

Jerry Falwell: Founder of the Moral Majority and early Christian Zionist

by *Bill Berkowitz*

Conservative Christian televangelist leaves behind a controversial legacy marked by scads of bigoted and wacky remarks as well as the building of a Christian university

The Reverend Jerry Falwell, who died Tuesday at the age of 73, is perhaps best known for his fundamentalist social positions and tirades against lesbians, gays and feminists, not to mention "pagans", "abortionists" and assorted other miscreants. Rev. Jerry Falwell But Falwell also had a significant impact on U.S. foreign policy over the last 30 years, and was one of the founding fathers of so-called Christian Zionism -- the belief that the modern state of Israel is the fulfillment of Biblical "End Times" prophecy and thus deserving of political, financial and religious support. From his pre-Moral Majority days when he preached against religious folk involved in the civil rights movement, to his support for the President Ronald Reagan-backed contra movements in Central America and Africa that were responsible for the deaths of tens of thousands of people, to his invective against Nelson Mandela and South Africa's African National Congress and his support for the apartheid regime, Falwell was a Republican Party stalwart and a dependable voice of reaction. That conservative evangelicals have become such a formidable component of the Republican Party's voting base is due in part to Falwell's efforts. Evangelicals had largely stayed out of politics until the mid-1970s, when Jimmy Carter's declaration during the 1976 presidential campaign that he had been "born again" rejuvenated the political activism of the evangelical community. But Carter's more liberal positions on some social issues, and his support for a Palestinian homeland shortly after his election alienated right-wing leaders in the movement, including Falwell and New Right figures such as Paul Weyrich and Richard Viguerie, who steered evangelicals toward the Republican Party -- where they remain today. In the 1980s, Israel's Likud Party drew closer to the right wing in the U.S., and Falwell was a key figure in mobilizing conservative Christian voters. In her book "Spiritual Warfare: The Politics of the Christian Right", Sara Diamond notes that Falwell, often through his television broadcasts and his frequent trips to Israel, played a key role in "dr[awing] evangelicals to pay closer attention to Middle East politics." In 1979, Israel rewarded Falwell with a private jet. Two years later, he received Israel's Jabotinsky Award for his support. According to one account, "Jewish-evangelical relations had become so close by the early '80s that, immediately after Israel bombed Iraq's nuclear reactor in 1981, Israeli Prime Minister Menachem Begin telephoned Moral Majority leader Rev. Jerry Falwell before calling President Ronald Reagan to ask Falwell to 'explain to the Christian public the reasons for the bombing'." Falwell also served on the board of advisors of the American Alliance of Jews and Christians, an organization founded by Rabbi Daniel Lapin, the president of the conservative Jewish organization Toward Tradition, and Christian conservative evangelical Gary Bauer, founder of American Values. This past September, Falwell's church hosted Christians United for Israel's (CUFI) Pastor John Hagee, who accused Iran of being behind the summer war between Hezbollah and Israel. "They gave Syria 14,000 missiles and 100 million dollars," he claimed. "Those missiles were given to Hezbollah." Falwell served on the Board of CUFI. Shortly after his death, a number of Falwell's supporters unstintingly paid tribute to him as a seminal and courageous figure of the New Religious Right. Sen. John McCain, who during the 2000 Republican presidential primary called Falwell and the Rev. Pat Robertson "agents of intolerance" but had recently sought his support, issued a statement praising Falwell for his contributions. While Falwell helped place conservative evangelicals at the forefront of the political landscape, he was also in part responsible for coarsening the political dialogue in this country. In a career that was marked by a continuous stream of controversial -- and sometimes wacky -- statements, perhaps none was as mean-spirited as his reaction to the Sep. 11, 2001 terrorist attacks. Soon after 9/11, Falwell appeared on Pat Robertson's Christian Broadcasting Network's "700 Club," and told Robertson's viewers: "The abortionists have got to bear some burden for this because God will not be mocked," he said. "And when we destroy 40 million little innocent babies, we make God mad. I really believe that the pagans and the abortionists and the feminists and the gays and the lesbians

who are actively trying to make that an alternative lifestyle...all of them who have tried to secularize America. I point the finger in their face and say, 'You helped this happen.'" (For more on this, see "Rev. Falwell's hate and cowardice" (<http://www.workingforchange.com/article.cfm?ItemID=11929>.) He later "apologized" for those remarks. (For more on the so-called apology, see "Fundamentalist fanaticism: Rev. Falwell's threat to democracy mirrors that of the Taliban itself" (<http://www.workingforchange.com/article.cfm?ItemID=11968>.)

Falwell dated his political activism to the Supreme Court's *Roe v. Wade* ruling that established a woman's right to an abortion. "Believing life begins at conception, I became very exercised over this," he said. In the late 1970s, Paul Weyrich, widely considered as the godfather of the modern conservative movement, Terry Dolan, Richard Viguerie, the conservative direct mail guru, and Howard Phillips tapped televangelist Falwell to head up what was to become The Moral Majority. Over the years, as Falwell became more controversial and influential politically, he became a favored guest on cable television's news programs.

A savvy televangelist and media manipulator, who can forget his series of television run-ins with Larry Flynt, the publisher of *Hustler* magazine and other notable skin rags? "The most important result of our relationship was the landmark decision from the Supreme Court that made parody protected speech, and the fact that much of what we see on television and hear on the radio today is a direct result of my having won that now famous case which Falwell played such an important role in," Flynt told *The Raw Story* after Falwell's death.

According to the online publication, "Flynt and Falwell were on opposite sides of a landmark free speech case decided in 1988 by the Supreme Court over the parody advertisement above, in which Falwell supposedly describes losing his virginity to his mother. The Court found Falwell and other public figures could not seek damages for suffering emotional distress from parodies like the one published by Flynt in the 1983 edition of *Hustler*."

With Falwell at the helm, the Moral Majority, founded in 1979, prospered politically and financially. And, unlike some of his televangelist brethren who were severely wounded by sexual and financial scandals, Falwell's enterprises prospered throughout the 1980s. After the Moral Majority officially shut down in 1989, Pat Robertson's Christian Coalition, Dr. James Dobson's Focus on the Family, the Family Research Council and a host of other conservative Christian groups stepped into the breach. In 2004, Falwell, seeing a political opening and hoping to re-connect with his funding base, announced the formation of an organization called the Moral Majority Coalition, which he characterized as a "21st century resurrection of the Moral Majority." In his early seventies, after recovering from a serious illness, Falwell focused on making the Christian liberal arts college, Liberty University, which he founded in 1971, his everlasting legacy. The 4,400-acre campus is home to 9,600 students, and another 15,000 are enrolled in its distance learning program. The mending-fences visit of Sen. John McCain to the Liberty University campus last year was an example of Falwell's continued

involvement in top-level Republican politics. His connection to the founding of the Pastor John Hagee's Christians United for Israel also showed that Falwell wasn't only about setting up multi-million dollar endowments for his university and fashioning impressive real estate deals. Nearly 30 years after entering the political fray, Falwell had formidable political clout right up until his death.

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