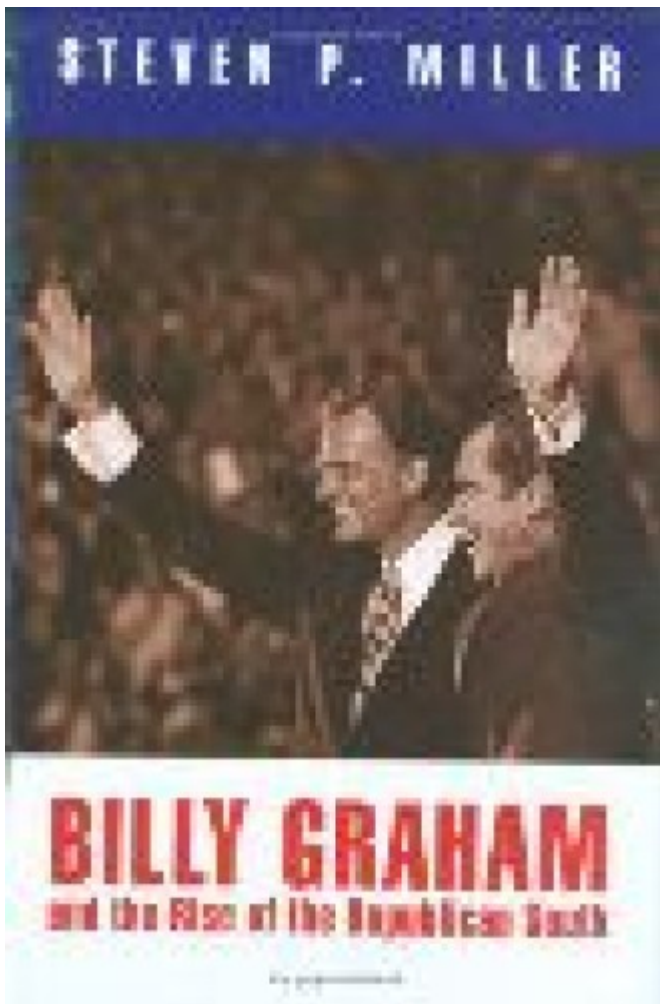


# Billy Graham, political operative

By [John G. Turner](#) in the [October 6, 2009](#) issue

## In Review



## Billy Graham and the Rise of the Republican South

Steven P. Miller

University of Pennsylvania Press

"Now Watergate does not bother me," sang Lynyrd Skynyrd's Ronnie Van Zant in the unofficial Alabama state anthem, "Does your conscience bother you?" When the

Watergate break-in turned into a presidency-threatening scandal in 1973, it clearly bothered Billy Graham's conscience. Condemned as a "court prophet" and criticized as a Republican stooge, Graham regretted his political alliance with Richard Nixon. Nevertheless, he refused to call for Nixon's resignation and instead blamed the president's sins on the nation's loss of a "moral compass." "There's a little bit of Watergate in all of us," the evangelist intoned on several occasions.

As "America's Preacher," Billy Graham was the most famous religious figure in the United States during the second half of the 20th century. Steven Miller, who grew up in a "rural Mennonite congregation" with "evangelical instincts," has written a political biography that shines fresh light on Graham's political machinations, navigation of the civil rights movement and boosting of the Sunbelt South.

Graham's moderation on issues of race and civil rights is well known. Graham haltingly but then definitively desegregated his southern crusades in the early-to-mid 1950s, condemned racist violence at Little Rock and invited Martin Luther King Jr. to pray at his 1957 New York City crusade. Within a few years, however, Graham criticized King's strategy of civil disobedience as lawless, condemned "extremists on both sides" of the civil rights struggle and called for a moratorium on protests. At best a mild prophet of racial justice, Graham quickly became a proponent of moderation, civility and gradualism, an evolution that cost him black support and attendance at later crusades.

Miller does not satisfy himself with the easy job of poking holes in the Billy Graham Evangelistic Association's mythic accounts of Graham's civil rights contributions. Instead, he contends that Graham's "politics of decency" provided "an acceptable path upon which white southern moderates could back away from Jim Crow."

Those moderates flowed into Richard Nixon's emerging "silent majority," steered by none other than Graham. Miller does not portray Graham as politically naive; nor does he suggest that he was simply used by Nixon. Instead, Graham emerges as a shrewd political operative in his own right, dedicated to the success of Nixon and the GOP despite his regular professions of nonpartisanship. Graham regularly undertook political assignments for Nixon, maneuvering against Democratic senator Albert Gore Sr.'s 1970 reelection bid and discouraging George Wallace from campaigning for the White House in 1972. Graham's politics of decency played a central role in the emergence of the reliably Republican South. Graham's constant calls for law and order in the wake of civil rights protests and urban unrest prefigured Nixon's 1968

campaign, and his willingness to openly help Nixon court the southern evangelical vote tilled the soil for Jerry Falwell and other Christian right activists.

Chagrined by Watergate, Graham distanced himself from Nixon and pledged to stay “a million miles away from politics.” He did not abide by that pledge, though he became more circumspect. One of the most original sections of Miller’s book is his discussion of Graham’s post-Watergate political career. The evangelist maintained a cordial but distant relationship with Jimmy Carter, developed an intimate friendship with the Bush family, and sympathetically responded to Bill Clinton’s personal travails (a reaction that in some respects mirrored his response to Watergate).

Miller concludes that most “portraits of Graham have exaggerated the nature of his depoliticization.” Though he distanced himself from the Christian right, he remained a quiet Republican activist. For this, evangelicals, other Christians and all Americans should be grateful. As shriller and sometimes hateful voices became identified with political evangelicalism, Graham emerged as a more irenic elder statesman. He never claimed the mantle of a prophet, and he certainly lacked consistency on the central issue of race relations. Yet when louder and angrier voices on the right further polarized American politics and sullied the image of Christianity in the minds of young Americans, Graham “modeled an important yet underappreciated strand of American conservatism that learned to speak a compassionate language of post-racialism and international humanitarianism.”

Moderate voices always anger those on the political and religious left and right, but there were far worse alternatives to Graham’s politics of decency. Similarly, religious and political progressives may not appreciate Rick Warren’s opposition to gay marriage, but Warren serves as a far more constructive representative of contemporary evangelicalism than many of his more conservative counterparts.

On the other hand, for all of Graham’s political and personal decency (to which there were occasional exceptions, such as when he made anti-Semitic comments that were caught on tape at the Nixon White House), his political theology ultimately proved bankrupt. Graham’s political thought revolved around what Miller awkwardly terms “evangelical universalism,” which emphasizes social change through individual regeneration and subordination to governmental authority. Graham was an evangelist without parallel in his era, but it would be hard to argue that those myriad conversions produced a more just or moral nation and world—and Graham’s emphasis on electing “Christian statesmen” proved problematic for obvious reasons.

Moreover, subordination and obedience were hardly a recipe for needed social change on issues like race.

In his “Letter from Birmingham Jail,” King termed the southern church “a thermometer that recorded the ideas and principles of popular opinion” rather than a “thermostat that transformed the mores of society.” Graham could be both and was often somewhere in between; he was thus an ill-fitting actor in morality plays like the civil rights movement and the Watergate scandal. That Miller captures Graham’s complexity is one of the chief virtues of this even-handed and probing political profile.

Before we condemn Graham for his moderation and political hypocrisy, we would do well to remember his own—admittedly self-serving—Watergate-era warnings against hubris and self-righteousness. Graham is hardly the only American religious leader to be awestruck by powerful politicians, to make false claims of political neutrality and to say embarrassing things behind closed doors. There’s a little bit of Billy Graham in most Christians who involve themselves in the political process.