



The Genesis of Christian Nationalism

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In recent years, the Christian right has become an increasingly powerful force in American politics. The belief that God has called on conservative Christians to rule over society has extended into all levels of government, from school boards to the White House.

Many pundits call this movement Christian nationalism. But while it may seem like a phenomenon born out of our current political moment, it represents the culmination of various movements with roots that trace back decades. The more extreme elements didn't just materialize a few years ago. They've been there from the start.





The New Christian Right

In the beginning — in this case, the 1970s — some Christians feared their influence in society was waning. The Supreme Court had outlawed school-sponsored prayer and Bible readings and had legalized abortion.

In response, religious figures began to organize around the idea that they had a duty to bring Christianity back into public life. Several Christian-influenced organizations, including Jerry Falwell's Moral Majority and James Dobson's Family Research Council, were soon formed and went on to shape Republican policies for decades to come. Evangelical Protestants of different denominations joined forces and united with conservative Catholics, like Paul Weyrich, the founder of the think tank the Heritage Foundation, to advance their shared political goals. Under the banner of "pro-family politics," the New Christian Right movement fought against abortion access, feminism and gay rights as attacks on traditional family values.



Jerry Falwell

Televangelist who founded the Moral Majority, which mobilized conservative Christian voters for the Republican Party. Falwell, who died in 2007, also founded Liberty University.



James Dobson

Prominent evangelical leader and founder of Focus on the Family and the Family Research Council, which helped shape the politics of family values. Dobson is 88.



Paul Weyrich

Founder of several organizations in addition to the Heritage Foundation, Weyrich helped craft a coalition between conservative Catholics and evangelical Protestants that would extend into the present. Weyrich died in 2008.

Evangelicals Become a Voting Bloc

The National Affairs Briefing Conference, Dallas, Texas, Aug. 22, 1980

Inside a red-rimmed sports arena, more than 15,000 evangelicals gathered with conservative activists to discuss how to get Christians more involved in politics.

They had come to an event known as the National Affairs Briefing because the evangelists Billy Graham and Bill Bright reported that God had issued each of them the same warning: America had only 1,000 more days of freedom. After speaking with the pair, televangelist James Robison said God had urged him to host a conference that would "refocus the direction of America."

The sea of believers roared as Republican presidential candidate Ronald Reagan took the podium.

"This is a nonpartisan gathering, and so I know that you can't endorse me," Reagan said. "I want you to know that I endorse you and what you are doing."

The moment underscored an important shift in American politics, helping to cement evangelical Christians as a reliable conservative voting bloc.

But while Reagan took the spotlight, backstage in Dallas, Robert Billings, a Reagan campaign adviser who had helped found the Moral Majority, nodded to a less prominent visionary: R.J. Rushdoony, the father of a more extreme movement known as Christian Reconstructionism.

"If it weren't for his books, none of us would be here," Billings remarked, as recalled in an essay by Gary North, an economic historian and Rushdoony's son-in-law.

"Nobody in the audience understands that," replied North.

"True," said Billings. "But we do."



Billy Graham

A pioneer in televangelism who met with every president from 1950 to 2010, but later said pastors shouldn't get too close to politicians. Graham died in 2018. His son Franklin Graham is an ardent supporter of former President Donald Trump and spoke at the 2024 Republican National Convention.



The New Christian Right Today

The conversation at the National Affairs Briefing shows the early influence of previously obscure elements of the Christian right that have surfaced in recent years. Other groups and figures that emerged in that period remain influential. Robison and Dobson became spiritual advisers to former President Donald Trump, helping him gain support among religious voters. The Heritage Foundation recently crafted Project 2025, a plan to concentrate executive power and promote far-right policies should Trump win the presidential election. Trump has [disavowed the plan](#), though some members of his administration worked on it.

The idea that Christians should be in power has become a central mission of today's Christian right, but the idea was taking root decades ago. In remarks strikingly similar to today's rhetoric, Bob Weiner, founder of a major ministry focused on college campuses, said in 1985, "We should be the head of our school board. We should be the head of our nation. We should be the senators and the congressmen. We should be the editors of our newspapers. We should be taking over every area of life."



James Robison

A televangelist and key organizer of the National Affairs Briefing, which came to symbolize evangelical Christians' uniting into a political force. Robison is 81.





Christian Reconstructionism

As Billings and North noted backstage at the National Affairs Briefing, the New Christian Right owed a lot to another movement, known as Christian Reconstructionism. The fundamentalist movement held that all aspects of society, including government, education, economics and culture, should conform to a strict interpretation of the Old Testament. Though less recognized, Reconstructionism heavily influenced the more mainstream New Christian Right and its aspirations for Christians to infiltrate systems of power.

Up until the 1970s, the way many evangelicals believed the world would end gave them little incentive to get involved in politics. When the rapture came, the faithful would ascend to heaven, leaving the troubled world behind. That sense of remove began to fade due to the influence of Reconstructionists, who, by contrast, believed they had to build God's kingdom before Christ would return — which required political action.

The movement's founder, Rushdoony, received less acknowledgement from politicians, in part because of his extreme views, which included justifying slavery, denying the Holocaust and endorsing the death penalty for homosexuality and adultery. But with Reconstructionists' prolific writings about what Bible-centered institutions should look like, including Rushdoony's 1973 book, "The Institutes of Biblical Law," adherents provided instruction manuals for the modern Christian right. Reconstructionists wanted to eliminate public education by slowly dismantling it, and they led the way in developing Christian schools and promoting homeschooling. Thanks in large part to that leadership, their principles spread.



R.J. Rushdoony

The founder of Christian Reconstructionism who also launched the Christian schooling movement. Rushdoony's writings, describing a society based on biblical law, shaped evangelical culture and the Christian right. He died in 2001.

Reconstructionists Join Forces With Other Evangelicals

Lincoln Memorial, July 4, 1986

Amid the swampy summer air, scores of evangelical preachers and Christian leaders crowded onto the stone steps of the Lincoln Memorial to sign "[A Manifesto of the Christian Church](#)." The document detailed their beliefs and the policies they would promote, such as fighting abortion, homosexuality and the teaching of evolution as a "monopoly viewpoint in public schools."

A group called the Coalition on Revival had brought representatives from many denominations to the memorial. Its mission: to "rebuild civilization on the principles of the Bible." Founder Jay Grimstead anticipated they'd have more political success by uniting evangelicals across denominations and persuasions.

"Christians are everywhere, and we're going to exert our influence in all walks of life," Grimstead belted to the crowd.



The Coalition on Revival helped evangelicals set aside their differing end-times beliefs and move toward political action by focusing on Reconstructionists' ideas for reshaping society. Positions articulated in the manifesto, such as denouncing the "state usurpation of parental rights," foreshadowed some of today's policy debates.



Jay Grimstead

A leader on the Christian right thanks to his efforts, via the Coalition on Revival, to unite various types of Christians to rebuild civilization on biblical principles. Though not himself a Reconstructionist, Grimstead said he was influenced by the movement's ideas. He died in 2024.





Christian Reconstructionism Today

Reconstructionism developed two related concepts that spread beyond their movement and that influence many Republican leaders today: dominionism and a “biblical worldview.” Dominionism holds that God calls Christians to rule over all aspects of society. A biblical worldview is a theocratic framework for seeing all of the Bible as a strict blueprint for structuring society, as opposed to merely guiding individuals.

Today, Reconstructionism’s influence is evident in assertions that the government should fall under biblical law, blurring the lines between church and state. It continues to drive Protestant Christian education and [anti-abortion activism](#), including efforts to criminalize getting or performing an abortion.



New Apostolic Reformation

In the 1980s, as evangelicals became more active in politics and megachurches sprang up across the country, some charismatic Christians — a subset of Protestants who incorporate supernatural elements like faith healing and prophecies — were increasingly moving away from traditional denominations and into independent churches. Those churches were connected by informal networks in which some leaders were considered apostles and prophets. The shift captivated C. Peter Wagner, a seminary professor who specialized in helping churches grow. He considered it the biggest change in Christianity in centuries, called it the New Apostolic Reformation and helped it flourish.

Starting in the late 1990s, Wagner held seminars to shape its tenets and cultivate new leaders. Key to his success was his partnership with Cindy Jacobs, a spiritual leader considered a prophet by some, who helped Wagner understand the world of charismatics.

NAR leaders adopted dominionism and promoted it to their followers. They also advanced the idea of “strategic spiritual warfare,” in which church leaders directed prayers to battle demons they believe control physical territory and influence world affairs. The rapid growth in independent charismatic churches has helped NAR become a formidable political force on the right. Former Alaska Gov. Sarah Palin, the Republicans’ vice presidential nominee in 2008, attended a [church that frequently welcomed NAR leaders to give guest sermons](#). But the NAR rose to national prominence in 2016 after their leaders united behind Trump.



C. Peter Wagner

A longtime professor at the evangelical Fuller Theological Seminary, he’s considered by religion scholars to be the “intellectual godfather” of the New Apostolic Reformation. Wagner died in 2016.



Cindy Jacobs

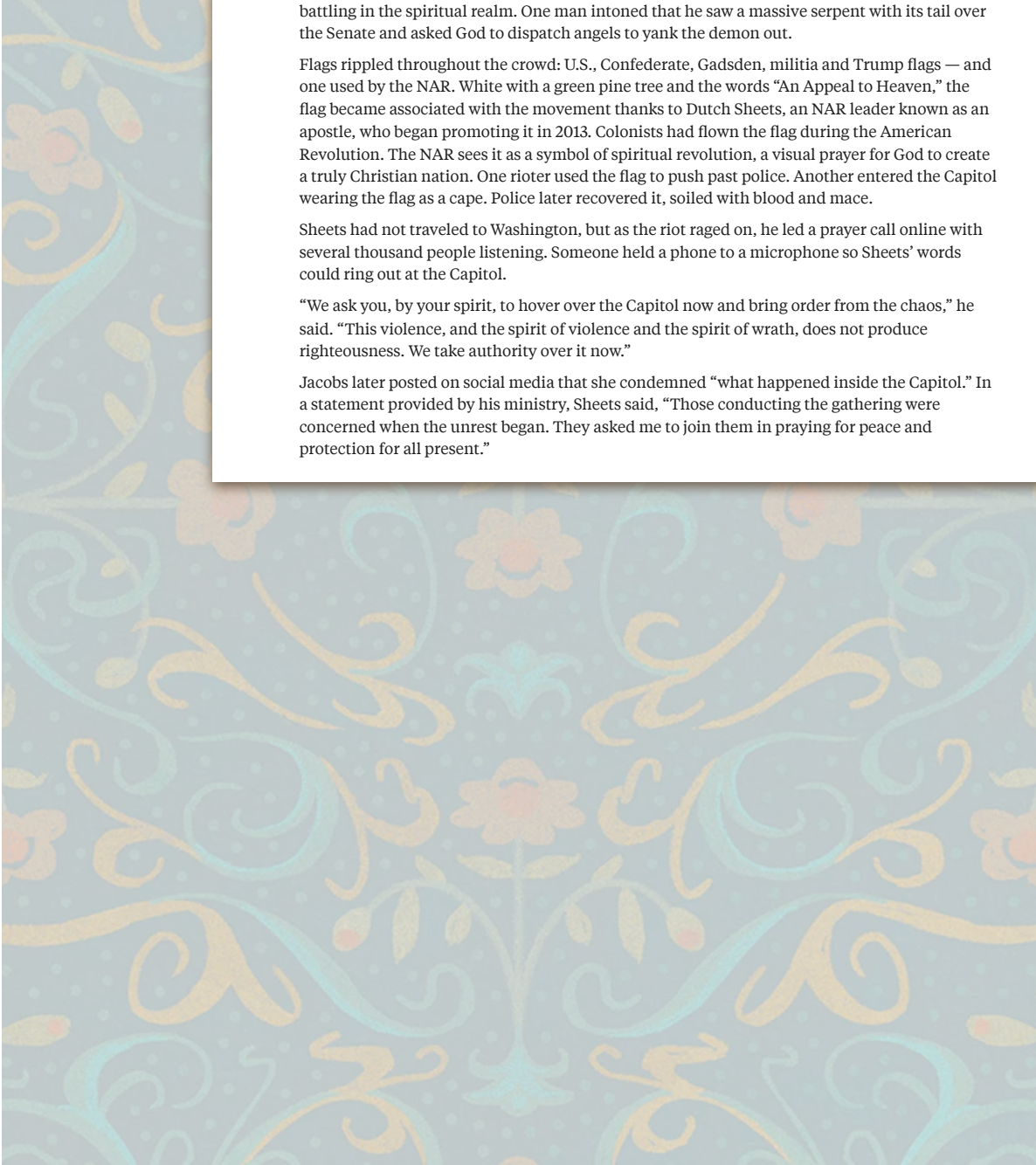

A leader in charismatic Christianity who helped Wagner develop the NAR, Jacobs, 73, led prayers on the grounds of the Capitol during the Jan. 6, 2021, riot.

A Prayer Call at the Capitol Insurrection

United States Capitol, Jan. 6, 2021

The mob stormed the Capitol. They beat police officers, smashed windows and flooded inside, disrupting the certification of the 2020 presidential election. Outside, on the steps and the scaffolding set up for the inauguration, the crowd seethed. The air filled with tear gas and shouts of “1776” and “Hang Mike Pence.” A gallows loomed on the lawn.

And on a stage by the southeast corner of the Capitol, a group of people looked on, blowing shofars and speaking in tongues. They raised their hands toward the sky as they prayed. While some of their followers joined the assault on the building, these leaders of the NAR stayed put,



battling in the spiritual realm. One man intoned that he saw a massive serpent with its tail over the Senate and asked God to dispatch angels to yank the demon out.

Flags rippled throughout the crowd: U.S., Confederate, Gadsden, militia and Trump flags — and one used by the NAR. White with a green pine tree and the words “An Appeal to Heaven,” the flag became associated with the movement thanks to Dutch Sheets, an NAR leader known as an apostle, who began promoting it in 2013. Colonists had flown the flag during the American Revolution. The NAR sees it as a symbol of spiritual revolution, a visual prayer for God to create a truly Christian nation. One rioter used the flag to push past police. Another entered the Capitol wearing the flag as a cape. Police later recovered it, soiled with blood and mace.

Sheets had not traveled to Washington, but as the riot raged on, he led a prayer call online with several thousand people listening. Someone held a phone to a microphone so Sheets’ words could ring out at the Capitol.

“We ask you, by your spirit, to hover over the Capitol now and bring order from the chaos,” he said. “This violence, and the spirit of violence and the spirit of wrath, does not produce righteousness. We take authority over it now.”

Jacobs later posted on social media that she condemned “what happened inside the Capitol.” In a statement provided by his ministry, Sheets said, “Those conducting the gathering were concerned when the unrest began. They asked me to join them in praying for peace and protection for all present.”



The NAR Today

In the United States, the NAR has become a driver for pro-Trump, far-right policies that promote a Christian worldview in government. Although not an NAR leader herself, Paula White-Cain, Trump's personal pastor of over 20 years, has been instrumental in connecting NAR leaders to Trump through her roles in his campaign and administration.

Just as Reagan recognized the political possibility of evangelical voters in the 1980s, powerful Republicans like House Speaker Mike Johnson of Louisiana and Rep. Marjorie Taylor Greene of Georgia have aligned themselves with the NAR today. Supreme Court Justice Samuel Alito flew the Appeal to Heaven Flag at his beach house, and Johnson displayed it outside his office. In September, [Johnson joined White-Cain on a prayer call](#) and told the audience that God had chosen Trump to be president a second time.



Dutch Sheets

A pastor who popularized the NAR's use of the "Appeal to Heaven" flag, which appears with him in this promotional image that he posted on social media. Sheets, along with C. Peter Wagner and Cindy Jacobs, has built a network that hosts prayer sessions over conference calls, providing structure for the NAR.





Seven Mountain Mandate

The NAR helped popularize the concept that Christians should conquer the seven spheres of society: family, religion, government, arts and entertainment, business, education and media. The idea took off in the 2010s when Lance Wallnau, a pastor considered an NAR prophet, repackaged the concept as the Seven Mountain Mandate. Wallnau wrote he learned about the concept when Loren Cunningham, an evangelical leader, told him that [God had separately given Cunningham and Bright the same seven arenas](#) in a message decades before. It was an evolution of Reconstructionists' dominion theology.

Wallnau has popularized the mandate into a powerful framework for conservative evangelicals to influence all aspects of society by taking "territory" and, [as he told an audience in September](#), "penetrating the systems and the culture and the organizational environment of what's around you in a community." The mandate has guided some Christians as they built media empires, Christian schools and businesses, and as they sought elected office.



Lance Wallnau

A Christian right influencer credited with coining the term "Seven Mountain Mandate." Today, Wallnau, 68, is traveling the country encouraging Christians to vote for Trump and become poll workers so they can be a ["spy in the camp."](#)



Bill Bright

The founder of Campus Crusade for Christ (today called Cru). Bright, who died in 2003, helped inspire the National Affairs Briefing and reframe dominion theology, leading to the Seven Mountain Mandate.

Wallnau Gets Out the Vote for Trump

Monroeville, Pennsylvania, Sept. 28, 2024

On a hot fall day, a couple hundred evangelical Christians sporting shirts and hats with Trump slogans and Bible verses gathered on the outskirts of Pittsburgh. For hours, they communed inside a cavernous convention center. They worshiped. They sang. They swayed and spoke in tongues. They listened as speakers shared prophecies and conspiracy theories about election integrity. They spoke of the devil and demons and their individual mandate to cast out the forces of evil by voting for Trump. At midday, the Republican nominee for vice president, [JD Vance](#), [graced the stage](#), lending the event the campaign's imprimatur.

It was the fifth stop of Wallnau's swing-state Courage Tour, which blended charismatic Christianity, conspiracy theories and conservative politics in an effort to deliver Trump back to the White House.

Years earlier, during the 2016 campaign, Wallnau visited the then-candidate at Trump Tower. He claimed that after he left, God told him to read Isaiah 45: "Thus says the Lord to Cyrus, His anointed, whose right hand I have held — to subdue nations before him."

Just as God had chosen the heathen Persian emperor Cyrus to restore the Jewish people from exile, Wallnau wrote in an October 2016 op-ed, God had chosen Trump to restore conservative Christians' cultural power.

"I believe the 45th president is meant to be an Isaiah 45 Cyrus," he wrote.




Wallnau and others saw it as a prophecy that justified evangelicals' support for Trump, a twice-divorced man with a history of adultery, who bragged about sexual assault and whom hundreds of people said had cheated them in business dealings. Wallnau's prophecy played a critical role in coalescing evangelical voters behind Trump.





The Seven Mountain Mandate Today



Wallnau has advised a [Christian-right charity called Ziklag](#), whose 2024 objectives include mobilizing Republican-leaning voters in swing states. Ziklag, whose members are influential and wealthy Christian families, has a long-term goal of elevating conservative Christians into positions of power so they can radically change American society. In the education mountain, for instance, Ziklag wants to “take down the education system as we know it today,” one official said, according to records obtained by the news outlet Documented, and a document obtained by ProPublica and Documented says the group would promote homeschooling as a “fundamental right.”

The New Apostolic Reformation opposes transgender rights and views abortion as a form of child sacrifice that empowers demons. When Alabama’s Supreme Court ruled that frozen embryos can be considered children, Chief Justice Tom Parker, who has expressed support for the Seven Mountain framework, issued a concurring opinion citing the Bible.

Leading up to the 2024 election, Wallnau has held tent revivals in swing states aimed at registering and mobilizing conservative Christians to vote and to serve as poll workers.

Sources: "Building God's Kingdom: Inside the World of Christian Reconstruction" by Julie J. Ingersoll; "Eternal Hostility: The Struggle Between Theocracy and Democracy" by Frederick Clarkson; "The Violent Take It by Force: The Christian Movement That Is Threatening Our Democracy" by Matthew D. Taylor; "The Radical Mind: The Origins of Right-Wing Catholic and Protestant Coalition Building" by Chelsea Ebin; "Spiritual Warfare: The Politics of the Christian Right" by Sara Diamond; "Invading Babylon: The 7 Mountain Mandate" by Lance Wallnau and Bill Johnson; original interviews with many of these authors.

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