P.S. to the NEWS
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CHRISTIANS AND PRESIDENTIAL CAMPAIGNS

The evangelical and fundamentalist Christians are making the politicians very nervous and making presidential politics very interesting. President and Mrs. Carter held a special strategy meeting in the White House last month to discuss how to cope with the problem. The White House staff is alarmed that the "electronic evangelists," who have large national followings and plenty of funds, are for the first time telling their people to register and vote.

These people are strongly committed to traditional family and moral values. The White House meeting was called to discuss how to stem the tide of wholesale defections from Carter to Ronald Reagan. Carter's staff blames this group for discrediting the recent White House Conference on Families.

Carter's staff is just seeking a scapegoat for its own follies. The White House Conference on Families discredited itself when it refused to accept a traditional definition of the family, and then passed resolutions favoring abortion, homosexual lifestyles, and a long list of extravagant federal spending proposals.

The Reagan campaign managers, on the other hand, have been smugly believing that the fundamentalists are safely harnessed to Reagan's candidacy. However, when Reagan appeared before a rally of 20,000 in Reunion Arena in Dallas in late August, Evangelist James Robison warned bluntly that these people are motivated by principle not personality, and that they will support Reagan when he is right and oppose him when he is wrong. Reagan, sitting on the platform, looked apprehensive, and his campaign aides looked like they wished they were somewhere else.

Politicians are always uneasy in the presence of voting blocs they don't control. That's why the party pols have been lambasting the so-called single-issue groups. But the fundamentalist Christians certainly aren't single-issue people; they are revved up about many issues.

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At that same August rally in Dallas, Dr. Jerry Falwell presented a laundry list of issues which the fundamentalists are concerned about and intend to do something about. These include a Human Life Amendment, opposition to homosexual privileges, resolute opposition to the drafting of women no matter what some court may decide, a constitutional amendment to restore prayer to the schools, the elimination of obscenity from newsstands and television, and strong support for Israel.

Political managers for presidential campaigns usually don't know how to handle unpaid supporters. A basic law of political machine building is that you never let a anyone advance to a position of importance who is not obligated to you financially or politically. Issue-motivated volunteers are like wild cards in the deck.

Political managers for presidential campaigns have a mind-set that people can be pigeon-holed into ideological boxes marked liberal, conservative, moderate, and the "arch" or "ultra" varieties of each. But the fundamentalist Christians don't fit under any of those hackneyed labels.

The typical campaign manager for Carter or Reagan doesn't even understand the difference between social conservatives (who care most about moral and family issues) and economic conservatives (who talk about balancing the budget). Nor do they understand that social conservatives look upon a strong national defense as a moral issue.

The evangelical Christians are alienated by the Democratic Platform which is pro-abortion and pro-gay rights. They are also alienated by the way, for four years, the Carter Administration has been wooing the gay vote by supporting legislation to eliminate the ban on homosexual immigration, by supporting homosexual teachers in classes on army bases, and by issuing the President's Position Paper endorsing homosexual demands.

Ronald Reagan is in an excellent position to harvest the votes of this group, but he hasn't got them yet. At the Dallas Arena, they listened and applauded, but they were disappointed with his platitudes and generalities and his failure to address himself to the moral issues. It will be a fatal mistake if Reagan thinks these people "have nowhere else to go except Reagan" in a choice between Reagan, Carter and Anderson. They surely do have another place to go -- back into their churches as nonvoters where they have always been.

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