

Remarks by Oregon Congressman Les AuCoin
to the Anti-Defamation League of B'nai B'rith
The Torch of Liberty Award Presentation
to Morrie Greenstein

Portland, Oregon
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On April 28 and 29 of this year, 250,000 fundamentalist Christians held what they called a "Washington For Jesus" rally in the nation's capital.

At a parade during the rally, a battalion of uniformed policemen marched under a banner that read "Cops For Christ."

In private meetings with Congressmen and Senators, rally members demanded that legislators fall to their knees and repent for their "sins" in voting wrong on various issues.

Not long after this, a California organization called "Christian Voice" published a "moral report card" which rated each member of Congress on the basis of how they voted on what were called "14 key moral issues."

The creation of the Department of Education was immoral, for example, because it allegedly "increased federal intervention and humanist regulation over public education" and because it was supported by the National Education Association which the organization accused of advocating a "godless" philosophy.

Only one of the six ordained ministers who serve in Congress scored better than 50 percent on these scorecards. Black members of Congress fared even worse; their average was 6 percent. But the authors of the scorecards were not interested in such subtleties. They wanted headlines and they got them. Headlines like this one: "Lawmakers Given Christian Ratings." And this one: "Morality Score Low For Local Congressman." One paper ran pictures of congressmen under the headings of "Saints" and "Sinners."

What do these things have to do with the principles and purposes of this organization and men like Morrie Greenstein, who we honor tonight?

The answer obviously is: everything. The Anti-Defamation League of B'nai B'rith is well known as one of the nation's leading defenders of civil and religious freedoms. In contrast, the facts I've just reported are only a few illustrations of excesses of a growing national movement that has the potential to plant seeds of religious intolerance and political recrimination in ways this nation has not seen since the days of Joe McCarthy.

Thus, on a night when you and I celebrate human rights and freedoms, I think it's very appropriate for us to reflect on what this new political force is, what it is doing, what it wants to do and what it might mean for our democracy. What it is is the movement of the Christian Right. What it's doing is jumping into partisan politics with manpower, money, and a national strategy. Its objective, in the words of one of its founders, is to "Christianize America" through political action.

So far it's hard to identify where it has lost in its first few jumps into politics. In 1978, evangelical activists helped unseat at least two U.S. Senators and helped elect one governor. Since then, they helped defeat 13 senators, they have helped block passage of the ERA in 15 states, they have disrupted the White House Conference on the Family, they have forced both the Federal Communications Commission and the Internal Revenue Service to back down on racial discrimination challenges to religious organizations and have successfully engaged in national party platform politics.

The case of Congressman John Buchanan of Alabama reveals a lot about the political methods of this movement.

John Buchanan is a Baptist minister and was actually an author of a constitutional amendment to permit prayer in schools. But he refused to sign a House petition to force a floor vote on a proposed statute on prayer that would have tied the hands of the United States Supreme Court.

Back in Alabama, the Moral Majority and Christian Voice denounced Buchanan as an opponent of school prayer. All one day during the campaign, a local Christian radio station broadcast this charge as an unquestioned fact. When confronted later with the fact that Buchanan had indeed supported prayer, the state director of the Moral Majority replied that his organization looked for "a general attitude, not just a man's voting record." He said, "John Buchanan may have voted for school prayer somewhere but basically he was against it." As of January, John Buchanan, the Baptist minister, will no longer be in Congress. He was defeated on November 4.

In a Dallas convention this year, several tactics were decided upon to advance this movement in the 1982 elections. Among them: massive voter registration centering on the churches; creation of local church "moral action committees" to study candidates and legislation; state and regional training seminars in political tactics; and a network of newsletters that "simplify" and "clarify" political issues from the standpoint of the scriptures. On this last point, the advice of Paul Weyrich, was especially chilling. Weyrich is a veteran political consultant for secular, ultraconservative causes.

Weyrich noted in Dallas that the Christian Right is sometimes criticized for its simplistic and uncompromising stands on complicated issues — but he told the Dallas crowd not to listen to such criticism. "Frame the issues," he said, "in such a way that there is no mistaking who is on the right side and who is on the wrong side. Ultimately, everything can be reduced to right and wrong. Everything."

Given this senerio, what are the issues for the Christian Right? The President of the Moral Majority, Jerry Falwell, has set forth an ambitious legislative agenda for the 1980's.

Among the top items: constitutional amendments to ban abortion and permit prayer in schools; the death of ERA; opposition to "socialized medicine" in the form of national health insurance; stiffer penalties for pornography and drug abuse; worldwide supremacy in atomic weapons; elimination of the Department of Education; and a balanced federal budget.

These are not mere legislative goals. These are moral imperatives. You can differ on a "goal" and be wrong — but to disagree on a "moral absolute" is not to be simply wrong, it is to be sinful, unchristian, or ungodly.

The implications are deep for a pluralistic democracy. If in order to be "religious" today, you have to support a certain stand regarding the Department of Education — then can you conceive of any other steps that could not be demanded of you tomorrow?

A Howard University political scientist by the name of James Tinney is a Pentecostal theologian who has observed this new political movement from the inside and sees enormous dangers in it.

Professor Tinney wrote: "I am alarmed at the threat to human rights and religious freedom which is posed by the 'Washington For Jesus' rally. What many do not realize is the event is but the tip of an iceberg of a political plan to turn the power levers of this country over to right-wing forces who are the opponents of every progressive move this nation has made toward equality and civil rights.

"What we see," he continued, "is a highly orchestrated move to make racism, sexism, ageism, classism, and homophobia the rule of the country — and the introduction of a brand of civil religion with a terrible potential for repression and persecution of non-believers."

Professor Tinney can be excused if he has overstated the point — but the country would be foolish to ignore the direct linkage he refers to between this new movement and the traditional, ultraconservative right.

The sudden addition of the evangelicals has not only provided a new dimension and new numbers to the political right but also served as a kind of cement, binding together the conservative single-issue groups in the name of family . . . God . . . morality . . . and opposition to government intervention.

This has long been one of the goals of Paul Weyrich, the ultraconservative activist who coached that Dallas convention on how to "frame" the issues.

Weyrich is the founder and director of the archconservative group called The Committee For the Survival of a Free Congress. He and Howard Phillips of the National Conservative Caucus have been two of the leading thinkers and tacticians of the so called New Right. Weyrich and Phillips recruited Jerry Falwell to form "The Moral Majority" 14 months ago. Today Weyrich chairs a committee that coordinates strategy and policy among most of the major secular and church-oriented political organizations of the New Right.

This partnership with evangelicals gives the New Right several practical advantages beyond a wholly new unifying theme. It provides millions of potential new voters heretofore unregistered; a new source of financial support; charismatic, unquestioned new leadership; thousands of dedicated new grassroots volunteers . . . and, most important of all, it provides the New Right with the trappings of religious virtue which purposely makes normal political dissent and criticism difficult.

It is far less clear what advantages will grow out of this partnership for individual evangelicals who, until now, were told that political activism was not consistent with their faith.

I would argue that there are major long-range risks to their own religious freedoms — not in political involvement, but rather in promoting the belief that one religion or any religion can be the sole basis on which to judge one issue as moral and other issues as sinful or ungodly. Many fundamentalist sects — most notably the Mormons — have paid a dear price as a result of religious intolerance and if history is any teacher, they could be expected to be among the first to be persecuted should government and God ever be mixed in the United States.

My friends, Jerry Falwell and people like him are partly right, and this makes them more dangerous than if they were totally wrong.

It is true that this nation needs spiritual reform;

that the family is endangered;

that ordinary people need to assert themselves politically;

that conventional churches, politicians and the media have been guilty of self-deception and hypocrisy.

But Falwell and others in the New Christian Right have substituted their own hypocrisy: a bias against the poor, an oversimplification of the issues, and political absolutism.

But surely we must know by now that no one has The Truth. It's your job and mine to show people that our nation's pluralism provides for the interplay of various partial truths so that we can begin to approach the whole truth.

Political movements come and they go. But often they catch the nation off guard and don't end until they cause major damage. How many people had to suffer, and for how long, until McCarthyism died?

Our job begins — yours and mine — with a reaffirmation of our values at meetings like this, on occasions like the one tonight.

The program tonight explains that the Anti-Defamation League of B'nai B'rith seeks to build cooperation between all sections of our society, so that each may draw strength from the other, learn from the other, and take pride in shared accomplishments.

I submit that there is special urgency in such words in America tonight.

And so, as we celebrate these values and honor our friend Morrie, let's recognize the dangers that exist in the political winds today. And let's give life to our beliefs by living our beliefs.

Let's do so by rejecting the substitution of rigid authoritarianism for open and free discussion in the political arena, in our schools, and in our communities.

Let's do so by reaffirming the basic human rights of all people — not just some people.

Let's do so by rejecting, for once and for all, the notion that a single religion's point of view has a special claim to truth, righteousness, or human morality.