

# Jerry Falwell, founder of the right-wing Moral Majority, dead at 73

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Jerry Falwell, one of the leaders of the Christian Right in the US, died Tuesday in his office in Lynchburg, Virginia at the age of 73. Although his brand of fundamentalist hucksterism has been around for a long time in America, Falwell belonged to a generation of preachers who enjoyed unprecedented success as religious entrepreneurs, television personalities and even political leaders.

While the evangelist's death has been dealt with in a somewhat muted fashion in the mass media, a sign of the decline in Falwell's own personal standing, such treatment as he has received has been generally respectful. Television news programs inevitably tell their viewers that Falwell was an "influential figure," who "left his mark" on America, although he was an individual who aroused "controversy."

Typically, Katie Couric of "CBS News" told her audience that the death of Falwell closed "one of the most controversial chapters of American political and religious history.... Revere him or revile him, Jerry Falwell's name is one for the history books." This explains nothing. Why should this character, mediocre in every department except his ability to appeal to the worst in his fellow citizens, have become a name in any history book?

In an especially stupid segment on CNN's morning program Wednesday, correspondent Brianna Keilar offered her description of the scene in Lynchburg: "People here are teary-eyed, they are grieving for the loss of Reverend Falwell. But one member of the church also told me, you know, he's in a better place. And even in death his message will live on. They say he lived what he preached." And so forth.

In fact, as a religious conman and bigot, Falwell contributed what he could to the debasement of American political, social and cultural life.

Born in Lynchburg in 1933, the son of a flamboyant businessman (and sometime bootlegger) and a devoutly Christian mother, Falwell discovered his calling while a college student. He dropped out of Lynchburg College and transferred to Baptist Bible College in Springfield, Missouri. What was the atmosphere at this worthy institution during the height of the anticommunist Cold War in the early 1950s? One can only imagine.

Back in Lynchburg in 1956, Falwell organized his own church and soon afterward began radio and television broadcasts of the "Old-Time Gospel Hour." He was a proponent of segregation at the time, telling a local paper in 1964 that the new Civil Rights Act had been misnamed: "It should be considered civil wrongs rather than civil rights." His television program hosted prominent racists

such as Govs. Lester Maddox of Georgia and George Wallace of Alabama.

Some years earlier Falwell had declared that the famed 1954 Supreme Court decision striking down school segregation "would never have been made" if Chief Justice Earl Warren and the other members of the court "had known God's word and had desired to do the Lord's will."

Falwell might have remained one of dozens and dozens of preachers with local followings had it not been for significant changes in American social relations.

Following the overwhelming defeat of Republican Barry Goldwater in the 1964 election to Democrat Lyndon Johnson, Richard Nixon sought to redirect the Republican Party toward the construction of a new mass base for right-wing economic and social policies. This became known as the "Southern Strategy," as the Republicans sought to whip up a racist backlash against the civil rights movement, particularly in the Southern states. After a century of one-party rule by the Democrats, the South was transformed into a stronghold of the Republican Party in the 1970s and 1980s.

As the Republican Party recast itself as a right-wing, quasi-theocratic party, and the ability of fundamentalism to play a leading role ceased to be primarily a regional phenomenon, Falwell rode the wave to national prominence. Along with a number of others, he launched the Moral Majority in 1979—on a program of imposing fundamentalist Christian dogma as state policy, ferocious anticommunism and anti-welfare-state economics—which was credited with assisting Ronald Reagan in winning the presidency in 1980.

If historian Douglas Brinkley is correct that Falwell "set the tone and tenor for the 1980s," it is a sad commentary on the decade. In any event, he certainly both embodied and agitated for the lurch to the right that has occurred in official American political life.

Falwell inveighed against gay rights, feminism and, in general, any signs of social liberalism. The Lynchburg preacher denounced Martin Luther King and others for their "left-wing associations" and declared that "Labor unions should study and read the Bible instead of asking for more money. When people get right with God, they are better workers." In 1979 he told his followers that he yearned for the day when America "won't have any public schools. The churches will take them over again and Christians will be running them." He opposed sanctions against the apartheid regime in South Africa in the 1980s, warning of a Soviet-backed

revolution.

Falwell later wrote that he was convinced that a majority existed in America that could “turn back the flood tide of moral permissiveness, family breakdown and general capitulation to evil and to foreign policies such as Marxism-Leninism.”

The actual political alliance was bound up less with such apocalyptic moralism than with the earthly material interests of the American upper class. Falwell and dozens of other television preachers helped mobilize disoriented sections of the middle class and working class behind a program which resulted in a dramatic transfer of wealth from working people to the super-rich, as well as enriching a sizeable layer of the upper middle class, including Falwell himself.

The premise of the Moral Majority proved to be a fraud, even in its own terms. Successive Republican administrations talked the language of the Christian fundamentalists and made significant attacks on democratic and constitutional rights, but these measures encountered a deep-rooted popular opposition. The promised theocratic transformation of American life did not materialize, and Falwell and many of his fellow televangelists, like Pat Robertson, had to continually up the dosage of their extreme-right demagoguery, embracing increasingly bizarre theories.

The election of Bill Clinton in 1992, in particular, seemed to set Falwell off. He threw himself into the campaign to destabilize and bring down the Clinton administration, producing a fanciful “documentary,” concocted of lies and innuendo, known as *The Clinton Chronicles*. The video hinted at the most outrageous crimes, from cocaine-smuggling to murder.

In 1999 Falwell declared that the Antichrist was probably on earth, and he would be Jewish and male.

Following the September 11, 2001 attacks, Falwell notoriously declared: “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, the ACLU, People For the American Way, all of them who have tried to secularize America ... I point the finger in their face and say ‘you helped this happen.’” He declared that the terrorist attacks were God’s judgment on America for “throwing God out of the public square, out of the schools. The abortionists have got to bear some burden for this because God will not be mocked.”

Such comments were criticized or even ridiculed by the American media, but these same people had been passing off this ignoramus as a serious moral leader and statesman for two decades. They bore considerable responsibility for his having a national audience to begin with.

By the time of his death, Falwell’s moment had clearly passed. Even at the height of his influence, it would be mistaken to believe, as the media and his own followers claimed, that his ideas ever had mass support. Falwell became a national figure in a period of political reaction when organizations to which broad layers of the population looked for leadership or assistance—the trade unions, civil rights organizations, the Democratic Party—were in the process of decomposing or dramatically shifting to the right. The relative prominence of the religious right has come in large measure by political default, as well as enormous subsidies from corporate America and the wealthy.

The vacuum of progressive politics in America has brought all sorts of people to the fore and, in many cases, made them rich. To give the man his due, Falwell was obviously a savvy business operator. He transformed his humble church, started with \$1,000 in 1956, into a massive propaganda and money-making operation. He made use of various technologies as they emerged to promote his cause. His Liberty University in Lynchburg has nearly 20,000 students, each paying some \$16,000 tuition a year.

Religion in America is big business. Total retail sales of religious products—including books, music, gifts and cards—amounted to some \$7 billion a year in 2005, according to *BusinessWeek*. Of the \$260.18 billion in charitable contributions Americans made the same year, \$93.18 billion went to religious organizations.

As we noted at the outset, religious hucksterism is not something new in the US. Such people have been around for a long time, since colonial days. The early twentieth century saw no shortage, in the Billy Sundays and Aimee Semple McPhersons. Sinclair Lewis (*Elmer Gantry*), H.L. Mencken and others did their share to discredit the charlatans and religious backwardness in general.

Writing in the *Baltimore Evening Sun* in September 1925 in the aftermath of the death of William Jennings Bryan, notorious for his campaign against the theory of evolution in the Scopes Trial, Mencken commented: “The way to deal with superstition is not to be polite to it, but to tackle it with all arms, and so rout it, cripple it, and make it forever infamous and ridiculous. Is it, perchance, cherished by persons who should know better? Then their folly should be brought out into the light of day, and exhibited there in all its hideousness until they flee from it, hiding their heads in shame.”

For a generation Falwell personified the smarminess, hypocrisy and thinly veiled thuggery of a retrograde social trend. All in all, his was a baleful presence in American life.



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