Alas! On November 4, 1980 the evangelical incumbent, Jimmy Carter, knew that his race for reelection was over even before the polls had closed. Elected at a ratio of 2:1 by his fellow evangelicals four years earlier, the tables turned on the southern Sunday School teacher as he lost the support of evangelicals by the same ratio by which he had won it. The fact that this rather unpopular president lost the support of the country is no shock, but the reality that evangelicals shifted their support over the course of four years from someone who spoke their language and tried his best to live the private life prized by evangelicals poses an interesting question. What was it that made the majority of evangelicals decide to vote against a man who shared more of their beliefs than any other President of America’s past?

What defines an American evangelical is a matter of dispute but there are a few key meeting points on which most American evangelicals agree. According to Wheaton College’s Institute for the Study of American Evangelicals, this group affirms the four major tenets of conversionism, activism, biblicism, and crucicentrism. Conversionism prompts evangelicals to share their faith through activism with those outside the fold in hopes that they will change their lifestyles and live in a more biblical manner. Biblicism
emphasizes the word of God revealed through the Scriptures while crucicentrism places Christ at the center of evangelical’s lives.²

In the mid-1970’s, evangelicals prayed for a moral leader and Jimmy Carter seemed the easy answer. Having lost the past two elections by a landslide, the Democratic party was looking for a candidate above the scandal of Watergate, the Vietnam war, and welfare. From the peanut fields of Georgia a new kind of leader emerged. Americans gravitated towards the uncharacteristically honest candidate famous for directly telling the American people “I will not lie to you”, a man who ran his campaign on promises of honesty, goodness, and love.³ Jimmy Carter was not only a Washington outsider who humbly considered himself lucky to win the presidency but also an evangelical Southern Baptist Christian comfortable sharing his faith with America. Born again ten years before the election, Jimmy Carter told the country that “Jesus comes first on my life, even before politics”, a statement Americans had never heard from a presidential candidate.⁴

This appeal to something other than the powers of the world rejuvenated Americans struggling to comprehend the earlier scandals of the decade. Americans were appalled by the Washington-bred politicians who were assumed slaves to power, greed, and deceit. Negativity was the norm when Americans thought of the Washington political scene and Carter’s acknowledgement that something other than politics claimed his life refreshed American voters.

While president, Carter did not shirk from the duties of an evangelical Christian and continued to share his faith through teaching Sunday School at First Baptist Church in Washington, D.C. As a teacher Carter asked his pupils questions about what
Christians believed and told the class that “there is something completely unique about Christianity; we have a personal relationship with a living God: Christ.” Carter stated that although he attended Sunday School, believed in Christ, was not prone to adultery or murder, and did not destroy his body with alcohol or drugs, this was not enough for salvation. In accordance with core evangelical tenets Carter proclaimed that “God saves us because he loves us and Christ died for our sins.”

Enter Ronald Reagan, an attractive actor who successfully courted evangelicals despite the fact that his personal life was a far cry from the evangelical ideal exemplified by Carter. Reared in small Illinois towns, Reagan achieved the “American dream” and found fame and fortune in Hollywood, paving the golden path of this rugged cowboy of Hollywood to the governorship of California. Also an outsider, Reagan felt pressured by his adoring fans to run for office even though he stated that he “had a good job and a good life and, at fifty-four, the last thing [he] wanted to do was start a new career.”

Although he courted evangelicals and eventually won their vote his private life contrasted with Carter’s squeaky clean example. When asked whether he was a born again Christian, Reagan hesitated, stating that one time he had “submitted to voluntary Baptism.” This was a far cry from the enthusiastically evangelical Carter, who to the dismay of many secular Americans had bourn a Christian witness to the South Korean President Park Chung Hee. Ronald Reagan did not witness to non-Christians about his faith and flouted the lifestyle evangelicals cherished through his divorce and remarriage. Reagan overlooked the biblical mandate to tithe ten percent and managed to spare less than one percent of his adjusted gross income for charitable and religious causes.
Reagan did not directly espouse something other than evangelicalism, but his actions went against some of the tenets Jimmy Carter and other evangelicals followed.

The evangelical opinion of the candidates was more important in the 1980 election than ever before because evangelicals mobilized and started to take politics more seriously in the post-Watergate years. Prior to 1970 religious conservatism correlated with political inactivity. Because of a multitude of factors-- including the education and mainstreaming of evangelicals, the entering of a self-professed evangelical outsider into the Washington scene, and issues of morality peppering the political dialogue-- born-again churchgoers were just as likely to register and vote as other churchgoers for the 1976 election. Most of these Christians were pleased to find Jimmy Carter on the ballot and had few if any qualms about casting their vote for a man they considered as part of their fold. By 1980 evangelical political activity was at an all-time high as for the first time evangelicals voted in higher proportions than many other American populations. At the time of the Reagan-Carter election more evangelicals than ever before were voting but the majority of their votes were cast against the evangelical man they had helped to elect four years earlier.

A force other than that of personal piety was propelling many evangelicals into political activity and towards the right. In June 1979, just in time for the election of 1980, the Reverend Jerry Falwell created the Moral Majority Foundation. “The Moral Majority was not a religious movement” and from its onset Falwell stated that this was not a religious but a political organization dedicated to mobilize all who wanted to join evangelicals and fundamentalists in their quest to rid America of the dangers that threatened the American family. Moral Majority members gladly welcomed any
American who shared their belief system. Often citing the separation of church and state as the reason behind this interfaith effort, they began training new troops to wage a war on what members viewed as the un-American evils planting themselves in the traditional framework of their glorious country. Falwell asserted that “our founding fathers were not all Christians but they were guided by biblical principles.” It was not the faith of the individual but a desire for political principles derived from Judeo-Christian ethics which characterized members of the Moral Majority.

For evangelicals America’s future mattered. According to Falwell, “if there was ever a time when God needed a job done, it was during the 1960s and 1970s. The future of our nation was at stake.” It was especially important that America incorporate these principles in this impending moral crisis. A renewal of fundamental American values had to occur. “God ha[d] special plans for this great, free country of ours” and America was the last hope in this world and should serve as the base for world evangelism.

Most evangelicals did not join Falwell’s troops, but shared their concerns. The Moral Majority claimed to have registered two and a half million new voters and re-registered one and a half million new voters for the 1980 elections. In addition to the evangelicals directly affiliated with the Moral Majority in the year after Reagan’s election, conservatives cited 50 million born-again protestants as resonating with their ideologies and yearning for an America built on pro-family principles. Organizations such as the Religious Roundtable equipped evangelicals for activism, and evangelicals unaffiliated with these organizations found themselves in agreement with much of what they espoused.
In the decade after the scandal of Nixon and disillusionment with the American political scene evangelicals wanted a president with a pristine image. They were yearning for a more moral America where they would not have to look around them and see Americans choosing sinful ways. America was drowning in darkness and needed a beacon. Evangelicals were presented with men with two very different images—both Washington outsiders not connected with the scandals of the early 1970’s.

The irony that a man pegged as a simple farmer in reality had a complex personal image and an assortment of attributes did not make sense to many evangelicals and translated as inconsistencies or even hypocrisy in the eyes of the American public. Carter was plagued by a southern accent which betrayed his country roots even when dressed elegantly in his striking Navy uniform. Born in a small Georgia town to a farmer and a nurse, Carter had received degrees in fields a far cry from the peanut farm, graduated from the Naval Academy, and did his graduate work in reactor technology and nuclear physics.\(^{16}\) Aware of these tensions in his image, Carter justified them as normal for “a human being. I’m not a packaged article you put in your box and say, ‘Here’s an ignorant Georgia peanut farmer with no flexibility. He’s gotta be predictable.’”\(^{17}\) Carter further confused evangelical voters by interviewing with the enemy, *Playboy* magazine, and admitting to walking the difficult line between unwanted lust for other women and marital fidelity.

In addition to his assorted attributes Carter had quite an amalgam of friends and supporters and this concoction of people included some very free-spirited individuals. To the dismay of evangelicals he did not seek to court evangelicals in the political arena but instead gravitated towards those with similar political ideas. The sociable farmer not
only was friendly but counted all kinds among the people closest to him. According to Jimmy Carter’s campaign manager Hamilton Jordan, “it [became] clear that Carter had not applied his concern with the Ten Commandments to the behavior of the staff. They are, at least some of them, as hard-drinking, fornicating, pot-smoking, freethinking a group as has been seen in higher politics.” Within his circle of friends and aides Carter allowed people who engaged in the very behaviors the Moral Majority was mobilizing to fight. Evangelicals somewhat correctly viewed his primary supporters as including Gloria Steinem, Ralph Nader, environmentalists, and many other secular and atheist groups. They could not understand how a president so committed to his faith would not appoint others with similar beliefs to his inner circle or second level of advisors.

Contrastingly, Ronald Reagan consistently was an actor with a smooth delivery. Throughout the twentieth century the media which had made Reagan famous played an increasingly important role in the presidential elections, and this time it conveyed Reagan’s handsome image while his acting abilities graced him with the nickname “the great communicator”. In the movies Reagan was cast not as a country farmer who was a friend to all but as a gallant cowboy fighting for the right. Reagan’s most memorable performance was Drake McHugh in the film Kings Row, nominated for three academy awards and based on a popular novel. The movie version eliminated or dramatically toned-down references to immoral behavior, including sadism, pre-marital sex, homosexuality, and incest. Not just for the creators of the film but also for Reagan’s evangelical supporters these were behaviors to be eliminated from American life. Just as the Hays Code of 1934 removed these horrors from the movies Ronald Reagan carefully left his divorce out of his image and embodied the glossy persona of a wholesome
American running for office. His evangelical supporters hoped he would turn the sinful wasteland this endangered country was slipping closer towards into the picturesque life often captured in Hollywood’s classic films.

Evangelicals had begun to craft an image for America; they did not want Americans to have the option of choosing immorality and propel their beloved country in a sinful direction. For many evangelicals the ideal America can be understood as depicted on a pamphlet issued by the Reverend Jerry Falwell. Believing America to be a country founded on Judeo-Christian principles, Falwell created a list of seven principles which made America great: the dignity of human life, the traditional monogamous family, common decency, the work ethic, the Abrahamic covenant, the divinely ordained establishments of the family, state or civil government, and the religious institution.

Instead of living in what they feared was becoming the decadent world depicted in R-rated movies, evangelicals yearned for an America free of violence, foul language, sexual impurity, drug abuse, and other markers of sin. Through their votes they wanted to transform this foul world into one that would appeal to general audiences. In the election of 1980 evangelicals were looking for a candidate who not only had a glittering personal image but combined these principles and in accordance with them produced a glorious image of America.

Not only a clean personal image but a positive image of America was on the evangelical agenda, and Jimmy Carter’s vision did not fit the bill in 1980. In the 1976 election Carter was a fresh face and his criticism of America struck a chord with the negative outlook of post-Watergate America. Instead of praising America’s glorious history Carter’s image complicated history and called out for help. Carter paired
America not with a great tradition but with a flawed past. “We have made mistakes and we have paid for them…In recent years our nation has seen a failure of leadership. We have been hurt, and we have been disillusioned…We feel that moral decay has weakened our country.” Carter entered the presidency at a time when morale was low. It would have been hard for a presidential candidate to speak glowingly about everything America had done in the early 1970’s. Yet this complicated vision of a good yet struggling country did not cease once he entered his presidency but continued throughout its entirety. In 1980 evangelicals yearned for a Rockwellian portrait of American life but Carter did not give this to them. In his farewell speech, the President painted a picture of a country with many problems, including special interest groups, private interests, environmental problems, resource allocation, and human rights issues.23

In contrast with Jimmy Carter, Ronald Reagan linked his American image with a glorious past and spoke of an America in which the majority wanted to live moral lives. In his speech to the Annual Convention of the National Association of Evangelicals Reagan articulated that “there's a great spiritual awakening in America, a renewal of the traditional values that have been the bedrock of America's goodness and greatness.”24 Reagan spoke of an America that was part of a grand tradition of goodness. America’s people today can still live in a pure world free from the vices deplored by evangelicals. America was a nation of cowboys ready to stamp out intruding problems, which were foreign in origin and certainly not part of the original American framework. Reagan stated that:

One recent survey by a Washington-based research council concluded that Americans were far more religious than the people of other nations; 95 percent of those surveyed expressed a belief in God and a huge majority believed the Ten Commandments had real meaning in their lives. And another study has found that
an overwhelming majority of Americans disapprove of adultery, teenage sex, pornography, abortion, and hard drugs. And this same study showed a deep reverence for the importance of family ties and religious belief. This picture of America as a godly kingdom could have come straight from a Moral

Majority pamphlet. Instead of complicating the picture and introducing situation ethics, Reagan’s America was full of a good Christian people living solid lives and disapproving of those who did not do the same. While Carter painted Americans as essentially good guys in the midst of a dynamic world, Reagan filled in the details and characterized them as the protagonists in a war against the evils of the world.

Using the major tenets of Evangelicalism Jimmy Carter clearly beat Ronald Reagan, but this was not enough to win the election of 1980. Jimmy Carter’s negative imagery of American political life coined with an exemplary private life was appropriate in 1976 when Americans were all disillusioned with the American political scene and wanted a pure man to arise from the recently dirtied political scene. In 1980 winning a litmus test based on private faith was not enough to secure the vote of the burgeoning segment of evangelical voters. As evangelicals fervently entered the political arena they were looking not for an individual of piety and personal faith in the midst of a troubled world but of gloss and strength ready to battle the demons of society; and a peaceful peanut farmer was trumped by a heroic cowboy. Carter’s murky view of America clouded his image as an evangelical struggling with the temptations of the world. Reagan emerged from the election a glorious king ready to prepare eager evangelicals for a crusade against the evils of the world, thus beginning a new era in which evangelicals prepared themselves to fight the evils threatening the dignity and traditions of their beloved nation.
22 Falwell, Jerry. America’s Six Deadly Sins. Lynchburg, VA: Old-Time Gospel Hour Press, date unknown, p. 3.