

Chapter Title: KILLING DEMOCRACY TO SAVE THE NATION

Book Title: Preparing for War

Book Subtitle: The Extremist History of White Christian Nationalism--and What Comes Next

Book Author(s): BRADLEY ONISHI

Published by: Augsburg Fortress, Broadleaf Books. (2023)

Stable URL: <https://www.jstor.org/stable/j.ctv2phpsfh.10>

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Chapter 7

KILLING DEMOCRACY TO SAVE THE NATION

IN LATE SEPTEMBER OF my first year of high school, just four months after my conversion to evangelicalism, I attended the “See You at the Pole” rally at the flagpole in front of my high school. Any fears I had about attending a public prayer rally were allayed when I saw the dozens of other kids who had gathered an hour before classes would start. While we envisioned ourselves as a persecuted minority, Orange County evangelicals comprised a sizable percentage of the population. In a school of 2,000 students, about 150 had turned out to pray that September morning.

When Mom let me out of her gray minivan in the parking lot, the early arrivers had already formed a circle around the pole, holding hands and bowing their heads. There was no program or leader. When someone felt led to pray, they did, “interceding for” our teachers, school, nation, and friends. At times we broke into song; at times there was silence. We carried on until the bell rang for first period.

“Why were you guys praying to the flag?” a classmate asked me later that day. Only then did it occur to me that it probably seemed

as if we had gathered in some sort of patriotic ritual to honor Old Glory. Looking back, I see the kernel of truth lodged in his sense that we were praying not *at* the flagpole but *to* the flag. Switching out one two-letter preposition for another one, my classmate perhaps intuited something I did not yet see.

See You at the Pole is a yearly event that gathers evangelical students at their respective institutions to pray at the foot of the American flag. Having been started in 1990 by students in Texas as an offshoot of the National Day of Prayer, See You at the Pole was a time to “lift up their friends, families, teachers, school, and nation to God.” By the next year, reportedly over a million teenagers across the nation gathered at their schools’ flagpoles. The rally has taken place on the fourth Wednesday of September ever since, with millions of young Americans participating every fall.

As a zealot with a tendency to take things to the extreme, I went above and beyond during my senior year and committed to praying at the flag *every* Friday; I invited anyone to join me. Most Fridays I was alone when I stood there at the pole an hour before school. Sometimes there were three or four of us. We prayed for God to reign on our campus and in our nation. We asked him to combat the godlessness of our culture and to change the hearts of our teachers, administrators, and peers. Gathering at the foot of our country’s national symbol each week, we asked the Lord of heaven and earth to retake what was rightfully his. We wanted our school and our country to be a shining light to the world—a place where the kingdom of God and the American nation were indistinguishable.

AMERICA, CITY ON THE HILL?

In 1630, John Winthrop proclaimed to his fellow Puritans that New England would be a city on a hill for all the world to emulate. He was drawing on Matthew 5, where Jesus extols his followers to participate

in the kingdom of God in a way that will make them a shining light to all people. Winthrop envisioned his people as a “New Israel” and a “chosen people” who would shed light across a world made dark by sin and tyranny.

Americans have long conflated the kingdom of God and the nation-state. The notion that the United States is a shining city on a hill resounds throughout our history. The likes of John Kennedy and Ronald Reagan have called on it during times of war, hardship, and crisis to remind Americans that this great democratic experiment is not the easiest route but is the right one, that democracy is complicated and often painful but worth it in order to live in freedom, peace, and equity. The biggest proponents of the city on a hill metaphor have always been politicians and Christian pastors, two groups invested in forming an image of the American republic as a light to the world morally, civically, and religiously.

During my high school years in the late 1990s, however, many White evangelicals felt as if the country was slipping further and further away from its exceptional role as God’s chosen land. Despite James Dobson’s movement for family values based on the heteropatriarchal nuclear family, and despite the purity pledges sent to the nation’s capital, there were signs of godlessness all around. President Clinton was embroiled in an adultery scandal involving an intern. This was the era of fierce debate over same-sex civil unions and eventually the legalization of same-sex marriage. The American family was changing. Mixed-race couples were increasingly normalized in many parts of the country. Divorce rates stabilized, while the taboo surrounding divorce was evaporating. Single mothers. Single fathers. Blended families. Children with two moms. Children with two dads. These became standard figurations of American life. And the levers of democracy—elections, policies, and legislation—seemed powerless to stop them. But most of all, American culture kept moving forward in spite of White Christian nationalists’ attempts to stop the progress. It

seemed as if all the work to revolutionize electoral politics and stem the tide of cultural revolution in the seventies and eighties wasn't enough.

"I believe it should be the duty of every Christian to pray for repentance and revival in the land," Billy Graham wrote in 1993. "If I were not a believer in Christ, I might at this point in history succumb to total pessimism." While Graham urged Americans to pray to the heavens for renewal, some Christians began to look east for new political and cultural blueprints in Russia and eastern Europe. In order to effect the visions of a "pure" America and to realign the American social body, some White Christian nationalists became enamored of authoritarian regimes as the exemplars of morality and civic structure. They began looking to countries where there is no meaningful democratic governance or human rights records—countries ruled by autocratic strongmen without a free press, democratic processes, or even freedom of religion. In what would become an authoritarian turn within White Christian nationalism, adherents began to believe that preserving the holy trinity of family, God, and nation might be worth the sacrifice of democracy itself.

FROM THE GOLD RUSH TO PUTIN'S PUPPET

One night in 1964, Dana Rohrabacher was hiding in a tree, waiting for bandits to show up at the office below. His plan was to thwart their attack and protect the campaign and the candidate that had ignited in him a youthful zeal for politics. As a student at Palos Verdes High School near Los Angeles, Rohrabacher had become enthralled with Barry Goldwater after reading the Arizona senator's *The Conscience of a Conservative*. No vandals showed up that night to the Goldwater campaign offices that Rohrabacher was "protecting" from high up in that tree, but this story became an emblematic tale of his commitment to the Goldwater revolution in conservative politics. Like many others from the Arizona senator's failed presidential run, Rohrabacher used the defeat as the basis of his political calling.

Over the next decade, Rohrabacher made his way from Southern California to Washington, DC. After time on Capitol Hill, he became assistant press secretary to President Ronald Reagan, helping outline Reagan's foreign policy, which came to be known as the Reagan Doctrine, and build out the Gipper's anticommunist policies and message. After Reagan left office, Rohrabacher returned home to California and won election to the US House of Representatives for a district in the northern coastal region of Orange County. Rohrabacher would spend the next thirty years (1989–2019) representing this conservative Orange County enclave in Congress. As a Goldwater campaign alum and a Reagan administration official, he had the quintessential profile for the district, having cut his political teeth on staunchly libertarian policies and vehement anticommunist rhetoric. Below his surfer-dude persona and Christian lingo was a bulldog who wasn't afraid to represent the county's ultraconservative constituents even when others considered him extremist.

But then something strange happened. The man who had come up through the ranks warning the world of the threat of communism in the Soviet Union morphed into the most pro-Russia member of either house of Congress.

It began thirty years ago when he hosted the then vice mayor of St. Petersburg, Vladimir Putin, in Washington, DC. They played a game of touch football and then drunkenly arm wrestled to decide who should win the Cold War. From the turn of the millennium forward, Rohrabacher transformed into what some have dubbed "Putin's favorite congressperson." Over the years, he has compared Putin to Gorbachev and has said Reagan would want the United States to establish good working relationships with Russia. He tried to derail the Magnitsky Act, which prohibits certain Russian oligarchs from entering the United States and inhibits their ability to bank here. He also compared Russia's military invasion of Crimea to the Revolutionary War.

So how did the man who was once so devoted to libertarian ideals that he hid in a tree to protect the Goldwater campaign from vandals

become the most vocal congressional advocate of Vladimir Putin, a leader who uses his autocratic powers in the least libertarian ways possible? Putin is known for restricting immigration, limiting free speech and the free press, controlling Russia's economy through a network of oligarchs with state business interests, and teaming up with the state church to wage violence against members of the LGBTQ community. Rohrabacher's pro-Russian platform became so pronounced that in 2016, Republican congressman Kevin McCarthy, who became House minority leader a few years later, said in a private meeting with Paul Ryan and a few others that he thinks Putin pays two people: Donald Trump and Dana Rohrabacher.

While it's impossible to conclude decisively how and why Rohrabacher went from an anti-Soviet crusader to a pro-Putin cheerleader, one hint might be in what he told KPCC Radio in 2013 about his infamous arm-wrestling match with Putin. "He's a little guy, but boy, I tell you, he put me down in a millisecond. He is tough. His muscles are just unbelievable. He's a tough guy and he's supposed to be a tough guy. That's what the Russian people want." As a "tough guy," Putin doesn't abide by democratic institutions and processes. He acts with absolute authority and threatens those who challenge him with physical violence. His rule is based on force and might, not the will of the people. And perhaps surprisingly, this is exactly why religious luminaries on the New Religious Right now see him as the model global leader.

As we explored in the previous chapters, one of the foundations of the New Religious Right is American nationalism, fueled by "I Love America rallies" and the constant juxtaposition of the cross and the flag. Communism—particularly the Soviet type—has always been a go-to bogeyman for White Christian nationalists. Yet all it took for the movement to reverse its stance on Russia was for the former Soviet Union to transition to an autocratic regime led by one "tough guy." Allan Carlson, the former director of the Family and America Study Center and the founder and longtime international secretary

of the World Congress of Families—organizations committed to defending traditional “family values”—put it this way in 2018: “There are great experiments in post-liberal political and economic life occurring right now in real places in Poland’s law and justice party, in the Hungary of prime minister Victor Orbán, and yes, in the land of the great Russians led by Vladimir Putin.”

Carlson’s praise for these parties and leaders isn’t an accident. Paul Weyrich, the godfather of the New Religious Right, began taking regular trips to Russia in the 1990s. There he trained activists and saw in Russia a chance to reraise Christendom. “Clearly it is in the American national interest to keep Russia on its side not only in the fight against radical Islamic fundamentalists but on a more permanent basis,” Weyrich cowrote with Edward Lozansky in 2001. “And the Russian people must understand that being an American ally brings substantial dividends.”

For Weyrich, remaking the United States as the city on a hill would require foreign help from Russia. Here’s how Sarah Posner put it when I interviewed her in 2020: “In the early days of Putin, he kind of admired him and thought it was okay for a strong leader to dispense with some of the procedures and protocols of democracy in the service of advancing that kind of ideal of a Christian nation. This was not something that was really on the radar of many rank-and-file Christian rights activists until the Trump era.”

Always the visionary, Weyrich saw, by the turn of the millennium, what his comrades on the New Religious Right wouldn’t until a decade later: Russia is a model for the type of “pure” nation that White Christian nationalists want. Russia is not only one of the Whitest places on earth; under Putin’s regime, it has also become openly hostile to outsiders, especially those coming from Muslim-majority countries. It has a Christian past rooted in the hierarchical and patriarchal Orthodox tradition, which in many ways matches up with the kind of authoritarian politics that does not wait for, or depend on, democratic mechanisms to process decisions about policy or governance.

Authoritarians like Putin have become the model leader for a segment of the American population who have lost their majority but want to maintain the purity of the American body. For them, democracy is not the ideal form of governance if it doesn't yield the political and cultural hierarchies they desire. If installing an authoritarian who will act on their behalf and against the will of the people is their best hope of retaining control, then, for some of them at least, so be it.

Sarah Posner, author of *Unholy: Why White Christians Worship at the Altar of Donald Trump*, summed it up in 2019:

Indeed, many in the US Christian right believe America has failed as a role model for the rest of the world—that liberalism, unrestrained, has brought a once great nation to its knees. To them, the “illiberal” autocrats across the Atlantic are fast becoming the new standard-bearers in a global battle for traditional values, an antidote to what they see as rising decadence and moral relativism in the West.

What this means, on the ground, is a visible partnership between what is known as the Alt Right (short for the “alternative right”), made up of openly xenophobic and racist figures who want the United States to be a White ethno-state, and the heirs of the New Religious Right, religious communities that want the United States to be a Christian nation marked by patriarchy and Christian hegemony. Both groups mourn a mythological America they see as lost to the throes of pluralism, immigration, the expansion of civil rights for people of color and the LGBTQ+ community, and the changing racial demographics of the country.

It's worth noting that this is how Christian nationalism provides an umbrella for a diverse coalition of groups and movements. While many in the Alt Right may not seem religious in terms of their church attendance or daily Bible reading, they find in the Christianity

offered by Dobson, Carlson, and others a resonant worldview. If White Christian nationalism is based on the foundations of racism, xenophobia, and queerphobia, then it offers Alt Right bigots a religious umbrella for their movement that can accommodate their core ideology without demanding adherence to particular doctrinal positions or church attendance.

This, of course, lines up with the history we have traced in previous chapters. The formation of the New Religious Right was founded on protecting segregation academies, a patriarchal nuclear family, and vehement nationalism. In this sense, it is easy to understand how the inheritors of Weyrich's and Falwell's visions of America not only find allies with the Alt Right abroad, but could look to Russia and other central and eastern European countries as paragons of how society should be racially ordered: with Whites at the top and everyone else in their proper place below them. What is most startling about the authoritarian turn in White Christian politics is how quickly the New Religious Right flipped its position on Russia.

Weyrich died in 2008, the same year Barack Obama won the White House. The election of the first Black president accelerated the process of White Christian nationalists' enchantment with authoritarian figures like Putin as the answer to the problem of the United States' liberalism. After Weyrich's death, other organizations and other leaders stepped in to fill the vacuum, cultivating relationships with far-right leaders and organizations abroad. The most important of these was the World Congress of Families, an international coalition dedicated to the "family values" ethos first cultivated by Dobson's Focus on the Family in the 1980s.

WORLD CONGRESS OF FAMILIES

A common refrain is that the United States no longer "makes" anything. We don't export many goods anymore; we import them from China, India, and other places. But one way to think about the World

Congress of Families (WCF) and similar organizations is as exporters of the American family values movement. Though it was formed independently in 1997, the WCF is now part of the International Organization of the Family, which according to their mission statement, “Unites and Equips Leaders Worldwide to Promote the Natural Family.” In addition to the WCF, the International Organization of the Family publishes a journal, runs a leadership institute, and shapes policy initiatives. The International Organization of the Family uses the WCF to promote complementarianism and the nuclear family as the bedrock of any healthy nation. The organization views all nonheterosexual relationships and family structures as destructive and harmful to children, labeling them a “gender ideology” that corrupts individuals and countries alike. And they are patriarchal through and through—the earthly father is seen as an extension of the divine Father, and thus his authority is unquestionable and near absolute. “The complementary natures of men and women, both physically and psychologically, are evident throughout the course of human history and in every society,” writes WCF founder Allan Carlson and vice president Paul Mero in *The Natural Family: A Manifesto*. “Deviations from natural sexual behavior cannot truly satisfy the human spirit.”

Seeing a bleak situation at home, the WCF has been in bed with foreign leaders and organizations it believes can help bolster its movement and create an international synergy in the fight for the “traditional family” for almost two decades. It has exported the Christian language of family values and, in turn, learned from authoritarian leaders who share a similar patriarchal and heteronormative vision of society. “They’ve had these conferences all over the world,” Sarah Posner told me in our 2020 interview. “But in recent years, they’ve had them in coordination with far-right leaders in places like Italy, Hungary, Moldova, Russia. And so in recent years, they’ve begun to look at and partner with autocratic leaders, who they actually get to officially cohost the conference. So it’s not just that they had a conference in Budapest; it’s that Orbán helped sponsor it. Or in Italy

they had a conference in Verona, and Matteo Salvini cosponsored it. The one that I covered was in Moldova, which was cohosted by the then president of Moldova, who was Putin ally Igor Dodon.”

The rhetoric coming from these conferences can be unnerving even for those used to operating within conservative Christian settings. Forming connections in countries like Hungary, Georgia, and Turkey means that public anti-LGBTQ hate speech can be in full bloom, with little fear of public outcry. As one speaker at a World Congress of Families gathering in the republic of Georgia in 2016 said: “Tell the LGBT tolerance tyrants, this lavender mafia, these homofascists, these rainbow radicals, that they are not welcome to promote their anti-religious and anti-civilizational propaganda in your nations.”

In the previous chapter, we saw how Christian nationalism is the original purity culture. For White Christian nationalists, the goal is to foster a “pure” society based on the foundation of the patriarchal, heteronormative nuclear family. This, according to Dobson, Carlson, and their cohorts, is the pathway to national strength and vitality. Purifying the bodies of teenagers and ordering the family the right way will lead to an impenetrable national body, resistant to decay and decline. Authoritarian leaders like Hungary’s Viktor Orbán and Russia’s Vladimir Putin agree. Both men have used the rhetoric of Christian values and heritage to justify violence against LGBTQ communities and policies outlawing queer sexualities and gender identities. In 2020, Orbán criticized western Europe for “experiments with a godless cosmos, rainbow families, migration, and open societies.”

The family values rhetoric doesn’t stop there, however. “We think that the problems of Europe can be traced back to the denial of Christian roots. We see the misinterpretation of tolerance many times. Being tolerant should not mean that one gives up his or her identity,” said Katalin Novák, Hungary’s minister of state for family, youth, and international affairs, in 2019. She later gave a keynote address at the “Make Families Great Again” conference held at the Hungarian embassy in Washington, DC.

In 2018, Putin outlawed “gay propaganda” and defended this action by claiming that the family is the basis for a prosperous nation. He said, “We know there are ever more people in the world who support our position in defense of the traditional values that for centuries have formed the moral foundation of civilization.”

These ideas and actions have garnered nothing but praise from the WCF. “And the homosexual propaganda—the law in the Russian Duma: it passed on first reading, it would ban propaganda to minors, preventing them [LGBT people] from corrupting children,” wrote Larry Jacobs, WCF managing director, in 2013. “What a great idea and the rest of Europe is going the other way, legalizing LGBT propaganda.”

While issues surrounding gender and sexuality are the stated reasons for the WCF’s and other conservative religious organizations’ liaisons with authoritarian leaders, their actions reflect a startling reality: many White Christian American nationalists now see autocratic regimes as the shining cities on a hill. They are the models of how to construct a pure society. Using the rhetoric of Christian heritage and family values, leaders like Orbán and Putin give transcendent authority to their antidemocratic, anti-LGBTQ, and antipluralist modes of governance. “They’ve made a kind of seamless transition from being anticommunist to supporting these autocrats,” Sarah Posner told me in 2020. “And it seems that the reasonable conclusion to draw would be that they don’t like totalitarianism when it’s left-wing totalitarianism, but they’re okay with it coming from the right.”

Even if Putin and Orbán rely on undemocratic processes, physical violence, and various forms of corruption to achieve what they see as the proper order to their societies, White Christian nationalists favor their tactics over the slow-moving processes of a democratic republic. When the bedrock of your worldview is the will to power, all that matter is results. The goal is domination, not dialogue or debate—much less democracy.

TRUMP, PURITY, FAMILY VALUES, AND AUTHORITARIANISM

Given the New Religious Right's admiration of Putin, Orbán, and other autocratic strongmen, their unwavering support for Trump makes complete sense. In the opening to his presidential campaign, Trump uttered what are now infamous words about Mexican people. "They're sending people that have lots of problems at that. Bringing those problems with us. They're bringing drugs; they're bringing crime. They're rapists."

On January 27, 2017, just weeks into his presidency, Trump signed an executive order that banned foreign nationals from seven predominantly Muslim countries from visiting the country for ninety days, suspended entry to the country of all Syrian refugees indefinitely, and prohibited any other refugees from coming into the country for 120 days. "I think Islam hates us," he said. "There's something, there's something there that ... that's a tremendous hatred. There . . . there's a tremendous hatred. We have to get to the bottom of it."

He then shocked the nation after violence erupted between White supremacists, including neo-Nazis, and counterdemonstrators at a 2017 rally in Charlottesville. "I think there's blame on both sides," he said. "You look at both sides. I think there's blame on both sides, and I have no doubt about it and you don't have any doubt about it either. And if you reported it accurately, you would say it. But you also had people that were very fine people on both sides."

In May 2020, Trump's former head of national security, John Bolton, released a memoir. In one episode, he chronicles Trump's response to President Xi's explanation as to why the Chinese leader needs to build concentration camps for Uyghur Muslims. According to Bolton, Trump said that building the camps was "exactly the right thing to do."

When he ran for the presidency in 2015, Trump made waves by calling the press the "enemy of the people." He repeatedly called for investigations into his political enemies, encouraged supporters to call

for the jailing of Hillary Clinton, and used the Department of Justice as his own personal law firm. During the 2020 uprisings in reaction to the murder of George Floyd, Trump infamously ordered peaceful protesters be dispersed with tear gas so he could march through the Rose Garden to hold up a Bible in front of St. John's Church.

These are only a few examples of Trump's authoritarian tendencies. Predictably, they did little to scare off the White Christians who helped usher him into the White House in 2016. In fact, among White evangelicals, Trump's support rose 3 percent in 2020. Overall, in the 2020 election, 84 percent of White evangelicals, 57 percent of White nonevangelical Protestants, and 57 percent of White Catholics voted for him.

IT TAKES AN IMPURE MAN TO PURIFY THE NATION

If we want to gain a more expansive view of why White Christian nationalists have transformed Trump into an American savior, we have to combine our analyses of purity culture and family values with their infatuation with foreign strongmen. The first question to answer is what autocratic rulers do for a nation. History is clear that authoritarian leaders limit free speech, control the media, enforce draconian laws that inhibit personal freedoms, and ban or marginalize minorities and the LGBTQ community. For most of us, this spells bad news. Not only does autocracy belie the will of the people in favor of the rule of one (or a few), but it goes against the basic rights we associate with democratic societies: freedom of the press, of assembly, of religion, and of speech; the right to pursue life, liberty, and happiness; the right to transparency from our leaders; and the ability to vote them out when their policies and views no longer represent the majority.

By sacrificing civil liberties and human rights, however, strongmen autocrats are able to effect purity in ways democratic processes, like voting, and democratic institutions, like state and national legislatures,

cannot. In the last chapter, we saw how this vision of the family grew from the eugenics and nationalistic models of Popenoe and Gilder and then was given a religious frame by Dobson through Focus on the Family. Viewed through this lens, we can conclude that in many ways purity culture and the family values discourse developed and spread by Focus on the Family and the World Congress of Families are in essence strongmen values stuffed into the shell of a theology of sex and the family. The shared foundation of authoritarian regimes and the family values ideology is a desire to order every level of society—individual, family, and nation—according to a White, patriarchal authority structure imbued with a transcendent authority from God the Father.

TRUMP'S FAMILY VALUES?

When I stood in front of my school's flagpole on those lonely Friday mornings, praying for my classmates and my country to come back to God, I never expected that my evangelical brethren would one day pin their hopes for national repentance on a thrice-married television star accused of sexual assault, corruption, fraud, and money laundering. When I kissed Alexis for the first time as a high school senior, using every nerve, muscle, and ounce of willpower in my body to avoid lust and temptation, I never expected that one day a man who had sexual encounters with a sex worker mere weeks after his third wife gave birth would become the candidate of choice for "family values" voters.

One of the peculiar aspects of the White Christians' love affair with Trump is the clear dissonance between their sexual ethics and his sexual abuses. It's perhaps the most glaring hypocrisy when it comes to conservative religious voters claiming Trump is an American messiah who will deliver the nation back to its founding—and back to God. Yet there is a way that Trump's sexual savagery actually reinforces rather than betrays the family values discourse and

purity culture ethos we've been examining in this chapter and the previous one. And it ties directly to the White Christian nationalist admiration for foreign strongmen.

As we've observed, the foundations of these movements are White supremacist and queer-phobic in nature. Their visions of a pure society are based on the American social body as a straight, White, native-born body, living under patriarchal authority, who speaks English as their native language. Trump not only celebrates this model, but as president he did so as the leader of the American family. In Trump and Trump's family, White Christian nationalists saw the embodiment of the "pure" nation in terms of ethnicity, race, gender, and sexuality.

But it goes deeper than having a White family with Nordic genes in the White House. In *Compromising Positions*, Leslie Dorrough Smith, a scholar of religion, argues that White heterosexual men are often forgiven of sexual transgressions such as extramarital affairs, harassment, and even abuse because their aggressive sexual behavior is actually seen as a virtue for the leader tasked with protecting the nation from invaders and extending the American empire. In some sense, they transcend the call for sexual purity because their "hyper-masculine aggression is read by the public as a sign of America's own prowess and strength," Dorrough Smith writes. "In other words, the moral details of our leaders' illicit sex are not only irrelevant to whether he bears power but may actually be an indication that he deserves the power he has," Dorrough Smith continues, "precisely because his sexuality proves his masculinity, and thus his claim to authority."

Many Americans, including large swaths of White Christian nationalists, seem to accept that the figure who is asked to protect the purity of the national family may have to overstep the bounds of purity himself in order to do so. This transgression is viewed not as an unforgivable sin but as a sign of virility and power. As Kristin Kobes du Mez argues in *Jesus and John Wayne*, one of the clear lessons of

the conservative Christian idolization of Trump is that certain “family values” Christians often want a leader who is unencumbered by Christian virtue in order to help them bolster and cultivate the family values they claim are the bedrock of civilization.

As I said before, Jimmy Carter was too much of a Christian to be a Christian nationalist, much less a protoauthoritarian in the vein of Putin or Orbán. His dedication to Christ actually hindered his manifestation of the types of viciousness that many White Christian nationalists see as requisite for protecting the nation from outside invaders and internal threats. Carter, in other words, was too Christian to be the kind of president many White Christians want. Instead, they prefer a self-styled barbarian, unhindered by the duty to be Christlike.

“They see him implementing his agenda against all odds. If the swamp gets in his way, Trump bulldozes over it,” Miranda Devine wrote for Fox News in 2019. “Supreme Court, tick. Taxes cut, tick. Regulations slashed, tick. Jobs up, tick. Military rebuilt, tick. ISIS stopped, tick. Globalism challenged, tick. Paris climate treaty scrapped, tick. Borders strengthened, tick. Wall built, half-tick.”

For his supporters, Trump’s barbarism is a feature of the system, not a bug. “The American people chose a barbarian for president,” Devine writes, “because they knew only a barbarian could drain the Washington swamp.” As we will see in the next chapter, White Christian nationalists see the world as in a constant state of cosmic war, where all those opposed to them are God’s enemies who will eventually be defeated. They see themselves as the true believers—and true Americans—charged by God to carry out his mission on earth. Trump has been viewed as the barbarian-king who is willing to fight this war without concern for civility or etiquette. Like a good strongman, he is seen as the head and protector of the American family—one who oversteps the bounds of purity in order to make it possible for a pure nation to exist. His transgressions are not only forgivable; they are signs that he is up for the job.

This is why White Christian nationalists often fly the Trump flag alongside the American flag at rallies, church events, and parades. This is why one now sees apparel that reads “Jesus Is My Savior, Trump Is My President.” This is why Trump is often likened to a biblical figure chosen by God to lead his people out of exile and back to the promised land. And it’s why, if the republic and the democratic institutions that uphold it need to be martyred in order to maintain their vision of the American body and American family, some White Christian nationalists will choose autocracy over the will of the people. They will erect gallows outside the Capitol, violently attack police officers, and vandalize chambers of Congress, instead of letting someone else become head of the national body.

In many ways it’s no surprise that the group who believed—and still believes—it has an inherent right to power over the nation sees democracy as unfortunate collateral damage in their culture war. If the will of the people needs to be left behind in order to remake America as the city on a hill, then so be it. The goal is to retake the country for God, even if the republic has to be martyred in the process.