

Has God a Place in Politics?

By Religious News Service

When Richard Nixon resigned from the presidency in 1974, many Americans concluded that lack of moral resolve had been the major cause of the Watergate scandal. They felt that what was lacking in government were leaders of impeccable character who were dedicated to the best interests of the nation.



Although President Gerald Ford seemed to many to fit that description, his pardoning of Richard Nixon cost him valuable support in the 1976 election. And Democratic presidential candidate Jimmy Carter's professed commitment to the ideals of evangelical Christianity struck a responsive chord in many voters who felt that he would bring a spiritual wholesomeness to the Executive Branch.

In one incident in which the president's religion came into focus this year, it was as a target of criticism. It involved Carter's witnessing of his faith to South Korean President Park Chung Hee, a Buddhist, in June. Objections were based largely on the contention that as a head of state, Carter was out of line in discussing his faith with another government official who was of a different religion.

Three years later, President Carter's ratings in national polls have sunk below those of President Nixon at the height of Watergate. The polls indicate a prevalent feeling that Carter is a well-meaning but ineffectual leader. While his successful role in leading to the historic treaty between Israel and Egypt was credited in part to his religious faith — and that of the leaders of the two Middle East nations — his supporters have not been emphasizing his evangelical faith recently.

An old cliché declares that politics is the art of the possible. This is as true for politicians with strong religious commitments as for those of a more secular bent. For office-holders, the dilemma is how to balance their strongest religious principles against the compromises needed to get legislation passed in some form.

In 1976, veteran White House reporter Forrest Boyd analyzed the question, "Do we really want a saint in the White House?" in an article in *Moody Monthly* magazine, published by the Moody Bible Institute of Chicago.

"I don't believe a saint would compromise basic principles, but there are times when it's hard to tell which principles should be defended to the bitter end," Boyd wrote. "At times the question is between compromising a little bit to accomplish something, or refusing to be flexible and accomplishing nothing. The problem is knowing what to compromise, how much to compromise, and whether the goal to be reached is worth the compromise."

Steven V. Monsma, a Michigan legislator, cites the need for compromise in political action with an illustration from the Vietnam War era. He remembers the deadlock in 1973 when Congress wanted to end all bombing in Cambodia and the Nixon Administration wanted no limitations on the bombing. The outcome was that Congress voted a cutoff, but gave a 47-day deadline, enabling the bombing of Cambodia to continue until Aug. 15, 1973.

"Is not the blood of hundreds of innocent victims killed during these 47 days on the hands of those who agreed to this compromise?" the legislator asks. "I think not. The forces of evil (if I may be allowed to oversimplify, for purposes of illustration, an admittedly complex situation) were committed to indefinite bombing, and insisting on ending it now with no compromise would have led to indefinite continuation of the bombing."

Rep. Robert Edgar (D-Pa.), a United Methodist minister who is serving his third term in Congress, says most of the bills he votes on do not involve clear-cut moral choices. "Very often the choice is between two wrongs or two rights," he comments. "Ninety-eight percent of the time there is no 'God



JIMMY CARTER



GERALD FORD



RICHARD NIXON

position." According to Edgar, most government decisions involve a judgment "based on the facts as you know them" rather than on morality.

In his 1977 book, *Religion at the Polls*, church-state analyst Albert J. Menendez concluded that adherents of certain religions do not necessarily tend to vote a certain way when they are members of Congress.

"Only on a few, selective issues when traditional religious/cultural values clash do adherents of certain religions tend to vote a certain way when they are members of Congress," Menendez wrote. "It can and usually does affect such issues as abortion, prayer and Bible-reading in public schools, and government aid to church-related schools."

Roman Catholics active in the pro-life movement have often discovered to their dismay that co-religionists will not always vote the way they want them to upon being elected. Rep. Robert F. Drinan (D-Mass.), a Jesuit priest, has frequently been attacked by pro-lifers for failing to oppose legislation that would extend Medicaid coverage to poor women seeking abortions.

Father Drinan, in turn, has been critical of the pro-life movement, charging that it "has become politicized over this one issue (abortion) as if it would solve all our problems, without being sufficiently aware of other right-to-life issues."

Maryland State Senator J. Joseph Curran, Jr., a Catholic, also was criticized by pro-lifers last year for voting for publicly financed abortions. "I don't believe in abortion, but I can see that government has to address all the people," he explains.

"What I do in the legislature, I do as a public person. How I feel as a Catholic is going to be a matter between me, my church and God."

One prominent legislator who feels "his Christian faith has definite implications for his positions on national issues is Sen. Mark O. Hatfield (R-Ore.). On matters ranging from world hunger to the SALT II treaty, he has related his views to what he feels are the imperatives of the Gospel.

"I have come to the conviction that the Gospel of Christ calls believers to a whole set of commitments, values and life style, molded by an unconditioned compassion, which would inevitably have an influence on the decisions made by a politician who not only professed such a faith, but lived it," he has said.

Expressing his disillusionment with SALT II on the ground that it does not go far enough in reducing armaments, Sen. Hatfield has declared that "the more armaments you build which separate people, threaten people and cause fear, both at home and throughout the world, the more you deny the Christian commission of reconciliation."

Christians in government often find themselves at opposite ends of the spectrum on particular issues, and some observers question whether the Bible can be made to apply to specific political problems today.

In a 1977 editorial in *The Christian Century* Magazine, editor James M. Wall commented that "the use of religious validations to settle secular conflicts is a misuse of religion and a disservice to politics. Ours is a multireligious world, filled with a rich variety of tribal, institutional and national beliefs, all yearning toward an understanding of ultimacy."

The editorial affirmed that "the Christian faith, as communicated through tradition, Scripture and history, is a proper foundation for approaching all contemporary secular issues," but he added that "the Bible is not a document that sets forth an international game plan."

For a Christian politician, "the grating thing is trying to decide whether your motivation is trying to get elected or your principles," says Indiana State Rep. Daniel E. Huff, a Christian Church (Disciples of Christ) minister. He holds that it is unrealistic to ignore the factors that get a person elected, and that for this reason the Christian politician must not get too far ahead of the prevailing public attitude.

The consensus seems to be that a "Christian politician" will not always take predictable stands on issues, and may frequently find it necessary to compromise in order to have any chance at getting legislation passed.

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