

US History 2  
Falwell v Drinan Debate  
Makeup/XCR (Unit 7)

The reading can be found below, after the questions.

- (a) What are two details that Reverend Falwell includes in the debate that you found really interesting (either in a positive or problematic way)? Explain why, using quotes and details from the reading.
- (b) What are two details that Father Drinan includes in the debate that you found really interesting (either in a positive or problematic way)? Explain why, using quotes and details from the reading.
- (c) There were at least 40 million Southern Christian Evangelicals in 1980, when this debate occurred on television. Yet Falwell is talking about bringing just 10,000 or 20,000 evangelicals together – why do you think this relatively small number is something that he is proud enough of, that he brags about his accomplishment in the debate?
- (d) Can you see any key phrases and/or connections in the debate to any of the Civil Rights or Civil Liberties concepts we have discussed in class this year? Explain and give specifics/details from the reading to support your argument.
- (e) Can you see any key phrases and/or connections in the letter to any **non-history** class or concept that you have learned in school? Explain and give specifics/details from the reading to support your argument.

## The MacNeil-Lehrer Report (broadcast 22 August 1980)

*It's part of a growing new factor in this election year, the so-called evangelical vote. Tonight, one of its leaders, the Reverend Jerry Falwell, debates its purposes and propriety, with Congressman Robert Drinan, a Catholic priest, who questions both. Republican presidential candidate Ronald Reagan goes after the evangelical vote tonight at their Dallas Conference.*



*Reverend Jerry Falwell, Sr*



*Father Robert Drinan*

*The Reverend Jerry Falwell started out some 24 years ago as the founder of the Thomas Road Baptist Church in Lynchburg, Virginia. His congregation consisted of 35 families. In the early years of his ministry, he preached against mixing religion and politics, but that's all changed now. Today, Mr. Falwell presides over a 17,000-member church and a broadcast operation... [with] a \$57 million operating budget as well. His old-time gospel hour is carried by 373 stations, a wider market than all CBS affiliates put together. 14 months ago, he founded Moral Majority, believed to be the largest evangelical political organization in the country, with chapters in 47 states, a mailing list of 400,000, and a budget this year of \$5 million.*

*On the other side, we have Father Robert Drinan, the first Roman Catholic priest elected to Congress. During his 10 years as a representative from the state of Massachusetts, Father Drinan earned his reputation as an unabashed liberal... He was first elected on an anti-Vietnam anti-draft platform, was an influential voice for the impeachment resolution that, while not adopted, led to the resignation of President Richard Nixon, and he has been consistent in his advocacy for civil liberties and social issues like federal financing of abortions for the poor. Father Drinan will be retiring from political office this November, under a new directive from the Vatican that prohibits priests from holding elective office.*

### **Mr. Falwell, is the Dallas Conference accomplishing what you wanted thus far?**

*Falwell:* Yes, it's numbers have grown from 10,000 yesterday to probably 20,000 by the end of the evening tonight. And many of these, the majority are pastors. I would say easily 12 to 14,000 are pastors from across the United States who are coming awake today to the great moral decadence, the moral tailspin in which our country now finds itself. They're also awakened to the fact that we are first class citizens and that the real problem in America can't be laid at the

doorsteps of the politicians in Washington. But rather, it is my opinion and the opinion of the leaders of this movement that the moral condition of our country is a reflection of the spiritual apathy of the churches in this country and for the first time in my lifetime, that is changing.

**What do you think has caused the moral decadence as you see it?**

*Falwell:* Well, a few years ago, about a generation ago, we were told that religion and politics don't mix and we accepted that without being told book chapter and verse. We were told politics is dirty business, you fellows run your churches and we'll run the government and they've done that right in the ground. And our country today, I didn't- I preached against what I'm doing 20 years ago, 15 years ago, because I never really believed that a Supreme Court of this country would legalize abortion on demand, which I totally agree with the Roman Catholic Church is murder. It is and has resulted in seven to eight million murders of defenseless little babies since that time. That was the one catalyst that probably moved me into action more than anything else.

I didn't know at the time what to do. I began preaching on my national television program about the atrocity of this genocide. Mormons began to rally beside me. Roman Catholics, Right to Life people began to come. And I began to realize that there is a coalition in this country of moralists. They're not all evangelical by any means; moralists who share similar moral values. They're pro-life and pro-traditional family. Pro-moral meaning anti pornography, anti drug scene, pro-American, meaning strong superior national defense, pro Israel. And though we theologically (= religious rules) have great differences, we very much share those premises and are willing to fight together, not only on a theological basis. Moral Majority of which I am the head- it's not a religious organization. It is totally political, which allows us as citizens to sit down around these various high water marks in moral convictions and work together for moral change through the legislative process.

**Do you believe that if these folks do get organized, if you and others who are involved in this movement in a general way are able to get all of these folks you're talking about together and get them involved enough to vote in November that you could actually decide who the next president will be?**

*Falwell:* Well I'm not saying that at all. We have registered approximately three million persons since January and we will probably conservatively register another one million between now November. That is only scratching the surface because, as George Gallup (= the polling company) indicated recently, there about 40 or 50 million of us and 45% of us were not registered at all as of last September, indicated by a poll that we paid for. So we have a mammoth job ahead of us, of registering our people, more than that getting them informed on the issues. We've been saying loud and clear at this conference, and everywhere we go, don't get tied to a candidate or a party. I am not a Reaganite. I am not a Republican. In Virginia, one registers only as a voter fortunately. And although I am certainly conservative, not only in moral and theological issues, but as well in in the political realm, and most of our people are, we do not go so far as to think that one is not a Christian because he's a liberal or a liberal Democrat, as somebody suggested the other night.

But we do believe that there is a majority consensus out there that has been apathetic, asleep, uninvolved and that we have got to come to the forefront now and not for the purpose of control. If there's anything we would fight against it's a Khomeini (=Iran) type control by any religious rule. What we want is not control, it is influence, which we have not been exerting. We took the blame, we didn't blame the politicians. Now we must stand up, be counted, get informed connect candidates and issues and we have 72,000 pastors, Roman Catholic priests, Jewish rabbis, Mormon elders, fundamentalist, you name it, in a Moral Majority of over 2 million lay people. We have 50 states organized now, a state chairman, organizational groups that are principle-oriented that during 1981, 82, 83, 84 and so on... Hopefully we can make a tremendous difference in influencing this country back to moral sanity, back to a strong free enterprise system that is fast deteriorating, and back to superior national defense, which in my opinion is the best deterrent against war.

**Congressman Drinin, do you agree that the nation is in a moral tail spin?**

*Drinin:* No, there's obviously many things wrong but I think that you could argue that the churches have been extremely active, that in the area of civil rights and on Vietnam. I'm very proud of what the churches have done. The National Council of Churches and the Methodists and the U.S. Catholic Conference are very well represented in Washington, along with the friends, and particularly Network, a group of Catholic nuns who lobby about very important social issues such as food stamps and food for the world and disarmament and eliminating the draft. So I don't think it's fair to say that the churches have been asleep. Furthermore, the moral decline depends upon your point of view. When a Reverend Fallwell says that the moral majority is out there awaiting for the ERA to go away, the moral majority is for the ERA. Two-thirds of both houses, 35 states, and 65% of the people haven't in fact approved of the ERA and I don't think that it's appropriate to say that they're an immoral group doing those things.

**You've charged that the Moral Majority, that is the organization that Mr. Fallwell represents, is misusing religion. Could you just expand on that?**

*Drinin:* Yes it seems to me that they have a brand of American chauvinism (= bias for one's own cause) and they are telling potential conservatives or actual conservatives that their religion, the evangelical religion, reinforces the conservative views of these individuals and I think that's a misuse of religion. Religion should give guidelines, obviously, and I want the churches to be more active but I don't think that the churches should say, even by implication, that there are certain Christian values that dictate certain political positions.

**How does what you are condemning within this moral majority differ from the kinds of influence that the Catholic church and other churches have had in politics over the years?**

*Drinin:* I'm not condemning it. I'm just saying that they go one step beyond, what in my judgment, churches should do. That churches should lay out the issues, they should inform their constituencies and urge the constituents to accept a position that's consistent with what the constituent feels. I don't think that any religious body should ever endorse a candidate or endorse a particular position which is sectarian, or rather which is partisan. The churches obviously should lead, should give information, but they should never, as a church, say that Christianity

dictates this particular political position. For example, the three or four conservative evangelical groups in Washington rate congressman now, and one of the things on which they rated them was the Department of Education. I voted for that. I think it's a good idea and I don't think that anything in Christianity says that this is a good idea or a bad idea.

Likewise on Taiwan. All of these evangelical groups say that we should not retract or retreat from our treaty to protect Taiwan if necessary. Well I think that's a political question on which religious values give no one answer.

### **How do you think this coalition between the conservatives and evangelicals came about?**

*Drinan:* Well some people say that it was the conservative right wing group that actually went out and induced the conservative evangelicals to come in and support their position. I'm not certain that you could prove that. On the other hand, it was the conservatives feeling that their positions were not completely being heard in the country, that they went to the political right wing people and there is a definite alliance there. And the Committee for the Survival of a Free Congress in Washington, which is strictly right wing, radical right wing. They help to organize and coordinate these religious groups. [As] for their growing appeal? I'm not certain that it is growing. [I agree] that all of these people, as Reverend Falwell said, are in fact conservative and that they may seem to be more conservative now but I'm not certain really that it is growing.

### **Reverend Falwell, did right wing political groups come to you and others and say help us out or was it the other way around?**

*Falwell:* Absolutely not. This has been an osmosis type thing in my own life. The abortion ruling of 73, Roe versus Wade, was what challenged me and thousands like me that something had to be done. A number of other issues; the homosexual revolution, the pornography explosion of the last eight to ten years, many of these things which we feel are very poisonous and damaging to the moral values of this country, plus bureaucratic agency intervention in many of our various Christian enterprises and interference, harassment. What convinced us that self-defense was the name of the game and we therefore I think have been forced into the open.

And I'd like to say that Father Drinan, who is saying that we shouldn't endorse candidates, is expressing the heights of hypocrisy. He obviously endorsed a candidate named Father Drinan and ran for office and as far as influencing political thought, how can one influence thought any more than becoming a congressman?

*Drinan:* That's not what I said sir. I said that no Christian group, no religious group that is organized as a group should endorse a candidate. Obviously I think the clergymen have the right and sometimes the duty to endorse candidates.

*Falwell:* Well may I say that it's shocking to me that you are a Roman Catholic priest, a part of a church that condemns abortion and calls it murder as your Pope did very courageously in America last year. How that you could support federal funding for abortion, absolutely in contradiction of everything that church stands for. I personally think that's why you've been asked to resign. I think you were the focal point that caused that.

*Drinan:* The Holy See (=Pope) has denied that. And as you know the Supreme Court said that there's a constitutional right in a couple or in a woman to have an abortion. Can the federal government say that we are going to restrict and constrict that particular right?

*Falwell:* The Supreme Court, last month on June 30, said that this is constitutional by the narrowest of margins, five to four. That may conceivably change the thinking of some people in the congress and in the country but I'm not certain. Regardless of how that changes thought, that doesn't change the fact that if the congress, the constitution and the executive branch all legalized abortion, you and I as men of the cloth have a higher authority, in my opinion, and that is Almighty God and the Word of God and the church we represent. And all three in both instances, your church and mine, condemn abortion as the taking of human life and I cannot see how you could possibly justify your position as a man of the cloth, repudiating position of your own church and voting regularly for federal funding for abortion.

*Drinan:* I have not repudiated the position of my own church. I have said thousands of times that abortion is immoral in my judgment and coming out of my tradition. But this is oversimplified piety, as if everything that the churches hold must, in fact, be put into American law. And that's mixing religion with nationalism, mixing religion- ... and a lot of Catholics in the congress and throughout the country feel that the state should not deny Medicaid funds to people who are entitled to an abortion under the law.

**Let me ask you this Reverend Falwell, a point that congressman Drinan made a moment ago, which is, if you believe, that if you are a Christian and you accept Christianity, then that dictates a certain political position on issues. Is that your belief?**

*Falwell:* I believe that there are certain very clear moral edicts that would override every consideration in a Christian's life. For example, it is my conviction that the family is a traditional husband-wife, man-woman, relationship. And that God so established the family and the Garden of Eden, Adam and Eve, not Adam and Steve.

And [I say] that regardless of Father Drinan and other legislators who would attempt to endorse a perverted lifestyle. He has supported gay rights.... I would simply say that I have, as a minister of the gospel, a commitment to love the homosexual while hating homosexuality. Just as we have an alcoholic institution, we hate the effect of the excessive use of alcoholic beverages, but we love the person who uses those. And I would vote every time against inordinate gay rights simply because, and it wouldn't matter to me if it was the law of the land or whatever, I would still openly stand on the side of right if I was the only person doing it.

*For the full audio and transcript, see American Archive at:*  
<https://americanarchive.org/catalog/cpb-aacip-507-0v89q5qw13>