

Preparing a Place for the Righteous: Reagan, Education, and the New Right

The future of the New Right and its influence on American education is closely connected with the popularity and the appeal of Ronald Reagan. President Reagan serves as the linchpin between more moderate Americans and the New Right. In order to understand what may happen with the New Right and American education, one must examine Reagan's relationship with the right-wingers and his perspectives on New Right theology and political thought.

The Real Ronald Reagan

Contrary to more popular assumptions, the American public knows very little about the true theological, social, political, and educational perspectives of Ronald Reagan. Sure, we get a glimpse now and then, but the President has effectively hidden many of his perspectives from mainstream Americans. Does he share a right-wing, fundamentalist social vision with its romantic assumptions of a world of good versus evil? Does he see the public schools as a battleground where these forces of good and evil fight for the minds of American youth? These are difficult questions to answer fully, for the data is insufficient. One of the President's skills as the great communicator has been to evade penetrating questions aimed at determining his real view. The determination of Reagan's stance is important because of the position of leadership he holds with the American public—a position unparalleled in recent American history. Ronald Reagan leads the American people—what is the vision toward which he is leading them?

One incident which grants insight into either a Reagan who accepts the fundamentalist, right-wing cosmology or an incredibly hypocritical Reagan was described by the Rev. Harold Bredesen, a member of the board of directors of the Christian Broadcasting Network (CBN). Near the end of

Reagan's first term as governor of California, Bredesen told of a conversation which took place at Reagan's home, in which the then Governor spoke of Biblical prophecies that have been fulfilled. "His closeness to the Lord impressed me very much," Bredesen continued, and he seemed to live his life in accordance with the scriptures. That afternoon Bredesen, Pat Boone, and George Otis (another well-known fundamental broadcaster) joined hands with Reagan and they all began to pray. Soon the prayer turned to prophecy. Bredesen claimed that God told the group that if Reagan would follow his way that he would put Reagan in 1700 Pennsylvania Avenue. (Of course, the White House is 1600 Pennsylvania Avenue.) Reagan was "electrified," Bredesen said. "I had his right hand and . . . it was wobbling like this. Honestly, I've never seen an arm wave so under the anointing of God." Pat Boone called Reagan after the 1980 election and asked him if he remembered that day. The president-elect responded, "Do I ever!"¹

While the incident is revealing, it still does not answer the questions about Reagan's personal view of the fundamental right. Was he just using them for political advantage, or did he share their cosmology? Never an avid churchgoer, Reagan has an ambiguous religious record. Even the fundamentalist right-wingers themselves disagree over Reagan's theological intentions. Part of this distrust, of course, may have resulted from his "suspect" theatrical background and his divorce. But much of the suspicion was derived from Reagan's priorities as a politician.

The distrust manifested itself in the 1980 campaign, as many fundamental right-wingers threw their early support to Phillip Crane and John Connally. The distrust had resulted from Reagan's appeals to moderates between the 1976 campaign and 1980. New Right fundamentalists had not forgotten his attempts at the 1976 convention to reach out to centrist Republicans. In order to solidify fundamental, right-wing support, Reagan realized that he must prove himself. Thus, he courted the fundamentalists at the 1980 Republican convention, emphasizing his adoption of their social and education agendas. In his convention suite at Detroit he entertained Jesse Helms, Jerry Falwell, Phyllis Schlafly, and New Right strategist Howard Phillips. Considering themselves the soul of Reagan's campaign, the fundamentalists felt betrayed when Reagan selected moderate George Bush as his running mate.

The tension between Reagan and the fundamentalist New Right has continued through his Presidency, as Reagan has periodically attempted to broaden his appeal while maintaining the zeal of the fundamentalists. Feeling the heat of fundamental anger after the appointment of Bush, Reagan chose to intensify his appeal to the group. In August of 1980 he began his campaign to rally the Right with an appearance before the fundamentalist Religious Roundtable's national affairs briefing in Dallas. At this meeting Reagan won the enthusiastic support of the Moral Right for the 1980 campaign. In his speech he questioned the First Amendment separation

of church and state, rejected governmental tyranny over religion, attacked the Federal Communications Commission's investigations of religious broadcasters and the Internal Revenue Service's "vendetta" against Christian schools, celebrated the Ten Commandments, praised lawmakers who sought "divine guidance" in government, referred to the religious audience's "rendezvous with destiny," and criticized the theory of evolution. He ended the speech with a line that aroused a thunderous response:

I can only add to that, my friends, that I continue to look to the scriptures today for fulfillment and for guidance. Indeed, it is an incontrovertible fact that all the complex and horrendous questions confronting us at home and worldwide have their answers in that single book.²

He followed this appearance with campaign speeches to religious broadcasters in Lynchburg, Virginia, where he promised Jerry Falwell that he would use the Presidency as a "bully puppet" for the moral concerns of the New Right. A few weeks later he granted an interview to Jim Bakker's PTL Club Magazine (*Action*), where he blasted the ERA and reiterated his disdain for atheism. He reassured Bakker that he would be most comfortable if surrounded by advisors who believed in God.

The landslide victory produced euphoria within New Right circles. Still, Reagan's tendency to appeal to moderates rekindled the latent tensions between the President-elect and his zealous supporters. His appointment of Howard Baker's campaign manager, James Baker, as a key White House aide along with other moderate Republican appointments again aroused criticism from the Right. In what would become common practice in the following years, Reagan followed his appeal to the moderates with a series of reassuring meetings with New Right leaders Richard Viguerie, Terry Dolan, Howard Phillips, Phyllis Schlafly, Paul Weyrich and Jesse Helms. He also entertained members of the Yaffers (Young Americans for Freedom), anti-abortion groups, anti-labor organizations, and anti-tax groups. In these meetings he promised to make more "correct" appointments as soon as possible.

Quickly honoring his promises, Reagan appointed New Right fundamentalists to key administrative positions. At Health and Human Services he nominated a fundamentalist anti-abortion crusader, Dr. C. Everett Koop. Marjory Mecklenburg, who was president of one of the nation's largest anti-abortion committees, was named director of the Office of Adolescent Pregnancy Programs. At the Department of Education the former president of the fundamentalist National Christian Action Coalition, the Rev. Robert Billings, was named a consultant and assistant to the Secretary of Education. Soon Billings was promoted to Director of the Education Department's ten regional offices as well as the special "Christian School Liaison Officer."

Reagan, Education, and the New Right

This was a newly created position and no counterpart for other religious denominations was considered.³

The Effects of the Reagan Education Policy

Whatever the intentions of the President, the effect of such appointments was dramatic. With fundamental right-wingers in powerful positions, political and educational policy in the United States began to change direction. The first step of the Reagan conservative education policy was to reduce the federal role in American schooling and grant more power to state and local governments. In the first budget submitted by the administration, cuts of \$1.1 billion were sought in compensatory education for disadvantaged students and programs for handicapped and bilingual students. Congress balked at such dramatic cuts, and expenditures fell only by \$500 million between fiscal 1980 and fiscal 1982. Other initial priorities for the administration included controlling spending increases for the guaranteed student loan program; the abolition of the Department of Education and its replacement with a foundation similar to the National Science Foundation; the institutionalization of tuition-tax credits for parents of children in public and private schools; and the passage of a constitutional amendment to allow for prayer in schools.⁴

In the fall of 1984 the nonpartisan Congressional Research Service of the Library of Congress issued a report on the educational impact of the budget changes of the first term of the Reagan administration. The group pointed out that the first term was marked by a pattern of fighting between Reagan and the Congress over cuts in education programs.

President Carter's \$17.1 billion proposal for educational programs in fiscal 1982 was reduced to \$12.6 billion by President Reagan. Congress resisted, and a \$14.7 billion compromise was finally reached. For fiscal 1983 Reagan requested \$9.9 billion, but Congress ultimately approved \$15.4 billion. The Library of Congress reported that, after adjusting for inflation, actual educational purchasing power was reduced by 21.2 percent between fiscal 1980 and fiscal 1984. Between fiscal 1980 and fiscal 1985 federal resources for compensatory education were down 23.8 percent; block grants to states and local educational agencies were down 36.2 percent; funds for bilingual education were down 42.8 percent; monies to aid the education of more than four million students with physical and mental disabilities were down 13.9 percent; and funds for vocational education were down 33.3 percent.

While many observers have pointed out that the massive federal cutbacks feared by Reagan's opponents did not materialize during the first term, it was only the efforts of Reagan's congressional opponents that prevented such reductions in educational funding. Reagan pointed out in the 1985

campaign that funding for federal programs in education grew during his four years in office from \$14.8 billion in fiscal 1981 to almost \$17 billion counting the projected fiscal 1985 budget. When inflation was considered, however, funding actually suffered a loss of almost \$4 billion in 1980 dollars, or a real decline of about 25 percent.⁵

Liberals and many spokespeople for poor people in America argue that the Reagan record in education reflects the lack of social concern of his supporters in the New Right. Critics have charged that Reagan's right-wing appointees have conveyed a tone of ethical indifference that illustrates an intrinsic lack of compassion for the poor. Liberals contend that the brunt of Reagan's education cuts have fallen on school systems with the largest number of economically disadvantaged and other special-needs students. In the attempt to control the growth of the guaranteed student loan program, for example, one important effect has been cutbacks in the funding of Pell grants to disadvantaged students—again presenting at least the appearance of indifference to the needs of the poor.⁶

According to the nonprofit lobbying group, the Children's Defense Fund (CDF), President Reagan's economic policies have slashed \$10 billion from federal programs that help children. The CDF report, issued in January of 1984, claims that Reagan budgetary policies have dropped 700,000 children from Aid to Families with Dependent Children and Medicaid. Another 440,000 have lost education aid and thousands of mothers have been deprived of maternal and child health services. The report specifically chided Reagan for consistent cuts in federal educational aid for disadvantaged children. Overall the CDF claims that the effect of the Reagan budgets are forcing more children to live in poverty, while providing them fewer avenues for escape.⁷ To add further to the liberal perception that Reagan's educational policy is indifferent to the needs of poor children, the President has made the statement in many of his talks on education that the generations who lived through the Great Depression and World War II are guilty of trying to make things too easy for children. Though the President may not have been referring to poor children when he made the observation, the statement, when combined with the pronouncements of New Right appointees, Attorney General Ed Meese's thoughts on hunger, and the reports on the effects of budget cuts, gives many Americans the impression of a politician who is callous to the needs of the economically troubled.⁸

While it is important to examine the budget priorities of the Reagan administration as part of the attempt to ascertain the social and educational vision toward which the President is moving the country, it is also revealing to examine the state of affairs within a Reagan-led executive department. By the end of Reagan's first term the Department of Education was in turmoil—the confusion has continued into the first year of Reagan's second term despite the appointment of William Bennett as the new secretary of Education.

Reagan's fundamentalist, right-wing appointees have been calling the shots at the Education Department in recent months. Rep. Pat Williams (D-Montana) commented recently concerning activities at the Department that "for 25 years I have watched the ascendancy of the right-wing, and every four years they have provided comic relief. That has changed. They are now in charge." In the period since Reagan's first inauguration, the department staff have been cut by 25% and more politically oriented firings are in the offing. At the same time the number of political appointees is double what it was under the Carter administration. Overall funding is lowered by sixteen percent, women's equity programs have been terminated, and civil rights training programs and funds for Indian education are scheduled for elimination.

One liberal critic has charged that President Reagan has made the DOE a dumping ground for right-wing extremists. Leaders of the New Right now occupy positions that control management, publications, legal affairs, civil rights enforcement, research grants, and departmental planning and budget. Of the top eight political appointees under Secretary Terrell Bell, six were active in New Right politics. Never before have political appointees been put in charge of the department's ten regional offices. The President recently purged the membership of many of the department's advisory councils, which provide a forum for individuals with viewpoints which oppose the policies of the department. Appointment now rests not upon proven expertise in education, but upon ideological purity. For example, new appointees to a panel on women's educational programs included a director and a first chair who were both members of Phyllis Schlafly's Eagle Forum.

In relation to the appointees, Secretary Terrell Bell came across as a progressive moderate. From the beginning Bell was suspect in the eyes of the right-wing fundamentalists. While the Secretary remained a team player, appearing at congressional hearings appealing for school prayer and budget cuts, the Right did not feel that his heart was in the right place. Bell further angered the New Right by firing some of his right-wing critics within the department. Bell eventually established his control over the management of the department, but much of the decision-making power remained in the hands of second-level appointees from the New Right. Frustrated by the perpetual battles, Bell finally resigned in late 1984. President Reagan has had little to say about the changes within the department. Those individuals who have directed the changes are after all his appointees.⁹

The effects of the President's right-wing appointments to the Department of Education are slowly beginning to become apparent. The relationship between the department and private schools has become closer than ever before. When more than two dozen categorical programs were consolidated into the education block grant, an arrangement was made to share books and teaching materials with private schools. These sharing arrangements have

been extended by the Reagan appointees to apply to all aspects of the block grant funding. During the Reagan years the private schools' share of federal funds has leaped from \$16 million to \$40 million. This private-school increase occurred at the same time that the block grant arrangement provided twelve percent less than the categorical programs in total educational expenditures.

Urban public schools have been the big losers under the Reagan Education Department. In addition to the reduced funding in general, the urban schools in America's 32 largest cities during the 1982–1983 school years gave fifteen percent of their block grant funds to private schools—in previous years that figure had been only five percent. In Philadelphia, for example, nearly one-third of the \$2.3 million in block grant funds was earmarked for private schools. Critics of the administration note that, although the law requires that private schools comply with civil rights legislation before receiving federal funds, few of the private schools in question have enforced such provisions.

Another result of the New Right influence on the Department of Education has involved the enforcement of the Hatch Amendment. This legislation, adopted in 1978, requires students to obtain their parents' consent before they can participate in federally funded programs which mandate psychiatric or psychological examination. The department established the Family Educational Rights and Privacy Office to process complaints from parents about possible violations of the amendment. The possibility exists that the amendment may be interpreted to terminate programs which New Right groups believe are "alienating school children from their parents, from religious beliefs, and from our nation's patriotic heritage." Already conservative parental groups, such as Phyllis Schlafly's Eagle Forum, have given many school districts lists of undesirable activities that are presumed to be forbidden by the Hatch Amendment. Some of the forbidden activities include classroom activities such as role playing and student discussion of current events.

The polarization at the Department of Education is quite disturbing to many observers. The danger exists, many critics claim, that the educational agenda of the New Right may be forced upon the American schools by way of the Department of Education. The irony of this possibility is apparent when one remembers that only a few years ago the New Right was calling for the destruction of the agency. By the summer of 1985 fewer and fewer calls for the abolition of the department were being issued from New Right circles.¹⁰

Reagan, the New Right, and the Call for Excellence

In the search for the real Ronald Reagan and the future of American educational policy, one thing is apparent—Reagan is a savvy and pragmatic

politician who recognizes political hay when he sees it. The report of the Commission on Excellence in Education marked a watershed in his educational policy. With the issuance of the report, the President shifted the emphasis of his educational policy—not necessarily changing his goals, but changing the vehicle for their accomplishment. On the surface the report offered the President's liberal opponents a means of attacking the Reagan education policy. Instead of decreased federal support, they argued that the President's policy of neglect and his proposals for expanded budget cuts actually contributed to the decline.

Reagan has not allowed this strategy to work; he has used the report to support the New Right thesis that federal educational involvement is the culprit. The president has promoted the document as a testament to the failure of the federal education policy of the past; in other words, he has effectively blamed the liberals and their policies for educational decline. In the eyes of the American public he has made educational excellence a part of the conservative educational agenda.

The shift in Reagan's strategy revolves around his ability to capture excellence and to place it in the conservatives' corner. Up until the late spring and summer of 1983, Ronald Reagan had said very little about the role of education in American society. In 1982 Ernest Boyer, head of the Carnegie Foundation for the Advancement of Teaching, was moved to conclude that the most serious impact of Ronald Reagan on education was the President's failure to affirm public education as an essential need for strengthening the nation. Jack Schuster, Professor of Education at the Claremont Graduate School, wrote in late 1982 that Reagan's policies were precipitating a "decline in education as a national, or societal, priority."¹¹ Boyer and Schuster based their opinions on the data available to them.

The only educational issues which Reagan had publicly addressed as President were prayer in schools, the abolition of the Department of Education, and tuition-tax credits. Prayer in schools was touted as the most important move that could be made to improve public education in America; the abolition of the Education Department, Reagan argued, would allow the schools to serve their constituencies by removing senseless federal regulation and by getting government off the backs of local school personnel; and tuition-tax credits would stimulate private schools and in turn improve public education through competition. After the release of *A Nation at Risk*, Reagan transcended his three-point plan for educational excellence as he began to speak of quality teaching, merit pay, better teacher training, discipline, and back to basics. It was time to turn around the liberal neglect of the past. Permissiveness, weak colleges of education, tenured lackadaisical teachers, watered-down curricula became the buzz words for liberal educational policy. The President has made the same points as his New Right supporters while carefully avoiding the labels so often used by the fundamentalist right-wingers.

In the case of his call for excellence, he has described the programs and the failure of those liberals whom the New Right refers to as the atheistic, secular humanists without ever using the term "secular humanist" himself. It is a masterful political strategy, for it allows Reagan to walk the fine line between the zealous Right and the moderate center of the political spectrum. As a result Reagan can reap the benefits of the New Right political machinery while transcending identification with their zealous extremes. The President and his advisors have accomplished a political coup d'etat—they support New Right policy without appearing to be a part of the New Right.

Liberals watched in amazement as the President turned *A Nation at Risk* into an endorsement of New Right educational goals. In a White House ceremony on April 26, 1983, Reagan told Commission on Excellence members:

Your call for an end to federal intrusion is consistent with our task of redefining the federal role in education . . . so we'll continue to work in the months ahead for passage of tuition tax credits, vouchers, educational savings accounts, voluntary school prayer and abolishing the Department of Education.¹²

Almost immediately liberals exclaimed that the commission had not recommended these policies. The President had, in effect, issued a new report which could have been entitled, "The Commission Report According to Reagan." The late Congressman Carl D. Perkins of Kentucky polled the members of the commission and told the House of Representatives on August 4, 1983, that

the commissioners do not support reductions in federal assistance to education The report foresees a definite and significant role for federal funding in education. The commissioners were unanimous in the belief that increased state and local funds would be necessary as well.¹³

Thus, according to the liberals Reagan distorted the spirit of the commission's report, moving the document into the camp of the New Right and its educational agenda. A nonsectarian document, they argued, was turned into support for a fundamentalist educational program of school prayer, tuition tax credits for Christian parents, and strong discipline. Anne C. Lewis, executive editor for *Education USA*, points out that the major educational issues debated during Reagan's first term were issues pushed by religious interests. The excellence movement was intertwined with New Right religious issues. Even an ostensibly neutral piece of legislation to bolster the teaching of mathematics and science was introduced with a provision giving students the right to hold end-of-day religious meetings in public schools.¹⁴ By the 1984 campaign the evolution in the President's

educational platform was complete; his agenda was an amalgam of New Right religious concerns and a call for excellence based loosely on the report of the Commission on Excellence in Education.

The call for excellence, as Reagan has worked it, may have struck a responsive chord with the American public by eliciting some latent middle-class fears. The drift of American educational reform over the past several decades has been one of increasing egalitarianism by the expansion of the educational franchise. The 1970s and 1980s have been decades of economic scarcity, as opposed to the economic expansion and optimism of the 1950s and 1960s. Ronald Reagan was elected at a time when most Americans had finally concluded that the era of abundance had ended. In an era of economic trouble the ideal of expanding opportunity for everyone grates against the middle class's dream of success. Those already in the middle class often want avenues to material success restricted, not opened. Many of them do not want their status or their control of resources threatened by an increased access to what little there is in a depressed economy. Even when the economy displays a temporary improvement, it cannot overcome the overwhelming American feeling that our resources are limited—the perception that the great American pie is not expanding. In such a social context, our social and educational institutions retreat from their commitment to opportunity. Laws once ensuring affirmative action, desegregation, mainstreaming and the like are ignored or repealed. Those who have already made it to the middle class draw up the ladder behind them and do their best to close the door.

Ronald Reagan has been able to use the renewed call for quality to political advantage, for his position speaks directly to the status-anxious middle class. The middle class expresses its status anxiety in phrases such as “it’s time we quit paying so much attention to the minorities,” or “the rich get tax breaks and the government takes care of the poor, but nobody helps those in the middle.” This status anxiety not only helps us explain the popularity of Ronald Reagan, but it grants insight into the recent legitimization of the socio-educational policies of the once-scorned fundamentalist Right. Indeed, it has been the Right that has consistently pushed measures to restrict governmental expansion of economic and educational opportunity to the economically disadvantaged.

Ronald Reagan and the New Right have carefully portrayed liberal educational reform as rampant egalitarianism with an ultimate consequence of destroying quality education. The fundamentalist right-wingers have unabashedly called the liberal effort communism, because, they claim, it attempts to level society. In the process, the right-wingers argue, it is contrary to the wishes of God, for it separates reward from work. Rather than guaranteeing a person's right to achieve reward from the fruits of his labor, it is claimed that liberal educational policy has sought to legislate human equality.

Anyone who goes into modern schools, many conservatives argue, can tell that school officials and teachers have lost control. New Right critics have blamed such a loss of control on a “new progressivism” that emerged in the 1960s. The “new progressives,” or romantics, saw inequality as unjust and saw its origins in external circumstances that favored one participant over another. Usually these external circumstances involved factors of culture over which, the progressives claimed, the student had little control. As a result, the New Right analysts contend, academic problems and disciplinary problems were excused as cultural aberrations and were not dealt with effectively. Academic standards declined, teacher authority was destroyed, and little was done to turn the situation around until conservatives began to call for a change. These calls for academic excellence, the New Right argues, continue to be opposed by liberal educators who see the excellence movement as an attempt to oppress minorities or to stamp out student creativity. Thus, Reagan and the right-wingers have effectively blamed school failures on liberals, in the process removing school from the social factors which influence it. By no means is this to argue that all conservatives fail to see the school in its proper social context. It does imply, however, that President Reagan and his New Right supporters often commit an error of causal oversimplification, blaming all school ills directly on what they call liberal education policy.

Ronald Reagan and the 1984 Election

In the 1984 campaign Reagan continued his policy of portraying the liberals as the purveyors of evil in the world, often reflecting the spirit of the rhetoric of the New Right. The President used strong language throughout the campaign to portray Mondale and his Democratic followers as anti-religious. The day after the Republican convention Reagan stated at a prayer breakfast that anyone who opposes the school prayer amendment is intolerant of religion. On September 4, during a speech in Utah, the President accused the liberal Democrats of favoring freedom against religion. Candidate Mondale subsequently charged Reagan with being unable to handle diversity of opinion, as he [Reagan] insults the motives of those who disagree with him.¹⁵

Many liberals were dismayed by the President’s language at the Dallas prayer breakfast, when he stated that opponents of school prayer “refuse to tolerate prayer’s importance in our lives.” Such a locution rang Orwellian in the ears of certain liberals who interpreted “tolerate its importance” to mean “mandate.” These same liberals maintained that Reagan was not consistent with his stated intention of promoting religion in general. If he was serious about religious objectivity, Charles Krauthammer wrote, “then he should support silent school prayer, which is denominationally neutral.” Reagan’s

intent, Krauthammer concluded, was to elicit favor with New Right fundamentalists “whose expressed aim is to use the cause of religion-in-general as a wedge to promote . . . its particular brand of Christian fundamentalism.” Other than the school prayer issue, the candidates devoted relatively little attention to education in the post-convention phase of the campaign.¹⁶

The 1984 campaign clearly displayed the fact that Ronald Reagan refused to distance himself from the New Right—Reagan considered himself as much a leader of a movement as a party leader. At the Dallas convention in 1984 Reagan surprised many strategists by his harsh rhetoric and his defense of the New Right worldview. He spoke of the New Right as a dam against a flood of liberal usurpers who had been attempting to secularize America. Reagan’s election campaign statements represented no break with the spirit of many of his previous utterances. In March of 1984, speaking at the National Association of Evangelicals meeting, he issued a strong attack on those “who turned to a modern day secularism.” The press rarely pointed out that the President was reflecting the New Right’s secular humanism theory. It seemed at times that the term “the Teflon presidency” was especially applicable in matters dealing with the New Right.¹⁷

Reagan’s references to secular humanism were not only to be heard in public speeches to highly partisan groups. Reagan’s assistant, Morton Blackwell, who was assigned as a special liaison to the New Right, disclosed that he has overheard Reagan discussing secular humanism in the White House with New Right theorist, Tim LaHaye—welcomed guest in the Reagan White House and the author of the New Right tract on education, *The Battle for the Mind*. LaHaye heads the American Coalition for Traditional Values (ACTV), which is supported by Jerry Falwell, Jimmy Swaggart, and Jim Bakker. The President received leaders of ACTV in the White House in June 1984 and has courted their financial support on numerous occasions.¹⁸

This courting of the New Right consistently made the President’s inner circle of political advisors edgy. Some inside staffers confided that they wanted to see the church-state issue put to rest.¹⁹ Reagan’s campaign team believed that as the New Right connection became better known by the public, the President would be hurt. The leaders of the Reagan campaign tried diligently to move the focus of the campaign away from the New Right social agenda toward a less politically divisive economic orientation. Throughout Reagan’s first term the senior staff felt little sympathy for the New Right’s moral crusade. Conservative Edwin Meese, for example, personally and very quietly supported a pro-choice position on abortion—not a position that would endear him to Rev. LaHaye and his fellow evangelicals.

The campaign leaders had a well-planned and carefully calculated re-election strategy. The evangelical New Right and its constituency rallied the

faithful around issues like school prayer and abortion. The White House staff, understanding the divisiveness of the issues, gave the New Right token support while secretly wishing for a perpetual frustration of the New Right goals. Little substantial support was given to New Right legislation in Congress and any White House aide who pushed the New Right issues too hard lost power in the inner circle. Faith Whittlesey, the director of the Office of Public Liaison, worked fanatically for New Right goals—once making an emotional appeal to bewildered corporate leaders for tuition tax credits. She quickly lost prestige among the senior staff and became a nonentity. The flaw in this strategy was the President, for he never cooperated with the plan. Reagan served to inspire the very forces that his staffers were trying to keep under wraps. The President encouraged the movement whenever he had a chance, speaking in inspirational tones to evangelical audiences, entertaining them at the White House, and creating media-oriented photo opportunities, all against the wishes of his campaign strategists. But the President may have had the last laugh.²⁰

By moving into the uncharted waters of religious politics, Ronald Reagan occupied an area never before claimed. The traditional response to the religion and politics issue has been to ignore it. Jimmy Carter may have claimed status as a born-again Christian, but he chose to stay away from the specific political implications of such a stance. Thus, as a national political figure, Reagan has stood alone as the politician as religious activist. This has certainly alienated a corps of civil libertarians, but, more importantly, it has created a cadre of zealous supporters from the New Right and religious organizations marginally associated with it, who see Reagan not just as a popular political figure, but as a moral leader. It was Ronald Reagan who was the first national political leader in modern times to speak for prayer in the schools, to advocate anti-abortion sentiments sincerely, to talk unembarrassedly about stricter discipline in schools, and to affirm the rights of Christian people to get governmental support for removing their children from the morally degenerate public school system.

These themes play well to rural and transplanted rural voters who harbor fundamentalist religious viewpoints and who find themselves in the lower or lower-middle socioeconomic classes. A key element in Reagan's political success has been that these groups have traditionally been Democratic constituencies. William Schneider of the American Enterprise Institute maintains that, since the President cannot appeal to these voters on economic grounds, Reagan's religious and nationalistic themes have worked especially well. Thus, the President has had it both ways—appealing to traditional Republican constituencies on the rational economic level and appealing to traditional Democratic constituencies on the emotional religious level.²¹

The real Ronald Reagan continues to be elusive, but it is apparent that, at

Reagan, Education, and the New Right

the very least, Reagan is personally comfortable with the social and educational views of the right-wing fundamentalists. He has given lip service to the theological side of the movement, but his commitment here is marked by ambiguity. Through his appointments Reagan has pushed American politics toward the right. Through these same appointments Reagan continues to move American education toward the fundamentalist conservative vision of what schools should be.

Government by committee has worked well for Ronald Reagan. He has maintained his distance from divisive, emotional issues, while retaining an unprecedented popularity with the American public. In the process the New Right has profited. With Ronald Reagan the right-wing fundamentalists have achieved respectability and power far beyond their dreams of a decade ago. The post-Reagan future of the New Right may have clouds on its horizon, but the New Right approaches that future in a position of power. The power has been bestowed by Ronald Reagan.