

# Nationalist Republicans and the Cold War

By John Kenneth White

Excerpted from: *Still Seeing Red: How the Cold War Shapes the New American Politics* (Boulder, CO: Westview Press, 1997) pp. 138-142. Reprinted with permission.

In 1964, Ronald Reagan was on the mashed potato circuit campaigning for Barry Goldwater. As his text he used a talk he had given for years to employees of General Electric, sponsors of the television series he hosted (*Death Valley Days*) and a major defense contractor. In advocating Goldwater's candidacy, Reagan railed against communism and claimed that Democratic liberals had become the Neville Chamberlains of their day:

*The specter our well-meaning liberal friends refuse to face is that their policy of accommodation is appeasement, and appeasement does not give you a choice between peace and war, only between fight and surrender. We are told that the problem is too complex for a simple answer. They are wrong. There is no easy answer, but there is a simple answer. We must have the courage to do what we know is morally right, and this policy of accommodation asks us to accept the greatest possible immorality. We are being asked to buy our safety from the threat of the Bomb by selling into permanent slavery our fellow human beings enslaved behind the Iron Curtain...*

*If we are to believe that nothing is worth the dying, when did this begin? Should Moses have told the children of Israel to live in slavery rather than dare the wilderness? Should Christ have refused the Cross? Should the patriots at Concord Bridge have refused to fire the shot heard 'round the world? Are we to believe that all the martyrs of history died in vain?*

*You and I have a rendezvous with destiny. We can preserve for our children this the last best hope of man on earth or we can sentence them to take the first step into a thousand years of darkness. If we fail, at least let our children and our children's children, say of us we justified our brief moment here. We did all that could be done.*

On October 27, 1964, Reagan reprised his GE speech in a television broadcast for Barry Goldwater. Stephen Hess and David Broder hailed it as "the most successful national political debut since William Jennings Bryan electrified the 1896 Democratic convention with his 'Cross of Gold' speech [which also had been carefully pretested on the lecture circuit] and it made Reagan a political star overnight."

But unlike the libertarian Goldwater, Reagan emphasized Judeo-Christian values as necessary ingredients in the fight against communism. As Reagan himself once noted, the Bible contains "all the answers to the problems that face us today." The result was a powerful elixir of politics and religion. The phrase "godless communism" was first popularized by Harry Truman, and religious leaders often used the words in

“

*The phrase 'godless communism' was first popularized by Harry Truman, and religious leaders often used the words in the same breath. But it was Ronald Reagan, more than any other public figure, who effortlessly sang from the hymnal of 'godless communism.'*

”

the same breath. In 1949, for example, evangelist Billy Graham said: "Communism is inspired, directed, and motivated by the Devil himself. America is at a crossroads. Will we turn to the left-wingers and atheists, or will we turn to the right and embrace the cross?" In 1954, during the high point of the Cold War, Congress added the words "under God" to the *Pledge of Allegiance*.

But it was Ronald Reagan, more than any other public figure, who effortlessly sang from the hymnal of "godless communism." Reagan was convinced that communism was antithetical to the will of God, and his midwestern upbringing by a profoundly religious mother made him especially well-suited to place God on the side of anticommunism. The Disciples of Christ Church, home to Nelle Reagan and adopted by son Ronald, rejected communism as "tyrannical, immoral, and anti-Christian." Reagan told television interviewer David Frost in 1968 that Jesus Christ was the historical figure he most admired. Fueled by these religious convictions, Reagan turned foreign policy into an issue of morality—especially when it came to communism. In 1961, he addressed a rally of Dr. Fred Schwarz's Christian Anti-Communism Crusade. Fifteen years later, challenging Gerald R. Ford for the Republican presidential nomination, Reagan inserted into the platform a section titled "Morality in Foreign Policy," which read thus: "Honestly, openly, and with firm conviction, we shall go forward as a united people to forge a lasting peace in the world based upon our deep belief in the rights of man, the rule of law, and guidance by the hand of God." Fueling Reagan's outrage was Ford's refusal to receive Soviet dissident Alexander Solzhenitsyn—a decision Reagan not only decried but thought immoral.

Later, at a 1984 Dallas prayer breakfast, Reagan connected politics with morality and religion:

*The truth is, politics and morality are inseparable. And as morality's foundation is religion, religion and politics are necessarily related.... Without God there is no virtue, because there's no prompting of the conscience. Without God, we're mired in the material, that flat world that tells us only what the senses perceive. Without God, there is a coarsening of the society. And without God, democracy will not and cannot long endure. If we ever forget that we're one nation under God, then we will be a nation gone under.*

But it was in a memorable 1983 address that Reagan fused God with anticommunism. Speaking to the National Association of Evangelicals, Reagan damned the Soviet Union as an "evil empire," saying it was "the focus of evil in the modern world." The speech was designed to prevent the ministers from adopting the Democratic party's call for a "nuclear freeze." But it had a larger purpose. Although Reagan presided over the largest peacetime military expenditures in history, he told the evangelicals that something more than firepower was needed: "I've always maintained that the struggle now going on for the world will never be decided by bombs or rockets, by armies or military might. The real crisis we face today is a spiritual one; at root, it is a test of moral will and faith." Reagan resurrected Whittaker Chambers's view that the "crisis of the Western World exists to the degree in which the West is indifferent to God." He sprinkled his address with allusions to the Almighty, claiming that religious apathy was tantamount to "collusion" with communists. Reagan called communism a counterreligion premised on man rather than God: "[It is] the second oldest faith, first proclaimed in the Garden of Eden with the words of temptation, 'Ye shall be as gods.'"

Only God and country could provide victory in the Cold War—an article of faith Reagan thought preordained: "I believe that communism is another sad, bizarre chapter in human history whose last pages even now are being written." Meanwhile, he asked those present to pray for "the salvation of all those who live in that totalitarian darkness."

Reagan's words resonated with most Americans. Seventy-three percent in a December 1983 poll said that the "real problem with communism is that it threatens our religious and moral values." An equal percentage in an earlier survey agreed with this statement: "By sending military aid to countries threatened by communism and by being tough with the Russians, Reagan is sending message to Moscow that will rebuild respect for the United States in the Kremlin." Christian fundamentalists were especially supportive. For years, they had abhorred communism and shared a belief in a strong military. In 1980, the Moral Majority bought newspaper advertisements that read: "We cannot afford to be number two in defense! But, sadly enough, that's where we are today. Number two. And fading!" Jerry Falwell, founder of the Moral Majority deplored the "sad fact" that an all-out nuclear exchange with the Soviet Union "would kill 135 million to 160 million Americans, and the United States would kill only 3 to 5% of the Soviets."

Thus, Reagan and the evangelicals were in sync on defense matters—and when it came to the satanic aspects of communism. This was especially true when in 1983, Reagan elevated the plight of seven Soviet Pentecostals who had taken refuge in the US embassy five years earlier. Vice President George Bush told Soviet Ambassador Anatoly Dobrynin, "It may sound bizarre to the Soviet government, but Reagan attaches great significance to the Pentecostals' case" Eventually, the seven were granted exit visas—thanks to Reagan's intervention and a constant barrage of criticism from Christian Americans.

Reagan's overt linking of religion and anticommunism elevated his popularity ratings. But there was another dimension to his appeal. Frequently, he evoked the millenarian sentiments so commonly and passionately felt by the evangelicals. Upon listening to the "evil empire" speech, for example, several born-again Christians thought they were hearing the fulfillment of prophecies found in the Book of Revelations, which heralded the coming of the Anti-Christ. Revelations 13:17 said the Anti-Christ would have "the mark of the Beast" on his forehead—something many took as a reference Soviet Communist Party chief Mikhail Gorbachev's wine-colored birthmark. Ezekiel 38 and 39 predicted that the final war would come from the north, which many born-

“

*Reagan's words resonated with most Americans. Seventy-three percent in a December 1983 poll said that the 'real problem with communism is that it threatens our religious and moral values.' An equal percentage in an earlier survey agreed with this statement: 'By sending military aid to countries threatened by communism and by being tough with the Russians, Reagan is sending message to Moscow that will rebuild respect for the United States in the Kremlin.'*

”

again interpreted as meaning the Soviet Union. Jerry Falwell often made etymological linkages between Russian and biblical names, and Reagan was fascinated to learn that the Russian word for "wormwood" was Chernobyl. Reagan himself believed Armageddon was nigh, telling televangelist Jim Bakker in 1980: "We may be the generation that sees Armageddon." According to Jeffrey K. Hadden and Anson Shupe, "Reagan's first

## Party Realignments

term in office saw evangelicals enjoying unprecedented access to the presidency and the White House, with theological liberals and moderates virtually locked out. Jerry Falwell replaced the more establishment evangelical Billy Graham as the White House's unofficial chap-

nated with the election of the cardinal of Krakow, Karol Jozef Wojtyla, to the papacy. Pope John Paul II had spent decades tormenting the Communist regime in his native Poland. Like him, many Catholic Americans stood shoulder-to-shoulder with their Eastern Euro-

Wyszyski, Stepinac, and Mindszenty, Pope Pius XI, and Pope Pius XII—did not believe in “coexistence with communist regimes.” In 1930, the Pope asked Catholic Americans to pray for the reconversion of Russia with a prayer at each Mass that read: “Blessed Michael the Archangel! Defend us in the day of battle! Be our safeguard against the wickedness and snares of the enemy. Rebuke him, O God, we humbly pray! And do thou, O Prince of the Heavenly Host, thrust back into Hell Satan and all other evil spirits who wander through the world seeking the ruin of souls.” As Buchanan put it: “This is not the rhetoric of détente.” Some years later, watching Soviet schoolchildren being indoctrinated into the Young Octoberists, Buchanan likened the Cold War to “a religious war for control of the soul and destiny of mankind, the outcome of which cannot be arbitrated or negotiated.”

“*Catholics, not often associated with the Christian Right, were also inspired by Reagan's rhetoric and remained a key target for GOP strategists. For decades, the Roman Catholic hierarchy had opposed communism as self-avowed atheism. In 1978, that struggle culminated with the election of the cardinal of Krakow, Karol Jozef Wojtyla, to the papacy. Like him, many Catholic Americans stood shoulder-to-shoulder with their Eastern European cousins.*”

lain.” That access reflected the newfound power of the evangelicals: In 1978, 25 Christian ministries regularly broadcast on the tube; by 1989, the number grew to 336.

The linkage Reagan made between anticommunism and religion, coupled with his support for traditional moral values, translated into unprecedented support from the Christian Right. In 1980, Reagan got 61% support from white evangelicals; in 1984, 81%. Bush also received 81% of the born-again vote against his secular opponent, Michael Dukakis, in 1988, and a less impressive but substantial 61% backing in 1992.

Catholics, not often associated with the Christian Right, were also inspired by Reagan's rhetoric and remained a key target for GOP strategists. For decades, the Roman Catholic hierarchy had opposed communism as self-avowed atheism. In 1978, that struggle culmi-

pean cousins. Patrick Buchanan, a Catholic high school student during the late 1940s recalled one memorable incident:

*When the Communist regime in Budapest announced in 1948 the coming trial for treason of Josef Cardinal Mindszenty, the Primate of Hungary who had resisted both the Nazis and the communists, there was enormous anguish. Cardinal Mindszenty was constantly in the prayers of the nuns and the school children, and when the newspapers displayed months later, the shocking picture of the drugged and broken prelate as he “confessed” at one of Stalin's ugliest “show trials,” the Catholic world was stunned. We did not need any classroom discussion about Marxism to recognize the evil of communism; it was written all over the tortured face of the Catholic priest.*

Buchanan recalled that his Catholicism—the church of Cardinals

The fusion of religion with anti-communism paid enormous political dividends. Catholics, long a mainstay of the New Deal coalition, slowly abandoned their Democratic heritage. Part of that breaking-away resulted from their joining the ranks of the middle class. As they acquired middle-class values, Catholics (like their Protestant brethren) became increasingly critical of excessive federal spending—especially moneys diverted to minority (read: black) programs. Viewing the government through the green eye-shades of middle-class taxpayers, they left the Democratic party in droves. But their political drift had its origins in Republican denunciations of FDR's “sellout” at Yalta. Catholics, remembering the martyrs in the East, lent receptive ears to Republican charges that their sacrifices were made on the altar at Yalta.



*John Kenneth White is a professor of politics at the Catholic University of America.*