



Jimmy Carter, the Politics of Family, and the Rise of the Religious Right (Since 1970: Histories of Contemporary America)

J. Brooks Flippin

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As Jimmy Carter ascended to the presidency the heir apparent to Democratic liberalism, he touted his background as a born-again evangelical. Once in office, his faith indeed helped form policy on a number of controversial moral issues. By acknowledging certain behaviors as sinful while insisting that they were private matters beyond government interference, J. Brooks Flippenn argues, Carter unintentionally alienated both social liberals and conservative Christians, thus ensuring that the debate over these moral “family issues” acquired a new prominence in public and political life.

The Carter era, according to Flippenn, stood at a fault line in American culture, religion, and politics. In the wake of the 1960s, some Americans worried that the traditional family faced a grave crisis. This newly politicized constituency viewed secular humanism in education, the recognition of reproductive rights established by *Roe v. Wade*, feminism, and the struggle for homosexual rights as evidence of cultural decay and as a challenge to religious orthodoxy. Social liberals viewed Carter’s faith with skepticism and took issue with his seeming unwillingness to build on recent progressive victories. Ultimately, Flippenn argues, conservative Christians emerged as the Religious Right and were adopted into the Republican fold.

Examining Carter’s struggle to placate competing interests against the backdrop of difficult foreign and domestic issues—a struggling economy, the stalled Strategic Arms Limitation Talks, disputes in the Middle East, handover of the Panama Canal, and the Iranian hostage crisis—Flippenn shows how a political dynamic was formed that continues to this day.



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