

INTRODUCTION

The United States Senate approved two treaties in the March and April of 1978 which transferred sovereignty of the Panama Canal to the Panamanian government at the end of a transition period ending in 2000. The land that would become the canal had not belonged to Panama since the Hay-Bunau-Varilla of 1903 signed it away “in perpetuity” to the United States.¹ The treaties passed by a vote of 68-32, only one vote over the 67 required for its passage.² The canal, so long a tangible symbol of American vision, purpose, and pride, became the focus of a heated debate about the status of America’s role as a moral leader in a world which many, despite the unraveling of the Cold War consensus during the Vietnam War, felt was still polarized by capitalism and communism. Between September of 1977 when President Jimmy Carter and Panamanian ruling general Omar Torrijos signed the treaty and their eventual ratification, President Carter expended all his political capital to ensure the treaties’ passage, trying to advance a foreign policy commensurate with his commitment to human rights and international morality.³

The primary purpose of this study is to examine the response of Christians to the Panama Canal Treaties. Why did conservative evangelicals and Christian fundamentalists oppose the “giveaway” of the canal to such a degree that Bill Clinton, writing in his autobiography well over two decades later, would attribute his loss of the Arkansas governorship and Jimmy Carter’s loss of the Presidency in 1980 in part to,

¹ Denison Kitchel, *The Truth About the Panama Canal* (New Rochelle, New York: Arlington House Publishers, 1978), 209. This stipulation appeared in Article II of this treaty.

² Robert A. Strong, “Jimmy Carter and the Panama Canal Treaties,” *Presidential Studies Quarterly* 21, no. 2 (1991): 269-286.

³ George D. Moffett III, *The Limits of Victory: The Ratification of the Panama Canal Treaties* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1985), 205-207.

“Reagan’s alliance with Christian fundamentalists in their opposition to abortion and the Panama Canal treaties.”⁴ On the other hand, mainline and moderate denominations more theologically liberal than conservative evangelicals supported the treaties’ ratification to an overwhelming degree.

Two biblical stories help illuminate how Christians approached interpreting the Panama Canal Treaties as they reflect the state of American morality and its future as a world leader. Given that biblical interpretation serves as a useful tool for examining how Christians embrace particular public policies, this method proves useful. First, the figure of Gog in the books of Ezekiel and Revelation symbolizes evangelical Christians’ hatred for what they perceived as threats to national security. Ezekiel prophesied that Gog, as the leader of the land of Magog, would scheme against Israel, invade other countries, and signal the coming of the tribulation. Many Christians in the 1970s looked to Russia as either a metaphor for Gog, or as prophecy literally fulfilled. In their view, the Panama Canal Treaties threatened to advance Communism and thus signal the prophecies of both Ezekiel and the apostle John in Revelation. In their view, Communism was godless and worked against the message of the gospel, working to advance an atheistic ideology rather than an evangelical morality.

Second, the story of Naboth’s vineyard serves as a useful illustration of how more liberally theological groups viewed the Panama Canal Treaties. Jezebel, wife of King Ahab, conspired to take possession of a vineyard from a farmer named Naboth after he refused to sell it to the king. Ahab seized Naboth’s vineyard after its owner was wrongfully executed for cursing God, even though it had been in Naboth’s family for generations. Themes of illegitimate ownership, conspiracy, and injustice permeate the

⁴ Bill Clinton, *My Life* (New York: Knoph, 2004), 283.

story of Naboth's vineyard, and these same themes served mainline Christian groups in their attacks on the status of the Hay-Bunau-Varilla treaty. The United States, in a ruse which betrayed Panama's legitimate claim to its territory, seized the Canal Zone as if it had stolen Panama's birthright.

Both sides claimed the moral high ground in the battle over the treaties' ratification. This disparity occurred because not all Christians agreed on what "morality" exactly was when it came to the treaties. On this issue conservative evangelicals and fundamentalists equated morality with national security. The transfer of sovereignty of the canal, from their perspective, would serve as a boon to Communism and thus jeopardize national security. Moderate evangelicals and mainline denominations, conversely, envisioned a morality commensurate with the ideals of the Christian social gospel, helping to free the oppressed from their oppressors, making it easier for missionaries to do their job. The Division of Overseas Ministries of the Christian Church (Disciples of Christ), for instance, argued that congregations in their church needed to develop programs to promote a new treaty with Panama and to educate about injustices of the past and the inadequacy of the 1903 treaty.⁵ To many moderate and mainline Christian commentators the "spiritual future of the country was at stake between the forces of evil and the forces of good."⁶

The struggle between theological conservatives and moderates during the 1970s did not wage in a religious vacuum; the country as a whole faced numerous challenges during the later part of the decade. The Vietnam War shook the economic and political

⁵ "Christian Church Supports Panama Treaties," *Congressional Record* 123, no. 23 (14 September 1977): 29319.

⁶ Charles W. Engel, "Open Forum: Two Wrong on Canal Issue," *Baptist Digest* (27 February 1978).

will of the country, testing America's commitment to maintain its leadership of the Cold War consensus it inherited after World War II. Historian Robert Buzzanco spoke to the far reaching social and political ramifications of the war, saying it "exposed America's liberal world mission, made clear the contradictions between foreign intervention and domestic reform, energized millions, especially the young, to become involved in the affairs of their country, and led to distinct and often dramatic new social relations and ways of thinking."⁷ Watergate spread like a cancer through Richard Nixon's presidency, eventually forcing him to resign, leaving a pervasive skepticism among Americans about political power and those who wielded it, while stagflation—the previously presumed impossible phenomenon of both inflation and a stagnant economy—made Americans ill at ease about their fiscal health.⁸ Many fundamentalists and evangelicals believed that because America abandoned its "Christian roots," many of these problems descended upon the nation.⁹

Debate over other social and political topics raged between mainline denominations and conservative evangelicals throughout the decade. Referring to a myriad of issues from the 70s to today, in 2005 Jimmy Carter complained that "it is likely that modern-day believers in Christ are more sharply divided than Christians in those earliest days."¹⁰ The Panama Canal represents just one of those issues that has been unexplored by historians. By noting to which theology a particular denomination,

⁷ Robert Buzzanco, *Vietnam and the Transformation of American Life* (Malden, Mass: Blackwell Books, 1999), 251.

⁸ James Patterson, *America in the Twentieth Century: A History* (New York: Harcourt, 2000), 467-470.

⁹ Several historians and writers, however, have dismissed the idea that America was, at its inception, a distinctly Christian nation. See especially Mark Noll, Nathan O. Hatch, and George Marsden, *The Search for Christian America* (Westchester, Ill.: Crossway Books, 1983) and Jon Meacham, *American Gospel: God the Founding Fathers, and the Making of a Nation* (New York: Random House, 2006).

¹⁰ Jimmy Carter, *Our Endangered Values: America's Moral Crisis* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 2005), 37.

organization, or sect subscribed, the rift in American Christianity over the canal becomes clear. The scholarship has already noted how this theological rift manifested itself in religious sentiment regarding the Vietnam War. The work of historian Mitchell Hall, for example, shows how religious mainline leaders found a voice in Clergy and Layman Concerned About Vietnam (CALCAV), which represented the first large scale religious critique of the war. As Hall demonstrates, only a select few evangelicals joined CALCAV, choosing instead either to remain in the “silent majority” or to hold their own pro-war demonstrations.¹¹

In some cases subtle differences of opinion concerning the treaties would manifest themselves within a denomination itself. Among America’s churches that officially supported the treaties (or whose leaders personally endorsed the treaties), a difference of opinion existed, in general, between the laity, who, along with the majority of the American public, disapproved of the treaties and “elites” who preached, wrote articles, and gave speeches supporting their ratification.¹² This has been the case during many of the nation’s politically contentious debates.¹³ The progressive leaders of religious organizations such as the National Council of Churches, the Ohio Council of Churches, the National Conference of Catholic Bishops, and the Synagogue Council of America issued statements endorsing the treaties and even testified before the Senate Foreign Relations Committee in favor of ratification. The president of the Southern Baptist Convention publicly announced his support despite the tension that existed

¹¹ Mitchell K. Hall, *Because of Their Faith: CALCAV and Religious Opposition to the Vietnam War* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1990).

¹² For the purposes of this paper, elites are defined as those who have significant clout in the theological and political positions of a Christian denomination or organization, usually pastors, denominational officers, or editorialists for Christian publications.

¹³ For example of an analysis of divisions between the pulpit and pew during the Civil Rights Movement, see David L. Chapell, *A Stone of Hope: Prophetic Religion and the Death of Jim Crow* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2004): 131-152.

between himself and the congregations of Southern Baptist Churches. James Wall, editor for *Christian Century* wrote that:

The U.S. religious community... projects through its official leadership a remarkable unanimity in support of the treaties. This support is so strong that the Panama gap has become one of those national issues that challenge the capacity of our religious institutions to sway public opinion, both within and outside their own constituencies.¹⁴

The differences that surfaced over the Panama Canal Treaties were essential ingredients of not only theological struggles between conservatives and liberals, but political as well. As scholars grapple with religious involvement in the political sphere, it is important to remember the context of an overwhelming number of social and political debates which waged across a wide spectrum of political thought. Nevertheless, the debate over ratification pushed national defense into the spotlight in the view of conservative Christians who opposed Communism and prepared themselves to battle Soviet agents, if not at their doorstep, then in their backyard in Latin America. Along with a aversion for abortion, various kinds of public school curriculum, and liberation movements, national defense as an idea created an alliance between theological conservatives—fundamentalists and evangelicals alike—and set the stage for the cordial relationship between the Reagan administration and pro-defense Christians.

BATTLE FOR A NEW TREATY

To fully understand the religious response to the Panama Canal treaties, a discussion of their journey to ratification and the public debate surrounding them is necessary. One must first appreciate that the difficulty of building the canal prompted a profound sense of patriotism and pride in American ingenuity. Since construction of the

¹⁴ James M. Wall, "Church Support For Canal Treaties," *Christian Century* 94, no. 35 (2 November 1977): 995.

canal ended in 1914, accounts of the American travails on the isthmus became staples in public discourse; where the French failed to realize their goal, Americans overcame the obstacles. Workers overcame hazardous work conditions, a lack of supplies, a shortage of experienced personnel, and a severe outbreak of yellow fever in 1905. By the canal's completion, some 22,000 lives had been lost.¹⁵ All this contributed to the political passions evinced by the treaty debate.¹⁶

Panamanian complaints about American sovereignty over the canal, especially over the “in perpetuity” clause of the Hay-Bunau-Varilla Treaty of 1903, surfaced immediately. Panamanian nationalism created a sense of ownership of the Canal Zone and, consequently, many Panamanians began to agitate for transfer of ownership or, at a minimum, a revision to the 1903 treaty. The first major push on the part of the United States to address Panamanian concerns was in 1936, when on 2 March both countries signed a treaty ending the American protectorate over Panama in an effort to promote “good neighbor” policies in US foreign policy. The treaty specifically limited American involvement in Panama to the “effectual maintenance, operation, sanitation and protection of the Canal and its auxiliary works.”¹⁷ The Senate however did not ratify the treaty until 25 July 1939, after significant revisions allowing the United States essentially to act first and consult afterward if the security of the canal was threatened.

The political push to return the canal to Panama heated up again in 1964 when a group of American students living in the U.S.-controlled Panama Canal Zone raised

¹⁵ Gary Nash and Donald Critchlow, eds., *Encyclopedia of American History*, Vol. 10 (New York: Facts on File, 2003), 232.

¹⁶ Bruce W. Jentleson and Thomas G. Paterson, eds., *Encyclopedia of U.S. Foreign Relations*, Vol. 3 (New York: Oxford University Press 1997), 352-353.

¹⁷ Lester Brune, *Chronological History of the United States Foreign Relations*, Vol. 2 (New York: Garland, 1985), 721.

an American flag over their high school, despite a regulation passed by U.S. administrators prohibiting flying either the Panamanian or American flag in the zone. Violent demonstrations ensued by nationalist Panamanians who objected to the symbol of American sovereignty being raised, and during this “Flag Crisis” twenty-one people were killed (five Americans and sixteen Panamanians) and 700 were injured. After briefly suspending diplomatic relations with the Panamanian government, President Johnson pledged to reexamine the Hay-Bunau-Varilla Treaty of 1903 and soon announced a policy of negotiating an entirely new treaty with Panama.

Public opinion, solidly in favor of retaining all sovereignty of the Canal Zone, however, kept treaties concerning the Panama Canal from ever reaching the Senate for debate or ratification. Again seeking the relaxation of Panamanian-American tensions in 1967, negotiators reached an agreement effectively handing over administration and sovereignty of the canal, but news of the talks leaked to the American public, and the subsequent uproar prevented them from continuing any further. In 1974 Henry Kissinger and Panamanian Foreign Minister, Juan Tack, negotiated a treaty that again broke down due to domestic political pressure. In the fall of 1975, the Senate passed a resolution which strongly opposed any transfer of sovereignty in any new treaty, even over a significant transition period. This Kissinger-Tack treaty, however, served as the basis for the treaties which would eventually be ratified by the United States Senate in 1978.¹⁸ This effort by American politicians to relinquish control of the canal, like the attempt in 1967, was also predictably met with considerable opposition from the heart of the American public.

¹⁸ Strong, Robert A. “Jimmy Carter and the Panama Canal Treaties,” *Political Science Quarterly* 21, no. 2 (Autumn, 1991): 271.

The debate over handing over the Panama Canal truly grasped national attention in the presidential election of 1976. During the Republican primary, California Governor Ronald Reagan used the issue against Gerald Ford in an attempt to capture the party's presidential nomination. Knowing that the issue sounded emotional chords among conservatives prompted Reagan to use it as a political tool. Reagan biographer Lou Cannon observed that because the California Governor's presidential bid was in financial jeopardy after early losses to Ford in the primaries, Reagan took up the canal issue and consequently won the support of Sen. Jesse Helms.¹⁹ While Reagan ultimately failed, he employed a rhetoric that spoke for the public sentiment against the canal. He guaranteed applause at campaign stops when he said, "When it comes to the Canal, we built it, we paid for it, it's ours and we should tell Torrijos and Company that we are going to keep it."²⁰ He used humor when he accused the Ford administration of "giving up the defense of the hemisphere on the installment plan,"²¹ and appealed to patriotism when, in a nationally televised campaign speech, he averred that the Canal Zone was United States territory, "every bit as much American soil as is the land in the states that were carved out of the Gadsden and Louisiana Purchases, and is the state of Alaska," an argument used frequently by other conservatives.²² It remains unseen whether Reagan used the Panama Canal Treaties for purely political gain or if it was indeed an emotional issue close to his heart. There is some evidence to suggest that other groups knew the treaties' value for long-term political growth. Gary Jarmin of the American Conservative Union said, "It's

¹⁹ Lou Cannon, *President Reagan: The Role of a Lifetime* (New York: Perseus Books, 2000), 296. Indeed, Cannon refers to the Panama Canal treaties as the "centerpiece of his comeback campaign that almost won him the nomination," 471.

²⁰ Reagan quoted in Jimmy Carter, *Keeping Faith: Memoirs of a President* (New York: Bantam Books, 1982), 154.

²¹ Unsigned, "Panama: The Enduring Irritant," *Time* 107, no. 9 (1 March 1976): 22.

²² Robert D. McFadden, "Panamanian Scores Reagan on Canal" *New York Times* (17 April 1976): 6.

a good issue for the future of the conservative movement. It's not just the issue itself we're fighting for. This is an excellent opportunity for conservatives to seize control of the Republican Party."²³ At a bare minimum then, the treaties were important as issues themselves and as shapers of the American political landscape.

Ford struggled to address Reagan's accusations and failed to appeal to any real segment of the American public.²⁴ While campaigning in Texas, Ford claimed that the United States would never give up defense or operational rights to the canal, but the statement was later qualified by Ron Nesson, his press secretary, as lacking "precision and detail."²⁵ Journalist Stanley Karnow, in an article for *Saturday Review*, supporting Ford's position on the canal, articulated the President's position in more forthright language:

Ford recognizes, as his predecessors did, that the Panama Canal has become an anachronism. It is too narrow to accommodate modern commercial and military ships. It is indefensible. It loses money. And its legal status, established in a lopsided treaty between the United States and Panama seventy-three years ago, is an obsolete arrangement that irritates even the most moderate of Latin American nationalists.²⁶

Despite President Ford's ambiguity, he received the Republican nomination, and the Panama Canal would become an issue in the general election, albeit dwarfed by the attention given to other foreign policy issues, such as the Middle East.

During the second Presidential debate of the general election, Georgia Governor Jimmy Carter seemingly took a hard-line stand on the canal issue, condemning Ford's

²³ Jimmy Carter, *Keeping Faith: Memoirs of a President* (New York: Bantam Books, 1982), 160-161.

²⁴ Rather, the only substantive criticism of Reagan during this time regarding his Canal came from the Panamanian Foreign Minister, Aquilino Boyd, who argued that the canal could not be analogous to Reagan's examples because birth in one of these zones did not guarantee United States citizenship.

²⁵ David Binder, "Ford Clarifies Position on Canal After Conservatives' Criticism," *New York Times* (15 April 1976): 19.

²⁶ Stanley Karnow, "The Politics of Bluster and Ballyhoo," *Saturday Review* 3 (24 July 1976): 13.

1974 instructions for Kissinger to relinquish sovereignty of the canal at the end of an agreed transition period. Carter affirmed his position on the issue, saying that while he would want to continue raising payment for shipped goods and reducing our military presence in the Canal Zone, he “would never give up complete control or practical control of the Panama Canal Zone.”²⁷

Yet early in his Presidency, Carter made it clear that passage of a treaty with Panama was of the utmost importance. After the campaign and during the transition period, Carter told Zbigniew Brzezinski, his National Security Advisor, that the Panama Canal was to be an early foreign policy priority for the new administration.²⁸ Carter said in his 1982 memoirs that after the election he gained a better understanding of U.S.-Panama relations when he learned more about the history of the relationship between the two countries and the unfairness of the 1903 treaty. He wrote that the United States “needed to correct an injustice.”²⁹ During the height of the debate over ratification of the treaties in March 1978, William Safire of the *New York Times* issued a scathing indictment of President Carter, accusing him of vacillating on the canal issue. Safire argued that Carter took a hard-line canal position, to the right of both President Ford and Ronald Reagan, just to solidify his hold on the South for the general election and then changed his position on the issue after he had won. However, Carter felt that his change of mind about a new canal treaty was not a contradiction since he had qualified his statements with “for the foreseeable future.”³⁰

²⁷ <http://www.debates.org/pages/trans76b.html>. Taken from the website of the Commission on Presidential Debates.

²⁸ Zbigniew Brzezinski, *Power and Principle* (New York: Farrar Straus Giroux, 1983), 134.

²⁹ Jimmy Carter, *Keeping Faith* (New York: Bantam Books, 1982), 155.

³⁰ William Safire, “Panama’s Political Palindrome,” *New York Times* (6 March 1978): A21.

NEGOTIATING THE TREATIES

For the negotiations, Carter delegated significant powers to the American representatives, Sol Linowitz, a prominent expert on Latin American affairs and former ambassador to the Organization of American States (OAS), and Ellsworth Bunker, also a former ambassador to the OAS. The negotiations began in the winter of 1976 and carried on until the summer of 1977. On 7 September 1977, General Omar Torrijos Herrera traveled to Washington, D.C. and signed the treaties in an elaborate ceremony with President Carter. The essential idea to the treaties was that after a significant transition period, administrative and political authority of the canal and the zone around it would be handed over to the Panamanians. The agreement, ultimately ratified by the Senate in 1977, contained a twenty-one year shorter transition period than the failed agreement negotiated by Kissinger and approved by Ford in 1974, which called for a fifty-year transition period. The ratification process, beginning after the signing of the treaties in September 1977, proved to be Carter's "most difficult political battle" he ever faced while in office.³¹

The first treaty, ratified on 16 March 1978, was entitled the Neutrality Treaty. Coming into effect on 31 December 1999, this treaty ensured the neutrality of the canal and gave the United States and Panama the right to defend the canal from threats to that neutrality, allowing international commerce to move through the canal freely. Panama also pledged in the Neutrality Treaty to keep the canal open to vessels of all nations, including warships.³²

³¹ Jimmy Carter, *Keeping Faith: Memoirs of a President* (New York: Bantam Books, 1982), 152.

³² See the U.S. Department of State website: <http://www.state.gov/p/wha/rlnks/11936.htm>

The second treaty, ratified on 18 April 1978, is commonly referred to as the Panama Canal Treaty. This treaty detailed the complicated process by which the canal's administrative duties were to be handed over to the Panamanians and established the Canal Commission, a board comprising five Americans and four Panamanians, to supervise the twenty-two year transition period. The treaty also gave Panama jurisdiction over the 533-square-mile Canal Zone after thirty months of the treaty's passage, secured a pledge from both Panama and the United States not to negotiate the construction of a new, sea-level canal (and hence, one that would not be as susceptible to attack as the gate-lock system) with any other nation, and provided for increased revenues for Panama until 2000, when the canal would be handed over permanently.³³

After the treaties were negotiated and signed, an informational meeting was held in the State Dining Room of the White House to brief religious leaders and journalists. Ellsworth Bunker, Ambassador to the Organization of American States during the Johnson Administration, while fielding questions from the group was asked by Wes Michaelson of *Sojourners* magazine, "Are the treaties just?" Bunker avoided answering the question directly and gave an answer to the question that was consistent with the rhetoric of a diplomat: "If we want to get the treaties passed by the Senate, we have to speak in terms of American interests. But I think the treaties also meet the best interests of the Panamanians." President Carter and National Security Advisor Zbigniew Brzezinski, seeing the dissatisfaction on the faces of the listeners, learned from the meeting that they needed to promote the treaties more effectively to religious leaders and Christian intellectuals.

³³ Unsigned, "Basic Provisions of Treaties," *New York Times* (19 April 1978), p. NJ21.

James M. Wall, editor for *Christian Century* observed that Carter's foreign policy often dealt in the type of rhetoric that appealed to Christian leadership. Common themes in Carter's speeches were justice, hope, human rights, as well as freedom and opportunity. In a nationally televised address on 1 February 1978, one month before the Senate vote on ratification of the treaties, Carter included a claim that was sure to appeal to religious leaders concerned about how "just" the canals were:

We Americans want a more human and stable world. We believe in good will and fairness as well as strength. This agreement with Panama is something we want because we know it is right. This is not merely the surest way to protect and save the canal; it's a strong, positive act of a people who are still confident, still creative, still great.³⁴

President Carter used this definition of "just" to help him promote his style of foreign policy decision-making, a policy commensurate with moderate evangelical biblical values, at odds with men like North Carolina Senator Jesse Helms who feared that such an interpretation represented a "veneer of Christianity" which cast historically American values in terms which were contrary to God's law, concerned more with avoiding being called "imperialistic" than holding true to true theologically conservative Christian values.³⁵ The basis for support of the Panama Canal Treaties among moderate Christians therefore hinged on an interpretation of the Hay-Bunau-Varilla Treaty of 1903 as immoral, presenting America as a colonial power. Consequently, the Carter Administration had to be careful in their appeal to religious leaders, refraining from painting the United States as a colonial power simply looking for a way to manifest its

³⁴ Carter quoted in *Contemporary American Public Discourse*, Halford Ross Ryan, ed. (Prospect Heights, Illinois: Waveland Press, 1992), 292.

³⁵ Jesse Helms, *When Free Men Shall Stand: A Sobering Look at the Supertaxing, Superspending, Superbureaucracy in Washington* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1976), 16.

contrition.³⁶ As such, Carter could not simply boast the support of mainline denominations or organizations like the National Council of Churches.

HISTORIOGRAPHY

A study of the Christian response to these treaties can fit into a growing body of scholarship on the New Christian Right. During the late 1970s and early 1980s when public debate over the Panama Canal Treaties was at its height, and Ronald Reagan's evangelism-friendly administration dominated American politics, theological conservatives took a more participatory role in national, state, and local politics than they ever had before.³⁷ The founding of the Moral Majority in 1979, the emergence of televangelists such as Pat Robertson and Oral Roberts, the courting of the religious Right by Ronald Reagan, and, most importantly, the visibility of religious protesters at abortion clinics and parents at school board meetings debating the content of science textbooks all testify to the increased involvement of this "New Christian Right." Evangelicals became increasingly associated with and central to political conservatism, even though this had not always been the case in American history. Liberal movements such as abolitionism and the Social Gospel, for example, served as primarily religious impulses long before the New Christian Right's ascendancy. Nevertheless, the increased activity of theological conservatives demonstrated that the secularization theory of religion, the idea

³⁶ David Skidmore, "Foreign Policy Interest Groups And Presidential Power: Jimmy Carter and the Battle Over Ratification of the Panama Canal Treaties," *Presidential Studies Quarterly* 23, no. 3 (1993): 484.

³⁷ The late 1970s is typically the starting point among scholars when New Christian Right activity begins to take off. For a discussion of evangelical activity, as well as an intellectual history, in the preceding years, see Robert Booth Fowler, *A New Engagement: Christian Evangelical Thought, 1966-1976* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1982). I use the terms New Christian Right and "theological conservatives" to include evangelicals (those who stress salvation through a personal savior and have a "limited inerrancy" view of the Bible), fundamentalists (evangelicals who stress separation from society and have a "total inerrancy" theology) and charismatics (Pentecostals who stress divine revelation rather than rationality).

that religion erodes when positioned within a modern society, seemed to be incorrect with respect to American Protestantism.³⁸ As historian Mark Hulsether put it, “Evangelicals could no longer be interpreted as either marginal or alienated from the establishment after the early 1970s. Politicized evangelicals such as Jerry Falwell and Pat Robertson led a key battalion in a victorious conservative army, however much they complained that Nixon or Reagan did not enact their complete agenda.”³⁹

This context encouraged sociologists, historians, political scientists, and journalists to look more carefully at theological conservatives during the twentieth century, asking just how important these activists were in shaping American cultural and political life. In 1972, sociologist Dean Kelley encouraged scholars to stop pushing religion to the periphery of the literature and to devote more attention to it, specifically its rightist elements. Rather than accepting the assumptions of many scholars at the time that theological conservatives, especially fundamentalists, were on the fringes of American life and thus incidental to social structure development, Kelley sought to relocate them as the prime mover of modern American Christianity. As Kelley demonstrated through extensive statistical data, these congregations were growing at a faster rate than that of mainline groups and exerting more and more influence on the collective attitudes of the right as a whole.⁴⁰ Writing in 1980 George Marsden in

³⁸ Robert Wuthnow, *The Restructuring of American Religion* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1988), 3-5. Wuthnow begins his book discussing the errors inherent in secularization theory. While institutions themselves may fade, religion itself is rearranged and processed through new structures and medium.

³⁹ Mark Hulsether, *Building a Protestant Left: Christianity and Crisis Magazine, 1941-1993* (Knoxville: University of Tennessee Press, 1999), 146.

⁴⁰ Dean Kelley, *Why Conservative Churches are Growing: A Study in Sociology of Religion* (New York: Harper and Row, 1972). The attack on the idea that evangelicals and fundamentalists have occupied only the periphery of American Christianity also receives treatment in Roger Finke and Rodney Starke, *The Churching of America, 1776-1990: Winners and Losers in Our Religious Economy* (New Brunswick:

Fundamentalism and American Culture likewise viewed fundamentalists not as a culturally dislocated group but as an increasingly socially and economically mobile constituency that established itself in the middle-class, enjoying the fruits of the consumer culture.⁴¹

What is the relationship between the theological conservatives of old and the new crop that sprouted during the 1970s? Was their political resurgence an isolated event or did it represent continuity with the fundamentalism of the early decades of the twentieth century? Some commentators contended that the two were not connected, that with the “defeat” of fundamentalism at the Scopes Trial, it essentially died, and the only adherents to its ideas were sparse groups on the extreme right.⁴² In 1970, for example, religious historian Ernest Sandeen argued that the roots of American fundamentalism can be traced to both the conservative theology of Princeton University during the nineteenth century and the preaching of John Nelson Darby, a devout British premillennialist.⁴³

Fundamentalists coalesced as a social force, culminating in the publishing of *The Fundamentals* in 1905, then suffered defeat at Dayton and, having become “split and stricken” in the 30s, Sandeen chose to end his history of fundamentalism there. Princeton

Rutgers University Press, 1993); George Marsden, *Understanding Evangelicalism and Fundamentalism* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans Publishers, 1991).

⁴¹ George Marsden, *Fundamentalism and American Culture: The Shaping of Twentieth Century Evangelicalism, 1870-1925* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1980).

⁴² Norman F. Furniss, *Fundamentalist Controversy* (Hamden, CT: Archon Books, 1954); Frederick Lewis Allen, *Only Yesterday: An Informal History of the 1920s* (New York: Harpers, 1931); Edward Larson has labeled the prevailing idea in public discourse that fundamentalism died at the trial the “Scopes Legend.” See Larson, *Summer for the Gods: The Scopes Trial and America’s Continuing Debate over Science and Religion* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1997): 204-206, 225-246. Larson also credits, in addition to Allen’s book, the enormously popular play-turned-movie “Inherit the Wind” for establishing this myth.

⁴³ Ernest Sandeen, *Roots of Fundamentalism: American and British Millenarianism, 1800-1930* (Chicago: University of Chicago, 1970). Sandeen argued that dispensational premillennialism (based upon a literal reading of Revelation 19-20, this is the belief that Christ will come for his church, followed by a seven-year tribulation, then by a second return) is essential for a complete understanding of fundamentalism, as it motivates fundamentalists to interpret world events as harbingers of Christ’s eminent return.

sociologist Robert Wuthnow also exaggerated the “defeat” of fundamentalism as late as 1988, writing that, “By the time WWII ended...fundamentalism had largely ceased to exist as an organized movement....The organizational and cultural identity of fundamentalism had become largely that of an isolated fringe group comprised of separatist sects.”⁴⁴

However, the work of historians Leo Ribuffo and Joel Carpenter, beginning in the early 1980s, established fundamentalism as a culturally and organizationally vibrant tradition during the “intervening years.” Paying attention to fundamentalists’ use of mass communication techniques, as well as the growth of parachurch organizations which operated outside of the purview of any established church, Carpenter and Ribuffo argued that fundamentalism actually expanded during between the 1920s and 1950s, which witnessed the emergence of Billy Graham and the anti-communist “New Evangelicals,” a term which Carpenter positions in a “stream” of fundamentalism, separate from that of the hardliners. Embarrassed by their public defeat at the Scopes trial, fundamentalists and conservative evangelicals withdrew into their own subculture, establishing publishing companies, periodicals, radio stations, Christian entertainment, and, perhaps most importantly, their own private universities, primary, intermediate, and secondary schools.⁴⁵ Recent scholarship has echoed Ribuffo and Carpenter. For instance, the accomplishments of fundamentalist Baptist minister J. Frank Norris in Fort Worth, TX also illustrates the vibrant anti-alcohol and closely related anti-Catholicism during the

⁴⁴ Wuthnow, *Restructuring of American Religion*, 134-138. Quote on page 137.

⁴⁵ Leo Ribuffo, *The Old Christian Right: The Protestant Far Right From the Great Depression to the Cold War* (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1983); Joel A. Carpenter, “Fundamentalist Institutions and the Rise of Evangelical Protestantism 1929-1942,” *Church History* 49 (March 1980), 62-75; and, especially, Carpenter *Revive Us Again: The Reawakening of American Fundamentalism* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1997). Edward J. Larson has used this model effectively in discussing the controversy over science in public schools: see Larson, *Summer for the Gods*.

early 1930s, a time when denominational tensions within American Christianity were at an all time high.⁴⁶ While fundamentalism's political activity in the public square certainly abated, the literature has established, it not die completely.

By the 1980s however, Protestants and Catholics fought side by side on many of the same issues, the sharp antagonisms over the "rule" of the pope and use of alcohol became less vitriolic. It again became necessary to ask who these Christian activists actually were. Rather than identification as a "Protestant" or "Catholic," it became more common for a Christian in public discourse to refer to himself as a "liberal" or "conservative." This blurring of denominational lines received careful attention in 1988 by Robert Wuthnow in *The Restructuring of American Religion*. Wuthnow, a Princeton sociologist, showed how American religion was "shaped" by its social environment: the growth of the state (especially in its commandeering of social service provisions usually provided by the church) and decreasing involvement by conservative church structures in higher education were the primary external forces that facilitated this transition.⁴⁷ These two factors contributed to a decline of denominationalism and polarized American political-religious culture with conservatives on one hand, who claimed divine guidance, and liberals on the other, who viewed their political role more in terms of common morals and civic responsibility.

It goes without saying that the wealth of material on the New Christian Right is maddeningly broad, diverse, and, on occasion, abstruse. Thankfully, scholars have a greater appreciation for the role played by religion in American society now than they did

⁴⁶ Barry Hankins, *God's Rascal: J. Frank Norris and the Beginnings of Southern Fundamentalism* (Lexington, KY: University of Kentucky Press, 1996). Hankins also discusses Norris's success in his pastorate in Detroit, MI, lending to the idea that fundamentalism was not necessarily a rural phenomenon.

⁴⁷ Wuthnow, *Restructuring of American Religion*, 317-322 and 71-99, respectively.

thirty years ago, and as long as Christianity continues to play an active role in contemporary politics, it will continue to be of value for historians. All the same, careful attention for the history of American evangelicalism can and should be given to new questions that can help scholars understand modern theological conservatives.

For instance, there is a need to address the affinity between conservative Christianity and pro-military policies, foreign and domestic. Why are conservative evangelicals and fundamentalists inclined to support large defense budgets, as they did during the two Ronald Reagan administrations, and oppose the dismantling of overseas bases? Among the New Christian Right, what subtle differences exist with respect to these policies and how can an examination of theology, especially dispensational premillennialism, expand our understanding of why faiths respond differently to military policies? In other words, why do theological conservatives find themselves active in conservative political activity?

How did the New Christian Right, grounded on appeal to authority, become bedfellows with an economic philosophy which appealed so much to freedom of choice and unfettered progress? Were some theological conservatives perhaps more likely to abandon economic liberalism in order to embrace social and cultural issues they perceived to be dangerous or immoral?

A linguistic analysis of various modes of biblical interpretation would also be a welcome supplement to the existing literature. Do fundamentalist and evangelical modes of exegesis appeal more to anti-intellectuals? Does the simplicity of “literal interpretation” make it easier for the evangelical and fundamentalist message to spread; much in the same way, in science, projectile energy takes the path of least resistance?

Similarly, does the difficulty in comprehending liberal theology make it less likely to appeal to Christians that value a personal relationship with scripture? Answers to these questions are crucial for a full grasp of not only conservative Christians and “Antiliberals” but Christianity as a whole. This thesis will attempt to answer many of these questions.

CHAPTER 1 – OPPOSITION TO THE TREATIES

“I am against you, O Gog, ... You and all your troops and the many nations with you will go up, advancing like a storm; you will be like a cloud covering the land ... On that day thoughts will come into your mind and you will devise an evil scheme.” Ezekiel 38: 3, 9-10

How do the Panama Canal Treaties help explain the growth of political conservatism among the Christian Right, and what do they tell us about the subtleties of difference among evangelicals? First, the historiography in recent years ascribes significant influence to the New Christian Right for its role in the rise of political conservatism as a whole during the unraveling of the postwar liberal consensus.⁴⁸ The scholarship offers little, however, to explain the mutual affinity between many Protestants and national defense conservatives. Why have conservatives been more likely to embrace pro-defense policies? The treaties help explain this attraction, because they were more than a simple resolution over sovereignty of territory. They represented a serious policy debate about the future of the nation’s relationship with the international community, especially the third world. Should the United States put a premium on its national security as theological conservatives contended? Or should the country be obligated, if not willing, to demonstrate signs of neighborliness—some might say justice—to its Latin American neighbors as more moderate evangelicals insisted?

Christians were divided on their feelings about the treaties, and no significant scholarship has been devoted to explaining that split or the tension that existed between denominations or groups with opposing views, even though Jimmy Carter himself

⁴⁸ Godfrey Hodgson, *The World Turned Right Side Up: A History of the Conservative Ascendancy in America* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1996) and Lisa McGirr, *Suburban Warriors: The Origins of the New American Right* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2001). The literature is in desperate need of an updated published historiography; in the interim see Leo Ribuffo, “God and Contemporary Politics,” *The Journal of American History* 79, no. 4 (March 1993): 1515-1533 and Ribuffo, “Why is There so Much Conservatism in the United States and Why Do So Few Historians Know Anything About It?” *The American Historical Review* 99, no. 2 (April 1994): 438-449.

complained in his diary that, “both Mormons and Baptists have people for and against the treaties.”⁴⁹ Harold O.J. Brown, professor of theology at Trinity Evangelical Divinity School in Deerfield, Illinois wrote in the heat of the battle for ratification, “It ought to be possible for Christians to disagree about it without prejudging one another’s motives and spiritual integrity. But more than one Christian group seems to be doing just this.”⁵⁰

How do these divided feelings on the Panama Canal Treaties help us better understand not only the rise of conservatism at large, but also the subtleties of difference within the New Christian Right itself? For those Christians such as Jerry Falwell, Tim LaHaye, and the congregants in the pews of the Southern Baptists Convention who viewed America’s leadership in the world from the perspective of devoted evangelicalism, the canal’s loss meant both the loss of American prestige and the country’s ability to act itself as an evangelical actor in an immoral world.⁵¹ The debate over ratification thus serves as an important reflection of the affinity between the military-industrial complex and theological conservatives, a relationship evidenced by the areas of the country which served as nuclei for the growth of both religious and political conservatism as an idea leading up to the 1980s, areas of the country that also boast a defense presence: Orange County, CA and Colorado Springs, CO being the prime examples of this union.⁵²

⁴⁹ Jimmy Carter, *Keeping Faith: Memoirs of a President* (New York: Bantam Books, 1982), 176.

⁵⁰ Harold O.J. Brown, untitled, *Moody Monthly* 78, no. 6 (February 1978), 72.

⁵¹ This analysis relies heavily on the work of anthropologist Susan Friend Harding, *The Book of Jerry Falwell: Fundamentalist Language and Politics* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2001). Harding argues that through Falwell’s careful linguistic dance between evangelicalism and fundamentalism, he sought to shed the separatism exhibited by so many fundamentalists and bring them into the political culture as active participants, while shoring up the support of more moderate Protestants. This addition to the historiography has been crucial, as it helps quell some of the debate over whether or not Falwell was an evangelical or a fundamentalist—Harding argues that, in a sense, he was both. Harding demonstrates how Falwell translates biblical appeals for personal salvation and morality to the country at large, suggesting that America, once saved, can assume the role of the evangelical in a secular world.

⁵² Lisa McGirr, *Suburban Warriors: The Origins of the New American Right* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2001), 11-12. James Dobson’s Focus on the Family would be located in Colorado Springs, while Robert Schuller’s Crystal Cathedral was founded in Orange County.

ANTI-LEFT CHRISTIANITY

The treaties were ratified in March and April of 1978, only a year before the onset of a significant theological debate and administrative restructuring of the nation's largest Protestant denomination. As historian Barry Hankins explained, "Beginning in 1979, the Southern Baptist Convention experienced one of the most contentious and significant denominational battles in American religious history."⁵³ The intense feelings exhibited by opponents and supporters of the treaties would reflect the growing divisions within the nation's largest denomination. The primary point of contention between the different factions in the SBC was the issue of inerrancy, a debate still in force today among many denominations. At times the conflict has threatened to split the denomination and compelled Southern Baptist Convention President Jimmy Allen to urge "battling with the Bible instead of over the Bible."⁵⁴ Jimmy Carter wrote in 2005 that because the SBC distanced itself so far from mainline or traditional Christians, he and his wife finally decided to sever their affiliation with the Convention.⁵⁵

Is the bible wholly infallible as conservative theologians such as Francis Schaeffer insisted? Or is there a more limited inerrancy, which helps Christians "accommodate" modernity? When the Bible's authority is subverted, ardent conservatives argue, the result is an ill-founded faith in human beings to save themselves, leading to ideas which abandon Christianity, namely Secular Humanism and Communism. Jesse Helms coupled atheism and socialism, claiming that they were

⁵³ Barry Hankins, *Uneasy in Babylon: Southern Baptist Conservatives and American Culture* (Tuscaloosa: University of Alabama Press, 2002), 3.

⁵⁴ "SBC President Urges Baptists to Overcome Mission Barriers," *Baptist and Reflector* 144, no. 5 (2 February 1978): 2.

⁵⁵ Jimmy Carter, *Our Endangered Values: America's Moral Crisis* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 2005), 42.

inseparable entities: “when you have men who no longer believe that God is in charge of human affairs, you have men attempting to take the place of God by means of the Superstate.”⁵⁶

Liberalism, Helms noted, “leaned” towards socialism and atheism and was too incompatible with scripture. Helms defined liberalism as the political product of Christianity’s ultimate nemesis: secular humanism. As a “pseudo-religion,” Helms explained that humanism attempted to provide a secular counterpart to biblical morality, to establish a “heaven on earth.”⁵⁷ Helms entertainingly argued that because humanism had replaced Christianity as the “state religion,” liberals should practice their own definition of separation of church and state and prohibit the ideas of John Maynard Keynes, Sigmund Freud, and John Dewey, just as liberals attacked Bible reading and the Lord’s Prayer in public schools. Humanism had its own tenets, followers, and infrastructure: “The new religion is, to sum it up, collectivist, totalitarian, and implacably hostile to the family, the church, and free institutions. It claims dedicated adherents in politics, in communications and education, in business and industry. In short, the new religion, makes a god of government.”⁵⁸ Conservatism, of course, was the antithesis of humanism, according to Helms, believing that their role in government stemmed from an obligation to God and family. Government began with the individual, not the state.

Christian anti-communism was at its height during the 1950s in the aftermath of the dissolution of the alliance-by-necessity relationship of the Soviet Union and the United States during World War II. As the historians Mark Noll and Edwin Gaustad

⁵⁶ Jesse Helms, *When Free Men Shall Stand: A Sobering Look at the Supertaxing, Superspending Superbureaucracy in Washington* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1976), 16.

⁵⁷ *Ibid.*, 26.

⁵⁸ *Ibid.*, 27.

have written, by adding the phrase “under God” to the pledge of allegiance, as well as other patriotic gestures, Americans interpreted the ideological battle of the Cold War as a Holy War as well.⁵⁹ The best example of Christian anti-Communists were “Neo-Evangelicals,” such as Billy Graham, who made a point to emphasize what they felt were the antagonistic natures of Christianity and Communism. Writing in 1951, Graham argued that, “...for some time I have been stating to this radio audience that communism is far more than just an economic and philosophical interpretation of life. Communism is a fanatical religion that has declared war upon the Christian God...What a challenge this should be to every Christian: Who is greater—Marx or Christ?”⁶⁰ The rhetoric by Graham and others served as the prelude to Christian anti-communism for the next forty years. Jesse Helms claimed that Communism was a “counterfeit religion,” which falsely promised an “abundant life for all” without the need for a savior.⁶¹ Journalist Lou Cannon framed Ronald Reagan’s anti-Communism within the President’s religious convictions, alongside his economic philosophies; Communist ideas were “antithetical to the will of God” and the “highest aspirations of humanity.” Reagan’s deep-seated belief that Communists lied, cheated, and committed any crime to further their cause led him to logically conclude that the Panama Canal would serve as yet another theatre for Communist subversion.⁶²

Panamanian dictator Omar Torrijos was the focal point of American fear about Communism in Panama. It was no secret that he and Fidel Castro’s friendship warmed

⁵⁹ Mark Noll and Edwin S. Gaustad, eds., *A Documentary History of Religion in America since 1877* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2003), 441.

⁶⁰ Billy Graham, *Christianism v. Communism* (Minneapolis: Billy Graham Evangelistic Association, 1951), 1-4.

⁶¹ Helms, *When Free Men Shall Stand*, 119.

⁶² Lou Cannon, *President Reagan: The Role of a Lifetime* (New York: Perseus Books, 2000), 240-241.

after Torrijos seized power in 1968; eventually, Panama and Cuba even resumed official diplomatic relations in 1974. Castro and Torrijos held much in common: both espoused rhetoric of freedom and liberty, claimed to fight imperialism and colonialism on their doorstep, and both men championed reforms for tenant farmers and city workers, Torrijos with his collectivist settlements called *asentamientos*.⁶³ Paul Ryan, a former naval officer and research associate at the Hoover Institution on War, Revolution, and Peace, pointed out in 1978 why friendly relations between the two men may have concerned anti-Communists: "...he developed a more productive plan to achieve international stature through global military interventions engineered by a Soviet-Cuban military tandem. In addition, he courted political favor with the newly created mini-states in the Caribbean and strengthened his ties with the Third World as a means of promoting anti-Americanism, inciting nationalism, and supporting subversion."⁶⁴ Panamanian delegates to the Conference of American Armies in Montevideo, Uruguay in October 1975 highlighted Torrijos's Soviet sympathies as well when they objected to condemnations of "made-in-Moscow Communism" as a "grave menace" to the security of the hemisphere. After the success of Cuban and the Soviet Union activity in Angola, only three months after the conference, wariness about Torrijos's intimacy with Communist nations only heightened.⁶⁵

In 1975 Torrijos interviewed with the Russian newspaper *Izvestiya*, detailing his numerous problems with the United States and explaining his sympathies for Moscow. Torrijos claimed that Panama was in a struggle for national liberation and that its recent

⁶³ Paul B. Ryan, *The Panama Canal Controversy: U.S. Diplomacy and Defense Interests* (Stanford: Hoover Institution Press, 1977), 71-73 and R.M. Koster and Guillermo Sanchez, *In the Time of the Tyrants: Panama, 1968-1990* (New York: W.W. Norton, & Co.), 151.

⁶⁴ Ryan, *The Panama Canal Controversy*, 73.

⁶⁵ Ryan, *The Panama Canal Controversy*, 77.

establishment of formal diplomatic ties with Cuba was to be followed by, “New steps in this direction...with the Soviet Union.” On 19 July 1977, the Soviet Union sent an official delegation to Panama and left with an economic agreement, fulfilling Torrijos’s prediction that, “links between us will be wide and mutually profitable.”⁶⁶ Though Torrijos may not have been as staunch a Soviet ally as Castro, his sympathies with them stirred up enough fear that many Americans warned of what would come of another Latin American country fully embracing Communism, perhaps leading to many of the anti-religious rhetoric and measures taken by the Soviet Union. The worst scenario, of course, was atomic war, and fears about its possibility drove rhetoric about Armageddon. Representative Tim Lee Carter of Kentucky made this statement on the House floor in November 1977: “If the [P]anama treaties are approved and U.S. power withdrawn [is] from that situation, there will be a Soviet presence in Panama within five years. The U.S. will then face Option Impossible: either accept another major political defeat, or risk atomic war. At that point, we will take the defeat—yet another step down the road to ultimate defeat.”⁶⁷ Possibly fueling these concerns was a steadily unraveling détente, which never very healthy as an idea, eventually came apart after the Soviet invasion of Afghanistan in 1979.⁶⁸

Conservative fears about the anti-religious and militant nature of Communism, of course, were not completely irrational or unfounded. Shortly after the Bolshevik revolution, Vladimir Lenin himself explained that, “We repudiate all morality that proceeds from supernatural ideas or ideas that are outside class conceptions. Morality is

⁶⁶ Ryan, *The Panama Canal Controversy*, 122.

⁶⁷ Tim Lee Carter, *Congressional Record* 123, no. 28 (2 November 1977): 36726.

⁶⁸ James Patterson, *America in the Twentieth Century: A History* (New York: Harcourt, 2000), 484.

entirely subordinate to the interests of class war. Everything is moral that is necessary for the annihilation of the old exploiting social order and for uniting the proletariat.”⁶⁹ The *Washington Post* reported in July 1976 that while the Soviet constitution granted freedom of religion, this was a nominal liberty practice at best. As of the 1970s, existing churches were forced to register with the government, the establishment of new churches was prohibited, and government agents worked as spies within congregations to report on any subversive activity.⁷⁰ Many in the Christian Right therefore feared what would come of Latin America—and the United States, for that matter—if the canal were to fall to a Communist regime.

As a theological underpinning, informing the Christian view of Communism was a reading of biblical passages that interpreted the bible as a prophetic text rather than a mere historical record. For instance, Graham suggested that the prophesy of armies arising in Ezekiel 38 and 39—the forces of Gog—pointed to the rise of Russia as the center of an anti-Christian movement.⁷¹ The Gog referred to in Ezekiel may be a symbolic name for a nation’s leader or a representation of all evil military forces opposed to God, but the idea that they pointed to Russia soon became a fixture among conservative evangelicals.⁷² Referring to those passages in Ezekiel, the Apostle John, writing in the book of Revelation speaks of a betrayal, much like what some Evangelicals and many fundamentalists felt after the ratification of the Panama Canal Treaties: “Now when the thousand years have expired, Satan will be released from his prison, and will go

⁶⁹ “On Soviet Morality,” *Time* 17, no. 7 (16 February 1981): 17.

⁷⁰ Janis Johnson, “Movement Grows in Congress for Soviet Christian Support,” *Washington Post* (31 July 1976): A3.

⁷¹ Billy Graham, *Christianism vs. Communism* (Minneapolis: Billy Graham Evangelistic Association, 1951), 3.

⁷² See especially, Hal Lindsey, *The Late Great Planet Earth* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1970), 59-71.

out to *deceive* the nations which are in the four corners of the earth, Gog and Magog, to gather them together to battle, whose number is as the sand of the sea.”⁷³ Not only does this passage speak to the betrayal of Christianity by anti-Christian forces (Communism by Graham’s reading) but the pervasiveness of their invasions. Communism was more than an “anti-Christian” idea; it was a virus, which infiltrated and devoured an unsuspecting or unwitting host. Ronald Reagan certainly embraced this theology when evaluating the Soviet Union. Political scientist Paul Kengor, who argued in 2004 that Reagan’s optimism for an American victory in the Cold War was a byproduct of his faith, wrote, “He was certain that the Soviet Union leadership intended to spread the system responsible for such crimes worldwide, with Moscow as the headquarters for the pursuit of global communism. The Kremlin would usher in a Great Leap Backward.”⁷⁴ In 1976 while touring Cuba, General Torrijos did not do much to calm fears about the worldwide ambitions of Communism among the American public: “We have the moral strength to achieve the Panamanian ideal—total liberation...since we not only strive and present our cause, but we firmly reinforce the ranks of world revolution.”⁷⁵

When fundamentalists or evangelical conservatives blended this theology with public or foreign policy, however, it resulted in what Jimmy Carter would later call on of the “most bizarre admixtures of religion and government.”⁷⁶ Carter complained in 2005 that this amalgam was a cause for concern, because such fundamentalists felt it was their responsibility to hasten Christ’s return to earth, thus realizing biblical prophecy.

⁷³ Revelation 20: 7-8, New King James Version

⁷⁴ Paul Kengor, *God and Ronald Reagan: A Spiritual Life* (New York: Harper Collins, 2004), 141-142.

⁷⁵ Ryan, *The Panama Canal Controversy*, 75.

⁷⁶ Jimmy Carter, *Our Endangered Values*, 113.

Historian Bruce J. Schulman has suggested that Hal Lindsey's *The Late Great Planet Earth*, published in 1970, demonstrates the pervasiveness and, in some respects, popularity of this apocalyptic theology. Lindsey's book sold 28 million copies by 1990, having over 9 million copies in circulation by 1978—one of the best-selling books of the 1970s. Putting the drama of Revelation in terms of the nuclear age, a rising Communist China, and turmoil in the Middle East, the apocalyptic imagery of the book captivated readers and illustrated the strength of prophecy with Chapters like "Russia is a Gog," a reference to the same passage from Ezekiel Billy Graham used with such effect in the 1950s.⁷⁷ Because the "giveaway" of the canal was seen by so many conservatives as an advantage for Communism's global ambitions, it was interpreted as one of the events, along with the restoration of Israel as a nation in 1948, which signaled the imminence of Judgment Day. As part of the Cold War, the treaties were part and parcel of the conflict between political and religious conservatism on one side and political and social liberalism on the other.

Scholars have noted that the resurgence of political activity by the New Christian Right was a result of cultural defense against the threats posed by emerging social issues: abortion, stripping of involuntary school prayer, feminism, etc.⁷⁸ While the emphasis on cultural defense is rightly placed, historians have also devalued the degree of anti-Communism still permeating the ranks of Christians, especially the more conservative among them. Admittedly, anti-Communism—and its kindred anti-Soviet Union spirit—would not be as strong during the 1970s among Christians, mainly because of other more

⁷⁷ Hal Lindsey, *The Late Great Planet Earth*, 59-71 and Bruce J. Schulman, *The Seventies: The Great Shift in American Culture, Society, and Politics* (Cambridge: Da Capo Press, 2001), 93.

⁷⁸ Steve Bruce, *The Rise and Fall of the New Christian Right, 1978-1988* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1988), 3.

vital social considerations, but it nevertheless existed throughout much of Christianity in a way not acknowledged in the historiography.

While tirades against communism were not as prevalent among Christians during the 1970s as they were in the 1950s, they remained vibrant and existed as an essential link between social conservatism and the military establishment—a smaller but still necessary component to understanding late-1970s conservatism. The following three examples help illustrate Christian anti-communism during the 1970s. First, *The Christian Index* editorialized in December 1977 that if shepherds, wise men, and angels came to earth to sing hosannas for the Christmas season, they would find “dozens of communist tyrants systematically enslaving peoples and governments under the ruse of ‘welfare of the state.’”⁷⁹ The use of “ruse” by the editors echoed what many Christians felt at the time: the increasing role played by government in people’s lives was a dangerous slope towards a despotic, godless system of government. Second, C. Donald Cole, a Christian radio personality for the Moody Bible Institute, wrote in that organization’s publication that if the Russians kept “meddling” in Angola, they should pay a price for such activity.⁸⁰ Figure 1 (page 54) illustrates the apparent rivalry many evangelicals felt they had with Communism in that part of the country, noting that each idea sought its own converts. Third, Howard Keshner, an editorialist for *Answers* (formerly *Christian Economics*), wrote in May 1976 that Marxism sought to supplant God just as Satan sought to supplant God: “Marx is the negation of Moses and the moral law, Christ and the Sermon on the Mount, the Golden Rule, Adam Smith and the free

⁷⁹ “What if Heralds Came Down in 1977?” *The Christian Index* 156, no. 51 (22 December 1977): 2.

⁸⁰ C. Donald Cole, “Angola Agony,” *Moody Monthly* 76, no. 8 (April 1976): 24-27. See Figure 1.

market economy.”⁸¹ The emphasis on personal responsibility, a major tenet shared by conservatism and Christianity, is present throughout all three examples. Marxist ideology, they reason, robs humans of their ability to provide for themselves; its proponents should be held accountable for their actions; and it destroys the economic system that encourages the private enterprise of individuals.

If fundamentalists—and the politicians that represented them—treated Marxism-Leninism itself as a kind of religion, then one way to combat Communism was to evangelize directly to government officials who could, if converted, “create a bulwark against communism.”⁸² Such was the rationale behind the creation of the Christian embassy in Washington, where Strom Thurmond and a board of advisors raised one million dollars, donated by twenty businessmen, to realize this goal. One of these advisors, Republican Congressman John Conlan, told *Sojourners*: “There are two ways to have Christians in government. One is to elect them. The other is to convert those who are already there.”⁸³ By evangelizing to government officials, the embassy’s spokesman claimed, it did more than combat Communism. A national evangelistic revival would boost national patriotism. Jesse Helms echoed this offensive strategy by pointing to the Vietnam War as an example. America failed in Southeast Asia, because “it is not by any combination of money and power and armaments that communism will be restrained, but only through faith in God, heroic discipline, and moral courage.”⁸⁴

Patriotism during the 1970s is a tricky topic, but understanding the context of national sentiment is an important tool for understanding the eventual responses to the

⁸¹ Howard Keshner, “Marx Subordinates Man to the State,” *Answers* 2, no. 5 (May 1976): 2.

⁸² Kengor, *God and Ronald Reagan*, 144; “The Christian Embassy,” *Sojourners* (April 1976): 9.

⁸³ *Ibid.*, 9.

⁸⁴ Jesse Helms, *When Free Men Shall Stand: A Sobering Look at the Supertaxing, Superspending Superbureaucracy in Washington* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1976), 18.

Panama Canal Treaties, especially their opponents. Two issues in particular make patriotism important. First, given that the country was still nursing a wounded pride from Vietnam, threats from third-world countries were that much more emotionally contentious. Henry Kissinger, Richard Nixon's National Security Advisor, spoke to the legacy of the Vietnam conflict: "Vietnam is still with us. It has created doubts about American judgment, about American credibility, about American power—not only at home, but throughout the world. It has poisoned our domestic debate. So we paid an exorbitant price for the decisions that were made in good faith and for good purpose."⁸⁵ Camps of conservative Christians, in viewing America as God's country, deemed a strong national defense as a Christian value, wishing to avoid any further humiliation and ambivalence about the nation's future that, as Kissinger pointed out, resulted from the war. The picture on the cover of the June 1977 issue of *Arkansas Baptist*, which was also used by many other Christian publications, illustrates this relationship; Christians are shown raising a flag, in a scene reminiscent of the same act by Marines at Iwo Jima during World War II (see Figure 2, page 55). By relinquishing control of the canal, the United States demonstrated once again that a third world nation, like Vietnam before, had steered foreign policy and thus undermined American-Christian leadership in the world. From conservatives' perspective, suggestions by ratification supporters that the Canal Zone was indefensible was yet another example of America's declining global standing during the decade. Terrance Smith of the *New York Times* wrote that conservatives in general were deeply concerned about America's image as a world power. So much so

9. ⁸⁵ Kissinger quoted in Stanley Karnow, *Vietnam: A History* (New York: The Viking Press, 1983),

that a “new hawkishness finds expression today in the opposition to the Panama Canal Treaties.”⁸⁶

Second, because it was the bicentennial year, 1976 witnessed increasing signs of nationalism among the public. *Newsweek* managing editor John Meacham noted in 2006 how “Religion—public and private—was unavoidable in the bicentennial year of 1976.”⁸⁷ Among Christians, patriotism was especially prevalent, and that years’ convention of the Moody Bible Institute serves as a useful example because of its overt celebration of the milestone. Wesley Hartzell of the *Chicago Tribune* wrote that the MBI, at its Founder’s Week in Chicago during the February of 1976, saw its members worked up into a patriotic fervor when the institute’s president, Dr. George Sweeting, “sounded a call for Christians to insure the future of their fatherland by renewing their commitment to God, country and family.”⁸⁸ The context of Vietnam’s aftermath—contributing to the notion of a nation in decline—may have also provoked Sweeting’s reference to Edward Gibbon’s history of Rome, in which Sweeting argues that the preconditions for Rome’s fall certainly apply to the America of the twentieth century.

OPPOSITION TO THE TREATIES

Opponents of the treaty routinely used either overt language of morality or placed the canal issue in close proximity to other sensitive moral issues, such as school prayer.

⁸⁶ Terrance Smith, “Opinion in US Swinging to the Right,” *New York Times* (4 December 1977): 1.

⁸⁷ Jon Meacham, *American Gospel: God, the Founding Fathers, and the Making of a Nation* (New York: Random House, 2006), 215-217. Meacham also notes how Jerry Falwell took advantage of the bicentennial, taking seventy performers from his Liberty Baptist College (later Liberty University) and touring the nation with a musical titled *I Love America*. Falwell’s sermon following the performance stressed “calling America back to God.”

⁸⁸ Wesley Hartzell, “Bicentennial Rally Stirs Chicago,” *Moody Monthly* 76, no. 8 (April 1976): 49.

One song summing up the activity of North Carolina Senator Jesse Helms, whom the *New York Times* labeled the “spiritual leader of the far right,” crooned:

*He's a world champion redneck...
Kickin' up a fuss
Like prayer in public schools
No white kids on the bus;
The Panama Canal's still ours,
It's that way in his mind,
A true right-wing conservative,
Pied Piper to the blind.*⁸⁹

Helms also implied that the Panama Canal could serve as a boon for Communism in Central America, saying it would be the “best gift we could confer on Fidel Castro.”

Helms, along with Strom Thurmond of South Carolina, voiced the strongest opposition to ratification (both, predictably, were fundamentalist Southern Baptists).⁹⁰

Similarly, when Madge L. Bridgman of Overland Park, Kansas wrote her Senator in February 1978, she took the opportunity to list all sorts of grievances against liberal progress, proudly stating that, “I am opposed to Carter’s Panama Canal Treaty in anyway, shape, or form. I am also opposed to the Equal Rights Amendment. To use Federal Funds for Abortions is utterly Ridiculous. Here is hoping the Republican party can come up with a good nominee for the next Presidential election.”⁹¹

With respect to Helms, he often made use of the same apocalyptic imagery and metaphors found in biblical text, much in the same way Graham used the same language to oppose Communism during the 1950s. One of the primary organizations that Helms

⁸⁹ Quote from “Jesse Helms,” *New York Times Magazine* (8 February 1981): 22; song from “The Senate’s Mr. Right,” *Newsweek* (16 March 1981): 25.

⁹⁰ Jimmy Carter complained about Helms and Thurmond in his 1982 memoirs, saying that they were “nuts” after Carter asked Senators to hold off speaking about the treaties until they knew the details of the agreement. Evidently, Carter wasn’t happy that the Senators did not oblige. Jimmy Carter, *Keeping Faith: Memoirs of a President* (New York: Bantam Books, 1982), 159.

⁹¹ Madge L. Bridgman, Letter to Senator James Pearson, 3 February 1978, Senator Pearson Papers, University of Kansas, Box 220 Folder 2

used to that end was the Conservative Caucus, located primarily in Vienna, Virginia. In an undated flyer the Conservative Caucus boasted its “Statement of Principles,” among them the “Right to Religious Liberty” as well as political and economic liberty, personal security, self-government, and the right to life.⁹² These themes and virtues underscore evangelical thought, theology and rhetoric, each one giving the individual citizen more responsibility for his or her own contribution to society. Helms embraced the Conservative Caucus, which virulently opposed the ratification of the Panama Canal Treaties. Larry McDonald, a Congressman from Georgia, wrote an open letter to the supporters of the Caucus, encouraging them both to write their Senators to vote against ratification and to contribute financially to organizational operations to that end, arguing that the Canal was as much American territory as Alaska, Torrijos was a “two-bit dictator,” and it was strategically important. In 1984 at a “Ten Years of Progress” speech at the Four Seasons Hotel in Washington, D.C., Helms looked back fondly at his time with the Conservative Caucus, glorifying their fight against liberal policies such as the Panama Canal Treaties. Helms, drawing a biblical parallel not unfamiliar to his listeners that day said: “I want the Conservative Caucus members across the country to know that if I ever have to select the group I will take my stand with at Armageddon...YOU are that group.”⁹³

In a self-published “Ten Years of Progress, 1974-1984: The History of the Conservative Caucus,” the organization boasted of its activity during the battle for ratification, at the heart of which was the “Truth Squad.” An informal anti-ratification

⁹² Conservative Caucus flyer, Conservative Caucus, University of Kansas, Wilcox Collection, RHWL Eph 1708.1, undated.

⁹³ Jesse Helms, Speech to the Conservative Caucus, University of Kansas, Wilcox Collection, RHWL Eph 1708.6, 29 November 1984.

group including Senators Paul Laxalt, Jack Garn, and Bill Scott, as well as Congressmen Phil Crane, Larry McDonald, and George Hansen, the group claimed to have reached more than 10 million people through their activity, including TV ads, newspaper coverage, and personal appearances facilitated by a chartered Boeing 737 which made numerous stops at “Keep-Our-Canal” rallies. In keeping with the emphasis on personal responsibility (and its kin, personal sacrifice), the group also maintained that Conservative Caucus field men “slept in airports and bus stations while doing advance work for these events.”⁹⁴ Interestingly enough, the Conservative Caucus testified to the divisiveness of the ratification battle when they claimed: “No political issue in the last 25 years so deeply divided the liberal establishment from the American people as the Panama Canal surrender treaties.”⁹⁵

Phyllis Schlafly, the conservative commentator and activist whose anti-Equal Rights Amendment campaign effectively tanked its ratification, also opposed ratification of the Canal treaties in an article titled “The Moral Issues in the Panama Treaties.” Of all the arguments for or against the canal which claimed authority on morality, Schlafly’s is the most nebulous, with “morality” meaning everything from national security to constitutional interpretation to financial ethics. While her quixotic definition of morality is difficult to decipher, Schlafly did emphasize that the physical removal of American personnel was the primary reason for the treaties’ immorality; to do so deprived the means by which the canal could be defended with “the least cost of American lives.”⁹⁶

⁹⁴ “Ten Years of Progress, 1974-1984: The History of the Conservative Caucus,” University of Kansas, Wilcox Collection, RHWL Eph 1708.6, undated, p. 3-4.

⁹⁵ “Ten Years of Progress, 1974-1984: The History of the Conservative Caucus,” University of Kansas, Wilcox Collection, RHWL Eph 1708.6, undated, p. 3-4.

⁹⁶ Phyllis Schlafly, “The Moral Issues in the Panama Treaties,” *Congressional Record* 123, no. 30 (6 December 1977): 38625.

By ceding the Canal Zone, the United States, she assured would be unable to keep away saboteurs, rioters, or enemy troops. Unable to increase U.S. troop numbers, submitting to a Panamanian-American jointly run military board, and thereby perpetuating the Torrijos dictatorship (after all, Schlafly intoned, he is no “Simon Bolivar”) doomed Latin American nations while he and Communist agitators “run riot.”⁹⁷

One of the most telling examples of the language of religion and morality that surrounded the treaties was a poem composed by Milford E. Shields, who served as Poet Laureate of Colorado from 1954-1975:

Our sacred duty is to God and man
To hold the Panama Canal in trust;
It is our covenant and purposed plan
To see it serves all nations fair and just.

These facts of truth bear our contention out:
It was our manifest of destiny
Where others failed to bring the work about,
With skill and strength to forge it full and free.

In just arrangements with all men concerned
We raised our flag above our work complete,
A lasting witness to the trust we'd earned;
Ours was an honest and unselfish feat.

As we behold the future vast and just
We must perpetuate the proven plan
And hold the Panama Canal in trust...
Our sacred treaty with both God and man.⁹⁸

Despite ignoring the seeming paradoxes of the so-called “Age of Imperialism,” writing that a U.S. controlled canal was a “covenant” suggests a much more sacred and solemn duty than typical treaties or property exchanges. By paralleling the United States’

⁹⁷ *Ibid.*, 38626.

⁹⁸ Milford E. Shields, “THE PANAMA CANAL TREATY,” University of Arkansas Special Collections, David Pryor Papers MC 336 Box 55 Folder 43, 27 October 1977. It is probably not a coincidence that the poem was dated on the birthday of the man most directly responsible for realizing a transatlantic canal, Theodore Roosevelt.

responsibility with that of say Abraham's covenant with God in the book of Genesis, Shields appeals not only to the emotion of the canal treaty issue but religious implications. The canal was, in a sense, more than a simple matter of economic or political progress; it was indicative of man's relationship with God—a canal “saved” was another duty performed by Christian soldiers advancing the cause of evangelism and morality, a testament to their “witness” to the world.

In December of 1977, the Kiamichi Mountains Christian Mission from Honobia, Oklahoma attacked the Panama Canal Treaties, coupling the topic with other hot-button issues: “Why should God save a nation whose public schools ‘pluralistic’ program include advocacy of Socialism, Sexual how-to-do-it, sexual perversion and forced ‘equality,’ while forbidding the teaching of Christianity? Why should we give our canal in Panama for the Communists to use against us and pay them 100 million each year for accepting it?”⁹⁹ In an effort to encourage its readers to oppose the treaties because of the Christian duty to oppose Communism, the editorial offered a free copy of a sermon written by an entry into the Kiamichi Boy Preachers contest entitled “Why We, as Christians Must Oppose, and Expose Communism.”¹⁰⁰

Because of a deep rooted anti-Communism in camps of fundamentalists and conservative evangelicals, anti-ratification sentiment ran high. Norman Dannenbrink wrote to Arkansas Governor David Pryor, who had come out in favor of the treaties, “Communism and Christianity are the two opposites and for the life of me I can't understand why [you are] born again and you want to give away the canal and help Communism...Carter is always talking about human rights but how many Cubans have

⁹⁹ “Brother Mac says—,” *Kiamichi Mission News* 37, no. 12 (December, 1977), p. 1.

¹⁰⁰ “Brother Mac says—,” *Kiamichi Mission News* 37, no. 12 (December, 1977), p. 1.

rights in Cuba?”¹⁰¹ James Madsen succinctly wrote Pryor to “oppose the *immoral* move to give away our Panama Canal.”¹⁰² One of Pryor’s constituents from Perry, AR, Bruno Adackus, wrote in February of 1978 that ratification was more than just a simple immoral move, it was “shameless appeasement of a satanically cruel and implacable enemy.” Noting that a majority of Americans disagreed with the Panama Canal Treaties, Adackus complained that, “how, in the name of God, do they justify the most heinous of public acts, the act of aiding and abetting an avowed and dedicated enemy, in arrogant score of electorate mandate...the mandate of a CHRISTIAN electorate?”¹⁰³ Pearl Miller from Van Buren, AR used biblical language to castigate Pryor and Arkansas Senator Dale Bumpers for their public support of the treaties: “I don’t agree with Senator Bumpers who wants to give it over. Will, as the good Book says, the Blind...lead the Blind.”¹⁰⁴

Illinois Congressman Philip M. Crane published a book in 1978 entitled *Surrender in Panama: The Case Against the Treaty*. Billed as “the leading conservative intellectual in Congress” by the book’s publisher, Crane received a PhD in American history from the Indiana University in 1963. Crane’s primary legal argument was that the United States Senate had no business ratifying a canal treaty on its own, because he—as well as many other members of the House of Representatives—viewed the original treaty as a transfer of property which constitutionally required action by both chambers of

¹⁰¹ Norman Dannenbrink, Letter to David Pryor, University of Arkansas Special Collections, David Pryor Papers MC 336 Box 55 Folder 41, 2 September 77

¹⁰² James Madsen, Letter to David Pryor, University of Arkansas Special Collections, David Pryor Papers MC 336 Box 55 Folder 41, 11 September 1977.

¹⁰³ Bruno Adackus, Letter to David Pryor, University of Arkansas Special Collections, David Pryor Papers, MC 336 Box 55 Folder 43, 2 February 1978. Arkansas Senator Kaneaster Hodges acknowledged that 98% of his mail was against the treaties.

¹⁰⁴ Pearl Miller, Letter to David Pryor, University of Arkansas Special Collections, MC 336 Box 55 Folder 44, 28 February 1978.

Congress.¹⁰⁵ Crane though, felt that there was more at stake than a simple matter of constitutional interpretation. His argument pools together many different threads that letters to Senators, governors, or editors also levied, and it is worthy of featuring here:

Constitutionally aside, there is a deep moral issue at stake in Panama. In the past decade, the United States went through something very close to a collective national breakdown. Assassinations, rioting, war, campus violence, Watergate, and the tragic humiliating collapse of Indochina have all contributed to a global climate in which most of the world—but especially those nations and those ideologies who wish us ill—are watching the United States through wolfish eyes, searching for any trace of irresolution or weakness of purpose....wherever freedom is on the line and men must choose, America's image, strong or weak, will help to determine their fate. And the weaker our image becomes, the greater the danger of miscalculation, of adversaries pushing us too far in the belief that we will take any amount of pressure and abuse without standing up for what is right...In Eastern Europe, in China, in Cuba, in Angola, and in Indochina, we have seen all too well what can happen when boldness and strength are on the side of evil.¹⁰⁶

The “surrender” of the canal was thus an abandonment of a symbol of American strength and morality, a product of American resolve, and a metaphor for good. This language especially appealed to conservative Christians. Nelson Hobart of Hutchinson, KS sent a mailgram to his Kansas Senator, James Pearson, on 1 February 1978 after watching a program Crane hosted about the Canal on PBS. Hobart was sure to highlight Crane's open religion: “I just listened to the born again Christian. Vote no on the canal treaty. Never will a Chamberlain know how to deal with a Hitler.”¹⁰⁷

Divisions within the denomination did exist over the passage of the treaties. Jim Newton, in an April 1978 editorial for *World Mission Journal* supporting the treaties' ratification wrote that he realized that, “[n]ot all Southern Baptists will agree with this

¹⁰⁵ Philip M. Crane, *Surrender in Panama: The Case Against the Treaty* (New York: Dale Books, 1978).

¹⁰⁶ *Ibid.*, 16-17.

¹⁰⁷ Nelson Hobart, mailgram to Senator James Pearson, James Pearson Papers, University of Kansas, Box 219 Folder 1, 1 February 1978.

point of view,” yet he still encouraged people to express their opinions by writing to their Senators.¹⁰⁸ Like its enemies, the treaties’ supporters used the language of morality to express their views, though in their case, it was from a perspective of economic morals. The language of morality of the treaties’ opponents, on the other hand, was more concerned about the “direction “ of the nation, a fear that the “giveaway” of the canal was but one more step towards bringing about a country, which was no longer strong enough to serve as a moral leader for the world. To many Christians then, the canal issue was one in a long line of attacks on “traditional” Christian-American culture during the 1960s, after abortion on demand, restrictions on involuntary school prayer, and the diminishing opprobrium of homosexuality. Billy Graham put it this way after the Supreme Court ruled in 1963 that compulsory Bible reading in public schools was unconstitutional: “At a time when moral decadence is evident on every hand, when race tension is mounting, when the threat of Communism is growing, when terrifying new weapons of destruction are being created, we need more religion, not less.”¹⁰⁹

Letters to editors in state publications of the SBC regarding the treaties were overwhelmingly against ratification, especially during the late months of 1977. After Southern Baptist Convention President Jimmy Allen voiced his support of the treaties in September 1977, the threat to the SBC’s autonomous structure perceived by Tom F. Rayburn of Booneville, Mississippi convinced him to write the *Baptist Record*, complaining that, “if [Allen] is speaking as an official voice for the Southern Baptist Convention this does not necessarily reflect the political convictions of every Southern

¹⁰⁸ Jim Newton, “Ratify the Treaty,” *World Mission Journal* 49, no. 4 (April, 1978): 10.

¹⁰⁹ Billy Graham quoted in Meacham, *American Gospel*, 189.

Baptist.”¹¹⁰ From Rayburn’s point of view, the fact that Allen had failed to become aware of a majority of Baptists’ feelings caused him to misrepresent the convention’s feelings on the issue as a whole. Robert Callahan of Brunswick, Georgia wrote *The Christian Index* that Allen not only misrepresented the convention, but misunderstood the issue altogether. Accusing Allen of “not having done his homework,” Callahan stressed that the economics of the U.S.-Panamanian relationship was mutually beneficial and that Christian evangelism was being misinterpreted to mean, “the religion that can give [the world] the most in physical comforts.”¹¹¹ While moderates such as Allen argued that the US should exhibit an international example and national morality by ratifying the treaties, Callahan felt that it was out of the US’s hands to do so, “beyond the legitimate bounds of this country.”

The fear of “Godless” Communism becomes apparent when reviewing the letters written by Southern Baptist laity. For example, in January 1978 J.C. Campbell echoed a common complaint that the Communist threat did not come from the Soviet Union alone: “The dictator of Panama...is a close friend of Castro from Cuba. He is also closely associated with the same Communists from Soviet Russia who put Castro in business. Do we want our canal in Panama to fall under Communist control?”¹¹² Campbell appealed to patriotism to save the canal, noting that the love of America could prevent one more step, “toward the downfall of our nation.” The framing of such an argument is significant, because of its similarity to the attacks against such social issues as abortion,

¹¹⁰ Tom F. Rayburn, “Panama Canal Issue,” *Baptist Record* 99, no. 38 (13 October 1977): 4.

¹¹¹ Robert Callahan, “Our Readers Write,” *The Christian Index* 156, no. 44 (3 November 1977): 8. See also Henry J. Taylor, “Communist Threat,” *Congressional Record* 123, no. 24 (23 September 1977): 30692. Taylor, a former U.S. Ambassador to Switzerland, argues vehemently that relinquishing control of the canal puts it at risk in an unstable part of the world.

¹¹² J.C. Campbell, “Our Readers Write,” *The Christian Index* 157, no. 1 (5 January 1978): 9.

homosexuality, or women's liberation that also took place during the 1970s. All, it seemed, were part and parcel of a secular humanism, which threatened the nation. Bill Merrell of Magnolia, Arkansas wrote the *Arkansas Gazette*, saying that the debate was over much more than the canal itself, it was a question of the country's direction, and ratifying the treaties, he reasoned, was leading the country in the wrong direction.¹¹³ One writer to the *Baptist Digest* explained that if the treaties' were ratified, he could no longer believe in a democracy.¹¹⁴

One reader of the *Christian Index*, Howell Mayo of Wrightsville, Georgia, couched his argument against the canal's "giveaway" in the starkest of religious terms after claiming the support of the American Legion and all veterans' organizations for his views: "I believe it would be a sin to turn the Canal Zone over to a government that is in reality, not on the strongest friendly terms with us, but has strong Communist leanings."¹¹⁵ Mayo was sure to end his letter with an appeal to Christian values, noting that he would pray for others to become acquainted with the issue. Charles Engel of Lott, Texas was even more confrontational with his writing, attributing the endorsement of the treaties by SBC missionaries as the work of Satan: "How many silent, informed members of the Foreign Mission Board are spiritually opposed to atheistic Communism? Satan doesn't need their views."¹¹⁶ To opponents of the treaties such as Lott, Communism represented more than an abstract "other" that never affected their lives. It was an idea actively engaged in "deceit, infiltration, [and] subversion." No Communist government, they contended, actively welcomed or opened new ministries for Christian missions.

¹¹³ Bill Merrell, "More on the Canal Treaty Issue," *Arkansas Gazette* (4 September 1977): 2E.

¹¹⁴ John E. Davis, "Open Forum: Canal Treaty Not Favored," *Baptist Digest* (27 February 1978).

¹¹⁵ Howell Mayo, "Our Readers Write," *The Christian Index* 157, no. 7 (16 February 1978): 8.

¹¹⁶ Charles W. Engel, "Open Forum: Two Wrong on Canal Issue," *Baptist Digest* (27 February 1978).

One is confronted with a dilemma in evaluating the sentiment of the church laity regarding the treaties. Due to their status as a working-class group that typically failed to vote, it is difficult to measure their attitude toward the treaties, because public opinion polls were unable to accurately take them into consideration.¹¹⁷ Nevertheless, church leaders, as well as Christian intellectuals, often commented on the stances often taken by the laity. For instance, John Warwick Montgomery, director of studies at the International Institute of Human Rights in Strasbourg, France, wrote for the mainstream Christian journal *Christianity Today* that, “one is left with disquiet as one observes the mobilization of believers to fight against the ‘unholy abandonment of the Panama Canal.’”¹¹⁸ Theologically conservative Christian groups who opposed the canal, though, lacked any solidarity and would fail to organize an effective campaign to kill the treaties’ passage.

Interestingly enough however, the Panama Canal issue incorporated many of the conservative arguments that would contribute to the rise of a politically active and theologically conservative Christianity in the 1980s. The disparate organizations that were unable to prevent passage of the treaties finally coalesced into a concerted movement with the creation of the Moral Majority. Markedly conservative in political philosophy, the Moral Majority would become a significant influence on the discussion and interplay of politics and religion during the 1980s. The Christian laity that had unsuccessfully crusaded against liberal programs in the 1970s was finally given an organization that would lobby legislation, influence public sentiment, and provide a voice for right-wing evangelical organizations that otherwise had little experience in politics.

¹¹⁷ Woodward, “A Tide of Born-Again Politics,” *Newsweek* (15 September 1980): 28.

¹¹⁸ John W. Montgomery, “The Limits of Christian Influence,” *Christianity Today* 25 (23 January 1980): 60.

Led by Jerry Falwell, this group was founded on the idea of a politically active evangelical movement. Christian evangelicals preached politics from the pulpit and took “pro-family” stands by denouncing abortions, the Equal Rights Amendment, and gay rights, as well as other conservative stances on opposition to the Strategic Arms Limitations Treaty (SALT) and support of the Kemp-Roth thirty percent tax cut proposed in 1980. Perhaps most importantly, the Moral Majority sought to elect Christian leaders by mobilizing churches. Falwell explained that the mission of the church was three-fold: “To get people saved, baptized, and registered to vote.”¹¹⁹

One can safely assume that had the Moral Majority existed in 1978, it would have actively lobbied against passage of the Panama Canal Treaties. In September 1980 Falwell spoke to his 3,900-member congregation at Thomas Road Baptist Church in Lynchburg, Virginia: “Senator [Mike] Gravel of [Alaska] was ousted last night. He lost the primary. And that’s the beginning.” By the end of Falwell’s sermon, he had called out several Senators for their liberal views and urged listeners to speak out against their reelection: George McGovern of South Dakota, Frank Church of Idaho, John Culver of Iowa, Alan Cranston of California, Birch Bayh of Indiana, and Gaylord Nelson of Wisconsin. Unsurprisingly, all of these Senators had voted for ratification of the Panama Canal treaties in April 1977.¹²⁰

Writing in his 1980 book *Listen, America!*, Falwell lamented what he perceived as the weakening of the American military. To him, a strong military defense was not only reasonable, it was biblical: “The bearing of the sword by the government is correct and

¹¹⁹ Calvin Skaggs, Ali Pomeroy, and Van Taylor, *With God on Our Side: George W. Bush and the Rise of the Religious Right in America* (Brooklyn, NY: First Run Icarus Films, 2004), audiovisual recording.

¹²⁰ Woodward, “A Tide of Born-Again Politics,” *Newsweek* (15 September 1980): 28. Unsigned, “Senate Roll-Call Vote Approving Canal Pact,” *New York Times* (17 March 1978): A12.

proper. Nowhere in the Bible is there a rebuke for the bearing of armaments....Our government has the right to use its armaments to bring wrath upon those who would do evil by hurting other people.”¹²¹ Of immediate concern to Falwell was the health of oil imports and American access to strategic “sealanes” throughout the world. As he put it, fearing that the Soviet Union was militarily strengthening its position in Africa, the Middle East, and the Caribbean through “geopolitical gains,” the possibility of a stranglehold on America’s oil lifeline was likely in the event of a conflict. He interpreted the ramifications of the Panama Canal Treaties: “...we know that this vital strategic corridor was handed over to Panama’s Marxist dictator recently. It is today increasingly susceptible to Soviet influence and could pose a further threat to our oil lifeline....We need leaders of moral courage today who know that there is safety only in strength, not in weakness.”¹²²

As fundamentalists, pastors and New Christian Right activists, Jerry Falwell and Tim LaHaye personified the coupling of canal treaty opposition with conservative theology. LaHaye’s 1980 *Battle for the Mind*, in particular, used this technique by placing support of the treaties within a larger framework of secular humanism. LaHaye, a San Diego pastor, routinely denounced what he felt were the products of humanist politicians in America during the 1970s: abortion, ERA, removing prayer from schools, and evolution, among others. Central to his thesis is that secular humanism, as an idea, is undemocratic.¹²³ LaHaye argued that it facilitates the growth of socialism abroad, curbs patriotism, and ignores the will of the people at home. It is in this context that LaHaye argued that the Panama Canal Treaties’ ratification “stands as an example of the humanist

¹²¹ Jerry Falwell, *Listen, America!* (Garden City, NY: Doubleday & Co., 1980), 98.

¹²² *Ibid.*, 99-100.

¹²³ Tim LaHaye, *Battle for the Mind* (Old Tappan, NJ: Fleming H. Revell Co., 1980), 78.

philosophy functioning in the political sphere....Such politicians can be counted on to vote the same way on other issues: the continuing persecution of Rhodesia; permitting Cuban troops to enslave various African countries such as Angola; breaking off relations with Taiwan; or increasing appropriations to the U.N.”¹²⁴ LaHaye’s disdain for the United Nations is particularly evident throughout *Battle for the Mind*. He viewed the UN as the pinnacle of human arrogance, the ill-founded and unchristian belief that human beings, by themselves, can prevent wars. Like the Panama Canal Treaties, the U.N. represented the wrong “direction” for the American country, one that failed to prevent any wars.¹²⁵

Falwell published *The Fundamentalist Phenomenon* in 1981, and like LaHaye’s *Battle for the Mind*, Falwell’s text devoted much of itself to lashing out against the perceived threats to the American-Christian tradition. Also serving as a history of fundamentalism, Falwell wrote that the United States’ declining military power was tantamount to poor stewardship of the resources God made available for the country. While not referring to the canal issue itself, Falwell alluded to it by noting, “We have been surrendering our rights and sovereignty by this program of military disarmament.”¹²⁶ The inevitable result of such a program, Falwell insisted, was a defeat for American freedoms and liberties. The aftermath of Vietnam and its effect on American consciousness led Falwell to conclude that the country was in grave danger of economic and military prostration. In such a world, a stark polarity of power existed with

¹²⁴ *Ibid.*, 78. Phyllis Schlafly also argued that Cuban Communists would be “flushed with victory” after their activities in Angola and would be looking for new territories to perpetuate the Communist revolution. Schlafly, “The Moral Issues in the Panama Treaties,” *Congressional Record* 123, no. 30 (6 December 1977): 38626. Article submitted for the record by Representative Robert Dornan.

¹²⁵ *Ibid.*, 26.

¹²⁶ Falwell, *The Fundamentalist Phenomenon*, 212.

America on one hand and the Soviets on the other: "...they are determined to conquer our free country and to infiltrate the American people with godless communism. The security of our country is at stake. The balance of world power is at stake. We must return to a strong program of national defense."¹²⁷

Theologically informing LaHaye and Falwell was a deep-seated dispensational premillennialism: the belief that the return of Christ is imminent and that he will leave with his church (the Rapture) and then return (the Revelation) after a seven-year Tribulation.¹²⁸ Because of fundamentalist belief in a "literal" translation of the Bible, Revelation 19-20 often serves as the backbone of the dispensational premillennial view; articulated by Princeton theologian B.B. Warfield and preached by fundamentalists such as C.I. Scofield, dispensational premillennialism became a major theological tenet informing the worldview of many conservative evangelicals and fundamentalists.¹²⁹ The political activism of the dispensational premillennialists began with the anti-evolution crusades culminating at the Scopes Trial in 1925, but fundamentalists Falwell and LaHaye would adopt a more active political posture as well. Just as fundamentalism rose during the late 19th and early 20th century in response to Modernism—a more abstract, non-literal theology—so fundamentalist Christianity responded to Secular Humanism during the 1970s.

Few Roman Catholics publicly opposed the treaties or used religious rhetoric to denounce them. Given that one source cited the population of Panama as ninety-three

¹²⁷ *Ibid.*, 213.

¹²⁸ H. Wayne House, *Charts of Christian Theology and Doctrine* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 1992), 85. Donald T. Kauffman, ed., *Baker's Pocket Dictionary of Religious Terms* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Book House, 1967), 358. Premillennialism is in stark contrast to Postmillennialism, a much more sanguine view of human nature

¹²⁹ Edward J. Larson, *Summer for the Gods: The Scopes Trial and America's Continuing Debate over Science and Religion* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1997), 33.

percent Catholic, it stands to reason that the missions of the Catholic Church stood the most to gain from a tension-free Canal Zone, which a handover of the canal would have ostensibly created.¹³⁰ The Catholic Church, however, best exemplified the disparity that often occurred between the church elites and the laity when they split over the treaty issue. Congressman Larry McDonald of Georgia complained in October 1977 that: “As seems to be usual with most of the large denominations of America’s churches these days, the church hierarchy always marches off in a direction completely opposed by its membership. This appears to be the case with American Catholics wherein the bishops have gone on record in support of giving away our canal while the lay people do not support the proposed treaty.”¹³¹ The Catholics for Christian Political Action (CCPA), a laymen-run organization, garnered praise from McDonald after publicly opposing the position of the United States Catholic Conference, the civil arm of U.S. Catholic bishops, who argued in February 1975 that as a matter of “moral imperative” and “elemental social justice” that the 1903 treaty between the U.S. and Panama be scrapped.¹³² Gary Potter, President of the CCPA, in a break with the bishops, declared that, “we exist to give voice to the views of ordinary grassroots Catholics on important political and social issues...It is too bad that the USCC did not take a sounding of rank and file Catholics before adopting a position on this highly political issue.”¹³³

One of the few exceptions was Frank A. Capell, editor of *Herald of Freedom*. On 22 October 1977, Capell spoke at the *Herald of Freedom* Seminar at an airport in

¹³⁰ “What’s Ahead in Panama?” *The Commission* 37, no. 12 (December, 1974): 8.

¹³¹ “Religious Issues on Canal Treaties,” *Congressional Record* 123, no. 27 (21 October 1977): 34794.

¹³² “Statement by the Administrative Board of the United States Catholic Conference,” *Congressional Record* 124, no. 1 (24 January 1978): 541. Kenneth MacHarg, “A New Treaty for Panama,” *Christian Century* 92, no. 14 (16 April 1975): 375.

¹³³ Gary Potter, “Religious Issues on Canal Treaties” *Congressional Record* 123, no. 27 (21 October 1977): 34794.

Newark, NJ. An extremist who published *Henry Kissinger: Soviet Agent* three years earlier, Capell resented the contention by treaty advocates that the U.S. could not defend the canal and, putting words in their mouths, claimed that they were trying to “transfer our territory to the Marxist dictator [to avoid] violence and instability in the Zone.”¹³⁴ Capell, a devout Catholic, ended his speech with a prayer: “I always close my talk, my own personal talk, with a prayer and my prayer is that Almighty God will open the eyes of all those evil people who are doing things against our country, so that they will see the truth and the light and have the opportunity to repent before they died because they don’t realize it, but they, too, are expendable.”¹³⁵ Capell’s case is noteworthy because while he is a Catholic, his religious rhetoric appeals more to a personal God, a tactic more in line with conservative evangelicals or fundamentalists. His emphasis on individual responsibility (i.e. the need for one to repent) highlights the evangelical, salvific rhetoric opposing the treaties as opposed to the more common moral rights rhetoric that would support their ratification.

In conclusion, the conservative evangelical movement’s negative response to the treaties stemmed from their theology. Because they believed the Bible was an inerrant text, issues arising during the 1970s compelled this group to adopt a more politically active posture. The threats posed by secular humanism, communism, and liberalism reflected scriptural teachings of the end times and the tribulations that accompanied them. By not taking a firmer stance on the issue of biblical inerrancy, figures like SBC President Jimmy Allen faced stiff opposition from theologically conservative groups. To

¹³⁴ Frank A. Capell, speech to Herald of Freedom Seminar, Newark, N.J., University of Kansas Wilcox Collection, RH WL Eph 1951, 22 October 1977.

¹³⁵ Frank A. Capell, speech to Herald of Freedom Seminar, Newark, N.J., University of Kansas Wilcox Collection, RH WL Eph 1951, 22 October 1977.

show lack of resolve on that issue, many conservatives felt, resulted in a slippery slope towards atheistic ideas. Gathering from their rhetoric, fundamentalists and other theological conservatives incorporated two very important arguments which shaped how they evaluated the Panama Canal Treaties. First, they believed that a strong national defense was the best way to deter Communism's worldwide ambitions. At worst, they reasoned, a competent military would be needed to fight that battle in their own neighborhood. Second, waging a war of ideas for biblical inerrancy helped curb the onset of atheistic ideas at home. Whether by advancing a political agenda that put Christians in power or by protesting a school board meeting, the effort to reestablish America as a "Christian nation" worked towards a very specific end—to make it an evangel to the world in troubling times. The transfer of the Panama Canal to a dictator who seemingly threatened their goals was antithetical to their theology and, ultimately, their political persuasion.

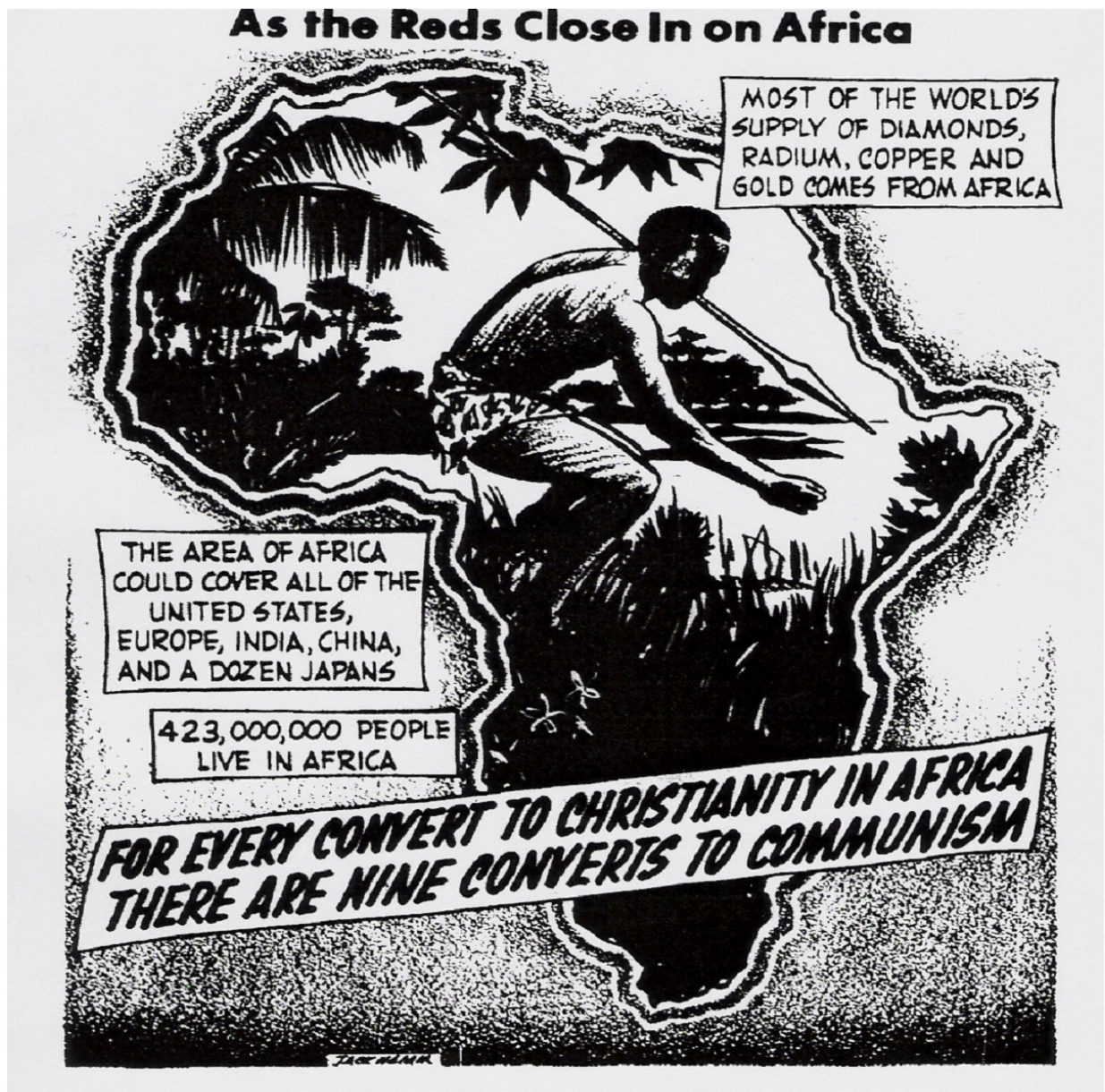


Figure 1: *Baptist and Reflector* 144, no. 20 (18 May 1978), 8.

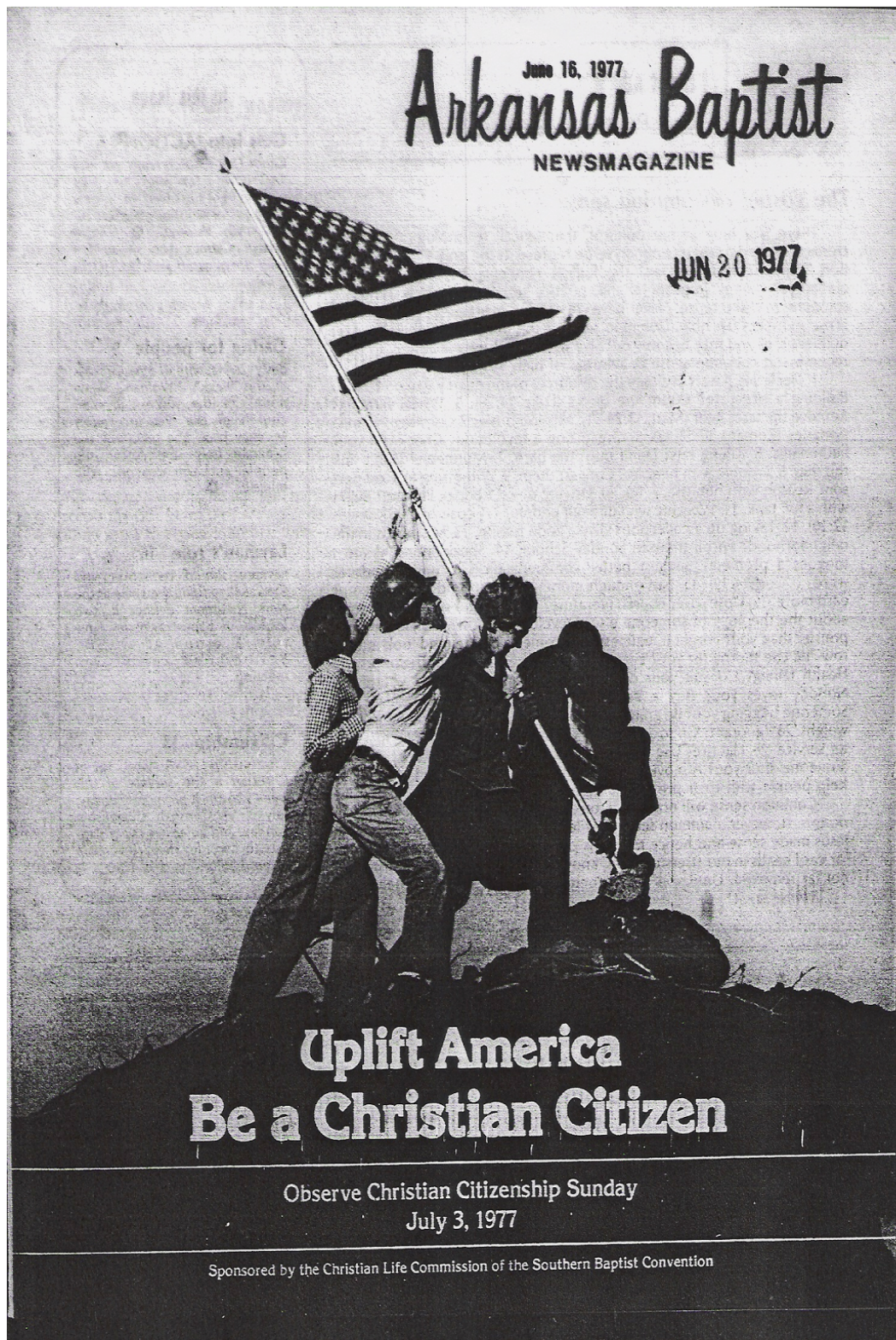


Figure 2: *Arkansas Baptist* 78, no. 26 (16 June 1977)

CHAPTER 2 – SUPPORT FOR THE TREATIES

Numerous—and diverse—bodies and denominations in the American religious community endorsed the Panama Canal Treaties after their signing in September 1977: the National Conference of Catholic Bishops, the National Council of Churches, the Synagogue Council of America, the Church of the Brethren, the Friends Committee on National Legislation, the American Jewish Congress, the United Methodist Church, and the Latin American Mission.¹³⁶ Strong support among evangelicals, however, came primarily from the highest levels of the Southern Baptist Convention and its Foreign Mission Board even though the SBC has a cultural and organizational history of reticence to accepting policy from elites in the denomination. Dr. J.L. Sullivan, president of the Southern Baptist Convention before the ratification battle began joked, “Each of our churches is autonomous and if we tried to move ahead of them and shove them into change they would tell us to jump in the lake.”¹³⁷

The most notable supporter of the Panama Canal Treaties among Southern Baptists was James Allen, pastor of a 9,000-member church in San Antonio, TX and President of the SBC from 1977-79 (see Figure 3, page 76). Allen, who described himself as a “social application progressive” but theological conservative, originally voiced his support in September 1977 after the signing of the treaties but also appeared in denominational publications and state newspapers throughout the ratification debate because of his endorsement.¹³⁸ Allen expressed the need for America to abandon an exploitive “colonial” past, and the canals were thus an “essential step toward clearing

¹³⁶ Stan Hastey, “SBC Foreign Mission Board Officials Endorse Panama Canal Treaties,” *Report from the Capitol* 33, no. 2 (February, 1977): 4.

¹³⁷ Michael Grealy, “Church Leader Reveals Secret,” *Advertiser* (3 August 1976): 10.

¹³⁸ AR 586, Folder 45, James Lenox Sullivan Papers, *SBHLA* and Box 34, Folder 25, Christian Life Commission Resource Files, *SBHLA*.

away the debris of yesterday in order to get to the tasks of today and tomorrow.”¹³⁹ That “debris” crippled American foreign missions, Allen insisted. How were missionaries, Allen asked, supposed to lead third-world peoples to Christ when they were constantly viewed as representatives of an exploitive, overbearing country? Indeed, the gospel itself was at stake, and Carter was thankful to receive the support of the president of the nation’s largest Protestant denomination, personally writing to Allen after ratification was secured that, “[t]his important achievement would not have been possible without the great and wonderful support you provided to me as your President.”¹⁴⁰

It can be safely assumed that Allen kept in mind the resources that the convention had allocated to the isthmus over the decades. The Home Mission Board sent missionaries to Panama as early as 1906 when thousands of Americans migrated there to find jobs in the construction of the canal.¹⁴¹ When Southern Baptist missionaries first arrived in Panama, they joined with the missionary work that began under Jamaican Baptists in the 1860s. Within a couple of years, the Jamaican Missionary Society handed over all of its work to the Baptist missionaries. By 1925, an English-language congregation was established, and the work of Panamanian Baptists soon became a hub for missions all over Central America: Costa Rica, Guatemala, and Honduras. A Panamanian Baptist Convention was eventually formed in 1959. The Home Mission Board appointed a medical missionary couple to supervise hospital facilities in Panama, which were established in 1965; by 1974, the hospital held as many as sixty beds.¹⁴² By 1 January 1975, when control over Panamanian missions was transferred from the Home

¹³⁹ “Allen Sees Canal as Exploitation Symbol,” *Biblical Recorder* 143, no. 37 (8 October 1977): 8.

¹⁴⁰ Jimmy Carter to Jimmy Allen, 21 March 1978, Box 1, Folder 1-13, Jimmy Allen Papers, SBHLA.

¹⁴¹ Leland Webb, “Panama in Transition,” *Commission* 37, no. 12 (December 1974): 3.

¹⁴² Leland Webb, “Panama in Transition,” *Commission* 37, no. 12 (December 1974): 5.

Mission Board of the Southern Baptist Convention to the Foreign Mission Board, the Panama Baptist Convention comprised forty-two churches, eighty-four missions and preaching points, and a theological seminary in addition to the hospital. In all, the convention boasted 7,000 members, located both in the Canal Zone itself and in other parts of Panama.¹⁴³

The SBC had been considering the transfer of missions to the Foreign Mission Board since 1966. They cited several reasons for wanting to do so, but the most interesting reasons were an increasing nationalistic spirit in Panama and the diminishing relationship between Panama and the U.S. As the sovereignty of the U.S. over the Canal Zone came into question, it logically followed that “home” missionaries were not as prepared as “foreign” missionaries. The SBC, realizing “an increasing assertiveness by the Panamanians in Canal matters,” understood that the Canal Zone was no longer being viewed by many as sovereign U.S. territory, but as a part of the Republic of Panama.¹⁴⁴ As the relationship between Panama and other Central and South American countries strengthened, it also naturally followed that Foreign Mission Board was more prepared to foster the relationships between them and the Panama Baptist Convention. As the operations of the Panamanian Baptists fell under the auspices of the Foreign Mission Board, leaders in the SBC also reasoned that a “Growing interchange of ideas and relationships between Panamanian pastors and other Central American and South American pastors...could be better furthered by one agency relating to all of the territory.”¹⁴⁵

¹⁴³ Toby Druin, “Panama: Missions in Transition,” *Home Missions* 45, no. 10 (December 1974): 4.

¹⁴⁴ Toby Druin, “A Spirit of Independence,” *Home Missions* 45, no. 10 (December 1974): 7.

¹⁴⁵ Toby Druin, “Panama: Missions in Transition,” *Home Missions* 45, no. 10 (December 1974): 5.

Jimmy Allen was an excellent example of a block of moderate Southern Baptists that would come under attack from the more conservative elements of the denomination for their theological and political convictions. As such, Allen would have to respond, attempting to shore up his *bona fides* as the convention's president. Just a few months after the Treaties' ratification by the Senate, *Baptist and Reflector* reported that Harold Lindsell, president of the Baptist Faith and Message Fellowship, contended that, "some Southern Baptist executives, seminary professors, and professors in Baptist college do not believe in the inerrancy of the Bible."¹⁴⁶ The topic of inerrancy transferred to other issues that Allen addressed individually. Homosexuality was a "disordered lifestyle," while his position on prayer in public schools was that government-sponsored prayer in schools was not the best way to realize an American revival. The most contentious statement by Allen was that, "The basic position of Baptists is a middle of the road belief in the infallibility of the Bible."¹⁴⁷ To a culture threatened by secular humanism, this was ground theological conservatives were not willing to give. Though he addressed these issues, Allen's primary concern however was never with homosexuality or prayer in public schools; he was more concerned about foreign missions.

As a field of missions, Panama housed importance for evangelicals far different from debates over national security. Evangelical missions witnessed relatively successful growth in the country. As of 1974, a report issued by the *Latin American Church Growth* reported that Baptists were third among evangelicals in Panama with 5,500 members (reporting one year a little more than 500 baptisms), behind the Four Square Gospel Church at 13,288 and Seventh-Day Adventists at 6, 210. Evangelicals made up 2.68

¹⁴⁶ "Allen Answers Charges of SBC Liberalism," *Baptist and Reflector* 144, no. 25 (22 June 1978): 16.

¹⁴⁷ *Ibid.*, 16.

percent of the population in Panama, making it the third most evangelical country in Latin America in terms of percentage of population.¹⁴⁸

Yet the nature of evangelism compelled evangelicals to do more. Beginning in 1978, the SBC implemented what it termed a Bold Mission Thrust, an attempt to dramatically increase the convention's members and influence abroad. Key to the Bold Mission Thrust was a goal of involving at least 5,000 short-term lay volunteers in mission trips of at least one or two years. On 22 November 1978, most state SBC conventions voted to increase funding and resources for the renewed emphasis on mission work.¹⁴⁹ Allen wrote in October of 1977, while trying to sell it to the convention's members, that the Bold Mission Thrust "may be the vision that galvanizes Baptists in to unprecedented impact on a lost and needy world."¹⁵⁰

The understanding that failure to ratify the Panama Canal Treaties would cripple missionary efforts was the primary argument in favor of their ratification by Christian evangelicals. After Carter and Torrijos signed the treaties in September, a former Southern Baptist missionary, Russell B. Hilliard wrote to *The Christian Index* that it was *because* of Vietnam that he felt the United States should return the Canal Zone to the Panamanians. Such a gesture, he reasoned, would demonstrate a love for Christ that could not be achieved through military might. Hilliard explained that Vietnam had already made it difficult for missionaries to complete their work: "If we Americans now turn our backs on the 'Third World' nations—counting on the chariots of Egypt (Isaiah 31:1) as in Vietnam—we will lose the only thing we have ever had as Americans that no

¹⁴⁸ Leland Webb, "What's Ahead in Panama?" *The Commission* 37, no. 12 (December 1974): 9.

¹⁴⁹ Robert O'Brien, "Wrapup: Baptist Conventions Mix Harmony and Debate," *Baptist Press* 22 November 1978, p1.

¹⁵⁰ Jimmy R. Allen, "SBC President Gives Specifics of Mission Service Corps," *Christian Index* 156, no. 42 (22 October 1977): 1.

one can take away from us—our character, our concern for the poor and needy, our love for mankind.”¹⁵¹ By equating the act of returning the canal as a form of missions itself, Hilliard thus illustrated the idea that the United States could itself be an agent of evangelism in the modern world, a world which did not feel the “white man’s burden” to civilize or Christianize a society.

In February 1978 only a month before the first ratification vote by the Senate, several members of the International Fellowship of Evangelical Students and Inter-Varsity in San Jose, Costa Rica expressed their support for the canal treaties from what they considered an Old Testament-principled perspective. As opposed to the letters inundating Senate offices around the country attacking the treaties—which were “blinded by ignorance, greed, and ethnocentrism”—the students employed three biblical examples to house their agreement with the treaties. The story of Naboth’s vineyard in the twenty-first chapter of 1 Kings provided the first lesson, as the writers paralleled the United States’ action in 1903 fomenting a rebellion in Panama to Queen Jezebel devising a “wicked scheme” to make sure her husband, King Ahab, would be able to have Naboth’s vineyard, which he so badly coveted. As Naboth’s land was an inheritance, so the isthmus’s narrow geography served as a country’s only natural resource. In an endorsement of the Panama Canal treaties, the students said, “The new treaty, correcting some of the grosser injustices in the original, is long overdue and deserves the support of Christians.”¹⁵²

¹⁵¹ Russell B. Hilliard, “Our Readers Write,” *Christian Index* 156, no. 48 (1 December 1977): 6.

¹⁵² “By Costa Rican Christians,” *Moody Monthly* 78, no. 6 (February 1978): 69. Jezebel hired two men to accuse Naboth of blasphemy in public, after which he was stoned to death. Ahab then took over control of the vineyard.

Nathan's parable to King David in 2 Samuel 12 served as the second biblical lesson. In the same way King David would condemn a rich man who stole from a poor man's flock of sheep, so the United States had swindled Panama out of its natural resource: "You stole it. And although you proclaim the virtue of free enterprise, you have imposed extremely low rates on canal traffic throughout this century, saving billions in shipping costs for U.S.A business (and other nations)—all at the expense of Panama."¹⁵³ The treaties were morally right, the students argued, because they were the correction of an injustice. How would the United States feel, the students argued, had the French demanded and claimed the territory around the Mississippi river, because they had supported the American Revolution?

The third lesson the Costa Ricans pointed out was the Year of Jubilee from Leviticus 25 which also served as Jesus' proclamation of "Good News to the Poor" from Luke 4:18-19. The Year of Jubilee involved a fifty-year span at the end of which the rich would return their land to the poor from whom it came. In this way, power and possessions among the wealthy would not get uncontrollable. "The Jubilee year from the inauguration of the canal was 1964," the students claimed. "Panama has waited patiently while you procrastinated in the renegotiation of the treaty through the years of Vietnam, Watergate, and recent elections."

Weston Ware, the director of the Peace Corps in Panama from 1966-1968, who taught a Sunday school class at First Baptist Church of Panama City, weighed in on the treaties by writing a letter to the editors of *The Christian Index*. He argued that the even though the canal was the isthmus's only viable "natural resource," the issue was more than economic solvency for the country: it was no less than a direct parallel with the

¹⁵³ "By Costa Rican Christians," *Moody Monthly* 78, no. 6 (February 1978): 69.

American struggle for independence. Arguing that we never had legitimate ownership of the territory to begin with, Ware claimed that the least the country could do was offer to give the canal back, just as a parent might withhold an allowance from a child until it had grown. Still, Ware's resort to a "struggle for independence" language struck at the heart of why the issue was so important to Panamanians, and why, had the Senate voted to deny ratification in the treaties, militant nationalism on the isthmus was certain.¹⁵⁴

Arguably the most important endorsement of the treaties came in January 1978 via two missionaries who joined Jimmy Allen in emphasizing the importance of ratification to foreign missions. Charles W. Bryan and Ervin E. Hastey, the former the SBC Foreign Mission Board area secretary for Middle America and the Caribbean and the latter the associate consultant in the evangelism department. Before accepting the administrative job with the Foreign Mission Board, Bryan served as a missionary to three different Latin American countries, while Hastey was nearly a twenty-five year veteran to Latin American missions, serving both in Panama and Mexico. Bryan and Hastey stressed that their comments in favor of the treaties were personal and not to be officially affiliated with the Foreign Mission Board as rules prevented them from endorsing public policy on behalf of the organization. Nevertheless, Bryan and Hastey stressed not only a temporary lapse in the denomination's mission work but more long-term effects as well, convinced that the canal issue housed greater potential for "impact" on U.S.-Latin

¹⁵⁴ Weston Ware, "Our Readers Write," *Christian Index* 156, no. 48 (1 December 1977): 6. See also Nicholas Von Huffman, "Let's Give it Back," *Progressive* 41, no. 11 (November, 1977): 49.

American relations than any other issue: “failure to ratify these treaties would have an adverse effect upon our overseas worked for 10, perhaps as many as 25 years.”¹⁵⁵

Bryan personally wrote Virginia Senator Harry Byrd in January 1978. After explaining his qualifications and unique perspective on Latin America, Bryan assured Byrd that if Congress ratified the treaties, “they will be doing the right thing at the right time and for the right purpose.” Again, Bryan stressed the long-term consequences were the treaties to fail, stressing that they would be serious “for years to come.” Moreover, the decision of Congress on ratification would “have more impact on our relationship with Latin America and with all third world powers than anything that will be done in the remainder of this century.”¹⁵⁶

At the eve of the treaties’ ratification in March 1978, Alan Neely, a professor from Southeastern Seminary at Wake Forest University, traveled to Colon, Panama and interviewed almost every Panamanian Baptist pastor there regarding the treaties, each of whom expressed some anxiety about the potential for economic fallout from ratification, but nevertheless favored its ratification.¹⁵⁷ Neely interviewed Wilfred Morgan, a seventeen year veteran of Bethany Baptist Church. Morgan explained that the ambiguous language of the treaties’ language regarding the transfer of the church’s property created some concern among the ministers: “I understand that within months after the treaties are ratified, this area where our building stands will be turned over to the Panamanian government and we will be subject to buy the property from the government for ‘a

¹⁵⁵ Stan L. Hastey, “SBC Foreign Mission Board Officials Endorse Panama Canal Treaties,” *Report from the Capital* 33, no. 2 (February, 1978), 4. The importance of Bryan’s and Hastey’s endorsement is also illustrated by the fact that most state publications of the SBC published the story off the Baptist Press.

¹⁵⁶ Charles W. Bryan, Letter to Harry F. Byrd, Jr., SBHLA Foreign Mission Board Reports, Box 128, Folder 11

¹⁵⁷ Jim Newton, “Ratify the Treaty,” *World Mission Journal* 49, no. 4 (April, 1978): 10.

nominal fee.”¹⁵⁸ Morgan noted, however, that because the transfer would take place under the auspices of a company unfamiliar to them, the ambiguity in the word “nominal” generated some tension. The pastor of nearby First Isthmian Baptist Church, Silvester Scarlett, echoed the same concerns, but the president of the Panama Baptist Convention, Reynaldo Topping succinctly explained that “the majority of us feel there is the necessity for a new treaty. I would hope the treaties are ratified.”¹⁵⁹ Regardless of the economic uncertainty for local churches surrounding the canal treaties’ implementation, the interviews illustrated that a majority of Panamanian pastors approved their ratification, because of the possible repercussions of failure to do so. This is primarily for two reasons: the potential for bloodshed on the isthmus and the possibility that SBC missionaries might be driven out of the country.

The argument made by evangelical missionaries was one stream in a larger concern on the part of liberal and conservative supporters alike about a general eruption of nationalism in the country if the treaties were not ratified. Among political liberals *The Progressive* argued that failure to ratify the treaties would result in a deadly rise of Panamanian nationalism, forcing the United States to defend its prestige, and what right-wing ideologues should bear in mind, it blasted, was the “risks intrinsic to getting involved in a fight with somebody who might fight back.”¹⁶⁰ Apparently, the journal felt that the United States, by not handing over the canal immediately would soon be looking at something akin to a colonial rebellion on the isthmus.

2. ¹⁵⁸ Alan Neely, “Panama Pastors Favor Treaties,” *World Mission Journal* 49, no. 4 (April, 1978):

2. ¹⁵⁹ Alan Neely, “Panama Pastors Favor Treaties,” *World Mission Journal* 49, no. 4 (April, 1978):

¹⁶⁰ Nicholas Von Huffman, “Let’s Give it Back,” *Progressive* 41, no. 11 (November, 1977): 49

Among political conservatives who supported the treaty, of whom William F. Buckley was the principle spokesman, the argument generally ran that if the treaties were ratified, the United States would be better off militarily (because transit through the canal during war time would be easier to negotiate with the support of the native population), economically (since the U.S. would negotiate loans to the Panamanian government and sell arms for its protection), and spiritually (because the U.S. would prove to the world that it does not have to control the weak in order to prove its prestige).¹⁶¹ Buckley's points were echoed by Ambassador Robert William Dean, a former U.S. ambassador to Peru, who spent time during the late 1970s as a diplomat in residence at Texas Christian University. Speaking to students at Southern Baptist Theological Seminary, Dean argued that, "[we] have a real interest in defending the canal from outside influence and also from those who would sabotage it from the inside. By signing the treaty with Panama and enlisting their cooperation in operating and defending it, it makes that job easier."¹⁶² Many of the treaties supporters made this argument, including Secretary of Defense Harold Brown who urged a "cooperative effort with a friendly Panama" rather than an "American garrison amid hostile surroundings."¹⁶³

Other denominations that lacked the hierarchical restrictions of the SBC, most notably the United Methodist Church, officially supported the treaties rather than solely relying on the personal statements of leadership made public. In 1976 the General Conference of the UMC adopted a statement on the "Panama Canal Treaty Negotiations"

¹⁶¹ William F. Buckley and Ronald Reagan, "Pro and Con: Heart of Panama Debate," *U.S. News and World Report* 84, no. 5 (6 February 1978): 35-36.

¹⁶² "Dean asks for support of Panama Canal Treaty," *Baptist and Reflector* 143, no. 45 (10 November 1977): 4.

¹⁶³ Brown quoted Jimmy Carter, *Keeping Faith: Memoirs of a President* (New York: Bantam Books, 1982), 155.

outlining six reasons why it hoped the negotiations would be successful: U.S. military intervention leading to the 1903 treaty, the lack of Panamanian representation at those treaty negotiations, the lack of redress for the initial inequity of that treaty, the “grave source of irritation” between Panamanians and Americans, the need for public understanding, and, most importantly, the Christian’s commitment to gospel commands her/him to do so.¹⁶⁴

Generally speaking, the UMC would emphasize its justification of support more in terms of moral obligation than threat to evangelism, as the General Conference’s statement demonstrates. Morality in this case frequently equated to economic rights. Noting that it would be fitting for America to return sovereignty of the Canal Zone at a time of celebration of America’s bicentennial, Kenneth MacHarg, pastor of Margarita Union Church in Panama, noted as early as April 1975 in *Engage/Social Action* that American control over the canal had impeded Panamanian livelihood. The country was unable to tax American businesses in the Canal Zone; American shipping companies, receiving discounts, saved over \$700 million dollars; and Panamanian citizens were given “second-class treatment” in American run businesses throughout the Canal Zone, unable to secure decent jobs due to discriminatory hiring practices—a point not raised by moderate Southern Baptist commentators.¹⁶⁵

UMC commentators were also more direct with their language advocating support of the treaties and pulled no punches in refuting the arguments of anti-treaty conservatives. The same month of the treaties’ signing by Carter and Torrijos in

¹⁶⁴ Herman Will, “The Panama Canal: A ‘Gut’ Issue,” *Engage/Social Action* 5, no. 11 (November, 1977): 10.

¹⁶⁵ Kenneth D. MacHarg, “A New Canal Zone Treaty,” *Engage/Social Action* 3, no. 8 (August, 1975): 6-11.

September 1977, William Eddy, a fifteen year veteran of Panamanian missions and dean of Asbury College, acerbically responded to conservative claims that President Carter was giving the canal away: “It’s not a giveaway. We took it away. And we’ve perpetrated a grave injustice there for a long time. Now, we have an opportunity to redress that injustice.”¹⁶⁶ Speaking to the issue of “certain” Communist influence should the treaties be ratified, an international affairs specialist with UMC’s Board of Church and Society commented that ratification was essential to improving American-Latin American relations: “All of Latin America is united on the canal issue, regardless of whether the governments are right, left, or center.”¹⁶⁷

Others offered support for the treaties by appealing to more emotional ideas. Joyce Hamlin, secretary for legislative affairs of the United Methodist Board of Global Ministries, couched support for the treaties in biblical themes: the oppression of Israel, the futility of military might, and the importance of neighborly love: “I believe these considerations apply to the current debate on the Panama Canal Treaty. Panama, a small nation, believes the treaty of 1903 was unjust, that the continued presence of a U.S. territory cutting a swath across its country robs it of self-determination, dignity, and hinders its economic development.”¹⁶⁸ One letter to the editors of *Engage/Social Action*, pleased with the publication’s sympathetic treatment of the treaties in the December 1977 issue, promised to send copies to each member of the Oregon delegation in Congress.

¹⁶⁶ “Washington Observations,” *Report from the Capitol 77*, no. 8 (September 1977): 3.

¹⁶⁷ *Ibid.*, 3.

¹⁶⁸ Joyce Hamlin, “The Panama Canal Treaty: Future Partnership or Future Problems,” *Response* 10 (January 1978): 33-34.

The writer then encouraged the journal to keep publishing material on the canal issue, equating it to “the message of Jesus Christ before members of Congress.”¹⁶⁹

One other reason the structures of the UMC supported the treaties may have been that its members were theologically or personally predisposed to look at national security in a different light than either conservative evangelicals or fundamentalists who defined security more in terms of personal responsibility and the country’s ability to act itself as a gospel-bearer. For instance, Lester R. Brown, director of the Worldwatch Institute in Washington, D.C. during this time, published an article in *Engage/Social Action* which sought to redefine national security altogether. Lamenting the ballooning military budgets of the Cold War years, a result of the tenuous relationship between the United States and the Soviet Union, Brown stressed that new dangers which threatened to cumulate over time posed a greater real danger to the world: namely, the deteriorating “relationship between humanity and the earth’s natural systems and resources.”¹⁷⁰ Given that many mainline Christians viewed the geographical makeup of Panama as its lone natural resource, it makes sense that the United States’ political sovereignty over the canal—and its commandeering as a militarily strategic location—might appear immoral. For Christians seeking to advance a more environmentally friendly form of the gospel, the Panama Canal Treaties were not seen as a way to advance national security or strengthen America’s role in the country as an evangel. Interestingly enough, Brown also commented that military mechanisms could not solve many of the natural resource problems plaguing many Third World countries. Brown believed that the best future for

¹⁶⁹ Arthur J. Stanley, “Letters: Panama Canal Issue,” *Engage/Social Action* 6, no. 3 (March, 1978): 47.

¹⁷⁰ Lester R. Brown, “Redefining National Security,” *Engage/Social Action* 5, no. 12 (December 1977): 12.

a country lay in proper management of its natural resources, a view widely shared by many mainline Christians. Because the outdated Hay-Bunau-Varilla Treaty gave the United States sovereignty over Panama's chief natural resource, many must have felt that the U.S. would not be as conscientious a caretaker as the country's native population.

Christian Century enumerated several factors that led to the conclusion that American-Panamanian relations were lopsided in favor of the United States and hence immoral and unjust. The first argument dealt with the disparity of savings to American commerce and the modest monetary gain for Panama itself. Twenty percent of the gross national income of Panama came from the Canal Zone economy, but the management of this income was largely out of the hands of the Panamanians due to American control of the zone. Second, seventy-percent of goods that traveled through the canal are either coming from or going to ports in the United States. While Panama received only an annual revenue of \$2.3 million in direct United States payments for canal operations, the annual savings for American businesses being able to transit through the canal, rather than the horn, was estimated at \$700 million.¹⁷¹ Thus, as Kenneth MacHarg of *Christian Century* pointed out two years before these two particular treaties were up for ratification, a poor nation was subsidizing the richest nation in the world. Third, the Zone itself, because it was under American jurisdiction, was exempt from Panamanian taxes, denying the country a significant source of revenue.¹⁷²

Other arguments to transfer sovereignty of the canal typically dealt more with the growing perception of America throughout the world as an imperialist power. Carter

¹⁷¹ Juan De Onis, "Panama Canal Treaty, a Latin Test Case," *New York Times* (16 January 1977): 147.

¹⁷² Kenneth MacHarg, "A New Treaty For Panama," *Christian Century* 92, no. 14(16 April 1975): 375.

noted that, “the issue had become a litmus test throughout the world, indicating how the United States, as a superpower, would treat a small and relatively defenseless nation that had always been a close partner and supporter.”¹⁷³ Carter certainly exaggerated the extent to which they had been an ally, because to Panamanian citizens, American control of the zone was a relic of the old imperialist order. The rise of third-world nationalism, coupled with the international opposition to the idea of colonialism, created an atmosphere of American resentment in the country, as Panamanian nationalists sought to establish sovereignty in the zone.¹⁷⁴ Consequently, the vote on ratification of the treaties was a moral issue to intellectuals like James Wall, editor of *Christian Century*. In April 1978 Wall praised Oklahoma Republican Henry Bellmon for voting in favor of ratification, saying that he may have sacrificed his political career, but “we do know that Henry Bellmon’s kind of courage and respect of others adds stature to the U.S. Senate.”¹⁷⁵

Donald Messer, as a Christian intellectual and using his position as a contributor to the largest circulating Christian publication in the nation, attempted to address many of the public concerns about the treaties. He identified four major themes in opposing arguments: issues of sovereignty, costs, security, and the American Spirit. Messer responded to each issue saying that the United States never had legal title to the Panamanian land and that just as America voluntarily gave freedom to the Philippines in 1946, so it should return the canal. Moreover, he argued that the U.S. never operated the canal to turn a profit—a dubious, if noble assertion—and that America would make

¹⁷³ Jimmy Carter, *Keeping Faith: Memoirs of a President* (New York: Bantam Books, 1982), 156.

¹⁷⁴ Robert Strong, “Jimmy Carter and the Panama Canal Treaties” *Political Science Quarterly* 21, no. 2 (Autumn, 1991): 270.

¹⁷⁵ James M. Wall, “A Decision Based on Respect,” *Christian Century* 95, no. 12 (5 April 1978): 37.

money made off of loans to the Panamanian government after ratification. America's military leaders, including the Chairmen of the Joint Chiefs of Staff, General George S. Brown, claimed that America would be better able to defend the canal with Panamanian cooperation, and the fact that the United States is willing to give up the canal freely is evidence of its greatness. Messer concluded:

The U.S. got what it wanted out of the new treaties: an open, neutral, accessible canal—just what we have now. The 'spirit of America' is best expressed when we act according to our ideals, demonstrating that America is strong and self-confident enough to act with fairness and justice toward smaller countries.¹⁷⁶

James Wall agreed with Messer's analysis:

Religious leaders can support the canal treaties as the best option available for justice in this particular moment in history. They do generally protect U.S. interests. They are more self-serving than self-giving for the U.S. But the treaties are consistent with President Carter's position on human rights as a cornerstone of his foreign policy.¹⁷⁷

Messer and Wall felt the reason for disagreement between the Church laity on one hand and Christian leaders and intellectuals on the other is the lack of information and susceptibility of the general public to the rhetoric often espoused by the conservative forces working to stop passage of the treaties. Messer claimed that the American public could be persuaded to support the treaties provided that they received enough accurate information on them. The evidence he used to reach this conclusion is compelling. A *New York Times*/CBS poll given in 1978 asked its participants if it was "OK to give [the canal] away." In response to that question, only twenty-nine percent approved, but when the question was worded differently, asking respondents if they would support ratification

¹⁷⁶ Donald E. Messer, "Panama Canal Treaties: Answering Questions on Main-Street America," *Christian Century* 95, no. 1 (4 January 1978): 13.

¹⁷⁷ James M. Wall, "Are the Panama Canal Treaties Just?" *Christian Century* 95, no. 5 (15 February 1978): 148.

of the treaties if they were certain “that the United States could always send in troops to keep the canal open to ships of all nations,” the percentage of those who approved of the treaties jumped to sixty-three percent.¹⁷⁸ Mary Louise Smith, the former Republican National Chairman, who supported ratification of the treaties, agreed with Messer’s analysis:

Most of the opponents [of the treaty] have not read the treaties and have only vague ideas of what is in them. But they know they are concerned about the country’s image after Vietnam and they are afraid that any pull back will be seen as a sign of weakness.¹⁷⁹

Ostensibly, the more the treaties were debated and the longer that the public was exposed to the information housed in them, the less the public opposed it. By January 1978 however, the percentage of voters who disapproved of the canal would drop to forty-eight percent according to a *New York Times*/CBS poll, down from seventy-eight percent from the previous summer.¹⁸⁰ The Christian Church (Disciples of Christ), a mainline denomination, sought to educate the public as well, passing a resolution through its Division of Overseas Ministries, stressing the need to: “undertake educational programs concerning the urgent needs for a new Treaty with Panama, including the history of the relationship, the injustices of the past, the inadequacies of the existing Treaty, the prospects of peaceful and just relations in the future, and the appeals for understanding from Panamanian church leaders.”¹⁸¹

¹⁷⁸ Donald E. Messer, “Panama Canal Treaties: Answering Questions on Main-Street America,” *Christian Century* 95, no. 1 (4 January 1978): 13.

¹⁷⁹ Terrence Smith, “Opinion in U.S. Swinging to Right, Pollsters and Politicians Believe” *New York Times* (4 December 1977): 1.

¹⁸⁰ Donald E. Messer, “Panama Canal: Answering Questions on Main-Street America,” *Christian Century* 95, no. 1 (4 January 1978): 13.

¹⁸¹ Paul Simon, “Resolution by the Division of Overseas Ministries of the Christian Church—Disciples of Christ,” *Congressional Record* 123, no. 23 (14 September 1977): 29319.

In a letter to *Christian Century*, Ann Spangler from Grand Rapids, Michigan responded to an article by one of the journals editors, David J. Kalke, asserting that Christians were obligated by Christian morality to support the Panamanian government in its attempt to gain sovereignty over the Canal Zone. In this letter, Spangler argued counter to Kalke about the notion of Communist subversion or expansion:

Those who dissent are aware of the injustices fostered by the present system within the Zone, but they are uncomfortable with the polemicists who attempt to annihilate U.S. influence in Panama. To these dissenters, it does not seem unreasonable to fear a communist take-over in the event that the U.S. should decide to withdraw entirely from their tiny and very vulnerable country...It is more likely that this greater wealth [gained from Panamanian control] will be absorbed by the government to stuff the already full purses of the bureaucracy and to consolidate the power of the military.¹⁸²

On the whole, then, theological moderates housed three main arguments in favor of the ratification. First, moderate evangelicals stressed a need to shore up support for mission work in Latin America. Because moderates were not militantly premillennialists, they were not as fearful of Communist influence in Panama, and the work of missionaries became paramount. Panamanian nationalism, not Communist subversion, was their primary concern. Second, a collective sense of the need for social justice manifests itself in nearly all arguments favoring ratification. These arguments, when using scripture as a weapon, typically quoted many of the Hebrew prophets and Old Testament themes of justice. They stressed the need to right a wrong, which manifested itself in two primary ways: the economic disparity of the original 1903 treaty in favor of the United States and the desire for Panamanians to control their primary natural resource. Finally, mainline and moderate groups were eager to shed the perception that America was an imperialist power. Though the empire was informal, strictly speaking, it nevertheless concerned

¹⁸² Ann Spangler, "Panama's Dissenters," *Christian Century* 93, no. 5 (18 February 1976): 157.

many theological moderates that America was even presenting the image of a large nation which exploited smaller ones. Because the stress for a strong military presence abroad was not a priority, moderate and mainline Christians dismissed rhetoric by conservatives that stressed a commitment to curbing the influence of Communism. Coupled with the aftermath of Vietnam, it was simply too much for pro-ratification Christians to risk an entanglement in Panama which could threaten either their evangelism efforts or their commitment to social justice.



Figure 3: Jimmy Allen, President of the Southern Baptist Convention, 1977-1979, courtesy Southern Baptist Historical Library and Archives

CONCLUSION

*“...for the first time ever, everything is in place for the battle of Armageddon and the second coming of Christ..” Ronald Reagan*¹⁸³

After the treaties’ ratification Panamanian missionaries praised them as a “positive step for missions.” Jackie B. Cooper, missionary in Arraijan, Panama acknowledged that his success with the gospel depended on the degree of nationalism among the native population, noting that the American presence on the isthmus tended to cool their approachability. Evangelism, in its rawest one-on-one form, was thus made easier by ratification. Cooper told the Baptist Press that the ratification helps missionaries, “be more direct in an evangelistic approach. I don’t feel they will refuse us. I think they’ll give us a better hearing now.”¹⁸⁴ Cooper maintained that his evangelistic style, primarily door-to-door, became more direct, explaining that he could be more aggressive with his message. Predictably, Jimmy Allen also praised the Senate for their vote: “The Senate has used good judgment in responding to the challenge to alter our relationship with Panama...[ratification] will move us into a better position to share the gospel in Central and South America.”¹⁸⁵ The outcry against the treaties ratification by conservatives, on the other hand, was predictably strong but not as harsh as one might think. “Stalwarts” like Helms claimed a limited victory by strengthening the treaties’ amendments, while also claiming they had made a point of attacking Carter’s acquiescent foreign policy.¹⁸⁶ Few letters appeared in denominational publications attacking the Senate for the vote.

¹⁸³ Cannon, *President Reagan*, 248.

¹⁸⁴ Stan Hastey and Jennifer Hall, “New Canal Seen as Positive Step for Missions,” *Baptist and Reflector* 144, no. 18 (4 May 1978); 8.

¹⁸⁵ *Ibid.*, 8.

¹⁸⁶ William Safire, “Panama’s Political Palindrome,” *New York Times* (6 March 1978): A21.

What, then, is to be made of the debate about the Panama Canal Treaties in the winter of 1977-1978? Opponents and supporters alike claimed authority on morality. To the former, saving the canal, in a sense, meant saving souls. Opponents of the treaties tended to couch their arguments in stark, God versus Communism language. To a premillennial dispensationalist, the impending return of Christ makes the need for immediate salvation urgent; as such, their anxiety about Communism was heightened and the threat that it actually posed was exaggerated. Whether or not the threat posed by the Soviet Union was legitimate is immaterial, because no matter the degree of threat, the angst of fundamentalists elevated it higher.

It is the degree to which they perceived the threat posed by Communism that separated the ardent opponents of the treaties from their supporters. Congressman Tim Lee Carter of Kentucky entered an article into the *Congressional Record* on 2 November 1977, which positioned the Soviet Union at the center of an apocalyptic view of American fate: “If there is to be a confrontation in Panama, it will not be with some Torrijos. It will be with the Soviet Union, and the stakes will be atomic world war....The U.S. will face Option Impossible: either accept another major political defeat, or risk atomic war. At that point, we will take the defeat—yet another step down the road to ultimate defeat.”¹⁸⁷

This type of rhetoric, which indicated continuity with the anti-Communist, prophetic premillennialism of Billy Graham during the 1950s, also weighed heavily on Ronald Reagan throughout his life. John Meacham noted that along with Reagan’s sense of destiny came “a fascination with the theology of the End Times, and interesting quirk,

¹⁸⁷ Jeffrey Hart, “U.S. Soviet Showdown,” *Congressional Record* 123, no. 28 (2 November 1977), 36726.

to say the least, for a president of the United States in the Nuclear Age.”¹⁸⁸ When Graham visited Reagan in 1968, he and the Governor discussed premillennial philosophies, a topic which fascinated both men. Reagan biographer Lou Cannon notes how it struck a resonant chord within the “extrasensory” minded Reagan: “[He is] far more curious about biblical portents than about governmental processes. He quotes Scripture, remembers Bible stories from his childhood days in the Christian Church, and regards Christ as his personal savior and as a hero of history.”¹⁸⁹

And to many, the Panama Canal Treaties did point to the end times. One of the most forthright examples of this rhetoric came from a statement submitted into the *Congressional Record* by Representative George Hansen of Idaho. Written by Commander Laud R. Pitt, the statement stressed the treaties as a harbinger of the end times:

The beginning for the United States actually began with the emergence and growth of Soviet power following World War II. But handing over the Panama Canal to the Communists will bring the end much nearer...The bloodbath that faces the American people will be even more disastrous than in Europe. Only a remnant of American citizens will remain to serve their Soviet masters. Millions of American young women will be spared and reserved for the special use of Russian soldiers. Small children also will be spared to form a nucleus for a slave labor force.¹⁹⁰

Rhetoric that pooled from conservative fears about Communist activity in the Western Hemisphere struck a particular resonance with fundamentalists and other theological conservatives. Surrendering sovereignty of the Canal Zone, they reasoned, brought the battle one step closer to the United States.

¹⁸⁸ Meacham, *American Gospel*, 222-223.

¹⁸⁹ Cannon, *President Reagan*, 247.

¹⁹⁰ Laud R. Pitt, *Congressional Record* 124, no. 6 (16 March 1978): 7393

Among evangelicals the Panama Canal Treaties serve as a useful measure of their differences during the late 1970s and early 1980s, especially within the Southern Baptist Convention. Moderates in the SBC who supported the treaties also claimed evangelism as the crux of their argument, but on a more interpersonal level: advancing the cause of evangelism meant giving missionaries the means to do their job in Panama. To moderate evangelicals like the General Conference of the United Methodist Church, to be moral meant exhibiting a Christian social salvation—recognition of an individual's economic liberty as well as their need to be saved. Ratification for moderates was beyond a national goal or direction; it represented an opportunity for the Christian faith to work outside of international political boundaries. The polarization of foreign policy liberals and conservatives within the denomination was a small issue when compared to more contentious issues such as biblical inerrancy, but it was nevertheless important in the larger debate about the direction of not only the convention but the country as a whole. Social and cultural issues were rightly placed as the focal point of the conservative rejection of liberal ideas in the historiography, but the debate about the future of the country during this time was not all about the area within American borders, it was a disagreement about America's role outside them.

This disagreement existed in the Catholic Church between the United States Conference of Catholic Bishops and the church's laity. Representative Larry McDonald from Georgia, speaking on the House floor, said: "As seems to be usual with most of the large denominations of America's churches these days, the church hierarchy always marches off in a direction completely opposed by its membership. This appears to be the case with American Catholics wherein the bishops have gone on record in support of

giving away our canal while the lay people do not support the proposed treaty.”¹⁹¹

Catholics for Christian Political Action, a laity driven organization, announced that it opposed the official position of the Catholic Bishops Conference: “We are sorry we must take up a position different from that of the USCC, but the reason we exist is to give voice to the views of ordinary grassroots Catholics on important political and social issues. We asked our members where they stood on the Canal issue. Many of them let us know, and we must be responsive. It is too bad that the USCC did not take a sounding of rank and file Catholics before adopting a position on this highly political issue.”¹⁹²

The Panama Canal Treaties were a microcosm of a greater rift within American Christianity. The theological, cultural, and political underpinnings of the debate over ratification pointed to larger differences of opinion about the direction of the United States, its military, and its morality. First, they illustrate the affinity between fundamentalists and national defense conservatives, helping to pave the way for Reagan's policies. Second, they represent a moment when conservative evangelicals and fundamentalists were not organizationally prepared to influence public policy, providing the impetus for politically active groups such as Focus on the Family and the Moral Majority. Third, more mainline denominations and moderate evangelicals (UMC and *Sojourners*, for instance) supported the treaties, which helps one paint a more nuanced distinction among evangelicals themselves. Fourth, arguments conservative evangelicals and fundamentalists made against the canal were often couched in the same language as abortion, homosexuality, or birth control—they were all “moral” issues that struck to the heart of biblical interpretation and cultural passion. Finally, there is relatively little

¹⁹¹ Larry McDonald, *Congressional Record* 123, no. 27 (21 October 1977): 34794.

¹⁹² *Ibid.*, 34794.

literature on the subject, despite the fact that many Christians had such a passionate belief about the treaties, one way or the other.

Judging from the existing evidence, whether or not a Christian supported the Panama Canal Treaties depended heavily on his or her conception of morality. But how does a Christian define morality? As we have seen, fundamentalists and conservative evangelicals framed their definition of morality on a strict interpretation—some might say narrow—of biblical text. This theological position made it likely to object to some of the hot-button issues of American culture during the 1970s: abortion, homosexuality, or pornography. With the unraveling of the postwar liberal consensus during the Vietnam War era, however, more fissures appeared among American Christians. Fundamentalists, who maintained a persistent, virulent anti-communism, sided with national defense conservatives. Patriotism, nationalism, and a confident belief that liberals had tied the hands of the American military during the war also contributed to these strengthening ties. After all, being patriotic and serving the country is a duty which appeals to a faith which hinges on personal responsibility, as it is the burden of every human to personally accept Christ as savior. Given also that dispensational premillennialism informed their theology and worldview, fundamentalists also strengthened ties with the military and conservative members of Congress in order to have a greater control over world events. America could, as an entity in and of itself, become an evangel in modern times, become the New Israel, and prepare for the immanent return of Jesus.

Moderate and mainline denominations typically subscribed to a more “social justice” morality as opposed to “personal responsibility” morality. As such, the military significance of the Panama Canal—when they admitted it was legitimate—was not as

important as what it could mean for evangelism and moral virtue. Returning—conservatives would say “giving”—the canal to Panama meant more than a simple transfer of sovereignty; it was the righting of a wrong. The 1903 treaty had put Panama at a disadvantage, mainliners and moderates argued, which led to growing nationalism on the isthmus and, consequently, increasing animosity towards the United States. What America should work toward, they argued, was a just foreign policy, shedding the imperialist nature of its past, an imperialism which kindled so many dubious human rights abuses.

The danger of third world nationalism did not threaten moderates or liberals as much as it did conservatives or fundamentalists. Because they were not dispensational premillennialists, it naturally follows that they would not be as concerned about American military strength or interpreting the rise of Communism as a harbinger of the end times. More pressing concerns such as Panama’s ability to become fiscally solvent, its legitimate right to have control over the country’s primary natural resource, and the possible indefensibility of the canal given the rise of nationalism on the isthmus, earned greater precedence. For moderate evangelicals like Jimmy Allen the easing of tensions in Panama could pave the way for bolder missionary efforts when they are not hindered by anti-American sentiment. In that sense, the handover of the canal actually served Christianity rather than hampered it.

The message of moderate and mainline churches, though, required numerous qualifications and did not employ to emotionally volatile language such as “giveaway,” “wrong direction,” or that it was a “sin” to hand it over. Moderate’s arguments for ratification were typically more qualified and nuanced. Rather than appealing to

emotion, they judiciously weighed national security concerns against increasing Panamanian nationalism, its effect on foreign missions, America's image in the international community, and America's ability to defend the canal in absence of new treaties.

Not only did the debate over ratification, along with a host of other issues—abortion, homosexuality, ERA, and tax-exemption for Christian schools, among others—highlight political disagreements among denominations themselves, but it pushed evangelical Christians further from the Democratic Party, a party many of them held close ties to during the 1970s. When *Newsweek* declared 1976 the “Year of the Evangelical,” much of it was due to Jimmy Carter, a professed born-again Christian and Southern Baptist Sunday School teacher, winning the presidency. As such, the belief that American nationalism and patriotism were at stake compelled conservative evangelicals and fundamentalists to better prepare for the looming culture wars of the 1980s organizationally and politically. The founding of groups like the Moral Majority in 1979 and Focus on the Family in 1977 demonstrated a more concerted, collaborative effort on the part of politically and socially conservative Christians to affect public and foreign policy. Conservative opponents of the canal treaties failed to mount a successful campaign to prevent their ratification, because they were not to coalesce into an effective political lobby until the 1980s with the entrenchment of conservative action groups. The difference of opinion between the laity and Christian editors of journals like *Christian Century* quelled whatever influence Christians could have mustered for opposition during the battle for ratification.

The Christian subculture built institutions all through the twentieth century, but the 1980s would be the decade in which radio stations, television evangelists, and Christian commentators would finally engage American life to a significant degree, declaring war on cultural, economic, and political liberalism. Ronald Reagan reaped the benefit of this engagement. Despite the fact that he was straight from Hollywood and divorced, Reagan found a way to harness the political activism of the right with its effort to increase evangelical power at the polls. John Micklethwait and Adrian Wooldridge of the *Economist* noted how Reagan, far from walking the evangelical line on policy issues, garnered their support more by “his ability to reduce politics of all sorts to certain core principles.”¹⁹³ To a constituency that preached a simple-messaged gospel and lived by what they saw as a common sense faith, Reagan’s couching of issues in either-or, good-evil fashion served as a refreshing alternative to endless liberal qualifications. Micklethwait and Wooldridge note that Reagan’s style was particularly valuable with respect to foreign policy, attributing disappointments during the 70s to “the fetish of complexity, the trick of making hard decisions harder to make—the art, finally, of rationalizing the non-decision.”¹⁹⁴ While Reagan was the levelheaded, populist conservative, Senators who rationalized away the canal were not “right thinking” people.¹⁹⁵

To conservatives, Jimmy Carter represented what was wrong with America. The author of the “National Age of Malaise” speech, who was typically candid to a fault, could never exude the infectious optimism of Reagan who envisioned America as a

¹⁹³ John Micklethwait and Adrian Wooldridge, *The Right Nation: Conservative Power in America* (New York: Penguin Press, 2004), 90-91.

¹⁹⁴ Quoted in Micklethwait and Wooldridge, *The Right Nation*, 91.

¹⁹⁵ Alta M. Hatton, letter to Senator Pearson, 16 January 1978, Senator Pearson Papers, University of Kansas, Box 219 Folder 16.

“shining city on the hill.” The contending rhetorics highlighted that Carter had “given up the canal” and furthered the already diminishing leadership of the U.S. in the Third World. The exceptionalism of the American Right thus served Reagan well in cashing in on the lingering psychological effects of the 1970s. The spirit, patriotism, and nationalism of his personality served as a prescription for the damaged American character. The loss of the Panama Canal to the pressures of a small country was too much to bear for conservatives, and Reagan served as the antidote for a policy, and a country, veered off course.

The fear of Communism among the public and Christian laity proved the undoing of President Carter’s foreign policy toward Communism in the latter half of his administration. While Carter and Soviet Premier Leonid Brezhnev signed the SALT II Treaty in June 1979, its ratification failed in the Senate due to a successful conservative campaign to kill it, led by Republican John Tower of Texas, Democrat Sam Nunn of Georgia, and Democrat Henry Jackson of Washington. These conservatives argued that the treaty was disadvantageous to the United States, and coupled with the fact that the Soviet Union invaded Afghanistan only six months after Carter had signed the agreement, it was destined to fail.

Reagan understood this and hit the ball where it was pitched. Believing that the Soviet Union was indeed the “focus of evil” in the modern world, he attacked Communism with a vigor that resonated with conservative evangelicals and fundamentalists: “...their goal must be the promotion of world revolution and a one-world Socialist or Communist state...The only morality they recognize is what will further their cause, meaning they reserve unto themselves the right to commit any crime:

to lie, to cheat, in order to attain that.”¹⁹⁶ There were other Communists who took a rhetorical beating from Reagan as well because of their religious repression: the North Vietnamese, Communist guerrillas in el Salvador, and North Korea, who he claimed, “declares those who worship God to be the enemies of the people.”¹⁹⁷ It is no coincidence that Reagan chose to deliver his “Evil Empire” speech to the National Association of Evangelicals in March 1983 as opposed to say, the National Conference of Catholic Bishops or the National Council of Churches. The speech itself blasted birth control for teenagers and abortion on demand before addressing the Soviet Union as his last point, finally urging the NAE to “pray for the salvation of al those who live in that totalitarian darkness...the focus of evil in the modern world.”¹⁹⁸ Reagan’s speech was characteristic of the dichotomy he often presented to his listeners. The Soviet Union was not a country to be ignored or overly qualified; there was a distinct “right and wrong, good and evil.”

Historian Godfrey Hodgson explained in 1996’s *The World Turned Right Side Up*, “the tragic irony is that Jimmy Carter’s historical legacy may have been a new evangelical constituency that, disillusioned with Carter’s politics, helped to install Ronald Reagan into the White House.”¹⁹⁹ Reagan lamented the failures on Jimmy Carter’s watch: “tragic neglect of our military establishment,” the growth of Communist power, and the Iran hostage crisis. What Reagan mourned the most, however, was America’s loss of faith in itself. The Carter Administration, failing to protect U.S. sovereignty over the canal thus exacerbated the first two of these laments.²⁰⁰

¹⁹⁶ Ronald Reagan quoted in Edmund Morris, *Dutch: A Memoir of Ronald Reagan* (New York: Random House, 1999), 436.

¹⁹⁷ Kengor, *God and Ronald Reagan*, 223.

¹⁹⁸ Ronald Reagan quoted in Morris, *Dutch*, 472-473.

¹⁹⁹ Godfrey Hodgson, *The World Turned Right Side Up* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1996), 185.

²⁰⁰ Godfrey Hodgson, *The World Turned Right Side Up* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1996), 242-243.

The canal treaties were more significant for what they represented than what they actually did. The relinquishment of U.S. sovereignty scared many conservatives, because of what the canal signified about American prestige. Indeed, the canal itself drew out the most in American nationalism. Author David McCullough wrote Carter shortly after the treaties had been signed:

To say that the opposition [to ratification] springs from some vague or naïve nostalgia for a simple past is really to miss the point. There is a grandeur about the Panama Canal...of a kind we like to think of as peculiarly American. The Canal is a triumph of an era we remember fondly for its confidence and energy, youth and sense of purpose. The Canal is something we made and have looked after these many years; it's "ours" in that sense, which is very different from just ownership.²⁰¹

Jimmy Carter, though probably not intending to do so, spoke to the religious overtones of the battle for ratification in his 1982 memoirs: "I thanked God when we got the sixty-seventh vote. It will always be one of my proudest moments, and one of the great achievements in the history of the United States Senate."²⁰²

²⁰¹ George D. Moffett III, *The Limits of Victory: The Ratification of the Panama Canal Treaties*, Ithaca and London, 1985, p. 45.

²⁰² Jimmy Carter, *Keeping Faith: Memoirs of a President* (New York: Bantam Books, 1982), 173.