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Evangelical Trump Supporters Hark Back to the 'Good Old Days' ^[1]

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Image via RNS/Reuters/Mike Segar

I am constantly asked why, in last year's presidential election, 81 percent of white conservative Christians voted for Donald Trump, a thrice-married, self-proclaimed womanizer whose personal behavior, religious practices, and lifestyle are far different than the majority of evangelical churchgoers. The answer is not hard to find.

Trump's winning mantra — "Make America Great Again" — was congruent with a wishful return to the Protestant hegemony that once existed in the United States, back in the Eden-like "good old days."

In the recollections of many evangelicals, America was then a tranquil, moral land deeply rooted in a specific set of traditional Christian values: the shining city on the hill, an idyllic small-town nation dominated by a white male leadership group.

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It is a vision that offered Trump voters a fuzzy feel-good moment about a history that never happened. Those who believe such an America actually existed suffer from historical amnesia because the reality was far different.

Cruel child labor and exploited immigrant workers constituted much of the work force required to build and maintain an expanding economy. It was an America that actively engaged in a vicious

system of human slavery — the country's original sin — only to be followed after a bloody Civil War by legally sanctioned racial segregation, discrimination, and persecution.

During those blissful years when America was “great,” women could not vote, and factory and railroad workers, miners, and other laborers had no recourse to collective bargaining or economic rights. There was widespread anti-Catholic, anti-Jewish, and anti-Asian bigotry.

In the 19th century, Catholic churches were burned, and in 1913 Leo Frank, a Jew, was lynched near Atlanta, brutally killed for a crime he did not commit. At the same time, there was widespread fear of the “Yellow Peril.”

American Indians may have unwittingly provided America with a host of geographical place names — the Dakotas, Massachusetts, Mississippi, and many other appellations — but they were denied the right to vote in some states until the 1950s. Many tribes were victims of a U.S. policy that forcibly moved Indians into government-built reservations that were degrading and stifling. One result of the forced confinements of the tribes was a high incidence of unemployment, alcoholism, and other maladies.

It was an America in which millions of its citizens, including many public officials, were members of the racist, anti-Semitic, anti-Catholic Ku Klux Klan. And there were a host of other social, economic, political, and cultural problems.

[READ: Food Apartheid: The Sustainability of Racial Discrimination](#) [5]

But no matter.

In the 2016 election, that mythical time of pristine, American “greatness” was invoked for millions of voters, many of them evangelical Christians who believed America had been “stolen” from them. They voted to “take back” America, and the past ills, inequities, and wretched economic conditions were conveniently erased from their collective memories. In place of historical reality was a hazy image of a lost innocent America, and a desperate craving to make our nation “great again.”

Many members of Trump's political “base” have not come to terms with the challenges of the modern world: rapid scientific advances, especially in bioethics; growing religious indifference among millions of fellow Americans; the rapidly changing ethnic, racial, and religious demographics in the U.S.; and, of course, the reality of climate change.

Many evangelical voters suffer a sense of political bereavement, the death of a once great “Christian America.” When the mourning for a lost America is combined with religious rage and spiritual certitude, it is a potent combination that astute politicians like Donald Trump can harness to their electoral advantage.

That is why many white evangelicals resonate with coded language about the dreaded “others” in today's America: immigrants, Muslims, Hispanics, LGBTQ, “secular humanists,” “elites out of the American mainstream,” “globalists,” and “the privileged media” are regularly pilloried to garner evangelical votes.

[READ: Americans' Selective Memory Will Not Heal Racial Wounds](#) [6]

A warning: Political and religious leaders who fail to recognize that perceived sense of traumatic loss are doomed to suffer electoral failures and the steady decline of “mainline” Protestant church membership.

The hope for a “restoration,” while not based on historical reality, cannot be minimized or disregarded because those feelings constitute the linchpin of Trump's conservative Christian “base.”

As evangelicals feel themselves beleaguered and belittled in what was once “their America,” shrewd politicians will fine-tune their messages and continue to gain election victories.

The 2016 campaign was not a quirk or a fluke. Fasten your seat belts; America’s bumpy electoral ride is certain to continue.

Via [Religion News Service](#) [7].

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