HUFFPOST

Jimmy Carter and the Evangelical Divide

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Jimmy Carter's improbable ascent to the presidency was abetted by his probity—"I will never knowingly lie to the American people"—and by a brief resurgence of progressive evangelicalism in the early 1970s. **His shattering defeat four years later, however, signaled the demise of progressive evangelicalism in favor of a radically different understanding of the faith articulated by leaders of the Religious Right.**

Over Thanksgiving weekend in 1973, a gathering of fifty-five evangelical leaders produced a remarkable document called the Chicago Declaration of Evangelical Social Concern. Just as progressive evangelicals in the previous century had decried slavery and the gap between rich and poor, the Chicago Declaration lamented the persistence of racial and economic inequality. **Evangelicals in the nineteenth century had been active in the peace movement and agitated for equal rights for women, including voting rights; the Chicago Declaration condemned the nation's militarism and issued a full-throated defense of women's rights.**

Not quite six months later, another progressive evangelical, Jimmy Carter, then governor of Georgia, delivered his famous Law Day address at the University of Georgia. Carter declared that his understanding of justice derived from two sources—from Reinhold Niebuhr's dictum that the "sad duty of politics was to establish justice in a sinful world" and from Bob Dylan, specifically Dylan's song "Ain't Gonna Work on Maggie's Farm No More." Carter went on to lament that Georgia's prison population consisted overwhelmingly of the poor and people of color, and he also deplored the cozy relationship between government regulators and the corporations they were charged to regulate.

The brief resurgence of progressive evangelicalism in the mid-1970s helped propel Carter to the White House. But almost immediately another group of evangelicals, who eventually coalesced into a movement known as the Religious Right, began agitating to deny Carter, their fellow evangelical, a second term.

The standard narrative surrounding the genesis of the Religious Right is that preachers like Jerry Falwell and Pat Robertson were so outraged by the Roe v. Wade decision of 1973 that they resolved to organize politically to overturn legalized abortion. **This abortion myth, however, is utter fiction. For most of the 1970s, evangelicals were at best indifferent to abortion, considering it a Catholic issue. Several prominent evangelicals, in fact, praised the Roe decision as marking an appropriate distinction between personal morality and public policy.**

Instead, Falwell and others, at the encouragement of conservative activist Paul Weyrich, organized politically to defend the tax exemptions of so-called segregation academies, many of them church-affiliated (such as Falwell's Lynchburg Christian Academy) that sprouted up after the Supreme Court mandated the desegregation of public schools.

As the Internal Revenue Service began rescinding the tax exemptions of segregated schools, including the notorious Bob Jones University, evangelical preachers were furious. Falwell famously complained that it was easier to open a massage parlor in some states than a "Christian" school.

The origins of the Religious Right, then, lie in the defense of racial segregation rather than defense of the unborn. (Falwell, by his own account, didn't preach a sermon against abortion until 1978.) But Weyrich, having kindled the ire of Falwell and other evangelical preachers against the IRS, still needed to persuade ordinary evangelical voters to organize politically. **Agitating in favor of racial segregation was a tough sell; he needed a secondary issue to pique their interest.**

For Weyrich and other leaders of the Religious Right the 1978 bi-elections demonstrated that abortion might work as an issue to galvanize grassroots evangelical voters. During that election cycle, pro-life Republicans in Iowa and Minnesota won three Senate seats and the governor's mansion. The Sunday before Election Day pro-life activists (primarily Roman Catholics) leafleted church parking lots, and two days later, in elections with a very low turnout, the Democratic candidates went down to defeat.

As I was conducting research in Weyrich's papers at the University of Wyoming, the correspondence surrounding the 1978 election fairly crackled with excitement. Finally, Weyrich had stumbled on the issue—abortion—that would motivate politically conservative evangelical voters. As the 1980 presidential election approached, Weyrich and leaders of the Religious Right hammered away at the abortion issue in an attempt to galvanize evangelical voters against Carter in favor of the Republican nominee, Ronald Reagan.

But therein lies yet another paradox. Whereas Reagan, as governor of California in 1967, had signed into law the most liberal abortion bill in the nation, Carter had a long history of opposition to abortion and had sought, both as governor and president, to limit its incidence. Nevertheless, leaders of the Religious Right, seeking a pretext to oust a fellow evangelical, one they regarded as too liberal, decided that Carter's refusal to seek a constitutional amendment was an unpardonable sin.

Jimmy Carter's defeat in 1980 not only deprived him of a second term and ended his political career, it signaled the demise of progressive evangelicalism on the national scene. Evangelical voters traded Carter's military restraint and attention to the plight of the poor, women and minorities for a candidate who, whatever his other qualities, advocated military swagger, favored tax cuts for the affluent, ridiculed welfare recipients and suggested that homelessness was a choice. Reagan had opposed both the Civil Rights Act and the Voting Rights Act as well as the proposed Equal Rights

Amendment to the Constitution, whereas Carter regarded his failure to secure ratification of the ERA among the bitterest disappointments of his presidency.

Carter and other progressive evangelicals, drawing on the tradition of nineteenth-century evangelical activism that cared for those on the margins of society, enjoyed a brief resurgence in the mid-1970s. But that surge was short-lived. Politically conservative evangelicals, led by Falwell and coordinated by Weyrich, forged the Religious Right to ensure that Carter, himself an evangelical, would be denied a second term.

Evangelical politics has never been the same.