

# The Righteous Nation:

Evangelical Influence on U.S. Foreign Policy in the Iraq War

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# Introduction

In May of 2009, Robert Draper, reporting for GQ, wrote an article recounting the many internal complaints leveled against Donald Rumsfeld, the Bush administration’s Secretary of Defense during the early years of the war in Iraq.<sup>1</sup> A Princeton graduate, former football player and fighter pilot, Rumsfeld was roundly favored in the early days of the Iraq War for his charm and command of the D.C. press corps. While public support for U.S. involvement had greatly diminished by 2009,<sup>2</sup> Rumsfeld attracted little scrutiny from the media when compared to the very public ramblings of President Bush<sup>3</sup> or the unmistakable incompetence of other cabinet members such as Douglas Fife. The article revealed Rumsfeld’s concern with the optics of his position hindering the Department of Defense’s ability to support operational effectiveness in the war, with Rumsfeld often being pictured as uncooperative, chauvinistic, and acting as if the power of the military was his alone to be channeled for the administration. As outlets began picking up the story, journalists focused on Draper’s beginning paragraphs detailing the daily critical military intelligence reports handed to President Bush. Cover pages adorned with full-color pictures from U.S. military paired with Bible quotes, patriotic notions of liberty and freedom precluding the figures that dispassionately recounted America’s recent military gains and losses gave the impression of a dual conflict occurring —between both nations and religions. While Rumsfeld was not personally responsible for the intelligence report covers, the situation echoed other efforts of the Bush administration to garner

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<sup>1</sup> Robert Draper, “And He Shall Be Judged”

<sup>2</sup> Carroll Doherty, Jocelyn Kiley, “A Look Back at How Fear and False Beliefs Bolstered U.S. Public Support for War in Iraq”

<sup>3</sup> NBC Universal Archived.“George W. Bush The Best Bushisms [www.NBCUniversalArchives.com](http://www.NBCUniversalArchives.com)”

support from Christians with public displays of religiosity. However, this was not a novel phenomenon but rather a modern instance of a deeper historical pattern.

Because Protestantism was an instrumental cultural force in shaping early American society,<sup>4</sup> it has always had some hand in policy and continues to do so such as in the fight for women’s reproductive rights. Despite early theological justifications for the pro-life movement being largely spearheaded by the Roman Catholic Church<sup>5</sup> and the Southern Baptist Church holding the relatively progressive view to allow for the “possibility of abortion under such conditions as rape, incest, clear evidence of severe fetal deformity, and carefully ascertained evidence of the likelihood of damage to the emotional, mental, and physical health of the mother,”<sup>6</sup> political activists such as Paul Weyrich and Francis A. Schaeffer worked to mobilize evangelicals in pursuit of conservative political causes by reframing abortion as being indicative of a “secular humanism” that would gradually erode American morality.<sup>7</sup>

This is only one of the many ways religion –Protestant Evangelism in particular– has exerted its influence on American politics, for better and for worse.

## Thesis

In this essay, I will argue that public Protestantism as civil religion is foundational to Christian Nationalism. This ideology, in turn, militarizes religious rhetoric to influence public appeal for foreign policy, such as in the instance of justifying the Iraq War. The following argument will establish that public Protestantism informs contemporary Chris-

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<sup>4</sup> Catherine Albanese, “America; Religions & Religion”

<sup>5</sup> Balmer, “The Historian’s Pickaxe: Uncovering Racist Origins of the Religious Right” 180

<sup>6</sup> Balmer, “The Historian’s Pickaxe. . .” 176

<sup>7</sup> Balmer, “The Historian’s Pickaxe. . .” 183

tian Nationalism, how Christian Nationalism militarizes civil religion, and how religious rhetoric is continually invoked to influence the public.

## The Protestant Character of Christian Nationalism

Christianity remains a dominant cultural and institutional force in the U.S. through American civil religion. Even as rates of self-identified religious affiliation Christianity declines,<sup>8</sup> Christianity is not in peril. Even as churches empty, we can make no mistake Christianity is merely migrating—a civic code of conduct uncontained by private practice, co-mingling in the public sphere with the United State’s most brazen Nationalist attitudes. Public Protestantism is inseparable from the story of America, existing as a silent partner of American Power. In its various contemporary expressions, public Protestantism is no more apparent or brazen than in the Christian Nationalist movement.

Christian Nationalism did not emerge from nowhere, it is an ideology as old as America itself. Early Spanish exploration in the New World was underpinned by the Doctrine of Discovery which casted the initiative as divine mandate. In *The Papal Bull “Inter Caetera”*, a founding document of the Spanish conquest of America, Pope Alexander VI introduces the decree by stating that “the Catholic faith and the Christian religion be exalted and be everywhere increased and spread, that the health of souls be cared for and that barbarous nations be overthrown and brought to the faith itself.”<sup>9</sup> The Doctrine of Discovery has carried on as a foundational truth of Christian Nationalism, that America is a battleground between the righteous and the barbarous and tying faith to empire, thereby sanctifying conflict. While the air of Christian Nationalism always ex-

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<sup>8</sup> Stephanie Kramer, et al. “Modeling the Future of Religion in America” 20

<sup>9</sup> Pope Alexander VI, “Demarcation Bull. . .” 1

isted as a driver in American expansion, the term had not been coined until the 1940s with the efforts of Gerald Lyman Kenneth Smith, a fascist demagogue who combined white supremacy with religious fervor in the inception of the Christian Nationalist Party, the Christian Nationalist Crusade, and the America First Party.<sup>10</sup> At its core, Christian Nationalism is the belief that America is—and must remain—a nation defined by Christianity. While Christian Nationalism has been exclusionary of certain denominations in the past, such as in Smith’s time, this is not a meaningful qualifier in defining Christian Nationalism. Public Protestantism is different from Christian Nationalism however, the latter being characterized enforcement. This is not to say that the two are mutually exclusive. In its fundamental distillation, public Protestantism is an amoral and observable cultural observation, a byproduct of early American development. However, public Protestantism often overlaps with Christian Nationalism, informing and sometimes sanctioning the actions of its followers.

## **The Sword of the Spirit: Turning Belief into War**

Christian Nationalism is hardly a drastic deviation from public Protestantism, there is no better proof of this than in the militarization of evangelist rhetoric that started with the Vietnam war, where Pastors such as Billy Graham, colluded with Washington D.C. to inform US foreign policy.<sup>11</sup>

Rev. Billy Graham may have been the first with such prominence to rewrite the narrative of the Vietnam War as a fundamentally moral conflict between good and evil: a continuation of the Doctrine of Discovery only from a defensive stance. A staunch

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<sup>10</sup> Rhys Long, “Origin story: The history of Christian Nationalism. . .”

<sup>11</sup> Jeffrey St. Clair, Alexander Cockburn, “The Preacher and Vietnam. . .”

anti-Communist, Billy Graham believed, “Communism is a fanatical religion that has declared war upon the Christian God.”<sup>12</sup> In 1989, a declassified document revealed Graham suggested to Nixon to enlist North Vietnamese defectors to bomb dikes, a policy that—by the Nixon’s own estimation—would have killed a million people.<sup>13</sup> Even while Billy Graham’s opinions on the war would change, the crusader theology tactic he helped create would live on in subsequent wars. 9/11 did not change the fundamental logic of Billy Graham’s strategy, only “Communism” was traded for “Islam,” the torch now being carried by Billy Graham’s son, Franklin, who further pushed the crusade agenda. In an NBC Nightly News broadcast, Franklin Graham stated, “. . . the god of Islam is not the same God of the Christian or the judeo-Christian faith. It’s a different God and I believe it’s a very evil and very wicked religion.”<sup>14</sup>

The Iraq War marked a completely new level of religiosity in war. The rhetoric was no longer relegated to the pulpits and was now in the public sphere. Franklin Graham further hammered his sentiments in a sermon delivered to the Pentagon, where he sanctified the war as divine justice stating in the wake of the invasion, “And of course, this week we look back on the events of the last few weeks and we come today to thank God for this nation.”<sup>15</sup>

## Religious Rhetoric in Wartime Policy

Even with its foreign policy implications, Christian Nationalism has become particularly visible in the cultural realm of Trump’s political career. Kelefa Sanneh wrote, “By

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<sup>12</sup> Billy Graham, “Christianity Vs. A Bloodless Religion”

<sup>13</sup> St. Clair, Cockburn, “The Preacher and Vietnam. . .”

<sup>14</sup> “Franklin Graham calls Islam a wicked and evil,” 6:00

<sup>15</sup> Barbara Starr, “Franklin Graham conducts services at Pentagon”

the time Trump reluctantly left office, in 2021, his relationship with evangelical Christians was one of the most powerful alliances in American politics. (According to one survey, he won eighty-four per cent of the white evangelical vote in 2020.)”<sup>16</sup>

Most contentious would be the U.S. and the Israeli lobby. While Political Action Committees such as the American Israel Public Affairs Committee (AIPAC) and Anti-Defamation League (ADL) center Judaism in its religious rhetoric, Zionism and Christian Nationalism often overlap, with many Christian Nationalists feeling kinship in advocating for a religious ethno-state preparing for end-times: a dream they hope to see realize in America, even through armed conflict. According to *Americans United for Separation of Church and State*, “Two-and-a-half centuries after the nation’s founding, the Christian Nationalizing of the United States military has reached greater heights still during the Trump era. According to a 2019 Congressional Research Service study, about 70% of troops consider themselves to be Christian.”<sup>17</sup> Further, Sarah Posner writes for MSNBC, “s. For many “Christians Zionists,” and particularly for popular evangelists with significant clout within the Republican Party, their support for Israel is rooted in its role in the supposed end times: Jesus’ return to Earth, a bloody final battle at Armageddon, and Jesus ruling the world from the Temple Mount in Jerusalem. In this scenario, war is not something to be avoided, but something inevitable, desired by God, and celebratory.”<sup>18</sup>

When there are no more horizons to expand into, no more lands to conquer, America has proven that Christian Nationalism is not a deviation from public Protestantism, it is its logical endpoint. Public Protestantism, as provides the foundational language of the chosen and their divine favor that underpins American Exceptionalism. Christian

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<sup>16</sup> Kelefa Sanneh, “How Christian is Christian Nationalism?”

<sup>17</sup> Bruce Gourley, “Armed, angry and apocalyptic. . . ”

<sup>18</sup> Sarah Posner, “The dispiriting truth. . . ”

nationalism seizes this language, infusing it with exclusionary and defensive politics that require an opponent. In the absence of a continental frontier, this ideology militarizes the rhetoric of faith, transforming geopolitical struggles into sacred conflicts against new “barbarous” forces, whether it be communism or Islam. The Iraq War stands as a stark testament to this process, where official policy and public discourse became saturated with the symbolism of a righteous crusade. The enduring alliance between political power and militant evangelical rhetoric confirms that this pattern is not an aberration. It is the evolved form of public Protestantism in a modern empire, forever seeking new battles to sanctify its purpose.

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