A Nation Under God

TRINITY CHAPEL in suburban Atlanta's Cobb County is hardly the picture of a revolutionary outpost. It's a stylishly modern Church of God—a denomination that, though conservative, is certainly mainstream. Parishioners are drawn from a community whose average income is a comfortable 35 percent above the national norm, whose tree-lined country roads intersect McMansion subdivisions. If Norman Rockwell were painting suburban sprawl, he'd likely pick Cobb County.

On a Friday last April, Trinity's parking lot filled with SUVs and luxury sedans as about 400 faithful gathered inside the sanctuary. The church was host to Restore America, a rally to "celebrate faith and patriotism" sponsored by Christian publisher American Vision. In the lobby, neatly blue-blazered youths were hawking So Help Me God, Roy Moore's account of his dethroning as chief justice of the Alabama Supreme Court. Tables were piled with textbooks for homeschoolers, tomes denouncing evolution, booklets waxing nostalgic for the antebellum South. That afternoon the congregants, who'd come to the conference from conservative churches around the region, would hear from Sadie Fields, president of Georgia's Christian Coalition, and they'd sway in rhythm as country crooner Steve Vaus sang "We Must Take America Back."

But the marquee pitchman of the day was Moore. Ruggedly handsome, with the military bearing he acquired at West Point, Moore has gained a rock-star following on the Christian right—a Moses to lead the chosen from a godless society. The judge has a stunning memory for long literary passages and judicial opinions, and he chants them in the sing-songy, down-home style of Southern demagogues from Theo Bilbo to George Wallace—"God" is "Gawud," with an upward lilt. When he proclaimed that "God is still sovereign, no matter what federal judges say," the crowd tittered and applauded. When he intoned that "there is no right to sodomy in the Constitution," they cheered. When he roared that unless judges "acknowledge God," they "should be impeached," the righteous noise shook the rafters.

It could have been nothing more than a half-hour rebel yell—except that Moore is more than the latest prophet of the religious right. He stands a good chance of being the next governor of Alabama; he's also arguably the single most significant politician to owe his ascendancy to Christian Reconstruction—an obscure but increasingly potent theology whose top exponents hold that Christian crusaders must conquer and convert the world, by the sword if necessary, before Jesus will return.

Moore has never declared himself a Reconstructionist. But he is a frequent orator at gatherings whose organizers are part of the movement. The primary theologians, activists, and websites of Reconstruction laud him as a hero. Moore's lawyer in the Ten Commandments fight, Herb Titus, is a Reconstructionist, as are many of his most vocal supporters, including Gary DeMar, the organizer of the Restore America rally and the head of American Vision, one of the most prolific publishers of the movement.

Reconstruction is the spark plug behind much of the battle over religion in politics today. The movement's founder, theologian Rousas John Rushdoony, claimed 20 million followers—a number that includes many who embrace the Reconstruction tenets without having joined any organization. Card-carrying Reconstructionists are few, but their influence is magnified by their leadership in Christian right crusades, from abortion to homeschooling.

Reconstructionists also exert significant clout through front organizations and coalitions with other religious fundamentalists; Baptists, Anglicans, and others have deep theological differences with the
movement, but they have made common cause with its leaders in groups such as the National Coalition for Revival. Reconstruction has slowly absorbed, congregation by congregation, the conservative Presbyterian Church in America (not to be confused with the progressive Presbyterian Church [USA]) and has heavily influenced others, notably the Southern Baptists.

George W. Bush has called Reconstruction-influenced theoretician Marvin Olasky "compassionate conservatism's leading thinker," and Olasky served as one of the president's key advisers on the creation of the Office of Faith-Based and Community Initiatives. Bush also invited Reconstructionist Jack Hayford, a key figure in the Promise Keepers men's group, to give the benediction at his first inaugural. Deposed House Majority Leader Tom DeLay, though his office won't comment on his religious views, governs with what he calls a "biblical worldview"—one of Reconstruction's signature phrases. And, for conspiracy buffs, two heavy contributors to the Chalcedon Foundation—Reconstruction's main think tank—are Howard Ahmanson and Nelson Bunker Hunt, both of whose families played key roles in financing electronic voting machine manufacturer Election Systems & Software. Ahmanson is also a major sponsor of ultraconservative politicians, including California state legislator and 2003 gubernatorial candidate Tom McClintock.

Yet for all its influence, Reconstruction is almost invisible to the media and secular society. Atlanta is ground zero for most Reconstruction activity—home office to DeMar's publishing house and home district to movement prophet Larry McDonald, who served four terms in Congress in the 1970s and 1980s—but the Atlanta Journal-Constitution has done only one major article on the movement. The entire Lexis-Nexis database includes only 43 articles from all of the U.S. media that make reference to Reconstruction, and only a handful of those explore the movement. "A hundred years ago, newspapers published the sermons preachers preached on Sunday," notes Ed Larson, a University of Georgia historian. "Everyone knew what the Baptists believed, or the Lutherans or the Presbyterians. That's no longer the case. And it has worked to the benefit of Reconstructionists as they doggedly pursued their goal."

Reconstructionists aren't shy about what exactly it is they are pursuing: "The long-term goal of Christians in politics should be to gain exclusive control over the franchise," Gary North, a top Reconstruction theorist, wrote in his 1989 book, Political Polytheism: The Myth of Pluralism. "Those who refuse to submit publicly...must be denied citizenship."

WITH HIS KHAKI PANTS and checkered shirts, Gary DeMar could be one of a million guys meeting weekly in men's groups at churches around the country. Bright and articulate, he's soft-spoken until he gets in front of a crowd. His publishing house distributes hundreds of tracts, more than 20 of them written by DeMar himself, with titles such as The Politically Incorrect Guides to Islam (and the Crusades), which promises "all the disturbing facts about Islam and its murderous hostility to the West," and The Marketing of Evil, which covers everything "from easy divorce and unrestricted abortion-on-demand to extreme body piercing and teaching homosexuality to grade-schoolers."

I first met DeMar 18 months ago at his church, Midway Presbyterian, in the Atlanta suburb of Powder Springs, where he was teaching a class on government. During the session, a teenage homeschoolel talked about how he had tried in a paper to prove that the family is a form of "Christian government." "You don't have to prove that," DeMar gently chided, and then added, with more heat: "That's established-established by God!" DeMar's lecture focused on the "three governments"—family, church, and state—all of which, he told me, should be ruled by God-fearing men.

The Old Testament—with its 600 or so Mosaic laws—is the inflexible guide for the society DeMar and other Reconstructionists envision. Government posts would be reserved for the righteous, as long as they are male. There would be thousands of executions a year, with stoning a preferred method because it would
turn the deaths into "community projects," as movement theologian North has noted. Sinners in line for the death penalty would include women who commit adultery or lie about their virginity, blasphemers, witches, children who strike their parents, and gay men (lesbians, however, would be spared because no specific reference to them can be found in the Books of Moses). DeMar told me that among Reconstructionists he is considered something of a liberal, because he'd execute gays only if they were caught indulging in sodomy. "I'm happy to just drive them back into the closet," he said.

In introducing Moore at the Trinity Chapel rally, DeMar told the crowd that he supports a "jurisdictional separation of church and state." But he was not mounting a defense of the First Amendment so much as outlining an organizational distinction. In his book Liberty at Risk, DeMar writes that "the State cannot be neutral towards the Christian faith. Any obstacle that would jeopardize the preaching of the Word of God...must be opposed by civil government."

Besides facilitating evangelism, Reconstructionists believe, government should largely be limited to building and maintaining roads, enforcing land-use contracts, and ensuring just weights and measures. Unions would not exist, and neither would unemployment benefits, Social Security, and environmental protection laws. Public schools would disappear; one of the movement's great successes has been promoting homeschooling programs and publishing texts used by tens of thousands of homeschooling families. And, perhaps most importantly, the state is "God's minister," as DeMar puts it in Liberty at Risk, "taking vengeance out on those who do evil." A major task for the government key Reconstructionists envision is fielding armies for conquest in the name of Jesus.

Reconstruction's premises may fly in the face of mainstream Christianity, and some of its leaders' beliefs would probably surprise even the movement's own foot soldiers. But what has made the theology such an explosive addition to public life is not its dogma on individual issues so much as its trumpet call to action. This is a faith in which religion is not an influence on politics; it is politics.

FOR DECADES AFTER the 1925 Scopes monkey trial, Christian fundamentalists were almost invisible in civic discourse. Then, in 1981, a book by scholar Francis Schaeffer, A Christian Manifesto, heralded a counterattack. America, Schaeffer argued, was careening into the abyss of humanistic secularism. Christians needed to take bold action to restore biblical principles and erase divisions between religion and civic life. To ignite the movement, Schaeffer mapped out a battle campaign—a crusade against abortion, which, he said, "would be worth spending much of our lifetimes to fight against."

For years, the antiabortion movement had been mostly Catholic. Schaeffer understood that the cause had the potential to galvanize broad masses of Protestants. "Schaeffer made abortion an issue for Christians more than anyone else, and he commanded Christian soldiers to start marching," says the University of Georgia's Larson. Manifesto sold almost 250,000 copies the year after Ronald Reagan became president—a period when the nation was veering to the right after becoming exhausted from the social movements of the previous two decades.

If Schaeffer was Reconstruction's John the Baptist, Rushdoony was its pope. Born in 1916 to Armenian immigrants, Rushdoony graduated from the University of California-Berkeley before becoming an ardent foe of secular education and the author of a series of texts that redefined conservative theology.

Rushdoony, who died in 2001, articulated a doctrine called "presuppositionalism." All issues are religious in nature, he posited, and people don't have the right or the ability to define for themselves what's true; for that they must turn to a literal reading of the Bible. His defining tome, the 800-page Institutes of Biblical Law, was published in 1973. But because of its extremism and overt racism—Rushdoony denied the Holocaust and defended segregation and slavery—Institutes and its author were largely ignored in
mainstream circles until the movement launched by Schaeffer found its intellectual grounding in Rushdoony's writings.

At the heart of Rushdoony's argument were two biblical passages. Genesis 1:28 commands men to have "dominion" over "every living thing." And in Matthew 28:18-20, the "Great Commission," Jesus commands his followers to proselytize to the world. Thus was born dominion theology. (Not all dominionists are Reconstruction apostles—but the differences are a matter of theological finesse, and political strategies are largely indistinguishable.) Adam and Eve broke their covenant with God, and Satan seized dominion. Christian Reconstruction claims it has a reconstituted covenant with God and the right to a new dominion in his name.

In this worldview, the mandate for Christians is not just to live right or to help their neighbors: They are called upon to take over or eliminate the institutions of secular government. This is what sets Reconstruction apart from the conventional Christian right and gives it a key advantage in organizing.

Traditionally, groups like Jerry Falwell's Moral Majority were "premillennial": They believed that humanity was inevitably headed for Armageddon, which would most likely arrive with a nuclear blast, whereupon Christ would appear in the second Coming and set things right. "The debate was over whether Brezhnev was the Antichrist," says the University of Georgia's Larson.

Reconstruction's alternative was "post-millennialism": Christ would not return until the church had claimed dominion over government, and most of the world's population had accepted the Reconstruction brand of Christianity. The postmillennial twist offered hope to the pious that they could change things as long as they got organized. (Reconstructionists angrily denounce end-times visions like those of Tim LaHaye's Left Behind series: If these are the Last Days, American Vision's website points out, "then why bother trying to fix a broken world that is about to be thrown on the ash heap of history? Why concern ourselves with education, healthcare, the economy, or peace in the Mideast? Why polish brass on a sinking ship?")

For premillennialists, Reconstruction's revolutionary philosophy offered an opportunity to turbocharge the religious right. Most conservative churches opposed abortion, for example, but Reconstruction-influenced groups such as Randall Terry's Operation Rescue were willing to field soldiers and take the fight to the enemy. This not only emboldened activists, it gave Reconstructionists a chance to spread their organizing message: If you want to do God's work, this needs to be God's nation.

Similarly, Baptist morality focused on personal choices, such as avoiding drinking. But Reconstructionists didn't tell believers to shun sin. They said to conquer it, even if the price was jail or martyrdom. Paul Hill, the antiabortion activist executed two years ago for the 1994 murders of abortion clinic workers in Pensacola, Florida, had been a minister in the Reconstruction-dominated Presbyterian Church in America.

The old left—the Communist Party and its many splinters—used organizing tactics called popular fronts, in which people were recruited through specific causes into a movement tacitly guided by the Party. Reconstruction has married those Leninist tactics to the causes of the right-abortion, evolution, gay marriage, school prayer. Gary North wrote in 1982, in an effort to reach Baptists, "We must use the doctrine of religious liberty...until we tram up a generation of people who know that there is no religious neutrality, no neutral law, no neutral education, and no neutral civil government. Then they will get busy constructing a Bible-based social, political, and religious order which finally denies the religious liberty of the enemies of God." Nowhere at the Restore America rally did anyone hoist a banner for Reconstruction; those attending came to develop a united front supporting such things as displaying the Ten Commandments in public buildings. But they were also introduced—and recruited—to the broader program.
Reconstruction’s major impact has been through helping to found and guide cross-denominational and secular political organizations. The Council for National Policy—a group that holds meetings for right-wing leaders, once dubbed "the most powerful conservative group you've never heard of"—was founded in 1981 as a project of top John Birch Society figures (see "The Fountainhead," page 50). Its members included Rushdoony, Gary North, Tim LaHaye, former Reagan aide Gary Bauer, and activist Paul Weyrich, who famously aimed to "overturn the present power structure of this country."

Another group, the Coalition on Revival, brings together influential evangelicals to produce joint statements and theological white papers. North and DeMar are among the coalition's most influential members; one of its founding documents is signed by 116 Christian right activists, including Rushdoony, mega-evangelist D. James Kennedy, and Roy Jones, a top staffer at the Republican Senatorial Committee.

When I last saw Gary DeMar, he was shepherding Roy Moore through a crowd of true believers at the Restore America rally. As they walked by, I asked Moore, "Do you favor a theocracy?" The judge turned and looked at me, shook his head, frowned, and walked away. But DeMar, in our interview, had already answered the question.

"All governments are theocracies," he said. "We now live in a secular humanist theocracy. I want to change that to a government with God at its head."

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