

# A Decade of Changing the Political Landscape

by Robert P. Jr Dugan

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*The 1980s saw a significant shift in the political landscape as evangelicals became a major force in American politics, influencing the outcome of the 1980 presidential election and shaping the country's moral and social agenda.*

**Scripture:** Psalm 139:23, Matthew 11:28, John 14:1, Galatians 6:9, 1 Peter 2:13

**Topics:** "Christian Politics", "Faith Activism"

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## Description

Robert P. Jr Dugan preaches about the significant political victories achieved by evangelicals in the 1980s, including the successful battle against IRS regulations threatening Christian schools' tax-exempt status and the formation of the NAE Washington Insight newsletter to provide reliable information on political issues. The sermon also highlights the rise of the Proverbs-Family Movement during the Carter Administration and the impact of evangelical voters in the 1980 election, where Ronald Reagan emerged as the victor. The sermon emphasizes the importance of grassroots objections and the need for evangelicals to engage in politics with integrity and commitment to bring about positive change.

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## Transcript

In its infinite wisdom, the Internal Revenue Service in August 1978 provoked a reaction that led to unprecedented evangelical political involvement in the 1980s. The IRS proposed a number of regulations for private schools which presumed them to be racist -- and no longer qualified for tax-exempt status -- if their student bodies did not contain an "adequate" percentage of minority students (based on their local communities). Had the scheme gone through, alleged "white flight academies" would probably have been forced to close their doors.

The regulations comprised nothing less than a threat to put a large segment of the Christian school movement out of business. When the IRS scheduled December dates for public comments, I testified. The IRS had to be stopped, lest faceless bureaucrats label hundreds of Christian schools as segregationist. They would be presumed guilty until they could somehow prove themselves innocent. That's not the way American justice is supposed to work.

The action sparked a storm of protest, with hearings extended to four days. One testimony about a Hebrew school located in a 50 percent Hispanic Miami neighborhood blew the IRS' assumptions to smithereens. How could the IRS suspect that school of discriminating against Hispanics, most of whom were Roman Catholic? Few of them were likely to seek admission to a Jewish school.

Should the IRS force Jews to recruit Hispanics, thus making the federal government indirectly responsible for Jewish evangelism? Try fitting that into the First Amendment.

The impact of the collective testimony -- backed by a mass of protest from Christians across the country -- was overwhelming. The IRS postponed implementation of its proposals and, in 1980, Congress passed the Ashbrook-Dornan amendments which prohibited the IRS from yanking tax-exempt status from religious schools. If the IRS had not seen the light, at least it had felt the heat. That's often how things work in politics.

Key to the victory were the grassroots objections of thousands of Christian citizens. To produce future pressure on the IRS, Congress, or the White House, it was obvious that evangelicals needed reliable information about issues affecting them in Washington. I myself had been "out there" for years and would have been willing to pay a king's ransom for a trustworthy newsletter -- an evangelical equivalent of the Kiplinger Washington Letter for businessmen. That's why the monthly NAE Washington Insight<sup>1</sup> was born in March 1979. For twelve years our monthly newsletter has been providing inside information and interpreting what government is doing, or threatening to do.

#### The Birth of the Pro-Family Movement

It was the mid-point of the Carter Administration when I had come to Washington. I discovered that most of the religious community in the capital felt it was more difficult to establish contact in the Carter White House than with any administration since Eisenhower's. I theorized that the president's staff wanted to de-emphasize Carter's widely publicized "born again" faith. The fewer religious leaders around him, the less people would be reminded of his faith, already too prominent for certain staffers' liking.

In any case, things began to change in the summer of '79, after Carter brought Southern Baptist minister Robert Maddox to his White House staff as a speechwriter, and then assigned him liaison duties to the religious

community. All his skills would be needed for a major conflict brewing during Carter's final year. A special White House program was about to galvanize Christians and others into the pro-family movement.

When we first got wind of the White House Conference on the Family, that was its name. But by 1980 it had been renamed the White House Conference of Families. By this subtle shift, liberal social scientists could avoid the implication that there was a traditionally definable entity known as "the family" -- persons related by blood, marriage, or adoption. That, of course, is the biblical definition. Conference planners wanted to install the American Home Economics Society's definition: "People who share the same living or cooking quarters and have a long-term commitment to each other." The sky would have been the limit on such "family" groupings.

Evangelicals were troubled, but at the same time encouraged that some of their leaders secured presidential appointment to the conference's final meetings. While pro-family forces did succeed at many points, a composite of positions adopted at those meetings formed a liberal social agenda, in some ways anti-family. To implement them would have required large amounts of federal dollars. Fortunately, the issue became moot when Jimmy Carter was defeated for reelection. Ronald Reagan was hardly going to

carry out the liberals' agenda.

### Born-again Candidates

There was one political mistake evangelical voters would not be able to repeat in 1980. In the past they might have voted for a presidential candidate solely on the basis of a common Christian faith. Not this time. Incumbent President Jimmy Carter, Republican challenger Ronald Reagan, and independent John B. Anderson all identified themselves as evangelicals. While the ultimate, error-free evaluation can only be made by God, each one seemed to have a credible profession of faith.

Back in 1976, Jimmy Carter's unabashed acknowledgement

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of his born-again Christian faith escaped no one's notice. It may have helped him capture the Democratic presidential nomination, partial proof that he was the most conservative candidate in the field. And it brought evangelical Christianity into the limelight, especially through Newsweek's "Year of the Evangelical" cover article. UPI reporter Wesley Pippert analyzed Carter as making a unique attempt to be a servant-leader, within his concept of the New Testament idea of servant. He was a strong family man and dedicated to peace.

Notwithstanding his incumbent's advantage and four years experience in the world's toughest job, Carter was not running strong. His track record in coping with economic and energy problems was poor, and his foreign policy skills were marked by the Iranian hostage situation. Among evangelicals, there was puzzlement and even disillusionment. Did they not have a right to expect that a fellow-believer would share their views on abortion and school prayer? His explanation that his sincerely held view of separation of church and state did not allow his spiritual convictions to shape his political positions would not wash. Further, why had he failed to include evangelicals in top-level positions in his administration?

Republican nominee Ronald Reagan was running on his track record as governor of California, our most heavily populated state. He had created a surplus from the state's deficit and eliminated a great deal of welfare fraud. Almost instinctively he identified with many of the moral and spiritual concerns of evangelicals, such as the sanctity of human life, the importance of returning voluntary prayer to the nation's schools, and the value of biblical morality. He convinced evangelicals that he would include qualified persons from their ranks in his administration. Reagan's personal faith was not as clearly expressed as that of Carter and Anderson, but it did appear genuine.

Moderately liberal congressman John Anderson entered the competition for the Republican nomination in June but, failing there, became an independent candidate.

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Anderson's 1964 designation as the National Association of Evangelicals' "Layman of the Year" was included in his official biography, but he would never have been granted that recognition in 1980. A gifted leader, his peers had voted him the second most persuasive orator in the House. He admirably used his rhetorical skills to swing the crucial votes that passed fair housing legislation in 1968.

Carter's campaign practically indicted Anderson with introducing a constitutional amendment to make Christianity the official faith of the nation in 1961, 1963, and again in 1965. Anderson now repudiated that

action as immature. Many of his social views had moved so far to the left that evangelicals were left shaking their heads. It seemed incredible that Anderson cosponsored gay rights legislation and supported unrestricted abortion rights, to the embarrassment of his evangelical denomination.<sup>2</sup>

Evangelicals were forced to make a thoughtful choice in this election. Not only did the dramatically divergent positions of Carter, Reagan, and Anderson demand careful evaluation, but a formidable new entity made its debut in presidential politics in 1980.

The new religious right saw evangelicals as a huge bloc of generally unmotivated voters. Surveys showed that these religious folk were more conservative than the general population in matters of economics and national defense. How could they be activated to add votes that would put conservatives in the win column? It dawned on new right strategists that issues like abortion, prayer in schools, and pornography would be of great moral concern to Bible-believing Christians, once they were informed. They went after the evangelical vote.

Meanwhile, the Republican Party had been cultivating evangelical leaders. I was part of a small cadre of leaders who had been getting acquainted with potential Republican presidential nominees -- and, eventually with the Democratic nominee, President Jimmy Carter. In August 1979 we met with John Connally on his Texas ranch. Then followed fall meetings with Ronald Reagan,

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Sen. Howard Baker (R-TN), and Rep. Phil Crane (R-IL). In early spring we met George Bush in Chicago.

During the 1980 National Religious Broadcasters convention, twelve of us were invited to the White House for breakfast with Jimmy Carter. The president remained for forty minutes of frank discussion, better than the fifteen pledged by his staff.

As promised, Republicans did indeed pitch their platform to evangelicals. They endorsed efforts to restore voluntary prayer to public schools, supported a constitutional amendment banning abortion on demand, and favored tuition-tax credits that would allow parents a realistic possibility of educating their children in Christian schools. In a highly controversial section, they even pledged to nominate federal judges who opposed abortion. Democrats, on the other hand, took opposing positions, even endorsing the drive for homosexual rights and against discrimination on the basis of sexual orientation. Support of gay rights was not calculated to attract biblical Christians.

As everyone knows, by the time Ronald Reagan arrived at the Republican convention in Detroit, the only suspense was his choice of a running mate. President Carter easily outdistanced Sen. Ted Kennedy (D-MA) for renomination. The election in November promised to be a cliffhanger.

It wasn't. Evangelicals were part of the reason. The nation's political crust shifted massively in 1980, the election registering 7.8 on a political Richter Scale. The public heeded the Republican slogan to vote "for a change," and commentators compared Reagan's victory to the dramatic turnabout election of Franklin D. Roosevelt in 1932. Indeed, until then in this century only Alf Landon in 1936 and George McGovern in 1972, among major party candidates, won fewer electoral college votes than did Jimmy Carter in his 489-49 loss. He became only the eighth incumbent to lose a presidential reelection bid.

Talk about changing the political landscape through elections! The United States of America felt the impact of

the evangelical voting bloc for the first time. Ever since 1980, we evangelicals have been a force to reckon with.

Millions deserted Carter at the polls, all the while probably regarding him as a decent man, personally honest, and with good intentions. Many of those were the so-called born-again voters who, ironically, probably had been responsible for putting him into the White House in '76.

Disappointed, disillusioned, distanced, or whatever, evangelicals who had once strongly supported Carter switched allegiance. According to the ABC News-Lou Harris survey, the white Baptist vote in the South revealed what happened. In 1976, that vote had preferred Carter to Gerald Ford 56 percent to 43 percent. By 1980, white Southern Baptists preferred Reagan over their own Southern Baptist Sunday school teaching Jimmy Carter by 56 percent to 34 percent.<sup>3</sup> Reading Bob Maddox' book *Preacher in the White House*, I got the feeling that neither he nor Jimmy Carter ever really understood why evangelicals forsook the president. Maybe it is fairer to suggest that they never accepted him.<sup>4</sup>

John Anderson's independent candidacy was not a factor in Carter's loss. Newsweek's "Mr. None-of-the-Above" did tally a vote total larger than the Reagan/Carter differential in fifteen states, but if Carter had carried the 167 electoral votes from all of them, Reagan still would have been elected by 322-216.

Evangelical leaders did not set out to construct an evangelical voting bloc, although some of the new religious right leaders did. When the election's smoke had cleared, the Moral majority's Jerry Falwell and others minimized the impact of the evangelical vote. The humble stance was strategic. While grander claims might have been justified, they would have sounded an alarm to their opponents.

What was the actual evangelical impact upon the election of Ronald Reagan? A baseball analogy makes sense. If a team wins an 8-7 game, any player on the winning team who scored or batted in a run could technically claim that

"his" run furnished the victory margin. On the other hand, that run or RBI would have been in vain without the other runs. Thus, analysts were forced to acknowledge that born-again voters at least batted in a run. With others, they produced the victory.

#### Disappointment with Reagan

One thing about Reagan disappointed evangelicals. He and Nancy, citing security problems, failed to attend worship services on Sundays. Instead, on weekends they either remained in the White House, helicoptered to Camp David, or flew to their ranch above Santa Barbara. That makes Nancy Reagan's comments about spiritual things, never mentioned publicly before their last summer in office, fascinating. The First Lady addressed a national conference of Youth for Christ in the nation's capital on July 27, 1988:

My father, who died six years ago, was a brilliant man, an internationally known brain surgeon. He was a person of tremendous self-confidence and intellect. So it is ironic that his spiritual life was influenced by a small, petty event that happened in his childhood. When he was a boy, there was a contest in his Sunday school class. The winner was to receive a Bible. My father knew he'd won the contest, for even then he

was totally confident in himself and his abilities. He simply couldn't accept it when the Bible was given to the child of the minister. And in reaction, my father, feeling wronged and disillusioned, allowed no place for faith in his life for the next eighty years.

He would take my mother and me to church and Sunday school, but he'd leave and come back only when it was time to pick us up. My mother had a very deep religious faith; she read her Bible every night. And it was that deep and abiding faith that helped her tremendously at the end of her life.

But my father didn't have that and at the end of his life, he was terribly frightened. He was even afraid to

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go to sleep for fear he wouldn't wake up. He'd move from chair to chair trying to keep awake and, I guess alive. I can't tell you how much it hurt to see him this way -- this man who had always been so supremely confident and strong in my eyes. My husband wrote him two long letters explaining the encompassing comfort he'd receive if he'd just put himself in the Lord's hands.

I was at the hospital with him, but my father never mentioned to me what happened next; the doctors told me. Two days before he died, he asked to see the hospital chaplain. I don't know what the chaplain did or what he said, but whatever it was, it was the right thing and it gave my father comfort. I noticed he was calmer and not as frightened. When he died the next day, he was at peace, finally. And I was so happy for him. My prayers were answered.<sup>5</sup>

Nancy Reagan's father paid a tragic, lifelong price for a momentary loss of integrity in the church. When we evangelicals seek to bring about change, when we relate to government, media, and even our own constituency, God forbid that we ever do so without absolute integrity.

But for the sovereignty of God, America would not have had much of an opportunity to evaluate the presidency of Ronald Reagan. Remember the intrepid humor of the president, when he scanned the doctors surrounding his hospital gurney, prepared to remove the would-be assassin's bullet? "I hope you're all Republicans!" Chief of the surgical team that day at George Washington University Hospital was Dr. Benjamin Aaron, who later suggested "there was some kind of divine providence riding with that bullet."

Moral Issues

Despite Reagan's early triumphs, evangelicals were restless. Their social concerns had been left on the back burner for the long months while the president and Congress tackled the economy. Toward the end of 1981,

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Connecticut Mutual Life released a poll showing that moral issues had gone to the top of the nation's political list. Data disclosed that liberals and conservatives were not as divided as before over traditional matters such as nuclear power, criminal rights, or economics. The survey found the sharpest societal divisions over such issues as homosexuality, marijuana, pornography, and abortion.

During Reagan's first term, the NAE and other religious groups battled for a constitutional amendment to allow prayer in schools, a human life amendment to protect the unborn, tuition tax credit legislation, and

against the appointment of an ambassador to the Vatican. Although the votes were not there in Congress, the White House was open to us -- in sharp contrast to earlier years. For nearly a year, the White House laid plans for a religious leaders' luncheon with the president. Old lists were considered inadequate. I worked with the White House to adopt criteria for the invitations and then to assemble the guest list. While Catholic, Jewish, and Protestant leaders were of course invited, this time evangelicals were represented at more than token levels. On April 13, 1982, the president hosted more than one hundred national religious leaders, many of whom, like NAE denominational heads and parachurch leaders, were eating in the State Dining Room for the first time. More than half of those invited were evangelicals.

Ronald Reagan, moreover, was willing to go out of his way to address evangelicals. While Presidents Ford in '76 and Reagan in '81 had addressed combined NAE and National Religious Broadcasters conventions in Washington, 1983 marked the first time any president traveled outside Washington to speak to evangelicals. When he did, in Orlando on March 8, 1983, Reagan gave probably the most controversial, and surely most oft-quoted speech of his presidency.<sup>6</sup>

Many commentators took umbrage when the president spoke not of a generic belief in God, but of his faith in the Lord Jesus. The New York Times' Anthony Lewis called his

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speech outrageous and primitive, terming his development of the reality of sin in the world "a simplistic theology -- one in fact rejected by most theologians." Lewis failed to note the decline of such liberal theology and the growing sway of its evangelical counterpart.

It was Reagan's application of the doctrine of sin that produced apoplexy in his critics, for this was his "evil empire" speech. He stated that the Soviet communists were "the focus of evil in the modern world," arguing that American military strength was necessary to restrain the "aggressive impulses of an evil empire." He pled for evangelicals to support his strong national defense and deterrence policies and to oppose voices calling for a nuclear freeze.

#### A String of Victories

Evangelicals began getting into the game in earnest, wanting to change the political landscape by pressing their senators and representatives with letters, phone calls, and personal contacts. Small victories started to appear. In '81, the Family Protection Act was introduced, designed to relieve some of the government imposed pressures on families. One section or another of this omnibus pro-family bill would become law over the next several years.

The following year saw evangelical Dr. C. Everett Koop finally confirmed as Surgeon General of the United States. Without the help of phone calls targeted at members of the Senate Labor and Human Resources Committee on Koop's behalf, his nomination might not have been ratified.

Thanks to a joint resolution passed by Congress, the year 1983 was signed into law by the president as the "Year of the Bible." Sen. Bill Armstrong (R-CO) gave strong leadership to achieving this national acknowledgement of the place of the Bible in America's heritage.

Finally, within a span of just a few weeks in the summer of 1984, evangelicals reaped a rich legislative harvest. Faithful Christian citizens personally experienced the biblical promise: "Let us not become weary in doing good, for at the proper time we will reap a harvest if we do not give

up."7 Four important pieces of legislation at last bore fruit, each dating back at least three years.

#### Drunk Driving Legislation

For years Americans had tolerated drunk driving, apparently not realizing the scope of the problem. Twenty-five thousand annual alcohol-related traffic fatalities were almost equivalent to a daily Air Florida crash. (Remember the terrible crash of '79, when only four persons survived as an ice-laden plane crashed into a bridge over the Potomac? Lynne and I were less than two miles away at the time, crossing another bridge spanning the Potomac in the swirling snowstorm.)

Why the apathy? Why had nothing been done? Perhaps many lawmakers who drank realized they had often gotten away with driving under the influence, and that strong sentences one day might penalize themselves or their friends. We began to editorialize that evangelicals, two thirds of whom are teetotalers, must take the lead on the issue. When the legislation passed, Christianity Today reported comments by a spokesman for Sen. Claiborne Pell (D-RI), chief sponsor of the legislation, that NAE's newsletter "generated a tremendous amount of mail" on the subject. Obviously, we were not the only ones.

#### Church Audit Procedures Act

In 1981 Mike Coleman visited us in Washington. He and other leaders of the Gulf Coast Community Church in Mobile, Alabama, were troubled about an Internal Revenue Service investigation of their church. The IRS wasn't talking about the reasons for its probe, and eventually it went far beyond the bounds of propriety, even making a brazen request to see all the pastor's personal counseling notes.

At the outset, the church was willing to cooperate, in the spirit of the biblical command to "submit yourselves for the Lord's sake to every authority instituted among men: whether to the king, as the supreme authority, or to governors, who are sent by him to punish those who do

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wrong and to commend those who do right."8 But the later demands were impossible. Everyone but the IRS understands that clergy confidentiality is traditionally as sacrosanct as a private lawyer-client relationship. By 1982, the church had finally cleared its name at a cost of more than \$100,000 in legal and accounting fees. Sadly, most of the expenditure could have been saved if the IRS had originally informed the church of the basis for its concerns. As it turned out, a disgruntled former member of the church had alleged that church funds were being used for private gain, and had submitted stolen papers as evidence.

Coleman's visit in time led to the drafting of legislation to prevent future harassment of churches, conventions, or associations of churches. It defined the rights and responsibilities of churches in cooperating with IRS investigations, but also placed several requirements upon the IRS. On May 11, 1983, Rep. Mickey Edwards (R-OK) introduced the Church Audit Procedures Act in the House, and simultaneously Sen. Charles Grassley (R-IA) introduced his Senate version. The White House ordered its own Treasury Department not to oppose the bill. Through congressional committee testimonies, marshaling evangelical and other grassroots support, and contacts with members of Congress and their staffs, the CAP Act became the law of the land -- attached to the must-pass Senate Deficit Reduction Act. There will be no more IRS "fishing expeditions" in evangelical churches, or in any others.

## A New Proposal Perceived as a Social Security Tax on Churches

Back in '82, government realized that Social Security was paying out \$17,000 more per minute than it was taking in (which amounts to nearly \$9 billion per year). A National Commission on Social Security Reform was appointed to stop the hemorrhage and to adjust the system for the long term. The president was alarmed enough to talk about a "pending insolvency."

When the Commission made its report, it bundled together many provisions to increase revenues, including a

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requirement that all employees of non-profit organizations be required to join. Churches would be included, not counting ordained ministers who had always been treated as self-employed for Social Security purposes. Paid church custodians, secretaries, organists and the like would now come under Social Security. For the first time, churches were to be taxed with respect to their religious activity, as distinguished from unrelated business income. It was obvious from the beginning that this provision would never be deleted, because the commission had agreed that the bailout was a package, and that changing at any one point would cause their plan to fail.

Few evangelical churches voiced objections to the new tax. They saw it as a pass-through tax for the ultimate benefit of their employees, rather than an assessment upon the church itself. Several fundamentalist pastors, however, howled in protest. They felt that submitting to this tax would be equivalent to taking money given to the Lord and handing it over to Caesar. So adamant were they, that they spoke of chaining themselves to the White House gates, and they seemed perfectly willing to go to jail for their convictions.

We wanted to head off a church-state confrontation by asking Congress to accommodate the sincere religious beliefs of our fundamentalist friends. An NAE proposal actually became the solution to the problem but, once again, hearings probably would never have been held without considerable complaint coming to Congress from the grassroots. Ultimately, the entire Social Security bailout package was adopted, with a provision avoiding church-state conflict. No minister had to go to jail.

## Equal Access

Last, evangelicals won this major religious liberty victory of the decade. In the *Widmar v. Vincent* decision of 1981, the Supreme Court ruled that a state university may not prevent campus organizations from conducting religious services on campus. A ban on religious worship would be a ban on free speech. It would be no violation of the

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Establishment Clause of the First Amendment to hold such forums in state university facilities. Religious groups should have "equal access" to those facilities. The court indicated, however, that this decision pertained only to the collegiate level, and that it might rule differently regarding lower level students of "impressionable age."

The Christian Legal Society and NAE were the original allies seeking equal access for high school students. It was ridiculous to think that, at their age, those students needed to be "protected" from

discussions of religion, given their wide-ranging high school agendas, or that they might somehow be confused into thinking that a student-sponsored Bible club was state-sponsored because it met in their school building. It seemed that the only kind of speech discriminated against in public schools was religious speech. It was as if a sign was posted at the entrance to America's high schools:

#### ATTENTION STUDENTS

Your Bill of Rights Forbids

All Voluntary Religious Speech

Among Students in a Group of Two or More

Any Place on this Campus

at Any Time

We intended to establish the civil right to meet in student-initiated clubs for the purposes of religious speech. CLS drew up a model Free Speech Protection Act, first introduced by Sen. Mark Hatfield (R-OR) before the Senate Judiciary Committee. Later his bill took on the name of equal access legislation, like that sponsored by Sen. Jeremiah Denton (R.-AL). In the House, Rep. Don Bonker (D-WA) championed the cause. In the summer of '83, CLS director Sam Ericsson and his staff were instrumental in winning the key legal case which would be at the heart of the battle for equal access, *Bender v. Williamsport School District*.

To abbreviate a longer story, we did everything humanly possible to win passage of the Equal Access Act. CLS and

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NAE drew up more than twenty pages of questions and answers for members of Congress, so that they could anticipate every possible argument and have convincing answers for colleagues, the press, and the people back home. When the issue came into the courts, we filed friend-of-the-court briefs. Joined in progress by the Baptist Joint Committee on Public Affairs, we worked with the staffs of members.

When the issue reached the floor of the Senate and House, we helped produce a huge grassroots mail and telephone support on Capitol Hill. Especially important in that was Dr. James Dobson, who would invite one or another of us onto his "Focus on the Family" radio program to explain the issue. When he asked his listeners to call, they did, and his is the second most widely syndicated radio program in the nation.

At the end, when equal access had become law, we pulled together a consulting group to draft guidelines for interpreting and implementing the act -- including former opponents like the American Civil Liberties Union, the American Jewish Congress, the National Council of Churches, and even People for the American Way, all of whom had a vested interest in seeing that equal access be applied fairly. High school principals reading the guidelines are encouraged to find them clear and balanced, not mere propaganda published by the winning religious groups.

Having worked to the maximum, all of us willingly admit that without God's providence, equal access would never have become law. Let me cite just three instances where it would demand more faith to think

that we were "lucky" than to see God's hand at work.

- At the heart of the battle was Lisa Bender, the Pennsylvania high school student who wanted to have a prayer club at Williamsport High School. Before the equal access concept got to Congress, she moved to Kentucky to train to be a missionary. Out of 435 congressional districts in the nation, she just "happened" to move into the district represented by the venerable Carl Perkins (D),

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chairman of the House Education and Labor Committee. Perkins took special interest in the legal battle of one of his constituents, and any education issue would necessarily pass through his committee.

- While the Senate quickly passed Equal Access 88-11, the House twice killed the bill. The day before equal access finally passed on July 25, a federal court of appeals turned thumbs down on the concept but, strangely enough, word of that decision did not reach Washington that day. Nor did it arrive the next day -- until ten or fifteen minutes after the close of the 337-77 affirmative vote. The court's action might have turned the House vote around. Why did Congress not know about it in time? I say it respectfully and you can take me literally: God only knows.

- Except for Rep. Perkins, equal access would never have reached the floor of the House that day. Perkins was so incensed by Speaker Tip O'Neill's blatant attempt to bury the bill that he threatened to bypass him with a rare parliamentary procedure, successfully worked just once in the prior quarter century. The Speaker was sufficiently intimidated by Perkins that he capitulated. Equal access got another vote and passed.

That was Carl Perkin's final legislative victory. He was stricken with a fatal heart attack nine days later, on a flight to his beloved old Kentucky home. God preserved his life until well into his seventy-second year. Equal access was his legacy.

The equal access victory teaches us that Christians must do everything humanly possible, while committing the results to God. That's a formula for success in politics -- and in all of life.

Anyone claiming that evangelicals won no significant political victories in Washington in the '80s is either ignorant or bearing false witness. The remarkable thing is that these successes came with the support of only a small percentage of the evangelical community.

What if hundreds of thousands of other Christians had

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joined forces with the comparative handful then involved? What if you, your friends, and your church had been involved? Had that happened, I believe we would have won major, front-page victories in areas such as school prayer or abortion. But we didn't and we haven't -- yet.

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Notes

1. The four-page NAE Washington Insight newsletter is sent to NAE member churches, individuals, or organizations. It is also available by subscription. A special church edition of Insight can be ordered in bulk

quantities, for distribution in churches and elsewhere. Write for information to the National Association of Evangelicals, Box 28, Wheaton, Illinois 60189. Or, should you prefer, write to NAE Office of Public Affairs, 1023 15th Street, Suite 500, Washington, DC 20005. [BACK]

2. So troubled was the Evangelical Free Church by the stance of its most prominent layman that it editorialized officially that Anderson was at odds with his own church. [BACK]

3. Richard A Viguerie, *The New Right: We're Ready to Lead*, The Viguerie Company, Falls Church, Virginia, 1981, 128. [BACK]

4. Many of those same evangelicals regard Jimmy Carter as the finest ex-president in their lifetime. They had always respected his personal piety, his persistent witness, and his commitment to the church as manifested in his serving as a regular Sunday school teacher even while president. Today there is more to admire: his refusal to exploit the presidency for personal gain, his servant-role in his work with habitat for Humanity, and his persistent efforts for peace. [BACK]

5. From text of Mrs. Reagan's Remarks, 27 July 1988, as released by the White House press office. [BACK]

6. Ronald Reagan's "Evil Empire" speech is included as Appendix III in this book. [BACK]

7. Galatians 6:9. [BACK]

8. 1 Peter 2:13-14. [BACK]

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Source: <https://sermonindex.net/speakers/robert-p-jr-dugan/a-decade-of-changing-the-political-landscape/>

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