

# Billy Graham: An Old Soldier Fades Away

Evangelist Billy Graham, who counseled presidents and stirred controversy with inflammatory statements on gay rights, opposition to Martin Luther King's tactics of civil disobedience, and support for U.S. wars, died Wednesday. Cecil Bothwell reflects here on his life and legacy.

By Cecil Bothwell

*"We are selling the greatest product on earth. Why shouldn't we promote it as effectively as we promote a bar of soap?" – Billy Graham, Saturday Evening Post, 1963*

Billy Graham was a preacher man equally intent on saving souls and soliciting financial support for his ministry. His success at the former is not subject to proof and his success at the latter is unrivaled. He preached to millions on every ice-free continent and led many to his chosen messiah.

When Graham succumbed to various ailments this week at the age of 99 he left behind an organization that is said to have touched more people than any other Christian ministry in history, with property, assets and a name-brand worth hundreds of millions. The address lists of contributors alone comprise a mother lode for the Billy Graham Evangelical Association, now headed by his son and namesake, William Franklin Graham, III.

Graham also left behind a United States government in which religion plays a far greater role than before he intruded into politics in the 1950s. The shift from secular governance to "In God We Trust" can be laid squarely at this minister's feet.

Graham's message was principally one of fear: fear of a wrathful god; fear of temptation; fear of communists and socialists; fear of unions; fear of Catholics; fear of homosexuals; fear of racial integration and above all, fear of death. But as a balm for such fears, he promised listeners eternal life, which he said was readily claimed through acceptance of Jesus Christ as one's savior.

Furthermore, he assured listeners that God loved us so much that He created governments, the most blessed form being Western capitalist democracy. To make this point, he frequently quoted Romans 13, particularly the first two verses. In the New American Standard Version of the Bible, they read, "Let every person be in subjection to the governing authorities. For there is no authority except from God, and those which exist are established by God. Therefore he who resists

authority has opposed the ordinance of God; and they who have opposed will receive condemnation upon themselves.”

The question of whether this was actually the recorded word of God or a rider inserted into the bill by Roman senators with rather more worldly aims never dimmed Graham’s insistence that all governments are the work of the Almighty. Almost perversely, he even endorsed the arrest of a woman who lofted a Christian banner during his Reagan-era visit to Moscow, opting for the crack-down of “divine” authority over the civil disobedience of a believer.

Governments, he reminded his Moscow listeners, do God’s work.

Based on that Biblical mandate for all governments, Graham stood in solid opposition to the work of Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. In his Letter from Birmingham Jail, all but addressed to Graham, King noted, “We should never forget that everything Adolf Hitler did in Germany was ‘legal’ and everything the Hungarian freedom fighters did in Hungary was ‘illegal.’ ... If today I lived in a Communist country where certain principles dear to the Christian faith are suppressed, I would openly advocate disobeying that country’s anti-religious laws.”

### **Finger on the Pulse of American Fear**

Fear is the stock in trade of most evangelists, of course, comprising the necessary setup before the pitch. As historian William Martin explained in his 1991 account of Graham’s early sermons, “even those whose personal lives seemed rich and fulfilling must live in a world filled with terror and threat. As a direct result of sinful humanity’s rebellion against God, our streets have become jungles of terror, mugging, rape, and death. Confusion reigns on campuses as never before. Political leaders live in constant fear of the assassin’s bullet. Racial tension seems certain to unleash titanic forces of hatred and violence. Communism threatens to eradicate freedom from the face of the earth. Small nations are getting the bomb, so that global war seems inevitable. High-speed objects, apparently guided by an unknown intelligence, are coming into our atmosphere for reasons no one understands. Clearly, all signs point to the end of the present world order. ...

“Graham’s basic mode of preaching in these early years was assault. ... Then, when he had his listeners mentally crouching in terror, aware that all the attractively labeled escape routes—alcohol, sexual indulgence, riches, psychiatry, education, social-welfare programs, increased military might, the United Nations—led ultimately to dead ends, he held out the only compass that pointed reliably to the straight and narrow path that leads to personal happiness and lasting peace.”

Columnist and former priest James Carroll had much the same take, noting that “Graham had his finger on the pulse of American fear, and in subsequent years, anti communism occupied the nation’s soul as an avowedly religious obsession. The Red Scare at home, unabashed moves toward empire abroad, the phrase ‘under God’ inserted into the Pledge of Allegiance, the scapegoating of homosexuals as ‘security risks,’ an insane accumulation of nuclear weapons, suicidal wars against postcolonial insurgencies in Asia—a set of desperate choices indeed. Through it all, Billy Graham was the high priest of the American crusade, which is why U.S. presidents uniformly sought his blessing.”

While Carroll had most of that right, the record suggests that, over and over again, it was Graham who sought presidential blessing, rather than the other way around. Letters enshrined in the presidential and Graham libraries reveal a preacher endlessly seeking official audience. As Truman said, years after his presidency, “Well, I hadn’t ought to say this, but he’s one of those counterfeits I was telling you about. He claims he’s a friend of all the presidents, but he was never a friend of mine when I was president.”

Of course, politicians have often brandished fear as well, and the twin streams of fear-based politics and fear-based religion couldn’t have been more confluent. Communist infiltrators, missile gaps and the domino effect each took their turn, as did the Evil Empire and, more recently, Saddam, Osama bin Laden and an amorphous threat of global terrorism.

In light of the Biblical endorsement of rulers, Graham supported police repression of Vietnam war protesters and civil rights marchers, opposed Martin Luther King’s tactic of civil disobedience, supported South American despots, and publicly supported every war or intervention waged by the United States from Korea forward.

### **A Pro-War Christian**

Born on a prosperous dairy farm and educated at Wheaton College, Graham first gained national attention in 1949 when the publishing magnate William Randolph Hearst, searching for a spiritual icon to spread his anti-communist sentiments, discovered the young preacher holding forth at a Los Angeles tent meeting. Hearst wired his editors across the nation, “puff Graham,” and he was an instant sensation.

Hearst next contacted his friend and fellow publisher Henry Luce. Their Wall Street ally, Bernard Baruch, arranged a meeting between Luce and Graham while the preacher was staying with the segregationist Governor Strom Thurmond in the official mansion in Columbia, South Carolina, Luce concurred with Hearst about Graham’s marketability and Time and Life were enlisted in the job of selling the

soap of salvation to the world. Time, alone, has run more than 600 stories about Graham.

The man who would become known as “the minister to presidents” offered his first military advice in 1950. On June 25, North Korean troops invaded South Korea and Graham sent Truman a telegram. “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 WORLD. WE CANNOT LET THEM DOWN.”

It was the first time Graham encouraged a president to go to war, and with characteristic hyperbole: Korea has never topped the list of Christian-leaning nations. Subsequently, Graham gave his blessing to every conflict under every president from Truman to the second Bush, and most of the presidents, pleased to enjoy public assurance of God’s approval, made him welcome in the White House.

Graham excoriated Truman for firing General Douglas MacArthur and supported the general’s plan to invade China. He went so far as to urge Nixon to bomb dikes in Vietnam – knowing that it would kill upward of a million civilians – and he claimed to have sat on the sofa next to G.H.W. Bush as the bombs began falling in the first Gulf War (though Bush’s diary version of the evening somehow excludes Graham, as does a White House video of Bush during the attack).

According to Bush’s account, in a phone call the preceding week, Graham quoted poetry that compared the President to a messiah destined to save the world, and in the next breath called Saddam the Antichrist. Bush wrote that Graham suggested it was his historical mission to destroy Saddam.

Through the years, Graham’s politics earned him some strange bedfellows. He praised Senator Joseph McCarthy and supported his assault on Constitutional rights, then scolded the Senate for censuring McCarthy for his excesses. He befriended oil men and arms manufacturers. He defended Nixon after Watergate, right up to the disgraced president’s resignation, and faced public scorn when tapes were aired that exposed the foul-mouthed President as a schemer and plotter.

Nixon’s chief of staff, Bob Haldeman, reported on Graham’s denigration of Jews in his posthumously published diary—a claim Graham vehemently denied until released tapes undid him in 2002. Caught with his prejudicial pants down, Graham claimed ignorance of the hour-and-a-half long conversation in which he led the anti-Semitic attack.

As reported by the Associated Press on March 2, 2002:

“Although I have no memory of the occasion, I deeply regret comments I

apparently made in an Oval Office conversation with President Nixon . . . some 30 years ago," Graham said in a statement released by his Texas public relations firm. "They do not reflect my views, and I sincerely apologize for any offense caused by the remarks."

Whether or not the comments reflect Graham's views at the time or thirty years later, it is his defense that bears much closer scrutiny. What were we to make of a preacher who insisted that his words didn't reflect his beliefs? Were we to believe him then or later, on other matters?

Graham was a political operative, reporting to Kennedy on purported communist insurgencies in Latin America, turning over lists of activist Christians to the Republican party, conferring regularly with J. Edgar Hoover and networking with the CIA in South America and Vietnam. He was even assigned by Nixon's operatives to talk George Wallace out of a second run for the White House.

To accomplish the latter, he phoned Wallace as he was coming out of an anesthetic stupor after one of his numerous post-assassination-attempt surgeries. While the long suffering gunshot victim asked the minister to pray for him, the minister asked him not to make a third-party bid for the presidency. "I won't do anything to help McGovern," Wallace replied.

There are many who would argue that the good that Graham did outweighs whatever political intrigue he embraced, and even the several wars he enthusiastically endorsed. To the extent that bringing people to Christ is of benefit to them, an untestable hypothesis, he was successful with his calls to come forward. He accrued hundreds of millions of dollars which were used to extend his ministry and thereby bring more people to "be saved," which is self-justifying but fails as evidence of goodness.

### **Billy Graham Freeway**

If Christian beliefs about the hereafter prove correct, we will all presumably discover what good he accomplished, or what chance for salvation we missed, in the sweet by and by.

In talking to one of his biographers, Graham recalled his mood during his fire and brimstone declamations, "I would feel as though I had a sword, a rapier, in my hand, and I would be slashing deeper and deeper into the consciences of the people before me, cutting away straight to their very souls."

In that regard, Graham's largest and most lasting monument is a highway cut through Beaucatcher Mountain, blasted through a majestic land form that once bisected Asheville, North Carolina. He helped convince recalcitrant landowners to permit the excavation and construction through the cut of the short stretch

of Interstate highway subsequently named the Billy Graham Freeway.

Downwind residents report that the weather has permanently shifted due to the gaping mountain maw and the future of the highway that transects the city continues to be one of the most divisive issues in that southern metropolis.

“Straight to their very souls,” indeed.

In every way, Graham was the spiritual father of today’s right-wing religious leaders who so inhabit the national conversation. If he cloaked his suasion in public neutrality it was the hallmark of an era in which such intrusion was deemed unseemly. If today’s practitioners are less abashed, it is in many ways reflective of the secure foundation Graham built within Republican and conservative circles.

Graham endorsed and courted Eisenhower and compared a militaristic State of the Union speech to the Sermon on the Mount, fanned anti-Catholic flames in the Nixon-Kennedy contest, backed Johnson and then Nixon in Vietnam, lobbied for arms sales to Saudi Arabia during the Reagan years, conveyed foreign threats and entreaties for Clinton and lent his imprimatur to G.W. Bush as he declared war on terrorism from the pulpit of the National Cathedral.

Billy Graham approved of warriors and war, weapons of mass destruction (in white, Christian hands) and covert operations. He publicly declaimed the righteousness of battle with enemies of American capitalism, abetted genocide in oil-rich Ecuador and surrounds and endorsed castration as punishment for rapists. A terrible swift sword for certain, and effective no doubt, but not much there in the way of turning the other cheek.

Graham will be cordially remembered by those who found solace in his golden promises and happy homilies, but the worldly blowback from his ministry is playing out in Iraq and Afghanistan, Chechnya and Korea, the Philippines and Colombia – everywhere governments threaten human rights and pie in the sky is offered in lieu of daily bread.

In the words of Graham’s ministerial and secular adversary, Dr. King, “I had hoped that the white moderate would understand that law and order exist for the purpose of establishing justice and that when they fail in this purpose they become the dangerously structured dams that block the flow of social progress.”

Farewell Reverend Graham. Let justice roll.

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Ulysses Books, 2010).

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