

Chapter Title: Prologue BEFORE AND AFTER

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Prologue

BEFORE AND AFTER

PROCESSING THE CAPITOL INSURRECTION is akin to coming to terms with a national home invasion. That violent mob's breach of a secure and sacred space on January 6, 2021, resulted in nothing less than a collective trauma. Decades of threats, calls for civil war, and White grievance politics burst forth into a vulgar display of vengeance. It was a day that divides time into Before and After. It was dismantling.

But as time has passed, it has become clear that January 6 was not an aberration or even some historically bewildering event. It was the logical outcome not only of the Trump presidency and election defeat but also of the long history of White Christian nationalist rhetoric, organizing, and influence across the United States. This book is partly a religious history of the events at the Capitol on January 6, 2021. But it is mainly a history of the events, movements, religious leaders, and religious communities that made that event possible.

It is also a history of my own involvement in those communities and movements. As a former White Christian nationalist who is now a scholar of religion, I have both an insider's view and a scholarly perspective on the long road to J6. This book recounts the historical

narrative by using my own history with the movement as a prism for understanding its principles, doctrines, emotions, and extremisms. I use my personal experience and training as a scholar to analyze the past and present and to forecast what comes next for MAGA Nation and the White Christian nationalists at its core.

As I processed the events from that horrific day, I began to ask the three questions that would become the foundations for this book. How did the rise of the New Religious Right between 1960 and 2015 give birth to violent White Christian nationalism during the Trump presidency and beyond? What aspects of the White Christian nationalist worldview—the worldview I once held—propelled some of the most conservative religious communities in the country to ignite a cold civil war? And how can understanding the history of White Christian nationalism help us anticipate how it will take shape in and influence the public square in years to come?

In chapters 1–5, we will answer the first question. Chapter 1 is a primer on White Christian nationalism—and my participation in it—and its development over the last half century. In chapters 2 and 3, I trace the history of extreme right-wing politics and White Christian nationalism in Southern California and the American South in the 1960s and 1970s. These chapters show how the development of the New Religious Right set the stage for the White Christian nationalist takeover of the Republican Party. In chapters 4 and 5, I examine the results of this takeover in the ouster of Jimmy Carter at the hand of his fellow White Christians and the White Christian nationalist support for Ronald Reagan.

In chapters 6–8, I answer the second question through studies of various components of the White Christian nationalist worldview—from sex, gender, and the national body (chapter 6) to authoritarian leadership and strongman masculinity (chapter 7), to the use of conspiracy theories to transform what is considered real, true, and actual (chapter 8).

If the first eight chapters tell a historical narrative of modern White Christian nationalism, chapters 9–11 analyze its present and future. Chapter 9 is a detailed analysis of the religious elements of the January 6 insurrection that reveals how White Christian nationalism was an integrating force for Trump’s coup attempt. Chapter 10 explores the myths and relics that have developed in MAGA Nation since the insurrection. I argue that January 6 was the first battle in MAGA Nation’s war on American democracy. Chapter 11 forecasts what MAGA Nation and White Christian nationalism may look like long after Trump has left the scene. Here I focus on the large-scale migration of Christian supremacists to the “American Redoubt,” and their dreams of a theocratic state separate from the American republic.

No definitive answers as to how we arrived at this political moment exist. There are many ways to tell this story and to investigate the historical events leading up to the insurrection. There are also too many figures and historical markers to cover in depth. Some scholars have centered on figures such as Billy Graham and Richard Nixon; others have taken a longer view by going back to the nineteenth century to illuminate the present; and others have zeroed in on gender, sex, and immigration in order to understand the history of White conservative Christianity in the United States. I am indebted to the scholars and journalists who have followed these routes, and this book draws on their insight at many points.

I am also indebted to the many Black authors who have articulated why it is time to capitalize White, as I have done throughout this book. While Black has been capitalized for some time, White has not been. Many style guides recommend capitalizing the former but not the latter. In my view, it is important to capitalize White to draw attention to it as a racial category that demands observation and investigation. For too long, whiteness has been invisible, especially to White people. As Nell Irvin Painter says, “We should

capitalize ‘White’ to situate ‘Whiteness’ within the American ideology of race, within which ‘Black,’ but not ‘White,’ has been hypervisible as a group identity.” By capitalizing White, we call attention to the specific racial category that has a particular history in the United States and beyond.

In order to focus this work, I decided to tell the story of the rise of White Christian nationalism since the 1960s, when various cultural and political movements transformed the United States and led to the extension of various civil rights and forms of cultural representation to religious, racial, sex, gender, and ethnic minorities. This set off a counterrevolution that resulted in, among other things, religious support for the Trump presidency and the central role of Christian nationalism at the January 6 insurrection. Tracing this path makes it possible to see how the myth of the White Christian nation provided the basis for our polarized public square—what amounts to an American cold civil war—and the worst attack on the Capitol in two centuries.