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*Jimmy Carter, the Politics of Family, and the Rise of the Religious Right.*

By J. Brooks Flippin. Athens: University of Georgia Press, 2011; pp. 350. \$69.95 cloth; \$26.95 paper.

For all the uncertainty in American politics, the partnership between the Republican Party and the so-called Religious Right has for decades remained strikingly stable. White Evangelical Christians rallied behind Ronald Reagan in the 1980s, marched in the “Buchanan Brigades” of 1992, and ensured two terms for George W. Bush, keeping the faith even when much of the nation did not. In 2008 and 2012, exit polls showed the Republican presidential candidate capturing approximately three-quarters of white Evangelical votes, a figure remarkably consistent with previous years. Even with the historic nature of Barack Obama’s candidacy—and despite his overt attempts to appeal to religious voters—the old alliances held firm. It thus remains a truism that, at election time, “values voters” based in the southern “Bible Belt” will turn out in droves for the GOP.

But this was not always the case. In fact, as J. Brooks Flippin argues in *Jimmy Carter, the Politics of Family, and the Rise of the Religious Right*, it was actually a Democratic president who ushered the faithful into the political realm. As America’s first “born again” presidential candidate, Jimmy Carter garnered significant backing from Evangelicals, particularly in his native south. He was very candid about the importance of faith to his daily life, prompting many in the press and the reading public to draw conclusions about the type of man he was and the type of president he was sure to be. Flippin notes, however, that Evangelicalism may be divided into at least two camps, and that Carter resided within the decidedly more liberal of these (20–21). Although he did not shy away from moral judgments about contemporary issues—including “family” issues such as abortion, homosexuality, the ERA, and others—Carter differed from Jerry Falwell and Pat Robertson in that he did not see these matters as

cause for governmental intervention. Instead, he sought to keep his religious views separate from his political decisions, leaving many of his supporters feeling disillusioned as a result. Later, when Ronald Reagan pledged to *take action* in response to their concerns, these voters saw in him the fulfillment of Carter's initial promise. Hence, Flippin suggests that, in activating and then diverging from his conservative Christian base, Jimmy Carter played an instrumental—if unintentional—role in delivering the Evangelicals to the Republicans.

Flippin's analysis of Carter's political strategy hinges on this problem of mistaken identity. Namely, Carter's public religiosity complicated and confused his interactions with representatives of both conservative and liberal advocacy groups. Even as conservatives became frustrated by his refusal to champion "moral" legislation, liberals grew increasingly impatient with his hesitancy to embrace their own causes. The result was a compromising—and *compromised*—administration, torn between the absolute demands of two notoriously *uncompromising* coalitions.

This is not to engage in undue criticism of Carter's administration—at least not necessarily. Flippin is rigorous in his attention to contextual detail, and he recounts a 1970's decade rife with bitter disagreements and demanding public figures, daunting challenges for any president with centrist aspirations. Much has already been made of Carter's candidacy as a moral rejoinder to Watergate disillusionment, but Flippin's readers will be struck by the sheer breadth of groups intent on directing the moral course of the new administration. It is impossible to understand Carter's balancing act without first understanding the organizational and rhetorical innovations that these interests achieved during his tenure.

As the book's title indicates, priority is given to those groups most invested in the relationship between the government and the family. Although "culture war" issues would quickly grow to epitomize the vitriol of political partisanship in the United States, Flippin notes that Carter's family focus was initially conceived as a point on which everyone could agree. Soon into his term, Carter sought consensus on tax deductions for married couples, certain welfare reforms, and—remarkably—a budget appropriation of \$35 million to explore "alternatives to abortion," including "family planning, adoption, and sex education" (125). Reasoning that such an effort would placate both pro-life and pro-choice factions, Carter was promptly disappointed. Lesson unlearned, the administration continued to court controversy through its handling of family issues and interests, culminating in the highly touted "White House Conference on Families," which famously—and in retrospect, *predictably*—proved a divisive mess.

Taken together, Flippin's chapters guide readers from the mid-1970s to the early 1980s, through Carter's candidacy, election, presidency, and on into the beginnings of Reaganism. The Introduction, set during the 1980 "Washington for Jesus" rally, provides some detailed foreshadowing that places the preceding events in context. Chapter 1 sets the scene, tallying and describing the various social movements rising to prominence on both left and right by the time of the bicentennial. Chapter 2, marking the "Year of the Evangelical," offers a behind-the-scenes look at Carter's campaign, its smiling, moderate religiosity, and the political forces that helped power him into the White House. Chapter 3 documents Carter's relationship with religious groups and figures, recounting the many who sought—and often did not get—the president's ear. Chapter 4 follows that thread, analyzing the growing disappointment with the administration, and chapter 5 relays the eventual backlash launched by disappointed and organized conservative forces. Chapter 6 charts the coalescence of the unified "pro-family" movement, and chapter 7 closes the circle with Carter's 1980 loss to Ronald Reagan. The epilogue reflects on Carter's legacy, as well as the successes and failures of the oppositional movement he inspired. "Whatever the future holds," Flippin concludes, "Jimmy Carter and the modern Religious Right share a common past" (349).

Flippin's book is a masterful piece of history, certain to prove invaluable to rhetorical scholars interested in presidential rhetoric, religious rhetoric, public address, social movements, and advocacy, among other subject areas. Although exhaustive, it remains accessible to a general readership as well. Political coalitions are always in flux, and there is perhaps reason to believe that the influence of the Religious Right is currently on the wane. But Flippin's work demands consideration from anyone who works at the intersection of religion and politics, or who simply hopes to better understand how this particular coalition came to be such a force in American life for such a long and tumultuous time.

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