

Jimmy Carter and the demise of progressive evangelicalism

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Jimmy Carter rode to the White House in 1976 on the twin currents of his reputation as a “New South” governor and a resurgence of progressive evangelicalism in the early 1970s. Progressive evangelicalism, which traces its lineage to 19th-century evangelicals and to the commands of Jesus to care for “the least of these,” represented a very different version of evangelical activism from that of the religious right.

In the wake of the Second Great Awakening in the decades surrounding the turn of the 19th century, evangelicals in the antebellum period unleashed their moral energies to reform society according to the norms of godliness. They enlisted in peace movements, criticized capitalism, and sought to eradicate slavery. They supported prison reform to rehabilitate criminals and public education as a way for children of the less affluent to improve their lot. They supported equal rights for women, including voting rights.

To a remarkable degree, the evangelical agenda of social reform endured into the early decades of the 20th century, when its program expanded to include, in addition to women’s rights, the rights of workers to organize. [William Jennings Bryan](#), the three-time Democratic nominee for president, is most often remembered for his less-than-stellar performance at the Scopes trial of 1925, but a more accurate portrayal of Bryan would place him squarely in the tradition of progressive evangelicalism.

Evangelicals, obsessed as they were with dispensational premillennialism in the early decades of the 20th century—Jesus will return at any moment—drifted toward political indifference. During the Cold War, they joined many other Americans in the crusade against godless communism.

Progressive evangelicalism, however, mounted a comeback in the early 1970s amid the final years of the Vietnam War and the corruptions surrounding the Nixon administration. A few evangelicals gravitated to the forlorn 1972 presidential

campaign of George McGovern, the Democratic senator from South Dakota, opponent of the Vietnam War and former Methodist seminary student. I recall skipping my own chapel at Trinity College in Deerfield to attend [McGovern's address in Edman Chapel at Wheaton College](#) on October 11, 1972. But Wheaton students greeted McGovern with jeers and catcalls, an indication that progressive evangelicalism was hardly hegemonic among evangelicals. Several Wheaton students hoisted a huge "Nixon" banner and paraded around the chapel.

The year following McGovern's defeat, however, Ronald J. Sider gathered 55 evangelicals at the YMCA in Chicago over Thanksgiving weekend. The document coming out of that meeting, the [Chicago Declaration of Evangelical Social Concern](#), condemned militarism, persistent racism and the yawning gap between rich and poor. At the behest of Nancy A. Hardesty of Trinity College, the declaration also included a statement on women's rights. "We acknowledge that we have encouraged men to prideful domination and women to irresponsible passivity," the declaration read. "So we call both men and women to mutual submission and active discipleship." In 1977, Sider published [Rich Christians in an Age of Hunger](#), one of the most popular evangelical books of the decade.

Enter Jimmy Carter. In his inaugural address as governor of Georgia in 1971, Carter said, "The time for racial discrimination is over." As governor, he reformed the state penal system and ratcheted up support for public education. An evangelical himself, Carter campaigned for president on themes consistent with progressive evangelicalism: military restraint, a less imperial foreign policy, human rights, racial reconciliation, affordable healthcare, and equal rights for women.

Carter's ability to pursue those goals was hampered by a stubbornly sour economy, the Soviet invasion of Afghanistan, and the taking of American hostages in Iran. However, he managed to renegotiate the Panama Canal treaties and shift American foreign policy away from reflexive Cold War dualism toward an emphasis on human rights, thereby securing the release of political prisoners. He advanced the cause of peace in the Middle East far beyond that of his predecessors (or successors), and he appointed more women and minorities to office than any previous president.

At the same time that Carter was pressing an agenda informed by, and consistent with, progressive evangelicalism, however, other evangelicals were organizing against him. Politically conservative evangelicals, who had tilted toward the Republican Party in the 1950s and 1960s, had been thrown off-balance by the

Watergate scandal and the corruptions of the Nixon administration. With the approach of the 1980 election, however, they had regained their footing and began organizing, paradoxically, to defeat Carter, their fellow evangelical.

Why? The simplest explanation is that politics trumped piety. Despite their evangelical affiliations, leaders of the Religious Right were eager to restore evangelical voters, after a dalliance with Carter and progressive evangelicalism, to the familiar precincts of the Republican Party and a notably more conservative political agenda. And they were prepared to go to extraordinary ends to do so, including an embrace of Ronald Reagan, a divorced man with episodic church attendance, and blaming Carter—inaccurately—for rescinding the tax-exempt status of Bob Jones University and various “segregation academies.”

The 1980 presidential election represented a turning point in U.S. political history. The Reagan landslide heralded not only the Republican capture of the White House and a Republican Senate, but Carter’s defeat also signaled the eclipse of progressive evangelicalism in favor of a political agenda virtually indistinguishable from the Republican Party itself.

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