Unholy, Why White Evangelicals Worship at the Altar of Donald Trump

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Chapter 1: The Blueprint for an Assault on Civil Rights

Five months later, Attorney General Sessions issued a twenty-five-page memorandum, entitled "Federal Law Protections for Religious Liberty," directing federal agencies, in every action they took—as employers, as policy makers, when disbursing grants, or when contracting with outside companies to provide taxpayer-funded government services—to protect the religious liberty of individuals and companies. "Religious liberty," the memorandum read, "is not merely a right to personal religious beliefs or even to worship in a sacred place. It also encompasses religious observance and practice." Therefore, 21

"[e]xcept in the narrowest circumstances, no one should be forced to choose between living out his or her faith and complying with the law." This had been a common argument for the Christian right when a health care worker did

not want to provide reproductive health care, when a company did not want to cover contraception in its insurance plan, when a wedding photographer did not want to work at a gay wedding, or when any employer did not want to hire a lesbian employee. But Sessions's memo dramatically expanded the scope of these kinds of refusals across the federal government. "Therefore," the memo read, "to the greatest extent practicable and permitted by law, religious observance and practice should be reasonably accommodated in all government activity." Americans United for the Separation of Church and State called the document "a roadmap for how to discriminate against most anyone, including women, LGBTQ people and religious minorities." But it was more: it was a blueprint for creating not just new rights but new authority for conservative Christians, according them extraordinary preference so long as the federal government was administered by Donald Trump. Trump, then, did not just deliver policy, in a quid pro quo with a voting bloc that fueled his election. He delivered power. And for that, he was not merely a reliable politician worthy of their praise. For the Christian right, Trump is no ordinary politician and no ordinary president. He is anointed, chosen, and sanctified by the movement as a divine leader, sent by God to save America.

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Chapter 2: God's Strongman

This thinking is a profound reversal of the Christian right's long-standing playbook for presidential politics. For decades, top Christian right operatives like James Dobson, the founder of Focus on

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the Family, and influential evangelical activists in early primary states like Iowa and South Carolina, insisted that in order to win their support, a

Republican presidential candidate must be a Christian, must have a relatable salvation story, and must link that faith narrative to a way of governing according to Christian values. Trump largely snubbed these demands, instead constructing his faith story largely from the accounts of his longtime friend, the televangelist Paula White. According to White herself and other evangelicals who have helped spread this origin myth, in the early 2000s, Trump saw the popular, slim, well-coiffed blonde preach her message "The Value of Vision" on TV. Trump, the story goes, liked watching Christian TV and just happened on White's show while channel surfing. Johnnie Moore, another Christian public relations professional who became the spokesman for the Trump campaign's evangelical advisory board, packaged the story to me this way: White's message—that having "vision" is crucial for success in life—was easily digested by the businessman Trump, since she presented biblical ideas in a way that made sense in a business context. "You can take it as a business person, you could say I can apply this to my life today or this is how I think about things," Moore said, as he recalled how he later watched White deliver her "message" and realized it "wasn't just like preaching the Bible, it was the Bible meets practical life in a way a mega business person can relate to."3 Trump liked what he heard—or perhaps, saw—called White up, and they have been friends ever since.4 In the mid-2000s, Trump appeared on White's television show, Paula White Today, in which she was discussing "keys to successful living," to talk about his business success. He told her his father set a good example for him by doing "nothing but work" and rarely taking vacations.5 More than a decade later a New York Times exposé showed that Trump and his father grew their wealth from "dubious tax schemes," including "instances of outright fraud."6 But White, and the legend built around her relationship with Trump, helped portray him to evangelical audiences as a successful businessman who applied "biblical" values in his everyday life.

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Trump would go on to make repeal of the Johnson Amendment—which could open up churches to limitless electioneering and the possible flow of unaccountable campaign cash through their coffers—a centerpiece of his outreach to the Christian right. Jerry Falwell, Jr., the president of Liberty University who was one of the first evangelical leaders to endorse Trump in the 2016 primary, told me that Trump had privately discussed his support for

repealing the law. Falwell said Trump spoke to him about "how it needed to be repealed, and how it pretty much silenced people of faith because it scares pastors and leaders of nonprofit organizations like Liberty University and others from taking a political position because they're afraid of losing their tax exempt status."16 This characterization was not true; the Johnson Amendment does not prohibit pastors or nonprofits from taking positions on political issues, only from using tax-exempt resources to endorse a candidate in an election. At his pivotal June 2016 meeting with one thousand evangelical leaders in Manhattan, which cemented evangelical support for his candidacy, Trump bragged that "I think maybe it will be my greatest contribution to Christianity and other religions is to allow you to go and speak openly, if you like somebody."17 With Trump's blessing, at the 2016 Republican convention, the party added a plank to its platform calling for repeal of the Johnson Amendment. "Republicans believe," the platform now reads, "the federal government, specifically the IRS, is constitutionally prohibited from policing or censoring speech based on religious convictions or beliefs."18 At the convention in Cleveland, Ralph Reed told a luncheon gathering of Christian right activists that the platform change was made at Trump's "insistence." The role of the Johnson Amendment, Reed said in a familiar warning, was to "harass and persecute the conservative faith community," as it "puts a gun to the head of every church," such that "if you so much as utter a word about politics, we will revoke your tax-exempt status."19

Once in office, Trump signed an executive order directing the IRS to stop enforcing the Johnson Amendment. He later bragged, falsely, that his White House had repealed it, even though repealing it would require an act of Congress. Nonetheless, Trump's promises, and the lack of enforcement of the rule, have worried campaign finance watchdogs like the Campaign Legal Center, which argues that "in the wake of U.S. Supreme Court decisions like Citizens United, there is every reason to believe that any effort to loosen the Johnson Amendment's strictures would lead to a new flood of dark, unaccountable and tax-deductible

campaign funds into our elections."20 As much as Trump displays little interest in the details of policy, the Johnson Amendment is one he has consistently focused on.

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Chapter 3: Race Rules

But in his crusade against Trump, Moore would be outmanned by forces beyond his control, including many of his own fellow Southern Baptists, along with the formidable spiritual army of self-styled prophets defending their own King Cyrus. Even though Trump has spawned what seems like an army of evangelical detractors, many occupying elite positions in Christian higher education, think tanks, and punditry, they never succeeded in bringing their brethren to a come-to-Jesus moment about him. Michael Gerson, the former George W. Bush speechwriter–turned–Washington Post–columnist, has written countless teeth-gnashing plaints about the ongoing evangelical genuflection to Trump. Evangelicals, he mourned around the one-year mark of Trump's presidency, had lost their "gag reflex."17 Yet despite their prominent perches, Gerson and Moore are actually outliers among their fellow evangelicals 71

For Trump fans, then, Moore was not a top evangelical leader but an interloper who didn't understand the Bible. Instead of seeing Moore on secular television, or reading any of his prolific writings, they were reading Trump's Twitter feed, where he called Moore "truly a terrible representative of Evangelicals and all of the good they stand for" and "a nasty guy with no heart!"20

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It took Trump three days, and being pressed in a meeting with New York Times reporters and editors, to grudgingly distance himself from Spencer's Nazi display, saying, "Of course I condemn. I disavow and condemn." It is hard to imagine any other president-elect, after having his name invoked in a Nazi chant, issuing such a belated and bland disclaimer. Spencer texted me the morning the Times ran a transcript of the interview, wanting to talk by phone. He previewed what would later become a staple of Trump's presidency: attack the press and insist that what you have seen with your own eyes and heard with your own ears is not actually true but rather a concoction of enemy news media. Trump had disavowed not the actual alt-right, Spencer insisted, but rather "this monster that the media has created about the alt-right. This idea that the alt-right is neo-Nazism, he's disavowing that." And in a forecast of Trump's own persistent attacks on the press as liars and fake news, Spencer added that the "Lügenpresse"—the German term for "lying press" used by the Nazis, revived by attendees at Trump rallies during the campaign, and invoked again by Spencer inside the Ronald Reagan Building—was "not exclusive to the Third Reich." Trump's desultory reaction was not a random outlier but part of a pattern. He was not misspeaking or stumbling on words or misunderstanding what was happening. Trump had long been engaged in an ongoing rhetorical dance with the alt-right, starting early in his presidential campaign, eventually using

his growing platform to elevate their odious ideas into the daily political conversation. During this whirlwind of racism and xenophobia that defined his campaign, Trump gathered strength with white evangelical voters, ultimately winning over a major swath of evangelical political leaders, pastors, and influencers and ascending to the White House owing to their support. Trump's election only cemented Moore's isolation from Trump's core group of evangelicals, who found themselves

enthralled with their extraordinary access to the Oval Office. Moore fell under fire, very publicly, from big-name Southern Baptist pastors who accused him of sowing divisiveness and threatened to withhold contributions to the ERLC. Jeffress warned that deacons in his church "do not believe it [the ERLC] represents our church's beliefs"35—a remarkable accusation that was echoed by other Trump-aligned pastors.36 In response, Moore struck a conciliatory tone, writing a blogpost apologizing to anyone who believed "I was criticizing anyone who voted for Donald Trump"—which of course he had been.37 After the torrent of criticism over his "very fine people on both sides" comment about the neo-Nazi violence in Charlottesville in August 2017, Trump's white allies on his Evangelical Advisory Board stood by him. After Charlottesville, a small group of evangelical leaders, including Moore, along with Steve Gaines, then president of the Southern Baptist Convention, and the popular African-American televangelist T. D. Jakes, pressed Trump to disavow the alt-right. In an open letter, these leaders and about thirty others called on Trump "to join with many other political and religious leaders to proclaim with one voice that the 'alt-right' is racist, evil, and antithetical to a well-ordered, peaceful society." The alt-right, they wrote, "does not represent constitutional conservatism.

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Chapter 4: The Alt-Right Out in the Open

Setting up "think tanks," using books, podcasts, media, and social media to spread its ideas, and gradually pulling the more mainstream right further to the fringe are hallmarks of the far right in Europe, which aims to "modify the dominant liberal-democratic political culture and make it more susceptible to a non-democratic mode of politics," the Ukrainian political analyst Anton Shekhovtsov has written. "Importantly, the European New Right has focused almost exclusively on the battle for hearts and minds rather than for immediate political power."66 The American alt-right has used the European New Right as a model in this and other

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ways—such as when Spencer claimed that the torch-carrying rallies in Charlottesville in May and August 2017 were inspired not by the Klan but by the Greek far-right party Golden Dawn; he considered such displays "spectacular; it's theatrical and mystical and magical and religious, even."67 The far right in Europe served as a model for a new politics in which the American right—just as Brimelow had with Raspail and Powell—was looking abroad for its inspiration. The goal has not necessarily been immediate electoral victory but an erosion of confidence in liberal democracy itself and growing acceptance of the ideological messages of the far right. After CPAC 2018 was over, Spencer said he met many alt-right kids there, and "they're talking about immigration, they're talking about chain migration." This was a big change; CPAC kids, Spencer said, "weren't talking about this at all four or five years ago."68 That spring, hundreds of miles away in the mostly white town of Balaboo, Wisconsin, in the

home state of the young man I talked with in Spencer's CPAC hotel room, a group of high school boys were photographed in their prom clothes giving a Sieg Heil salute. From the White House to the heartland, taboos had been shattered.

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Chapter 5: The Origin Myths of the Christian Right

The well-worn foundation story of the modern religious right depicts Moral Majority founder Jerry Falwell, Sr., as roused to action as a direct result of the Supreme Court's 1973 Roe v. Wade decision legalizing abortion, driving previously apolitical evangelicals out of the pews with a moral imperative

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to protect babies from slaughter. This mythology has cast evangelicals as historic heroes leaping to the defense of the innocent, and their movement as a righteous guardian of faith and family. But as much as abortion is now, four decades later, the centerpiece of the religious right agenda, the real story of the formation of this movement was not about protecting babies, families, or morality. Instead, it was a story of racist backlash against school desegregation and other civil rights advances, all cloaked in the language of freedom and religion. If today it seems a mystery how the movement of "family values" came to deify the irreligious, womanizing Donald Trump, this largely buried history shines a bright light on how they were drawn together by shared tropes—caricatures of social justice warriors and an overbearing government—to save white Christian America. At the center of this story is Paul Weyrich, the architect of the antiestablishment New Right that rose up in the 1970s, purporting to be a right-wing populist alternative to country club Republicanism. Weyrich, an experienced political reporter and talk radio personality in his native Wisconsin, arrived in Washington in 1967 to work as a press aide to Gordon Allott, a Republican senator from Colorado. Weyrich's early years in Washington convinced him that conservatives had failed to match what he believed to be liberalism's powerful institutions guiding policy making in Washington: ideological caucuses within Congress where like-minded lawmakers shared ideas and shaped legislation, and the Brookings Institution. Back then New Right organizers saw that think tank—now considered by the left to be a centrist den of conventional wisdom—as a hotbed of the far left. In

1973, Weyrich co-founded the Heritage Foundation, the powerful, agenda-setting conservative think tank that today boasts an annual budget of more than $80 million, and the American Legislative Exchange Council, which has transformed the legislative landscape at the state level, crafting and lobbying for its model legislation to beat back gun control, eviscerate unions, curtail voting rights, privatize prisons and education, and detain immigrants. With a Republican congressman from

Illinois, Philip Crane, Weyrich co-founded the Republican Study Committee, a right-wing caucus that deemed fellow Republicans too moderate. In 1979, he co-founded the Moral Majority with Falwell, considered by many to mark the founding of the modern religious right. But in many ways, the Moral Majority was a culmination, not the beginning; the movement had in fact begun years earlier, as Weyrich and his New Right allies cultivated religious voters to join the cause against an "elite" secular political culture that had foisted unwelcome social and cultural changes on white Christians. From his early days in Washington, Weyrich was well-versed in propagating the rhetoric of white grievance. One of his tasks while working for Senator Allott in the late 1960s was to produce a weekly Washington Report radio broadcast, for which Weyrich asked Allott canned questions about the issues of the day. In 1969, the scripts often turned toward topics like "campus unrest," the civil rights movement, and busing as a mechanism to achieve school desegregation. Weyrich's writings from this period teem with animosity toward the left. Like much of the right, Weyrich and Allott were vehemently opposed to busing—but twisted that opposition into an attempted defense of equality. In one script, Weyrich said, "Opposition to bussing does not mean opposition to civil rights," to which Allott replied, "Forced bussing is a step backward in the whole civil rights picture," while maintaining that his position did "not lessen my commitment to providing equality and justice, through law, for all citizens."1 In their words were the seeds of later New Right and Christian right rhetoric—that ending racism was the sole province of individual actors, and any government efforts to promote equality for minorities was an infringement on the rights of the majority. Once Weyrich left Capitol Hill to focus on his own political organizing—launching, in 1974, the Committee for the Survival of a Free Congress—his New Right sought to expand a conservative constituency beyond well-heeled "elites" interested more in economic and foreign policy than in defending "traditional" or "family" values. To Weyrich and his compatriots, the old guard of the conservative movement was too focused on free market economics and not enough on moral, cultural, and religious issues. More important to the New Right than laissez-faire economics, Weyrich wrote in a 1982 essay, are "culturally destructive government policies" like "racial hiring quotas and busing" because "the damage they can do is enormous and practically irremediable."

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The resolutions of the Southern Baptist Convention (SBC) over this period show how evangelicals, pre-Roe, were in favor of legal abortion, gradually shifting

into a more radical opposition as the religious right was being organized in the 1970s. In other words, the hard-line opposition to abortion followed the organization of the religious right, rather than serving as the impetus for it. Just two years before Roe —the same year rape, incest, clear evidence of fetal abnormality, and carefully ascertained evidence of the likelihood of damage to the emotional, mental, and physical health of the mother." A call to legalize abortion in this range of circumstances would today be considered radically leftist by current Southern Baptist leaders, who oppose abortion with no exceptions, or perhaps with the sole exception to save the woman's life. In 1976, three years after Roe, the SBC adopted another abortion-tolerant resolution that called on citizens "to work to change those attitudes and conditions which encourage many people to turn to abortion as a means of birth control," but "also affirm[ed] our conviction about the limited role of government in dealing with matters relating to abortion, and support the right of expectant mothers to the full range of medical services and personal counseling for the preservation of life and health." 12 The following year the body was forced to issue a statement in light of "confusion" caused by the 1976 resolution—meaning it received pushback for sounding too liberal—stating, "we confirm our strong opposition to abortion on demand and all governmental policies and actions which permit this." 13 The SBC reaffirmed that resolution annually until 1980, when it finally adopted a more full-throated statement supporting making abortion illegal again. "Our national laws permit a policy commonly referred to as 'abortion on demand,' " the resolution read, and "we favor appropriate legislation and/or a constitutional amendment prohibiting abortion except to save the life of the mother." 14

Nixon's statement was "surprising," Weyrich went on, because "we are unaware of any strong anti-abortion input among his close associates," and it could be assumed that Graham "did not give Mr. Nixon strong

counsel." 5 Many decades later, in 2009, the public would learn, via the release of audiotapes by the Nixon Presidential Library, that Nixon did believe there were circumstances in which abortion is "necessary," such as "when you have a black and a white," or rape. 6

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The origin myth promoted by contemporary evangelicals also portrays their forebears as political naïfs, summoned out of their previous reticence to enter the political fray by the urgency of the national moral lapse that Roe represented. But just as the abortion spark is a myth, so is the claim that evangelicals were not political before the Supreme Court's landmark ruling. Fifteen years before founding the Moral Majority, Falwell had had no hesitation in opposing the 1964 Civil Rights Act, calling it a "terrible violation of human and private property rights." The bill, he sermonized, "should be considered civil wrongs rather than civil rights." 20 He helped distribute literature disparaging Martin Luther King, Jr., by then–FBI director J. Edgar Hoover, who oversaw agency surveillance, including wiretaps, on the civil rights icon, who he claimed was a Communist and "the most notorious liar in the country." 21 Falwell delivered an infamous 1965 sermon, "Ministers and Marches," just weeks after the Selma-to-Montgomery civil rights marches, during which state troopers, sheriff's deputies, and a white civilian posse brutally beat and teargassed marchers on what became known as Bloody Sunday. Falwell said, "I do question the sincerity and non-violent intentions of" King and other civil rights leaders, "who are known to have left-wing associations" 22 —a familiar imputation frequently made by both Falwell and Hoover. In her memoir, his widow Macel described that sermon quite differently, focusing on her husband's assertion that it was more important for ministers to preach the gospel than to get involved

in the politics of civil rights. But when Roe came down, she claimed, it "threw Jerry into a dilemma of epic proportions, far greater even than the struggle against segregation" 23 —implying that he had been involved in the struggle against segregation, rather than opposing its end. But the

historical record clearly shows it is fanciful revisionism to claim that Jerry Falwell ever privately or publicly struggled against segregation. In 1968, Falwell invited segregationist George Wallace, the former governor of Alabama who had launched a third-party run for president, to give a campaign speech from the pulpit of his church. 24 And despite repudiating the "Ministers and Marches" speech in 1980, 25 just three years later Falwell was on television opposing the creation of a federal holiday commemorating King. He said on CNN, "I just feel that there are other Black Americans and the corporate body of Black Americans who are due honor more than one recent individual about whom there is a great question mark even to this moment," insisting that we don't know enough about King's character and morality because "the records are sealed," an apparent reference to Hoover's still-secret surveillance of King. 26 In fact, as evidence of the Hoover-led surveillance came to light many years later, it showed that Hoover spread numerous falsehoods about King and was obsessed with his sex life and with painting him as a national security threat with Communist ties. 27 Later birther smears against Barack Obama, many of which were perpetuated by Trump—that he might have been born in Kenya, that he was not a loyal American, and that he hid his college transcripts—echoed Falwell's insinuation, which other right-wingers frequently made during King's life, that King had a secret past he kept hidden from the public. These kinds of tropes animated the untapped resource that Weyrich sought for his New Right coalition: white fundamentalists and evangelicals. In a 1981 lecture that he delivered at Harvard University, Weyrich described the religious right—a "thoroughly potent political force"—as comprising different segments of religious voters, with white evangelicals being the late adopters. Before them, Catholics had been outraged by abortion even before Roe struck down laws criminalizing abortion nationwide. (Weyrich once observed that the early Catholic activists of the New Right shared a common thread in that their parents rights" activists were motivated by their opposition to a 1971 comprehensive federal childcare bill that activists objected to because it "was aimed at giving the Federal Government enormous power and authority in the area of childcare and, in consequence, many of us felt it was dangerous, and, yes, immoral." 29 (In fact, it would have created federally funded childcare centers that provided educational, nutritional, and medical services.) 30 After Congress passed the bill, these "parents' rights" groups organized a massive and successful letter-writing campaign to the White House,

pressuring Nixon into vetoing the bill. “The experience provided the key to the future,” Weyrich said at Harvard—meaning that the activism of parents’ rights groups offered a blueprint for the future mobilization of grassroots activists who contended that the government was imposing liberal ideology on them and their families.

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But it was another issue that “catapulted” evangelicals “into a final awareness,” Weyrich told the Harvard audience. “The Commissioner of the Internal Revenue Service attempted to close some Christian schools on the basis that they were discriminating against minorities.” Ministers and other religious leaders were so angry, Weyrich said, that “they were ready to do whatever was necessary” to fight back. 31 In fact, the IRS did not threaten to close the schools—the agency had, in compliance with federal court rulings, merely developed policy that would deny tax exemptions to private schools that discriminated against students on the basis of race. But in casting progressive government action as the enemy of Christian freedom, Weyrich helped lay the groundwork for the central animating principle of the Trump-evangelical alliance: that the government, unfettered, would take away Christians’ freedom, and only a strong hand like Trump’s could save them. Weyrich consistently repeated this racial backlash foundation story

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through the 1990s, recounting to historians and interviewers the difficulties he had persuading evangelicals to join his anti-abortion cause. He told the historian Randall Balmar that it was the IRS action regarding schools, not abortion, that “enraged the Christian community.” According to Balmer, Ed Dobson, a close associate of Falwell’s, corroborated his account. 32 Weyrich had similarly told the historian William Martin in 1996 that evangelicals were “galvanized” not by Roe but rather by the government “intervention against the Christian schools, trying to deny them tax-exempt status on the basis of so-called de facto segregation.” 33 After white evangelical support propelled Trump into the White House in 2016, Balmer told me it showed the religious right had come “full circle to embrace its roots in racism” and had “finally dispensed with the fiction

that it was concerned about abortion or ‘family values.’ ” 34

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Chapter 6: The New Right and Racism

As the school tax-exemption controversy simmered in the 1970s, the early organizers of the New Right were simultaneously stirring the antagonisms of white Christian voters over two other issues related to school desegregation: court-ordered busing and the changing content of public school textbooks. While Weyrich did not emphasize those two issues as specific inflection points in his later accounts of how he drew white evangelicals into the New Right, at the time busing and textbooks were generating as much acrimony from the New Right as the private school tax-exemption changes were. The private school tax-exempt controversy involved parents who had already isolated themselves from the public schools because, Christian school leaders like Billings claimed, they saw all too clearly the totalizing, anti-Christian designs of the public school and government “elites.” As Billings told the Conservative Political Action Conference in 1979, “government schools distrust the private schools because they cannot ‘control’ them.” 1 But countless prospective New Right voters still had children in those “government” schools—and the New Right had plans to turn those parents against their own public education system. An American Conservative Union fund-raising letter captured the tactic in a deadly precedent for massive ‘social engineering’ control of American families.” 2 Both antibusing and antitextbook protests were directly aimed at impeding the process of desegregation of

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American education. Desegregation (a promise still unfulfilled, more than six decades after Brown) would not take place overnight and would require legal rulings, policy making, and social change from as far away as Washington and from as close to home as the local school board. The New Right played a key role in vilifying any government-led effort to address segregation in schools. Its propaganda maligned government functionaries as intent on subverting parents' authority over childrearing with radical changes in public education, portraying these efforts as anti-American, anti-Christian, and subversive to the natural order of things. The New Right sought to agitate its grassroots with a message that desegregation amounted to nefarious bureaucratic tinkering with their comfortable status quo. Organized opposition to busing, as well as to textbook changes that would finally broaden the classroom experience beyond an all-white canon and end the long erasure of the black experience from public school curricula, were early and defining battles for the New Right. In rhetoric foreshadowing today's Trump coalition and its derision for the institutions working to usher in a new era of nondiscrimination and pluralism, the New Right stoked grassroots anxiety by portraying these changes as illegitimate exercises of "elite" power to impose "political correctness," infringing on the freedom of those whose lives had been unbothered by segregation and race discrimination.

School busing and textbooks

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From Bob Whitaker to Sam Francis to William Lind to Donald Trump, the mythic "middle American radical" was honed not only as a political mascot but as a locus for voter resentment, a rallying cry for

cultivating voters who believed that liberalism, pluralism, and civil rights had ripped their heritage and culture right out from under them. The history of the New Right—and its deep and pervasive opposition to civil rights, desegregation, immigration, and other efforts at ending race discrimination—has been largely forgotten or erased. But that history demonstrates, in multiple ways, how the New Right, and its calculated alliance with white evangelicals, foreshadowed the rise of Trump's coalition. The bloc behind Trump—a combination of the religious right, white nationalists and their sympathizers, and more "traditional" Republicans—had been mapped out by Weyrich decades before, fusing the ideas of New Right ideologues like Rusher and Whitaker with the grassroots activism of conservative white evangelicals and antichoice Catholics. Over the years, the coalition yielded to societal pressure to reel in its overt racism and opposition to civil rights advances for black Americans. But once Trump brought white nationalism out of the closet, the opposition to civil rights and multiculturalism as elitist ideas tyrannically imposed on white Americans were familiar not only to the hard-core white supremacists of the alt-right but to conservatives and paleoconservatives steeped in the same grievances. These voters still harbored resentments that their rights and standing in American society had been somehow diminished by the civil rights movement—and that the "mainstream" conservatism of the two Bush presidencies had not represented their interests, either. Trump didn't make an entirely new movement out of whole cloth. With his own televangelist gloss, he reactivated the fundamental driving force of the conservative movement

in the second half of the twentieth century.

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Chapter 7: The Civil Rights Era Is Over

Although Reagan was the religious right's first presidential hero, the full promise of a theocratic presidency was left unfulfilled on his watch. His successor, George H. W. Bush, was a one-term disappointment for the religious right, leading to the election of Bill Clinton—a charming white southern Christian, but a Democrat whose presidency the religious right was determined to destroy. During this period, Weyrich's coalition began to see its influence grow, even when Republicans were out of power. The political machine he had played a key role in building—the echo chamber of Washington insiders meeting weekly to plot strategy on core issues, reinforced by expanding conservative media willing to repeat right-wing talking points, and a grassroots constituency eager to be mobilized by the latest secular outrage—had been realized. Yet despite presiding over this influential network, Weyrich was often publicly despondent about his movement's shortcomings. Even after the historic GOP takeover of the House in 1994, he despaired over whether the establishment was just exploiting the coalition, fueled by the religious right and other white voters disaffected by the expansion of civil rights for minorities, for its numbers, but then would ignore it when it came to policy making and Weyrich's mission to remake America. He still saw the "establishment" as a reluctant and "The Religious Right saved the Republicans, but some in the GOP have already drawn the long knives to further disassociate the party from issues of concern to social conservatives," he complained in the Heritage Foundation journal Policy Review, invoking a pungent reference that has been used to describe extrajudicial executions and political

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purges, including in Nazi Germany in 1934. Weyrich's indignation over the party's insufficient gratitude and even, he implied, outright hostility to its loyal base led him to a familiar ultimatum: "The Republican establishment risks precipitating a new party if they persist on alienating these conservatives." 1 But just as it had in the 1970s, the threat of a third party turned out to be empty—until 2016, when Trump all but created a third party by energizing the social conservatives first organized by Weyrich. Weyrich didn't live to see it, but Trump was the Wallaceite candidate he and his New Right allies had dreamed of elevating with the support of the religious right. Before Trump, the circle of "New Right" and paleoconservatives like Pat Buchanan had been unsuccessful either in launching a third party or in nominating a Republican presidential candidate who fit the mold. Before Trump, Buchanan had twice—in 1992 and 1996—tried and failed to win the Republican nomination by giving voice to the New Right's "social issues"—which included not just abortion and LGBTQ rights but also immigration and race. Trump shaped the GOP more forcefully into the party of the New Right's dreams by waging a war of attrition on the party establishment of #NeverTrumpers who opposed his candidacy in the hope of preserving the customs and mores of mainstream Republicanism. Once Trump consolidated control, and the GOP's accession to him became complete, he was able to bring the GOP closer to the New Right's third-party vision than it had ever been in Weyrich's or Rusher's lifetimes.

president, Trump has checked off box after box on Weyrich's long-unfulfilled wish list. He is unquestioningly responsive to the religious right's demands and a promoter of the white voters the New Right had convinced were a disenfranchised, forgotten majority, left behind as historically marginalized and disenfranchised groups increasingly attained legal rights rooted in the promise of America's founding documents. Much like the New Right, Trump has been a persistent antagonist to the values of a pluralistic democracy, and he is particularly opposed to advancing the civil rights of racial, ethnic, and sexual minorities, and to an independent judiciary protecting those rights.

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As Trump's short-lived and beleaguered attorney general, Jeff Sessions proved himself to be a dutiful student of the Christian right's tactics to upend the law, in alignment with its ideology that conservative Christians were the ones whose civil rights truly needed protection. For guidance, Sessions turned to the leading experts at the Alliance Defending Freedom (ADF), the powerhouse Christian right legal advocacy organization that had battled for years to ban same-sex marriage and abortion, elevate expanded religious rights for conservative Christians, and erase the separation of church and state. The ADF was omnipresent in every one of these fights in court, and in the court of public opinion. Having interviewed its lawyers, watched them argue in court and to Congress, and witnessed the organization mushroom in size and reach, I saw the ADF gradually transform itself, along with its legal theories, into a preeminent player in the legal mainstream. By the time Trump took office, the ADF and its affiliated lawyers were positioned to segue into high-ranking political positions, be nominated to the federal bench, and play an integral role in shaping the policy of the U.S. government. Much of the organization's raison d'être has been to cast Christians as recognition of gay men, lesbians, or bisexuals as a protected class. But this attempt to block the advancement of civil rights drew an immediate court challenge, leading to the Supreme Court's 1996 ruling in Romer v. Evans, striking down Amendment 2 as an unconstitutional violation of the Equal Protection Clause. Alan Sears, a former Reagan administration lawyer and the ADF's first president, provided early signals of the future strategy, both rhetorical and legal, in his 2003 book The Homosexual Agenda: Exposing the Principal Threat to Religious

Freedom Today . Sears argued that the legal challenge to Amendment 2 was proof that "radical homosexual activists and their allies are looking for any opportunity to attack and silence any church that takes a biblical stand with regard to homosexual behavior." The persecution that churches faced due to the "wrath of angry homosexual activists," Sears wrote, "is a snapshot of what will happen to the church in America." In 2006, I saw Sears tell the first Values Voter Summit that "the homosexual agenda and religious freedom are on a collision course." Perhaps he knew this because the organization he ran was making it so. The ADF, which today boasts an annual budget of nearly $50 million, has, more than any other Christian right organization, laid the groundwork for that draft executive order on religious freedom, leaked within the first two weeks of Trump's presidency, forecasting the Trump "religious freedom" agenda.

AG Jeff Sessions

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"For decades," he wrote on the Heritage Foundation website, "the left has attempted to raise sexual orientation and gender identity to special protected status through Congress." After Republican majorities blocked these efforts, Obama shifted gears to "issuing various edicts that misinterpret existing civil rights protections to include sexual orientation and gender identity," including his 2014 executive order that barred discrimination against LGBTQ people by federal contractors. When sexual orientation and gender identity to special status." He accused Obama of interpreting religious conscience protections "narrowly in order to make religious groups bend to the LGBT agenda," concluding that his administration had a

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"proven lack of respect for religious freedom" in its push to expand LGBTQ rights. 22 Severino specifically derided the actions of the office he would later be appointed to lead.

Once installed at the OCR, Severino proceeded to hire staff from leading Christian right organizations who had track records of advocating for special religious protections for people who oppose abortion and LGBTQ rights, and against access to health care for women. As his chief of staff, he hired March Bell, whose previous appointments included serving as staff director and chief counsel for the Select Investigative Panel on Infant Lives, an investigative committee Republicans launched in 2015 in reaction to the Center for Medical Progress's deceptive Planned Parenthood videos—with the goal of ending all federal family planning funding for the organization. 24 From the Family Research Council came Mandi Ancalle, who had served as the organization's general counsel for government affairs, as a contract policy adviser.

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Their allies in the Federalist Society and the Judicial Crisis Network were primed to hand Trump an extensive list of ideologically like-minded judicial nominees and to wage multimillion-dollar dark money campaigns to get them confirmed. One of Trump's signature achievements for the conservative movement has been his compliant stacking of the federal judiciary with nominees who have espoused extreme right-wing views on the president to erode an independent judiciary—a sweeping sabotage of the entire system of checks and balances. What's more, the overwhelming majority of Trump's judicial nominees are male and white. By the summer of 2019, 80 percent of his nominees confirmed to appellate judgeships, and 74 percent of his nominees confirmed to the trial court bench, were men, compared to 56 and 59 percent, respectively, for Obama's nominees. Eighty-six percent of his confirmed appellate nominees and 90 percent of his confirmed trial court choices were white, compared to

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Obama's appellate and trial court selections, who were 65 and 63 percent white respectively. 43 Many of Trump's judges are skeptical of—if not outright hostile to—the legal structure protecting civil rights. Eleven Trump nominees refused to say during their confirmation hearings whether Brown v. Board was correctly decided. 44 Others have openly derided diversity and pluralism. Neomi Rao, whom the Senate confirmed to fill Brett Kavanaugh's seat on the powerful D.C. Circuit Court of Appeals after he was elevated to the Supreme Court, had written in a 1994 tirade against "the multicultural college campus" that the "multiculturalists are the self-appointed heirs of the civil rights movement," who promote "divisiveness not togetherness" as they "seek to undermine American culture." 45 Trump and his Senate allies, led by Majority Leader McConnell, have, according to the Leadership Conference on Civil and Human Rights, done "everything they can to reshape the federal judiciary to roll back our civil and human rights at record speed." 46 But for some conservatives, any opposition amounts to persecution of Christians. After it was reported that Trump judicial nominee Gordon Giampietro once wrote on a Catholic website that "calls for diversity" are "code for relaxed standards (moral and intellectual)," 47

Democrats achieved a rare success in blocking his nomination to the U.S. District Court for the Eastern District of Wisconsin. The Federalist , a conservative news and opinion site that is frequently a mouthpiece for the Trump administration, complained that "for the crime of publicly voicing the teachings of his faith, Giampietro will never sit on the federal bench." 48 Instead of women being the victims of sexism or black Americans the victims of racism, conservative Christians have become the victims of "political correctness." The political machinery that has enabled Trump in what will likely be his most lasting assault on America's democratic institutions arose out of an organized conservative backlash to Reagan's failed 1987 Supreme Court nomination of Robert Bork. As much as the conservative mythology around Bork has portrayed him as a victim, his views on a number of issues were, even at the time, well outside the political and legal mainstream. Bork and his defenders maintained that his views were based not in animus but in his "originalist" view of the constitution. Whatever label was affixed to the Bork judicial

ideology, his positions were shaped by his antipathy, shared with the New Right, to legal changes in the 1960s made to protect the rights of minorities and women. Bork had opposed the 1964 Civil Rights Act, which prohibited discrimination in public accommodations, writing prior to its passage that such protections were based on a "principle of unsurpassed ugliness." He rejected Supreme Court legal rulings that had found a constitutional right to privacy, the legal underpinning not only of Roe v. Wade, which struck down laws criminalizing abortion, but also Griswold v. Connecticut, an earlier case that invalidated state criminalization of the sale of contraceptives. 50 During Bork's confirmation hearings, Sen. Orrin Hatch asked him if any Supreme Court case had stirred more controversy and criticism than Roe; Bork, seemingly oblivious, identified Brown v. Board, a case that was most certainly not even remotely controversial by 1987. 51

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Casey's Judicial Crisis Network is the top organization in a multimillion-dollar dark-money advocacy campaign that grew out of the conservative backlash to the failed Bork nomination. 54 Founded after the 2004 presidential election as the Judicial Confirmation Network, to influence senators to confirm George W. Bush's nominees in the newly Republican-controlled Senate, the organization developed heavy-handed tactics to shape public opinion, state by state, to pressure red-state Democrats to vote for Bush nominees. After Obama was elected, the group changed its name to the Judicial Crisis Network (JCN) and worked to thwart the confirmation of his nominees; in opposing Sonia Sotomayor's 2009 nomination to the Supreme Court, the group called the future justice "a liberal judicial activist of the first order who thinks her own personal political agenda is more important than the law as written."

Judicial Confirmation/Crisis Network

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The mutual dependence between Trump and the religious right persists not in spite of his scandalous presidency but because of it. The movement desperately needed a savior; Trump was eager to oblige because of his bottomless need for a worshipful retinue. Trump and the religious right, then, are each essential to the other's success. For Trump, success is evading culpability for a dizzying mess of political and financial corruption, and carrying out his xenophobic goals of sealing the country from "invasions" of black and brown people. For the Christian right, success is flipping the script on civil rights, casting conservative Christians as the real victims of prejudice and discrimination, undermining the separation of church and state, and implementing a totalizing legal structure of "biblical" law. Their symbiotic relationship, in which Christian right leaders regularly glorify Trump, and Trump in turn gives them carte blanche to radically reshape law and policy, has brought the country closer to the Christian right's aspirations than it ever has been in the movement's history. Trump has so advanced the Christian right's personnel and policy ambitions that it's unlikely the movement would be copacetic with turning back the clock when—and however—his presidency ends. But the turn toward increasingly theocratic and autocratic governance did not emerge solely from the peculiarities of the movement's relationship with Trump. Under the cover of protecting "Christian" values, the Christian right has enmeshed itself in the global wave of right-wing authoritarianism, and evinces admiration for the same nativist despots be looking toward these foreign autocrats for inspiration.

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Chapter 8: The End of American Exceptionalism

The religious right and the alt-right are bonded together by shared grievances over a supposedly lost America in which Christians don't have to bake cakes for gay couples and white people don't have to bow to "multiculturalism" or "political correctness." But this fused political bloc does not actually long for a mythical past of the formerly "great" America that Trump idealized for them. Instead, it envisions a future in which America, and the hard-won values it codified over the past seven decades—desegregation and church-state separation by the Supreme Court; laws passed by Congress to protect the rights of minorities such as the Civil Rights Act, the Voting Rights Act, and the 1965 Immigration Act; the advance of rights for women and LGBTQ people—loses its standing as a moral and political leader in the world and is transformed into a nativist power that accords different rights to different groups of people, based on race, religion, and ethnicity. For the ideologues of this bloc, America has so lost its bearings that they must look now to leadership outside of the United States to lead it out of an abyss. Their shared target: modern, pluralistic liberal democracy that is led by what they would disparage as "globalists" who are destroying the 1990s,Weyrich devoted considerable energy to recast the culture wars as a global endeavor. To Weyrich, an ardent anti-Communist, the fall of the Iron Curtain meant not just the end of a reviled ideology and totalitarian regimes but a chance for a "Christendom" that had fallen away to be reborn. America could well have some new allies, not just geopolitically but, more important, spiritually. "If the Judeo-Christian culture

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is to survive and renew itself," he wrote, "it needs to reunite—from California to a non-communist Russia." 1 In his revised culture war, Communists were replaced by "cultural Marxists" as the global enemy, which included a fifth column in the United States. Alt-right funder Bill Regnery recalled to me having conversations about "what happens when the wall comes down," and he said that Weyrich "was involved in some overtures to right wingers, or those he perceived to be somewhat right wing, in Russia." 2 After the fall of Communism, Weyrich began making regular trips to Russia and the former Soviet states, training activists in organizing and campaign strategies he had honed in his years in American politics. Friends described him as "energized" and "having fun" in his travels there. 3 He backed the presidential campaign of Boris Yeltsin and later became a cheerleader of Vladimir Putin. Weyrich and Institute for Cultural Conservatism director William Lind presented a new alliance with Russia as an essential component for saving "Christendom" from Islam. In a commentary on Weyrich's Direct Line, a program on his short-lived National Empowerment Television network, Lind argued that Russia "holds the West's—and Christendom's—vast open flank that faces east and south. If that flank collapses, we will soon find Islam once again at the gates of Vienna." Lind was invoking what has become a staple of Islamophobic demagoguery—that the 1683

battle between the Ottoman and the Holy Roman empires means that Christian Europeans should always be on the lookout for Muslim invasions and repel them. But for Lind, the Washington "establishment" failed to recognize Russia's critical strategic importance to the United States, in the context of what Lind believed was a third world war already in motion. "It is a war of Islam against everyone else," he argued, and "Russia is Christendom's most important barrier against Islam." Lind told a conference of U.S. and Russian policy makers, organized by the Free Congress Foundation in

Trump's candidacy and presidency brought closer ties with Russia into a new and sinister focus, given the influence that the Russian president exerted on the election of 2016. But in embracing Moscow, Trump was not articulating a new idea for many leading thinkers of his new political coalition—he just elevated it to a global conversation. The white nationalist admiration for Putin began during the George W. Bush era, expressed as a hostile reaction to Bush's neoconservative foreign policy and openness to immigration. The antipathy to Bush's foreign policy grew out of the movement's affinity for isolationism, a theme pressed on Republicans by Pat Buchanan and his fellow paleoconservatives when he the conservative movement was largely sidelined, in part because of the immense power of the Christian right within conservatism, and the convergence of its priorities in the Middle East with those of conservative foreign policy hawks. The Christian right was one of the top cheerleaders for the Iraq War, which it saw as part of an existential battle to defend both America and Israel from "radical Islam." In the decade before Trump entered the presidential race, it would have seemed impossible that the openly anti-Semitic and isolationist alt-right would have found itself in the Trump camp with the Christian Zionists of the Christian right. After all, the Christian Zionists' support for Israel and a militaristic foreign policy is anathema to the anti-Semitic and isolationist alt-right. But both movements, with their shared hostility to pluralism and democratic values, found a common antagonist in the first black American president. Barack Obama's presidency—and the right's stoking of conspiracy theories questioning his place of birth and citizenship, his supposed Muslim faith, his imagined Communist links—brought the alt-right and Christian right together in support of Donald Trump and the new nationalist right. The Christian right, driven by

what it claimed was the undermining of Christian values during the Obama era, began looking toward the very same autocrats who had captivated the alt-right. These political figures were also using "family values" such as opposition to abortion and LGBTQ rights as a means to merge Christian nationalism with ethnic nationalism, creating a potent bloc against European Union "elites." These two parts of the bloc were further drawn together by the migrant crisis that escalated in 2015, which was caused, the alt-right claimed, by the needless wars in the Middle East launched by their ideological enemy,

the neoconservatives. Because many of the migrants were from Muslim countries, the situation seemed to embody long-standing conspiracy theories in the Christian right about invasions of the West by Muslim hordes. For both the Christian right and the alt-right, the reaction of Europe's xenophobes to an influx of refugees and asylum seekers served as a template for what Trump portrayed as an "invasion" on the U.S. southern border. Both the alt-right and Christian right claim to be saving "Western civilization" or "the Judeo-Christian West." But what those slogans really mean is that America and the western European countries that dominate the European Union are already dead, having succumbed to "globalists" and "political correctness." What both the Christian right and the white nationalist right are looking toward now—with or without Trump—is a new locus of power in the world, one defined by a rejection of the hard-won and fragile American values of democracy and human rights, and by an exaltation of authoritarian natalism, xenophobia, and homophobia.

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Chapter 9: The Undrained Swamp Loves an Autocrat

Although Trump is frequently portrayed as bumbling or misspeaking in defense of authoritarianism, seeming missteps or bizarre asides, such as his claim

to have exchanged "beautiful love letters" and fallen "in love" with North Korean dictator Kim Jong-un, are not isolated blunders. Despite his attempts to be seen as bringing fresh thinking to outdated foreign policy, his description of the European Union as a "foe," and NATO as an "obsolete" relic that should be discarded, 1 are not the harmless pronouncements of an outsider, renegade president shaking up the wonks of the "deep state." Nor is his affinity for Putin a consequence simply of his business ties to Russia, or his lust to see its hacked Hillary Clinton emails arrayed in public view. Trump means it. But he did not invent these changes. He is less a leader than a vehicle for a global assault on democratic institutions and human rights, assaults that began in Washington well before he became president, in the seamy world of unscrupulous political strategists and lobbyists—the denizens of the swamp that Trump had disingenuously promised to drain. For decades, Republicans had turned to Arthur J. Finkelstein, a top political strategist known for his precision polling and messaging, and for not appear to diminish the mutual affection between him and the Republican Party. Some of Finkelstein's many protégés, affectionately known as "Arthur's kids," ended up in the orbit of the Trump campaign. These Trump allies included self-identified "dirty trickster" and Trump adviser Roger Stone, who in 2019 was convicted for obstruction and lying to investigators in the Russia probe, and campaign pollster Tony Fabrizio, who has claimed he urged Trump to contest Michigan and Wisconsin late in the campaign, a strategy credited with tipping the election in his favor. 3 Paul Manafort, Trump's onetime campaign manager and now a convicted felon, had used Finkelstein's attack strategy as far back as 1996 while working on Bob Dole's presidential campaign against Bill Clinton. These tactics, according to a campaign trail dispatch in Newsweek, "boiled down to a single sentence that employed Finkelstein's favorite pejorative term: 'Clinton is a liberal.' " 4 American political strategists

have not confined their activities to the United States; they have exported this disdain for liberalism around the world, and in Europe they have aided the rise of right-wing-populist, anti–European Union, anti-NATO autocrats. In 2008, Finkelstein set off for Budapest to become a political consultant for Viktor Orbán's Fidesz Party. 5 At the time, Orbán had been out of power for six years, after serving one term as prime minister during the years following Hungary's 1999 admission into NATO. In 2010, two years after retaining Finkelstein, Orbán ran again and won.

He is less a leader than a vehicle for a global assault on democratic institutions and human rights, assaults that began in Washington well before he became president

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Chapter 10: The Assault on Reality

Trump's assault on human rights and the rule of law depends on far more than his supporters cheerleading his strongman moves or looking the other way as he eviscerates democratic institutions. It requires an affirmative buy-in to his alternative reality, where facts are fake news, the press is the enemy of the people, Democratic lawmakers are traitors, and only devout Christians know the real "truth," whether from their proof-texting of the Bible or in their claimed prophecies from God. Trump—as will anyone following in his footsteps—benefits from a prodigious infrastructure decades in the making, including networks of churches, advocacy organizations, charismatic televangelists, and Christian media, all of which have converged to maintain a fervent audience

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primed to be politically activated by the relentless chaos sown by Trump and his allies. The havoc is the point: while the rest of the public is whipsawed and overwhelmed, Trump's loyal followers see their divine leader as a victim beset by enemies from multiple directions, and see themselves as spiritual warriors called by God to protect him. By activating every obscure corner of evangelical culture, Trump has elevated every obedient foot soldier into a critical cog in his totalizing strongman politics. Editors, colleagues, and even readers often ask me whether a particular religious right figure is powerful or influential, worthy of news coverage or even any attention at all. Clearly some figures are more influential than others, either because they have bigger churches, larger television and conference audiences, and best-selling books, or because they are especially close to presidents or other elected officials. But under Trump—the televangelism president—the doors of the Oval Office have been opened to pastors and religious leaders, and televangelists in particular, in unprecedented ways. These meetings are not mere photo ops, so often the approach of George H. W. and George W. Bush that irked Christian right leaders as

trivial gestures. In the Trump presidency, Christian right leaders routinely boast that they attend high-level meetings, and that the White House seeks their counsel on important matters of policy, from religious freedom to prison reform to Israel. These leaders, in turn, have become accomplices in Trump's assault on the truth. The White House's open door policy, and the frequency with which Christian right leaders are welcomed for meetings both ceremonial and highly political, has not only boosted the celebrity of the Christian right leaders who have been brought into the presidential circle. Proximity has also multiplied the ways that Trump's lies and conspiracy theories become the reality of the followers of these Trump allies. In that alternate, conspiratorial reality, any scrutiny of Trump or his inner circle is cast as a plot, deeply rooted in "fake news," George Soros–funded protesters, Clinton family machinations, or even Satan, to bring down God's chosen leader of the United States of America. The religious leaders close to the Trump White House assist in his assault on reality by immersing their followers at church, on television, and online into a universe disassociated from

reality and severed from even the most basic facts. Their alternative universe is instead permeated with narratives about how Christians and Trump are under attack, and about how only Trump's heroic defense of their religious freedom saves them from the onslaught of godless secularism. — Trump has consistently used these Christian right supporters as a shield against news coverage that exposes his wrongdoing, potentially threatening his presidency. In July 2017, just three days after The New York Times broke the explosive story that Paul Manafort, Donald Trump, Jr., and Jared Kushner had met in Trump Tower with a Russian lawyer who they believed had "dirt" on Hillary during the presidential campaign,1 Johnnie Moore, an evangelical public relations professional who served as the spokesman for Trump's evangelical advisory board, tweeted a photograph of Trump in the Oval Office, sitting at his desk, with Moore, Paula White, the televangelist Rodney Howard-Browne, and Browne's wife, Adonica, standing behind him.

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Other Republican candidates and presidents have courted the religious right, televangelists in particular, elevating their status despite scandals and rhetoric that offended other key constituencies. Most critically, these candidates extended legitimacy to their claims to know of God's plans and prophecies and the power to carry them out. But no previous Republican candidate or president sought the evangelical embrace to support their autocratic impulses, or to broadcast a claim that he is God's anointed, a leader of unparalleled divinity and authority. No previous Republican candidate or

president has embraced, perpetuated, and enabled such a staggering exhibition of lies and conspiracy theories and used his bully pulpit to denigrate his perceived enemies. Trump has succeeded in captivating white evangelical voters not just because he has befriended certain high-level leaders in the evangelical world. He has succeeded because there is virtually no leader in the evangelical world he wouldn't welcome by his side—as long as that leader pledged allegiance to him. Out in the world, the foot soldiers of the Christian right, in seeking out prophets and apostles and teachers and preachers, don't follow just one evangelist, or even a few. Through television, conferences, books, and social media, evangelicals absorb the teachings and writings of a wide variety of

figures. I've lost count of the conversations I've had with people—at churches, at conferences, even standing in line at a pro-Trump church service the day before he was inaugurated—discussing all the teachers they've learned from. It's like a buffet meal, and the offerings of pro-Trump propaganda are vast. Trump will not always be president, but he has elevated the conspiracy theory to a new high status in American politics. His evangelical allies, in turn, promote conspiracy theories about Trump the strongman, a fearless, anointed leader who is laboring heroically to save the Christian nation despite threats from socialism, the deep state, or George Soros. In return for their veneration, the life raft his presidency needs daily, Trump has given the Christian right new life, has spared them a Hillary Clinton presidency and a more liberal Supreme Court, and has given them unprecedented free rein in his administration and a defining role in the government of the United States. He's the leader they've been waiting for—the one who has been prophesied—who will affirm their authority as long as they accede to his. And they were there for him when he needed them most—to be his shield against impeachment—armed not only with all of their adulation, but with the escalating and ever-evolving set of conspiracy theories that became the president's only defense.

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Epilogue: And God Will Smite the Impeachers

It is far too facile an explanation to pin this devotion solely on a personality cult around Trump. The conditions that first brought him to power and, later, led to a nearly complete Republican capitulation to his whims were set in motion by two religious and political transformations of the 1970s: the sprawling political and ideological infrastructure Paul Weyrich built in the wake of Watergate, and the proliferation of televangelism and its marriage to Republican politics. At this critical moment in American history, when the democratic experiment hangs in the balance, this totalizing political and religious culture, rooted in a white Christian nationalist political ideology, was

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tailor-made to go to the mat for Trump.

Transformation of Evangelism and its marriage to the GOP

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Trump's willingness to stack the courts and federal agencies with Christian right loyalists, and to give them full authority to transform a secular liberal democracy into a Christian nationalist autocracy, has produced more gratitude for his presidency than for the presidency of any other Republican since the advent of the modern Christian right. And movement leaders know they have Weyrich to thank for his vision of a government led by right-wing Christian ideologues trained in the network of think tanks and advocacy organizations that had been his brainchild. The annual Values Voter Summit, held in October 2019, kicked off the day after Lev Parnas and Igor Fruman, associates of Trump's personal lawyer Rudy Giuliani in his Ukrainian dealings, were arrested at Dulles Airport and charged with felony violation of U.S. campaign finance laws. But this news was of no concern to the values voters; instead, speakers were reminding attendees of the unprecedented power Trump had delivered to them. "I was thinking about the late Paul Weyrich, who used to say, 'Personnel is policy,' " Perkins told the audience as he introduced Alex Azar, the health and human services secretary,

whose department has been ground zero for the implementation of Christian right policy priorities. "What makes the difference in this administration," said Perkins, "is that we're not on the outside looking in, we are on the inside working out."3 In a fund-raising email two weeks later, Perkins described impeachment as a "virus" and accused "the Left" of having been unable to produce "a single legitimate charge against President Donald J. Trump!" It was therefore time, Perkins wrote, "for America's Christians and conservatives to use our combined clout and put a stop to this political attack tearing our nation apart."4 That combined clout includes, crucially, the network of televangelists and

self-proclaimed prophets who have backed Trump with an unparalleled fervor.

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