



Can Evangelicals Help Trump Thaw Relations With Russia?

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On March 8, 1983, Ronald Reagan stood before an audience of evangelicals and declared that the Soviet government was the "[focus of evil in the modern world](#)." The arena erupted in unsurprising applause, standing ovations, and echoes of the hymn "Onward Christian Soldiers." While many conservatives supported a hardline stance on the Soviet Union, the religious right gave Reagan the moral backing he needed to reignite the Cold War.

Pastors preached sermons about the godless, evil Russians. The 3.5 million-strong National Association of Evangelicals—who invited Reagan to address its annual gathering, where he gave that 1983 speech—became "[a leading anti-communist voice](#)." And the Moral Majority purchased full-page advertisements in newspapers using charged religious language to frame the issues. "Recognizing the inherently moral nature of debates about nuclear weapons, the Moral Majority gave Reagan's policies the weight of their moral authority," as historian Jeremy Hatfield has [observed](#).

More than three decades later, another Republican prepares to move into the White House, but unlike Reagan, President-elect Donald Trump seems to be [cozying up](#) to the former Soviet Union. If this weren't enough to contradict Reagan's legacy, some of his most loyal Cold War allies—conservative Christians—have advocated building bridges with Russia. As the new administration makes its plans, their collective moral voice may be just what Trump needs to thaw relations with the big bear across the sea.

Given how the Republican Party has lionized Reagan, it's difficult to imagine the party's top leader embracing the country his predecessor once stood against. And yet, Trump has gone out of his way to laud Russian President Vladimir Putin on numerous occasions, even [giving his leadership an "A" rating](#). Last month, Trump praised Putin as "[very smart](#)" for delaying his response to new American sanctions against Russia. And Putin has returned the favor, calling Trump a "clever man" and "[talented](#)."

If that weren't enough to make the Gipper roll over in his grave, Trump has even seemingly sided with Russia over his own government. After U.S. intelligence officials announced that Russia hacked into Democratic officials' emails to influence the November election, the president-elect [challenged](#) their assessment. When American officials said that pro-Russian

forces in Ukraine shot down a Malaysia Airlines flight in 2015, Trump [claimed](#), “no one really knows who did it.” When he was asked about Putin killing dissenters, Trump [replied](#), “Well, I think our country does plenty of killing also.” And, of course, Trump has famously claimed that Putin is a stronger leader than President Barack Obama.

Conservative Christians, including well-known evangelical leaders, have similarly defended Russia and decried the outgoing American president. [Franklin Graham](#), the son of famed evangelist Billy Graham, [praised Putin](#) in a 2014 op-ed for enacting harsh anti-LGBT laws:

Isn't it sad, though, that America's own morality has fallen so far that on this issue—protecting children from any homosexual agenda or propaganda—Russia's standard is higher than our own?

In my opinion, Putin is right on these issues. Obviously, he may be wrong about many things, but he has taken a stand to protect his nation's children from the damaging effects of any gay and lesbian agenda.

Graham also reportedly attacked Obama while visiting Russia—claiming, according to Russian press, that Obama “[promotes atheism](#).” Nary a peep was heard from conservative Christians in response to Graham criticizing an American president before a foreign audience. Which is to say, they did not give Graham the treatment many gave the Dixie Chicks when the singers criticized George W. Bush while abroad.

The protection against the LGBT “agenda” that Graham referenced is a 2013 “[gay propaganda](#)” [law](#) that makes it illegal in Russia to regard straight and same-sex relationships as equal or disseminate materials promoting gay rights. The law is part of a Russian state-led crackdown on LGBT rights that has led to an increase in violence against gays and lesbians—[including beatings, abductions, and public humiliation](#).

The year the law was passed, the World Congress of Families announced it would host its annual conference in Russia. (Though after much controversy, they [canceled the gathering](#).) Headquartered in Rockford, Illinois, the WCF has been one of the most powerful religious-right groups fighting the legalizations of gay marriage and abortion abroad since its founding in 1997. The WCF has helped organize several events in Russia since 2010, and WCF's executive director said he hoped American evangelicals would be “[true allies](#)” in Russia's fight to protect Christian values.

State-sponsored discrimination of gays and lesbians doesn't sound like a Christian value. But some prominent evangelicals seem to regard it as such, including Bryan Fischer, spokesman for the evangelical American Family Association, who said the propaganda law was the type of “[public policy that we've been advocating](#)”—and might not have gone far enough. And [Peter LaBarbera](#) of Americans for the Truth About Homosexuality, who backed the legislation. And the American Center for Law and Justice, a prominent evangelical legal group that [has supported some](#) of Putin's anti-LGBT measures. And Brian Brown, co-founder of the National Organization for Marriage, who [actually traveled to Russia](#) to testify on behalf of anti-gay legislation and called Putin a “lion of Christianity.”

In recent days, other evangelical leaders have also joined the pro-Russia chorus. Televangelist Jim Bakker, for example, [expressed excitement](#) that Putin might help Trump usher in the end times and hasten the second coming of Jesus. Ted Baehr, founder of MovieGuide and America's most prominent evangelical film critic, has publicly supported Russia, too: He traveled there recently on a [speaking tour](#), vowed to [use his organization to protect Russian families](#) from so-called non-traditional values, and has even encouraged the creation of a "[Christian Oscar](#)" in the country.

And pastor Rick Joyner declared that "[there is much more freedom of religion in Russia than there is in America](#)," where "we no longer have freedom of speech." Joyner's assertion may be the most bizarre given that the Kremlin [enacted a law](#) just this year that dramatically reduces religious freedom to restrict evangelization efforts outside of church.

From religious liberty to LGBT rights, Russia is just as totalitarian as it ever was, but this doesn't seem to matter to some evangelicals. Which means that the religious right—a force that helped Reagan defeat Mikhail Gorbachev's oppressive regime—might help Trump forge strong bonds with *Putin's* oppressive regime. Oh, irony of ironies.

Not all evangelical leaders are smitten with Russia. But even some who aren't keen on Putin still support Trump's efforts to strengthen ties. Robert Jeffress, a Trump supporter and megachurch pastor in Dallas, Texas, told me he is not sympathetic toward Moscow's stances on religious freedom or LGBT issues. Still, he supports the president-elect firming up the United States' relationship with the country.

"I do not fault President-elect Trump for trying to find common ground with Russia—or any nation, especially when it comes to eradicating ISIS," Jeffress said via email. "In a nuclear world, trying to build bridges with your enemies is a virtue, not a vice—as long as those bridges do not provide a pathway for your enemies to destroy you."

Jerry Falwell Jr., president of Liberty University, the largest evangelical college in the United States, is concerned with Russia's restrictions on religious liberty; calls their treatment of sexual minorities "barbaric"; and says he doesn't trust Putin's intentions. But Falwell still supports the Trump administration potentially getting closer to Putin's government.

"I look at Trump more as a very, very, very shrewd and calculating businessman, and I think any good businessman would try to open up opportunities for negotiation and for relationship-building," Falwell told me. "I think that's all he's tried to do with Putin. I think he's smart enough to know that you can't even negotiate if you don't have a relationship."

Falwell's late father was the founder of the Moral Majority. He was [tasked by Reagan himself](#) to convince evangelicals to support a hardline approach to the Soviet Union, and he [literally wrote the book](#) on why Christians should be wary of Russia. But when asked what his father's position would be if he were still alive, the younger Falwell said his dad would support Trump forging a relationship with Putin for the purpose of negotiating world affairs.

Religion has influenced politics since the nation's founding. As George Washington said in his 1796 farewell address, "Of all the dispositions and habits which lead to political prosperity, religion and morality are indispensable supports." Alexis de Tocqueville noted religion will play an important role in American politics so long as the United States remains a country comprised of religious citizens. And as historians Andrew Preston, Bruce Schulman, and Julian Zelizer write in [*Faithful Republic: Religion and Politics in Modern America*](#):

Religious Americans contribute to national debates on ethics, morals, economics, the size and proper role of government, and foreign affairs. Either individually or collectively, they bring their influence to bear on the political process by making their views known to politicians and government officials—many of whom are themselves religious, or at least conversant with the history, values, and prerogatives of religious communities.

A president might support a law or foreign-policy strategy because it is politically expedient. But religious leaders can stamp "thus saith the Lord" on it and rally their large constituencies to the cause, as they did toward the end of the Cold War. The religious right just helped elect Donald Trump in the most stunning upset in modern American politics. Now they may help their president build a closer relationship with Russia than the United States has seen in a half-century.