

The Christian Right and US Foreign Policy today

Written by Lee Marsden

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LEE MARSDEN, APR 14 2010

In a recent article on this site, Shireen Hunter warns against over emphasising the role of religion in international relations arguing that 'religion is neither the source of conflicts and disputes nor a panacea for global problems'. Such caution is justified and the recent enthusiasm for considering the religious dimension in international relations must be tempered by the reality that religion is but one of many competing interests demanding the attention of political elites in determining foreign policy choices. However, it is a significant voice and its increased prominence is due in no small measure, for western audiences at least, to the influence of the Christian Right in US domestic politics and international affairs during the Bush administration.[i]

The death and semi-retirement of prominent leaders together with the resounding Democratic election victories in 2008, might suggest that the movement has reached its nadir and is no longer worthy of consideration. I would argue, however, that the movement is highly resilient and continues to influence US foreign policy at the micro level in the delivery rather than the formation of US foreign policy.

The Christian Right emerged as a force within US politics in the late 1970s as conservative evangelicals and right wing Catholics became increasingly disillusioned with the Carter presidency. As a reaction against what they saw as the failed promise of a born again presidency a plethora of Christian Right organisations emerged. The most prominent of these was the Moral Majority, which led opposition to the equal rights amendment, abortion and later stem cell research, opposition to sex outside marriage, support for prayer in schools, and support for Israel. The movement was primarily concerned with domestic politics but moved into the foreign policy arena in support of Reagan's crusade against the 'evil empire' and to avoid liberal legislation being introduced via the back door by United Nations' advocacy of women's' and gay rights.

The easy access to the White House enjoyed by the movement was curtailed by Reagan's successors in the White House with the first Bush presidency showing little enthusiasm for consultation with the movement and Clinton being the subject of a vitriolic campaign highlighting his character flaws. The movement eventually re-emerge as a significant foreign policy actor towards the end of the Clinton presidency when it spearheaded a campaign with neoconservatives and civil liberties organisations for religious freedom in Sudan.

The Christian Right recognised their potential to become significant political actors in the US polity after Pat Robertson's unsuccessful presidential attempt in 1988. Robertson's Christian Coalition showed the way by successfully infiltrating the Republican Party and its supporters taking over numerous state parties to such an extent that today they constitute some forty percent of the party. This political force, organised around a small number of key social issues and fiscal conservatism, was utilised by Karl Rove to engineer George W. Bush's victories in the 2000 and 2004 election. As a reward for mobilising support for his presidential bids, Bush, himself a conservative evangelical, welcomed leaders of the Christian Right into the White House, through face-to-face meetings and consultations and weekly conference calls to discuss administration policy. Further rewards included the establishment of a Faith Based and Community Initiative programme, which enabled faith based organisations (largely Christian Right) to bid for federal funding to deliver social and medical programmes at home and abroad.

Christian Right leaders in organisations and both houses of Congress seized the opportunity presented them to persuade the president to endorse a Religious Freedom Act, which would monitor the human rights record of all

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countries and require the US government to advocate religious freedom in those countries. They also successfully persuaded him to engage with Africa and introduce the President's Emergency Plan for AIDS Relief, which pledged \$15 billion to AIDS/HIV relief on the continent. One third of this money was ring fenced for abstinence only programmes, while a global gag rule forbade any US personnel from advising women on abortion on any US funded programme. Assistance programmes were increasingly carried out by Christian Right organisations such as Operation Blessing, World Vision and Samaritan's Purse. These consistently tested the boundaries of church state separation as they delivered USAID and evangelistic programmes throughout the developing world.

On the big foreign policy decisions in the post 9/11 world, however, the Christian Right became cheerleaders rather than influencers of US foreign policy. In the global war on terror while Christian Right leaders, including Jerry Falwell, Pat Robertson and Franklin Graham excoriated Muslims, the president sought to differentiate between 'good' and 'bad' Muslims while emphasising shared values. The decision to go to war with Iraq was made on perceptions of national interest rather than religious grounds. Nonetheless, moral legitimacy was conferred by Richard Land and other leading Christian Right leaders who produced a 'just war' justification for the conflict to counter opposition to the war from the Pope and mainline US churches. Throughout the conflict, the Christian Right remained the leading advocates and supporters of the war.

Support for Israel has always been a major concern of the Christian Right and the administration proved to be the most supportive of post war administrations. To what extent this was due to Christian Right influence as opposed to Bush's own objectives or neoconservative influence is a moot point. The movement was unwilling to see any peace settlement that would trade Israeli held land for peace and yet Bush was willing to support Sharon's unilateral decision to withdraw from Gaza. Bush also pledged the US to a two-state solution, embarked on the Road Map and Annapolis to seek a resolution to the conflict, albeit with minimal commitment or enthusiasm.

The movement was effective in achieving small changes in policy through effective lobbying when Bush's condemnation of Israeli incursions into Hebron and targeted assassinations of Hamas leaders in 2002 and 2003 was abandoned. Christians United for Israel, the leading Christian Zionist organisation, also claim credit for persuading the president to allow Israel more time to weaken Hezbollah and Hamas during Israel's attacks on Southern Lebanon in 2006 and Gaza in 2008/9. In reality, the administration required little persuasion and Christian Right leaders found themselves pushing against an open door.

With the change in administration, observers expected to see any residual influence of the Christian Right diminish. Indeed, the loss of a number of their leaders in the 2006 mid term elections, followed by a clean sweep by the Democrats in the 2008 general election might have heralded their demise. However, Barack Obama, courting the evangelical vote, has continued Bush's faith-based initiatives with a reconstituted Office of Faith Based and Neighborhood Partnerships, and appointed a 25-member religious advisory council, including representatives of the Christian Right. Second generation Christian Right leaders such as Rick Warren and TD Jakes, continue to enjoy privileged access to the president.

The real achievement and claim for long lasting influence comes at the micro level. The Christian Right have become skilled political operators infiltrating and controlling many local Republican parties. Supporters lobby and campaign around a narrow range of interests and encourage senators and congressional representatives to vote in accordance with the movement's issues through a series of punishments and rewards determined by voting records on those issues. Support for Israel in both houses of Congress remains overwhelming across the aisle. Conservative evangelicals have risen to the highest levels within the US armed services and now constitute almost two thirds of all military chaplains. Members of the Christian Right are disproportionately represented at the delivery end of US foreign policy. Increasingly, military chaplains are an essential point of intelligence, contact and liaison with Muslim leaders in Iraq and Afghanistan, an area that becomes problematic when conservative evangelical chaplains consider their interlocutors to be spiritual enemies.

USAID continues to solicit grant applications to deliver overseas assistance from Christian Right organisations creating a perception, particularly among Muslim recipients, that US foreign policy and Christianity go hand in hand. The ability of the movement to ally themselves with other right wing groupings such as neoconservatives and, more

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recently, the Taxed Enough Already (tea) party means that they cannot be written off any time soon. The Christian Right are marginalised to the extent that Obama has greatly increased broad religious representation in advisory bodies but continue to exert influence as they deliver US foreign policy on the ground.

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[i] For a more detailed discussion of the Christian Right and US Foreign policy see Stuart Croft, 'Thy will be done: The new foreign policy of America's Christian Right', *International Politics*, 44, 2007; Esther Kaplan, *With God on their Side*, New York: The New Press; Lee Marsden, *For God's Sake: The Christian Right and US Foreign Policy*, London: Zed Books, 2008; and John Micklethwaite and Adrian Wooldridge, *God is Back: How the global Rise of Faith is Changing the World*, London: Penguin, 2010.

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