

Crusader: Bush's religious passions

by [Kevin Phillips](#) in the [July 13, 2004](#) issue

Are George W. Bush's religious convictions his own business and no one else's? Or do they have very public consequences? We can begin to probe the question by considering the religious context of his entry into national politics.

Not long after he was recruited for Christ by Billy Graham amid personal and business difficulties of the mid-1980s, Bush became his father's principal liaison with the Religious Right. During the presidential campaign of 1987-88, Bush worked with the Religious Right in receiving lines and at parachurch functions. He also undertook such tasks as getting his parents together with televangelists Jim and Tammy Faye Bakker. As *Newsweek* bluntly summarized in March 2003, George W. "assembled his career through contacts with ministers of the then-emerging evangelical movement."

No other president got his start this way. Indeed, the contacts he developed with little national attention gave him unique credentials for harnessing the political momentum of fundamentalist, evangelical and Pentecostal Protestantism. And Texas, a state where business and religious conservatives have long collaborated, gave Governor George W. Bush a prime launching pad for a national campaign.

In the 2000 campaign, fortune smiled on George W. Bush in the form of Bill Clinton's tarnished legacy. While Clinton's Southern Baptist idiom might otherwise have reassured born-again white Dixie, his affair with an intern made him a moral Beelzebubba. Though he survived impeachment, he was anathema to fundamentalists and evangelicals. This helped Bush to defeat Al Gore, himself a Southern Baptist, in all 11 states of the Old Confederacy. Part of Bush's strategy was to promote a national moral restoration by holding out his parents and the Bush clan as exemplars of traditional values and religious commitment.

So powerful was this surge that Bush's support among fundamentalists and evangelicals hit 84 percent—the highest ever for a Republican presidential nominee. Religious conservatives cast an unprecedented 40 percent of the nationwide GOP presidential vote.

Academicians analyzing the 2000 election were struck by how Bush had integrated the hitherto demanding leaders of the Religious Right into his electoral coalition without provoking negative attention. Professor John Green of Akron University, an expert on religious politics, identified this alliance as an “untold story” of the election. The connection became obvious, however, in the religiosity of the president’s speechmaking, his heavy attention to prayer, and the patronage he gave to Religious Right loyalists in positions related to population planning, women’s rights, reproductive rights, faith-based programs and church-state relations.

It is timely to ponder a related Oval Office attentiveness: the way American policy in the Middle East may have been shaped to appeal to the Religious Right. Could Iraq possibly have been cast and attacked partly as the new Babylon (and Saddam the new Nebuchadnezzar)? Was a compelling percentage of the Bush coalition cheered by conflagration and crisis in the Middle East, seeing it as a prelude to Christ’s return?

Bush’s willingness to identify religious intention in war planning is unprecedented. In July 2003, the Israeli newspaper *Ha’aretz* quoted him as telling the Palestinian prime minister that “God told me to strike at al-Qaeda and I struck them, and then he instructed me to strike at Saddam, which I did, and now I am determined to solve the problem in the Middle East.” A friendly Bush family chronicle by Peter and Rochelle Schweizer quoted one unnamed relative as saying that Bush sees the war on terrorism as a “religious war”: “He doesn’t have a p.c. view of this war. His view of this is that they are trying to kill the Christians. And we the Christians will strike back with more force and more ferocity than they will ever know” (*New York Times*, March 29).

The first President Bush watched fundamentalist and evangelical voters emerge as a powerful constituency in 1990 and 1991. Huge ratios cheered the first gulf war, and many imbued it with deep biblical meaning: Babylon-cum-Baghdad, the symbolic center of wickedness, would be destroyed by God. The war might be the prelude to Armageddon; the Second Coming and the Rapture might be at hand.

Reporters described the atmosphere at the 1991 National Religious Broadcasters’ Convention in Washington, D.C., which overlapped with the first weeks of the gulf war: the convention was full of sweatshirts saying “Jesus Is Coming” and copies of the 91st Psalm bound in desert camouflage colors. Many attendees expected or even welcomed nuclear war as a sign of the Second Coming (Larry Jones,

Evangelicals for Nuclear War, Covert Action: The Roots of Terrorism, Ocean).

Shortly after 9/11, Pat Robertson's retirement as president of the Christian Coalition prompted the *Washington Post* to ask Washington-based Religious Right leaders about a successor. None was needed, they said; the terrorist attack and the White House response had made George W. Bush their leader. No previous U.S. chief of state had ever been accorded that recognition. God, several said, had picked Bush to lead America through its crisis.

Following the 9/11 attack, a religiously focused Bush publicly called for a "crusade" in response, retreating from that term only after advisers cautioned against offending Muslims. In *Bush at War*, Bob Woodward observed that "the president was casting his vision and that of the country in the grand vision of God's master plan." Tom DeLay, the Republican majority leader of the House of Representatives, confided to a Texas Baptist audience that God had made Bush president "to promote a biblical worldview."

To not a few Religious Right leaders, Islam itself is essentially evil. Jerry Falwell called the Prophet Muhammad a "terrorist," but later apologized. Pat Robertson called him a "wild-eyed fanatic," a "robber" and a "brigand." Franklin Graham, son of Billy, branded Islam "evil." Former Southern Baptist Convention President Jerry Vines called Muhammad a "demon-possessed pedophile." Press reports blamed Falwell's remarks for the gains by pro-al Qaeda radical parties in Pakistan's early 2003 provincial elections. Overall, postinvasion international surveys published by the Washington-based Pew Center reported that in countries from North Africa through the Middle East to Indonesia, Muslim regard for the United States had plummeted; in many nations, respondents preferred Osama bin Laden to George W. Bush.

Occasional stories in the national media have detailed the increasingly religious tenor of Bush's public phraseology and conveyed his sense of his religious constituency. Richard Mouw, president of Fuller Theological Seminary in Pasadena, California, said he was worried about the parallels that were being drawn by religious conservatives: "Iraq as Babylon—I've been hearing that a lot lately."

Specific interpretations of contemporary events as part of the end-times scenario laid out in the Book of Revelation are far from broadly accepted by Christians. They are the province of a significant minority. A *Newsweek* poll in 1999 found that 45

percent of U.S. Christians believe that the world will end with an Armageddon battle between Jesus Christ and the Antichrist. Members of “mainstream” Protestant churches—from Episcopal to Methodist and Presbyterian—are much less inclined to share this view. As for Catholics, only a fifth believe in Armageddon. Robert Edgar, general secretary of the National Council of Churches, told an organizational meeting of the new “Faithful Majority” in March that the second coming of Christ has already occurred—at the time of the resurrection.

Still other Christians believe that Christ will not come back until government is in the hands of the godly—a theocratic precondition of sorts. George W. Bush has never commented on this latter school, known as Dominionism. However, several preachers tied to the movement—Anthony T. Evans and Jack Rayford—served as speakers at 2001 inauguration functions.

Cynics who see little but politics in all of this could note the Bush family’s ties to Sun Myung Moon, head of the Unification Church, who regards himself as the Messiah. George Bush Sr. has made multiple speeches on Moon’s behalf, and George W. Bush allowed Moon to cosponsor the Inaugural Prayer Lunch in January 2001. Morris Chapman, chief executive of the 18-million-member Southern Baptist Convention, described himself as “shocked to see that Sun Myung Moon was on the program, and in essence the host. I was even more surprised on the way out to be given a propaganda book on the Unification Church.”

The exact tenor of George W. Bush’s own religious views remains unclear. Concerned churchpeople must create a framework for a political and constitutional debate. How can John Kerry’s divergences from Vatican doctrine and difficulties with Catholic bishops anxious to deny him communion be front-page news while commentators studiously ignore the president’s religious beliefs that may have influenced his decision on war?