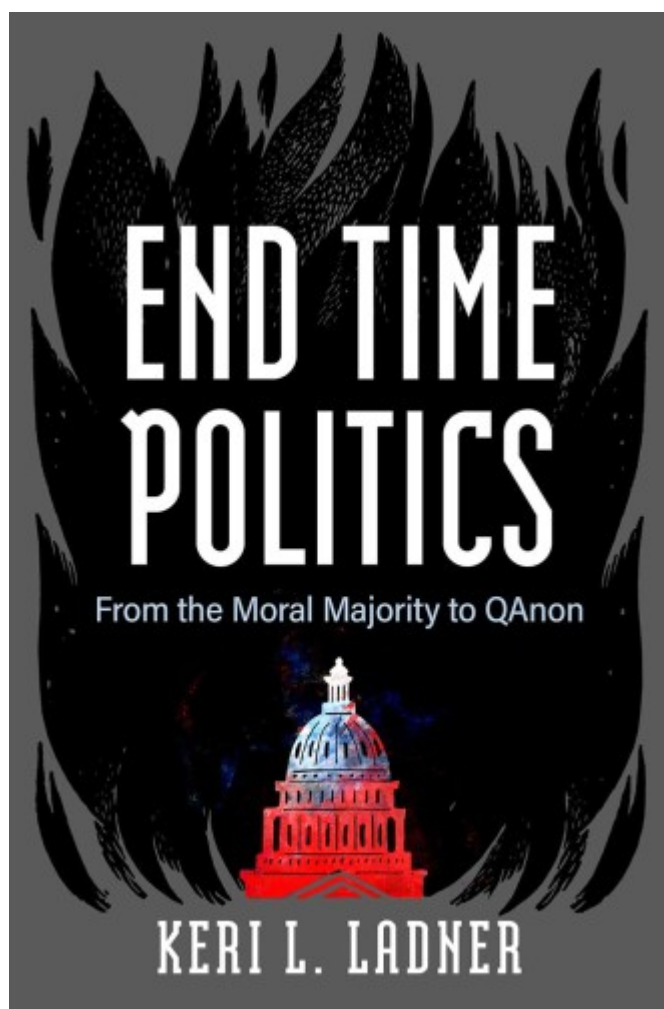


Jerry Falwell's toxic legacy

Keri Ladner digs into the Moral Majority founder's archives to show how his fantastical interpretations of world politics seeded the ground for QAnon.

by [David P. Gushee](#) in the [July 2024](#) issue

In Review



End Time Politics

From the Moral Majority to QAnon

By Keri L. Ladner

Fortress Press

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RW-REPLACE-TOKEN

End Time Politics is primarily an examination of the disastrous apocalyptic, dispensational, politicized theology of the late Jerry Falwell. Keri Ladner, who holds a PhD from Edinburgh University, has dug around in the available sermons, speeches, newsletters, and briefings of the depressing Falwell collection, sparing the rest of us from having to do it. She shows how this thinly educated man twisted an already highly questionable version of Protestant thought known as dispensational theology to underwrite what was essentially conservative White southern Americanism—complete with its segregationism, “biblical capitalism,” anti-communism, militarism, nationalism, patriarchy, anti-abortionism, homophobia, and denialism on matters such as climate change.

The author’s greatest discovery, in my reading, is the centrality for Falwell of a consistent advocacy of unregulated laissez-faire capitalism throughout his writings and speeches over many decades. This becomes a through line with all the issues he addressed. Falwell identified this ideology as biblical, based on a few proof texts from scripture. He deployed it to oppose everything from the New Deal to the civil rights movement to public schools to environmentalism. Ladner helps readers understand how the Cold War helped turbocharge conservative opposition to pretty much the entire progressive project, and she helps us make sense of why the strategy of labeling enemies as socialists or communists—30-plus years after the end of the Soviet Union—remains such an important part of the right-wing playbook to this day.

The most creative part of the Falwell strategy—and he was by no means alone in this—was his facile interpretation of current events over many decades to fit into an end-times scenario in which Jesus’ return was always just around the corner. Ladner shows that in terms of classic Darbyite/Scofieldist dispensationalism, Falwell’s primary theological innovation was to claim repeatedly that supposedly predetermined events in the end-times scenario (such as the timing of the apocalypse and who exactly would be burned to death at what moment) could be altered by just the right amount of repentant conservative Americanism before it was too late.

Ladner ends her book with a brief conclusion that effectively connects Falwell, who died in 2007, with the more recent QAnon craze on the far right. The connection is indeed clear, as during his lifetime Falwell actively pushed Clinton-related conspiracy theories that mutated into the QAnon illusion of a satanic governmental pedophile sex-trafficking ring in the highest circles of liberal politics. But more deeply, Falwell helped seed the ground for QAnon with his fantastical, conspiratorial, “here’s what’s *really* happening” interpretations of earthly politics. His paranoid conspiracy theorizing helps explain why even today 20 percent of the US population believes in the QAnon conspiracy and many more than that believe the 2020 election was stolen. The toxic epistemological fracturing of the US population has Falwell’s fingerprints on it. That’s quite a legacy.

Ladner is a relatively new author, and at times it shows. The organizational scheme of the book is puzzling, some content is repeated nearly verbatim in multiple chapters, and occasionally odd word choices reveal misunderstood meanings. These are correctable problems.

One final note seems important, a recommendation for this promising young scholar: *Go ahead and write that post-fundamentalist memoir that is inside you.* Ladner clearly has a personal story to tell. She gives us a glimpse of it in the introduction to the book, but then she returns to it only once. It seems that Ladner was abandoned by her Christian parents in Texas and put into a shady Christian children’s home for the offense of being a “delinquent adolescent.” She was 11. She writes: “When my father pulled me out of the car and carried me inside, then drove away, my life changed in ways that I am still only beginning to understand.” I don’t think “carried” in this sentence is used in the southern way, as in “Mama, will you carry me to ballet practice today?” No—I think she was *carried*.

Keri Ladner, thank you for your book. It offers an invaluable dive into the toxic fundamentalism that has so distorted Christian faith and damaged so many people. It also brims with a deep commitment to a far better version of Christianity than the one you met at Victory Acres Children’s Home. I hope that someday you will tell us your whole story.