

C. Everett Koop and the religious right

By [Randall Balmer](#)

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It requires only modest exaggeration to say that [C. Everett Koop](#), the distinguished surgeon general (and Dartmouth alumnus) who died on February 25, was responsible for the emergence of the religious right. As much as anyone else, Koop persuaded American evangelicals in the late 1970s that opposition to abortion was a matter worthy of their votes.

Although televangelists like [Pat Robertson](#) and [Jerry Falwell](#) frequently asserted that it was the Supreme Court's [Roe v. Wade](#) decision of 1973 that galvanized politically conservative evangelicals into a voting bloc, that claim collapses in the face of historical scrutiny:

- The Southern Baptist Convention called for the legalization of abortion at its gathering in St. Louis in 1971. It reaffirmed the resolution in 1974 and again in 1976.
- The United Methodist Church passed a similar resolution in 1972.

It was a different court decision, *Green v. Connally*, that prompted evangelical leaders to organize. That 1971 ruling by the District Court of the District of Columbia upheld the Internal Revenue Service in its opinion that any institution that retains racially discriminatory policies is not—by definition—a charitable organization and therefore is not entitled to tax-exempt status.

When the IRS rescinded the [tax exemption of Bob Jones University on January 19, 1976](#), evangelical leaders howled in protest. Ignoring the crucial fact that tax exemption amounts to public subsidy, they insisted that the federal government was meddling in the affairs of religious organizations. With the encouragement of conservative activists like [Paul Weyrich](#) and [Richard Viguerie](#), these leaders of what became the religious right began to organize.

But the movement still needed an issue that would energize evangelicals at the grassroots. The 1978 elections persuaded Weyrich that abortion could be that issue. On the Sunday before the election, pro-lifers in Iowa and Minnesota leafleted church parking lots. Two days later, they defeated a popular incumbent Democratic senator in Iowa, and in Minnesota they captured the governorship and both Senate seats.

What Weyrich still lacked was a way to alert grassroots evangelicals to the scourge of abortion, and here is where C. Everett Koop figures into the story. Koop, a distinguished pediatric surgeon, had long opposed abortion, but in 1978 he teamed up with Francis A. Schaeffer, a goateed, knicker-wearing evangelical philosopher, to produce a film series called [*Whatever Happened to the Human Race?*](#)

Schaeffer had long excoriated what he called “secular humanism” and warned that the legalization of abortion would soon lead to infanticide and euthanasia. Koop’s sterling reputation as a physician added credibility to the argument. As the film series toured American cities in 1979, the term “secular humanism” entered the political lexicon—and Falwell, Weyrich and other leaders of the religious right harvested popular anger over abortion. They adroitly mobilized politically conservative evangelicals into a potent voting bloc in time for the 1980 election.

The rest, as they say, is history. The religious right settled on Ronald Reagan as their champion and standard-bearer, despite the fact that as governor of California Reagan had signed into law the most liberal abortion bill in the nation. They supported him instead of his evangelical opponent with a longer record of opposing abortion, incumbent Jimmy Carter.

The religious right’s reward was the appointment of Koop as surgeon general of the United States. But Koop proved to be his own man:

- He called attention to the burgeoning AIDS crisis, even though others in the Reagan administration preferred to ignore it.
- He advocated for sex education and the use of condoms, which pitted him against other leaders of the religious right, especially Phyllis Schlafly.
- He quashed a specious, politically motivated report that asserted that women who had abortions suffered adverse psychological effects.

- He called attention to the deleterious effects of both smoking and second-hand smoke in restaurants and bars and on airplanes.

All in all, a distinguished career: physician, public-health advocate and (wittingly or not) political organizer. Besides, not many surgeons general of the United States have a rock song written about them (Frank Zappa's "Promiscuous").

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