American Dream, American Nightmare? Students Respond to White Christian Nationalism

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Introduction
by
George Faithful

_America itself is a dream. It is a nightmare. It is a tool, a concept, an ideology, a symbol._
-Aidan Gray-

What happened in the U.S. Capitol on January 6, 2021? Why? And what should concerned citizens think, feel, and do in response? How you answer the questions reveals a great deal about your own political perspective. Was it an “insurrection,” “riot,” “protest,” “coup,” “righteous correction,” or simply “one big misunderstanding”? By whom? “Left-wing conspiracy”? “Right-wing rabble”? Others? However you answer the questions, the 1/6/21 event was the culmination of longstanding, intertwined dynamics in the religious and political scenes in the U.S.

My own background as a historical theologian is in the history of concepts (incl. doctrine) in Christianity in general. I wrote my doctoral dissertation on the intersection of nationalism and Christianity in Germany in the 1940s and 50s. (Published as _Mothering the Fatherland_, Oxford, 2014.) When I wrote it I thought, naively, that Christian nationalism hadn’t happened here in the U.S. and that the topic would not be of any particular contemporary relevance. I was wrong.

In Fall 2022, I taught “Religious Nationalism” here for the first time. I wasn’t sure what to expect—I never am—but even less so this time than usual. After over a decade of teaching full-time in higher ed, I have learned to measure my expectations. Whatever they were, the students exceeded them.

For the first time in my career, I witnessed a simultaneous overlap between students’ personal passion, urgent current events, course content, and my expertise. Usually three out of four ain’t bad, but this was extraordinary. I present their best work here. But they are, together, a representative cross-section of that first semester.
What we as a nation has witnessed is a resurgence of religious nationalism. It isn’t always white (depending on how you define “white”) and it isn’t always Christian (same), but that particular racial-religious intersection plays an especially prominent role, sometimes more, sometimes less, in what follows.

I regret that our group contained a lack of diversity in some key ways: few Evangelicals, no Republicans, and no self-professed conservatives, political or otherwise. This limited how much we could hope to understand together—and as a former Evangelical, Republican, and conservative, my own memories can only accomplish so much—so that the following pages show a similar lack of inclusion of those key voices. As evidenced by the Kristin Kobes Du Mez’s *Jesus & John Wayne*, some of the most compelling critiques of contemporary Evangelical circles come from within them.

The co-authors’ words are their own. I do not always agree with them. Indeed, they often disagree with each other. The title, for example, began as Gray’s declarative statement. In the form of a question, some of them respond to that same statement “yes,” some “no,” others “maybe.” As you read, take care not to construe the authors (“California college students”) or their subject (“[usually] white [and often also] Christian nationalists”) as monolithic blocs. There is significant diversity, even to the point of divergence, within each group.

In order to showcase their work in its purest form, I discerned my role as editor more as compiler than as micromanager (other than running spellcheck one last time). In this way, future student readers will be able to better measure their expectations of their own writing—especially in the likely event that this will be required reading the next time I teach the class.

We learn from each other. Whether you are reading these works as a student or as a member of the general public, I invite you to learn from them, as I have, even as you contribute your own voice to answering the questions: Who are we? What is this place? And who—what?—should we be together?
How to Manage
When Someone You Love
is a Member of a White Nationalist Group
by
Kaya Bottmeyer

There is no simple way to address this topic. The experience of “losing” a loved one to extremist views and to extremist groups is often confusing and painful. It is something that I personally can say is complicated and wrought with feelings of betrayal. There are many different types of extremist groups, and in the current state of the world, some of the most common extremist groups consist of religious or nationalist (or both) groups that function under the belief that they seem to know how the world should function more than the rest of us. For example, neo-Nazis, Islamic extremists, and in reflection of my experience, white nationalists. It is crucial to understand a few things in this work: how these groups work, why people join, and how to help them leave. Now, with anything as complex as this, there is a need for an understanding of the broad array of reasons why people find themselves in these situations. With a topic as delicate as extremist groups, one must simultaneously hold the seriousness and capacity for hate and violence of the groups, as well as the capacity for change and reflection from its members.

While the focus of my writing will be through the lens of my own experience with a family member joining a white nationalist group, it is valuable to understand that much of this information and advice can be applied to someone in any sort of extremist group. We are in a time with an unfortunate presence of many so-called “hate groups,” which subsist off the feelings of misunderstanding and dejection of the general public. In America, The Southern Poverty Law Center tracked a rising tide of hate groups from 2000 to 2010, increasing from around 600 to 1000
total. These numbers decreased again until 2015, where they rose until 2019, and are now dropping off again, with a total of 733 in 2021. These numbers include, but are certainly not limited to, groups such as the KKK, Aryan Nations, Nation of Islam, American Freedom Party, Westboro Baptist Church, Jewish Defense League, and the Proud Boys. The reason for listing those is that it shows there are numerous different types of groups people could fall into, with many vastly different missions and priorities. Notably, white (and often Christian) nationalist groups are prevalent in the US at the moment and ebb and flow with the state of American politics.

The reasons why people join these groups varies by individual, but there are certain factors that often play a role. Studies, such as one done in 2021, find that some of the most common factors in joining are related to trauma (Brown, 2021). ACE’s, which are adverse childhood experiences, or family instability are one of the most noted threads in those who join these groups. Beyond childhood, unprocessed or unresolved trauma of any kind appears to contribute significantly to individuals joining. Shannon Foley Martinez became a neo-Nazi at 15 years old. She had grown up in a dysfunctional family and never felt that she was close to those around her. After being sexually assaulted her freshman year of high school, her feelings of isolation and a lack of support and love lead to her joining a neo-Nazi group. She reflects on it now, saying, “I felt so worthless. I was just like, who’s worse than the Nazis? They’ve gotta take me in.” This ties into some of the other contributing factors, such as low self-confidence, a lack of a sense of belonging, and feelings of being rejected by the rest of society. Often times members find a community in an extremist group, people who will talk to them every day, listen, commiserate, and overall help them feel like they belong to something bigger than themselves. Financial instability and mental illness are both also connected to joining, but it is important to note that the relationship between these factors and joining is not necessarily causal. A final notable factor in joining is a reorienting event. Reorienting events can be many different things, but essentially they are something that changes the way an
individual views the world around them. These reorienting events cause the individual to reconsider their worldview with a harsher stance. An example would be being charged with gun possession, pushing someone towards a group that protects 2nd Amendment rights. Overall, there are many different factors in why someone joins an extremist group, there is not one single pipeline, and members of different groups often have different reasons for joining.

As a loved one, you can keep an eye out for certain prerequisites or signs that someone might radicalize. The best place to step in and help is before someone has fully joined or radicalized, so knowing what to look for is really valuable. There are 5 main signs to keep an eye on, and the more of these you see, the more likely someone is heading towards radicalization. First off, someone who already subscribes to conspiracy theories may be more easily targeted or drawn into extremist groups. Second, fitting multiple of the aforementioned risk factors such as financial instability, issues with self-confidence, and a lack of a sense of belonging could be signs that someone may end up joining. Third, is noticing that someone is pulling away and becoming distant, or becoming more angry with the world around them. Fourth, if their social media use has changed, they become consumed with social media, especially if they are listening to extreme news outlets or media figures. Fifth, is the use of slurs towards any race or ethnicity especially when used in conjunction with hate speech and the displaying of hateful imagery such as white nationalist style flags, swastikas, racist imagery, and more. At this juncture, it is a lot easier to step in and help guide someone away, especially if you are able to identify why their behavior is changing.

The reason why all of this is so important to me, is that I lost a family member to an extremist group. My uncle was adopted at a young age and never knew his birth family. He struggled with bipolar and had multiple swings of mania and depression over the past decade, sometimes more positive episodes like getting into yoga or traveling on whims. He was extremely kind and loving, but when he lost his cool he really lost it. He struggled with keeping close friends long term,
and with financial instability. I share all this to compare his situation to the risk factors I’ve mentioned previously, so you can see a real life example of those at play. His story with joining an extremist group began in 2016, when he became a staunch Trump supporter. He was often present at rally’s and enjoyed being a part of the whole movement. In 2017, he participated in an anti-hate rally against the alt-right in Berkeley. He ended up getting beat up by members of Antifa, and ended up meeting the Al-right protestors who were also getting attacked. From this experience, he bonded with them, and they formed a sort of little group of community throughout the day. These people he befriended were members of the proud boys, who he then became quite close with. They bonded over shared dejected feelings and it provided him with a community, and a form of camaraderie. With this, he dove deeper into the alt-right movement and the Proud Boys. He slipped further from his friends and family, and when he came out of his manic episode he quickly realized what a drastic decision he’d made and how many people he had lost the respect of around him. He felt so hopeless that unfortunately he took his life in early 2018. Seeing this from the outside, being someone who loves my Uncle Dave, it was a really challenging experience. It was confusing, causing me to think “how did this happen?” It was complicated, causing me to think “can I support you when I disagree with this affiliation?” It leads to major feelings of betrayal, and you feel like you can’t do anything and like you don’t know the person anymore. You don’t know what to do, or how to help the person best.

Deradicalization is really the portion that matters most. It is important to maintain compassion if you find yourself losing a loved one to an extremist group. Patience and understanding are often your greatest tools, as so much of deradicalization is about timing and leveling with someone. Studies show that intervention, when done properly, is the most effective tool in helping people deradicalize, alongside disillusionment with the group, or individual deradicalization processes such as attending therapy or reading the right books (Brown, 2021). With
that in mind, some of the best suggestions for anyone in an extremist group or that is showing signs of radicalizing are as follows. Being there, by supporting the individual and helping them feel less alone is a great way to help them think differently about their support system. Along with this, having compassion is crucial throughout, trying to understand that sometimes people are stuck in groups whose ideologies they don’t truly believe, or haven’t had enough exposure to other ideas that they don’t know how to get out. Giving individuals books to read at the right time can be really helpful, allowing them to be exposed to ideas about deradicalizing when they are receptive can give them some power in the decision to deradicalize, which can be really effective. Quite notable as well, is helping people solve their “why.” This can be different things for different people, but working to resolve any sort of unprocessed trauma seems to be one of the best ways to support people in deradicalizing. Knowing too, that you can only truly change yourself, and if you have played any role in their trauma, working on yourself first can help them resolve their trauma and pave the way for them to begin their own process of recovery.

As for prevention, there are certain measures that can be taken to try to keep someone from radicalizing and joining an extremist group, especially young people. Increasing opportunities of exposure to diverse populations is a main prevention option. The more interactions you have with different kinds of people from a young age, the harder it is to hate people for things like their ethnicity or race. Providing more opportunities for mental health care is also very helpful, even though there isn’t a causal relationship, better mental health care can aid disengagement. Increasing media literacy among the public can help people learn how they may be targeted, and know extremist catchphrases and lingo. Along with that, teaching the public how to identify and handle misinformation on social media can prevent targeting or radicalization. For further info, the SPLC reports on Preventing Youth Radicalization provide in depth information on what parents, teacher and the larger community can do to try to prevent youth from joining extremist groups.
Citations


Faith is a curious thing. Just like God, faith means something different to everyone. Growing up, I was somehow sure that God existed, but I was not sure of my faith. By that I mean to say, it was hard to imagine a world without a higher power, or some vague governing figure guiding us through life; I knew I believed in the existence of something but what was “God” like, and what does He believe in? With so many different factions of Christianity it can be difficult to ascertain what certain people want you to believe about God and what you really believe about Him. Despite the views that right-wing Christians try to instill upon the world, I choose to believe in a Christian God who does not condemn homosexuality or premarital sex, because why would you want to worship a God who judges people for being who they are?

When I was a child my father, an Anglo-Saxon male, would recite to me words of wisdom, usually from popular culture of his time. The most relevant piece of wisdom he bestowed upon me that would carry on into my adulthood, consequently, came from a 1966 animated children’s movie: *It's the Great Pumpkin, Charlie Brown*. In the cartoon, Charlie Brown’s best friend Linus wisely states, “There are three things I’ve learned never to discuss with people: religion, politics, and the Great Pumpkin.” Growing up in a religiously ambiguous household with an ethnically Jewish mother, a former Mormon father, and attending Episcopalian Sunday school all the while, I wondered why religion was a taboo discussion amongst polite society. My cross section of beliefs led to even more curiosity as I became acutely aware of how religion does greatly affect society. One would think if something was not to be discussed among polite society it wouldn't have a profound impact on the daily lives of people. I was wrong.
My personal idea of Jesus was who we mourned in the Nicene Creed, and God the father who we recited a daily prayer each night before bed. I never grasped the full meaning of these rituals imbued upon me by the church, but I understood the meaning of faith and I knew that I believed. However, I came to realize that ambiguous upbringing and obscure faith led to strong conflicts in the modern world of religion and politics. I remember one Easter Sunday when I was sixteen and not allowed to attend mass with my boyfriend at his family’s church because they were Catholic, and I was “Christian”. I couldn’t understand why I wouldn’t be allowed to partake in communion if everyone is welcome at my progressive Episcopalian congregation in Berkeley. Do we not all pray to the same God? I was similarly confused when my paternal grandfather who had been absent for most of my life came back into the picture, my mother’s only link to her Jewish heritage. It was then that she told me that she had attended temple and Jewish Sunday school until her late teens. All this time I hadn’t known that my mother was taught Hebrew, lit the menorah, and had seder on Passover. I asked her if that means I’m Jewish, and she said, “kind of”. Does that mean I’ve been praying to the wrong God? Does the Jewish God have different beliefs than my Christian God? It was hard to say.

I didn’t place too much importance onto my Jewish heritage and Christian-light upbringing until very recently. I had always known I was going to be a lawyer. Ever since elementary school, since my first in-class debate, I knew it is what I am meant to do. I was fortunate enough to be further encouraged to pursue the law path by all my teachers and advisors leading up to college. When I finally settled on my choice of school, Dominican University, and my major of political science, an interesting opportunity came my way. My father had been bragging about my college plans on his online blog; one of his friends from San Rafael reached out to him and said that he had a job at his law firm, near campus, if I was interested. I was completely shocked to have this chance presented to me. I didn’t think I would start working at a law firm until law school or even later, let
alone freshman year of undergrad. I didn’t think I was qualified; I didn’t think I deserved it, and I had no idea what to expect. I asked my father if he could tell me anything about his friend, my future boss, and he said, “he is Jewish and very proud of it”. By this he meant that my boss, Mr. Leviloff, is an active member in the Jewish community of Marin and a former teacher at his synagogue. Mr. Leviloff knew that my mother was Jewish, and therefore he called me “part of the tribe” though I have never been to a temple nor participated in Yom Kippur. Does being “part of the tribe” mean that we pray to the same Judeo-Christian God? I was never quite sure.

I did good work at the firm and was well-liked, so I gathered that my background had nothing to do with any approval I received from my job. A few months into my time there, I was sent out on an assignment to a client’s house in Lucas Valley. The client was an elderly man with some mental troubles, and he was Jewish. Before I left for the assignment, my boss told me that the client had been skeptical about my involvement with his case. It didn’t help that I was just shy of 19 and had only been working at the firm less than six months, through somewhat of a family connection. To ease my worries, my boss told me that I am more than qualified to gather information for this case and I need not doubt my abilities because of one grumpy old man. I drove to his house in my dad’s pickup truck one rainy day in December, blasting Christmas music through the sleepy Marin County suburb. When I arrived at the client's house, my investigation of the old man quickly turned into his peremptory interrogation of my background and qualifications. His manner was guarded and nearly hostile until I confided in him that my mother was Jewish, and that her father’s side came from prominent Marxist’s who were close friends of Leon Trotsky. All true statements, that I felt almost forced to offer up. My own last name from my father is as Anglo-Saxon as it gets, “Moody”. The rest of the interview went just fine, because once again I was “part of the tribe”, let alone the fact that I celebrated Christmas and Hanukkah that year.
It was this interaction that convinced me it was the right decision to dye my naturally blonde hair (courtesy of my father) dark brown before college and led me to believe that when I do become a lawyer, if I use my mother's Jewish maiden name, I might get more respect. The tricky thing is, no matter how I outwardly appear or am perceived by others I was not raised Jewish. Yes, I attended Hanukkah parties and ate latkes, but I had memorized the Lord's Prayer by five and was baptized at Grace Cathedral Episcopal church in San Francisco. I wondered how I could be raised on these Christian ideals but born into Judaism. My mother told me that when she was young, her parents took her to a synagogue where she learned about Jewish religion and culture, but ultimately, they knew she would choose for herself what she believed in. And even though my father was raised in the much more intense religious cult of Mormonism, he too came to his own conclusions in adulthood. Therefore, I was to be raised Anglican, with a Baptist grandmother and a Jewish but atheist grandfather. If I knew what my God believed in, despite my plethora of conflicting influences, I was sure my faith would be unshakable. Once again, I was wrong.

It is hard not to be aware of the intense political polarization in our current time. Elections are now won by extremely slim margins, and highly disputed by the losing party because of suspected “voter fraud”. Suddenly, you’re a leftist or a rightist, or your opinion does not matter. In the same way that my parents brought me up to seek my own faith, I form my own opinion of politics. I prayed for Biden to win the entire nail-biting election week of 2020. But what really shook my faith and was possibly the most religiously and politically appalling event in the past two years, was the events of January 6, 2021.

I was at my grandmother's house that morning, and as I was leaving, she asked me, “Did you hear what’s going on at the capitol?” I said no, “There’s some riot or something happening over there.” I thought that couldn’t be right, until I went home and saw my mother watching the news. Almost like a church, the capitol building is a sacred place, an honored establishment. I couldn’t
believe what was happening, the sheer audacity of it, the complete disregard for law, the violence and vandalism of America's symbol of democracy. The values those insurrectionists demonstrated that day were neither democratic nor patriotic, and definitely not God-fearing. When the real footage was released from that day, I became even more horrified at the reality of it all and what it would mean for the future. I recalled one scene on the Congress floor: several men with semi-automatic weapons going through desks of private documents, throwing things, and then called to action by one “leader” who said they should take a moment to thank God. They proceeded to thank Him for supporting “true patriots” and it was because of their faith that they were moved into action that day. How can one interpretation of God say that breaking the law is a punishable sin, and another can convince people that it is their divine right as American Christian Patriots to cause national chaos? As a person of faith, the notion that one's religion justifies their unilateral actions is alarming. This incident led me to the conclusion that God is a concept individually shaped by values and personal motivations, and faith is an attribute practiced formally or informally by believers. I am a believer, and my values of equality and fairness shape my idea of the God that I pray to.

When looking into the future juxtaposition of religion and politics, my Magic 8 Ball would read: outlook not good. I fear that as the political sphere becomes more polarized and the practice of politics within a democracy becomes more contentious to the people within it, religion will continue to be a battering ram used to fight between the right and left. The democrats did elect a Catholic president in 2020, but the Supreme Court is packed with religious conservatives bent on taking us back to the 19th century. Religion and politics are more publicized and criticized than ever. It may well be argued that one’s religious ideology is based on their motivations and can be directly tied to their politics. Therefore, if religious factions continue to have their antagonist and anarchic motivations legitimized by political figures, American democracy as we know it is in danger.
In the Name of Trump

by

Gina Dudley

On January 6th, 2021, I had just been hired as a front-desk member at the YMCA. We had a training that day to go over the new membership system being used. The event at the capitol started on my way to the meeting. When I walked into the back room, my manager had the news projected on the board, and my initial reaction was fear; why were people being violent, and why were they at the capitol? MAGA flags were filling the screen with visuals of people storming the capitol and fighting each other. Where were the police? Having also seen the Black Lives Matter movement on the news, I knew there were quick ways to mobilize police, so where were they when the threat was going inside our nation's capitol?

Being a Jewish woman who grew up in Idaho, I have a unique perspective on what it means to be American and how special it can be. I can vote, buy a lottery ticket, drive a car, and own a home. Privileges women do not get to take advantage of in other countries. However, the Jewish aspect of my identity has been a largely different story. Showing up to attend Rosh Hashanah and needing to pass through 3 security checkpoints at my Synagogue, seeing the Anne Frank memorial destroyed, and even having someone write ‘Gina Dudley is a dumb Jew’ on the bathroom wall when I was 13. I have spent my entire life watching Jewish people fall victim to crimes, a lot of the time in our place of worship. I know Freedom of Religion is one of five guaranteed rights in the first amendment, yet there are many religions, like Judaism, where this right does not seem guaranteed, and religion seems to become a threat to our well-being.

My sister is friends with my synagogue’s bomb dogs.
As a society, we celebrate our ‘successes’ and triumphant moments even when they are brought about through the oppression of other groups. Immediately after describing the 4th of July as “the gross injustice and cruelty to which he is constantly victim,” Frederick Douglass said, “there is not a nation on the earth guilty of practices, more shocking and bloody, than are the people of these United States, at this very hour” (Douglass). America, to me, is exactly this; we, as a nation, have the mindset that the ends justify the means and that it does not matter how we got to said point. Douglass is also furious about how the 4th of July celebrated “independence” while there was an active slave trade. This is exactly why I feel so negatively about the foundations of America; we celebrated our independence from British reign while holding captive another population of individuals. America is built on oppression.

This destructive pattern was repeated in WW2 when the U.S. fought Nazi Germany and its allies while actively captivating and persecuting Asians in America. However, in those same conditions, my Jewish grandfather was able to flee to the States with his parents, and that pilgrimage is why I sit here today. Safe. To be American is not to be blind to the privileges we are afforded, like free K-12 education, free choice when it comes to careers and schooling, government aid (however minimal it may be sometimes), and the ability to marry whom you want. However, it can be terrifying when those rights seem to come into danger.

On January 6th Congress sat down to certify the results of the 2020 presidential election. That is when loyal MAGA/ Trump supporters stormed the capitol in an attempt to stop this from being performed. The demographic of Trump supporters consists of largely white evangelical Christians and their voting patterns reflect that. 84 percent of white Evangelicals and 50 percent of white Catholics voted for Trump in 2020 (Nortey, 2021). Within these supporters were members of the Oath Keepers, Proud Boys, and the Three Percenters, known hate groups. The Oath Keepers recruit mainly ex-military individuals, whereas the Proud Boys are a far-right hate group almost
entirely made up of white males. Arguably, the most prominent group present that day was the Three Percenters. However, they are not a group but an ideology that believes there is a direct correlation between the U.S. government today and the British government in the 1700s (Southern Poverty Law Center, 2022). The individuals who align themselves with the Three Percent are openly anti-government and move with the belief that if the government can’t provide justice, it is the militia's turn to step in and demand it. That’s exactly what happened.

While there were three primary hate groups at the January 6th event, thousands of other citizens chose to be there independently. The challenge they faced was that there was no centering reason for each person to be there, no one thing tying everyone together. Watching footage, individuals are talking about being there to harm members of Congress, form a new government, stop the electoral certification, or because they thought their local representative would want them to be there. The one common theme among the group surrounded accusations about the 2020 election and it having been stolen. How Donald Trump had actually won re-election, but there was so much voter fraud and illegal activity occurring that Joe Biden was able to win (Grynbaum, 2022). Groups were given these ideas directly from Trump after losing the election, already being such faithful supporters of him, there was no choice but to take action.

Countless groups and individuals claim that the individuals at the Capitol were members of Antifa dressed as MAGA supporters. However, chat rooms that have been leaked from months leading up to the event prove otherwise (Decker & Broadwater, 2021). More individuals, including former Vice President Mike Pence, claim that it was “just another day in January” and that the media blew it out of proportion. A third group claims that federal agents were storming the Capitol, but the media turned their reporting to make it look like MAGA.

Everyone in attendance at the event was, in some capacity, a supporter of President Trump, no matter who or why they showed up. Being a Trump supporter leaves them to fall within the
The aforementioned demographic of white evangelical Christians or lay somewhere near it, creating a mixture of beliefs that include both politics and religion. The stronger that political religious force grew, the more radicalized it became. This happened because of the people’s ability to go to church and talk about politics and a political event and talk about religion, unlikely to encounter anyone who has an opposing viewpoint.

It wasn’t until I got home from YMCA training that I found out that individuals were at the Capitol hoping to stop the certification of electoral votes. It was not until the first semester of my sophomore year at university that I learned there had been praying inside the Senate Chambers. While watching the footage of this prayer, I felt my view of America shifting and the fear of persecution for my religion building.

Before the prayer, the event at the Capitol could have been tagged as being a result of nationalism, but after, it was clear that religious nationalism was present. Religious nationalism is the undying devotion to one’s country rooted in and influenced by religion. A defining moment caught on video happened when a man went to sit in the chair reserved for the Head of the Senate, asking another person to take a picture of him (New Yorker, 2021). Several others in the room challenged him for this decision, but he managed to redirect attention to the situation by suggesting a prayer. After this suggestion, all arguing ceased, and prayer commenced. Inside the United States Senate chambers.

Quotes from inside the Capitol on January 6th, 2021

“While we’re here, we may as well start a new government.”

“Wait, guys, let’s take a moment.” *all bow heads in prayer

Prayer inside the United States Senate chambers, a direct overlap of church and state.
The most shocking alternative to the January 6th event is the outlook that it was an act done to protect the Constitution and the fairness of our elections. They saw the entrance into the Capitol to stop a Constitutionally written process as their duty in order to protect democracy. Whose word were they operating off of when coming to that conclusion? None other than former President Trump, the runner-up in the election that was being certified (American Oversight).

There is nothing more proven than video and writing. Every single one of the alternative viewpoints has stemmed from the minds of people who were there or wish they could have been, showing no responsibility. There were hate groups and individuals there ready to take over the Capitol in the name of Trump, Religion, and Democracy. To say it was anything different would be a mistake, a misjudgment of the truth.

The individuals who were present that day are being held accountable and charged for the crimes committed, but there were thousands, so there will be people who never get consequences. As for why there were limited police there, they had initially been told to stand by while the Capitol officers were instructed not to use their heavy-duty crowd-control weapons. Moreover, despite seeing maps of the Capitol on Pro-Trump message boards and having ample warning that something could take place on that day, security released a memo that there was unlikely to be a threat (Broadwater, 2021).

How do we prevent something like this from happening again while also giving the people of the United States a voice to protest? The answer is simple: we must stop allowing threats to go unchecked and hold each other accountable. We must not allow such extreme beliefs with so little information and challenge each other to look at a broad spectrum of reporting. Extremist counterparts have been able to cause extreme violence because society has given them a platform and a microphone to speak through, it is time to take that away.
References


Home of the Free and Brave

by

Alexander Kulin

America, land of the free and home of the brave, once upon a time those words meant something so different than what to me today. Raised in a conservative household in the aftermath of 9/11 I was a kid full of patriotic fervor and hope for a great country I thought was equal under the groundwork of our forefathers. But as I got older it became more challenging for me to simply be shielded from the reality around me and people that look like me. America can be all the things it says and believes to be true about itself as a country but often falls short due to its hypocrisy. From corporate lobbying and its effects on legislation usually at the expense of its citizens to the military-industrial complex and its impact on intervention in areas that were never needed America perpetuates a power structure that affects minorities and the working class to keep working for the cultural elite. I’m not saying that I’m not proud or grateful to be an American but to ignore the inequalities because the effects haven’t reached your front door is irresponsible. As Fredrick Douglas said “now is the time, the important time. Your fathers have lived, died, and have done their work, and have done much of it well. You live and must die, and you must do your work”.

Although to the credit of the civil rights movement we have come a long way since the time of Fredrick Douglass at the same time, he calls out the hypocrisy of the day and we need to do the same.

Corporate lobbying is defined and justified by addressing whether an industry needs to be protected from an economic shock or foreign competition. The main goal of most corporate lobbying mostly aims to influence the decision-making of governments with regard to specific legislation or other governmental activities that can affect an organization. This has long been an outdated system that allows Corporations to directly influence politicians through fundraising their
campaigns and writing legislation through private legal groups to push the private agenda of the corporate elite usually at the expense of the American citizens. To give an idea of the reach and scope of corporate lobbying Congress each year spends 2 billion dollars lobbying by comparison corporations and private companies spend 6 billion dollars. It's clear to see why these companies have so much sway in private funding and propping up politicians in the hopes of mutual legislation to allow for more lax restrictions in their industry or to put restrictions in the form of whatever political ideology they stand behind. A great example of this is the Murdoch family who spends more than 500 million a year on right-leaning groups and thinks tanks to further legislation and far-right movements in America. The Murdoch family themselves are industry giants owning major stakes in about 40% of major news companies across America. Given the positions of a prominent family in media who have made it extremely clear in their affiliations and have sway financially but also in the media through ownership of Fox News and many other prominent new channels, it is a direct conflict of interest for one family to have sway in not only the media directly but also through corporate sponsorship. But there has also been a crucial and unalienable right until recently that has been under attack and the Murdoch family does have a huge role in the perpetuation of stigma against this; they are not the main contributors to the fall of Roe vs Wade(1973).

A Christian Legal group by the name of Alliance Defending Freedom was pivotal in the erosion of one of the most essential human rights in the 21st century working over the last 20 years to slowly chip away at abortion rights. The ADF has been involved in over 65 successful supreme court rulings being the major contributors in 13 of them. Many of these are on rulings on religious issues such as praying in schools to Anti-LGBT rulings such as the right to refuse service to gay couples at restaurants. So now the real question is how did this Christian legal slowly erode protections around Roe vs Wade? Christian legal groups and private think tanks' strategy for influencing legislation has a few steps first they find like-minded politicians on state and local levels,
write bills as a lobbying group, and then offer free legal representation to help fight all endeavors put forth by the officials that back them eventually petitioning the Supreme Court. The Jackson vs Dobbs ruling of Mississippi on July 22, 2022, was the turning point in which the ADF worked for hand in handwriting the legislation and backing their party with legal representation and fundraising in return for their unwavering support of challenging Jackson vs Dobbs as the ADF president said in their Vice documentary “you can get to the supreme court by winning or losing.” Religious values have been used as a galvanizing force even more in recent years with growing political tensions and an ever-expanding Christian nationalist movement along the right-leaning majority inside of the Supreme court this made it the perfect storm to allow Jackson vs Dobbs to be ruled that the abortion was not a protected constitutional right. The president of the ADF Kristen Waggoner describes the current times as a “Spiritual Awakening” for Evangelical Americans and that people are waking up to the truth. This makes me wonder as well how much the ideals of separation of church and state have been eroded or has there ever truly been a separation at all?

From the famous words “one nation under god indivisible” to George Bush’s famous line “God told me to end tyranny in Iraq,” many wars have been fought in recent times over religion. It’s hard to say that we ever had a true separation of church and state. As well, the Cold War along with Red Scare propaganda was portrayed as a war between God-loving freedom fighting Americans and godless heathens under an authoritarian regime trying to bring tyranny to our doorstep. Along with the fact that there has rarely President who hasn’t been Christian with a few notable exceptions such as Abraham Lincoln and Thomas Jefferson it’s pretty clear from the beginning that the separation of church and state has always been a blurry line as religion has always been a tool to galvanize support and to have common ground with the American people in politics. As well as the ADF president saying “the time is now for Christian Americans’ ” with a growing movement of Christian nationalism coupled with Trump Era rhetoric we see many of these same sentiments with the same
wording reiterated by the far right. I fear that although a group may not present themselves as far-right or adjacent they still can spread their same rhetoric through normative claims usually under the guise of “family”. This type of rhetoric is usually the beginning of what is referred to as the alt-right pipeline usually targeting alienated individuals from society which can incite mobilization of violence from hate groups as seen in Charlottesville, the January 6th insurrection, and the countless mass shootings which were perpetuated by individuals who had fallen down this road (Buffalo Shooting, Colorado Club Q Shooting, Pittsburg Synagogue Shooting). As seen in recent months with Kanye West’s antisemitic statements and his proclamation of love for Hitler there have been multiple credible threats of violence in synagogues all over the east coast and even a display of support from Neo Nazis in Los Angeles. Hate mobilizes quickly and can be spread through normative claims along with regressive themes such as Roe vs Wade we must not allow a place to build in modern society as it spreads faster than ever through social media. There is a way to help mitigate hate and restrict such groups from having increased influence over the legislation of our country and that starts with addressing the problem of corporate lobbying.

There are many improvements to be made to corporate lobbying to reduce the power of special interest lobbyists over lawmakers. The first step would be to ban lobbyist fundraising. Lobbyists themselves are given a limit on how much they can spend which is around $2,500 but many skirts around that minimum by holding fundraisers and bundling contributions together to give much more money. Banning lobbyist fundraising would be a step toward cutting off special interest groups from buying special treatments from lawmakers. This ban is important because it would need to be done through multiple pieces of legislation to ensure scrutiny. The Next step would be to expand lobbyist disclosure. This would allow the public to better understand who is funding and spending money to try and influence the government and constitute a commonplace definition of lobbying to anyone who makes more than one lobbying contact on behalf of a client.
over a year period. The last but equally important step would be to ban members of Congress from accepting contributions from interests in front of their committees. Often half of the money members of Congress raise from huge fundraising efforts is from industries they directly decided legislation on behalf of. It goes without being said this is a huge conflict of interest we have allowed to go on in perpetuity for far too long. Taking the necessary step is vital and I’ve come to the conclusion that the change I want may never come in my lifetime. But for me personally, this has never been about a single person. We have to be the change we envision for the future even if it is one we may never see for ourselves. America is a great country but it often falls short due to its own hypocrisy that doesn’t mean we can’t be better because if I know one thing the future is still there to take time will tell where this country turns.
The “Abortion Myth”:
History of the Pro-Life Movement in the United States
by
Madeleine Larson

For this paper, I think it is ideal to start off with a disclaimer. This paper is not to change any one person’s mind about abortion, this paper is an educational resource about the history of the Pro-Life Movement. The belief that life begins at conception and that baby’s life is viable and deserves to have a voice through Christians or pro-life sources is not an oppositional viewpoint for this paper. This is specifically to cover the Pro-Life Movement, its origins, and to simply to bring up questions about the movement rather than any ideology. Educating about the movement someone might identify as being a part of without knowing the full picture, is different than scrutinizing someone’s belief about abortion as a whole.

There is a theory in this realm of scholarship called “the Abortion Myth”, this is the belief that the Religious Right has always opposed abortion.\(^1\) The Religious Right is the powerful evangelical politically conservative movement that has reshaped American politics starting in the 60s-70s and more so through Ronald Reagan. Katherine Stewart discusses in the book *The Power Worshippers: Inside the Dangerous Rise of Religious Nationalism:*

\(^1\) Randall Balmer, “The Religious Right and the Abortion Myth”, *Politico*, May 10, 2022

https://www.politico.com/news/magazine/2022/05/10/abortion-history-right-white-evangelical-1970s-00031480
The most popular origin story of Christian nationalism today, shared by many critics and supporters alike, explains that the movement was born one day in 1973, when the Supreme Court unilaterally shredded Christian morality and made abortion ‘on demand’ a constitutional right. At that instant, the story goes, the flock of believers arose in protest and threw their support to the party of ‘Life’ now know as the Republican Party. The implication is that the movement, in its current form, finds its principal motivation in the desire to protect fetuses against the women who would refuse to carry them to term.2

The belief of the “Abortion Myth” is not just believed by supporters of the movement, but also a misconception that the Pro-Choice movement has believed. This is an important movement to touch on when discussing White Christian Nationalism because it is part of the formation of the modern Christian right-wing nationalist movement. To help understand where the Pro-Life Movement is today, there must be a historical timeline established.

Going back to the 1800s, abortions were extremely common with no stigma attached.3 In the mid-19th century, healers and midwives became way more widespread for women’s healthcare needs leading to physicians backing anti-abortion laws to weed out their competitors in the healthcare sphere. They framed this as healers and midwives not having the right medical equipment or scientific understanding to safely perform an abortion. There was no religious backing in this


case nor concern for the fetus. Many historians believe that with a combination of Physicians needing all the credit and the scientific argument was used to cover up the real issue which was women’s education, bodily autonomy, and women’s rights. By 1900, every state had a law forbidding abortion at any stage, whether through drugs or procedures except for the life of the mother. From 1900-65 there was no pro-life movement because there was no religious backing, and the physicians already got it banned. This led to more back alley abortions and higher mortality rates hence “you aren’t banning abortion, you’re banning SAFE abortion.”

In 1959 the American Law Institute, put together model legislation, advocated for the liberalization of abortion law. They suggested that the law should make exceptions for women who were raped and/or whose mental or physical health was at stake. In the 1960s with the second feminist wave at it’s peak, more pro-choice and bodily autonomy movements started to rise and

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fight for legalizing abortion and rights of women. States such as Colorado, California, and New York adapted their laws and legalized abortion.\^7

In 1968, *Christianity Today* held a conference with the American Christian Medical Society to discuss the morality of abortion.\^8 This conference spanned multiple days filled with full debate within the evangelical community where eventually decided that it was not agreed whether the act of abortion was sinful. The founder of *Christianity Today*, Carl F.H Henry stated, “a woman's body is not the domain and property of others,” and his successor, Harold Lindsell, allowed that, “if there are compelling psychiatric reasons from a Christian point of view, mercy and prudence may favor a therapeutic abortion.”\^9 In 1971, the Southern Baptist Convention issued a statement calling for the legalization of abortion which they defended again in the years after Roe.\^10 The lead pastor of the First Baptist Church in Dallas and one of the presidents of the Southern Baptist Convention, “issued a statement praising the ruling. “I have always felt that it was only after a child was born and had a life separate from its mother that it became an individual person,” Criswell declared, “and it


has always, therefore, seemed to me that what is best for the mother and for the future should be allowed.”[^11]

The 1973 *Roe vs. Wade* decision, legalizing abortion in all fifty states, changed everything and nothing.[^12] To clarify this statement, Roe legalized abortion and was a wider statement for the feminist movement but, this did not mean abortion was readily accessible to anyone who needed one. Abortion access still disproportionally affects communities of color, low-income standing, people who might not have access to healthcare, and someone who may not identify as a woman. After the Roe decision, states still were able to enact T.R.A.P laws (Targeted Regulation of Abortion Providers) which limit the access to abortion even while Roe was in place. Examples of T.R.A.P laws are having abortion clinics meet the same standards as medical centers and requiring surgical rooms and doctors; while these might sound great, they are completely unnecessary for an abortion clinic. Clinics have been shutdown even for not having hallways large enough for two hospital bed to pass through which is necessary in out-patient medical centers, but not for an abortion clinic. T.R.A.P laws can also involve time constraints in which a woman can get an abortion with some having standards as low as a few weeks. While Roe was a landmark decision, it still left room for loopholes.

Before Roe, the anti-abortion movement was very small, geographically disperse, and focused on individual state legislatures. White evangelicals in the early 1970s slowly mobilized against Roe v. Wade, which they considered a Catholic issue. After 1973 activists and state legislators alike worried that Roe prescribed a one-size-fits-all abortion law that could only be addressed at the national level. After 1973 the direction of pro-life activism changed, even as its demographics and core political arguments remained the same. While antiabortion activists retained their focus on individual fetal rights, they began to develop new ways to convey that message to the public that focused on the fetus rather than the woman carrying the fetus.

The pegged beginning of the Religious Right seems to be, “in the 1970s in response to attempts on the part of the Internal Revenue Service to rescind the tax-exempt status of whites-only segregation academies (many of them church sponsored) and Bob Jones University because of its segregationist policies.” Jerry Falwell was personally affected by this because he himself had

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opened a segregation academy and vehemently opposed the civil rights movement.\textsuperscript{17} While evangelicals were losing the fight against civil rights, they turned focus to “government intrusion into their affairs as an assault on religious freedom.”\textsuperscript{18} This issue did not mobilize evangelicals to the extent that they were hoping for which is when they turned attention towards abortion. During this time, Francis Shaeffer, a born-again evangelical Christian started to share ideals in evangelical circles that played a large role in establishing the Christian pro-life movement.\textsuperscript{19} This is when Southern Baptist pastor and televangelist, Jerry Falwell came into the picture as well as Billy Graham. One of the tools that had the largest effect were graphic pictures of aborted fetuses, the most important drawn from John and Barbara Willke’s \textit{Handbook on Abortion}. Some later called it the “Bible of the pro-life movement.”\textsuperscript{20} As activists moved the fetus into the political spotlight, they tried to keep the pregnant woman behind the curtain. In the late 1970s and early 1980s, evangelical Christians joined


the movement in great numbers, rejuvenating and eventually radicalizing the movement.\textsuperscript{21} But by the late 1970s and early 1980s, this sentiment had changed.

In the 1980s and 1990s, many pro-lifers, especially those who remained in more mainstream right to life groups, focused on making access to abortion more difficult on the state level. Due to their efforts, states across the country passed laws that required parental notification, “informed consent” (mandating women view materials about fetal development and the risks of abortion) and waiting periods between the initial consultation and the abortion. Restrictions were legal as long as they did not place an “undue burden” on women seeking the procedure, validating the work of anti-abortion activists and making abortion increasingly difficult to access—especially for rural and low-income women and persons of color. Fetal life was made to be central to how many Christians viewed their religion and their politics.

This history helps to explain why we and where we at today. Abortion was a catalyst for the Religious Right to gain more control and used to cover up it’s racist, segregationist beginning. This movement has a murky past when it comes to the true belief in right to life. Before I end my paper, I would like to recognize that between the early 1980s and the 2000s, there were 153 assaults, 383 death threats, 3 kidnappings, 18 attempted murders, and 9 murders related to abortion providers.\textsuperscript{22}

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No matter your personal stance on abortion, this undue violence against abortion providers is outrageous. In my view, the Pro-Life Movement does not encapsulate the belief of the right to life. Uncovering this past can help pro-life supporters distinguish their beliefs from the larger movement.


To Embrace the Difference

By

Jason Halpern

America to me, the country that I call home is an imperfect place. It is full of many people from many different backgrounds who all see the world through a unique lens to them. However, many people seem to want to disregard the different lenses and perspectives that our country and the world can be looked upon. I wish to elaborate on not only my view of the country I call home, but on others views of it as well.

In the words of Fredrick Douglas “What, to the American slave, is your 4th of July? I answer: a day that reveals to him, more than all other days in the year, the gross injustice and cruelty to which he is the constant victim.” This quote to me has always stuck with me. What is freedom and independence truly to a man like me, a light skinned black man in America. I was born and raised in Rancho Cucamonga, California, a suburb of Los Angeles. In this country the same freedom that might be given to a man of a different ethnicity is not given to me. It is an ever present thing that I and others like me have to live with 24/7. This gives me a perspective not held by every American. It makes me ask things such as, should I give loyalty and sacrifice for a place that has shown that I do not have a place there? Am I truly lesser than those around me simply for the color of my skin, the way I do my hair to show my culture, the clothes I wear, even down to the way I speak and articulate myself. So like Frederick Douglas when The 4th of July swings around, I find it easy to see what is wrong with my country. Further worth mentioning, I am also an atheist. To me religion has never really made sense. For example, “I see not only America, but the world without the perspective or viewpoint of a higher power. This alters how I view religion in government, and I feel it goes without saying that I believe personally that they should be separate. It also creates an interesting perspective of how I view the world as a whole. I do not believe the world is naturally good or evil. I think the world just simply is, a place that makes no sense and religion is humanity's way of facing the unknown. I believe it is up to us as
people to decide together what is right and what is wrong since the world to me does not run on a set moral compass. This view is not in my mind a bad lens to see the world through. It is simply something that is not commonly voiced to a public sphere.

This leads me to my good friend Aidan. We have a joke where we like to say we disagree on seventy percent of all things. To accurately show you how different our views are I interviewed Aidan, and asked him what he thought about America and how religion played a factor. “I believe that America is a foundation that is used to let anyone who is in power to make discussions and change what America actually is. Like how the president’s political party changes every term. First a liberal, then republicans, then liberal, etc. This goes the same with laws around things like abortion. Whoever has the power in America gets to say if abortion is legal or not. So who’s to say that America is pro or anti abortion? Because America can support either depending on who is in charge at the moment.” Religiously Aidan is a Episcopalian which in his own words is much simpler than I thought it would be. “It’s just Christianity, but much more forgiving and reasonable. Like they say things like,” the devil is a wack dude, he really sucks” and things like that. It’s just casual.” His religions he says helped him create a structure for the view on America above which is utterly fascinating to me because it is different. Despite our different views of America and religion and on almost all things in life me and Aidan are friends. This is because us being different helps us grow. We learn and play off of each other. Each of us challenged the other in ways that we never would have found otherwise if we had not known each other and embraced our differences. This is how I believe we fix what is wrong in not only the United States but the world.

All of us see the world in a unique and interesting lens. This can be altered by our backgrounds, life experiences, our race, and even where we are born. I feel like in the world there is this desire for everyone to be the same. People will say things like “if we all thought the same then the world would be a better place!” To me that could not be further from the truth. If everyone thought like me, then everybody would only see the world through one narrow lens. However, meeting people like Aidan allows me to see the world in a
light that I would never see it through otherwise. We as people are fundamentally different, and being different should be something that is celebrated not put down. In not just the United States, but around the world we need to embrace a different perspective. An even more radical example of this can be seen in me taking the time to learn the views of white Christian nationalists. I did this by reading through *The Flag and the Cross* by Gorki Perry. In the book he states that “White Christian nationalism’s story goes something like this: America was founded as a Christian nation by (white) men who were “traditional” Christians, who based the nation's founding documents on Christian principles. The United States is blessed by God, which is why it has been so successful; and the nation has a special role to play in God’s plan for humanity. But these blessings are threatened by cultural degradation from “un-American” influences both inside and outside the borders.” Of course I do not agree with this worldview. There are so many things in this “story” that make me scratch my head and make me slightly lose faith in humanity if I am being completely honest. Regardless, it is important that this view is acknowledged, because it exists. Simply pretending it does not is never going to solve the problems that I at the very least believe are caused by it. We must give ourselves the chance not to agree or even understand but to be informed. To allow ourselves to be malleable in our understanding of how the world works, so that we can recognize that our view of it is not the only one out there. Our differences give us a chance to learn and grow. There is no world I would rather live in the one that gives me a chance to do that. I’m not saying that this will solve every problem in the world or my country, there will always be something that we can point to. I cannot promise that the white Christian nationalist story will cease to be told. However, if we do our best to attempt to inform people about the different perspectives out there we give people the chance to make the change for themselves.

While writing this essay I have gained a deeper understanding of what I already have believed to be true. We can better understand how to better care for our fellow humans around the world by accepting the truth that we are all different in some way. We must learn to treat being different as something natural. To do our best to take an imperfect world and do our best to make it better not just for ourselves but everyone
that resides in it. I hope this essay has inspired others to open their ears and listen and attempt to see how others see this world.
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