

Politics and Religion in America Today

by

George McGovern

I want all of you here to know, in case anyone is nervous about this, that I personally don't have any sense of regret or bitterness about my own situation, either looking back on 1972, or on what happened on November 4, 1980. I am really rather enjoying being free from the day-to-day constituent pressures I've been under, in public life, for the last twenty four years. And while I have enjoyed service in the United States Senate -- obviously it is better to win than to lose -- nonetheless, there are some advantages, after long periods of life in public life, of having a chance to back off and look at the problems that face the country, perhaps with a little less immediate necessity of coming up with a quick answer. I used to be frustrated in the Senate, as an old history teacher, when those roll call bells would ring, sometimes eight, nine, ten, or twelve times a day. I would have to cast that many roll call votes on issues that, obviously, couldn't have been as carefully examined as one would like. Thus I am looking forward to the kind of experience we are going to have here tonight. It will be in give-and-take on some of the issues that certainly concern liberals, but I think are of equal concern to thoughtful conservatives and other Americans who believe in the democratic process.

Having said what I did about not regretting my own personal freedom now -- nonetheless there were some things happening in the 1980 election which, I think, deserve a very careful and searching look. Some of the most capable people in American politics went down before challengers who, intellectually, and from other standpoints, were not the equal of the people they defeated. I am thinking about Senator John Culver of Iowa, for example. Two or three years ago, when I was asked about some of the more able people in the United States Senate, I said that the State of Iowa probably had the two best members in the United States Senate in Dick Clark and John Culver. And now both are gone-- victims, I think, of right-wing single-issue zealots. This can happen in a State like Iowa, where one can never win by more than three or four points anyway, whether one runs as a democratic or a republican. Both of those senators were defeated by individuals whom most objective observers would say are not as qualified as the person they replaced. And there are others. Birch Bayh of Indiana, John Brademas of Indiana, Gaylord Nelson in Wisconsin (one of the nation's leading environmentalists), Frank Church of Idaho (the chairman of the Senate committee on foreign relations, and one of the most effective opponents of the war in Vietnam), all went down on November 4, 1980. And the list goes on -- there was Ekhard in Texas and Prior in North Carolina, and many others.

Some people have described this as a swing to the right, or "as the death of liberalism," or even the end of the New Deal. Various descriptions can be placed on it. By whatever name a dangerous trend has been gathering force in American politics over the last few years. And it involves the substitution of emotionalism, a kind of a cleverly-marketed extremism, and, sometimes an almost fanatical devotion to a single issue for a tolerant, reasonable and common-sense approach to the issues which face the nation. If permitted to continue, the processes will not only degrade our language and public dialogue; it can also seriously jeopardize the democratic process as a whole. For, if, in fact, only about half of the eligible voters in this country are even going to bother to go to the polls, and the single-issue zealots send between 80 and 90 percent of their people, we could very easily slide into a position of minority rule in this country, then one majority -- whether you call it moral or immoral -- would actually lose control of the political process.

Consider, for example, just two or three cases which illustrate what I am talking about. Let's take, for example, the strategic arms limitations treaty -- so-called Salt II. This treaty, a favorite target of the right-wing, was a carefully negotiated treaty. It was negotiated by a conservative Republican president, Jerry Ford, and a conservative Democrat president, Jimmy Carter. They worked on it over a period of some five years until it satisfied the military both in the Kremlin and Washington. It carried the endorsement of all of the joint chiefs of United States. Yet it was unable to clear a supposedly liberal-oriented United States Senate, after some five years of effort. In 1976, it was withdrawn because President Ford feared the challenge of the right-wing coming from the Reagan forces. It was withdrawn again in 1980 when it became clear that the Carter administration didn't have the political force to push the treaty through to ratification. Notice that the setback to the nation's security, and to its economic interests, occurred despite what seemed to me to be obvious common-sense advantages to the United States and to the Soviet Union, yes, indeed, to the rest of the world. Passage of the treaty would have put some kind of ceiling on the nuclear arms race.

The outgoing U.S. Ambassador to the Soviet Union, Thomas Watson, long-time chairman and president of the IBM Corporation, and one who could not be confused as representing the left-wing, said during his appearance on "Issues and Answers:" "Unless the United States and the Soviet Union soon ratify a nuclear arms treaty, the super powers are bound to destroy each other in the next two or three decades." I believe this too.

Furthermore, the alternative to the Salt Treat, or something similar to it, is an enormously expensive and highly-dangerous nuclear arms race between Washington and Moscow. It will leave both countries not only economically poorer but also militarily less secure. The folly of all of this, to me, is one of the great frustrations and challenges to come out of this last campaign.

Consider, as a second example of the irrationalism in contemporary politics, this fact: A simply stated amendment to the Constitution of the United States assuring, at long last, equal rights for the more than half of our citizens who happen to be women has been unable to secure the political support necessary for ratification. The question is how any reasonable person, who has taken the time to look at that amendment, and who believes in equality of opportunity for the American people, can deny this late in our history (the 1980s) a simple statement of that kind, affirming the equal rights for the women of this country.

And then a third example that I had to contend with in my State -- I suspect that this issue, along with abortion, were the two that did me in -- the Panama Canal Treaty. Now this treaty, again supported by the last four presidents of the United States (two democrats and two republicans), by the Joint Chiefs, and by sixty-eight United States Senators (including both the Republican leader, Howard Baker, and the Democratic Leader, Harry Byrd) passed the Senate. And yet senators who had sat through the hearings and had studied that issue carefully, who had come to a judgment that it was in the best interests of this country, were brought down to defeat, in some cases, on that issue alone.

Then let me turn to the so-called "family issue" that I have referred to. In my State -- but this was no different in Indiana, Iowa, or Idaho -- I was widely advertised as the "anti-family candidate," and my opponent was hailed as the "pro-family candidate." All of this was because of my stand in favor of equal rights for women. (How this got to be an "anti-family issue" is not quite clear to me.) The fact that I would not support an amendment making it a federal crime, under all circumstances, for a pregnancy to be interrupted, got me the label by well-organized and well-financed right-wing groups as the "anti-family candidate." And that was heralded in pamphlets distributed by the hundreds of thousands all over my State. Now it just so happens, if you are interested in pursuing this, that I happen to be the father of four daughters and one son; and I've been married to the same woman for thirty-seven years. Nonetheless, I was the "anti-family" candidate despite the fact that I was running against a 57 year-old bachelor.

One of the problems that liberals must confront, if there is to be any future for liberalism, is the way the acceptable symbols of our society are being preempted by right-wing groups, or by groups that can be loosely described as right-wing groups. We've seen this happen with the family issue in the 1970s, where that is an issue that is being claimed by the Phyllis Schaffly's and others on the right as their special province. They are claiming they are the guardians of the family. I happen to think that the economic pressures that play upon the American family, the pressure of inflation, joblessness among the young (especially minorities) in the cities, the drug culture, those are the kind of thing we ought to be concerned about when we think of the needs of the family. Nonetheless, this is an issue that the right-wing is working desperately to pre-empt. In doing so, they are painting liberals, moderates and progressives as enemies of the family.

We say something of that same kind of process take place in the 1960s with the war issue. I was one of those out in the forefront in opposition to the war in Vietnam. But I remember something that happened in that period that we should have been more concerned about at the time it was taking place. That is, in the middle of this great debate over the Vietnam War, those who were supporting the war effort began wearing the American flag in their lapels and on their tie clips. Those of us who opposed the war ended up wearing a dove or an olive branch, certainly perfectly respectable symbols. But why did anyone suppose that the flag belongs only to those who were supporting that miserable war in Vietnam which everyone now realizes was a tragic mistake. I can say truthfully -- Dr. Capps referred to me as being a bomber pilot in World War II in his introduction tonight --- that it took more courage, and, I would even argue, more genuine patriotism to stand up as a new senator in 1963 and to speak out on the Senate floor against the war in Vietnam than it took to fly those combat missions as a bomber pilot some 35 or 36 years ago. And yet we permitted the flag to be pre-empted by those who were in full support that mistaken venture of ours in Vietnam. I think the flag has to be retrieved by people deeply concerned about what is happening in this country, and who are willing to stand up as defenders against policies that are not in the national interest. I have to say, as an observer of the American right, that in the minds of many people across this country, both the family and the flag are being possessed by the right-wing groups.

And now in 1980, they are pursuing God. What we end up with is that the radical single-issue and right-wing groups say "we'll take the flag, the family and God, and you liberals can have the Panama Canal Treaty and abortion." On this kind of a division of issues, you don't have a formula for success at the polls.

Let me just quote a few of the things the right-wing is saying these days so that you will get some idea of what I feel we are up against. The group that caused the greatest damage in my part of the country in 1980, perhaps was the National Conservative Political Action Committee. They were out there organizing a full two years ahead of the election. By the time I got out there, to start my campaign in the summer and fall of 1980, I discovered that they had been ranging across the state, organizing neighborhood groups, having call-in citizens dominate the talk shows on radio, and all the other things that were done so effectively to turn public opinion against liberal incumbent democratic senators.

Listen to John Dolan, the director of this group. "There is no question about it. We are a negative organization. We are not interested in respectability. We are going to beat these liberals and send a shiver down the spine of every senator and congressman." Now, it is interesting to note on this latter point that the first organized effort made by the surviving democrats in the Senate after the election was to get together a group of fifteen or sixteen of their number to try to figure a way to pull Democrats in the Senate and the Democratic Party more towards the right. This is "the shiver down the spine" that John Dolan talked about. It isn't just that ten or eleven senators were defeated on November 4, 1980. But the National Conservative Politican Action Committee is working toward the intimidation of the survivors, twenty-two of whom have been targeted for defeat in 1982. Listen to Mr. Dolan further, from a press conference in Sioux Fall, South Dakota: "Images are important, but issues are not. We start early and we use repetition, and it's bound to have an impact. Start, he said, for example, with an image like 'George McGovern does not represent South Dakota.' Keep hitting away at that image. That's a lot more effective than to say that George McGovern either did or didn't do x, y, or z for South Dakota. We're hoping, he said, that these negatives will stick, although the voters may not even remember why they are so upset." (Maybe that's one of the reasons that, when I go home now, people tell me they don't know why I lost.) In a final burst of candor, Mr. Dolan said this at the same press conference: "There will be people voting against him, by November, who won't remember why. Because, with the kind of tactics we use, we can elect Mickey Mouse to the United States Senate." (Some people are cruel enough to think that this is exactly what was achieved.)

But these right-wing political groups (some twenty or twenty-one of which were functioning in our state during the summer and fall of 1980) have now been joined by some of the television evangelists who can speak to much larger groups. I want to make clear my own position on this, so that I am not misunderstood. I am not against all born-again Christians, or all fundamentalists, or all evangelists. I think some of them are sincere and thoughtful people. It so happens that my own

father was an evangelical clergyman. But he never taught me that God was a right-wing reactionary.

Let's look at some of the new breed of electronic evangelists. The first is the Rev. Jerry Falwell. (He told a television audience the other day that he admired George McGovern, so I would say that he is not all bad. I wish he had said it before the election.) Jerry Falwell heads up the Old-Time Gospel Hour, with a weekly audience of 25 million people, on 317 television stations, and a budget of some \$60 million a year. You have to make a lot of speeches in Santa Barbara to get 60 million dollars.

Then there is the Rev. Pat Robertson, in number-two position, with the 700 Club. He is on television five nights a week, with an audience of five million, 130 television stations, and a budget of \$100 million -- even bigger than the Falwell budget. (I used to know his father, Senator Willis Robertson from Virginia.)

Then there is the Rev. James Robison of "James Robison Presents," with a weekly audience of 5 million, 93 television stations, and a budget of \$13 million.

Out of his group, Rev. Falwell has founded a spinoff, a political action arm, which is called The Moral Majority. It was established in 1978. It now has chapters in all fifty states, with a mailing list of 400 thousand active members. This figure is important, I think, because as I have said, 25 million people watch the Old-Time Gospel Hour. This indicates that a lot of people who support Falwell's religious gospel are not involved in his right-wing political action group. But included within the four hundred and seventy thousand clergymen who occupy at least seventy thousand pulpits across the country, the Moral Majority alone has a budget of \$5 million and they have hopes of raising this to \$10 million this year. I have no doubt that they'll achieve it.

This group works very closely with a group called the National Christian Action Coalition. This is the group, with William Billings as director, a co-founder of the Moral Majority (there is an overlap here). It is the same group which came out with the Family Issue Voting Index, under which I and many other senators were condemned as being anti-family because we supported ERA and other dangerous proposals of that kind.

Then there is the Christian Voice, under the directorship of Gary Garman. This is the group that gave the moral ratings to members of Congress. There were fourteen subjects on which we were rated: the Panama Canal Treaty, sex education (and, if you were for this you lost ten points), but you also lost ten points if you didn't support a constitutional amendment on abortion -- they don't want people to be educated on these issues, but they punish you if you don't come out and make it a federal crime for an abortion to take place. ERA --- ten points. Ten points if

you didn't come out for a balanced budget. You lost ten points if you supported the Department of Education. You lost another ten points morally if you opposed any increase in military spending. Now how they get that out of the New Testament is beyond me. I guess it will surprise none of you here to know that I got a zero. I thought maybe they were anti-Methodist until I learned that Father Drinan, the only Jesuit priest in the Congress, also got a zero rating on morality. But you'll be cheered to know that Congressman Richard Kelly, of Abscam fame, got a hundred percent. And so did Congressman Bauman of the State of Maryland whose extra-curricular activities have been highly publicized. Here again the best way to get the flavor of these Moral Majority people is to look at their own words. There was a huge meeting of some 15 thousand, largely clergymen, in Dallas, Texas last August. I think some of you will recall that meeting. President Reagan was there at that meeting as a candidate; President Carter declined to go. Here are some of the words... The Rev. James Robison speaking at the Dallas meeting: "I'm sick and tired of hearing about all of these radicals and perverts and liberals, all of these people coming out of the closet. It's time for God's people to come out of the closet and change America." And then this interesting phrase, "if necessary, God will rise up a tyrant, a man who might not have the best of ethics, to protect the freedom of the ethical and the godly." Now this is another kind of theology that my father never taught me.

And here is the Rev. Baily Smith, I regret to say, the President of the Southern Baptist Convention, everyone in this room will recognize that his is obviously not the sentiment of a good many Southern Baptists. Nonetheless, he is the head of this group of some 13 million members. He said at the Dallas meeting. "I'm telling you people, all other gods besides Jehovah and his son Jesus Christ are strange gods" He went on, "It's interesting to me at great political rallies how you have a Protestant to pray, and a Catholic to pray, and then you have a Jew to pray. Now, with all due respect for those dear people, my friends, God Almighty does not hear the prayer of a Jew." And this is a sentiment I didn't think we'd hear expressed in America from a public assembly of people who claim to be God's people. But here at the same meeting, Paul Weyrich -- he's the head of a group called the Committee for the Survival of a Free Congress-- said to the conference. "Now, folks, one of those reporters who interviewed me the other day said, 'Well, you know, you people think that everything is black and white, that everything can be reduced to simplicity.' And then he added, 'Well, I accept that charge, because that is what I do think.'"

This is the kind of simplistic and arrogant nonsense that I think is very dangerous both to religion and to politics. I was supposed to talk about the future of liberalism. But this goes beyond that. It ought to be of equal concern to thoughtful conservatives, even though the conservatives were the chief beneficiaries of it, perhaps, in 1980.

Let me cite as further authority for what I am trying to say here tonight that even an evangelical like Dr. Billy Graham has become deeply alarmed about the Moral Majority. And those of you who look at PARADE MAGAZINE, the Sunday supplement, will remember that he was on the cover two or three Sundays ago, and he also addressed the Association of Religious Broadcasters about a month ago. And this is what he said, "I am concerned that some of the greatest challenges to both religion and politics are being ignored. I do not believe that the greatest challenges are the private sex lives of individuals. Rather it is issues like the nuclear arms race that threatens the survival of all humanity." Then he added, "How can we [meaning these religious broadcasters] be indifferent to the millions who live on the brink of starvation each year while the nations of the world spend \$550 billion each year on the weapons of war?" This comes from one whose credentials as a Christian fundamentalist can hardly be challenged. I'm glad to see that some of these Christian evangelists are themselves becoming alarmed at the extremes to which that movement has gone. Dr. Graham goes on to say that as a young man he was guilty of some of these excesses. He said, "Some of these people today in the Moral Majority remind me of the way I sounded twenty years ago, when I was guilty of arrogance and too narrow an approach to the great issues that face us both in the field of politics and religion."

I might say that looking back, as I have done since the election, to try to find some biblical basis for accepting or refuting the Moral Majority, I don't find even in the New Testament any real claim on the part of Jesus Christ and his followers that they had a majority. In fact, what you see both in the Old Testament, among the Hebrew prophets, and in the New Testament is a recognition that people really committed to the truth are more frequently a minority, a "precious saving remnant," not the popular sweeping majority.

Listen, for example, to these words out of the New Testament. "Enter ye into the strait gate, for wide is the gate and broad is the way that leadeth to destruction; and many there be which go in thereat because straight is the gate and narrow is the way which leadeth to life, and few there be that find it." No Moral Majority there. And if you want a moral report card that I think is a great improvement on the one the Moral Majority is

rating us on (like whether we're for or against the Department of Education). Now look at this phrase from the twenty-fifth chapter of the Gospel of Matthew:

"For I was enhungered, and you gave me meat; I was thirsty and you gave me drink. I was a stranger and you took me in, naked and you clothed me. I was sick and you visited me; I was in prison and you came unto me.

Then shall the righteous answer him saying "Lord, when saw we thee enhungered and fed thee, or thirsty and gave thee drink? When saw we thee a stranger and took thee in, or naked and clothed thee? Or when saw we thee sick or in prison, and come unto thee?

And the King shall answer, and say unto them, 'Verily I say unto you, inasmuch as ye have done it unto one of the least of these my brethren, you have done it unto me.'"

Now that is a moral report card that is worthy trying to measure up to -- to minister to the sick, the hungry, those who are in prison, those who are poor.

And if you prefer the Old Testament, which some of our religious traditions do, you find these words: "What doth the Lord require of thee but to do justly, to love mercy, and to walk humbly with they God." Again, these strike me as being much better moral tests that we ought to confront in both politics and religion than the ones we are currently being offered. It's still well to beware of false prophets, these arrogant self-righteous people who set themselves as the judges of people in public life, and on such enormously complicated issues, most of which are secular issues.

In any event, what I am appealing for tonight is the same appeal that I made in this auditorium nine years ago. We should try to stay close to the central values of our democratic system, based as it is on the Judaeo-Christian principles, recognizing the dignity, freedom, and the worth of every individual. If we do this, I think the future of both liberalism and an intelligent conservatism will be secured. And we will be on the way toward making this country at least approach the kind of great and good land that we can be when we're faithful to our best ideals.

Thank you very much.

Santa Barbara, CA
March, 1981