

## ISSUES IN PERSPECTIVE

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### ***Is Donald Trump “Our Dream President?”***

President Trump delivered the Commencement address at Liberty University in Lynchburg, Virginia this year. This is the institution founded by Jerry Falwell, founder also of the Moral Majority and other organizations in the late 20<sup>th</sup> century. Falwell epitomized the attempt by evangelicals to influence the direction of Republican Party politics in 1980s and 1990s. In many ways, he also symbolized what became known as the “Religious Right” in those decades. His son, Jerry Falwell, Jr., is now Liberty University’s president. In introducing President Trump a few weeks ago, the young Falwell called him “our dream president.” As support for that rather extraordinary claim, Falwell cited Trump’s appointment of Neil Gorsuch to the Supreme Court, his support of Israel and his slight modification (via an Executive Order) of the Johnson Amendment dealing with ability of pastors to support political candidates and other political issues from the pulpit.

In this *Perspective*, I want to examine this remarkable claim that, for evangelicals, Trump is a “dream president.” If we define “evangelical,” for example, as someone who affirms the absolute authority of God’s Word, the substitutionary death and resurrection of Jesus Christ, and the importance of evangelism, then I am an evangelical. But, as an evangelical leader, I cannot agree with Falwell in stating that Trump is my “dream president.” Here are a few reasons why:

1. Broadly defined as a voting bloc in the 2016 presidential election, 81% of evangelicals voted for Donald Trump as president. The reasons for this astonishing allegiance to Donald Trump are varied. But that allegiance defies consistency and adherence to the standards God sets for leadership. Throughout his entire life, Donald Trump has evidenced arrogance, indeed hubris, not normally embraced by evangelicals. That arrogance and hubris has followed him into his presidency. Sexual immorality and numerous divorces have characterized Donald Trump’s life—factors evangelicals rarely have embraced in their political candidates. Trump has evidenced a disregard for truth and has consistently misrepresented facts, commitments and contracts. That demeanor has followed him into his presidency. Yet, amazingly, 75% of evangelicals in a recent Pew Research Center study approve of his job performance—“strongly” so. Evangelicals are now overlooking every aspect of Donald Trump’s despicable personal character. He begs Christian evangelicals to see him as the one who will rescue them from the sense of grievance and cultural dispossession they now feel. For much of American history, evangelicals have been in places of power (culturally, economically and politically) and often actually set the agenda for the culture (see Frances Fitzgerald’s new book, *The Evangelicals*, for a worthwhile overview of this premise). But no longer! Evangelicals

are in a clear minority and feel dispossessed and their list of grievances with the cultural left grows weekly. In short, evangelicals now see Trump as their cultural savior. Hence Falwell's astonishing claim that he is our "dream president." No matter how you analyze this extraordinary claim, this is political expediency and (in light of how evangelicals spoke of Bill Clinton's immorality and lying) hypocritical.

2. Donald Trump ran as a candidate on the promise that he would "drain the swamp" in Washington. In the words of conservative columnist Ross Douthat, "the various outsider groups that cast their lot with him—from working-class ex-Democrats to antiwar conservatives to free-trade skeptics to build-the-wall hawks to religious conservatives fearful for their liberties—have seen him pick very few difficult fights on their behalf."
  - For the working-class voters, there is no infrastructure bill and the health care overall is a disaster. Instead, his proposed budget recommends upper-bracket tax cuts and spending reductions on programs that would most directly impact the working class.
  - So far, his foreign policy choices have been minimal in impact. In fact, his attempt to cozy up to Vladimir Putin is actually causing a significant crisis in his administration because of unethical and perhaps illegal things done by his associates.
  - For religious conservatives, there is Neil Gorsuch but he has made no movement on anything dealing with the LGBT movement, a major concern to evangelicals. There is much rhetoric but little substance.

Douthat concludes that "the conservatives rising to his defense need to recognize that there is no elite 'counterrevolution' here for them to resist, because there is no Trump revolution in the first place. You don't want to sell him out to the establishment; I get it. But open your eyes: He's already been doing that to you."

3. Conservative columnist Peggy Noonan, who was one of Ronald Reagan's speech writers, contends that "the president of the United States has produced a building crisis that is unprecedented in our history . . . The president's staffers seem to spend most of their time on the phone, leaking and seeking advantage, trying not to be named in the next White House Shake-Up story . . . The president spends his time tweeting his inane, bizarre messages—he's the victim of a 'witch hunt'—from his bed, with his iPad." The tragedy of this debacle is that there is a real need to do the serious business of the American people: Tax reform, regulation reform and the desperate need to begin fixing our infrastructure as a nation. On top of this is of course the need for significant reform or replacement of the Affordable Care Act, which has raised unrealistic expectations within the American population that the US government can fix the health care system of the United States. So far, this has not happened. At this point in any young

presidency, the new president can rely on competent staff members that are settling in and adjusting to their new role. But Trump has an enormous number of staff not yet appointed. And those vacancies will probably remain so because talented people on the outside do not wish to join an administration that evidences such dysfunction and despair.

4. One of Vladimir Putin's primary objectives is to demonstrate the failure of western democracies. His view is that his authoritarian approach to government is what is needed today—not the American model of democracy! Hence, he has sought to undermine the western democracies, as he did in our election in 2016, as he sought to do in France a few weeks ago, and as he continues to do in the fragile eastern and central European democracies. Because of the incredible dysfunction of the Trump administration, he is achieving his objective. The world views what is occurring in the US as a circus. The Trump administration is not building confidence and it is not providing the model that the US has been since World War II. As Noonan advises, the top Republicans need to confront Trump and declare, "Stop it. Clean up your act. Shut your mouth. Do your job. Stop tweeting. Stop seething. Stop wasting time. You lost the thread and don't even know what you were elected to do anymore. Get a grip. Grow up and look at the terrain, see it for what it is. We have limited time. Every day you undercut yourself, you undercut us . . . Act like a president or leave the presidency." "The president needs to be told: 'Democracy is not your plaything.'"

Our nation's democratic-republic is fragile, yet amazingly resilient. It has survived numerous crises since 1963, each one a potential catastrophe for our democratic-republic: John F. Kennedy was assassinated. Richard Nixon faced impeachment but resigned rather than face certain conviction. Ronald Reagan faced potential impeachment over the Iran-contra crisis. Bill Clinton was impeached but not convicted. George W. Bush was perceived by many as an illegitimate president because of the disputed electoral votes in Florida in 2000. The crisis we are facing with Donald Trump is just as serious. Putin loves that dysfunction, for it feeds perfectly into his claim that only authoritarian government works in the 21<sup>st</sup> century. Western Europe no longer believes it can trust the US. As the Trump presidency goes forward and the promises he made remain unfulfilled, the crisis of our democratic-republic will only deepen.

We must pray that God in His mercy will be gracious once again to this nation. We desperately need His help.

See *The Economist*, "Lexington" column (20 May 2017), p. 27; Peggy Noonan in the *Wall Street Journal* (20-21 May 2017); Ross Douthat in the *New York Times* (21 May 2017); Michael Gerson in the *Washington Post* (15 May 2017); and Robert Samuelson in the *Washington Post* (28 May 2017).