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The Politics of a Praying Nation: The Presidential Prayer Team and Christian Right Sexual Morality

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Abstract: Many contemporary Christian conservative projects provide a context for and invitation to believers to engage in intercessory prayer or to serve as “prayer warriors” for causes and public policies that organizations and institutions advocate. One of these is the Presidential Prayer Team, a project that encourages prayer for the president and for public officials. Because the Presidential Prayer Team is a delivery system for Christian conservative political commitments and goals, analyzing it provides information about the variety of quotidian ways in which Christian conservative political values and goals are rhetorically packaged and delivered to followers and those who are likely converts to the conservative theology and politics of the Christian right. In this article I focus on the ways in which the Presidential Prayer Team engages in priming with regard to issues of sexual morality, and particularly political issues related to LGBTQ rights and issues.

Keywords: Christian right, Presidential Prayer Team, LGBTQ, sexuality, priming

In November 2010 *Christianity Today* published an article entitled “The Politics of Prayer.” Under the heading “Pray for All Leaders—Particularly Our Guy,” the author, Tobin Grant, expressed a concern that is often heard in settings of religious worship as well as in religious media: that Christian belief and commitment may be leveraged for political ends by groups with political aspirations and access to believers. Grant, who decries the use of prayer and scripture as “fundraising tactics,” indicts both the Family Research Council (FRC; on the political right) and Sojourners (on the political left) for using calls to prayer (FRC) or scripture (both FRC and Sojourners) for political and partisan ends (Grant 2010, para. 10). Yet the use of prayer in contexts of cultural or political engagement and mobilization is commonplace. Researchers in the field of religion and politics study many dimensions of organized religious initiatives, literatures, campaigns, and elite addresses/position statements for their political content. But, perhaps relying on assumptions that prayers are, on the one hand, deeply private and spiritual and, on the other hand, politically ephemeral, few scholars of politics have focused analytical attention on them and their relationship to political enterprises.

Prayer is usually understood either as a solitary pursuit or as one practiced in the company of other believers. In addition to research on prayer and its effects for those who pray, some research has found significant correlations between liberal or conservative political ideology and categories of prayer such as praise, thanksgiving, penitence, and petition/provision. One study relies on spontaneous prayers and reports of prayer by individuals who pray to

tease out a correlation between conservatism (and right-wing authoritarianism) and prayers of praise, thanksgiving, and penitence, and a correlation between liberalism and prayers for provision (Hanek, Olson, and McAdams 2011). However, here I will focus on prayer that is not spontaneous but, rather, is generated by sociopolitical groups and institutions and, in particular, by leaders of organizations, paid staff members, or high-profile volunteers (including authors, speakers, and prominent pastors). Some of this prayer is delivered in public settings such as meetings of Ralph Reed's Faith and Freedom Network, the FRC's annual Values Voter Summit, and Governor Rick Perry's August 2011 Houston event, "The Response."

But prayer also is delivered in virtual venues by way of personalized e-mails to subscribers, live (and cached) Internet video streams of public events, and Internet downloads from organizations, as well as through direct mail. Christian conservative "prayer projects," which have proliferated in recent years, provide a context for and invitation to believers/supporters to engage in intercessory prayer or to serve as "prayer warriors" for causes and public policies that organizations and sectors of the Christian conservative movement advocate. Such projects enlist individuals or churches as subscribers, regularly contact subscribers and other believers, and constitute a significant segment of Christian conservative culture (Luhmann 2012).¹ Like some other arenas of Christian popular culture, prayer projects also generate political content that can take many forms, including biblical principles that respond to political arguments and positions on legislation, court decisions, or choices of political leaders.² The prayers of these prayer projects do not employ "the code" of "God talk" identified by Brian Calfano, Paul Djupe, and Angelia Wilson in political messaging to conservative evangelicals in the United States and the United Kingdom (Calfano and Djupe 2009; Calfano, Djupe, and Wilson 2013). Instead of religious cues in public discourse that will be recognized and understood only by believers, the prayer of these projects is straightforward in its appeals (and appeal) to Christian conservatives. Such prayers can be analyzed as political texts.

The title of this article refers to a popular series of books by Christian author Stormie Omartian that highlights the phrase "The Power of a Praying __," which is protected by registered trademark.³ The franchise includes *The Power of a Praying Nation* (2002), a response to the attacks of 11 September 2001 that integrates cultural and political critique with personal and spiritual prescriptions for avoiding future catastrophic episodes of divine judgment on the United States.⁴ My goal is to show how Christian conservative elites and organizations use Christian media, including the text of prayers and related devotional content, to prime Christian conservative believers on lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, or queer (LGBTQ) issues and to tie these issues to the presidency of Barack Obama. These messages aimed at believers discuss social and political issues in ways that enhance the accessibility and salience of particular framings of these issues and create associations between these frames and political parties and leaders (Miller and Krosnick 2000).

As an empirical matter, whether groups are single-issue or general-purpose groups, the prayers, devotionals, and related discourse disseminated by organizations or institutions with a political agenda usually reflect the agenda of the organizations with which they are associated. In this way, social and institutional interests and dynamics shape prayer and, in doing so, simultaneously provide a rhetorical infrastructure of support for cultural and political initiatives. In this sense, prayer becomes a form of what Sara Diamond has identified as "cultural politics": the second track of a "dual-track focus" whose first track consists of conventional electoral politics. For Diamond, cultural politics include "the informal processes of everyday life [through which] people come to know what they think and decide how to act—or decline to act—politically" (2001, 42).⁵ The domain of cultural politics encompasses a wide

range of discourses, media, and venues, including radio, television, books, churches, Web sites, e-mails, and social media.

A variety of national Christian conservative prayer projects have come into existence in recent years. These include the Presidential Prayer Team (PPT), Forty Days for Life (a pro-life organization that organizes prayer campaigns at clinics where abortions are performed and provides regular reports, prayers, and devotionals to subscribers), Intercessors for America (whose motto is “connecting hearts of prayer for the nation to God and each other”), and the Salt and Light Council: Biblical Citizenship for Churches (whose ministry affiliates “exist to” “pray for our state, nation, world, and elected officials”; [Salt and Light Council 2012](#), para. 2). These prayer projects can be contrasted with Christian right organizations such as the FRC in two ways: first, by their narrower focus (on prayer rather than on political activities such as lobbying) and, second, by the tone of their advocacy on matters of interest to Christian conservatives. While it shares the cultural politics of the Christian conservative movement, the PPT tends to soften the hard ideological edge, and often mocking tone, associated with rhetoric produced by the FRC on the same social and political issues.

In what follows, I analyze the PPT, a project that has as its explicit purpose encouraging prayer for the president and other public officials. The PPT does not present itself as politicized; indeed, in its original incarnation during the Bush administration, its political orientation was discernible only indirectly, and then mostly through its readings of American history and especially its representations of the intersections of public leadership with Christian faith. However, with the transition from the Bush administration to the Obama administration the political commitments of the PPT emerged into sharper focus. As a result, the PPT provides a text through which it is possible to discern the workings of Christian conservative cultural politics. Because the PPT is a delivery system for Christian conservative political commitments and goals, analyzing it and other prayer projects provides information about the variety of quotidian, sometimes daily, ways in which Christian conservative political values and goals are rhetorically packaged and delivered to followers and those who are likely converts to the conservative theology and politics of the Christian right.

What Is the PPT?

Founded on 18 September 2001 in the wake of the 11 September attacks, the PPT took as its mission the task of leading prayer for the president and other public officials. As Snopes.com has pointed out, for a short time after its founding the PPT operated in a context of confusion about its relationship to the Bush administration, which had convened a National Prayer Service at Washington, DC’s National Cathedral and had declared Friday, 14 September, a National Day of Prayer and Remembrance in recognition of the casualties of the attacks and their families, as well as those who had served or were serving in rescue and support positions ([Snopes 2008](#)). When PPT organizers were challenged on the group’s ties to Bush and his administration, the organization’s Web site clarified that President George W. Bush was not officially connected to the PPT. Nevertheless, throughout the Bush administration, the iconic image associated with the PPT that appeared in PPT e-mail alerts was President Bush, his brow furrowed and his head bowed in prayer.

The original purpose of the PPT was “mobilizing and encouraging Americans to pray daily for the President, his cabinet, and other leaders of our nation” ([Presidential Prayer Team 2005](#)).⁶ The PPT describes itself as a non-partisan, non-profit 501(c)3 membership organization headed by a president/chief executive officer and a board of directors. However, the PPT was launched by David Bolthouse, president of the Envoy Group, a Christian advertising

and consulting firm based in Longview, Texas; and minister Cornell Haan. Past clients of the Envoy Group include Focus on the Family, the National Association of Evangelicals, and Campus Crusade, International. In 2003 the Envoy Group turned over operation of the PPT to its new staff; the organization put out a press release, and Bolthouse—who continues to serve as executive director of the PPT—was quoted on the transition:

We get a kick out of using our knowledge of the Internet, marketing, fundraising and publicity for developing grassroots movements for meaningful nonprofit clients, but serving President Bush in this important way was a distinct honor. Our team has put many days, nights and weekends in building PPT, but we're now ready to move on to other projects and the baby we nurtured into a giant is now ready to be managed entirely by its own staff. (Envoy Group 2003, para. 4)

Because Bolthouse does not elaborate in this press release how the PPT has served President Bush, it appears that he is insinuating a connection between Bush and the PPT that the project disclaimed early in its operation. The quote also suggests that the PPT began as a grassroots movement that was bolstered by the expertise of the Envoy Group rather than being a product of the advertising and consulting company.

Over time, the organization's activities diversified; in addition to a listserv that communicates with members, activities have included a volunteer ("Ambassadors") program, an "Adopt Our Troops" program, a radio show, PPT publications, unscientific member polls, and a children's program (Presidential Prayer Team for Kids). What began as the original "product" of the PPT, an e-mailed report to subscribers on policy makers and their jobs, and specific admonitions to pray for the president, is now called the "Vantage Point Devotional: A Daily Life Perspective from God's Word."⁷ Administered in e-mail alerts, the polls have always had a clear didactic function, asking such questions as "Is the Bible as relevant to the governing of our nation today as it was during the time of our Founders?" Early PPT publications include a hard-copy devotional and matching prayer journal, and the *Presidential Prayer Team Activity Journal for Kids: Kids Who Pray for the U.S.A.* (Presidential Prayer Team 2003a, 2003b; Gillan and Baumgartner 2003).⁸

Because I became a member of the PPT shortly after its founding, I have been able to map the evolution of its rhetoric, including not only the prayers themselves but also the supporting material in which calls to prayer are embedded. Today, much of this material is identified by the PPT as news, and because of the ways in which the PPT closely relates the content of prayers and devotions to the news it offers subscribers, I will call this particular news content "devotional news" to distinguish it from news content constructed and delivered by non-religious sources. To denote the strategic purposes of the visual, theological, and political content delivered by the PPT and other purveyors of political prayers, I will use the more comprehensive term "devotional rhetoric." While always soliciting new believers for its e-mail rolls, the PPT directs its rhetoric toward in-group members of the conservative Christian right. The orientation to its target audience makes the PPT a useful site for surveying Christian conservative conceptions of morality (including sexual morality), patriotism, and the production of out-groups that are responsible for threatening American moral unity and the well-being of America.

In its original incarnation, during the Bush administration, the devotional rhetoric of the PPT performed a number of functions. These included soliciting prayer for national leaders but also a number of other functions that were performed rather than explicitly narrated: deploying and reinforcing the reconstructionist argument that past American leaders shared a political theology with contemporary conservative Christians, informing PPT members about the functions and institutions of government, providing information about the

president's schedule and movements, introducing domestic and foreign leaders (including the Bush administration's political appointees in executive branch agencies), and detailing policies and administration initiatives in real time.⁹ In short, the PPT packaged the goals, projects, and key actors of the Bush administration and served them to members as neutral reportage in the service of informed prayer, suggesting that those who knew what the president was doing, and with whom, would be more effective in praying for him. During the Bush administration, the PPT executed its Christian right pedagogical function by performing simultaneously the tasks of holding the born-again president up in prayer and consolidating support for the president's agenda and policies.

In the months and years after the 11 September attacks the PPT gave rhetorical support to a Christian conservative perspective on the domestic factors that precipitated the attacks on New York and Washington, DC, urging members to "pray for a resurgence of godly character in America" and "a return to biblical values" (Presidential Prayer Requests e-mail for 16 October 2003).¹⁰ Such general exhortations are packed with end-times meaning for conservative Christians as they summon up the forms of national sin that provoke God's wrath. Even more consistent with conservative Christian politics are messages that remind members of a link between terrorism and American domestic sinfulness: "just as there is a physical threat to America from terrorists abroad, there is a spiritual threat to America from enemies within, who want to extinguish prayer and our trust in Almighty God from the very foundation of our country" (PPT e-mail, 27 February 2006). Far from being an unusual frame through which to make sense of large-scale attacks staged in the United States against American citizens, this conception of collective punishment with a plea for national atonement was quite common among Christian conservatives after 11 September.

In addition to explicating the 11 September attacks as punishment on a sinful nation, the PPT presented support for President Bush as a crucial factor in facing the twin threats of terrorism and national sin. Indeed, support for an America that dedicates itself to following God's will required support for Bush. Christian citizens devoted to the president and to a godly America would recognize that terrorists and fellow citizens who refused devotion to Bush and godliness constituted equivalent threats to the nation: "no matter how the critics try to tear down the Office of the Presidency, no matter how hard the terrorists try to defeat America, we know that President Bush still needs our genuine prayers and support" (PPT e-mail, 31 May 2006). Through a persistent set of putatively neutral and apolitical messages, the PPT evoked the associations that other Christian right leaders spell out in pedagogical detail: fractious forms of immorality and even criticism of the president constituted a spiritual threat to the nation, against which godly leaders like Bush struggled to save us. Christian citizens had a role in saving the nation because it was they who held up the president to God in prayer and specified the terms of their concern for him and the nation. Commenting on Bush's slide in public opinion polls during his second term, the PPT advised:

Being popular is beyond one's control. Doing the right thing steadily, before God, as best one can, is within one's grasp. Let's keep praying that President Bush seek God everyday for guidance and wisdom to keep America on track as One Nation Under God. We must not fail to pray for our President. We must continue to pray for America. (e-mail, 31 May 2006)

Observing the PPT's hagiographic treatment of Bush and his administration, I wondered how the organization's charge to pray for the president might change if a Democratic president were to be elected to succeed Bush. Barack Obama's candidacy and election did, indeed, transform the tone, content, and urgency of the PPT's messages. In what follows I delineate structural and ideological revisions in the PPT's messages to subscribers and in its devotional

politics. The evolution of the PPT from a nascent cultural project of national prayer conceived during the Bush administration to a more mature prayer project whose politics have become more discernible can be traced by examining the PPT's cultural politics in and after the transition from the Bush administration to the Obama administration.

The PPT on Obama

The PPT's orientation toward the Obama administration began auspiciously with a book of prayers dedicated to the new president that was advertised on the PPT Web site: *The Presidential Prayer Team: 30 Daily Prayers for President Barack Obama*, written by Timothy and Christie Careathers (2008). Timothy Careathers is an African American minister and the founder (in 2012) of Tim Careathers Ministries ([Careathers 2012b](#)).¹¹ The cover of the slender volume bears a close-up of President Obama, hands clasped together, forehead resting on hands, and eyes closed in a prayerful posture.

30 Daily Prayers is a text external to the PPT proper—that is, it is not prayer-related content delivered to subscribers—and there are clear differences between the Careathers' devotional rhetoric, including prayers, and that of the PPT. There are essentially two distinctions between the political perspective of *30 Daily Prayers* and that of the PPT proper: the first is the strong advocacy in *30 Daily Prayers* for government support for vulnerable and indigent citizens, while the second is the clear concern in *30 Daily Prayers* about American racism and its effects on citizens and public policy. The particular conception of the new Obama presidency is revealed in the introduction, where the Careathers refer to the “energy, passion, electricity, fervor, indescribable anticipation and interest” aroused in the Careathers' “classes on the campus of Lane College, an HBCU,” about “Mr. Obama” and “the awesome opportunity God offered our nation, a woman and a man of color” ([Careathers and Careathers 2008](#), 7). Concerns about racial inequality and racism emerge in separate meditations about diversity (Day 6), education (Day 7), immigration (Day 14), racism (Day 18), and war (Day 28). Advocacy for government intervention on behalf of economic justice emerges in meditations on college tuition (Day 5), health care (Day 12), Main Street–Side Street (Day 17), religions (Day 19), social security (Day 23), unemployment (Day 26), Wall Street (Day 27), and welfare (Day 30). Given the high profile of opposition to the Patient Protection and Affordable Care Act (PPACA)—now known by its critics and supporters alike as “Obamacare”—the Careathers' prayer on the subject of health care is striking for its departure from conservative (including Christian conservative) perspectives on national health policy. Addressing themselves to God, they write:

Even though, you have blessed this country to research, demonstrate and practice the most advanced techniques and procedures, as you know, we don't provide basic or quality health care to all Americans. We must apologize right now for our biases to those without adequate health insurance. This is not your wish for our ailing inhabitants . . . no one should suffer because of lack of finances. How selfish of a nation, we've become. ([Careathers and Careathers 2008](#), 58–59)

In comparison to racism and economic justice, abortion (Day 2) and same-sex marriage (Day 21) receive relatively little attention, although the authors describe those on behalf of whom they pray against same-sex marriage as “conservative Christians.” Characterized by conservative orientations toward issues of morality such as sexuality and abortion, and liberal orientations toward socioeconomic class and government intervention to ameliorate inequality and racism, *30 Daily Prayers* is recognizable as a text that reflects the theology of the black church (see [Lincoln and Mamiya 1990](#); [Tucker-Worgs 2012](#)).

By contrast to this text published on the eve of Obama's inauguration, in the months that followed the 2008 presidential election, the PPT's devotional rhetoric shifted to reflect rising concern about Obama's political leadership and the direction in which America was moving. A sign of this rising concern is evident in the grammatical shift that came to characterize prayers "for" the Republican and Democratic presidents—the original purpose and justification for the PPT's existence. Prayers for George W. Bush usually took the form of an imperative sentence containing a prepositional phrase: "[you] pray *for* President Bush." Taking this form, the imperative directs Christians to lift up the president in prayer and to ask God to give the president strength to do what he must—and should—do. By contrast, prayers for Obama tended to take a different form, that of an imperative sentence containing a dependent clause: "[you] pray that President Obama [do something named in the call to prayer]." This very different kind of imperative does not lift the president up in prayer in an unqualified way but, rather, primes those who pray to support a specific political outcome that right-thinking Christians should embrace.

During the 2012 presidential campaign, the PPT escalated its rhetoric about the importance of the election outcome to the well-being of the nation. The message in the week of 23–27 July was stark: "Impending Storm—Let's Meet It Head On" (e-mail, 24 July 2012). Eschewing the usual mix of news columns, devotional rhetoric, and prayer suggestions for a variety of recipients, the text of the alert read as follows (emphasis in the original):

Dear Cindy,

Dark Clouds are often an ominous sign of an impending storm. That's not only true in nature, but in the spiritual realm as well—and there **are** dark clouds on the horizon signaling a brewing spiritual storm . . . and a battle for the very heart and soul of America . . . **Never before** have we seen so many groups opposed to God and antagonistic toward Christian beliefs. **Never before** has there been such an obvious need of prayer for our nation and its leaders.

Both the unique format of the alert and the tone of apocalyptic urgency evident in this personalized letter contrast sharply with the tone and format of Bush-era PPT messages.

However, this apocalyptic urgency did not prevent the PPT from commenting not only on the positions of the candidates but occasionally on minutiae of the Democratic and Republican campaigns. For example, in a "Special Edition" of the Weekly Prayer Update for 13–19 September, the PPT offered subscribers coverage of the Democratic and Republican conventions in separate articles. "Finding God in Charlotte: God Out, Then In at Democratic Convention" detailed the well-publicized convention imbroglio in which the word "God" was first omitted from the Democratic platform and then included after an ambiguous set of voice votes from delegates on the convention floor. This scenario of Democratic delegates booing the decision to insert "God" into the platform is vividly contrasted with Governor Mitt Romney's sincere Christianity in "Romney Promotes Core Christian Views: But Will the Polling Data Translate to Votes at the Polls?" In addition to implicitly addressing many Christian conservatives' skepticism about Romney's Mormon faith, the article reminds readers of the importance of Republican turnout to Romney's election prospects. Addressing both major party conventions in a single Weekly Prayer Update enabled the PPT to devote equal space to Democratic and Republican campaigns while priming subscribers on a core question—what party and, by extension, what presidential candidate best represents a Christian conservative orientation toward the role of religion in US politics as well as positions on the issues?—and the answer: the Republican candidate, Romney.

In the weeks before the 6 November election, the PPT sponsored a special initiative called “Pray the Vote 2012,” which involved special election-related e-mail messages sent to subscribers. For this initiative, a separate section of the PPT Web site offered biographies of the Democratic and Republican presidential and vice-presidential candidates, collected comments from members, and provided extensive information on “America’s Vital Signs”—eight issue areas obtained by polling members in 2010 “to identify the top concerns for America” (PPT 2010, 1). The “Vital Signs” were sanctity of life, sanctity of marriage, sanctity of the family, national debt, education, immigration, unemployment, and socialism. It is well to remember that the Tea Party movement was launched in early 2009 and, with considerable support from Christian conservatives, achieved its highest levels of popularity in 2010 with an agenda that tracks closely to this list of “Vital Signs” (see Wilson and Burack 2012). The obvious difference between the “Vital Signs” and the agenda of the Tea Party movement is that the Tea Party advertised its public transcript of “small, non-intrusive government; government fiscal responsibility; and constitutional fidelity of the sort that . . . prevailed in the era of the Republic’s founders” but not its hidden transcript of nativism and “religiously motivated forms of social conservatism in the areas of reproductive” and LGBTQ rights (Burack and Snyder-Hall 2012, 8).¹²

The PPT was less reticent than the Tea Party would be about how the specter of an Obama presidency was closely linked to the unraveling of Christian morality in America. Beginning in 2008, the PPT delivered a number of commentaries on “Morality in America.” Subscribers received Weekly Prayer Update e-mails that provided a paragraph or two of each “Morality in America” article, which continued though a link to the PPT Web site. One “Morality in America” devotional news story during this period was “The Surprising Enemy of Freedom: A Passionate Warning for America,” which focused on the “LGBT coalition” of “supporters of incest and sex with animals” (e-mail 23 August 2012). This warning of what was in store for America under an Obama administration was more direct and stigmatizing than most of the rhetoric that would be published after Obama took office, but it is consistent with the perspective on LGBTQ people and issues that the PPT has distributed throughout Obama’s years in office.

The Cultural Politics of Sexual Morality

In its first years of existence the PPT did not engage in detailed reportage and moral analysis of particular episodes and circumstances related to sexual morality. What PPT messaging did in its early years was to assert the existence of immorality in America, often positioning President Bush as a leader who was striving to do the will of God in spite of opposition. This kind of rhetoric, which details the degradation of collective American morality to a tipping point that can precipitate God’s judgment, received public attention when it was delivered by Jerry Falwell and Pat Robertson days after 11 September 2001. But it was, and is, more common than this rare eruption of Christian conservative in-group rhetoric into public view would suggest. In fact, after 11 September, many respected Christian right elites elaborated a conception of divine punishment on the nation as a direct consequence of Americans’ toleration of forms of sinfulness such as abortion and same-sex sexuality, though these statements did not receive the same level of attention from journalists and researchers as the 700 Club conversation of Falwell and Robertson.¹³

This disinterest in outlining explicitly the sources of sexual immorality in American culture and politics changed after Obama’s election. Over the course of the Obama presidency the PPT has focused its subscribers’ attention on particular issues concerning sexual morality,

and especially on the rights and status of LGBTQ people. A number of significant political issues involving LGBTQ people and issues have been prominent in the news and in public discourse since Obama took office in early 2009, and here I will address the PPT's responses to four issues: the repeal of the "Don't Ask, Don't Tell" (DADT) military policy on lesbians, gay men, and bisexuals in the military; the controversy over the fast-food chain Chick-fil-A and its president's support for organizations that opposed same-sex marriage; conservative opposition to the Boy Scouts of America (BSA) changing its policy excluding gay youth from membership and gay adults from positions of leadership in the organization; and the June 2013 Supreme Court decisions on same-sex marriage.

A prominent test of the Obama administration's commitment to LGBTQ equality in his first term in office was the process of repealing the DADT policy promulgated during the Clinton administration. As Congress took up the issue in December 2010, the PPT transmitted special e-mail alerts that informed members about the unfolding deliberations and legislative process, first in the House of Representatives and later in the Senate. In the first Prayer Alert, "House Expected to Vote on 'Don't Ask, Don't Tell' Repeal," the PPT informed its subscribers that Senators Susan Collins (R-ME) and Joe Lieberman (I-CT) had introduced the bill to repeal the law and that a vote on the legislation might be scheduled for that very day. The PPT suggested that subscribers pray "as the Lord leads" for two outcomes: first, "that the House would take to heart the opinions of field leaders who ask that the repeal not happen"; and, second, "for the men and women and their families who are impacted by the legislation" (PPT e-mail, 15 December 2010).

Only three days later, a special Prayer Alert, "Senate Repeals the Ban on Gays in the Military," announced that the bill to repeal DADT had passed, "marking a major triumph for President Obama, liberals and the gay community" (e-mail, 18 December 2010). Although many in the LGBTQ community were critical of Obama for much of his first term in office because of perceptions that he was insufficiently committed to pro-LGBTQ policies, the PPT's declaration of the DADT outcome linked Obama, political liberals, and LGBTQ citizens/activists. Once the ban had been repealed officially and a waiting period for implementation had been promulgated, the prayer that legislators would retain the policy out of respect for "field leaders" was no longer appropriate. PPT subscribers were then urged to pray only "for the men and women and their families who are impacted by the legislation" (PPT e-mail, 18 December 2011). Well after the DADT policy had been repealed and enacted by the military branches, the PPT took up the theme of the erosion of religious liberty in the armed services and linked it to the repeal of DADT. In "Beyond 'Don't Ask, Don't Tell': Religious Liberties of Soldiers and Chaplains Eroding Quickly" (PPT e-mail, 28 June–4 July 2012), readers were informed that the integration of open lesbians and gay men into the military was now restricting the religious liberty of military chaplains to preach on passages of biblical texts such as Leviticus 18:22 and 20:13 to the troops.¹⁴ On the topic of DADT, the devotional rhetoric of the PPT is consistent with that of the FRC with one key exception: the FRC consistently has expressed more disapprobation toward LGBTQ people themselves, suggesting, for example, that gay service members have committed thousands of sexual assaults against their heterosexual peers in the armed services (FRC e-mail 5 June 2013, para. 4).¹⁵

A second LGBTQ issue addressed by the PPT is the controversy over the anti-LGBTQ political commitments, comments, and contributions of the president of the family-owned business Chick-fil-A. A PPT "Viewpoint" article during the 2012 presidential campaign focused on the "flap" over fast-food restaurant Chick-fil-A's corporate philanthropy and the political views of its president, Dan Cathy. "Chick-fil-A Back Flap: Don't Play Chicken with First Amendment" noted that "Dan Cathy sparked controversy when he expressed his

personal belief in the biblical family unit and that same-sex marriage was bringing God's judgment on the nation" (PPT e-mail 30 August–6 September 2012, para. 3). By the time the PPT picked up the issue, the FRC had already given the controversy attention in two direct alerts to FRC subscribers: "At Chick-fil-A, Thigh Will Be Done" (FRC e-mail, 19 July) and "Lord of the Fries" (FRC e-mail, 26 July). In this case as in others, when the devotional politics of the PPT and the rhetoric of the action alerts of the FRC converge on a subject, the FRC news commentary offers rhetoric that is more pointed, sarcastic, and overtly political, while the PPT softens its rhetoric in ways that are more consistent with a call to prayer. So, for example, "Thigh Will Be Done" explains the controversy in this way:

Yesterday, to the outrage of the liberal media, Dan [Cathay] put his passion for man-woman marriage on full display. "...I think we're inviting God's judgment on our nation when we shake our fist at Him and say, 'We know better than you as to what constitutes a marriage,' I pray God's mercy on our generation that has such a prideful, arrogant attitude to think we can try to define what marriage is all about." Unlike J.C. Penney, whose homosexual pandering [hiring Ellen DeGeneres as a spokesperson] is driving the stock to record losses, Chick-fil-A is catering to mainstream America. (ellipsis in the original)

A third issue related to LGBTQ people since 2009 is not specifically related to US government policy or President Obama but has unfolded in the context of the parlous moral conditions that Christian conservatives understand to prevail in the post-Bush political era: the BSA's reconsideration of its policy of banning gay youth and gay adults from participating in the organization. In January and February 2013, the FRC dedicated many regular e-mail alerts and special "Breaking News" updates to the BSA deliberations; some titles included "Will the Boy Scouts Stand Up to Bullies?" (28 January), "Scouts Consider Breaking Camp with Tradition" (29 January), "Boy Scouts Fall on Tough *Times* [a reference to the *New York Times*]" (31 January), "Support Our Troops! Defend the Scouts" (1 February), "Scouts Weigh Big Tent Policy" (4 February), "Weebelos Wobble, Will They Fall Down?" (5 February), "Texas Lassoes More Leaders for Scouts" (14 February), and "Page Turner? BSA Fails to Woo S[outhern] B[aptist] C[onvention] Leader" (20 February). Compared to the FRC, the PPT exercised restraint on the subject of the BSA's deliberations, noting in mid-February in "Boy Scouts Delay Member Decision" that the venerable organization might "lift its ban on homosexuals" (e-mail 14 February 2013, para. 1). After the BSA changed its membership policy to permit gay-identified youth as members, the PPT published a devotional news item, "Beyond the BSA: Christian-Based Alternative to Boy Scouts Being Planned" (e-mail 25 July 2013). While the FRC generally blamed the reformulation of BSA policy on gay activist "bullies" and other forms of liberal coercion, the PPT expressed sadness about the BSA's decision and expressed concern about cultural decay and its effects on young Americans.

Finally, on Wednesday, 26 June 2013, the Supreme Court announced pro-same-sex-marriage decisions in two cases: *United States v. Windsor* and *Hollingsworth v. Perry*. On the following day, as many Christian right organizations—including the American Family Association, the Christian Coalition, and the FRC—responded to the disappointing outcomes in the cases, the "Vantage Point Devotional" (e-mail, 27 June 2013) included a devotional news item: "High Court Hands Pair of Victories to Same-Sex Couples." The story noted that Justice Antonin Scalia had read his dissent from the bench and quoted his assertion that the Court's opinion in *Windsor* proceeded from a "diseased root: an exalted notion of the role of this court in American democratic society." The devotional news item itself is relatively less angry and combative than the FRC's 26 June message to subscribers, "The Defiance of

Marriage Act,” although the perspective expressed in the prayer prompts is consistent with that of the FRC:

As the Lord leads, please pray:

- About the turbulence that will exist in state legislatures across the country to adopt same-sex marriage laws.
- About the “diseased root” in America that denies the sanctity of marriage in open defiance of God’s laws.

Here, as in many devotional news items, the priming against same-sex marriage occurs in the prayer material itself, which widens the scope and moral significance of Justice Scalia’s “diseased root” from a perverse view of the “role of th[e] court” to the denial of “the sanctity of marriage” “in America.”

In its “Weekly Prayer Updates” and “Vantage Point Devotional” and on its Web site, the PPT prefaces its prayer prompts to subscribers with the phrase, “as the Lord leads, please pray,” which usefully can be divided into two parts. The first is conditional: “as the Lord leads.” This phrase suggests respect for diverse perceptions of God’s communications with believers, but it also is consistent with the delivery of ideological viewpoints in the form of speculative formulations of the Lord’s will as conservative believers understand it. The second phrase, “please pray,” is prescriptive and even mildly imperative.

The devotional rhetoric of the PPT becomes evident in light of two sets of comparisons: the first is between earlier and later texts, with the 2008 presidential campaign as the key boundary between the two periods. The Bush-era PPT was an organization that celebrated the continuities between Christian leadership of the early American republic and the declarations of Christian belief of more recent political leaders, including President George W. Bush. By contrast, the Obama-era PPT is an organization that decries the diminished morality of America through devotional news articles that repetitively link Obama, the Democratic Party, political liberals, and LGBTQ people with immorality and ungodliness. The second comparison that illuminates the devotional rhetoric of the PPT is between PPT texts and those of other Christian conservative organizations and leaders—such as the FRC and its president, Tony Perkins—that have adopted a more scathing and sarcastic tone. In formulating their devotional rhetoric for Christian conservatives, both organizations engage in “nichemarketing,” with the FRC performing the “hard-sell” while prayer projects such as the PPT perform the complementary “soft-sell,” often packaged in invitations to pray (Burlein 2002).¹⁶

Conclusion

Why focus such sustained attention on a target as small as the PPT? Even if the organization’s self-description—“Largest Prayer Movement for Our Nation” with “4.4 Million Members Served”—is accurate, the PPT is not a major Christian right policy or lobbying organization. Nor does it provide a platform for a charismatic leader whose interpretations of scripture and politics can be transmitted to, and influence the political views of, believers. Instead, the PPT is one among many small cultural projects that can easily go unnoticed and unexamined by researchers with an interest in confluences of religion and politics. What makes the cultural politics of the PPT and similar prayer projects important is the way in which they function collectively to reinforce a set of particular Christian conservative political ideas and aspirations as well as particular conceptions of the links between theo-political terms and phenomena.

Even though the PPT provides a site for mass subscription, if not mass membership, most users probably are not aware that the PPT was co-created by the chief executive officer of a Christian advertising and consulting firm. Indeed, the absence of this kind of information facilitates a conception of spontaneous formation that is consistent with an unmarked, non-denominational conception of Christian belief that is neither doctrinal, particularistic, nor “political.”¹⁷ The shift toward politically and theologically fundamentalist, evangelical, and charismatic/Pentecostal believers identifying merely as “Christian” also has the effect of making it easier for these political and theological conservatives to be persuaded that politically centrist and liberal Christians such as Obama are not, in fact, Christians at all. Indeed, in the “Weekly Prayer Update” of 24–30 May 2012, the PPT responded to Obama’s announcement of support for same-sex marriage with an article that asked, “Can Christians Support Him Now? Obama and Same-Sex Marriage: Prayer More Vital Than Ever” (e-mail 24 May 2012). Looking ahead to the 2012 election, the article weighed Obama’s likely electoral calculations and then noted hopefully that “many evangelicals who have been tepid to the apparent Republican nominee, Mitt Romney, now seem to be galvanized and have promised to take their outrage to the ballot box.”

The PPT’s “soft-sell” of Christian conservative issue positions and orientation toward the role of religion in politics means that the PPT is less easily identifiable than organizations such as the FRC as a vehicle for Christian conservative social and political positions. The PPT routinely addresses current events that are in the news, presenting devotional news bulletins and articles with information drawn from a range of sources such as the *New York Times*, *USA Today*, CNN, CBS News, and Fox News. However, through their choices of topics, as well as the form and content of prayer material, PPT authors consistently craft devotional rhetoric that primes Christian conservatives to identify LGBTQ rights, visibility, and integration into mainstream institutions as moral violations and threats to the nation.

With the exception of *30 Daily Prayers for President Barack Obama*, published soon after the presidential election in late 2008, the political positions expressed by the PPT have been reliably socially and economically conservative. However, it is the differences between the PPT’s devotional rhetoric in the first years after its founding—during the administration of a president agreeable to Christian conservatives—and that after the election of a Democratic president in 2008 that invite analysis. Obviously, there are a variety of ways to categorize, characterize, and make sense of the transformation in the political rhetoric and prayer content produced by the PPT between the Bush and Obama administrations. These include a shift in the grammatical format of injunctions to pray for the president, an enhanced focus on breaking news and moral/cultural social issues, and explicit criticisms of, and exhortations to, Obama after 2008 that had no parallel during the Bush administration. Combining political and theological themes and arguments, such devotional rhetoric deserves the sustained attention of scholars who analyze and explain the strategies and circuits of conservative cultural politics.

Notes

1. In her study of “the American evangelical relationship with God,” T. M. Luhrmann makes a distinction between “apophatic” and “kataphatic” styles of prayer in the Christian traditions. Kataphatic prayer relies on language and mental representations, “imagined conversations” with God. Much Christian conservative prayer, and certainly the style of prayer that is most suited to conservative prayer projects, is kataphatic (see [Luhrmann 2012](#), 162, 168).
2. See the analysis of Chick tracts in [Burack 2008](#). See also [Hendershot 2004](#).

3. Besides being the author of popular Christian books, Omartian is also a “committee member” of the Presidential Prayer Team.
4. In addition to *The Power of a Praying Nation*, other books in the franchise highlight the “power of a praying” mom, wife, husband, parent, life, teen, woman, or kid. Other titles by Omartian employ the variation “power of praying.”
5. A slightly different definition of “cultural politics” is offered by Peter Jackson, who emphasizes the centrality of the concept to cultural studies. Even though there is substantial overlap between the two definitions, I use Diamond’s here because of its robust relationship to political ideology and not just to Jackson’s construction of social meaning and “relations of dominance and subordination” (Jackson 1991, 200).
6. This page no longer appears on the PPT Web site.
7. The Vantage Point Web page describes this additional benefit of PPT membership in this way: “**Vantage Point**—a personal daily prayer devotional series for our prayer team members. The content originates from own staff writers—who carefully draw truths from God’s Word that will inspire and help your daily walk with Christ. We also provide special prayer items for our nation called **Prayer Watch**. It’s [sic] purpose is to inform and encourage your prayer time for our country, its leaders and our military” (Presidential Prayer Team 2013; emphasis in the original).
8. *The Presidential Prayer Team Journal* and *The Presidential Prayer Team Devotional* were published as a boxed gift set.
9. Throughout its existence, the PPT has expressed an understanding of American history that is associated with the work of right-wing popular historian David Barton and his organization Wallbuilders. See also Berlet and Lyons 2000.
10. When I quote from particular PPT e-mail alerts I cite the delivery date in the text of the paper. Although some of the text from regular e-mail alerts is on the PPT Web site, much of this material is not stored in an accessible location; thus, this research relies on hard copies of the text originally disseminated to subscribers by e-mail.
11. Although one page of the ministry Web site mentions volunteers and student field trips, there is no information about these activities on the Web site, and links return the user to a contact form for Tim Careathers. All other information on the sparse Web site refers back to Careathers’s book *Supernaturally Natural* (2012a).
12. The concepts of public and hidden transcripts are drawn from Scott 1990.
13. For examples and comparisons between these episodes of in-group rhetoric see Burack 2008, chapter four.
14. In the King James Version, Leviticus 18:22 reads, “Thou shalt not lie with mankind as womankind: it is abomination.” Leviticus 20:13 states, “If a man also lie with mankind, as he lieth with a woman, both of them have committed an abomination: they shall surely be put to death; their blood shall be upon them.”
15. Family Research Council, “The trouble with Barack’s barracks,” 5 June 2013. The alert charges that “[t]he White House has spent Barack Obama’s entire presidency sexualizing the military, beginning with the repeal of ‘Don’t Ask, Don’t Tell.’ It doesn’t take a rocket scientist to understand that when Congress made sexual attraction a qualification for military service. . . it radically altered America’s fighting force.”
16. To demonstrate this distinction between groups that engage in complementary messaging, Burlein uses the far-right Christian Identity Movement and the mainstream Christian right group Focus on the Family.
17. For the significance of religious restructuring and the decline in denominationalism, see Wuthnow 1990.

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