

TV INTERVIEW

Paul Weyrich
Interview by Walter Capps
Kerr studios
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CAPPS: I'm Walter Capps, I'm a professor in the Religious Studies Department here at the University of California, Santa Barbara. I've been teaching a course on the theme "Religion and Politics in America today." I have the privilege of having in the studio with me this morning Mr. Paul Weyrich, who is the President of the Free Congress Foundation, and also the President of the Committee for the survival of a Free Congress. He is a leader of the religious right, and has been responsible for political strategy on the part of the new religious right, very much involved in the theme of the class. I'd like to welcome you Mr. Weyrich, and hope you enjoy your stay here in Santa Barbara and at the university.

The first question I want to ask you has to do with the origins of the name Moral Majority. We've heard a variety of viewpoints about that. Some people have said that you were the author of the name Moral Majority, others attribute that to Jerry Falwell. Could you clarify that for us, and tell us briefly how that name came into vogue, what it is meant to stand for, and what strategies are implicit in it.

WEYRICH: Well, actually the name came about quite by accident. I was down in Lynchburg, Virginia, the headquarters of Jerry Falwell, for a meeting with him. One of my colleagues, Howard Phillips, was also going to attend this meeting, and he was late. Ed McIntere, who had arranged for the meeting, said why don't you - talking to me - why don't you give Jerry Falwell a sort of political overview about how you see things out there. And so, I talked about how people had been divided by historical denominational differences, and that these differences had kept them apart politically so that they weren't able to unite and elect people to public office. Yet, I said, despite that, out there there are probably 60 to 65 percent of the public that share certain basic values; what you might call a Moral Majority.

Then, I went on and Falwell put his hand down on the

table and said, "Stop - hold it right there. Repeat what you said." Well, I had gone on by that time, and I started to repeat what I had just said, and he said, "No, no, no, back before. You said something about out there, there was some kind of majority." And I said, well, you know, this 65 percent of the public that shares certain values, you might call a Moral Majority. And he turned at that point to his marketing person who was with him the room, and he said, "That's it. If we form an organization, that's what we'll call it." So that's how the name came about, and if Howard Phillips hadn't been late we probably wouldn't have the name.

CAPPS: It might have been called something else?

WEYRICH: That's right.

CAPPS: Now, you've been involved in the work of the Moral Majority - I'm using the phrase Moral Majority generically, but we're really talking about the religious right. You've been involved in that since, I guess maybe the late sixties, early 1970's. And the success of the movement has really surprised a lot of people, particularly a lot of people on university campuses who weren't prepared to accept the fact that a conservative religious movement could gather the kind of force that it has during that period of time. When you look back on the beginnings of it, could you identify two or three - or maybe just one, sort of stimulus behind it or reason for the success? What I'd like for you to do is say something about what really brought it into being, or what were the initial intentions, and what gave it the initial spark.

WEYRICH: Well, I think, as is the case with all movements, you have root causes and you have immediate causes and the root causes, really go back many years to the sort of defensive position which was adopted by a lot of fundamentalists and evangelicals, probably following the Scopes trials. That defensiveness became ever more pronounced as government moved

into what you might call values related questions, which occurred in the middle 1960s. So, as that movement began occurring and as the Supreme Court decision on abortion occurred, and the push for the ratification of the Equal Rights Amendment, and other kinds of issues began to boil up on the political front, you have a simultaneous development on the religious front called the ecumenical movement.

The ecumenical movement really sought to unite people of different faiths on a common agenda. In some cases, it sought to merge different denominations, but on the political front, if you will, which is the relevant questions in terms of politics, it sought to put most of the mainline religious denominations into a sort of central framework of issues, which (these) issues then would be put before the public on a sort of moral basis.

That caused a very significant reaction on the part of those members of those mainline churches who didn't agree with that battle inside of those denominations. But, most of them ended up giving up and getting out of those denominations and into the various fundamental churches that were forming across the country. At the same time that that was occurring, the Vatican Council came about in the Roman Catholic church and created an enormous amount of upheaval, to the point where the traditionalists inside the Catholic church, which had been the dominant religious segment, since probably the Council of Trent, begin to be on the defensive, and were backed into the corner by the ecumenical group which had seized control, particularly in the United States, of the Catholic Church. So, it put the traditional Catholics really in the same position as the fundamentalists and evangelicals.

So, all of them were sort of back up against the wall, reacting to a very strong ecumenical movement which was seizing the moral high ground and presenting its issues in a framework which most of these conservative religionists found unacceptable. That condition, I would say, enabled the historical bridges to be crossed, in that people who were unwilling to consider themselves allies in the previous eras, were suddenly willing to look at each other as co-oppressed, in the sense that you

know they felt they were in sort of the same defensive position. So, it was really the ecumenical movement, as well as the government moving into issues which it previously had not moved into, or let's put it this way, the consensus about these issues which no longer existed and the divisions which resulted from the lack of consensus caused, I would say, conditions to be right to bridge the otherwise unbridgable gaps between Orthodox Jews on the one hand, fundamentalists, and evangelical Protestants on the other hand, and traditionalists and Catholics on the third hand.

CAPPS: It becomes a kind of sub-ecumenical movement in a way, I mean it's a counter-ecumenical.

WEYRICH: It's the reverse ecumenism.

CAPPS: Yes. Now, what links the advocates of the movement together then - would be this concern about traditional values and what has been happening to basic values within a more liberal socio-political environment, I would suppose. But, there's a tremendous amount of theology involved in this, and you mentioned the fundamentalists, and you mentioned the way in which this has grown up within the churches. When we talk about the religious right, are we talking about a distinctive theological set of positions, a theological world view? Is it theology we're referring to there?

WEYRICH: Well, I suppose in a very primitive sense that you could say we're talking about theology, to a certain extent. I think that we're really talking about a world view of how people look at themselves vis-a-vis their creator, how they look at their place in society, how they look at their positions with respect to the here and now versus eternity. So, there is a sort of underlying theology to all of this, which would, I suppose, undergird most of the positions taken by the various people.

CAPPS: But, one could be an advocate of the movement without espousing the theology, isn't that true? I mean, not everyone in the religious right would call him or herself a religious person or would be involved in that for religious reasons.

WEYRICH: There are people who, I suppose, see the religious right as a political opportunity; but, these people don't have the prominent positions in the religious right. Most of the people in the religious right are people who are involved with their own faith, they may have widely differing denominations but there are very few key individuals in the religious right who are not strong believers.

CAPPS: How many people are we talking about? How many - when you look out at what is called the religious right, how many Americans would that involve?

WEYRICH: Well, it's involving an ever increasing number. It's hard to get a handle on the precise numbers, because there's a lot of overlap between, say, the followers of Jerry Falwell, and the followers of Pat Robertson, and the followers of James Robison, and the followers of Charles Stanley, and the followers of James Kennedy, and on and on and on - I'm speaking here of the television evangelists.

But, Bob Tetter, who is a Republican pollster (and not one who is a particular favorite of mine, and with whom I argue with a great deal in terms of the kind of polling questions that he asks), was persuaded by Congressman Knut Gingrich of Georgia to put certain questions related to the religious right in a nationwide very extensive in-home poll, which he took for the Republican Congressional Campaign Committee recently, which cost a quarter of a million dollars.

He was astounded to learn that now 45 percent of Americans acknowledged watching one of those television evangelists once a week ... That is a phenomenal number, and it corresponds with what I know to be the case, and that is the exponential growth of most of these operations, which are far larger today than they were, say, two years ago.

CAPPS: So, you're suggesting then that the movement has not yet peaked. I would have thought that 1980 to 1982 was the high point in the development in this religious right. It's still increasing in numbers and enthusiasm and political power?

WEYRICH: Absolutely. Well, political questions are quite different, because in the 80 to 82 time period, the movement was very much linked to the presidency of Ronald Reagan. Failure of the Reagan Administration to act on a number of issues connected with the religious right caused a lot of those people to back off. But, in terms of the actual numbers, let me give you a couple of ideas. Pat Robertson, who runs the Christian Broadcast Network saw his ministry double within the past year - double - and it was a large operation to begin with. His Christian Broadcast Network now reaches 26 million people at least once a week.

Reverend Charles Stanley of Atlanta, who was up until a couple years ago, a regional television minister, who was just in the south, is now in all 50 states and is getting 3,000 contributions a day without ever asking for contributions on his program. Jerry Falwell, the Old Time Gospel Hour, they have an incoming watts line, for example, where people who want help call in. Last year, at this time, they were spending 63,000 dollars a month paying for the incoming calls. This year, they are spending 300,000 dollars a month taking the incoming calls. There is a definite movement in the country and I could cite the growth of Jimmy Swaggart, for example, who a few years ago wasn't heard of and now is the fastest growing ministry - and last year took in something like 65 million dollars in his television ministry - and, you know, a few years ago - who heard of Jimmy Swaggart? That is the fastest growing political/religious movement in the United States.

CAPPS: So, you're suggesting that it's really not dependent then upon Ronald Reagan, I mean, there is some dependency there, but that this movement would still be a very strong and forceful one, even if Ronald Reagan were not the President?

WEYRICH: Oh, absolutely. Ronald Reagan articulated the views of a lot of the people connected with the movement, but they are not particularly pleased with the back burner nature of the Reagan agenda as far as the social issues are concerned. And, many of them who were highly enthusiastic about Reagan are not as enthusiastic today. How that will translate politically down the road remains to be seen. But, I think there are more and more troops to deal with. We have larger and larger meetings.

I'm going very shortly to Cleveland, where I'm going to be doing a training seminar for 300 pastors from fundamentalist churches in the Cleveland area. Now, you would not think about Cleveland as a stronghold for fundamentalism in the country, so I think that may give you some clue as to sort of the burgeoning nature of this movement.

CAPPS: You're talking about book burning and censorship?

CAPPS: When the movement first came to light - I'm talking about a period a few years ago, there was a lot hysteria, a scare connected with it. Many of the reporters and writers about it were comparing this era to the McCarthy era; and, there was a fear about the rise of a new right, and that (it) would make civil liberties more difficult to acquire, and that there would be an attack on personal freedoms and human rights. How do you feel about that initial reaction to the new right, I know that you will say that it's unfounded, but - book titles like God's Bullies and Holy Terror -

WEYRICH: I know, I'm honored to have a chapter devoted to me in both of those books. The books were largely written by people who did not understand the nature of the movement, did not understand the people involved; and, who took certain statements that were made by people who would have to be counted as on the extreme allied with the movement, and made that out to be the movement as a whole. I would liken it to some of the rightists old-right analysis of the civil rights movement in the 1950s, which clearly suggested that the entire civil rights movement was really a product of the Communist Party. Now, if one is to study that movement, and one is to be objective

about it, one would have to conclude that, in fact, there were active Communists who allied themselves with the movement. But, if one were to look at the civil rights movement and conclude that this was nothing but a fermentation of the Communists - it's absurd. The movement went to the heart and soul of the black people in the United States, and it included all kinds of people, many of whom, by the way, are now active in the religious right, leaders like Reverend E.V. Hill, for example, of Los Angeles. So, clearly the analysis that the Constitution of civil liberties were threatened by the emergence of the religious right is not accurate. Some people, like in any group, are not prudent and make statements which most of us cringe at when we see and disassociate ourselves with.

CAPPS: You're talking about book burning and censorship?

WEYRICH: Yeah, that kind of stuff does not concern the vast majority of people who really are simply concerned about their own ability to educate their children as they see fit. They're concerned about their values, and they are very much on the defensive. The media picture of the religious right has been a group of people on the offensive, ready to charge out and strangle anybody with whom they disagree. Now, if you work with these people, as I do, and you know them, you don't find that mind set at all. You find them, if anything, very reluctant to engage in the political process. You find people who, for 50 years, were told it was sort of a sin to be involved in politics, and who are now being told it's a sin not to be involved in politics, and who are very, very leery of throwing their weight around politically - and who are very reluctant to get involved in issues, other than bottom line sort of morally oriented issues. So, the number of people, for example, who would go out crusading on an issue like the balanced budget, or something, involved in religious right is very, very small.

CAPPS: We don't have time to answer this question properly,

but I would like to hear something about what you really would wish for this country. In the press ... there has been talk about the question what is America? Do we have an idea of America that supports consensus opinions in this country, or are there several Americas that are vying - competing with each other? Say something briefly, if you can, (I know it's a complicated question), about what you would like this country to be if it isn't, how would you like the future of the country to be different from the present state of affairs?

WEYRICH: Well, I would hope that America could be a beacon of hope to any of the oppressed across the world who find themselves the victims of totalitarianism of any kind. I would hope that America could be the place where the unborn, where the weak, where the poor find a place where they can be cared for, and an opportunity to better themselves. And, I would hope that America would be a place where all people are tolerated, regardless of differences, which has historically been the case, but I'm afraid, is less so today than it has been in a long time.

I think that America ought to be a nation where people are taught basics so that they can care for themselves, and do things for others as well. So, I would like to see a return to basics in America, while at the same time, pushing forward in all the great technological advances that we can see coming down the path, and all the different disciplines and in space. In short, an America that offers a vision of hope for the future, while at the same time is very much wedded to traditional values and fundamentals, which produce, I think, good citizens.

CAPPS: You've been talking about the work that goes on in the churches. You've talked about the preachers and the parishioners and their involvement in politics. If that should fail, or if that should ever taper off - the involvement of all those people - or if you become disappointed with whoever's in the White House - whoever that would be, Republican or

Democrat ... would you be interested in forming a third party? Would the religious right ever take the form of a third party, such as we've had in the past in American politics?

WEYRICH: It's conceivable. I am an advocate of a sort of limited third party, that is not a third party to run presidential candidates, which I think is a dead-end street, but a third party to run people for the House of Representatives and the United States Senate and below - state legislatures and things of that sort. I think that there's a place for a third party, which as you know, from your political experience, generally end up influencing the major parties. I would look to the model of the Progressive party, for example, from Wisconsin, and the Progressive party really influenced both political parties in the middle west. And, I would hope that if there is a new party, that it perhaps could influence the major political parties as well. If not, maybe take the place of one.

CAPPS: How do you respond to the criticism or the question that what the religious right really has in mind is what some have called monochromatic society. I know you won't like this, but there's an intention in creating a Christian nation where one religious tradition is preferred over all others and what would happen if the religious right is successful. Instead of being a time of tolerance for all people, it would give real support to one of the religious traditions in a pretty traditional way, and a lot of other people who espouse other religious views would be excluded.

WEYRICH: Well, I reject that off hand because if we're talking about authentic Christianity, as opposed to some perverse version of it which we've had from time to time throughout history. But, if we are talking about authentic Christianity, then all of the other religious groups should welcome any movement in that direction, because authentic Christianity treats others as children of God and as brothers. Now, you can cite any number of examples throughout history

and say, well, they didn't in this case and this group of people didn't and they got in control, and you always have that danger - I think you have that danger no matter who gets in power in any democratic institution, but most of the people that I know - 99.9 percent of the people involved in the religious right are fundamentally committed to the Democratic processes. They know what it's like to have the hand of big government go against them, as is happening in states like Nebraska, for example, and they don't want to see the hand of big government go against any group in the United States, even though they may disagree with them. So, I don't think that you will find that that charge has much substance.

CAPPS: But, if the school prayer initiative is passed, and it would take some years for all this to happen, but a Constitutional amendment allowing some form of voluntary school prayer. Would the religious right tolerate a situation in which Buddhists or Hindus or Moslems, or non-Christian or non-Judeo Christian prayers are said in the classroom?

WEYRICH: Oh, surely.

CAPPS: That wouldn't cause any problems?

WEYRICH: Well, I can't speak on every individual case, because I'm sure some people would be less tolerant than others, but I think that if these people are part of the community, what the religious right really wants to see is local control of that kind of thing, and I think that if you have a large number of people in a community, or even a small number, I think that the students ought to learn what their religious beliefs are and find out what their prayers are like.

CAPPS: Our time is just about over. I just wanted to point out that this is the University of California, and I'm very proud of the fact that the University of California would invite you, not because we shouldn't, but because there would be campuses in this country that might only simply

present one point of view. But, you'll have a chance in a few minutes to talk to a class of undergraduate students. Tell us briefly what the message is going to be. What do you want to convey to them?

WEYRICH: Well, I'm going to, I think, tell them that the religious right is probably the most exciting and interesting political development that this country has seen in a long time, and that they ought to study it and learn about how it's developing and understand where it's coming from. And, I think they will have nothing to fear from it, and I think frankly that society will be better off if some of the views that we espouse are adopted.

CAPPS: Thank-you very much. I've been talking with Paul Weyrich who has come to the University of California, Santa Barbara campus from Washington, D.C., representing the religious right, coming from the presidency of the Committee of the Survival for a Free Congress.