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The Historical Presidency

“Rallying Force”: The Modern Presidency, Social Movements, and the Transformation of American Politics

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This article analyzes the often fraught yet sometimes productive relationship between the modern presidency and social movements. Although the presidency–social movement nexus is fraught with tension, collaboration between the White House and social activists was indispensable to the important changes that occurred during the second half of the twentieth century. Focusing especially on Lyndon Johnson’s uneasy but critical relationship to the civil rights movement and Ronald Reagan’s enlistment of the Christian Right into the Republican Party, we trace the emergence of a novel form of politics since the 1960s that joins executive prerogative, grassroots insurgency, and party polarization. Johnson’s efforts to leverage presidential power to advance civil rights played a critical role in recasting the relationship between national administration and social movements, one that paved the way for a national conservative offensive. The relationship forged between Johnson and the civil rights movement has echoes in the similar joining of the Reagan presidency and the Christian Right, an executive–insurgency alliance that instigated the transformation of the Republican Party and spurred the development a new presidency-centered party system by the end of the 1980s.

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This article explores the relationship between the modern presidency and social movements, an uneasy but critical alliance in the quest for both liberal and conservative reform during the past half-century. Focusing on Lyndon Johnson's relationship to the civil rights movement and Ronald Reagan's collaboration with the Christian Right, we explore the idea, born of the Progressive era, that the presidency is inherently disposed to ally itself with major reform movements. Presidency scholars, like many citizens, regularly perceive occupants of the Oval Office as leading agents of change in a labyrinthine political system that can be difficult to navigate. Social movement scholars, in turn, associate social and political transformation with organized, collective insurgencies of ordinary people motivated by common purposes or social solidarities. By definition, social movements are, to borrow James Jasper's words, "conscious, concerted, and relatively sustained efforts by organized groups . . . to change some aspect of their society by using extra-institutional means" (1999, 5).

Although both presidents and social movements have played leading roles in the development of major legal and policy innovation over the course of American political development, the respective literatures on executive power and insurgency rarely intersect. Salutary efforts to probe the subject tend to emphasize the inherent conflict between a centralizing institution tasked with conserving the constitutional order and grassroots associations dedicated to structural change (e.g., see Riley 1999; Sanders 2007). To be sure, the relationship between presidents and insurgents is fraught with tension; nonetheless, it has significant formative potential given the ambition and capacity of both actors under opportune conditions to transform the political order. For all of their differences, the ambitions and work of presidents and movements are sometimes complementary rather than antagonistic.

Our central point is that the emergence of the modern presidency recasts in important ways the relationship between executive power and social movements. Constrained by constitutional norms, the separation and division of powers, and a decentralized party system, the disruptive potential of executive power was often limited until the twentieth century. With the advent of the modern presidency during the Progressive era, however, the White House was more likely to challenge the existing order of things. To be sure, modern executives regularly have shied away from close relationships with controversial social movements and sometimes openly attacked them (Tichenor 1999, 2007). Nonetheless, the consolidation of the modern presidency during the New Deal realignment invested the executive with powers and public expectations that made it a critical agent of social and economic reform (Milkis 1993). Once the White House became the center of growing government commitments, its occupants were more likely to profess support for the same high ideals that prominent social movements in their camps championed (Miroff 1981, 14).

The idea that the executive office might act as a spearhead for social justice—a rallying point for democratic reform movements—reached a critical juncture during the Johnson presidency. The nation received glimpses of the transformational possibilities of presidential-movement collaborations during the presidencies of Theodore Roosevelt, Woodrow Wilson, Franklin Roosevelt, Harry Truman, and John F. Kennedy. But they

also demonstrated the deep conflicts of interest and ideology that inherently divided presidents and movements. Only with Lyndon Johnson was the full panoply of modern presidential powers—political, administrative, and rhetorical—deployed on behalf of insurgent interests and demands. Johnson claimed broad authority to transform domestic policy on his own terms at a time when Congress and parties were subordinate to a “modern” presidency at high tide and a national administration unprecedentedly expansive. This also was a period when the civil rights movement’s ability to blend and balance disruptive collective action and conventional political pressure was at its zenith. Consequently, Johnson and the civil rights movement formed a more direct, combustible, and transformative relationship than was true of previous collaborations between presidents and social movements (Milkis and Tichenor 2011). The result was both a historic body of civil rights reforms and enormous political fallout for Johnson and the Democratic Party.

A little more than a decade later, a new executive-insurgency alliance spurred a national conservative offensive. Like Johnson, Reagan commanded a strong and active presidency that reshaped national law and policy commitments, but he sought to deploy modern executive power to achieve conservative objectives. Some of these purposes, most notably a more aggressive anti-Communist agenda and the protection of “family values,” required the expansion rather than the rolling back of national governmental responsibilities. Moreover, by the time Ronald Reagan became president, cultural forces unleashed by the Great Society had created a more polarized political environment. Reagan’s contribution to the development of a decidedly right of center modern Republican Party, pledged to advance issues of critical importance to Christian conservatives, made the GOP an attractive venue for the forging a strong bond between the White House and Christian Right. As we shall see, the fact that Christian conservatives were less suspicious of executive power than civil rights activists had been might have diminished the Christian Right’s reformist potential. Yet with their impressive march through American political institutions, these religious movement activists joined with Reagan in advancing a more centralized, polarized, and programmatic party system that defied national consensus and enduring reform, and appeared to issue, instead, a rancorous struggle between conservatives and liberals for control of the modern executive office.

The two cases examined in this article thus shed light on important developments in American politics. Johnson’s alliance with the civil rights movement and Reagan’s ties with the Christian right mark critical episodes in the confluence of executive prerogative and insurgency that both infused politics with moral fervor and sharpened conflict between liberals and conservatives. By the end of the 1980s, these new strains had formed into a novel form of party politics that joined presidential prerogative, grassroots mobilization, and partisan polarization. We seek to take account of this transformation of American politics in the conclusion, suggesting that the critical, tense alliances presidents have forged with social movements over the past half-century have advanced reforms and visions of an alternative political order—but at the risk of weakening the means of common deliberation and public judgment, the very practices that nurture a civic culture.

Seizing the Moment: Lyndon Johnson and the Politics of Race

When Johnson assumed the presidency, he had instrumental reasons for taking a strong civil rights stand. By this time, the Solid South was no more, as Dwight Eisenhower and Richard Nixon had won substantial support below the Mason-Dixon line. The best hope for establishing an executive-centered liberal coalition lay in expanding the black vote. Moreover, black voters were suspicious of a southern president, as were many northern liberals who had become strongly committed to the civil rights cause after the demonstrations in Birmingham, Alabama, and the March on Washington in 1963. Johnson felt the need to prove himself to the growing civil rights movement by carrying out—indeed surpassing the civil rights—program of the Kennedy administration.

Moreover, Johnson wanted to make his own historic mark on the presidency, and he viewed civil rights reform and an alliance with the leaders of the civil rights movement as critical to the success of the Great Society. In the view of Johnson and aides like Richard Goodwin and Bill Moyers, the social movements that emerged in the 1960s suggested that ideas and practices that were marginal during the Progressive era and New Deal might become the foundation of a new reform program. “Johnson intended to align himself with the cause of blacks and women and consumers,” Goodwin has claimed, “and he saw their causes as evidence that the country was ready for leadership committed to social change.” The civil rights movement, especially, “demonstrated not only the power and possibility of organized protests, but the unsuspected fragility in America to liberating changes” (Goodwin 1988, 275).

Viewing the growing civil rights movement as an opportunity for the White House to build a new reform coalition, Johnson as vice president scorned the Kennedy administration’s caution on questions of racial equality (Conkin 1986, 164). Kennedy did make use of executive orders to advance civil rights; for example, he and Johnson agreed during the 1960 campaign that Johnson would head a new President’s Committee on Equal Employment, which required government contractors to take active measures to achieve equality in job opportunities. But seeking to protect and nurture a fragile liberal coalition and riveted by the heightened tensions of the Cold War, the Kennedy White House kept its distance from the civil rights movement. In the wake of the Birmingham violence, Kennedy’s aides began to acknowledge that their efforts for reform were hampered by the White House’s failure either to “make an all out fight” for legislation or to engage the civil rights movement in the cause.¹ Johnson was determined not to make the same mistake. His more aggressive approach on civil rights was readily apparent when he delivered a widely praised speech to the Georgia state legislature in May of 1964. Declaring unequivocally that the time had come for “justice among the races,” Johnson insisted that he would never feel that he had fulfilled the responsibility of his “high office”—the national constitutional office—so long as those old hatreds

1. Memo, Lee White to Lawrence O’Brien, April 17, 1963, Lee White Papers, Box 22, Legislation, 11-13-61 to 11-12-63, John F. Kennedy Library, Boston, Massachusetts; see also Theodore Sorensen’s report on 1963 legislative proposals, where he admits that the most important reason for the failure of the administration’s voting rights bill was “the lack of all-out support by minority organizations.” Theodore Sorensen Papers, Box 59, “Proposals for 1963,” Kennedy Library.

continued to rend the country and tarnish the American creed. "Georgians helped write the Constitution. Georgians have fought and Georgians had died to protect that Constitution," he observed in a calm but firm tone. "Because the Constitution requires it, because justice demands it, we must protect the constitutional rights of all of our citizens, regardless of race, religion, or the color of their skin" (Johnson 1964).

Johnson's determination to take the civil rights fight into the deep South reverberated far beyond Georgia's borders. In going before the legislature of a southern state to make an unflinching statement on civil rights, he gained some respect from many northern liberals and civil rights leaders. It was "becoming of the President of the United States," a *Washington Post* editorial declared, that he should make such a "forthright statement" below the Mason-Dixon line. Johnson's words were not novel; he and other presidents had said as much before. "But said in this setting," the *Post* recognized, "the words have special impact, special meaning. They throw down the gauntlet of a challenge: they say to the South—in part because they are spoken by a President of the United States who is himself a Southerner—"Remember that you are Americans; remember that you belong to a Union, not a confederacy" (May 9, 1964, 1, 11).

Indeed, Johnson's hope was to liberate the South from its isolation. This task was begun by the New Deal. Roosevelt's national reform program, LBJ observed in his 1964 election eve speech at the Houston Astrodome, did much to "ameliorate Southern poverty," as the "South found it's voice in a new political instrument of the Union" (cited in Leuchtenburg 2005, 413). The average income of the South had increased six times since the 1930s, rising much faster than the rest of the nation, in no small part due to military contracts. But if the South's progress was to continue, Johnson warned his Georgia audience—if the South was to participate fully in the nation's prosperity—it had to "move forward under [the Constitution] to give every man his right to work at a job." The desegregation that the Johnson led contracts compliance committee achieved at the Lockheed Martin plant in Marietta, Georgia must become the model, not just in the South, but also in "all the States in the Union" (Johnson 1964, 649).²

Johnson's highly successful trip to Georgia strengthened his resolve to see civil rights legislation enacted that would dismantle the Jim Crow system. Martin Luther King, who had met LBJ during his tenure as vice president and quickly sized him up as a valuable ally, recognized the importance of the president's early and earnest advocacy of civil rights:

[Johnson's] approach to civil rights was not identical with mine—nor had I expected it to be. Yet his careful practicality was nonetheless clearly no mask to conceal indifference. His emotional and intellectual involvement was genuine and devoid of adornment . . . [I]t was Vice President Johnson I had in mind when I wrote in *The Nation* that the white South was splitting, and that progress could be furthered by driving a wedge between the rigid segregationists and the new white elements whose love of their land was stronger than the grip of old habits and customs. (King 1998, 242-43)

For a time, LBJ's "careful practicality" and moral leadership made him an indispensable ally of the civil rights movement. His greatest strength as majority leader of the

2. For a detailed discussion of the desegregation of the Lockheed Martin, see Graham (1990, 47-53).

Senate had been personal persuasion, a talent he now used to convince the Senate Republican leader, Everett Dirksen, to endorse the 1964 civil rights bill and enlist moderate Republicans in the cause. This support came with a price. Dirksen insisted on compromises that reduced the power of the Equal Employment Opportunity Commission (EEOC) and limited the authority of the Justice Department to bring suits against businesses to those situations in which a clear “pattern and practice” of discrimination existed.³ These compromises addressed moderate Republicans’ distaste for overlapping bureaucracies and excessive litigation, as well as their desire to protect northern and western businesses from intrusive federal agencies. Still, the principal objective of the civil rights bill—eliminating entrenched segregation in the South—was preserved.

Dirksen’s support of the civil rights bill also followed from the senator’s perception, confirmed by the president’s successful southern tour, that public opinion had turned in favor of civil rights. Investing the power and prestige of his office in a cause and a movement, Johnson persuaded Dirksen and most members of Congress that civil rights reform could no longer be resisted. As Dirksen put it, paraphrasing Victor Hugo’s diary, “No army is stronger than an idea whose time has come.”⁴ Johnson signed the Civil Rights Act on July 2, 1964.

Throughout the fight for this legislation, Johnson drew strength from and collaborated with civil rights leaders, even seeking their support for his decision not to delay signing the bill until Independence Day.⁵ More controversially, most civil rights activists accepted the compromise that the Johnson White House struck with Mississippi Freedom Democratic Party (MFDP) at the 1964 Democratic Convention, which included seating of the regular Mississippi delegation.⁶ In return, the deal included the symbolic gesture of making MFDP delegates honored guests at the convention, with two of its members seated as special delegates at large, and a prohibition of racial discrimination in delegate selection at the 1968 convention. The Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee (SNCC) and the Committee of Racial Equality (CORE) assailed the White House for sacrificing the MFDP’s moral cause on the altar of expediency. But the MFDP, through its lawyer Joseph Rauh, joined King and most moderate civil rights leaders in

3. The Equal Employment Opportunity Commission, charged with preventing racial and sexual discriminatory practices in employment, was stripped of its authority to file suit in the courts. The commission could recommend, but only the Justice Department had the power to initiate a suit. The Justice Department, in turn, could only file suits under conditions where obvious discriminatory practices, which characterized Jim Crow laws in the South, prevailed. On Dirksen’s relationship with Johnson and the role that the Republican Senate leader played in enacting civil rights legislation, see Hulsey (2000, 183-204).

4. Dirksen cited in Hulsey (2000, 196). Johnson’s power over Congress had become so great by the summer of 1964 that he was able to pressure Republican Minority Leader Charles Halleck, to support a rule that enabled Congress to act on the president’s poverty legislation. See telephone conversation between Lyndon Johnson and Charles Halleck, June 22, 1964, Johnson Tapes, all of which can be found at <http://millercenter.org/scripps/archive/presidentialrecordings/johnson> (accessed May 2, 2013).

5. See, for example, Johnson telephone conversation with Roy Wilkins, head of the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People, July 2, 1964, Johnson Tapes. Johnson was concerned that Republican legislators were heading off to the GOP convention and might not be able to participate in the signing ceremony, thus risking the bipartisan support LBJ had worked so hard to achieve. Wilkins expressed his support for LBJ’s desire to sign the bill on July 2, emphasizing particularly the need to cultivate bipartisanship as “an overwhelming political reason” to act quickly.

6. Memorandum, Lee White to Lyndon Johnson, August 13, 1964, White House Central Files, Ex and Gen PL, Lyndon Baines Johnson Library, Austin, Texas.

swallowing the compromise.⁷ Not only were southern states threatening to walk out of the convention if the regular Mississippi delegation was purged, but Johnson and Democratic leaders also warned civil rights leaders that an unruly convention would cost the party the support of several border states and deprive Democrats of a chance to win a historic landslide—and a mandate for further reform.⁸

Just as important, Johnson's support for a nondiscrimination rule would have enormous long-term consequences for the Democratic Party. Previously, state parties had sole authority to establish delegate selection procedures. Johnson's proposed solution to the MFDP compromise established the centralizing principle that henceforth the national party agencies would decide not only how many votes each state delegation got at the national convention, but also would enforce uniform rules on what kinds of persons could be selected (Milkis 1993, 210-16).⁹

Having gained credibility with civil rights leaders during the first critical year of his presidency, Johnson solidified an alliance with them during the dramatic prelude to the 1965 voting rights legislation that ultimately enfranchised millions of African Americans. New archival materials, specifically the Johnson Tapes, clarify that Johnson did not want to go slow after the 1964 act. LBJ not only pushed aggressively to continue the advance of civil rights, but also seemed to welcome the movement's ability to disrupt politics-as-usual and to spur action. On January 15, 1965, for instance, Johnson put in a call to King urging more grassroots protest that would increase pressure on Congress by dramatizing "the worst conditions [of blacks being denied the vote] that you can run into . . . If you can take that one illustration and get it on the radio, get on the television, get it in the pulpits, get it in the meetings—every place you can—then pretty soon the fellow who didn't do anything but drive a tractor would say, 'Well, that is not right—that is not fair.'"¹⁰

Johnson later might have had second thoughts about this importunity, since King and civil rights activists would take direct action in Selma, Alabama, that aroused massive resistance from local police and state troopers as well as national demonstrations in support of the marchers, some of which were directed at the president for not taking immediate action to avert the violence. Nonetheless, when King sought his public endorsement of the Selma campaign, Johnson championed the demonstrators' cause despite the efforts of White House aides to shield him from public involvement in the crisis. "I should like to say that all Americans should be indignant when one American is denied the right to vote . . . all of us should be concerned with the efforts of our fellow

7. E-mail authors from Sherwin J. Markman, a Johnson White House aide, who was heavily involved in resolving the MFDP controversy, January 13, 2004.

8. Johnson also was concerned, even at this early stage of his presidency, that an unruly convention might open the door to a Robert Kennedy candidacy. Markman written communication.

9. As became clear at the 1968 convention, the rule was no paper tiger. Having found no evidence that the Mississippi Democratic Party had "complied with either the spirit or the letter" of the convention call prohibiting racial discrimination, the Credentials Committee voted overwhelmingly to bar the Mississippi regular delegation from its seats. A biracial delegation, including many members of the 1964 Mississippi Freedom party, was seated in its place.

10. Johnson Telephone conversation with Martin Luther King, Jr., January 15, 1965, Johnson Tapes.

Americans to register to vote in Alabama,” Johnson said. “I intend to see that the right [to vote] is secured for all our citizens.”¹¹

In March of 1965, as the crisis in Selma worsened, Johnson delivered his famous voting rights message to Congress. His speech warned that the enactment of the voting rights bill was but one front in a larger war that must include not just federal laws to throw open the “gates of opportunity,” but also affirmative action against ignorance, ill health, and poverty that would enable individual men and women to “walk through those gates.” As he memorably closed, “Their cause must be our cause too. Because it is not just Negroes, but really it is all of us, who must overcome the crippling legacy of bigotry and injustice. And we shall overcome” (Johnson 1965a).

LBJ had not won over southern congressmen, most of whom slumped in their seats as the joint session erupted in applause. Yet he had triumphed where FDR failed—without embroiling himself in an enervating purge campaign against conservative Democrats, as Roosevelt had in 1938, he joined civil rights activists to discredit southern resistance to racial justice.¹² Dr. King, watching the speech on television in Montgomery, Alabama, was moved to tears. As he wrote of the historical address, “President Johnson made one of the most eloquent, unequivocal, and passionate pleas for human rights ever made by a President of the United States. . . . We had the support of the President in calling for immediate relief of the problems of the disinherited people of our nation (King 1998, 288).

Even more skeptical civil rights activists, who had refused to acquiesce to the 1964 MFDP compromise, were moved by Johnson’s fervent support of what one of his startled advisors called “radical” changes in the federal government’s support of voting rights.¹³ SNCC President John Lewis acknowledged that on this night LBJ was “a man who spoke from his heart, a statesman, a poet.”¹⁴ The following week, CORE’s James Farmer led a march to the White House to express civil rights activists’ support for the president’s

11. Cited in Kotz (2005, 267). As Kotz notes, King was elated with the president’s expressed support for the marchers’ cause.

12. In 1963, Johnson mentioned FDR’s 1938 purge campaign to Kennedy aide Theodore Sorenson. Johnson recalled that FDR had attempted a failed “purge” in the 1938 primary campaigns, trying to replace conservative southern and border state Democrats with 100% New Dealers who were committed to economic reform. The president’s moral commitment to civil rights, LBJ believed, should not be expressed in an effort to purge southern Democrats, but rather through an appeal to their consciences: “I think the President could do this in North Carolina or some place. I’d invite the congressmen and senators to be on the platform . . . I’d have him talk about the contributions that they had made and then I’d say, ‘Now, we have a problem here. No Nation—a hundred years ago in the Lincoln-Douglas debate, Lincoln said, No Nation can long endure half slave and half free. Now no world can long endure half slave and half free and we’ve got to do something about it in our own country.’” Telephone Conversation between Lyndon Johnson and Ted Sorenson, June 3, 1963, George Reedy Office Files, Johnson Library.

13. Memorandum, Horace Busby to Bill Moyers and Lee White, February 27, 1965, “Voting Legislation (Civil Rights) 5” folder, Nicholas deB Katzenbach Papers, Box 8, Kennedy Library.

14. Lewis with D’Orso (1998, 340); see also Kotz (2005, 312). Johnson showed a less poetic, more practical side to Lewis in asking for the civil rights movement’s help in implementing the Voting Rights Act. Inviting the civil rights leader to meet with privately with the president in the Oval Office prior to signing the legislation, LBJ told him earnestly, “Now John you’ve got to go back and get all those folks registered. You’ve got to go back and get those boys by the balls. Just like a bull gets on top of a cow. You’ve got to get them by the balls and you’ve got to squeeze, squeeze ‘em till they hurt.” “I’d heard that Lyndon Johnson enjoyed talking in graphic, down-home terms, Lewis later acknowledged, but I wasn’t quite prepared for all those bulls and balls” (Kotz 2005, 346; emphasis in original).

efforts. "When President Johnson said 'we shall overcome' he joined the civil rights revolution," Farmer told the marchers "Now it's up to you and me to keep him in it—to keep him and our friends in Congress moving. If we let up the pressure, they let up the progress."¹⁵

Although most activists appreciated Johnson's support in achieving historic reforms, tensions within the civil rights movement threatened to sever its critical but uneasy ties with his White House. Indeed, in contrast to moderate civil rights leaders, more radical insurgents loathed White House leadership and their views increasingly gained a hold over the movement. Johnson's civil rights sermon won little praise from radical civil rights activists in Alabama like James Foreman, the field secretary for SNCC. As far as radical SNCC dissidents were concerned, Johnson's speech was little more than a "tinkling, empty symbol." As he told reporters, "Johnson spoiled a good song that day" (Lewis with D'Orso 1998, 340).

Social Protest and the Limits of White House Leverage

Toward the end of 1965, the energy and resources committed to the Great Society began to suffer, threatened by Johnson's preoccupation with the Vietnam War. The war also fatally wounded his relationship with the civil rights movement. Even moderate civil rights leaders like King became visible participants in the antiwar movement. King saw the Vietnam War not only as morally indefensible, but also as a growing commitment that would divert resources needed to address problems of poverty at home. As the schisms in the civil rights movement deepened along with the administration's involvement in Vietnam, Johnson became the target, rather than the ally, of civil rights activists.

In late November, White House aide Hayes Redmon lamented the antiwar efforts of civil rights activists. "I am increasingly concerned over the involvement of civil rights groups with anti-war demonstrators," he wrote in a memo to White House aide Bill Moyers. "The anti-Vietnam types are driving the middle class to the right. This is the key group that is slowly being won over to the civil rights cause. Negro leadership involvement with anti-Vietnam groups will set their programs back substantially."¹⁶ King's opposition became public in September of 1965, infuriating Johnson and exposing the inherent conflict between the interests of the president and civil rights movement. Like Kennedy, Johnson deferred to Federal Bureau of Investigation (FBI) Director J. Edgar Hoover's use of telephone wiretaps and hotel room microphones to discredit King on national security grounds.¹⁷

15. Farmer, cited in United Press International Story, March 21, 1965, "Selma to Montgomery I" folder, Nicholas deB. Katzenbach Papers, Box 8, Kennedy Library.

16. Memoranda, Hayes Redmon to Bill Moyers, November 27, 1965, and November 30, 1965, Johnson Library.

17. As Kotz notes, both Kennedy and Johnson "failed to recognize a significant historical reality. The Communist Party's fifty-year campaign to recruit African Americans to its cause had been a colossal failure" (2005, 236). Kennedy's Justice Department admitted as much in seeking to reassure some members of Congress who were looking into potential ties between the civil rights movement and Communists. As assistant attorney general for civil rights, in a letter he would quote in response to other such inquiries, Burke

Johnson had tried to renew ties with King a few weeks before the civil rights leader publicly voiced opposition to his administration. In August, soon after race riots broke out in Watts, he called King to express his continued support for civil rights and to question him about rumors that he opposed Johnson's Vietnam policy.¹⁸ Trying in vain to meet the demands of spiraling civil rights militancy, the president urged King to take seriously and to help publicize a recent commencement address the president had given on June 4 at Howard University (Kotz 2005, 353). The speech proclaimed that "freedom was not enough" and that the time had come to "seek . . . not just equality as a right and a theory but equality as a fact and as a result." LBJ told King that it demonstrated his administration's commitment to address the most stubborn forces sustaining racial inequality.¹⁹ The Howard University speech was arguably the boldest rhetorical presidential challenge to racial injustice since Lincoln's second inaugural. And yet, he complained, civil rights activists had in large part greeted it with a deafening silence. Johnson also urged the civil rights leader to support the administration on Vietnam, telling King, "I want peace as much as you do if not more so," because "I'm the fellow who had to wake up to 50 marines killed."²⁰

King acknowledged that Johnson's Howard University speech was "the best statement and analysis of the problem" he had seen and that "no president ever said it like that before."²¹ Nonetheless, King and other movement leaders refused to lavish praise publicly on the Howard University address, concerned that associating too closely with Johnson might weaken their standing in the civil rights community. As David Carter has written, "in this period of growing polarization it had become increasingly clear to civil rights leaders, and ultimately even to the President and his staff, that a White House blessing of a leader was tantamount to a curse" (2001, 320).

Indeed, King was the least of the administration's problems. As the civil rights movement trained its eye on the poverty-stricken ghettos of large northern cities, King

Marshall wrote Senator A. S. Mike Monroney (D. OK), "Based on all available information from the FBI and other sources, we have no evidence that any of the top leaders of the major civil rights groups are Communists, or Communist controlled. This is true as to Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr., about whom particular accusations were made, as well as other leaders. It is natural and inevitable that Communists have made efforts to infiltrate the civil rights groups and to exploit the current racial situation. In view of the real injustices that exist and the resentment against them, these efforts have been remarkably unsuccessful." Letter, Burke Marshall to Senator Monroney, July 23, 1963, "Special Correspondence: Congressional, House A-Z" folder, Burke Marshall Papers, Box 8, Kennedy Library. Indeed, King went to extraordinary measures to distance civil rights organizations from the extreme Left. For example, he suspended Jack O'Dell for several months while the New York civil rights worker's alleged ties to the Communist Party were investigated. Even though the Southern Christian Leadership Conference (SCLC) found no basis for these charges, King asked O'Dell to make his resignation permanent, so as to avoid even the hint of radical influence on the civil rights movement. "The situation in our country is such," King wrote O'Dell, "that any allusion to the left brings forth an emotional response which would seem to indicate that the SCLC and the Southern Freedom movement are communist inspired. In these critical times we cannot afford such to risk any such impressions." Letter, King to O'Dell, July 3, 1963, "Special Correspondence: Meredith, James H." folder, Burke Marshall Papers, Box 8, Kennedy Library.

18. Johnson telephone conversation with Martin Luther King, August 20, 1965, Johnson Tapes, <http://millercenter.org/scripps/archive/presidentialrecordings/johnson>.

19. Richard Goodwin, Speech Draft, May 1965, White House Central File: SP 3-93, Box, 172, Johnson Library; Johnson (1965b); Johnson telephone conversation with King, August 20, 1965, Johnson Tapes.

20. Johnson telephone conversation with King, August 20, 1965.

21. *Ibid.*

lost influence to more militant leaders who were better attuned than he to the frustrations and rage of young urban blacks (Mann 1996, 480). "Black power" advocates like Stokely Carmichael, newly elected head of SNCC, and Floyd McKissick of CORE, were not only dissatisfied with the achievements of the Johnson administration's civil rights program, but they also were contemptuous of its objective of racial integration. The growing militancy of black America erupted during the summer of 1966 as urban riots swept across the nation. In the wake of these developments, the moderately conservative middle class, as the White House feared, grew impatient with reform. The administration's string of brilliant triumphs in civil rights was snapped. Its 1966 civil rights bill, an open housing proposal, fell victim to a Senate filibuster. Johnson's leadership of the civil rights movement was a great asset to him in 1964, but it was a political liability by the summer of 1966.

From the start of his presidency, Johnson had recognized that his alliance with the civil rights movement risked substantial Democratic losses in the South. The president's encouraging visit to Georgia gave him hope that he would be forgiven by white southerners; this was the very purpose of his appeal to conscience. But the elections of November 1966 confirmed the South was not in a forgiving mood. Three segregationist Democrats—Lester Maddox in Georgia, James Johnson in Arkansas, and George P. Mahoney in Maryland—won their party's gubernatorial nomination. In Alabama, voters ratified a caretaker administration for Lurleen Wallace, since her husband, George, was not permitted to succeed himself. George Wallace, dubbed the "prime minister" of Alabama, had by 1966 emerged as a serious threat to consummate the North-South split in the Democratic Party, either by entering the 1968 presidential primaries or running as a third party candidate. The gubernatorial race in California, where former movie star Ronald Reagan handily defeated the Democratic incumbent Edmund G. Brown, revealed that conservative insurgency was not limited to southern Democrats.

In the wake of the civil rights crisis of 1966, Johnson no longer met with civil rights leaders. Instead, he followed Attorney General Nicholas Katzenbach's advice to send a number of his younger aides to various cities to meet with young black leaders. The attorney general's suggestion was the origin of ghetto visits that White House aides made throughout 1967; a dozen or so visited troubled black areas in more than 20 major cities. On the one hand, the ghetto visits revealed the extent to which the modern presidency sought to assume important tasks once carried out by intermediary political associations like political parties. Rather than relying on local party leaders for information about their communities, Johnson asked his aides to live in various ghettos and then report directly to him about the state of black America. Local public officials and party leaders, even Chicago's powerful boss Richard Daley, were not told of the ghetto visits, lest they take umbrage at someone from the White House rooting about their home territories.

On the other hand, these visits marked the declining significance of the modern presidency as the leading agent of liberal reform—a symptom of its "extraordinary isolation."²² This isolation was accentuated by the evolution of the civil rights movement,

22. The term "extraordinary isolation" is Woodrow Wilson's. See Wilson (1908, 69).

whose more militant leaders, representing an oppositional culture that tended to withdraw rather than bestow legitimacy on reigning institutions, gained ascendancy in urban ghettos. The Johnson White House struggled to understand why young urban blacks, as one aide put it, “were against just about every leader (Negro and white) . . . except [black power advocates like] Stokely Carmichael.”²³ The awkward presence of these Johnson aides—mostly white, mostly from small towns and cities in the Midwest and Southwest—spending a week, sometimes a weekend, in volatile ghetto environments such as Harlem and Watts was, as a leading participant put it, a “unique attempt by the President to discover what was happening in urban ghettos and why.”²⁴ Aides were not sent to organize or manipulate or steer, but solely to gain a sense of the ideas, frustrations, and attitudes at the basis of the riots.

The ghetto reports apparently helped persuade Johnson to respond to the riots by intensifying his efforts to expand civil rights and war on poverty programs.²⁵ The administration continued to push for an open-housing bill that was enacted after King’s assassination. In 1968, LBJ also submitted and Congress passed the most extensive and most expensive public housing legislation in American history. Finally, Johnson continued to support the White House’s Office of Economic Opportunity, even though its sponsorship of Community Action Programs (CAPs), requiring “the maximum feasible participation of residents of the areas and groups involved,” was reportedly having a disruptive influence in many cities and was the target of bitter complaints from local party leaders. LBJ seethed privately about the “revolutionary” activity that some CAPs were fomenting, but he never repudiated them publicly and continued to support federal funds for neighborhood organizations. CAPs were the administration’s final, frail hope that it could benefit from the transformative energy of a movement over which it rapidly lost influence.²⁶

Political Failure and Enlightened Administration

Against the general norm that presidents are repressive or indifferent in their response to the demands of insurgent groups, Johnson’s uneasy collaboration with the civil rights movement shows how an ambitious president and social activists can form an alliance in the service of enduring reform. Although this fusion of presidential power to a movement for social justice was short lived, the fragile partnership made possible the most dramatic civil rights legislation since the Reconstruction era. Without the work of

23. Memorandum, Sherwin Markman for the President, February 1, 1967, White House Central File: We9, Johnson Library.

24. Markman written communication.

25. See Oral History of Sherwin Markman, 28; and Notes of a Meeting with Peter Lisigor, of the *Chicago Daily News*, August 4, 1967, Tom Johnson’s Notes of Meetings, May 1968, Meetings with Correspondents; and Memorandum, Tom Johnson to the President, August 10, 1967, and attached notes of meeting with labor leaders, Johnson Library, Box 1.

26. Explaining his evolving views of the civil rights movement to a White House aide, Johnson revealed that he had learned from reading Alexis de Tocqueville that the leaders of revolutions often become their victims. By 1967, Johnson viewed himself as the early leader and ultimate victim of a civil rights revolution (Kotz 2005, 395).

civil rights leaders and activists in mobilizing demonstrations that elicited the violent reaction of segregationists and aroused strong sympathy in the country, no civil rights revolution would have been possible. At the same time, without Johnson's willingness to support, indeed, to take advantage of the opportunity that civil rights direct action provided, the landmark laws of 1964 and 1965 might never have been enacted.

Johnson's singularly determined fusion of executive power to a social movement eventually imploded. As early as 1965, it became clear that Johnson's effort to become a leader of the civil rights movement suffered from his attempt to manage all the other responsibilities that the modern presidency pulls in its train. Since Theodore Roosevelt, reformers and ambitious presidents had endeavored to reconstruct the executive office so that its constitutional mandate to "preserve, protect and defend the Constitution" might be rededicated as a vantage point for social and economic change. But Johnson's explosive relationship with the civil rights movement cast serious doubt on the "Progressive era conceit that the presidency is inherently disposed to ally itself with movements for reform and liberation" (Skowronek and Glassman 2007, 7). In the end, the Great Society revealed both the untapped potential for cooperation between the modern presidency and social movements and the inherent tensions between "high office" and insurgency that made such collaboration so difficult. The tasks of the modern presidency—the domestic and international responsibilities that constrained the "steward of the public welfare"—necessarily limited the extent to which Johnson could become a trusted leader of the social movements that arose during the 1960s.

By 1968, Johnson, the self-fashioned agent of a political transformation as fundamental as any in history, had become a hated symbol of the status quo, forced into retirement lest he contribute further to the destruction of the liberal consensus. As he privately told Hubert Humphrey in the spring of 1968, "I could not be the rallying force to unite the country and meet the problems confronted by the nation . . . in the face of a contentious campaign and the negative attitudes towards [me] of the youth, Negroes, and academics."²⁷

LBJ thus saw the mantle of leadership pass to the likes of Eugene McCarthy, whose pioneering grassroots organization drove the president from the field in 1968, and George McGovern, the Democratic nominee for president in 1972. The "McGovern Democrats," who took control of the Democratic Party in the wake of the fractious 1968 presidential contest, followed the progressive tradition of scorning partisanship—of desiring a direct relationship between presidential candidates and grassroots activists. In this respect, the expansion of presidential primaries and other changes in the nomination politics initiated by the McGovern-Fraser reforms were the logical extension of the modern presidency. But these reformers, champions of a "new politics," rejected notions of popular presidential leadership that prevailed during the Progressive era and New Deal eras (Ceaser 1979; Miroff 2007). Viewing the president as the agent rather than the

27. W. W. Rostow, Memorandum of Conversation, Participants: The President; the Vice President; Charles Murphy; W. W. Rostow, April 5, 1968, White House Famous Names, Box 6, Folder: Robert F. Kennedy, 1968 Campaign, Johnson Library.

steward of the public welfare, new politics liberals embraced the general ideas current in the late 1960s that social movements should direct presidential politics and governance.

Even as McGovern's insurgent presidential campaign was an electoral disaster, the legislation conceived by the ephemeral alliance between Johnson and the civil rights movement built a national administrative apparatus that had staying power in American political life. The 1964 and 1965 civil rights reforms empowered the federal bureaucracy—especially the Department of Justice, the Department of Health, Education, and Welfare, and the newly formed EEOC—to assist the courts in creating parallel enforcement mechanisms for civil rights. These proved effective. For example, in four years the Johnson administration accomplished more desegregation in southern schools than the courts had in the previous 14.

As historians like Hugh Davis Graham have chronicled, “new theories of compensatory justice and group rights” given prominent expression in LBJ's Howard University Address were deftly advanced by “new social regulators” in the EEOC (Graham 1990, Chapter IX). Despite the late-1960s political demise of the Great Society, the EEOC staff, aided by supporters in other executive agencies and the federal courts, was able to expand the EEOC's power far beyond the original constraints of Title VII of the act. The text of Title VII explicitly sought to limit findings of discrimination by requiring evidence of intent. EEOC staffers argued that racial disparities in the composition of a labor force were ample proof of discrimination, whether intended or not. Seizing authority on its own accord, the EEOC collected data from tens of thousands of employers in order to analyze entire industries. Only a couple of years after Johnson left office, the federal courts deferred to EEOC guidelines, tossing aside Title VII's original dictates in favor of an “effects based definition of discrimination” that went beyond the goal of equal treatment to that of equal results (Graham 1990, 250). A “quiet revolution” had occurred in national administration, one that dismantled the compromise that Dirksen and moderate Republicans extracted in 1964.

Similarly, as Richard Valelly has documented, an “extended Voting Rights Act” emerged from an institutional partnership between the Justice Department and the courts. The alliance between bureaucratic discretion and legal activism expanded the 1965 statute from the commitment to free African Americans from discriminatory practices, such as literacy tests, to a more capacious program that promoted minority office holding, regulated nonsouthern states and local jurisdictions that had discriminated against the voting rights of racial minorities, and freed regulators and plaintiffs from having to demonstrate intentional discrimination in seeking remedies for low levels of minority representation and electoral participation (Valelly 2004, chap. 9).

These administrative and legal efforts appeared to give institutional form to hard-won victories achieved by Johnson and civil rights activists. At the same time, the securing of what Valelly has called a “second reconstruction” tended to isolate civil rights activists. LBJ paid dearly for the alienation of the social movements from the White House; just as surely, the civil rights movement and the other social protest movements it inspired paid a price for their rejection of presidential leadership. The 1960s unleashed new forces and new expectations that could not be quelled by the election of Nixon. Indeed, it was the 1970s rather than the 1960s when affirmative action and many other

civil rights measures became a real presence in American society. And yet, even as they continued to look to the national government to solve the problems thrown up by an industrial—and postindustrial—order, the public interest groups that emerged during the 1970s (which evolved from the social movements of the 1960s) distrusted presidential leadership and bureaucratic agencies, and sought to protect social policy from unfriendly executive administration (Melnick 2005). Teaching Americans both to expect more from the government and to trust it less, the Great Society was the fulcrum on which decline of liberalism and the rise of conservatism tilted.

Johnson's willingness to embrace the civil rights movement and its reform agenda transcended narrow, cautious self-interest. Indeed, his wholehearted support for far-reaching civil rights defied the careful distance that most presidents maintained vis-à-vis social movements. As we shall see, Reagan and his political allies developed an alliance with Christian Conservatives that was arbitrated by a reconstructed Republican Party. Consequently, he would be much less exposed in his relationship with the Religious Right than Johnson had been in seeking to leverage the civil rights revolution.

Ronald Reagan and the Christian Right

Like Johnson, Reagan viewed the modern executive as an institution that would allow him to make his mark on history; like Johnson, Reagan also viewed the emergence of a social movement as a sign that American politics was open to fundamental change. In part, Reagan's alliance with the Christian Right represented conservatives' recent embrace of national administrative power. Until the late 1960s, opponents of the welfare state were generally opposed to the modern presidency, which they saw as an engine of liberal reform. By the end of the Johnson presidency, however, it was clear that a strong conservative movement would require an activist program of retrenchment to counteract the enduring effects of the New Deal and Great Society (Teles 2007). As Bert A. Rockman has written, "it was the Nixon presidency, particularly its aborted second term, that became celebrated for its deployment of [unilateral executive power]," but "the Reagan Presidency intended to perfect the strategy and to do it from the beginning" (1989, 10).

Yet the relationship between Reagan and the Christian Right would be mediated by the Republican Party that developed a strong national organization during the 1970s. Indeed, Reagan benefited from, and in turn helped to galvanize, a renewal of party politics. His administration's opposition to the liberal administrative state advanced a transformation of the party system in which the traditional party apparatus, based on patronage and state and local organizations, gave way to a more programmatic party politics based on national organization. Although the uneasy partnership between Johnson and the civil rights movement contributed to the development of a more national and programmatic Democratic Party, the liberal public interest groups spawned by the social movements of the 1960s tended to emphasize "state-building" rather than they did party-building. In contrast, Reagan and the Christian Right spied advantage in

forging a national party offensive that would connect them to an electorate that had become increasingly disenchanted with the liberal administrative state.

The electoral success of the Republican Party on Reagan's watch led pundits to speculate about whether the 1980 election was a "critical," realigning presidential contest. But as Irving Kristol noted in a 1983 essay in the *Wall Street Journal*, reprinted by the *Conservative Digest*, those discussions missed an important point: "the really basic political changes *within* parties which, over the longer term, alter the very meaning of a party alignment" (Kristol, March, 1983, 10, emphasis in original). At the end of the day, Reagan, abetted by the Christian Right, instigated a the development of a more moralistic party politics that polarized activists in Washington, DC, but left a large part of the country indifferent, if not avowedly hostile to the "new" party system.

Out of the Wilderness

During the late 1970s, the Christian Right emerged as a potent new force in American politics. This evangelical movement could trace its wellsprings to a gradual political mobilization of evangelicals between the 1940s and 1960s, and fresh alliances between evangelical leaders and a savvy group of New Right professionals in the 1970s. In the early 1940s, conservative Christian clergy responded to what they saw as the liberal apostasy of mainline Protestant denominations by forming organizations like the fundamentalist American Council of Christian Churches and the less absolutist National Association of Evangelicals. Yet these evangelical leaders generally steered clear of politics, and most of their followers either voted Democratic or not at all.²⁸ In the decades following World War II, the core political activism of evangelicals centered on protecting and later expanding their access to the broadcast airways. They formed the National Religious Broadcasters Association and successfully lobbied Congress for television and radio regulations that they deemed favorable to their cause.²⁹ Not coincidentally, it also was during the postwar decades when a magnetic young missionary, Billy Graham, fueled the evangelical revival through televising mass rallies that called on people across denominational lines to be "born-again" (Hunter 1983, 44-45). Graham's popularity and savvy use of media helped beckon evangelicalism from its post-Scopes trial exile back to the public square.

The rise of a *politically* engaged movement of conservative Protestants, however, also reflected social and political changes in the 1960s and 1970s that deeply offended Christian fundamentalists, evangelicals, Pentecostals, and charismatics. Whereas older televangelists like Billy Graham, Oral Roberts, and Rex Humbard tended to avoid political commentary, a new generation of preachers like Jerry Falwell, James Robison, Pat Robertson, and Jim Bakker hit the airwaves in the 1970s with a clear agenda to defend against what they perceived as culturally liberal government policies that favored

28. For a useful review of studies highlighting evangelical apoliticism in these years, see Wuthnow (1983, 168-72).

29. For an excellent background on evangelical politics from the 1940s to 1960s, see Diamond (1995, especially chap. 4).

"secular humanism" over faith-based morality. These apostles of the new electronic church were particularly outraged by the Supreme Court's 1973 decision legalizing abortion in *Roe v. Wade*, potential threats to the tax-exempt status of some Christian schools, Senate passage of the Equal Rights Amendment (ERA) in 1972, and the specter of gay rights.

The *Roe* decision proved to be an especially important spur to Christian insurgency. Most "pro-lifers" continued to work through political channels, joining state affiliates of the National Right to Life Committee. But, as Jon Shields has observed, "*Roe* energized pro-lifers, pushing many activists into the streets" (Shields 2009). According to William Bennett, the president of the National Humanities Center, and Terry Eastland, editorial page editor of the *Greensboro* (North Carolina) *Record*, evangelical militancy was not merely a reaction to the rights revolution; rather, they suggested, it represented a new strain of rights politics. "The New Right Christians may be called a civil rights group, not in the sense, as in the case of blacks, that certain rights have been denied them, but in the important psychological sense common to all civil rights groups, that they have been shut out of politics and are now ignored," they wrote. "Feeling so oppressed, they have now become aggressors. The members of [Christian Right groups] are asking, as blacks and women and others have done, for recognition, for status in the polity." (Bennett and Eastland 1980, 18).

The political ferment that was growing among American evangelicals at the grassroots, led by prominent clergy and religious broadcasters, did not escape the notice of a seasoned group of Washington, DC-based professionals who shaped the rise of the conservative New Right in the 1970s. These professionals included the conservative direct-mail fund-raising pioneer Richard Viguerie, Howard Phillips and the Conservative Caucus, John (Terry) Dolan and the National Conservative Political Action Committee, and Paul Weyrich and the Committee for the Survival of a Free Congress. Although these strategists viewed long-standing opposition to communism and the welfare state as critical, the "New Right" they envisioned would echo and challenge the moral causes of the sixties and seventies. As the New Right's *Conservative Digest* explained, the moral issues championed by militant evangelicals, rather than foreign policy or economic concerns, marked the true divide between older and newer conservatives:

For the past 50 years, conservatives have stressed almost exclusively economic and foreign policy. The New Right shares the same basic beliefs . . . , but we feel that conservatives cannot become the dominant political force in America until we stress the issues of concern to ethnic and blue-collar Americans, born-again Christians, pro-life Catholics, and Jews. Some of these issues are busing, abortion, pornography, education, traditional Biblical moral values and quotas. (Viguerie 1980, 17)

Although the Christian Right was more closely attuned to party politics than civil rights activists had been, they did not accept politics as usual. The New Right was deeply disappointed with the moderate international and domestic policies of the Nixon and Ford administrations. During the 1976 presidential campaign, evangelical support was credited with helping Reagan, then the dark horse insurgent Republican candidate, who had entered national politics as an advocate for Barry Goldwater in 1964, score a dramatic

victory in the North Carolina primary and to gain momentum in subsequent southern contests. Yet when Reagan lost the GOP nomination to Gerald Ford, most evangelical voters cast their ballots for Jimmy Carter, an avowed “born-again” Southern Baptist (Reichley 1987, 78-79). The Carter administration soon ran afoul of evangelical leaders on a variety of issues including school prayer, abortion, and the ERA, but they were most incensed by the administration’s efforts to deny tax-exempt status to religious schools that failed to integrate racial minorities from their local communities (Diamond 2000, 65-66; Edsal and Edsal 1992, 132-34; Flippen 2011).

Entering the 1980 election, the New Right claimed that they were “ready to lead,” and they mobilized to defeat Carter’s bid for reelection. New Right leaders endorsed Reagan after his nomination became a *fait accompli*, but they remained adamant that their cause was not enduringly tied to that of the GOP, and they urged Christian Right leaders to avoid partisan capture. As Michael Lienesch has observed, powerful professional strategists of the New Right, such as Viguier and Weyrich, “set much of the political agenda for their politically less sophisticated recruits” (Lienesch 1993, 8; see also Flippen, 2011, 23); as part of this political baptism, they warned their junior partners about the perils and possibilities of a Reagan presidency. Weyrich insisted that the New Right’s task was to capture, not to dismantle, the executive-centered administrative state forged on the New Deal and Great Society. “We must fight inside a Reagan administration for what we believe in,” he urged. “Let us not expect him to fight for our causes just because he gave us lip service during the campaign or because we are ‘right.’ Let us expect to have to fight hard for what we get, and let’s do it” (Weyrich 1980, 5).

The Forging of a Conservative Republican Party

In important respects, the Reagan presidency would justify this view of fractious presidential politics. And yet, Reagan and the Christian Right would form an alliance that spurred a transformation of the Republican Party, one that joined executive prerogative, insurgency and partisan polarization. Reagan’s candidacy coincided with the development of a national Republican organization that incorporated the Christian Right, along with economic conservatives and foreign policy hardliners, into a new party coalition. During the 1980 campaign, Reagan openly courted conservative Christian leaders by sharing their enthusiasm for restoring traditional values and pledging his support for their social agenda. He won an early endorsement from Christian Voice, which organized an effective political action committee—Christians for Reagan—on his behalf. The Reagan campaign also openly appealed to conservative religious leaders and constituents by supporting the removal of a pro-ERA plank from the Republican platform and the insertion of an antiabortion plank (Reed 1996, 113-14).

In August of 1980, the Religious Roundtable organized a “National Affairs Briefing” in Dallas to coincide with the Republican national convention. More than 15,000 ministers from 41 states attended this event, and the featured speakers were Robison and Reagan. At a press conference prior to his address, Reagan told reporters that the biblical story of creation should be taught in public schools as prominently as the theory of

evolution. When Robison's speech assailed Communists, homosexuals, liberal politicians, and other threats to the traditional family, Reagan nodded and applauded enthusiastically from the dais. Reagan's own address included one of his most memorable lines, suggested by Robison when he prepped the candidate on what he should say: "I know this is nonpartisan, so you can't endorse me, but I want you to know that I endorse you" (quoted in Martin 1996, 216). The line drew a standing ovation. Reagan's speech also sounded a familiar refrain in railing against plans to "force all tax-exempt schools—including church schools—to abide by affirmative action orders drawn up by—who else?—IRS bureaucrats." To rapturous applause, he closed by urging conservative Christians to mobilize in order "to protect the American family and respect its interests in the formulations of public policy." (*Conservative Digest*, September, 1980, 21). Reagan was now the unquestioned darling of the Christian Right, and Falwell pledged that the Moral Majority would get evangelical voters to elect Reagan "even if he has the devil running with him" (Guth 1983, 36).

Reagan's 1980 presidential bid thus served as an important catalyst for unifying and mobilizing the Christian Right, making it a formidable electoral force in U.S. politics. Although his victory was attributed more to economic and foreign policy than to social issues, many Republicans and Reagan himself gave the Christian Right considerable credit for the GOP's decisive gains. This perception was confirmed by an ABC News-Lou Harris poll that concluded "Ronald Reagan won his stunning victory . . . not because the country as a whole went conservative, but because the conservatives—particularly the white moral majority—gave him such massive support." The ABC-Harris survey showed that among 39% of the electorate that viewed itself as conservative, Reagan won by an overwhelming 62% to 30% margin. This movement had been particularly important in the dramatic incursions the Reagan campaign made in the South and rural Midwest, a conservative Republican advance that appeared to respond, especially, to appeals of the Christian Right (Lofton 1980, 13). Another study of 100 heavily "evangelical" counties found that 58 went for Carter in 1976, but only 16 in 1980 (Menendez 1996, 139-42).

Against this backdrop, Christian Right leaders hoped to play an important role in the Reagan administration. When asked at his first news conference how much he would consult with conservative organizations—specifically the Moral Majority and Jerry Falwell—in the formation of his government, Reagan responded that he certainly would be "open" to these people: "I'm not going to separate myself from the people who elected us and sent us there" (Lofton 1980, 13).

The Christian Right and Executive-Centered Politics

From the start, the Christian Right enjoyed considerable access to the Reagan administration and GOP leaders. In contrast to the civil rights movement, however, this alliance placed little to no grassroots pressure on the White House. Even militant religious leaders like Falwell took pains to demonstrate their loyalty to the Reagan

administration, investing their hope that the modern presidency could be deployed in the service of a conservative party offensive.

To a point, Reagan justified that faith. He appointed a number of Christian Right activists to visible administration positions. Morton Blackwell, who served as a liaison between evangelicals and the Reagan campaign organization, was named a special assistant on the White House staff. Robert Billings, the former executive director of the Moral Majority, received a prominent post in the Department of Education. Gary Bauer, a future director of the Family Research Council, became domestic advisor in Reagan's second term. James Watt, a member of the Assemblies of God, was named secretary of interior. Reagan also used his "bully pulpit" to advocate Christian Right causes, including frequent endorsements of constitutional amendments to prohibit abortion and restore school prayer (Reichley 1985, 324-25). This was not merely rhetorical flourish. The president exercised his executive powers to bar the disbursement of public funds to any family planning organization that discussed abortion as an option with patients. The White House also threw its support behind fundamentalist Bob Jones University in its lawsuit against the Internal Revenue Service (IRS), which had revoked the institution's tax-exempt status because of alleged racially discriminatory practices (Oldfield 1996, 118-21). Treasury Secretary Donald Regan announced in early 1982 that he would no longer deny tax exemption to private schools practicing racially discriminatory policies, arguing that Congress had not explicitly given the IRS this authority. That same day the Justice Department announced the shift in IRS policy now rendered a pending Supreme Court case on the matter moot. When a firestorm of protest erupted that accused Reagan of encouraging racially discriminatory policies at universities, his administration modified its position slightly. But its support for Christian Right positions on the issue was clear.

Finally, contrary to received wisdom that Reagan merely gave lip service to anti-abortion legislation, Reagan worked with Morton Blackwell and other Christian conservatives to attach the Helms amendment to a debt ceiling bill in 1982.³⁰ Reagan and Blackwell viewed the Helms provision, which banned federal funding for abortion, as a more practical pro-life measure than proposals for a pro-life constitutional amendment. Although five previous Congresses had voted to restrict abortion funding (the Hyde amendment), the Helms amendment would make that ban permanent; furthermore, it included language—"affirming the humanity of the unborn child in our society"—that invited the Supreme Court to reconsider the *Roe* decision. As Reagan noted in a letter to key senators, "this amendment is a responsible statutory approach to one of the most sensitive problems our society faces—the taking of a life of an unborn child." Reagan and Blackwell were able to unify most Christian Rights groups behind the Helms measure, but they could not overcome a filibuster by Senator Robert Packwood (R-OR).³¹

30. On Reagan's lack of support for antiabortion legislation, see Martin (1996).

31. Press release, Ronald Reagan, template of letter sent to select Senators, September, 8, 1982, folder "Abortion 1982 (1 of 6)," Box 1, Elizabeth Dole Files, Ronald Reagan Library, Simi Valley, California.

The failure to enact the Helms amendment confirmed the view of Reagan and pragmatic advisors, like James Baker, Michael Deaver, and Elizabeth Dole, that the president had to maintain some distance from Christian Right groups and their causes. Public support for the *Roe* decision, they believed, dictated that the president's commitment for social issues be carefully modulated. As Dole, assistant to the president for public liaison, wrote during the fight over the Helms amendment, "In working to support cloture we should be aware of the fact that the more visible our efforts become, the more difficult will be our efforts in reversing the erosion in the general women's constituency. In the have-your-cake-and eat-it-too spirit, the optimal posture for the president will be that level of involvement where his work guarantees success on the cloture vote, having taken such in the least visible fashion possible."³² That Reagan worked behind the scenes, rather than go public, in supporting the Helms legislation showed that he agreed with this advice. By the same token, the failure of this optimal strategy betrayed the tension between the White House's partisan and policy objectives and those of its evangelical allies.

More to the point, the Reagan administration believed that too much emphasis on social issues would deflect its attention from the economic and foreign policy concerns that it deemed more pressing. In one of his first important presidential addresses, Reagan assured the Conservative Political Action Conference that he and his "fellow truth seekers" did not "have a separate social agenda, a separate economic agenda, and a separate foreign policy agenda . . . Just as surely as we put our financial house in order and rebuild our national defenses, so too we seek to protect the unborn, to end manipulation of school children by utopian planners and permit acknowledgment of a Supreme Being in our classrooms" (Reagan 1981). And yet, the Reagan administration focused far more on economic issues and a defense buildup than on religious matters. James Baker, the politically moderate White House chief of staff, and Robert Michel, the House Republican leader, set the tone early by serving notice that social issues would not be the administration's top priority. Reagan even reneged on a campaign promise to appear at the 1981 March for Life in Washington, offering instead to meet privately with anti-abortion leaders in the Oval Office. Several of them boycotted the meeting in protest.

Adding insult to injury, Reagan nominated Sandra Day O'Connor to the Supreme Court in the summer of 1981. O'Connor was an economic conservative, but she had demonstrated no support for the Christian Right's program; indeed, while a member of the Arizona state legislature, O'Connor had supported the ERA and women's rights to choose. Reagan and his aides argued that the selection of O'Connor fulfilled the president's promise during the 1980 campaign to nominate a woman, and they insisted that her "instincts and values were consistent with his." But the Christian Right and its allies in the conservative movement angrily saw the choice as a betrayal. "Politically," Richard Viguerie lamented, "this nomination is devastating": it was likely to undermine, he feared, Republican efforts to win enduring support from "democrats, independents and

32. Memorandum, Elizabeth Dole to Ed Harper, August 31, 1982, folder, "Abortion of 1982 (4 of 6), *ibid.*

nonvoters who were attracted not only by the Republican economic program but also by GOP positions on busing, abortion, and pro-family issues” (1981, 40).

In the wake of these disappointments, Weyrich organized a conference call among conservative religious leaders in hopes of rallying them to press their social policy goals on the president. Yet few of these leaders were prepared to battle the Reagan White House. Paradoxically, at the same time the White House was marginalizing religious issues, the Moral Majority and other conservative religious organizations dutifully joined a broad coalition of conservative interest groups in rallying behind the president’s budget and tax reform plans (Reichley 1985, 325). The docility of Falwell and other evangelical leaders frustrated Weyrich: “What overshadowed all their concerns was simply their pleasure in being able to get in even the back door of the White House. . . . They were willing to put aside what minimalistic ideas they had on their so-called ‘agendas’—and with the exception of their pro-life position, they were trivial—to safeguard meaningless access” (Weyrich, cited in Martin 1996, 222-23).³³

The relationship between the Reagan administration and the Christian Right was far from meaningless, however. Key Christian Right leaders like Falwell and James Dobson, of The Focus on the Family, embraced Reagan’s position that a broad conservative agenda would strengthen the Republican Party’s commitment to core principles, such as tax policy supportive of the family, that were important to them and their followers. Largely eschewing the disruptive tactics of the civil rights movement, they used their extensive network of publications and media to build grassroots support for Reagan’s tax proposals. The White House adroitly promoted its 1986 tax reform program as “the strongest pro-family initiative in post-War America” and enlisted the support of Dobson to urge evangelicals to put pressure on their representatives to support the pro-family provisions of the proposal, especially a substantial increase in the personal and dependent exemptions. Dobson became a member of Americans for Tax Reform’s Steering Committee, which Grover Norquist managed at the behest of the White House, and he devoted a radio interview with President Reagan to a defense of the tax reform plan. In appreciation, Dobson and other Christian Broadcasting Network gained special access to White House briefings on issues of importance to the Religious Right.³⁴

As much as fiscal policy, the partnership between Reagan and the Christian Right made support for a messianic foreign policy a sacred cause of the GOP. Whereas the civil rights movement rejected conventional patriotism, viewing the Vietnam War as a violation of the liberating values it celebrated, the Christian Right, standing for “traditional American values,” viewed the Reagan’s fervent anticommunism as a blessing. The Moral Majority’s “Christian Bill of Rights,” proclaimed in 1980, included “the right to expect our national leaders to keep this country morally and militarily strong so that religious freedom and Gospel preaching might continue unhindered.”³⁵

33. Weyrich, cited in Martin (1996, 222-23).

34. Carl Anderson Papers, Interview Dobson and RR, 9-10-85; and *ibid.*, Dobson Briefing, 1-30-86, Reagan Library.

35. “Christian Bill of Rights,” *Conservative Digest*, November 1980. In return for signing the Christian Bill of Rights and sending it to the Moral Majority’s headquarters in Lynchburg, VA, respondents would receive a “parchment” of the Christian entitlements and an “Old Glory” lapel pin for signers to “proudly wear.”

Significantly, Reagan chose a meeting of the National Association of Evangelicals of March 8, 1983, as the site of one of his most important foreign policy speeches. This address sharply criticized the nuclear freeze movement, supported by most Democrats, which was devoted to international cooperation (Miroff, 2007, 268-69). Reagan's address framed the Cold War in the starkest moral terms. In the famous passage for which this address would be most remembered the president declared, "Yes, let us pray for the salvation of all of those who live in that totalitarian darkness—pray they will discover the joy of knowing God. But until they do . . . they are the focus of evil in the modern world." Meeting the challenge of this "evil empire" he added, was partly a matter of military strength; but the real crisis posed by the Cold War was "a spiritual one . . . a test of moral will and faith" (Reagan 1983, 364).

The mainstream press sharply criticized Reagan's address for dangerously entangling foreign policy and sectarianism. But the evangelical preachers in the audience loved it, cheering joyously as an orchestra played "Onward Christian Soldiers" (Lewis 1983). The president's foreign policy alliance with evangelical leaders was solidified a week later, when Falwell, the only Christian Right leader who had been speaking out against the nuclear freeze, was invited to the White House for a lengthy discussion with Reagan about how the Moral Majority could mobilize support for the president's "peace through strength" position. A few days later, National Security Council staffers briefed Falwell and supplied him with material he used to produce a glossy document that the Moral Majority mailed out en masse. The final page of the brochure shows a picture of Reagan and Falwell in the Oval Office, a partnership that promised more evangelical support for the president's controversial foreign policy and more stature for a prominent leader of the Christian Right. "Rev. Jerry Falwell might have become more than a crucial factor in our great nuclear arms debate," the prominent journalist Haynes Johnson wrote of the Reagan-Falwell alliance. He might also have been writing "a new, potentially fateful chapter in the story of church and state relationships in America."³⁶

The Christian Right never faltered in its support of Reagan's anti-Communist foreign policy initiatives. Indeed, the White House's controversial extension of this policy to Latin America, where Protestant missionaries were heavily concentrated, won the president strong praise from the Christian Right (Haberman 2005, 252). Reagan enlisted evangelical support for his anti-Communist policy in Nicaragua and El Salvador, offering Dobson and other evangelical leaders personal White House briefings on Central America.³⁷ The president prepared a short message in defense of the White House's

36. Haynes Johnson, "the Falwell-Reagan Connection," *Philadelphia Inquirer*, April 6, 1983; found in folder: Moral Majority (1 of 4), OA 9079 (box 7), Morton Blackwell Files, Reagan Library; see also Report, Special Briefing Opposing an Immediate Nuclear Freeze," Moral Majority Publication (Spring 1983), *ibid*. The Reagan archives also include a Gallup Poll commissioned by the National Association of Evangelicals that showed fundamentalist Christians were more likely than the general public to be against a nuclear freeze. News Release, July 5, 1983, folder, "Nuclear Freeze (1 of 10), OA 9079 (Box 7), *ibid*.

37. For example, see Carl Anderson Papers, Dobson Briefing 1-30-86; Morton Blackwell Papers, Box 56—Misc WH (3 of 7); Morton Blackwell—Box 58—Hispanic Evangelicals Briefing 9-14-83, Reagan Library.

Central American policy that was distributed to more than 1,400 religious radio stations, the impetus for the Christian media to mount an extensive grassroots mobilization effort targeting Congress.³⁸ While the civil rights and antiwar movements waged a full-scale attack on the modern presidency—an assault that continued with the strong resistance to the Reagan doctrine—conservative religious insurgents formed a partnership with the White House that advanced a transformation of an executive-centered party system.

Religion and the Reagan “Revolution”

The ties between Reagan and the Christian Right forged on the administration’s tax program and its policy of “peace through strength” assuaged some the evangelical leaders’ deep disappointment with the administration. They protested the marginalization of their social issues but deeply appreciated Reagan’s collaboration with evangelical leaders in its effort to lower taxes and fight communism. The Reagan doctrine, which had deep historical roots in the evangelical movement, was especially important to the Religious Right. “The world situation,” Reagan stated in an interview with *Conservative Digest* during the 1984 campaign, would be the “single most important thing” his administration would address during a second term (*Conservative Digest*, September 1984, 16). Leaders like Dobson and Falwell, who were given access to the White House and National Security Council, agreed, and argued that it would be self-defeating to antagonize the administration (Reed 1996, 114-15). Following their lead, evangelical Christians cast 80% of their votes for Reagan in his landslide victory of 1984 (Menendez 1996, 143).

Beyond the realm of policy, the Reagan presidency gave the Christian Right and its conservative social agenda enormous symbolic recognition. Reagan’s visionary rhetoric and unabashed celebration of America as a city on a hill persuaded the principal leaders of the Christian Right that he was with them, even when the actions of his administration did not support such a perception. Cal Thomas, a key figure in the Moral Majority, described Reagan as the Christian Right’s “surrogate Messiah.”³⁹ Reagan’s presidency established an enduring alliance between conservative religious groups and the GOP: in every presidential election since 1980, the Christian Right has focused its energies on electing the Republican candidate. Ralph Reed, a prominent movement figure, credits Reagan with leading religious conservatives “out of the wilderness” and “giving their concerns a viability in the political system that they had never had before” (1996, 116). As future Chief Justice John Roberts, then serving in the White House Office of Legal Counsel, argued in defending the president against the charge of Bob Jones III that the Reagan White House had been captured by pragmatists, such an indictment was truly “remarkable, given the political costs this administration has incurred in promoting the

38. Memorandum, Carl Anderson to William Lacy, March 5, 1986, folder “RR Nicaragua tape for Christian Media,” box OA 17967, Carl Anderson Papers, Reagan Library.

39. Thomas quote in Martin (2004, 49).

interests of Fundamental Christians."⁴⁰ Yet Reed and many other Christian Right activists paid a price for this support. Unlike the oppositional civil rights movement in the 1960s, which won tangible reforms from their uneasy alliance with a formidable president, the Christian Right, smitten by the power and stature of the executive office, accepted a form of co-optation from Reagan that may have contributed to the frustration of some of its most sacred causes.

Conclusion: Executive Power, Movements, and American Democracy

The relationship between the modern presidency and large-scale social movements, no matter how uneasy, has been a critical dimension of American political development. The two most important cases of presidential-movement collaboration during the past half-century show that these uneasy alliances impose costs on each partner: presidents risk becoming so tied to an ideological cause as to compromise their special commitment to law and national consensus; social activists gamble that their idealistic zeal will be co-opted in forming an alliance with a centralizing, mainstream institution. Nonetheless, during the strife of the sixties, and the final dramatic stages of the Cold War, presidents and social activists deemed these costs acceptable; they calculated that they needed each other to break through the imposing obstacles to change that define the American political system. The cases we have studied make clear that the presidency-social movement nexus is fraught with tension; at the same time, each suggests that collaboration between the White House and social activists was indispensable to the important changes that occurred during the second half of the twentieth century. The tempestuous collaboration between Johnson and civil rights activists led to the enactment of laws and the deployment of national administrative power that breathed new life into the Fourteenth and Fifteenth Amendments and extended the rights revolution to de facto practices that disadvantaged people of color, women, and the disabled. The alliance between a populist conservative and evangelical Christians infused American domestic and foreign policy with moral fervor and gave rise to a more programmatic and polarized party system.

Because the social movements of the 1960s grew out of an unprecedented clash between America's oppositional culture and the modern executive establishment, which presumed to embody its aspirations, Johnson became the focus of the activists' sense of national betrayal (Hecllo 1996). And yet, civil rights organizations and the other movements these associations helped inspire—feminists, environmentalists, and consumer advocates—believed they had no recourse but to forge ties with the administrative state. The new public interest movements of the 1970s, Jeffrey Berry has observed, followed from their leaders' desire "to transcend 'movement politics' with organizations that could survive beyond periods of intense emotion" (1984, 28). They championed statutes and

40. Memorandum, John Roberts to Fred Fielding, January 4, 1984, folder "Bob Jones University (Dr. Ng)," box 6, John Roberts Papers, Reagan Library.

court rulings that would make administrative agencies more responsive to social causes than they had been in the past. But participation in administrative politics has exacted a steep price: since the 1960s, as Charles Tilly observes, professional political organizers and centralized reform organizations “have taken an increasingly prominent part in promoting social movements” (2004, 13).

In recent years, both conservative and liberal activists have taken steps to respond to this criticism. Recognizing that their alliance with Reagan distanced them from rank-and-file supporters who provided foot soldiers and voters who would support their causes, conservative Christians at the end of the 1980s refocused their organizing talents on forming a strong grassroots political movement. Through organizations like the Christian Coalition, which was directed by Ralph Reed, leaders of the religious right emphasized getting conservative evangelicals involved at the local level of the Republican Party, where they were able to have greater influence on future Republican nominees at the state, local, and national level. These localized efforts mobilized new voters, enhanced other forms of participation, such as neighborhood canvassing, and gave Christian activists tremendous influence over GOP nominations and national platforms, especially after the revamped grassroots evangelical organizations were credited with their party’s capture of both the House and Senate in the 1994 congressional elections (Haberman 2005, 251-52). The elevation of George W. Bush, saved from alcoholism by a born-again experience and counseled by Morton Blackwell protégé, Karl Rove, firmly established the Christian Right grassroots network as a central part of a national Republican “machine” that successfully deployed a reciprocal top-down and bottom-up campaign strategy in the 2004 election (Milks and Rhodes 2007). In contrast to the civil rights movement of the 1960s, the Christian Right thus set about from the start to build and remake *the party* with which they were most closely aligned.

This example would not be lost on progressive candidates and activists intent on revitalizing the Democratic Party. Improving on the innovative techniques that the Bush-Cheney campaign developed in 2004, Barack Obama further refined and greatly expanded the multilayered grassroots campaign that joined his presidential candidacy to party-building. Tellingly, this effort was supported by a network of activist liberal groups, composed of organizations like MoveOn.org, the National Women’s Political Caucus, the Service Employees International Union, and the National Council of La Raza, led by activists who have sought both to learn from and counteract the Christian Right’s success in mobilizing new voters and lobbying for its causes (Frates 2009).

Significantly, Obama’s campaign organization was kept intact after the 2008 election and ensconced in the Democratic National Committee, where the president and key White House advisors, such as David Plouffe, envisaged Organizing for America (OFA) as the grassroots arm of the party. Although OFA, facing an uphill battle amid the controversy aroused by the president’s health care bill and the stubborn persistence of the Great Recession, could not fend off a Republican landslide in the 2010 congressional elections, it played a key part in mobilizing support for the administration’s Patient Protection and Affordable Care Act and Obama’s 2012 reelection campaign

(Milkis, Rhodes, and Charnock 2012).⁴¹ Representing what might be considered a coming of age of Johnson's Great Society, Obama and his broad network of supporters forged a coalition of minorities, youth, and educated white voters, especially women. In turn, this liberal coalition was strongly countered by insurgent forces that the Reagan presidency empowered, newly energized by the rise of the Tea Party movement, whose followers were determined to hold the GOP accountable to the conservative principles—tax relief, family values, and patriotism—that Reagan and his Christian Right allies had trumpeted.⁴² The bitter struggle over national health care reform—the holy grail of progressive politics since the New Deal—revealed how the partnerships forged between the White House and social movements during the Johnson and Reagan years had spawned a politics that left the country polarized along ideological and racial lines. While about three-fifths of Hispanics and three-fourths of African Americans who voted in 2012 said they wanted Obama's health care law maintained or even expanded, nearly three-fifths of whites said they wanted it repealed (Brownstein 2012).

At the dawn of the twenty-first century, then, a new politics has emerged that combines executive prerogative, party politics, and social activism. It remains to be seen whether this reconfiguration of the relationship between the presidency and social movements will ameliorate or intensify the alienation and mistrust that the public has expressed for the national government since the late 1960s. But the integration of the national parties and movement politics seems to have contributed to the American public's growing interest and participation in politics during the past decade, as well as to the serious, passionate debate over the war on terror and health care reform. At the same time, as many pundits lament, the polarized politics that currently riles presidential politics and governance might pose a risk to constitutional forms and antagonize an American citizenry that is put off by chronic partisan rancor and policy stalemate. Can presidents and social activists be joined and still retain the distinctive virtues they have traditionally bestowed on the American polity? This is the fundamental question that emerged when these two forces combined roughly 50 years ago, serving as a potent engine of reform and recasting the very character of American politics.

41. After the 2012 election, Obama's organization was recast as Organizing for Action, which was established as a nonprofit "social welfare" organization that would mobilize grassroots support for the progressive causes championed by Obama and his coalition: implementation of the Patient Protection and Affordable Care Act, immigration reform, climate change legislation, and gun control. Removing his organization from the Democratic National Committee, President Obama promised his followers that it would strengthen its potential as a grassroots advocacy group. Such a move, of course, also reinforces the development of an *executive-centered* Democratic Party. <http://www.barackobama.com/about/about-ofa/> (accessed April 21, 2013).

42. Support for the Tea Party is not synonymous with support for the Christian Right. But survey analyses have shown that Tea Party supporters tend to have conservative opinions not just about economic issues, but also about issues such as abortion and same-sex marriage (Pew Forum on Religion and Politics 2011). Moreover, Tea Party and Christian Right leaders have collaborated on issue advocacy and electoral campaigns. The alliance between Tea Party and Christian Right activists formed the foundation of the Faith and Freedom Coalition, organized by Ralph Reed, which was very active in the 2012 Republican primaries and general election (Becker 2012; Kilgore 2011).

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