

Reagan political years paralleled right's rise: The Gipper's legacy

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Ronald Reagan's influence on Christian politics in this country will be felt for years to come. The 40th president, who died June 5 at 93 after a lengthy battle with Alzheimer's disease, used his acting experience in communicating optimism to the public and also introduced many conservative Christians to real political power.

Reagan was present—and uttered one of his most famous lines—at the meeting that many credit as the birth of the Religious Right, which molded evangelical Protestant conservatism into a cohesive political movement.

At the Religious Roundtable's National Affairs Briefing in 1980, after being introduced by a Southern Baptist evangelist as "God's man," Reagan—then a presidential candidate—told the conservative Christian luminaries, "I know you can't endorse me, but I endorse you." Reagan's quip sparked a long relationship with conservative Christians.

As president, Reagan was also remembered for calling the Soviet Union an "evil empire" in addressing the National Association of Evangelicals meeting in Orlando.

Reagan is credited with bringing the Religious Right fully into the GOP fold. "I will remember Mr. Reagan primarily for his relationship with the evangelical Christian community in our nation," Moral Majority founder Jerry Falwell recalled in 2002, in a column on the Web site WorldNetDaily.com. Baptist Falwell said of the president's 1980 election: "We had long been shut out of the White House when Mr. Reagan took office."

Falwell noted that Reagan introduced ideas to the Republican platform that were important to conservative evangelicals—such as opposition to abortion and homosexuality, and unwavering support for Israel. Evangelicals helped elect Reagan—for years a nominal Presbyterian who supported the Christian Church (Disciples of Christ) in honor of his mother—over born-again Southern Baptist Jimmy

Carter.

Nonetheless, Carter praised Reagan's abilities. "This is a sad day for our country," Carter said June 6, prior to teaching his Sunday school class in Plains, Georgia. "I probably know as well as anybody what a formidable communicator and campaigner President Reagan was," Carter said, according to the Associated Press. "It was because of him that I was retired from my last job."

Reagan focused much of his presidential energy on fighting communism, strengthening national defense and promoting conservative economic policies. Despite promising to overturn the 1973 Supreme Court ruling legalizing abortion and to pass a constitutional amendment allowing government-sanctioned prayer in public schools, Reagan ended up devoting little political capital to those causes. But he was revered nonetheless by conservative Christians.

Tennessee pastor Adrian Rogers, a former president of the Southern Baptist Convention, described Reagan as "a man of principle" unswayed by "political correctness" or polls. "In that sense, I think he was comparable to our current president," Rogers told Baptist Press. "I think the same mosquito may have bit them both."

Some progressive Christians criticized Reagan, however, for what they said was his warmongering and neglect of the poor. Others complained that he failed to address the AIDS crisis as it was killing thousands of gay men and intravenous drug users during the 1980s. Reagan did not publicly acknowledge the disease's existence until 1987.

His official biographer, Edmund Morris, quoted Reagan as wondering aloud if "the Lord brought down this plague" because "illicit sex is against the Ten Commandments." Added Morris: "Reagan often was able to instill confidence in the American public, yet around this issue—this is one around which he failed even to communicate."

Although his legislative legacy on social issues was limited, Reagan had a strong hand in changing the federal judiciary and church-state law. In his eight years in office, Reagan appointed many conservatives to the federal bench—including three of the Supreme Court's current members. He also promoted William Rehnquist, a staunch conservative, to the position of chief justice. Those changes led to judicial rulings lowering the traditional "wall of separation" between church and state, a wall

that had been strengthened by the courts for at least two decades.

James Dunn, former executive director of the Baptist Joint Committee on Public Affairs and a frequent critic of Reagan, said it was “inappropriate at this moment . . . to be overly analytical” regarding Reagan’s legacy for religious freedom. But, Dunn said, the late president “significantly revised and reinterpreted the American tradition in this vital area.”

Dunn, now a professor of Christianity and social policy at the Divinity School at Wake Forest University, did praise his former foe. “The optimistic spirit that pervaded Reagan’s public presence did make a contribution to American life and is, at least in some measure, related to Christian hope,” Dunn said. *—Robert Marus and Greg Warner, Associated Baptist Press*