

THE PETER TOMASSI ESSAY

## TURNING APOLITICAL TO STAY POLITICAL BILLY GRAHAM, EVANGELICAL RELIGION, AND THE VIETNAM WAR

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## ABSTRACT

This essay explores the intersection between Evangelicalism and foreign policy in the context of the Vietnam War. As a handle into the topic, it focuses on examining how Billy Graham, a prominent religious actor, negotiated the public sphere and private halls of power in order to influence politics, and specifically the American foreign policy decision to intervene in Vietnam. More than just a religious figure, Graham was a political actor who was able to adapt to a changing political climate by shrewdly turning to an apolitical message in the public sphere in order to sustain his political role in the private sphere. Within the White House, Graham practiced a unique and masterfully subtle style of ‘friendship politics.’ He cultivated a level of intimacy with President Johnson and Nixon unmatched by any other religious leader at that time and often leveraged this connection to influence foreign policy. By examining the political maneuvers of a man at the forefront of Evangelical Christianity, this paper aims to shed light on how a religious group sought to find, and found, its way into the White House, a platform that was used to nudge diplomatic decisions towards the Calvary.

Once described as “the closest thing to a White House Chaplain,” prominent American Evangelical Preacher William F. (Billy) Graham shared personal connections with every American president from Harry Truman to Barack Obama. Relations between Preacher and president were particularly warm over the course of the Vietnam War during the Johnson and Nixon era, as suggested by frequent letters of correspondence, telephone conversations, and overnight White House visits. These exchanges often detailed Graham’s advice and personal support for the president as well as his policy decisions.

On July 11, 1964, Graham wrote a private letter to President Lyndon B. Johnson in which he voiced his support for U.S. escalation of the war against communism in Vietnam by painting the president as a Christ-like figure who was to save Christendom:

“My dear Mr President,

... I do not know whether you have seen some of the newspaper articles where I have been quoted

as supporting you and telling the people what a dedicated man you are. You are now getting some unjust criticism, but remember that the most criticized men in American history were those whose names shine brightest in history... also remember they crucified Christ within three years after He began his public ministry. It is what God thinks about our actions and what history will say a 100 years from now that counts...the Communists are moving fast toward their goal of world revolution. Perhaps God brought you to the stop the Kingdom for such an hour as this – to stop them. In doing so, you could be the man that helped saved Christian civilization.”<sup>1</sup>

Yet, only four days earlier, when Graham was asked in public to comment on the morality of the Vietnam War at a press conference in Ohio, he portrayed himself as firmly apolitical:

What do I think of Viet Nam I think I am as confused as most of the rest of us are but in studying these things we must realize that very few of us really know all the facts...And I think it

is very easy for some of us on the outside to give simple answers to complex problems, and it's not quite as easy.<sup>2</sup>

Why did Graham maintain an apolitical front in public while playing a political role in encouraging the war in Vietnam in his private interaction with the president? Moreover, such a neutral public stance on Vietnam in the 1960s lay in stark contrast to his openly anti-communist, pro-intervention message during the Korean War in the 1950s. Graham had then publicly labeled the communists as “disciples of Lucifer [that have] slaughtered millions of innocent persons” and argued that American military strength was necessary for world peace.<sup>3</sup> What caused this shift from political to apolitical in the public sphere?

This paper examines how Graham, a religious actor, negotiated the public and private halls of power in order to influence politics, and specifically, the American foreign policy decision to intervene in Vietnam. More than just a religious figure, Graham was a political actor who shrewdly turned to an apolitical message in public in order to sustain his political role in the private realm. The 1950s was characterized by an atmosphere of public religiosity, which allowed Graham, a rising Evangelical figure, to speak openly on political issues with little criticism. Moreover, this decade also mapped onto strident McCarthyism, providing a larger rhetorical space for Graham's overheated political message. In contrast, the 1960s saw America's post-war religious fervor become more subdued, and loud McCarthyite anti-communism similarly quieted down. The zeitgeist of the sixties was marked by increased secularization and war weariness. On the issue of U.S. intervention overseas, a single anti-communist, pro-war stance no longer dominated public opinion. In its place was a range of divisive and divergent opinions. This change in societal climate saw Graham moving along with the times, as he simultaneously shifted from vocal anti-communism to a public neutral stance that maintained a focus on converting individuals to Christianity. In keeping above the fray, the Preacher (Graham) avoided being perceived as violating the separation of church and state whilst sustaining his popularity and authority among an increasingly cynical American public. Navigating his public and private platforms of power, the Preacher consciously retreated from openly airing his support for war so that he might privately encourage the presidents

towards intervention, an action he believed to be more efficacious.

How Graham negotiated his political role illuminates a moment in time when a religious group attempted to assert itself on diplomatic decisions. Though the subject of this study may be Billy Graham, he is not to be seen as merely an individual actor, but rather a conduit by which organized Evangelicalism courted political influence. He is representative of the movement for three main reasons. First, Graham's pro-war stance was not an independent view, but one rooted in biblical theology advocated by the greater Evangelical community. Second, Graham was not working alone, but had the backing and support of the Billy Graham Evangelistic Association (BGEA), formed in 1950 to support the evangelist's crusade planning. Third, Billy Graham was considered a prominent leader of Evangelicalism in America, if not the face of the movement. A New York Times article once proposed, “If Evangelicals wanted to know where the movement was at any moment, the only sure guide was to look to where Graham is.”<sup>4</sup> Hence, to gain an insight into how Evangelicals attempted to shape foreign policy in Vietnam, it seems an appropriate choice to examine Graham and his political strategies.

Conventional accounts of US diplomatic history focus mainly on realist assumptions and offer balance-of-power, geo-strategic and economic explanations for intervention overseas. However, there has been a recent pushback in scholarship suggesting that such traditional interpretations cannot fully account for why America went to war. The presumed separation between church and state has led many scholars to dismiss that religion has a role to play in U.S. politics, let alone geopolitics. However, this essay proposes that its role in shaping statecraft is one that is worth exploring. Specifically, by examining the political maneuvers of a man at the forefront of Evangelical Christianity, this paper aims to shed light on how a religious group found its way into the White House.

Current scholarship on Billy Graham is largely journalistic or biographical in nature, focusing on his impact on the Evangelical movement and social ethics, but is less interested in his relationship to political power.<sup>5</sup> Scholars during the Nixon era treat Graham as a spokesman for the ‘silent majority’ and an advocate for civil religion. A recent work by Steven

Miller examines Graham's presumed constituency in the South and argues that southern politicians and people alike had looked to him for regional leadership on matters of desegregation and civil rights.<sup>6</sup> Yet, Graham's influence on policy seemed to have extended beyond national boundaries. More than just a phenomenon situated within the context of Cold War religiosity or the origins of American Evangelicalism, Graham was a shrewd political actor who moved with the times.

This essay is organized around three broad strokes of argument: political context, political style, and political complexity. The first section situates Graham in the historical and political context of a larger Evangelical movement. The second section focuses on Graham's political style, examining the shifting public and private dimensions of the Preacher's political and moral interventions. The final section of the essay aims to give nuance to the argument by highlighting the broader tensions and complexities of the nexus of religion and political power as they emerge in this case.

### NEO-EVANGELICALISM: THE FIGHT TO RETURN TO THE FRONTLINES

Following the end of the Second World War, America witnessed an upsurge in public religiosity. This was the fruit of a concerted and organized campaign by the Evangelical Movement, a religious group that had long desired to reclaim its place of prominence and to influence national policy in a country which they deemed to be God's chosen nation. Leading this Evangelical fight to return to the frontlines of society was Billy Graham, a talented Preacher whose charming personality allured both people and politicians alike.

Working for the Youth for Christ, Graham, then just a thirty-one-year-old rookie evangelist, was scheduled to lead the 'Christ for Greater Los Angeles' Campaign in September 1949. Yet, it was this particular event that catapulted the captivating Preacher into overnight national prominence. Applying biblical prophecy to the contemporary world, Graham cried with a trumpet loud voice:

Western culture and its fruits had its foundation in the word of God...Communism, on the other hand, has decided against God, against Christ, against the Bible, and against all religion... Communism is a religion that is inspired,

directed and motivated by the Devil himself who has declared war against Almighty God... The Fifth columnists, called Communists, are more rampant in Los Angeles than any other city in America...In this moment I can see the judgment hand of God over Los Angeles, I can see judgment about to fall.<sup>7</sup>

Because of the reported conversion of several famous Hollywood personalities, the campaign caught the attention of national and even international media.<sup>8</sup> An advertisement in the Los Angeles Daily News on October 26, 1949 printed a picture of a young Preacher charismatically stabbing his finger at the sky with Bible in hand and proclaimed 5,000 conversions after "Billy Graham's 5th Sin-Smashing Week."

Following the end of the World War, Neo-Evangelical hope for an American religious revival seemed indeed to be well on its way—national religious membership surpassed 50 percent of the total population by 1945. Quickly noting the striking convergence between the national public mood and Evangelical concerns and aspirations, the Neo-Evangelicals seized the opportunity to reinsert themselves into public life. In the uncertain age of atheistic communist conquest and threats of a nuclear holocaust, the Neo-Evangelicals assured the American people that they could find their security and hope in their Evangelical heritage. 'Spiritual Armageddon [was] Here' and America's weapon was 'the saving Star of Bethlehem.'<sup>9</sup>

Fully aware that the socio-political trend was in their favor, the Neo-Evangelicals then mounted a massive, vibrantly innovative, and creative campaign to regain public presence and bring renewal to America. Most striking of all their efforts were the citywide revival meetings, reminiscent of the tent meetings of the First Great Awakening. On Memorial Day of 1945, Youth for Christ, a rising para-church group, organized a Chicagoland Gospel Rally at the Soldier Field Stadium, which attracted nearly 70,000 people. These rallies "dress[ed] revivalism in more fashionable attire," as Preachers copied popular entertainment styles, updated gospel music, and produced slick advertisements.<sup>10</sup>

This brings us back to September 1949 at the Youth for Christ Los Angeles Gospel Rally. This revival meeting that skyrocketed Billy Graham to national fame was not a sudden anomaly but rather

a product of a momentum kick started by the Neo-Evangelicals in the early 1940s. Billy Graham had come to matter in American public life and, by implication, so did the Evangelicals. Yet, this was only a foretaste of what was to come.

### THE POLITICAL THEOLOGY OF THE PRO-WAR EVANGELICAL MOVEMENT

Monica Toft, Daniel Philpott, and Timothy Shah propose the concept of a “Political Theology,” defined as “the set of ideas that a religious community holds about political authority and justice.”<sup>11</sup> These ideas are formulated based on religious texts and traditions, and represent how a religion’s theological beliefs and statutes are translated into political ideals and agendas.<sup>12</sup> They contend that a religion’s political theology in some part influences a religious actor’s political activity and determines how he interacts with the state.<sup>13</sup>

The Evangelical movement’s doctrinal views on war led them to believe that war was natural, given that it was in man’s inherent evil human nature to fight and war with one another.<sup>14</sup> True peace could not come until the second coming of Christ.<sup>15</sup> Regarding the Vietnam War, Evangelicals saw U.S. intervention as a necessary struggle during the Cold War between the godly and the godless, given communist antagonism towards God and religion. In a magazine editorial, the National Association of Evangelicals declared communists as “the enemies of the American way of life.”<sup>16</sup> Quoting the Apostle Paul’s call to “stand fast in the freedoms wherewith Christ has made us free,” *Decision Magazine*, a household Evangelical periodical, ran an article that claimed that Christians should support the war because communism threatened the freedom of both South Vietnam and America. In their eyes, once the Vietcong won over Vietnam, at least a million South Vietnamese would immediately be executed because of their faith.<sup>17</sup>

Evangelicals also supported the war in Vietnam because of the fresh ground for missions to both the U.S. military and locals. The military draft and build up in the Vietnam War allowed for Evangelism to reach recruit thousands whose experience in the battlefield deepened their need and desire for God.<sup>18</sup> Additionally, the war in Vietnam also enhanced the opportunity for missionaries to reach the locals. The Asia-South Pacific Evangelism Congress in Singapore

in November 1968 boldly announced the “Christ Seeks Asia” mission.<sup>19</sup> In line with this vision, the war in Vietnam presented missionaries with hope for entry into a country that had previously been closed off to the gospel.

Toft et al. argue that this very political theology shapes and influences the political pursuits and inclinations of a religious actor.<sup>20</sup> Hence, through examining the actions and message of Billy Graham, the religious actor of the Evangelical movement, I will demonstrate how political theology may be directly translated into concrete political activity.

### FROM POLITICAL TO APOLITICAL

In an interview on June 29, 1979, George Champion, retired Chairman of the Board of Directors at the Chase Manhattan Bank and key patron of the 1969 New York Crusade, was asked whether Graham had “changed in twenty-two years, as far as his message concerned... [and had] he addressed social ills more or less than he did when he was here in 1957?” To this, Champion firmly answered, “He hasn’t changed that I can see... He’s preaching the Bible, and he’s referring to the Bible all the time.”<sup>21</sup> Despite Champion’s claim, a closer examination comparing Graham’s public message in the 1950s to that of the 1960s reveals quite a different story. Specifically, the fifties saw Graham openly preaching a fiery, fist-shaking clarion-call to arms against communism, while in the sixties he carried a mellower message focusing on Jesus and the Gospel and little else.

The headlines of a New York Times article on January 3, 1951 boldly read, “Graham says City is No. 1 Target.” The thirty-two year old evangelist had warned a gathering of 700 clergymen that New York City “stood on the brink of catastrophe” as a prime target for communist destruction.<sup>22</sup> Like other Evangelicals, Graham firmly believed and openly preached that communism was the brainchild of the Devil, and a godless ideology that clearly opposed the doctrines of Christianity.<sup>23</sup> In his eyes, the Soviet Union desired international conquest, and he feared that communism would take over the United States and the world either by open aggression or a fifth column within American society.<sup>24</sup> Not only did he preach against communism, he also urged an open battle against it during his Crusades. In September 1957, to an audience of over 100,000 men



gathered at Broadway in New York, Graham called America to arms as he loudly proclaimed, "Let us tell the world tonight that we desperately want peace but not peace at any price...let us tell the world tonight that [America is] morally and spiritually strong, as well as militar[ily] and economically."<sup>25</sup> Following his visit to the troops in Korea in 1952, Billy Graham published and circulated a war diary titled *I Saw your Sons at War* in which he recorded his personal impressions of the war during his travels. The diary concluded with Graham's remarks and recommendations on political situation of the country. Affirming President Syngman Rhee, he argued that although, in principle, the war should be fought by locals, in reality, the South Koreans could not hold out against the communist North on their own until their armies were properly trained and supplied. Hence, he urged the United States against an immediate withdrawal from Korea.<sup>26</sup>

Moreover, Graham's audience was not just the congregation at his crusades, but also the politicians in power as well. Upon hearing news reports of North Korea's invasion of South Korea in June 1950, Graham wrote a private telegram to President Harry Truman saying,

Millions of Christians praying God give you wisdom in this crisis. Strongly urge showdown with communism now. More Christians in Southern Korea per capita than any part of the world. We cannot let them down.<sup>27</sup>

Importantly, his private and public anti-communist messages were one and the same throughout the 1950s. Graham was unafraid to openly urge the Oval Office to take up arms and defend the freedom of United States against communism. For example, in April 1950, against the backdrop that the USSR was growing a nuclear arsenal, the Preacher publicly called on the president to announce a day of national repentance.<sup>28</sup> Similarly, following his emergence at the White House lobby after a meeting with Eisenhower in 1956, Graham was quoted by the *New York Times* saying, "Militant Christianity is the philosophical bulwark the free world needs to add to its economic superiority in the "Cold War" with international Communism."<sup>29</sup>

Having heard Graham's fiery message encouraging and urging war against communist domination, one would be extremely surprised to

witness the same man later say, "I'm sure God is not limited to one particular government, and that's the reason I do not carry on a major Crusade against any particular ideology."<sup>30</sup> This was during a press conference in response to a question which asked him whether the Christian Church had "written the [communist] world off."<sup>31</sup> Yet, by the 1960s Graham's public message had experienced a noticeable shift in both content and tone, changing from politically charged to gently apolitical. When asked to give the Christian perspective on the morality or justice of the Vietnam War, Graham appeared ambivalent, stating, "I don't intend to answer political questions...I have not made any statement on Vietnam [because] I don't know the answer."<sup>32</sup> When further pressed on the church's moral obligation to provide an answer, Graham maintained that the church should not impose their authority on the state:

I remember Mr Dulles one time used to go to church and he said, "Here I am the Secretary of State with all the facts. I go to church and am hungry for a sermon on the gospel, hungry to hear something about the Bible. And all I get is a lecture on what I ought to be doing in foreign affairs by a man who is not competent to talk on foreign affairs."<sup>33</sup>

Such a response was vastly different from the Preacher's earlier public recommendations to the public and the White House on matters of diplomacy. In his war diary on Korea, Graham had clearly implied that the Americans should continue to fight the war because it was a matter of achieving "moral justice" and not just peace.<sup>34</sup> In stark contrast, Graham now publicly denied getting involved in the politics of the Vietnam War. He was apparently asked to join in on a Senate-initiated foreign relations committee to discuss his views on foreign policy, but the evangelist told of how he denied the invitation because he felt that he lacked the proper skills.<sup>35</sup>

Instead, the evangelist repeatedly emphasized that his main message was apolitical and centered on faith and the gospel. In an interview with Edward Fiske of the *New York Times*, he told the journalist that he symbolized "faith that works" and nothing more. He even went to the extent of denying his widespread popularity or leadership of the Evangelical world. Instead, he saw himself as "an individual...and a private citizen."<sup>36</sup> With this, he painted an image of himself as a humble evangelist

who dutifully sought to preach the gospel rather than get involved in politics or lead political lobbies. Each time he was asked to comment on the war, Graham would squarely maintain that his chief objective was to convert people to Christianity.<sup>37</sup>

### TURNING APOLITICAL TO STAY POLITICAL

Billy Graham's motivations behind his apparent change in exterior posture from political in the 1950s to apolitical a decade later seem somewhat unclear. One might suggest that perhaps Graham's personal convictions on the threat of communism had changed over the course of time. Yet, private correspondence in the later period between him, the BGEA staff and American politicians confirm a resolutely anti-communist stand. In 1964, the Preacher warned President Johnson in a private letter of the perils of a global communist revolution. Much of this private rhetoric still recalled that of Graham's public diatribes in the 1950s. Since it is clear that the Preacher's private views on communism did not change over time, the apparent transformation in content and tone of his public message suggests that it was likely a more calculated move on his part. As the religious revival of the fifties faded away and *Time Magazine* proclaimed that 'God [was] dead,'<sup>38</sup> it was unlikely that an Evangelical, even of Graham's stature, could speak openly on political issues with authority without criticism. Hence, the Preacher rode the ebb and flow of American religious fervor, astutely turning to an apolitical message in the public in order to maintain his mass popularity and hence, sustain his political role in the private realm. In other words, Billy Graham turned apolitical in order to stay political.

In the 1950s, a pervading sense of public religiosity continued to dominate and grow in society. Darren Dochuk argues that religion was the "third pillar of cold war culture," and life in this decade revolved around "public displays of devotion."<sup>39</sup> Church membership rose from 49 percent in 1940 to 69 percent in 1960, and in one year alone, the Revised Standard Version of the Bible, published first in 1952, sold more than 26.5 million copies. Hollywood saw the production of Christian 'epic' stories like *The Ten Commandments*, *Solomon and Sheba*, and *Ben Hur*. Similarly, music charts saw the likes of Christian-themed singles find their way to the top ten. Religion not only permeated pop

culture, but also the politics of the day.<sup>40</sup> Under a law in 1952, the president inaugurated a National Day of Prayer. In 1956, Congress established "In God We Trust" as the official national motto. Andrew Preston argues that "as politics reflected religion, so too did diplomacy."<sup>41</sup> The country's visible faith was seen as an antidote to the atheistic and godless evil of communism. Fletcher Bowron, the Mayor of Los Angeles in 1950, openly endorsed Christianity with a press release declaring that "the world face[d] a choice between God and atheistic communism" and therefore "never has the preaching of Christianity been so urgent and the acceptance of the Christian way of life so essential to [America's] survival as free people in a free world."<sup>42</sup> Similarly, Graham's early sermons were ingrained with the Cold War mentality as he tapped into people's fear of communism and provided the Christian solution: a need to be a God-fearing nation. Because of the widely accepted notion that America was 'God's country,' the evangelist was able to openly speak on political issues with authority and little criticism.

Furthermore, the atmosphere of public religiosity in the 1950s allowed, and even encouraged, an open relationship between a famous Evangelical figure such as Graham and politicians in power. Front-page editorials and headlines faithfully reported the "private" meetings between the president and Preacher. On 21 March 1956, a special report in the *New York Times* read, "The Reverend Billy Graham talked religion and world politics with President Eisenhower for 50 minutes today."<sup>43</sup> Graham and Eisenhower were open with their personal relationship and news reports were happy to disclose that they were 'old friends [that saw] each other quite frequently.'<sup>44</sup> Each time Graham visited Eisenhower's farm, shared a meal with him, or preached a sermon at the White House, journalists were eager to cover the meeting.<sup>45</sup> More than just friends with a Preacher, Eisenhower fashioned himself as a religious man and overtly declared that belief in a supreme being was necessary to the American way of life.<sup>46</sup> Overall, Graham was able to openly support White House foreign policy since the rhetoric of the politicians was very much in sync with the Evangelical anti-communist message. Because of the public religiosity of the fifties, this received neither open criticism nor calls for the separation between church and state. Instead, president and

Preacher formed a tight-knit bond as they together led the “chosen nation of God” together.

Yet, by the 1960s, the pervasive sense of religious fervor in America had begun to die down and had given way to a period of division and confusion amidst the rapid secularization of society. Michael Kazin and Maurice Isserman, two leading historians of the decade, claimed “nothing changed so profoundly in the United States during the 1960s as American religion.”<sup>47</sup> They then addressed the trend of growing atheism in the country during that time. The religious confusion of the era is evident from how even Protestants began to subscribe to secular ideas about death and the meaning of life. In 1961, Christian theologian Gabriel Vahanian published “The Death of God,” in which he argued that the modern world and the scientific view of reality had superseded the need for a supernatural God.<sup>48</sup>

The change in societal climate from the fifties to the sixties was reflected not only in the realm of religious fervor but also in the political mood of the day. The early fifties had mapped onto a strident anti-communist message, beginning when Republican Senator Joseph McCarthy delivered a speech in which he claimed to have a list of names of 205 communists working in the U.S. State Department. The media took this up, and McCarthy effectively galvanized the nation in a four-year campaign to rid the federal government and American institutions of its communist spies.<sup>49</sup> McCarthyism provided Graham with an even larger rhetorical political space for his overheated message against communism. Yet, by the late fifties, similar to the subduing of religious fervor, loud McCarthyite anti-communism had also simmered down.

Likewise, on the issue of U.S. intervention in Vietnam, a single anti-communist, pro-war stance no longer dominated public opinion as in the fifties. In its place were divisive and divergent opinions. Particularly, as the conflict in Vietnam escalated during the mid-sixties, the anti-war movement also started to grow. The American public that had once supported American intervention in WWII, and Korea now found the war in Vietnam morally reprehensible; given absence of a direct threat to American security, it felt that the bombing and devastation of Vietnam was unjustifiable.<sup>50</sup> Because of the failure of expansion of the war to produce

any tangible results, in addition to higher taxes required to fund the war and the continual expansion of the military draft, the public grew increasingly disenchanted and frustrated with Vietnam. Polls taken in 1967 indicated that the majority of Americans felt it was a mistake to intervene in Vietnam.<sup>51</sup> Major metropolitan broadsheets shifted from support of the war to opposition, choosing to depict the war in unfavorable terms.<sup>52</sup> Mounting dissatisfaction at the war drew large groups to anti-war rallies as participants became more vocal and daring in their opposition. One of the most striking act of protest took place on October 21, 1967 when nearly 100,000 anti-war demonstrators gathered in Washington and another 35,000 raged at the Pentagon steps.<sup>53</sup> In 1968, an anti-war student demonstration at Columbia University resulted in 1,000 policemen wielding nightsticks to forcefully break up the mass sit-in.<sup>54</sup> As time passed and the war still did not end, the anti-war movement grew in rancor and violence. George Herring argues that “the bloodshed in the streets of night-stick city” indicated that the war in Vietnam was causing “a kind of civil war” in the United States.<sup>55</sup> The general public mood was tired, angry, frustrated, and confused.

It is in light of this change in societal climate that we must understand Graham’s shift in public posture. The Preacher often prided himself on being keenly attuned to the socio-political and cultural trends of the day. In a letter to President Truman, Graham boasted that he knew “something of the mood, thinking and trends in American thought.”<sup>56</sup> The Preacher was a man who not only knew the times, but was also one who moved along with it. Parallel to the change in political and religious atmosphere, Graham simultaneously shifted from vocal anti-communism to a neutral apolitical stance that maintained a focus on converting individuals to Jesus Christ. The Preacher was aware that the war-weary public would have little patience for yet another loud and clamorous partisan voice. Moreover, an increasingly secularized and cynical society would not have gone easy on a Preacher with a political message, and likely would have criticized him for violating the separation of church and state. In choosing to keep above the fray by avoiding an overtly political message, Graham sought to sustain his popularity among the American public.

Graham’s strategy of turning apolitical and

neutral on the war was wise, particularly when considered alongside the failure of vocal dove and hawk groups to gain mass appeal during this time. Herring argues that public opinion polls found that majority of Americans were disapproving of the anti-war movement, finding its “radical and hippie elements” extremely “obnoxious.”<sup>57</sup> On the other end of the spectrum, the strident pro-war movement was not doing well either. One of its leading voices was the Fundamentalist movement, the hardline older brother of the Neo-Evangelical movement. The group was extremely vocal in reviling and rebuking both America and its leaders for its weak fight against communism. Carl McIntire, one of the movement’s key leaders, was loud and quick to condemn the president for his foreign policy decisions:

You know who is dominating the world right now? The Russians...and the President of the United States is going around and around and around in circles on a secondary level...do you think for one minute that the President of the United States is going to do anything about Russia unloading additional tanks and carrying on all this wonderful, wonderful manifestation of peaceful coexistence with the United States? Do you think the President’s going to do anything about that? Of course not. Our hands are being tied by this miserable, abominable satanic philosophy of peacefully coexisting with evil and the works of the devil.<sup>58</sup>

With such an antagonistic message, it is unsurprising that both American president and public turned away from the Fundamentalists.

To grasp the significance of the failure of the hardliner Fundamentalist movement to the success Billy Graham and the Neo-Evangelicals, we must be reminded of the historical context surrounding the emergence of this new Evangelical coalition in the 1940s. Following the demise of the Fundamentalism out of the public eye of America, a new and young generation of evangelists was eager to re-engage with American mainstream culture in order to start a revival in society. These Neo-Evangelicals were firm in their belief of the need to engage America, and denounced the “negativism” of the old school Fundamentalists that served only to attack and derogate rather than build up.<sup>59</sup> Since the public religiosity of the fifties propelled both moderate and hardline movements, it was the “secular” sixties, the

decade in which the socio-political climate of the day had turned against both groups, which proved to be the true test on which camp would be right in its approach.

It was the Neo-Evangelical group that chose to engage and adapt that came out on top. Unlike their militant brother camp that was alienated by society and forced to withdraw back into the shadows, this new group of Evangelicals continued to remain a dominant force even amidst the secularization of society. They had learned from the mistakes of the 1920s in which overtly political talk in a climate of modernization had led to the ousting of the Fundamentalists into the sidelines of American society. Carpenter argues that ever since this alienation, the Evangelicals had yearned for “respect in the public eye” and a “sympathetic hearing.”<sup>60</sup> Now that the fifties had allowed them to win the attention from the media and the prominence in American life that they so craved, the neo-Evangelicals were hard-pressed to protect and guard this newfound stature.

It is likely Graham’s shift from political to apolitical could also be explained and informed in part by this historical context surrounding Neo-Evangelicalism and its split from militant Fundamentalism. Graham was a part of, and even a leader of, the new and more accommodating generation of Evangelicals, and he too saw the need to adapt and change to societal currents. Learning from past mistakes, Graham cleverly chose to steer clear of explicitly divisive political issues such as support for the Vietnam War, in order to continue to attract the masses to listen to him. Unlike the Fundamentalist movement that had lost much of its clout because of its overtly political message, Graham’s Neo-Evangelical movement continued to amass popular support. A simple and apolitical message focusing on “an Unchanging Gospel for a Changing World” promised and provided stability in the midst of rapid social change and confusion. For example, a Connecticut investment banker explained that he went to Graham’s crusades because he saw him as “comforting”:

He’s talking about a part of America that doesn’t exist anymore...but it’s a part of America that people want to relate to...it’s nice to get away from all the problems of the cities and the universities for an hour and listen to someone who sees everything in such simple terms. Instead of smoking pot, you go hear Billy



Graham.<sup>61</sup>

In a period when church membership was on the overall decline and Protestant Christianity was under attack by secularization, it is astounding that Graham's popularity remained so high. His one-week crusade in New York City in 1969 attracted approximately 234,000 attendants, an increase from a weekly average of 150,000 people during his four-month tour of New York in 1957. Judging by these numbers, Evangelicalism continued to steadily grow and maintain its place in society even if public religiosity continued to wane.

One might conclude that an evangelist such as Graham would naturally do anything within his means to attract crowds to the gospel message. However, this was not the only reason that Graham needed to sustain a significant following; his motivations for the shift were not only spiritual but also political. He needed mass support to keep up his influence in the Oval Office and remain relevant in the eyes of those in power. After all, it was his mass popularity that first gave him inside access into the White House in the 1950s. When President Eisenhower held a news conference on foreign and domestic issues in 1956, a journalist asked him why he chose to spend so much time with Graham. Eisenhower replied, "Because of the very great crowds that he attracts to listen to him, I am very much interested in Billy Graham's activities."<sup>62</sup>

Judging by the letters that Graham wrote to the White House, it is evident that the Preacher was well aware of the importance of mass popularity in getting the White House's attention. In fact, when he first began to court a relationship with Harry Truman, America's first postwar president, he often relied on his rising mass appeal to get access to him. In a letter to Truman in 1950, Graham carefully highlighted to the President that he spoke to "five to twenty thousand people a night in every section of America."<sup>63</sup> By the mid-1950s carrying onto the 1960s, Graham attracted the masses in ways unheard of in modern American religious history. As he travelled across the country, hundreds of thousands of Americans came out to his crusades.<sup>64</sup> Sources show that the Preacher continued to take the effort to notify the president of the success of his activities and public appearances in America and around the world. On June 30, 1967, he informed President Johnson,

"You will be interested to know that we are averaging over 100,000 people a night here in Britain."<sup>65</sup> Again on June 1, 1968, "I address the Southern Baptist Convention on Friday night...at Houston and am planning to fly to New York where I am to appear on several television shows."<sup>66</sup> Through these letters, Graham subtly highlighted to the presidents the influence that he continued to hold among the people and, therefore, reminded them of his relevance to the White House.

Graham likely made a conscious decision to shift the tone of his public message. For a man who clearly had strong views on communism and the war, and who possessed a large platform to voice these views, it must have taken much self-control to remain apolitical. Leon Jaworski, a prosecutor who was friend of both Johnson and Nixon, remarked that when it came to speaking on political issues, Graham "kept himself under tremendous...proper, adequate restraint."<sup>67</sup> The evangelist cautiously and watchfully nurtured and shaped his public image. In a letter written to *The Christian Weekly* in 1967 responding to criticisms that he had been meddling with national policy, Graham defended that he had been "extremely careful not to be drawn into...the problems of the Vietnam War."<sup>68</sup> Graham was also shrewdly aware of the distinction between the private and public. In a letter to President Johnson in 1964, he told him about how he wanted to "publicly answer Bishop Pike for his criticisms sweet little Lucy...but thought it might be better to let the matter die [though he] intend[ed] to write him a personal letter and send a copy to [Johnson]."<sup>69</sup> Such a note reveals one who was keenly aware of the presence and impact of his public platform, but consciously chose not to use it, and yet at the same time, he did not forget to privately affirm the president of his support for him and his daughter.

Overall, Graham was able to skillfully negotiate the public and private spheres of power because he was highly cognizant of where he could best assert himself politically. While the societal climate of the 1950s opened space for him to vocally speak on political and religious issues without criticism or censure, the changing zeitgeist of the 1960s meant that his personal political views would be less welcomed by the public. As such, he turned his attention to the private halls of power at the White House. Yet to remain relevant in the private necessitated first remaining relevant in public. As a

keen political actor who followed societal currents of the time, Graham consciously retreated from airing his political views in public to maintain his mass following and, by extension, his influence in the private halls of power. What remains to be answered is what exactly Graham did or said in private in order to impact the direction of foreign policy in Vietnam.

#### POLITICKING IN THE PRIVATE: FRIENDSHIP POLITICS IN THE WHITE HOUSE

Graham once acknowledged in a press conference, “Sometimes you can do much more behind the scenes than you can waving out a flag.”<sup>70</sup> The Preacher’s popular mass following may have first gained him access into the White House, but it was really his strategic cultivation of intimate friendships with the presidents that allowed him to maintain and elevate his influence in the White House. Leveraging these friendships, Graham was able to have direct political conversations with decision makers, and he used this platform to voice support for the war.

In an oral history interview, Arthur Krim, an aide to President Johnson, described Billy Graham as a “President Gatherer” who “moved with ease to Nixon and then Ford and then Carter.”<sup>71</sup> However, there is evidence to show that Graham had established a relationship with the White House even before Johnson, starting with President Dwight Eisenhower in the 1950s. Graham wrote letters at least once a month to the president expressing his admiration and offering prayer and support. In a letter dated December 31, 1957, Graham told Eisenhower that he was “the most remarkable man in history...[and] God’s man of the hour.”<sup>72</sup> In earlier letters, he also affirmed his “complete devotion and personal affection” to Eisenhower and told him that he had urged the 75,000 Americans present at his Crusade to bow their heads in prayer for the president.<sup>73</sup> John Bolten, a companion to Graham in his travels to Asia during this time, noted how Graham would often drop by the Oval Office to see the president and discuss his observations of these places.<sup>74</sup> The letters of correspondence between the Preacher and the White House confirm this—Graham would often request to see the president to update him on the conversations he had with various international heads of states during his travels. Upon returning from the Middle East in March 1956, Graham asked to meet Eisenhower

because he felt that he had “vital information” to share with him after his meeting with the heads of the Arab nations.<sup>75</sup> Along with his public diatribes against communism, Graham also attempted to privately urge Eisenhower to fight against the spread of communist ideology. In 1954, amidst news of potential French military defeat in Vietnam, Graham wrote a letter to the president warning him, “Indochina must be held at any cost.”<sup>76</sup> The Preacher then offered to make use of his influence on television and radio to “sell the American public” on the necessity of pushing back against communism in the Far East.<sup>77</sup>

After Eisenhower, Graham continued to foster what seemed to be even closer personal relationships with President Lyndon B. Johnson and Richard Nixon. With Eisenhower, a majority of the letters from the president were sent through his secretary or other White House aides. However, with Nixon and Johnson, words of affirmation and support were often directly exchanged between the presidents and the Preacher. Much of the public knew that Graham shared a close personal relationship with Nixon, one that began from the time Nixon ran for president against Kennedy in 1962. In his letters, Graham addressed the president by the informal nickname “Dick”. Records show that between 1962 and 1972, the two would touch base on a nearly weekly basis over calls or meet-ups. Sometimes the two would even correspond more than once a day via telephone.<sup>78</sup> In the telephone conversations between the two, there was a tone of ease and friendliness as their dialogues were often interrupted by chuckles and laughter at comments made.<sup>79</sup> For example, in a twenty-minute conversation on February 21, 1973, the two casually chatted on a diverse range of topics stretching from Graham’s only aunt dying of cancer to commenting that “it was so stupid” of the Israelis to shoot down a Libyan airplane, and to pointing out how embarrassing it was for Israeli President Golda Meir to visit the U.S. at that time. They also enjoyed a private joke about Graham’s letter to Senator Mark Hatfield chiding him on his behavior towards the president.<sup>80</sup> The clear camaraderie and comfort between the two men in their telephone exchanges is striking. The intimacy and rapport between them was also apparent from how Nixon broke down and cried on Graham’s shoulder after he gave the eulogy at his mother’s funeral.<sup>81</sup>

While less known to the public eye, Graham also seemed to have shared an intimate relationship with President Johnson. In a letter dated November 23, 1966, Graham wrote:

I hope you realize that my personal affection for you has nothing to do with you being President....I just happen to love you- because you are you. Whether you are President Johnson or just plain Lyndon Johnson, I have the warmest affection for you as a personal friend.<sup>82</sup>

The affection seemed mutual—the president often invited Graham to spend time with him at the White House as an overnight guest. In a telephone conversation, Johnson told Graham that he desired him to visit for dinner and affirmed that the Preacher's presence would make him feel "stronger" for the coming week.<sup>83</sup> The relationship was intimate to the point where Graham would be invited to Johnson's bedroom, where they would give each other massages.<sup>84</sup> George Champion, another close friend of both Johnson and Graham, shared how Graham was often asked by the president to come to the White House and "morning, noon, and night... he was there."<sup>85</sup> This is confirmed by the daily diaries of President Johnson, which reveal that Graham met or spoke with Johnson on a monthly and sometimes weekly basis. In addition to holding church services for the president, Graham would often meet with him over a meal, coffee, or sometimes even a movie at the mansion. Their wives, assistants, and even their children would often accompany the two. Records also show that Graham flew with Johnson to various events in his private presidential plane. On one occasion, President Johnson was recorded to have instructed his secretary to send flowers to Graham when he was ill and confined in the hospital.<sup>86</sup>

The frequency and closeness of the interactions between Preacher and presidents indicate that those in the Oval Office did not seek out the evangelist merely because of his influence among the masses, but potentially also because they shared personal relationships with him. Such friendships could not possibly be a result of simple coincidence, and there is evidence to suggest that Graham carefully nurtured and grew his relationship with the White House. This specific style of 'friendship politics' is first played out through Graham's continual offering of spiritual support and prayers

to the presidents. The language and rhetoric used in his letters to both Johnson and Nixon are strikingly similar. To Johnson, he would repeatedly tell him that his "thoughts and prayers are with [him] almost constantly" and that he would "ask God to give [him] strength, grace, courage and wisdom to carry the heaviest responsibility in the world."<sup>87</sup> In the same manner, Graham also told Nixon of how he had "a strange burden on [his] heart to pray for [him] almost constantly."<sup>88</sup> By offering his spiritual support to the presidents, Graham drew legitimacy from his status as a famous Preacher and wooed those in power by suggesting that their friendship with him would allow God to be on their side. For example, on the night before Johnson was due for a surgery, Graham went to the extent of telling the president that God had divinely woken him up in the middle of the night just to pray for his operation.<sup>89</sup> In the same manner, he would assure Nixon that he strongly believed that the Lord was supporting him in all of his endeavors.<sup>90</sup>

In addition to acting as a spiritual advisor, Graham actively pursued friendship with the presidents by offering them his political support. Regardless of their political affinity, Graham never failed to assure his allegiance, suggesting that the nature of his support transcended partisan lines. Following a scandal during the 1964 presidential election campaign, where Graham's daughter was reported to have expressed support for the Republican candidate Barry Goldwater, the Preacher was quick to assure Johnson that he had taken care of this by holding a press conference in which he explicitly rallied Americans to unite behind Johnson. He firmly added, "I want to do anything in this world to help you."<sup>91</sup> On a separate occasion in which a journalist took Graham's comments and implied that he was criticizing one of Johnson's decisions, the Preacher responded with a private letter to Johnson clarifying that this was taken out of context and maintained his support for the president.<sup>92</sup> Billy Graham's political support for President Nixon was even more evident and public. During both the 1962 and 1969 presidential elections, Graham openly announced that he would vote for Nixon. In private, he would also sycophantically express his support with words such as "you're the greatest President that we've ever had in the history of America" or "this has become Nixon country down through [South

Carolina].<sup>93</sup>

This essay argues that part of the reason why Graham zealously fostered friendships with those in power was so that he could use this platform to influence policy decisions and outcomes, a position that was useful in a time when his role as a preacher offered him less room for political leverage. The Preacher himself stated that while he would not use his sermons to address political affairs, he would take the opportunity to “privately” speak to the president if necessary.<sup>94</sup> It is noteworthy that Graham seemed to have shared a more intimate relationship with Johnson and Nixon compared to Eisenhower. With the latter, Graham shared that his interactions were “warm and friendly, but...mostly formal.”<sup>95</sup> As Graham turned from political to apolitical in public, his private politicking in the form of pursuing close friendships with the presidents also seemed to have intensified. In navigating between his public and private spheres of power, it is likely that Graham observed the turbulent, war-weary public atmosphere of the 1960s and deemed that the private sphere was now more efficacious for voicing his support for the war, and hence chose to focus his efforts there.

Hence, it is unsurprising that a study of Graham’s private correspondence with the president and his aides in the Oval Office reveal a preacher that is not only a spiritual mentor and personal friend, but also a political advisor. While sources show that Graham gave the presidents his opinion on issues of domestic and international relevance, this essay is mainly interested in his advice regarding issues of foreign policy, particularly with regard to the Vietnam War.

First, there is evidence to indicate that Graham met up with the president to discuss issues of foreign policy and the war in Vietnam. In a letter to Johnson, on November 1966, the Preacher requested a visit to the White House after he had returned from Vietnam to preach to the troops, in order to discuss his “thoughts and impressions” from the trip.<sup>96</sup> The president’s daily diary records that Graham did meet up with the President on January 18, 1967, precisely to address that topic. Similarly, a note in Nixon’s Daily Diary on August 10, 1971 records how the president and Reverend Graham attended a foreign policy briefing by Secretary of State Henry Kissinger, which was arranged by the Preacher. The guest list consisted mainly of

well known evangelical leaders and figures such as Bill Bright, the president of Campus Crusade; Pat Zondervan, owner of a successful religious publishing company; and the chairmen of Gordon College and Wheaton College, two established Evangelical universities.

In these discussions, Graham assured Johnson and Nixon that the criticisms regarding their decisions to intervene or act decisively in Vietnam were invalid. For example, in 1964, he told Johnson that the disapproval that he was getting from the press on Vietnam was “unjust” and reminded him that it was the most criticized men in history who would stand out the most.<sup>97</sup> Similarly, a conversation between Nixon and Graham in February 1973 showed the two of them criticizing Senator George McGovern, Senator Mark Hatfield, and Senator Harold Hughes for expressing desire for immediate U.S. withdrawal from North Vietnam regardless of circumstance. Graham then congratulated Nixon for signing the Paris Peace Accords of January 27, 1973, and praised his “determination and perseverance” in the negotiations and achieving peace in such a way that the communists did not have the upper hand. Furthermore, by telling the president that “in a very dark moment in December [he was] right”, Graham seemed to be affirming the U.S. decision to bomb Hanoi and Haiphong in December 1972, which Nixon made to show support for South Vietnam and force the North back into peace negotiations.<sup>98</sup>

Not only did Graham fend off criticisms regarding intervention in Vietnam, he also encouraged the presidents to fight the war by emphasizing the importance of their leadership, depicting them to be savior-like figures amidst the chaos. By labeling the communists in Vietnam as evil and expansionary, Graham encouraged President Johnson to see himself as “the man that helped saved Christian civilization.”<sup>99</sup> In the same vein, Graham purportedly told Nixon that amidst degeneration and chaos in the world, the American people would look to him for leadership.<sup>100</sup> After Nixon signed the Peace Treaty in January 1973, Graham assured the president that there was a “whole new respect for [him] on the campuses,” and he had a “groundswell of support” from the people who now saw that Nixon was right in bombing Vietnam in December.<sup>101</sup>

Furthermore, there is evidence that Graham even tried to offer specific advice on military strategy



to the White House. In the Nixon Presidential Library Archives, there is a document labeled “Vietnam Strategy” and signed “BG, January 3, 1969.” At the top right hand corner of the first page, there is a handwritten note which reads “File: Billy Graham, January 5, 1969,” confirming that the evangelist wrote the report. While it is unclear whether President Nixon actually carefully read or considered the document, it is apparent that the Graham did attempt to offer his input on how to act in the war. In this private transcript by Graham on the war, he emphasized the need to make use of the South Vietnamese in fighting the war against the Vietcong. By doing this, he asserted that the U.S. could strengthen the war effort since the South Vietnamese would be able to defeat the enemy with “either ethical or unethical methods...familiar to the Oriental” and hence free the United States of international criticism regarding the means by which the war [was] fought.<sup>102</sup> There is evidence to show that Nixon did consider this particular point in Graham’s proposed “Vietnam Strategy”. In a memorandum written to Kissinger on August 6, 1971, he wrote,

Billy Graham told me of the fine work that \_\_\_\_\_ was doing with some of the tribes in Laos, Cambodia and the northern part of South Vietnam. Run a check on him and give me a report as to how effective he is. Graham tells me that his missionary friends say that these tribes, of which our own Laotian irregulars are a part, are our main bulwark against Communist influence in that part of the world.<sup>103</sup>

Graham’s document also discouraged a U.S. withdrawal from Vietnam and urged against recognition of the communist Vietcong as a legitimate government. He also proposed “the calling of China’s bluff” and warned the Chinese privately that the U.S. would use nuclear weapons on them if they intervened in Vietnam. Overall, he urged the need for “a tough non-nonsense policy” noting that the prolonged war had already cost the United States its standing and prestige in Asia. He argued that a hardline policy would have a psychological impact on the communists and push them to the negotiating table.<sup>104</sup>

Finally, Graham also tried to fight the Vietnam War privately on the home front by working behind the scenes to influence Evangelical groups to support

the Vietnam War effort. He told President Nixon in a conversation, “Just as you have changed the political picture, we hope to change the religious picture.”<sup>105</sup> He informed Nixon of the formation of a pro-war Evangelical alternative to the World Council of Churches, a body of mainline Protestants groups that fervently opposed the Vietnam War. The Preacher condemned the Council for “say[ing] nothing against the Communists, ever” and even went so far as to comment that “their stuff seems to be written on that side of the world [in Moscow].”<sup>106</sup> Graham then informed the president of his plan to win over different Protestant groups to his side. In response, Nixon told Graham about how Jesuit priest John McLaughlin had also become a “convert to our side,” coming in as an “all-out peacenik” but then returned from a visit to Vietnam with a different perspective.<sup>107</sup>

Graham may have had an apolitical public image, but in private, he was actively pursuing a form of friendship politics, in which he leveraged upon relationships which he had built with those in power and used these connections to assert influence on U.S. foreign policy in Vietnam. The striking similarity in Graham’s interactions with both Johnson and Nixon suggest that Graham was an adept political actor who rose above partisan lines and was able to win the friendship of both a Democrat and a Republican. With both presidents, he formed a relationship, offered prayers and God’s favor, and promoted a tough stance in Vietnam.

Yet, Graham was not merely an individual dabbling in politics, but was a representative of a greater Evangelical movement that supported war against the communists. The Billy Graham Evangelistic Association (BGEA) was formed in 1950 with the purpose of organizing Graham’s outreach efforts, which had started to increase in capacity and audience over time. By the seventies, the BGEA grew into a megacomplex worth 40 million dollars. It came to consist of a myriad of ancillary agencies, ranging from a radio station, two in-house magazines, a film production company, and a publishing house. It received an average of 2.5 million letters per year and sent out an average of 100 million.<sup>108</sup> The BGEA also had its own public relations, financial operations, and press release office, which often assisted Graham with communication with the White House, scheduling the Preacher’s meeting times with the president.

Sources also reveal that various members and offices of the BGEA communicated with several politicians on matters concerning Vietnam. For example, Sherwood Wirt, the editor of the BGEA's *Decision Magazine* sent two congressmen and a senator copies of his correspondence with a Canadian subscriber regarding the morality of the Vietnam War. In the letters, the editor firmly defended the justice of the war in light of the evil of communism and rejected the subscriber's arguments for peace.<sup>109</sup> The purpose behind sending these politicians the letters could be to privately assure them that Graham and the Evangelical movement were supportive of the government's decision to intervene in Vietnam. All three politicians thanked Wirt for making the correspondence available for their consideration and affirmed that they shared identical views on the necessity of the war.<sup>110</sup>

Evangelicals also tried to use Graham as a channel for influence on the president. A group of ministers from Los Angeles, for example, sent Graham a song entitled "The Prayer of our Nation" and asked him to forward it to the president. They wrote, "Because you and he are close friends... perhaps you will feel led out of God... to directly contact Mr. Nixon concerning this matter."<sup>111</sup> Graham also wrote a letter to Nixon telling him that he had been inundated with letters, calls, and telegrams with ideas and feedback that they desired the Preacher to tell the president given their known relationship. The president apparently took this somewhat seriously and would often pass on these letters to his aides and counsels for their consideration.<sup>112</sup>

In particular, Evangelical missionaries in Vietnam used Graham as a channel by which they could share their opinions on the war with the president. This is evidenced from two separate missionary reports on Vietnam that Graham submitted to Henry Kissinger for his examination. In both cases, Graham paraphrased the missionary's reports instead of presenting them verbatim. This is likely because Nixon and Kissinger would have been less inclined to pay attention to the report had it been presented word for word. This indicates the importance of Graham as a bridge to the politicians in power, and Graham's ability to use his personal connections to gain Evangelicals access into the White House. In the first report, labeled

"Confidential Missionary Plan for Ending the Vietnam War" and dated April 15, 1969, Graham reported that the missionaries strongly discouraged forming a coalition government between North and South, for fear that the communists would eventually take control. Graham elevated the credibility of the report by portraying these missionaries as the hands and feet of the U.S. government in Vietnam, highlighting their ability to give a unique perspective on the situation and sentiment in South Vietnam because of their personal ties to the locals and their leaders. The report also gave tangible suggestions on how to "Vietnamize" the war. This included psychological warfare strategies such as propaganda television programs as well as specific military strategies such as affirming the use of guerilla warfare and overwhelming air power. They strongly pushed for an offensive in the North rather than containment in the South, and even went to the extent of suggesting that the U.S. could specifically afford to withdraw 100,000 troops by the end of the year.<sup>113</sup> Two years later, in 1971, Graham submitted another missionary report that evaluated the success of the Vietnamization strategy. The missionaries warned that an immediate U.S. withdrawal would be a 'disaster' because the South Vietnamese were not motivated or ready to fight for themselves. They also argued that the Montagnard tribal highlanders were essential for the success of the Vietnamization program. They concluded by affirming that they were prepared to assist the Executive Office in liaising with the locals to help the American war effort.<sup>114</sup> These missionaries were in part motivated by their fear of a communist takeover and in part motivated by their personal love for and commitment towards the locals. Upon reading the report, Kissinger thanked Graham for the "first hand knowledge... [which he] found quite useful."<sup>115</sup>

The apparent involvement of the missionaries, the BGEA and other church leaders demonstrate that Graham was not alone in trying to encourage the president to continue intervention in Vietnam against the communists. Instead, Graham often had the partnership and assistance of other Evangelical voices. The Preacher then leveraged upon his friendship with politicians in power to further the Evangelical pro-war agenda, and effectively served as a bridge between the movement and the White House.

## WITHIN BLURRED LINES: A NEGOTIATION OF PUBLIC AND PRIVATE PLATFORMS OF POWER

So far, this essay has demonstrated a noticeable distinction between Graham's apolitical image in the public and his political actions in the private. Yet, the line between these two spheres was not always as clearly separated or defined in reality. Graham's well-known relationship with presidents often made it difficult for him to maintain an apolitical public image. Moreover, his involvement in apparently political events, such as a Christmas visit to U.S. troops in Vietnam in 1966, as well as President Nixon's visit to Graham's evangelistic crusade in Knoxville, Tennessee, in 1970, naturally raised doubts on his supposed neutrality. In other words, Graham's political style often created tensions for his Evangelical mission. However, Graham never once succumbed to admitting a private political agenda, but instead, shrewdly navigated past criticisms by employing different strategies that would preserve his non-partisan public image.

First, Graham was careful to portray his relationship with the presidents as merely a friendship and nothing more. When questioned about his role in the Oval Office, he denied any influence or any desire to have influence in politics and claimed that he was not a regular at the White House. Even when he admitted to meeting with the presidents, he argued that the bond he shared with these men was "not political or intellectual [but] personal and spiritual."<sup>116</sup> On the few occasions that Graham acknowledged an advisory role in the White House, he would admit only to being a spiritual mentor. He openly stated in a television interview that the president's position of leadership was a solitary one and Graham was happy to provide him with all the prayers necessary.<sup>117</sup> However, while he acknowledged the spiritual dimensions of his relationship with the presidents, Graham's preferred public representation of his relationship with the president still remained that of friendship.

For critics unconvinced that Graham held a purely apolitical friendship with the White House, Graham would allow a slightly more satisfactory answer. He admitted that at times, he would discuss political issues with the presidents, but only as a friend and confidante, and as such, the content of these conversations should remain confidential.

Through this strategy of remaining silent, Graham was able to somewhat appease his detractors without stirring up any unnecessary controversy or negative publicity. In an open statement in 1973 defining his position on the Vietnam War, Graham stressed that "any discussion [he had] with a President [was] private."<sup>118</sup> In a separate interview, Graham made a similarly styled statement, "It is an unwritten law that when you visit a head of state, you do not reveal what you discussed."<sup>119</sup> In his autobiography, the Preacher claimed that when he discussed politics with Nixon, it was always in an informal and unofficial capacity. He admitted that Nixon saw him as a "trusted friend without a personal agenda" who could act as a "sounding board" for his ideas, and listened to his private thoughts without leaking them to the public.<sup>120</sup>

It is in concrete events that we are best able to witness the tensions that Graham faced in trying to maintain an apolitical public image while still making political maneuvers in the private. The line between public and private, apolitical and political became blurred in these events: Graham was asked by the president to participate in public events that could easily be construed as political in nature. Agreeing to get involved would potentially tarnish the apolitical public representation he had nurtured; on the other hand, rejecting the president's request might mean losing political influence in the private. Therefore, Graham was often made to negotiate between private demands and public implications. Most of the time, the Preacher weighed the former to be more important and thus had to find a way to maneuver past criticisms and maintain his appearance of neutrality.

In December 1966, Billy Graham took an eight-day public Christmas visit to Vietnam at the request of President Johnson. Here, we witness the Preacher's observed apolitical-political style played out in a particular event. When questioned by the media, Graham claimed that General William C. Westmoreland, commander of the U.S. forces in Vietnam, was the man who had invited him to speak in Vietnam.<sup>121</sup> The stated purpose of the trip was to preach the gospel to the military and the locals, as well as to encourage missionaries and chaplains in Vietnam. He clearly stated that he was "not going to get involved in politics" but only wanted to "preach a Christian message."<sup>122</sup> However, in

private, sources show that Graham's visit was in fact a political maneuver, requested by President Johnson himself. Following the Preacher's return, the BGEA created and circulated a television program titled "Billy Graham on Vietnam." The program discussed his trip to Saigon and aimed to shed light on the 'spiritual impact' of the war on the American troops and the Vietnamese. While its content and subject was seemingly apolitical in focus, the purpose of the program was clearly political. This is strongly indicated by how the BGEA sent a tape and transcript of the program to the White House as well as a letter that wrote,

It is our intention to place this program on as many television stations as possible. We feel it contains the type of information people should know and we are particularly delighted, concerning Dr Graham's remarks about the President.... If I can be of any help to...the President, concerning this tape, please do not hesitate to let me know at once. Also, I would appreciate hearing the reaction of the President after his viewing of this tape.<sup>123</sup>

However, because of the nature of the event, it was difficult for Graham to mask his private political agenda and sustain an apolitical front. Given the fierce public debate on the American home front regarding the justice of the Vietnam War, his publicized visit to Vietnam received a fair share of criticism and raised doubts on his neutrality. In January 1967, an editorial in *The Christian Century*, a liberal-leaning anti-war Christian magazine, condemned Graham for endorsing the war, condoning its violence, and "meddling with national policy...[through] leap[ing] with both feet into the political arena."<sup>124</sup> Another editorial criticized Graham for his "duplicity" and demanded that he "drop the image of holy transcendence."<sup>125</sup> Moreover, in deciding to visit Vietnam, Graham had to answer several reporters' eager questions regarding his opinion on the justice and morality of American intervention in Vietnam.

Yet, in negotiating the benefits of accepting the president's request (that is, maintaining his friendship and influence at the White House) and its potential cost on his public image, Graham was willing to risk the latter. After all, by firmly and squarely maintaining his neutrality instead of publicly revealing his pro-war stance, the Preacher

could still avert media spotlight and overly harsh criticisms. When asked to comment on the justice of the war, Graham deferred his remarks to the end of his Vietnam tour. When questioned again after his trip, he still declined an answer by saying that the situation was "very confusing and frustrating" and "outside [his] jurisdiction."<sup>126</sup> He proposed that he was neither a hawk nor a dove, but instead likened himself to an ambiguous biblical symbol of a lamb ready for sacrifice.<sup>127</sup>

Graham also carefully crafted his apolitical image by ensuring that none of his actual activities during the Vietnam visit could be construed or reported as remotely political by his critics. He did exactly what he said he would do – preach the gospel. Reports of Graham's visit showed him touring hospitals, missionaries, and churches, and singing Christmas carols with the American troops while telling the Christmas story. One newspaper report painted for readers a beautiful image of his Christmas Eve prayer meeting at the base camp of the U.S. 1st Calvary airmobile division in An Khe, where 10,000 candles were lit as searchlights were temporarily turned off.<sup>128</sup> Another report told the touching story of Graham holding the hand of a badly wounded soldier and praying over him as doctors treated the man's bleeding arm.<sup>129</sup>

Overall, his publicly apolitical strategy seemed to be effective in staving off criticism, particularly when compared to the explicit political overtures of Cardinal Francis Spellman, another influential figure invited by President Johnson to Vietnam. The Cardinal was outspoken in his support for the war, asserting that anything short of a complete victory for the United States was unacceptable.<sup>130</sup> In his Christmas sermon to the troops, he likened the U.S. forces to "soldiers of Jesus Christ" fighting "a war for civilization."<sup>131</sup> Critics immediately denounced Spellman; metropolitan dailies across the US carried reports of how 75 lay Catholics staged a protest in front of the Cardinal's residence in response to his pro-war statements. They also told of an Episcopal Bishop from California openly expressing outrage, and of several national and international Roman Catholic magazines condemning Spellman for going against the Pope.<sup>132</sup> In comparison, Graham came out of his visit to Vietnam relatively unscathed. Notably, most of Graham's criticisms were found in Christian magazine editorials, whereas stories



of Spellman's public denouncement were widely carried by the mainstream media. Not only does this demonstrate the effectiveness of Graham's "apolitical" public strategy, but it also reveals how the Preacher was able to successfully negotiate the demands and consequences of his actions in the private and public sphere.

Moreover, the episode in Vietnam also reveals that Graham did not always strictly act politically in the private sphere, and apolitically in the public sphere. The shrewdness of Graham's politically apolitical strategy lied in the ability for even an apolitical image to make a political impact. On first glance, Graham's television program appeared to be apolitical in focus. However, a deeper examination of its content reveals Graham's tacit support of U.S. intervention and confirms the program's hidden agenda of subtly manipulating its viewers to support the war.

First, rather than give a depressing report on war, Graham painted a positive and encouraging picture. Vietnam has often been known as the first "television war," given that the television allowed for daily exposure to violent and horrific images of the conflict, intensifying the atmosphere of war-weariness among the American public.<sup>133</sup> Perhaps Graham's television program was created to counter the negativity and turn around the anti-war public mood. Instead of focusing on gory images of death, bombing and maiming in the jungles, the Preacher chose to emphasize the "sheer beauty...and wealth of the country." He described the French city of Saigon as "lovely" and "beautiful."<sup>134</sup> Instead of reporting the alarming death rate of American troops, Graham paid tribute to the patriotism and motivation of the military men. He compared them to the soldiers in the Korean War and praised them for being more committed, better equipped and educated, and more motivated.<sup>135</sup>

Second, Graham implicitly suggested to viewers that U.S. intervention was advantageous to the Vietnamese people. He argued that Americans should be proud of the military men in Vietnam because they were not only sent to bring war but also peace to the nation. He described how these army personnel were "engaged in tremendous pacification" as they "[taught] these people how to work out their lives."<sup>136</sup> This sentiment corroborates with a later statement by Graham in a press conference in 1968

where he called the public to remember how "there [were] millions of little people in Asia that are scared to death that [the U.S. was] going to withdraw."<sup>137</sup> By highlighting the dependency of Asia on America, Graham tacitly gave his stamp of approval to the American intervention.

Finally, in order to subtly encourage Evangelical viewers to support the war, the program chose to highlight the fruitful conditions of Evangelical ministry in Vietnam, claiming that it was a "misunderstood dimension" of the war. The program opened with a story from a U.S. Marine Captain stationed in Denang, Vietnam testifying to how 200 men accepted Christ at the Christmas service that Graham had conducted. The Preacher then affirmed that the troops were extremely responsive to the gospel message, more so than any other audience he has had in the world. He also praised the military chaplains for conducting strong evangelistic follow-up classes and programs. Graham also highlighted how the war was opening doors for fruitful Evangelical missions to the Vietnamese people. He described his meetings with missionaries as well as local Vietnamese Christian pastors and even went to the extent of declaring that Vietnam was en route to becoming the religious leader of Southeast Asia.<sup>138</sup> It was likely that this seemingly apolitical message would result in a political impact, particularly on an Evangelical viewer. After all, an Evangelical would have probably been significantly moved by the conversion stories of army personnel and locals in Vietnam and as a result, subconsciously start to take on a more supportive stance on the war. On a separate occasion, a missionary requested *Decision Magazine* to run an article publicizing the Evangelicals' abundant ministry in Vietnam. While he argued that such a move should "in no way be political," he also acknowledged that "it could exert a very profound influence on the reading audience of the magazine and in turn help to counteract so much of what is being said in the press."<sup>139</sup> While this is admittedly a different incident, it does suggest that Graham, Reverend Haden, and the team at the BGEA were likely cognizant and encouraging of the political impact that "Billy Graham in Vietnam" would have on its Evangelical viewers.

Two years after a second visit to the Vietnam troops in 1968, Graham got involved in yet another apparently apolitical event, which he once again used

for political signaling. On May 28, 1970, Richard Nixon appeared at Billy Graham's evangelistic crusade at the University of Tennessee in Knoxville, and was given an opportunity to address the crowd. This marked the first time the BGEA had allowed a president to speak at a crusade. Similar to Graham's visit to Vietnam, the Preacher's political-apolitical style of politics is clearly manifested in this event. In the lead-up to the event, Graham assured the media that "there [would] not be anything political...in his visit."<sup>140</sup> Unsurprisingly similar to the Vietnam tour, the program at the crusade appeared non-partisan and non-political in both style and content. The program flowed as per normal: a time of worship and song, a choir performance, a sermon by Graham, and a final altar call to participants to accept Christ. The remarks made by Nixon were short in length and neutral in content, centering on praise for the Preacher and admiration for America's "dedicated" youth.<sup>141</sup>

While there is no concrete evidence to prove that it was the president who initiated his own appearance, understanding the context surrounding the event strongly indicates that it was a strategic political maneuver. Nearly one month prior to the Crusade, news of American invasion of Cambodia had led to violent protests all around the nation, particularly on college campuses. Demonstrations at Kent State University and Jackson State College saw a dramatic clash with the police, resulting in the shocking death of six students. In response to this news, hundreds of university students went on strike, and some campuses even had to be closed down to avert further violence.<sup>142</sup> Hence, Nixon's attendance at the Crusade could be read as an attempt to symbolically reclaim support for the president and the war among young people. As a *New York Times* article accurately put it, Nixon was anxious to "create a new image of communication with youth."<sup>143</sup> Rather than a naïve party, Graham seemed to be fully cognizant of and involved in the plan. He shared in an interview that he had invited Nixon to the crusade because he identified that "the problem [was] with the university students right now" and "this would give [Nixon] an opportunity [to be] the president of all people."<sup>144</sup>

However, as in his visit to Vietnam, the president's appearance at the Knoxville event was hard for Graham to defend as purely apolitical.

Moreover, in a time when antiwar opinion in the wake of the invasion of Cambodia was reaching new heights, Graham received more criticism for his apparent violation of separation between church and state. Even if the Preacher had claimed that Nixon's appearance was non-partisan in purpose, a politically charged university landscape naturally led to a political interpretation of the event. Nearly 320 protestors showed up at the event, angered by the war in Vietnam and frustrated at Nixon's appearance. At the start of the event, a small group of protestors marched into the stadium imitating a funeral procession, carrying a casket and holding signs and banners that read, "Thou shalt not kill" or "God giveth life and Nixon taketh away." Throughout the Crusade, they filled up pockets of silence with anti-war chants like "1,2,3,4 we don't want Nixon's fucking war."<sup>145</sup>

Never before had Graham had received such loud and vehement criticism, but rather than caving into admitting a political agenda, the Preacher once again attempted to fend off criticism by firmly maintaining his apolitical stance. In an interview with the *New York Times* a month after the crusade, he was quick to dismiss suggestions that the president had made use of the crusade for political purposes. Graham portrayed himself as the initiator and Nixon as following his lead. He insisted that he was the one who had requested Nixon's attendance and that in response, the president was initially uncertain about accepting the invitation because he was afraid that it would "look political."<sup>146</sup> In portraying Nixon's reply as hesitant and casual, Graham attempted to quell claims that the event was carefully planned with a political purpose.

Hence, the Knoxville event is another clear example of how Graham sometimes felt a pull of tension between meeting a private political demand and its potential cost on his public image. In negotiating costs and benefits, Graham made a gamble and allowed the president to speak at his crusade. Since the majority of the crusade audience already supported Nixon and the war effort, it was unlikely that the Preacher was motivated by a desire to rally support for Vietnam.<sup>147</sup> Instead, it is possible that the Preacher took the risk because he was keen on using the event to prove to Nixon that the Evangelical population was a solid coalition in his "great silent majority."<sup>148</sup> Desiring for greater

Evangelical policy influence, Graham had repeatedly tried to convince the president of the importance of Evangelicals as an electoral group. For example, he wrote a letter to Nixon telling him about an “emerging Evangelical strength in the country that [was] going to have a strong bearing on social and political matters” in the coming years.<sup>149</sup> Later on in 1972, Graham strongly recommended Nixon to include a “spiritual note” in his presidential acceptance speech because “many of [his] hard core supporters [had] a strong belief in God.”<sup>150</sup> The Knoxville Crusade itself seemed to prove Graham’s point. A majority of the audience had responded enthusiastically when the president first entered the stadium. The crowd voiced its disapproval of protestors’ cries of “Peace, peace” by retorting with shouts of “Commie, commie.” A student who was passing out anti-war literature shared how many crusade participants rejected him, and one even went so far as to tell him to “stick it up [his] ass.”<sup>151</sup> President Nixon also seemed to be aware that the crowd was in his favor, as revealed by the note he made in his speech on how he was “glad that there seem[ed] to be a rather solid majority on one side rather than the other side tonight,” and this majority “[did] not approve of violence.”<sup>152</sup>

So, we can see that, rather than a flat caricature of an individual who solely acted apolitical in the public and political in the private, we can see that Graham was a three-dimensional political actor who shrewdly and appropriately navigated the private and public space. Miller argued that Graham was an adept politician, one with “seeming authenticity” and one who was able to masterfully “avoid specifics about more controversial subjects.”<sup>153</sup> Both events highlighted how the Preacher was able to stave off a lot of censure by consistently maintaining his apolitical position even in the face of opposition. The episode in Vietnam particularly demonstrated the artfulness of Graham’s apolitical front, in that a seemingly apolitical program could be used to make a political impact and subtly garner support for the war. On the other hand, the event at Knoxville showed how Graham was sometimes willing to risk his apolitical image for the sake of a greater cause (in this case, convincing Nixon of an Evangelical silent majority). In fact, both cases highlight the natural tension that Graham felt in associating himself so closely with the president. To do so meant putting

himself at risk of considerable criticism for the perceived violation of church and state, and yet, in negotiating the costs and benefits of such a move, “the disadvantages were far outweighed by the opportunity.”<sup>154</sup> Moreover, as a Christianity Today article wrote, there were “ample biblical precedents” found in the stories of Esther, Joseph and Daniel that demonstrated that one could do the work of God through private relationships with those in government.<sup>155</sup> All in all, our examination of the complexities of real life political events that the Preacher had to navigate provides greater depth to our vision of Graham as a political actor.

### THE PRESIDENT AND THE PREACHER: A TWO-WAY RELATIONSHIP

A greater degree of nuance can be added when we consider things from the perspective of those in political power. While it is not this essay’s purpose to prove that the presidents actually heeded Graham’s advice on the Vietnam War, it should be noted that the relationship between the Preacher and the Oval Office was a two-way rather than one-sided one. Although there is evidence indicating that Johnson and Nixon had some level of genuine admiration and respect for the Preacher, sources also reveal how White House aides carefully strategized the president’s relationship with the Preacher and made use of this relationship to achieve the administrations’ own political purposes.

The dynamic relationship between preacher and president is demonstrated by how both Johnson and Nixon often took the initiative to write letters, make phone calls, and arrange meetings with Graham. Rather than only waiting for Graham to contact them, the presidents often made time to seek the Preacher’s assistance and advice on matters related to policy. In a telephone conversation with Graham on 16 January 1967, Johnson applauded him for his performance in his visit to Vietnam and then invited him to the White House to give impressions of his experience in Vietnam.<sup>156</sup> Two days later, the president’s daily diary records that the meeting between both men actually materialized, and Graham was said to have reported that the morale of American troops in Vietnam was very high.<sup>157</sup> Yet, another record in Johnson’s Daily Diary documents how on June 14, 1967, Graham was invited to a Cabinet meeting in which he witnessed a briefing

on the UN and Middle East Situation as well as the problem of refugees in the United States.<sup>158</sup> Under Nixon's office, the presidential daily diaries reveal that the president would sometimes contact the Preacher for his own needs. On one occasion, Nixon called Graham three consecutive times without Graham picking up, and when Nixon finally got through to him, the president ironically complained about how difficult it was to get a hold of the Preacher when he needed him.<sup>159</sup>

Rather than a single explanation, it is more likely that there were a variety of reasons that account for why the presidents were motivated to actively pursue a relationship with Graham, rather than simply respond or react to the man. For one, there is strong evidence to indicate that the presidents possessed a significant degree of genuine affection and respect for the Preacher. The telephone conversations and letters of correspondence between these men reveal a tone of friendliness and sincere concern. One particular conversation recorded Johnson and Graham casually grumbling on the perils of aging and exchanging advice on what type of pills to take.<sup>160</sup> On another occasion, Johnson wrote a letter to Graham thanking him for his Christmas gift of "pretty cufflinks" and of "popcorn [that would] be devoured with much eagerness."<sup>161</sup> In writing to Reverend Pollock, Graham's biographer, Johnson sincerely affirmed that he would "never forget what it [was] like to have his companionship and his compassion, and to be better because of it."<sup>162</sup>

Nixon was known to have an even closer relationship with Graham than Johnson. 'Dick' wrote frequent letters to 'Billy' praising him for being an inspiration, and blessing and thanking him for "incisive and timely observations". He constantly assured him that he was a "great source of strength for [him]" and gave him many "affectionate regards and warm wishes."<sup>163</sup> Moreover, it seems like the president took a genuine interest in Graham's opinion on political matters. In a White House memorandum, an aide reminded Harry R. Haldeman, Nixon's chief of staff, that in addition to men like Nelson Rockefeller, Ronald Reagan, and John Connally, the president had also instructed him to contact Billy Graham on a weekly basis to update him on political situations and receive his opinions on these matters.<sup>164</sup> The series of "talking points briefing papers" which the aides prepared

for Haldeman saw him asking the Preacher for his impressions on how various groups in the country were reacting to specific events, such as Kissinger's secret negotiation with North Vietnam or the invasion and bombing of Cambodia.<sup>165</sup> The Preacher was also asked to comment on how he thought Nixon would fare in California in the presidential election of 1972, as well as give feedback on how the president could strengthen his position and maintain local support.<sup>166</sup> While there is nothing to prove that Nixon actually listened to Graham's advice, the fact that he instructed his aides to meet with Graham weekly indicate that the president saw the Preacher's viewpoints as respectable and worthy of consideration.

Subsequent personal oral history interviews with the presidents' assistants and friends confirm that Nixon and Johnson had some degree of genuine liking and respect for the Preacher. Arthur Krim, advisor to Johnson, admitted that the president was "obviously a fan of Billy's" even if he was not a "fan of evangelism." He revealed that Graham was often invited to visit Johnson's ranch in Texas and the two "seemed [to] like each other."<sup>167</sup> Such a sentiment can be corroborated by Lady Bird's interview in which she shared that Graham was a necessary feature of the Johnsons' lives and Bird was grateful for the friendship that she and President Johnson shared with Billy Graham and his wife.<sup>168</sup> In the case of Nixon, his assistant Charles Colson acknowledged that Nixon saw Graham as a "guy to talk over ideas and ask for opinions and reactions" and admitted that the president would "sound him out on things." Moreover, Nixon and Johnson's letters of correspondence with Graham did not stop after these men stepped down from their office in the White House, but continued on for many years in frequency and intimacy, indicating that the presidents saw their friendship with Graham as more than just functional.

Yet, as demonstrated by Graham's 'friendship politics,' one observes that in reality, genuine friendships can coexist with hidden political agendas. Just because the presidents earnestly admired Graham and enjoyed his company does not negate the fact that they also saw the expediency of publicly associating themselves with him. Rather than allowing a purely organic relationship to form, the presidents carefully nurtured their relationship with Graham. This is strongly suggested by the entourage



of White House aides that strategized and fashioned the president's public relationship with the Preacher. Soon after Johnson became president, his assistant Bill Moyers rejected an appeal from a minister who had requested that he utilize his personal friendship with Graham to encourage him to hold a crusade in Texas, a location that the minister felt was of crucial political importance.<sup>169</sup> Moyers was hesitant to approach Graham because the 'president and [himself had] gotten fairly close to Billy in the last 3 months ... [and they] try to avoid anything that even appears to be using this relationship for a purpose other than the friendship and fellowship it brings.'<sup>170</sup> The sense of caution in Moyer's reply suggests a sense of strategy in the way in which Johnson groomed his relationship with Graham. Charles Colson, special counsel to President Nixon, admitted in an oral history interview that they "tried in many ways to use Billy Graham [and they were] in the business of manipulating religious leaders." They attempted to make use of his mailing lists and also used him to assemble Evangelical leaders for a meeting in the White House so that they could "give them a real snow job."<sup>171</sup> Some of the president's aides evidently did not share the President's affection for the Preacher, and sometimes even went to the extent of mocking Graham. Haldeman once left a memo for Ehrlichman that wrote:

Billy Graham raised with the President today the point that postal rates for religious publications are being increased 400% while postal rates for pornography are only being increased 25%. Needless to say, the President was horrified to learn of this state of affairs and wants to know what we are doing about it.<sup>172</sup>

Upon cultivating a friendship with the Preacher, the presidents attempted to exploit the relationship for various political ends. By 1973, Graham had become a world-famous evangelist who had reached more than 5 million people in 38 different countries.<sup>173</sup> In the Gallup poll's list of "Top 10 Most Admired Men in the World", Graham has finished in the top ten 48 times since 1955, more than any other man since the poll started in 1948.<sup>174</sup> Time Magazine even dubbed him the "Pope of Protestant America" between 1950-1990.<sup>175</sup> The White House was aware of Graham's widespread popularity and frequently attempted to make use of its friendship

with Graham to shore up political support for the president among the Preacher's adherents. A memo from State Senator John Colan to Richard Nixon, dated July 2, 1968, was labeled "Project Billy Graham" and had the stated goal "utiliz[ing] and develop[ing] in the most positive manner an endorsement of Richard Nixon by Billy Graham, the Christian Statesman."<sup>176</sup> The plan was to use Nixon's friendship with Graham to garner votes for Nixon in the upcoming presidential election. "Project Billy Graham" was detailed, well thought through, and was conceived in four main stages. First, Graham would give the invocation at the Republican National Convention. Then, Nixon would then appear at Graham's Pittsburgh Crusade and make a publicized house visit to Graham in North Carolina. Third, Decision Magazine was to cover a personal interview with Nixon, specifically in September 1968. Finally, Graham was to write a personal letter to everyone on his mailing lists requesting them to vote for Nixon if "God so leads."<sup>177</sup> Johnson also tried to make use of his friendship with Graham to gain political support, albeit in a less formal way. He would often ask Graham to accompany him to various events as a sign of symbolic support. For example, at the Convention of American Association of School Administrators, Johnson publicly remarked to the audience that he "brought Dr. Billy Graham along with [him] to do the praying."<sup>178</sup>

Moreover, the fact that every president since Eisenhower was known to have met up with Graham set a precedent for future presidents to desire to cultivate some form of public relationship with the Preacher. The Preacher himself constantly declared in his White House sermons that the presidents were given a "mandate higher than the ballot box."<sup>179</sup> In the inauguration prayer for Nixon in 1969, Graham proclaimed that it was God's sovereignty that "permitted Richard Nixon to lead [America] at this momentous hour of history."<sup>180</sup> Hence, in gaining the friendship and endorsement of Graham, the president could legitimize his office as one that was a divine appointment by God. The fashioning of such an image was important to the president and his aides. In a note to Graham regarding his National Prayer Breakfast sermon in January 1973, Nixon's aides requested that the Preacher specifically discuss the significance of a leader that was led by God.<sup>181</sup>

Particularly with regard to U.S. intervention

in Vietnam, the presidents made use of their friendship with Graham to both garner support for the war among Evangelicals and to counter swelling opposition. As described in the previous section, Johnson had personally invited Graham to visit the troops in Vietnam in December 1966.<sup>182</sup> This was clearly a political move considering that three months earlier, John Wesley White, another BGEA evangelist, had put in a request to preach to the army men in Vietnam but was rejected. White had been told that there was “sufficient chaplain strength in Vietnam,” and there was no need for an outside evangelist – and yet, three months later, Graham was asked by the White House to visit the troops.<sup>183</sup> An increasingly war-weary public had begun to criticize the Johnson administration for prolonging the war. Recognizing this, the president mounted a public relations propaganda campaign to rally mass support for the war. This plan included making arrangements for influential American icons to visit Vietnam, as a symbolic gesture of support for the president and the war effort.<sup>184</sup> Hence, Graham’s personal invitation to Vietnam was not unique; several other famous personalities, such as Cardinal Spellman and Bob Hope, had also been given the invite. After their visit, it was not the president but his aides that were tasked with writing “thank you” telegrams to those men, although these were signed off under Johnson’s name. Charles Maguire, an assistant to Johnson, wrote a tongue-in-cheek comment to Jim Jones saying, “Per your unchristian new year’s commands, here follows a host of ecumenical presidential telegrams.” President Nixon’s aides were also known to have done backroom strategizing on how to utilize Graham to garner support for the president’s Vietnam policies. In brainstorming ideas for Nixon’s Inauguration Day program in 1968, a White House aide proposed that Nixon visit wounded servicemen in the company of Billy Graham so that families of men in Vietnam would not feel neglected by the president.<sup>185</sup>

Yet, the presidents were not necessarily always sly about exploiting Graham and his popularity. Graham’s noticeable influence on the world stage among people and politicians alike caused the Nixon administration to see the value in openly engaging him as a goodwill ambassador that could further the cause of American diplomacy. After all, the Preacher had long promoted to the presidents that he was willing to make use of his international crusades to

‘build a little goodwill for America.’<sup>186</sup> Graham also notably enjoyed easy access to government leaders around the world. When he flew around the world on his crusades, he would also often be invited to meet up with the ambassadors, admirals, generals, and heads of states of these countries. In September 1969, Graham informed the White House that Israeli Prime Minister Golda Meir had invited him to a private chat during her visit to Los Angeles. Henry Kissinger immediately instructed him to discuss the reaction of the American people to the Middle East situation and advised her on the “impossibility of [Nixon] standing by and watching the Middle East slip towards almost certain war without trying to help provide a political alternative.”<sup>187</sup> In November 1971, Kissinger wrote to Haldeman revealing that Billy Graham had been asked by Madame Chiang Kai-Shek and the Generalissimo to go to Taipei to talk to them about a situation in China. The couple affirmed that “Billy Graham [was] the one person from [America] that they [would] listen to and would like to meet.”<sup>188</sup> Hence, Nixon instructed Kissinger to give Graham a thorough briefing on U.S.-China policy and prepare talking points that he might use in his discussion with the Taiwanese president.<sup>189</sup>

The relationship shared by Graham and the presidents was a multi-layered and dynamic one. The White House saw the benefit of a public friendship with the Preacher in shoring up domestic political support for the president. It also took advantage of Graham’s international prestige to secure the goodwill of foreign leaders. Hence, more often than not, interaction took place not just between two individuals, Preacher and president, but rather two institutions, Evangelicalism and the White House. Similar to how the Preacher had a whole organization and movement supporting him in his endeavors, the president had the backing and advice of the White House aides, counsels, and special assistants.

## CONCLUSION

*Over the course of that weekend, Reverend Graham planted a mustard seed in my soul, a seed that grew over the next year...It was the beginning of a new walk where I would recommit my heart to Jesus Christ” – George W. Bush, 1999*<sup>190</sup>

On September 14, 2001, three days after the

terrorists' attacks on the World Trade Center and Pentagon, a National Day of Prayer was called for the victims of the attacks. In this time of grief and mourning, President George W. Bush gave words of comfort from scripture, assuring the nation that "neither death nor life nor angels nor principalities, nor powers nor things present nor things to come nor height nor depth [could] separate [America] from God's love."<sup>191</sup> America then went on to fulfill her God-mandated war on terrorism by invading Afghanistan and later Iraq. President Bush proudly defended that "the Liberty we prize [was] not America's gift to the world, [but was] God's gift to humanity."<sup>192</sup> Supporting this crusade of justice against Islamic terrorism, Reverend Ogilvie, chaplain of the U.S. Senate, prayed for the "consistency and constancy of God's presence to help [America] battle the forces of evil manifested in...cowardly acts of terrorism."<sup>193</sup>

President Bush's term in the White House seemed to mark the dawning of a new era where religion and politics seemed to consort confidently and unabashedly. Journalists and scholars alike were quick to pick up on this phenomenon. Arthur Schlesinger Jr. commented that Bush was the "most aggressively religious president Americans have ever had" and that "the religious right [had] become a potent force in national politics."<sup>194</sup> An article in the *New York Times* declared that Bush's "faith-based" approach to his presidential office blurred the line between religion and politics more so than ever before.<sup>195</sup> However, this essay takes the view that Bush's religiosity was not a radical break from American diplomatic tradition. One look into America's geopolitical history reveals quite the opposite; one only needs to replace "terrorists" with "communists" and "Global War on Terror" with "Cold War". The enemy may have changed, but God had always been on America's side, at least in the eyes of the Evangelicals and in the rhetoric of the politicians with whom they partnered.

While popular portraits of Graham in recent times may have depoliticized the man and turned him into a transcendent icon, the Preacher was very much a political actor in the heyday of his ministry in the fifties, sixties, and seventies. There was more to the man than met the eye, and he was one who shrewdly navigated and negotiated public and private spheres of power in order to steer the United States

in what he deemed to be the right course. Unlike the overt and brusque style of the later Evangelical leaders, Graham's particular brand of politics moving into the sixties was masterfully subtle. His strategy was that of 'friendship politics' whereby he cultivated a level of intimacy with Johnson and Nixon unmatched by any other religious leader at that time, and often leveraged upon this connection to gently nudge policymakers towards the Calvary.

Moreover, Graham's foray into friendship politics did not simply remain in his partnership with Presidents who professed Christianity; he even went to the extent of pursuing a friendship with John F. Kennedy, America's first Catholic president. Rather than completely disregard Kennedy solely on the basis of his Catholicism, Graham was a flexible political actor who was willing and swift to adapt to a new circumstance in order to gain access to Presidential power. Given the strained start to their relationship, Graham could have easily closed off all channels of communication with Kennedy once he came into office. Yet, in recognizing the need to sustain a relationship with the White House in order to maintain his political influence, the Preacher persisted in pursuing a friendship with Kennedy. He was quick to make public amends to his relationship with Kennedy. Shortly after the presidential election, Graham met up with Kennedy for lunch and a round of golf at Palm Beach. At a press conference that night, rather than continuing to warn against a Catholic president as he did before the election, Graham now praised Kennedy for easing Evangelical fears about having a Catholic in the White House.<sup>196</sup>

Graham's methods of interaction with Kennedy were also reminiscent of the same style of 'friendship politics' observed with Nixon and Johnson, albeit less intimate. When Kennedy's father suffered a massive stroke on December 20, 1961, Graham immediately sent a telegram consoling the president and assuring him of God's guidance in this time.<sup>197</sup> He also requested on several occasions to meet the president at the White House.<sup>198</sup> Graham even invited Kennedy to attend his crusade in Chicago in June 1962, a generous and conciliatory gesture in light of how hesitant Graham and the Evangelical community had been of Kennedy in the 1960 election.<sup>199</sup> There is no evidence to show that Graham gave his opinion on Vietnam to Kennedy. However, this could be explained in part by the fact

that there was little public knowledge or concern on the escalating war in Vietnam.<sup>200</sup>

Graham's relationship with Kennedy serves both as a qualifier and confirmation of this essay's arguments. On one hand, it adds nuance by suggesting that religion is likely more influential in the White House if the president shares the same faith. On the other hand, it also confirms the case for Graham's "friendship" style of politics. Although less intimate, Graham's method of cultivating a relationship with Kennedy was very much similar to his approach towards Johnson and Nixon. Given that the Preacher was willing and ready to foster a friendship with a Catholic president, originally an opponent, and one known to be somewhat of a womanizer, it indicates that Graham probably also did not seek friendship with the latter two Presidents purely out of affection, or similarity in faith or personality, but rather in all three cases, Graham viewed 'friendship' as a strategic political move to build a power base in the White House. After all, following Kennedy's assassination, and when Johnson and Nixon came into office and had trouble ending the Vietnam War, Graham was quite ready to put the blame for the war on Kennedy when questioned in public. In both a press conference in 1968 and a television interview in 1972, the President stated that it was President Kennedy that first committed to Vietnam and defended that Johnson had inherited a war that he could not pull out of.<sup>201</sup> In a private conversation with Nixon in April 1971, Graham assured the President that he had a written an editorial for the New York Times in which he "put all the blame for the whole thing on Kennedy [since] he sent the first 16,000 combat people" to Vietnam.<sup>202</sup>

All in all, this essay has attempted to tell both a religious and political history, and conceptualize a world in which faith and politics collide, overlap and intersect, and where the line between sacred and secular is often blurred. Political historians often neglect to take the religious perspective seriously, treating it as a sideshow unworthy of scholarly attention. On the other end of the spectrum, historians of religion have often shied away from politics, at most only focusing on how religion passively responded to the evolution of larger political culture. Through examining the political maneuvers of a key religious actor, this essay has showed that religion not only reacted to political

trends but also actively sought to shape them.

This is not an essay about religion and politics in general, but specifically on the interplay of religion and matters of foreign policy. Graham's political maneuvers and actions in this particular essay were studied in the context of the Vietnam War, and this was by no means a coincidence. If the narrative of Neo-Evangelicalism in American history is of a movement that had been shamed in U.S. public life and was now trying to reclaim its prominence in society, then the arena of war and diplomacy was the perfect space for the religious group to express and assert itself. The Evangelical brand of theology and eschatology encouraged a pro-war stance, a view that sometimes sat well with a nationalistic public and a perspective that was convenient for political figures who want to rhetorically justify the decision to go to war.<sup>203</sup> History shows that in the United States, one does not only rally around the flag, but also around God's flag. After the end of the Vietnam War in 1975, foreign policy temporarily went out public consciousness, only to resurface with Reagan's call for America to once again wage a relentless struggle against the Communist "evil empire". He declared that it was "better to die in a nuclear war, still believing in God, than to live under atheistic communism."<sup>204</sup> This appeal to religious rhetoric was very much reminiscent to the jeremiads of the immediate post-war decade, and also the clarion calls of Bush's war against Islamic terrorism.

Moreover, by demonstrating the attempts of Billy Graham and the Evangelical movement to voice support for the Vietnam War, this essay has also sought to chart a fresh direction in the study of the origins of America's longest and most divisive war, a war which cannot be solely explained by conventional balance-of-power or realist explanations. It was not the ambition of this study to measure if religion had an actual impact or consequence on foreign policy decision in Vietnam, but perhaps this paper could be a stepping stone for future scholars to explore the topic.

Interestingly enough, it was the Reverend Billy Graham who was asked to give the sermon at the Prayer Service held in the aftermath of September 11. It may seem as if age had finally caught up with the man. Now an octogenarian, his wavy blond hair turned into a full crown of white and his deep-set blue eyes were now hidden behind prescription



glasses for farsightedness. But although the vigor and electrifying voice of a once itinerant Preacher was no more, Billy Graham spoke with the same measure of stature and authority, and with the same conviction that “God can be trusted even life is at its darkest.”<sup>205</sup> While he reviled the evil of the terrorist attack, his chosen focus was on the nation’s spiritual need for renewal. The Preacher seemed an appropriate choice for the event, for America had come to see Graham as one above the fray of culture wars, partisan debates, and the very “beacon of stability and graciousness.”<sup>206</sup> According to some, “Billy Graham has lasted so long because he seems to be true...he’s a soft spoken man. In days when everything is so loud and biased, he talks to people in a loving way.”<sup>207</sup> Yet, there has always been more to the man than meets the eye. After all, the Preacher who had “planted a mustard seed” in the soul of the man who eventually led the United States to a God-guided war against terrorism had long been sowing seeds in the heart of a generation of politicians, carefully watering and growing the friendships he had cultivated within the White House, and patiently praying for the day that fruit would come.<sup>208</sup>

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140. Randall E. King, "When Worlds Collide: Politics, Religion and Media at the 1970 East Tennessee Billy Graham Crusade." *Journal of Church and State* 39 (Spring 1997): pp. 273-295.
141. Richard Nixon: "Remarks at Dr. Billy Graham's East Tennessee Crusade," May 28, 1970. Online by Gerhard Peters and John T. Woolley, The American Presidency Project. <http://www.presidency.ucsb.edu/ws/?pid=2523>. (Accessed February 3, 2014.)
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150. Memorandum for President From H.R. Haldeman, Subject: Reverend Billy Graham's Suggestion Re: Acceptance Speech (August 19, 1972), in Folder 7, Box 3, Collection 74, Ephemera of William Franklin Graham, Jr. "Billy", Archives of the Billy Graham Centre, Wheaton, Illinois. Original copy found in Richard Nixon Presidential Library.
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