigning for political objectives and goals. In distancing himself from the Christian right, he also emphasized the importance of an inclusive message:

If I took sides in all these different divisive areas, I would cut off a great part of the people that I really want to reach. So I've felt that the Lord would have me just present the Gospel and stay out of politics.³⁸

Fourthly, despite Bush's reluctance to understand or represent faith in overtly political terms, his has at the same time accepted the claims of those who asserted there should be closer ties between church and state. The concept of "compassionate conservatism" and proposals for the faith-based initiative that stemmed from it drew upon the work of conservative social theorists such as Myron Magnet and Marvin Olasky. In books such as *The Tragedy of American Compassion* (1992) and

36. The White House (2001), *President George W. Bush's Inaugural Address*, January 20, www.whitehouse.gov/news/inaugural-address.html

37. His son, Franklin Graham, has had rather closer ties although he too has maintained a degree of autonomy.

38. Cathy Lynn Grossman (2005), "The gospel of Billy Graham: inclusion," *USA Today*, May 15, www.usatoday.com/news/religion/2005-05-15-graham-cover_x.htm

Renewing American Compassion (1996), Olasky argued that provision for those in need, as a result of, for example, poverty, drug abuse, or mental illness, should be undertaken through faith-based and community organizations rather than government agencies. Such organizations could, Olasky asserted, offer more effective and lasting solutions. This was because they would work in a more personal and intensive way than government agencies. Individuals would not simply be regarded as members of a particular category and staff would not simply be employees undertaking the duties associated with a job. Furthermore, he argued, the private provision of services would encourage a growth in active citizenship whereby individuals would become more involved in their neighborhoods and communities.

“Compassionate conservatism” and the faith-based initiative flowed, in part, from the character of Bush’s beliefs. They also, however, had a political significance. While the faith-based initiative met with a guarded response from the Christian right because of fears that religious bodies might lose their autonomy and be compelled to compromise their beliefs through, for example, changes to employment practices, the initiative did enable the White House to reach out towards two other groupings. Firstly, many of the black churches sought funding for charitable projects. Secondly, the notions associated with the initiative and the provision of aid for those in need struck a particular chord with Roman Catholics. As John DiIulio, who was appointed at the beginning of Bush’s first term to head the White House Office of Faith-Based and Community Initiatives noted, there was “a natural affinity between the ways in which the president talks about certain social policy issues and the way Catholics talk about those issues.” According to DiIulio, Bush’s call to look first to faith-based institutions to build “armies of compassion” was a “near-perfect embodiment of Catholic social teaching.”³⁹

39. Adam Clymer (2001), “Bush is actively courting Catholic voters for 2004,” *The New York Times*, June 1, www.nytimes.com/2001/06/01/politics/01CATH.html?ex=1134363600&en=9f094c91dc8a7691&ei=5070&ex=1057809600&en=f25163a6f7a32fac&ei=5070

Not by Faith Alone

Faith, however, only provides a partial guide to the character and contours of Bush's thinking. Indeed, the focus by both European and American observers upon foreign policy and faith tends to distract attention away from the other factors that shaped Bush's thinking. While faith undoubtedly played a role in molding Bush's public image, and served as a "mobilizer" among grassroots activists, much of his thinking, the character of his electoral strategy, the nature of the domestic policy initiatives pursued by the administration, and the president's approach to moral and cultural issues were shaped by other processes. In particular, "W-ism," as it has been dubbed, was informed and structured by events, developments, and processes during the 1990s.

Revolution and Impasse

Firstly, Congressional Republicanism reached an impasse. Their election victories in November 1994 which placed Newt Gingrich in the Speaker's chair had been tied to the promise of a conservative revolution. The *Contract with America*, which had been signed by almost all Republican House candidates offered an assurance that within the first hundred days of a Republican-led House, there would be a vote on measures such as the Taking Back Our Streets Act, a law and order package, the Personal Responsibility Act, which would limit welfare provision, and the American Dream Restoration Act. Twenty three of the forty measures listed in the *Contract* were adopted. Most notably of all, the Personal Responsibility and Work Opportunity Reconciliation Act was passed and signed, albeit reluctantly, into law by President Clinton. It ended the system of welfare provision that had been initially established in the 1930s and created, in its place, the Temporary Assistance for Needy Families (TANF) program, which imposed time limits on public assistance and introduced work requirements for recipients.

Nonetheless, despite the reforms and the changes in the character of the Clinton administration that the Republican electoral victories brought about, the *Contract* did not represent the beginning of a revolution. Some of the most significant legislative proposals included within it were not enacted. Most importantly of all, the Republican strategy of confronta-

tion with the Clinton White House, which came to rest upon competing budget proposals, failed. Clinton's well-crafted intransigence, his pursuit of "triangulation" between the Republicans and the Congressional Democrats and the weight of public opinion, which supported the President in the budget crisis by a two-to-one majority, led the Republicans to back down. In the wake of this, they combined a pragmatic and incremental approach to policy-making with an intensely partisan spirit that culminated in the impeachment proceedings against the president. It was not a course that reaped electoral rewards. The Republicans lost ground, particularly among women. Although, it is traditionally the president's party that suffers in mid-term contests, the Republicans not only failed to make gains in the 1998 elections, but lost seats.

The Christian Right

Secondly, the Christian right faced increasingly visible difficulties. Although some of the organizations that collectively constituted the movement, most notably Focus on the Family, established themselves as giant commercial empires, the movement made few policy gains. Most of the hopes and aspirations expressed in the Christian Coalition's 1995 platform, *Contract with the American Family*, remained unfulfilled. Late-term abortions continued. Although there were sustained efforts to prohibit partial-birth abortion in both 1996 and 1997 which were backed by almost all Republicans and significant numbers of Democrats, the bills were vetoed by President Clinton. Looking back on the 104th Congress (1995-97), Clyde Wilcox concluded:

There's not very much of their agenda that happened ... Of all the major constituency groups that were part of the so-called Republican revolution, the Christian right once again finished last.⁴⁰

The movement also had structural weaknesses. The "peak" organization, the Christian Coalition, was financially over-committed. When Ralph Reed left his post as executive director in July 1997 so as to pursue a lob-

40. Clyde Wilcox, quoted in *Congressional Quarterly Weekly Report* 54.44 (November 1996): 3160.

bying career, the Coalition was \$3 million in debt.⁴¹ In the years that followed, donations to the Coalition fell from \$26.5 million in 1996 to an estimated \$3 million in 2000.⁴² In 1999, the Internal Revenue Service questioned the Coalition's non-partisan character and refused to renew its tax-exempt status.

Against this background, there was a sense of frustration or even despair among some cultural conservatives. Indeed, a number began to question the legitimacy or efficacy of the political process. The rise in President Clinton's approval ratings, his re-election victory in November 1996, and the failure of social conservatives to secure their goals led some to talk in dramatic terms about the legitimacy of government. According to Richard John Neuhaus: "It is not hyperbole to say that we are at a point at which millions of conscientious Americans are reflecting upon whether this is a legitimate regime ... That is the solemn moment we have reached."⁴³ Others questioned the purpose of political engagement. Against a background of seeming public indifference to Clinton's actions in the Lewinsky scandal, Paul Weyrich, who had played a pivotal role in founding the Free Congress Foundation, National Empowerment Television (NET), and the Moral Majority asserted that there was no longer a "moral majority." He spoke of a need for Christian conservatives to pull back from the political arena and instead "drop out of this culture, and find places ... where we can live godly, righteous and sober lives."

Remoralization

Thirdly, Bush's thinking and politics were shaped by the process of "remoralization." During the period between the mid-1960s and late 1980s, cultural and demographic trends, most particularly seemingly unrestrained promiscuity, increasing illegitimacy, burgeoning abortion

41. Leon Howell, "Ups and downs of the religious right – growing power," *Christian Century* April 19, 2000.

42. People for the American Way (2005), *Right Wing Watch – Christian Coalition*, www.pfaw.org/pfaw/general/default.aspx?oid=4307#3

43. Quoted in Jacob Heilbrunn (1996), 'Neocon v. theocon: the new fault line on the right,' *The New Republic*, December 30, 1996.

figures, and spiraling rates of family dissolution, had created a sense of impending crisis that required a forthright and resolute response by public officials.

By the end of the 1990s, however, there had been a process of leveling off. Indeed, some cultural trends changed direction. Although the out-of-wedlock birth rate almost tripled during the twenty year period between 1970 and 1990, it plateaued from the mid-1990s onwards.⁴⁴ At the same time, after a steady rise over a period of almost two decades, both the annual abortion total and the abortion rate (the number of abortions as a proportion of every 1,000 women aged 15-44), began to slide downwards from the late 1980s onwards. There seems to have been a particular shift among teenagers. Teenage pregnancy rates fell. The proportion of high school students who – according to surveys – have never had sexual intercourse was 53 per cent in 2003. This is a rise from 46 per cent in 1991. The rise seems particularly marked among seniors. In 2003, 53 per cent said they *never* had sex compared to 33 per cent in 1991. At the same time, for those who were sexually active, the age of first sex also seems to have risen.

“Remoralization” had consequences. It contributed to the shift away from the use of abrasive and sometimes apocalyptic forms of discourse within the conservative movement and the Republican camp. In the original 1994 edition of *The Index of Leading Cultural Indicators*, a handbook of key statistics, William J. Bennett, who served as Secretary of Education under President Reagan, had spoken in dramatic, perhaps threatening, terms:

Over the past three decades we have experienced substantial social regression. Today the forces of social decomposition are challenging – and in some instances overtaking – the forces of social composition ... *Unless these exploding social pathologies are reversed, they will lead to the decline and perhaps even to the fall of the American republic.*⁴⁵

Sentiments such as these and notions of an acute social crisis underlay the abrasive rhetoric and calls for the adoption of harsh forms of public

44. US Department of Health and Human Services (2004), *Health, United States*, www.cdc.gov/nchs/data/hus/hus04trend.pdf#009, 117.

45. William J. Bennett, *The Index of Leading Cultural Indicators: Facts and Figures on the State of American Society* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1994) 8.

policy that were adopted during the early and mid-1990s. However, in the introduction to the second edition of his book which was published in 1999, Bennett acknowledged that there had been

some truly remarkable gains ... Over the last few years, I have amended some of my own prior views ... It turns out that some social pathologies are less resistant to legislative action and political leadership than I once thought ... Our capacity for self-renewal is rare, and real.⁴⁶

Gubernatorial Conservatism and George W. Bush

Against this background, there was a shift in the center of political gravity within the Republican Party. Increasingly, GOP state governors, including Tommy Thompson of Wisconsin, who was later to be appointed as Secretary of Health and Human Services in the Bush administration, George Voinovich of Ohio, George Pataki of New York, John Engler of Michigan and Christine Todd Whitman of New Jersey as well as both George W. (Texas) and Jeb Bush (who finally secured the Florida governorship in the 1998 elections), led the way in the formulation and making of domestic policy.

In part, the governors' contribution came down to a matter of political style. The remoralization process allowed them to move away from notions of acute social crisis. They adopted significantly less confrontational, partisan and punitive forms of discourse than those in Congress and the Christian right. In addressing welfare issues, for example, the references to "welfare queens" that had, at times, laced the GOP's rhetoric were supplanted by a plea to aid those who faced systematic forms of disadvantage. In place of this, gubernatorial conservatism sounded a positive and optimistic note.

However, there were also differences of substance, and the Republican governors made their mark in terms of public policy. There was a willingness to address issues that had often been neglected and a will to test a range of different approaches. At the same time, the apparatus of govern-

46. William Bennett, *The Index of Leading Cultural Indicators: American Society at the End of the 20th Century* (New York: Broadway Books, 1999) 2-6.

ment was increasingly understood and represented in different terms. Whereas the Reagan administration and the *Contract with America* had regarded government as, by definition, intrusive, inefficient, and expansive and had sought to roll it back across a broad front, most of the governors accepted the need for pro-active government and stressed the modernization of governmental provision. As George W. Bush himself put it:

Government must be limited and focused, but it has an important job within its bounds. Government is too often wasteful and overreaching. But we must correct it and limit it, not disdain it. I differ with those who want to dismantle government down to the last paper clip.⁴⁷

Indeed, some of the governors increased spending on education, the environment and the infrastructure. By 2000, the Cato Institute, one of the leading Washington conservative thinktanks, was markedly less enthusiastic about Republican gubernatorial rule than it had been some years earlier:

The Republican governors tend to be touted as the GOP's policy stars, but ... although there are a number of tax-cutting fiscal conservatives among the group, far too many of those top state executives have become big-government Republicans.⁴⁸

Although generally regarded in broadly positive terms, George W. Bush was not spared from these strictures:

Bush racked up a decent, but not a dazzling, protaxpayer record as governor ... But Bush could leave conservatives frustrated. He is a politician who seems to always want to keep everyone happy ... his last budget grew by close to 10 percent, among the largest increases in the nation in 1999. He shoveled a record \$2.1 billion of new money into the Texas schools and then declared himself "the education governor."⁴⁹

Alongside these moves, a number of Republican governors made systematic attempts to court the minority vote. It was, in part, a reaction to developments in California where the GOP had, during Pete Wilson's governorship, become associated with anti-immigrant sentiments leading to a further slippage in its share of the Latino vote. George W. Bush, in

47. George W. Bush, *A Charge to Keep* 235.

48. Stephen Moore and Stephen Slivinski (2001), "Fiscal Policy Report Card on America's Governors: 2000," *Policy Analysis*, 391, February 12, <http://www.cato.org/pubs/pas/pa391.pdf>, 1.

49. Moore and Slivinski 62.

particular, actively sought to shape a different approach. Boris Johnson, the idiosyncratic British Conservative MP, spoke in almost rapturous terms:

Not only does he sloganise in Spanish. He speaks it ... He makes long speeches full of the test scores of Texan African-Americans; he calls in Hispanic adolescents who have learned to read successfully, and uses them as props for his orations.⁵⁰

Bush reached out to those who many other conservatives dismissed as the civil rights “industry.” For example, he distanced himself from the campaign for “English only” teaching that Republicans had pursued with a measure of success in California and over twenty other states:

Those who advocate “English-only” poke a stick in the eye of people of Hispanic heritage. “English-only” says me, not you. It says I count, but you do not. That is not the message of America.⁵¹

In contrast with Bob Dole, the 1996 presidential candidate who had turned down an invitation four years earlier, Bush addressed the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People in July 2000. In the speech he admonished Republicans by recording that “the party of Lincoln has not always carried the mantle of Lincoln” and he assured his audience that “strong civil rights enforcement will be a cornerstone of my administration.”⁵²

Lastly, most of the governors distanced themselves, at least to some extent, from the strident moral traditionalism of the Christian right. The issues that defined cultural conservatism, most notably abortion and homosexuality, were downplayed. Indeed, Massachusetts Governor Bill Weld, New Jersey Governor Christine Todd Whitman, and George Pataki of New York increasingly allied themselves with gay and lesbian campaigners. In New York State, an executive order banned discrimination on the basis of sexual orientation among state employees. They were also offered domestic partnership benefits. Later, in 2002, Pataki

50. B. Johnson, “Hague seeks out Texan Bushman for magic formula,” *The Daily Telegraph* February 13, 1999.

51. George W. Bush, *A Charge to Keep 237*.

52. Michael Tomasky (2004), “Compassion is out,” *The American Prospect Online Edition (Web Exclusive)*, July 12, www.prospect.org/web/page.ww?section=root&name=ViewWeb&articleId=8091

backed hate crimes legislation that included gays and lesbians and a law prohibiting discrimination in employment, education, housing, and public facilities.⁵³

Conclusion

Although the Bush administration will be remembered principally for its actions in the wake of the September 11th attacks and commitment to interventionism abroad, it also made its mark on public policy within the US. Its approach to domestic policy was in large part shaped by gubernatorial conservatism. Many of the initiatives adopted by the administration and around which “W-ism” was built upon the approaches that had been adopted during the late 1990s at state level. There was a readiness to address issues, most notably education and health provision, which had traditionally been the prerogative of Democrats. Indeed, sections of the 2002 No Child Left Behind Act were embraced more enthusiastically by Democrats than Republicans. Federal government spending rose to levels that had not have hitherto been countenanced by the Democrats “progressive” wing. “W-ism” also used the language that had defined gubernatorial conservatism and distinguished it from the forms of discourse associated with Congressional Republicanism and the Christian right. There was a stress upon “compassion” and proactive government. There was an acute sensitivity, particularly once the strategy had been honed and modified by Karl Rove, his principal adviser, to the contours of public opinion and the attitudes of those groupings and constituencies that could prove pivotal to electoral victory.

European observers have often had difficulties accounting for George W. Bush’s election successes. They have therefore tended to take refuge in explanations that rest upon electoral fraud in key swing states, a “super-mobilization” of white Christian evangelicals, a blind fear of terrorist attack or even, according to Britain’s *Daily Mirror*, the innate stupidity of many American people. While memories of the September 11th

53. Log Cabin Republicans (2005), *Talking Points: Our Republican Allies Represent GOP's Future*, www.logcabin.org/logcabin/talking_points_GOP_Allies.html

attacks undoubtedly played a part in shaping the outcome of the November 2004 presidential contest, all these approaches to Bush and “W-ism” fail to acknowledge the Republicans’ electoral skills and the party’s ability to secure a measure of support from groupings that had traditionally been loyal to the Democrats. In 2004, there was a particularly marked swing to the Bush-Cheney ticket among women, those on the lowest rung of the educational ladder who had failed to graduate from high school and, according to some surveys, Latinos. There was also a further shift among non-Latino Catholic voters who had once formed the political, organizational, and cultural core of the Democratic Party. To an extent, this was part of a long-term process. Many “white ethnics” (such as Irish, Italian, and Polish Americans) felt much more of an identity with Richard Nixon and Ronald Reagan than with those in the Democrats’ ranks who talked of minority rights and appeared to make common cause with America’s enemies. In November 2004, however, the shift gained greater momentum. It was pronounced even among the Democrats’ most committed backers. Despite John Kerry’s Catholicism, ten per cent of white Catholic Democratic identifiers failed to back him. Fourteen per cent voted for Bill Clinton in 1996 but did not support the Massachusetts senator.⁵⁴

For Bush himself, these victories were short-lived. As 2005 progressed, the Republicans’ political prospects looked increasingly bleak. Buoyed by its re-election victory, the president sought to spend political capital that he had not earned. The effects of the seeming quagmire in Iraq were compounded by Hurricane Katrina, the nomination of Harriet Miers to the US Supreme Court, and the mishandling of the port ownership issue. Up until then, however, the administration had pursued a skillfully crafted course. Despite the emphasis that is usually placed upon Bush’s debt to the Christian right and fundamentalism, his political strategy owed much more to electoral exigencies and the need to court particular swing groupings. Just as Bill Clinton “tamed” the Democratic Party by bringing it towards center-ground politics and teaching it to understand the anxieties of the Republican voter, George W. Bush began a process of shifting his party towards a grasp of the Democratic voter’s concerns and priorities.

54. William A. Galston and Elaine C. Kamarck (2005), *The Politics of Polarization*, The Third Way Middle Class Project, 35, www.third-way.com/news/tw_pop.pdf