

# Introduction

## *Setting the Table for SOGI Human Rights*

### From Obama to Trump

In this book, I tell the story of official support and assistance for sexual orientation and gender identity (SOGI) human rights in the Trump administration through the lens of domestic US politics and social movements. To be more specific, I place the orientation of the administration toward SOGI human rights in the context of the Christian conservative movement that helped to create the conditions for such an administration. I ask and answer this question: Has the Christian conservative movement that vehemently opposes LGBTQ civil rights in the US and LGBTQ human rights abroad used its influence to encourage the US government to revoke its advocacy for international SOGI human rights?

Lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, queer, and intersex (LGBTQI) communities continue to be disfavored and persecuted in many parts of the world. While conditions for LGBTI people have improved in some places since the turn of the millennium, conditions have deteriorated in other parts of the world, creating a situation of LGBTI safety and flourishing that has become more bifurcated over time.<sup>1</sup> One dimension of this bifurcation pertains in Europe, where instead of an iron curtain, “a rainbow curtain now divides the continent.”<sup>2</sup> Indeed, there’s evidence that “a transnational network of anti-LGBT actors . . . [is] co-opting the structures and mechanisms within the international system to coordinate the transnational diffusion of LGBT backlash and resistance.”<sup>3</sup> During the Obama administration, the US came out in support of SOGI human rights.<sup>4</sup> But in 2016, Donald Trump’s victory over Hillary Clinton aroused anxieties for many proponents of LGBTQ

human rights who feared that under Trump the US government would rescind its progress toward full equality for gender and sexual minorities.

Between 2013 and 2016, I heard LGBTQ, and human rights advocates in formal and informal settings in the US, Europe, Africa, and Southeast Asia pose a question: What will happen to US support for sexual orientation and gender identity human rights after the US presidential election? These interlocutors believed that SOGI human rights advocacy and assistance they received or administered would be safe in a Hillary Clinton administration. However, grassroots and international activists alike wondered openly whether US commitments to SOGI human rights might be reversed under a Republican administration.

Candidate Trump made many right-wing populist claims and promises. In his most evident feint in the direction of targeting LGBTQ people during the campaign, Trump secured Christian conservative electoral support in part by promising to protect Christian conservatives' "religious freedom" to discriminate against gender and sexual minorities. This promise was freighted with Christian conservative expectations about what would have to happen to LGBTQ rights in order for religious freedom to be properly protected. However, it's significant that in the course of a campaign in which Trump persistently identified immigrants as threats to America and Americans, he notably didn't scapegoat and demonize gender and sexual minorities, as many populist, authoritarian leaders do.<sup>5</sup> His ostensible lack of interest in reversing the recent legal and social gains of LGBTQ movements puzzled some observers. For example, Trump disapproved of North Carolina's HB2, the "bathroom law," and promised that Caitlyn Jenner could use the women's room at Trump Tower whenever she wished.<sup>6</sup>

After the 2016 election, and even before Donald Trump took office, SOGI human rights advocates were tendering perspectives and strategies to deal with possible global consequences for SOGI human rights of the US election. Human rights advocates, implementing partners, grantees, and beneficiaries of US State Department human rights programs were anything but indifferent to the consequence of the presidential election for US human rights assistance. It was clear in these conversations that many grassroots and international human rights advocates were concerned about the possibility that US SOGI advocacy might come to a halt, or even that the US government might begin to amplify the anti-LGBTQ, anti-SOGI commitments of Trump's Christian conservative or white nationalist voting blocs.

What did anti-LGBT Christian conservatives expect from the election of Donald Trump? We can reconstruct an answer to that question from

the outpouring of movement messaging that addressed itself specifically to the SOGI-related hopes and demands of the Christian right. I'll get to some of that messaging in the chapters to come, but for the moment I introduce a particular missive that differentiated Trump's personal views on LGBTQ people and issues from the likely effects of the policies of a Trump administration for a Christian conservative audience. Anti-LGBTQ pastor and attorney Scott Lively is a Christian conservative who has engaged in high-profile international efforts to lobby, amplify, and praise anti-LGBTQ civil and human rights projects. Lively is coauthor (with Kevin Abrams) of *The Pink Swastika: Homosexuality in the Nazi Party* and has personally been involved with influential anti-LGBTQ campaigns in Uganda, Russia, and Eastern Europe.<sup>7</sup>

Just after Trump's election, Lively published an article online in *BarbWire*—"politics and culture from a biblical worldview"—in which he acknowledged Trump's "obvious lack of support for the pro-family side of the Christian vs LGBT cultural showdown." There, he predicted success from the "populist power" of the "global uprising against the elites" that had emerged to fight "gay marriage" and the "Third World 'immigrant' invasion of the US and EU." In the column, Lively counsels Christian conservatives that "irrespective of Mr. Trump's personal views," two factors would weaken and rout "'gay' supremacy" in the US. One was Trump's control of court nominations, especially his ability to appoint Christian conservatives to the Supreme Court and the pressure from Christian conservatives that would assure those selections. A second was consistent with Lively's professed admiration for Vladimir Putin as the world's "greatest defender of true human rights": that "if Mr. Trump simply emulates Mr. Putin and defers to the church to repair the damage caused by long-term Marxist rule, we'll be able to clean up the mess in relatively short order." In this chilling suggestion, Lively alludes to the kind of officially-sanctioned discrimination, harassment, and violence that has driven LGBTQI people underground and from their countries as refugees, and resulted in many egregious human rights violations. Such violence is often performed by nonstate actors who are rewarded for their efforts with impunity from prosecution.<sup>8</sup> Lively didn't get his wish during Trump's term as president, but he was onto something I return to in the conclusion.

In the course of this book, I assess the impact of the Christian right on US government SOGI policies and programs using two themes. The first theme is a rhetorical social movement frame developed and disseminated by the Christian right that counterposes US government support

for SOGI human rights under the Obama administration with the charge that when it came to LGBTI rights, Obama and Hillary Clinton exposed their enmity to faith and religious freedom. Frames are a form of “meaning construction” social movements engage in to create and fix interpretations of issues “for constituents, antagonists . . . bystanders or observers.” This frame has performed crucial social movement work to link LGBTQ/SOGI rights with religious persecution and to link the fate of US Christians to those persecuted because of faith in other lands.

The second theme is an assessment of both the “supply” and “demand” sides of US SOGI human rights assistance in the Trump administration. By this, I mean I provide evidence of how Obama administration SOGI policies fared under Trump: the supply side of SOGI human rights assistance. I’ll also show the continuity of the demand side of the SOGI human rights equation from Obama to Trump: SOGI human rights grantees and implementing partners who continued to coordinate with US officials to design and provide human rights assistance. An investigation of these two themes reveals the following realities: what happened with regard to US support for SOGI from 2017 to January, 2021; how the administration used religious freedom to cultivate its Christian conservative base; how the Christian right used administration support for religious freedom to defend the administration against its critics; and how the Christian right cynically ignored the SOGI human rights they had long argued constituted the most potent threat to religious freedom around the world.

In this introduction, I provide a brief overview of the Obama administration’s SOGI policy that riled Christian conservatives and—in a formulation I’ve now heard many times on the SOGI trail—made the US the “biggest player” in international SOGI human rights. I also introduce readers to the dramatis personae of this story: the president, a key Christian right producer of political messaging, the Christian conservative US officials involved in SOGI and religious freedom during Trump’s term in office, and the small team of officials in the State Department’s Bureau of Democracy, Human Rights, and Labor who manage SOGI foreign assistance. Finally, I explain the terms I use in this book and sketch a roadmap of the argument to come.

This book is not primarily a work of theory. In addition to reporting on the administration from mainstream media, I’ve relied on scholarly sources, government documents, Christian right sources, and material derived from participant observation. I attended meetings at the State Department and US Capitol, LGBTQ/SOGI meetings in the US and abroad, and Christian right events. Instead of approaching the interplay of religious freedom and

SOGI human rights from theoretical perspectives, I employ a somewhat journalistic, “tick-tock,” account of what transpired during the years in which Trump occupied the White House and Christian conservatives occupied a “privileged position” among domestic interest groups.<sup>10</sup>

## SOGI Yesterday

US support for SOGI human rights didn't begin only when the Obama administration announced its SOGI human rights foreign policy. Before 2012, SOGI human rights assistance abroad originated within the State Department in the form of extensions to LGBTQ people of support for other vulnerable or marginalized populations. Thus, at first, SOGI was incorporated into longtime programs and policies such as Country Reports on Human Rights Practices and the President's Emergency Plan for AIDS Relief (PEPFAR), and into newer programs such as the State Department's Lifeline: Embattled Civil Society Organizations Assistance Fund. Perhaps the earliest cases of US support for SOGI human rights abroad involved allocations in the final years of the Clinton administration from a fund set up to pursue concealed Holocaust-era assets, compensate survivors of Nazi persecution and their heirs, and memorialize victims of Nazi persecution. State Department officials directed a percentage of the funds allocated by Congress for these purposes to gay Holocaust survivors and to projects related to commemorating gay and lesbian victims of Nazi persecution.<sup>11</sup>

Then, in December 2011, the Obama administration publicly declared its support for SOGI human rights through two coordinated mechanisms: Secretary of State Hillary Clinton's “Remarks on International Human Rights Day,” delivered in Geneva, Switzerland, and Barack Obama's “Presidential Memorandum—International Initiatives to Advance the Human Rights of Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, and Transgender Persons,” directed to US government foreign affairs agencies. Even in 2011, the US government was a relatively late adopter of support and advocacy for international SOGI human rights. Indeed, the US followed private charities, LGBTQ and mainstream human rights civil society organizations; nations such as Sweden and the Netherlands; and multinational organizations such as the European Union and the Council of Europe in such international advocacy. Phillip Ayoub contributes an important analysis of norm diffusion in European support for LGBT human rights in *When States Come Out: Europe's Sexual Minorities and the Politics of Visibility*.<sup>12</sup> The integration of SOGI human rights into

US foreign policy was reflected in US participation in multilateral efforts to secure human rights protections for LGBTQ people and activists and in Secretary of State John Kerry's appointment in early 2015 of foreign service officer Randy Berry to serve as the first special envoy for the human rights of LGBTI persons. Before Obama left office, the US had achieved "unprecedented leadership in promoting LGBT rights abroad."<sup>13</sup>

What is meant by "SOGI human rights" has been contested, especially, but not only, from perspectives of diverse cultures, traditions, and religious beliefs. The fact that Secretary of State Hillary Clinton proclaimed in 2011 in Geneva, Switzerland, that "gay rights are human rights, and human rights are gay rights" hasn't settled the question of whether SOGI is a legitimate category of human rights. Indeed, noting two years after Clinton announced US support for SOGI that "international human rights law has been developed by consensus" and that "there is nothing even close to a consensus on positive protections for gender or sexual minorities," Jack Donnelly argued in 2013 that "advocacy for LGBT rights is *not* advocacy for internationally recognized human rights." However, Donnelly clarifies that even if there's no international consensus to, for example, prohibit the criminalization of same-sex relations, denying LGBTI people the protection of laws and internationally recognized human rights, and condoning violence against them are prohibited under international law.<sup>14</sup>

Later in this book, I address false Christian right claims that the Obama administration tried to coerce LGBTI-unfriendly nations to accept same-sex marriage. But what were the Obama administration's goals with regard to SOGI human rights? When I talked with State Department and USAID officials between 2013 and 2016, their descriptions of their work—and the human rights concerns and jeopardy that motivated it—revolved, first and foremost, around egregious human rights violations such as torture, murder, execution, and impunity for violations committed against LGBTI people by their governments or fellow citizens. Second, US human rights officials talked about the importance of upholding the application to LGBTI people of human rights outlined in international agreements such as the Universal Declaration of Human Rights: rights to, for example, equal protection of the law, a fair trial, privacy, freedom of movement, asylum, freedom of religion, freedom of expression, freedom to assemble, and freedom to associate with others, including in pursuit of political recognition and equality.

Essentially, SOGI human rights policy and practices have operated on a foundational understanding that human rights that apply to non-LGBTI people also belong to LGBTI people, or that LGBTI people shouldn't be

singled out, as individuals or in groups, for stigma, harassment, discrimination, or violence. Decriminalization of same-sex sexuality, a goal to which the Trump administration gave occasional lip service, was one goal of US SOGI policy during the Obama administration, as indicated in Obama's presidential memorandum. However, although the US has provided some support for legal advocacy for decriminalization, State Department human rights officials have treated decriminalization efforts as contingent on circumstances in individual countries, and always requiring the judgment and leadership of local grassroots activists. As we shall see, this approach would have put State Department officials at odds with Ambassador Ric Grenell and his campaign for decriminalization of same-sex sexuality.

In Geneva, Clinton announced the formation of the Global Equality Fund (GEF), which over time has become the most significant global source for SOGI human rights funding and assistance.<sup>15</sup> The GEF is an umbrella fund with seventeen country partners that supports three kinds of assistance programs. These programs were constructed to perform different functions, and the officials who administer them use a variety of mechanisms to solicit and receive feedback from LGBTQI activists in order to try to make programs more responsive to the needs of LGBTQI people in different geographic spaces.

In addition to the GEF, international SOGI human rights advocacy also takes place in settings such as regular multilateral conferences as well as in a variety of other forums that represent different tracks of diplomacy, and diverse networks of advocates, civil society organizations, and government representatives.<sup>16</sup> During the Obama administration, it wasn't uncommon for SOGI activists to travel to Washington, DC, or locations outside the US where they could meet with US officials, and in many cases US officials went to the activists. My case study in chapter 5, which focuses on an activist organization I call ASOGIHRO, illustrates both of these varieties of collaboration between US officials and SOGI advocates abroad. Many such meetings are not publicized or reported in press accounts of SOGI human rights advocacy. Of course, researchers don't often observe meetings between US officials and LGBTQ people and activists. And researchers rarely participate in quiet diplomacy that consists of interactions between US officials and representatives of regimes and civil society in places where people face discrimination or violence on the basis of SOGI.

Given the prominent position of Christian conservatives and their issues in the 2016 presidential campaign, US-based and international LGBTQ and human rights advocates assumed that a Trump presidency would stem US

support for SOGI human rights advocacy and, possibly, impair international progress on SOGI. Indeed, the US Christian conservative movement, the Christian right, had been the major source of opposition to LGBTQ civil rights since the 1970s and had been a major player in anti-LGBTQ international “family values” advocacy since the 1990s.<sup>17</sup> During the Obama administration, the movement began to link government support for SOGI human rights to the problem of international religious persecution and used support for SOGI as a rhetorical weapon against the Obama administration.

In this introduction, I briefly introduce the cast of players in the drama of Trump, religious freedom, and SOGI human rights. The key players are: Trump (elucidating especially his alliance with Christian conservatives); the Family Research Council and its president, Tony Perkins; and the cast of Christian conservatives who served the forty-fifth president in some role adjacent to SOGI human rights or religious freedom. Behind the scenes, a set of State Department officials continued to carry out the SOGI human rights assistance programs of the US government. In surveying the Christian conservative sector of the cast, I also introduce the rhetorical frame the Christian right used to tie threats to international religious freedom to US support for SOGI human rights: SOGI human rights vs. religious freedom.

## The Players

### TRUMP AND “HIS” CHRISTIAN CONSERVATIVES

One feature of Trump’s leadership style was his habit of claiming a personal, indeed possessive, connection with subordinates and others he understood as properly related to him by fealty. As research confirms, there is no denying that Christian conservatives belonged to Donald Trump before, during, and after his term. However, it’s useful to remind ourselves that the Christian right was not in Trump’s corner from the beginning of his quest for the White House. In the autumn of 2015, not long after Trump declared himself a candidate for president, he addressed the Values Voter Summit at the Omni Shoreham Hotel in Washington, DC. There, Trump worked to ingratiate himself with the Christian conservative attendees and many others who would view the proceedings remotely. Trump carried a bible his mother had given him to the podium and announced, to scattered applause, “I brought my bible.” Neither Marco Rubio nor Ted Cruz brought his childhood bible to the summit that year. Trump’s bible clearly struck some



in the audience, of which I was a member, as a prop intended to influence their perception of him. Indeed, in the early months of the primary season, Donald Trump's personal reputation and his awkward attempts to bond with Christian conservatives persuaded some political pundits that he'd be unlikely to attract the support of "values voters." As we know, those pundits were wrong. Even though researchers found that Christian conservative voters didn't identify Trump as a religious person, he soon consolidated his support with this essential Republican constituency.<sup>18</sup>

Christian conservative enthusiasm for Trump has been a source of incredulity for many on the left. Since 2017, I've heard variations on this question: "I don't agree with Christian conservatives, but how can they call themselves Christian and endorse someone as amoral as Trump? It doesn't make any sense." Christian right support for Trump does make sense, however. Or, rather, sense can be made of it, and many thoughtful observers have contributed pieces of that puzzle. Indeed, the messaging of Christian conservative media and elites is replete with a variety of arguments for the close relationship that came to prevail between Trump and Christian conservatives. One of these explanations—Trump's evolving personal morality as a function of his maturing Christian identity—was proffered early by Christian right eminence James Dobson when he dubbed Trump a "baby Christian."<sup>19</sup> Another genre of justification can reasonably be understood, especially by outsiders, as intended to bind Christian conservatives to Trump by interpreting him through the lens of scripture. Multiple identifications of Trump with biblical figures explain and justify him to believers while also mobilizing them to the mission of protecting him from his political adversaries.<sup>20</sup>

One of the key identities projected onto Trump by Christian conservative leaders is King Cyrus, or Cyrus the Great, whose story is related in the Book of Isaiah.<sup>21</sup> The reference is common enough that Rebecca Barrett-Fox describes Trump as a "King Cyrus president," and Trump's Christian right followers have been called "King Cyrus Christians."<sup>22</sup> Trump has also been identified as Nebuchadnezzar, another ungodly king used by god for his purposes.<sup>23</sup> Both allusions to Cyrus and Nebuchadnezzar had the virtue of operating as prophetic wisdom after Christian conservative elites could no longer ignore the investigation of the Trump campaign's and administration's ties to Russia and obstruction of justice in attempts to obscure those ties.

Another identification of Trump with a biblical figure was particularly useful when news broke that Trump and his associates were compromised not only by financial and political misconduct but also by the claims of

Karen McDougal and Stephanie Clifford (aka Stormy Daniels) to have had sexual relationships with him and been paid for their silence about the affairs just before the election.<sup>24</sup> This figure is King David. To refresh the reader's memory, the books of 1 and 2 Samuel provide accounts of David's relationship with God and his emergence as a leader of the people of Israel. A number of prominent Christian conservatives echoed the identification of Trump with David. But they didn't do so on the basis of Trump's victory over great odds in the presidential administration (David and Goliath) or even on the basis of Trump's womanizing (David and Bathsheba) alone. No, one dimension of the identification of Trump with/as David was predicated on the King's sexual attraction to Bathsheba and his willingness to use his office to assure the death in battle of Bathsheba's husband so she could become one of his wives.

There are moments that help to illuminate specific elements of Christian right values and politics. So, picture it: the Values Voter Summit in the autumn of 2017. On the last day of the conference, I attend a breakout session featuring George Barna, the Christian conservative movement's survey researcher, who provides the movement with data and conclusions about Americans' beliefs, and religious and political behavior.<sup>25</sup> Barna is an enthusiastic Trump supporter, and on this day he is talking about and offering to sign copies of his new book: *The Day Christians Changed America: How Christian Conservatives Put Trump in the White House and Redirected America's Future*.<sup>26</sup> A member of the audience, an elderly man in a wheelchair who seems more skeptical toward the president than other values voters in attendance, interrupts the presentation to ask Barna to explain Christian conservative support for Trump. Barna's terse reply, before returning to his presentation, is "David killed someone." That spontaneous utterance is informative: Barna didn't say that David, with his many wives and concubines, was beloved by God, and so Trump may be, even though he hasn't excelled at the biblical monogamy contemporary Christian conservatives embrace.<sup>27</sup> Instead, what Barna said was that David was guilty of murder. The unspoken surmise of anticipatory absolution was clear: any crime short of murder would not stimulate Christian conservatives to reconsider their commitment to the president. And if Trump were to commit murder for personal gain, only then would he be in David's unimpeachable company.

What of Trump's response toward diligent Christian right efforts to identify him with or as biblical figures? Perhaps Trump decided he was being disrespected by being compared with a set of obscure, ancient rulers. Whatever the motivation, nothing less than an affirmation that he was

Jesus Christ would suffice to shore up his fragile, yet belligerent, ego. In August, 2019, Trump approvingly quoted Wayne Allyn Root, a messianic Jewish supporter, who had declared Trump to be the “King of Israel.” *Washington Post* reporter Sarah Pulliam Bailey provides biblical context for this unusual claim: “In the Bible, Jewish leaders call Jesus the ‘king of Israel’ in a mocking way when he was put on the cross, according to Matthew 27:42: ‘He’s the king of Israel! Let him come down now from the cross, and we will believe in him.’” On the same day, the president followed up this apparent blasphemy by looking skyward and proclaiming himself to be “the chosen one.”<sup>28</sup> Trump’s apologists have sometimes cast him as a gifted comic conveniently misinterpreted by his malign critics on the left. Given the accumulated evidence of Trump’s self-regard, I believe it makes more sense to say that Trump understood and publicly demonstrated the extent of his Christian conservative followers’ devotion to him.

However we conceptualize the passionate attachment of Christian conservative elites and grassroots followers to Trump, it is undeniable that he gave those believers hope, even if that hope was tinged with pessimism. Writing in the *Washington Post*, Elizabeth Bruenig relies on conversations she had with Christian conservative Texans to explain “what happened” to persuade Christian conservatives to back Trump. Bruenig comes away from these meetings with a sense that Trump has provided a “respite”—or perhaps “a bitter, brief victory amidst creeping defeat” from Christian conservatives’ losses in the culture wars.<sup>29</sup> The idea of Trump as an indispensable immoral, even non-Christian, figure to protect Christian conservatives from stigma and cultural change is consistent with John Fea’s case that the Christian right found in Trump their “strongman” as well as Thomas J. Main’s case that the Alt-Right found in him their “American Caesar.”<sup>30</sup> Chip Berlet and his colleagues have provided cogent analyses of the connections between these Trump constituencies.<sup>31</sup>

One aspect of Christian conservative support for Trump that for some people deepens the mystery and for others resolves it is Trump’s history of racist positions and propositions. From adamant support for the enslavement of African Americans to opposition to the civil rights movement, white Christian conservatism has frequently made common cause with racism as consistent with scripture and God’s will. Because Christian conservatism is a broad coalition, it is also accurate that some white Christian conservatives have striven to practice an antiracism that demands love, coworship, and reparation (though not financial reparations) with African Americans.<sup>32</sup>

There are many explanations for the historical linkage of racism with Christian conservatism, past and present. One I find persuasive is Fea's argument that Christian conservative support for Trump can't be explained without taking into account a durable conservative evangelical fear of outsiders and otherness that Fea connects historically to racial othering and racism.<sup>33</sup> In 2020, anxieties about race and racism became evident in a statement by six white presidents of Baptist seminaries that repudiated critical race theory and the analytical tool of intersectionality as incompatible with the Baptist Faith and Message and biblical truth. As a result of the statement, many African American pastors—already a minority in the Southern Baptist Convention—made the decision to leave the SBC.<sup>34</sup>

A common explanation for the bond between Trump and Christian conservatives has been that their support—frequently justified in other terms—is purely transactional. I agree with Sarah Posner, who rejects this account, arguing that the relationship is better explained as an “intense meeting of the minds” of “starstruck” supporters who “idolize” a leader who openly and relentlessly “articulates their shared grievances.”<sup>35</sup> Of course, such an intense bond may have multiple causes and enabling conditions. Empirical studies of closely related explanations such as “cultural backlash” and “status threat” identify demographics that are more receptive to appeals rooted in these reactions to social, political, and economic change. These groups—including “the Interwar generation, non-college graduates, the working class, white Europeans, the more religious, men, and residents of rural communities”—overlap considerably with Christian conservative believers.<sup>36</sup> However we conceptualize the meeting of the minds between Trump and his supporters, moral entrepreneurs devised messaging and scriptural touchstones as resources to facilitate both the bond with Trump and its *ex post facto* justifications.<sup>37</sup>

#### THE FRAME AND A FRAMER

Before he announced that he was running for president in 2015, Donald Trump had no discernable interest in religious freedom, including the freedom of conservative American believers to be exempted from laws intended to protect LGBT people from discrimination. However, during the campaign, Trump secured the endorsements of many Christian conservative elites. And he assured conservative believers that he would protect their right to dissent from and refuse to obey laws they understood as encroaching on the freedom to practice their faith. Since the state of Massachusetts legalized

same-sex marriages in 2004 and the handwriting on the wall indicated that other victories for LGBT equality would likely follow, the Christian right has pursued consistent strategies. These include a legal and political strategy of carving out exemptions for believers and a communicative strategy of claiming that LGBTQ people and their cultural allies are victimizing ordinary people for their belief. In fact, I agree with Andrew Koppelman that “in a free society . . . radical disagreement about moral fundamentals is inevitable” and that, in the kinds of conflicts that have become common between LGBT people and conservative believers, we’d all be better off seeking possible compromises and “accommodating religious dissenters” than trying to defeat them utterly and “eradicate [their] ideas.”<sup>38</sup>

Because debates about the scope of religious freedom so often pit conservative believers against proponents of LGBTQ rights, many on both sides probably assume that religious freedom is self-evidently a value that only serves the interests of orthodox believers. Understanding religious freedom as “synonymous with the right of individual conscience and freedom of mind,” Frederick Clarkson points out that it liberates and protects citizens who hold a “progressive vision of religious liberty” and, thus, supports pluralism against theocracy.<sup>39</sup> Rather than focusing here on the ways in which these debates and legal strategies have played out in the US in recent years, in this book I focus on a particular messaging strategy that Christian conservative elites adopted during Obama’s second term in office and continued to use throughout most of Trump’s term. The strategy extended to the international arena a domestic US frame that contrasted religious freedom in the US with LGBT civil rights.

After the Obama administration announced its commitment to SOGI human rights, the Christian right enthusiastically engaged in the systematic strategy of linking the administration’s support for LGBTQ civil and SOGI human rights to its putative lack of interest in both religious freedom in the US and threats to religious minorities—especially Christians—abroad. The Christian right’s *SOGI human rights vs. religious freedom* social movement frame that links SOGI to the persecution of Christians abroad has two prongs. The first prong of this frame is that Obama and his administration were indifferent or actively hostile to persecution of Christians outside the US (just as they were indifferent or hostile to the persecution of American Christians). The second prong is that the Obama administration consistently elevated LGBTQ people, identity, and human rights claims over the persecution of Christians abroad. By persistently deploying this frame, Christian right elites disparaged Obama, Hillary Clinton, and Democrats, and primed

Christian conservatives to support Trump and his administration across a range of policies they deemed essential to religious freedom.

Many important figures constitute the ecosystem of Christian conservative opinion in the US, including prominent pastors, leaders of Christian conservative organizations, elected officials, and media personalities. Some of these figures have a national profile; others' leadership is local or regional. Some elites rely on diverse media technologies and platforms to reach their audiences. Some have connections to party politics or have served in Republican administrations; others are relatively "apolitical." Some have achieved some renown for their role in nonprofits and legal efforts. Not all elites are equal in the authority they wield with Christian conservative constituencies. However, even in the fragmented realm of Christian conservative movement leadership, there's a remarkable degree of cooperation, coordination, and something of an interlocking directorate of elites—most of them men—across boards, ministries, networks, and organizations.<sup>40</sup>

Acknowledging the difficulty of ascribing leadership in the Christian right to a particular person or organization, I argue that the Washington, DC-based 501(c)(3) nonprofit Family Research Council (FRC) plays a particularly central role in setting and reflecting the agenda of the Christian conservative movement, formulating political messaging—what FRC calls "shaping the narrative"—networking key movement figures and organizations, lobbying Congress, helping to elect amenable policymakers, and influencing the agenda of the Trump White House.<sup>41</sup> Formed in 1983 after Focus on the Family founder, James Dobson, convened a meeting of pro-family Christian conservatives in Washington, DC, the FRC describes its earliest agenda as "counter[ing] the credentialed voices arrayed against life and family with equally capable men and women of faith."<sup>42</sup> Today, the FRC describes itself as a

nonprofit research and educational organization dedicated to articulating and advancing a family-centered philosophy of public life. In addition to providing policy research and analysis for the legislative, executive, and judicial branches of the federal government, FRC seeks to inform the news media, the academic community, business leaders, and the general public about family issues that affect the nation from a biblical worldview.<sup>43</sup>

FRC Action, the "legislative affiliate" of the FRC, is a 501(c)(4) nonprofit and the sponsor of the annual Values Voter Summit, held every year since 2006 at the Omni Shoreham Hotel in Washington, DC.<sup>44</sup> A blow to the

FRC's reputation was the group's designation as an anti-LGBTQ hate group by the Southern Poverty Law Center (SPLC) in 2010.<sup>45</sup> The designation rankled the FRC, which in turn responded gleefully to later revelations about discrimination and financial irregularities at the SPLC.<sup>46</sup>

In his account of the bond between Trump and conservative Christians, John Fea refers to the elites who are drawn to political power, provide Trump moral cover, and justify him to Christian conservative followers as “court evangelicals.”<sup>47</sup> Both because evangelicals aren't all politically conservative and because the category, “Christian conservative,” contains adherents of other Christian faith traditions, I could call the moral entrepreneurs I discuss in this book, “court Christian conservatives.” Generally speaking, however, I'll refer to them as movement elites, leaders, or moral entrepreneurs.<sup>48</sup> Whatever appellation we use, the Family Research Council's president, Tony Perkins, qualifies as such a figure, and in what follows I focus on messaging produced and disseminated by the FRC, most of which is attributed to Perkins.

Tony Perkins became the FRC's fourth president in 2003. A former Marine and Republican Louisiana state legislator, Perkins has a well-documented history of anti-LGBTQ advocacy. Perkins wasn't one of Trump's earliest court Christian conservative endorsers. However, as it became clear that Trump had the best shot of uniting Republicans and clinching the nomination, Perkins and the FRC moved to consolidate movement support for Trump. Perkins's fingerprints on Trump's campaign were evident as early as January 2016, after Trump spoke at Liberty University and, citing a verse from Paul's second epistle to the Corinthians, said “two Corinthians,” as written, instead of pronouncing “two” as “second.”

Defending himself to CNN's Don Lemon against the scorn that greeted his biblical illiteracy, Trump said, “Tony Perkins wrote that out for me—he actually wrote out 2, he wrote out the number 2 Corinthians. . . . I took exactly what Tony said, and I said, ‘Well Tony has to know better than anybody.’”<sup>49</sup> Perkins was a close ally of President Trump as well as of key Trump administration officials such as Sam Brownback and Mike Pompeo. In May 2018, Perkins was appointed by Mitch McConnell to a two-year term on the US Commission on International Religious Freedom, an independent, bipartisan commission created by the International Religious Freedom Act of 1998. He was elected by the commission as its chair for a one-year term in 2019. During Trump's term, Perkins stepped up to neutralize criticisms of the president by Democrats and other Christian conservatives, most notably former George W. Bush speechwriter and *Washington Post* columnist, Michael Gerson.<sup>50</sup>

Christian conservative moral entrepreneurs—elected and appointed officials, movement intellectuals, high-profile pastors, and media personalities—carefully craft theopolitical arguments to movement followers. These communiqués build on preexisting attitudes of believers and followers to directly or indirectly instruct them about what policies and political leaders to support.<sup>51</sup> So pro-Trump messaging focused on a diverse set of policy and political domains: the Supreme Court and federal courts; the abomination of abortion and the need to defund Planned Parenthood; conscience protections for a wide range of medical professionals; rolling back undeserved civil rights protections for LGBTQ people; stemming illegal immigration; and securing “law and order” in the streets. Christian conservative elites also provide reasons to support these policies and politicians, constructing social movement frames using various kinds of evidence. Some of the facts, claims, and narratives that constitute this evidence would be recognizable to those outside Christian conservatism as political, while other evidence is doctrinal, theological, or prophetic. The frames, evidence, and even the biblical justifications (or absence thereof) can, and do, change over time to meet new political challenges. I have more to say about the central social movement frame the Christian right used to delegitimize Obama, Clinton, and SOGI in chapter 1.

#### PERSONNEL AS POLICY

In 2019, Secretary of State Mike Pompeo delivered a speech, “Being a Christian Leader,” to the American Association of Christian Counselors in Nashville, Tennessee. Controversy ensued over Pompeo giving the speech in his official role as secretary of state and having it posted to the State Department website.<sup>52</sup> Addressing the controversy, Tony Perkins forcefully defended Pompeo by deploying the predictable comparison between the Obama administration’s hostility to religion and believers and the Trump administration’s passionate endorsement of Christianity.

After eight years of an administration that didn’t just marginalize faith, but punished it, it’s no wonder the far-Left has trouble coming to grips with Obama’s successor. As one insider joked, “President Trump may not be a Sunday school teacher, but he sure knows how to hire them.” Thanks to that, Americans are starting to see the pendulum of policies start to swing back to what the Framers intended.



Perkins closes the essay: “Personnel is policy, the old adage goes. Under this president, we’re grateful for both.”<sup>53</sup>

Government policies don’t administer themselves or shut themselves down, and it can matter what individuals hold key positions in an administration. When the Trump administration launched, many politically appointed positions were staffed with people who held traditional establishment credentials. Some of these were affiliated with the Christian conservative movement, but many—including James Mattis, John Kelly, Rex Tillerson, and Dan Coats—were not. Over time, however, the president shed many of these obstacles to his personal interests and elevated a set of officials who, whatever their professional credentials, shared a particular qualification for public service in the Trump administration: personal loyalty to Trump and whatever public policy agenda he announced. Here, I offer a quick overview of Trump appointees who ended up in key SOGI human rights-adjacent positions, many of whom I return to later in the book.

Besides their conservative commitments and loyalty to Trump, many political appointees and elected officials had anti-LGBT bona fides in common. I offer brief biographies of Mike Pence, Pam Pryor, Mick Mulvaney, Sam Brownback, Mike Pompeo, Kiron Skinner, and Robert Destro. I include Richard “Ric” Grenell’s bio in spite of the fact that he isn’t a Christian conservative because of his high-profile efforts to use the levers of US foreign policy to pressure countries that have continued to criminalize same-sex sexual relations to decriminalize. I list these bios in roughly the order in which these figures joined the Trump campaign or administration, or were appointed to positions with influence over US SOGI human rights.

Before she joined the Trump campaign, **Pam Pryor** held a number of positions that included political organizations and service to Republican elected officials. Her last position before the campaign was as a senior advisor for Governor Sarah Palin—a role John Hudson, writing for *Foreign Policy*, referred to as Palin’s “go-to girl.” Pryor served as director of “faith and Christian outreach” for the Trump campaign, where she helped “evangelical women ‘speak up’ for Donald Trump.”<sup>54</sup> She was a member of the Trump transition team for the State Department, including the Bureau of Democracy, Human Rights, and Labor (DRL). She went on to serve as senior advisor on global justice issues, senior advisor to the under secretary for civilian security, democracy, and human rights, and, in March 2020, acting assistant secretary for the Bureau of International Organization Affairs.

Foreign policy experts expressed concern about Pryor’s lack of expertise.<sup>55</sup> At State, she was tasked with advancing the Trump administration’s

efforts on “protecting and promoting religious freedom.”<sup>56</sup> According to Equity Forward, a watchdog group of lawyers, researchers, and communications specialists who monitor anti-reproductive health forces, opposition to abortion has been a focus of much of Pryor’s career. After joining the State Department, she worked to reverse “the underrepresentation of anti-abortion groups at international conferences” such as the United Nation’s Commission on the Status of Women. Pryor didn’t have a public record of anti-LGBTQ advocacy, but she had long worked closely with organizations that oppose LGBTQ human rights.<sup>57</sup>

**Mike Pence**, a former member of Congress and governor from Indiana, wasn’t Trump’s first choice as a running mate. Ultimately, Trump’s selection of Pence for his pull with Christian conservatives in July 2016 “felt a lot like the medicine Trump didn’t want to choke down.” According to Tom LoBianco, Trump worried that Pence “carried the whiff of a loser” because of the battle over a Religious Freedom Restoration Act (RFRA) Pence had signed into law in March 2015.<sup>58</sup> The RFRA, backed by the Christian right, was widely understood to have been crafted to protect businesses that refused to serve LGBTQ people, and at first Pence defended it. Before long, however, the law became a national story. The controversy polarized Indiana residents and subjected the state and Pence to scathing criticism from LGBTQ people and their allies, members of the business community, and—when he backed down and signed an amendment that clarified the law couldn’t be used to discriminate against LGBT people—Christian conservatives. However, even before this episode, Pence had a long history of anti-LGBT positions repudiating the idea of “sexual preference as a source of civil rights.”<sup>59</sup>

**Richard “Ric” Grenell** is a former Republican Party operative and, throughout most of Trump’s term, was US ambassador to Germany. He’s also a gay man who, in February 2019, spearheaded what quickly came to be understood as the Trump administration’s campaign for the decriminalization of same-sex sexuality worldwide. The decriminalization campaign wasn’t Grenell’s first moment of celebrity as ambassador. After Grenell assumed his post in Berlin in April 2018, he made headlines for comments in an interview with “alt-lite” internet media outlet *Breitbart* about seeking “to ‘empower’ anti-establishment rightwing forces throughout Europe.”<sup>60</sup> Despite fierce criticisms about Grenell’s conception of his role as ambassador from German government officials and former US diplomats, Grenell was neither recalled nor openly disciplined. While continuing to serve as US ambassador to Germany, in 2020, Grenell was appointed to the position of

acting director of national intelligence. Soon after Trump replaced him as DNI with former Texas Congressman John Ratcliffe, Grenell also resigned his position as US ambassador. Grenell reemerged after the 2020 election to denounce what Trump and his loyal retinue characterized as a stolen election and to agitate for a reversal of the election's verdict.

**Mick Mulvaney** was confirmed as the director of the Office of Management and Budget (OMB) in February 2017 and, on the departure of John Kelly, was named as Trump's acting White House chief of staff in January 2019. As director of OMB, Mulvaney attempted to enact budget rescissions in the late summers of 2018 and 2019 that would have retracted billions of dollars in foreign assistance funding appropriated by Congress but not yet obligated to particular programs by the State Department and USAID. The plan, which would have starved many human rights programs of resources, was protested by Republican and Democratic members of Congress and other officials, including Mike Pompeo.<sup>61</sup>

When Mulvaney was appointed to his post at the White House, LGBT media reported on Mulvaney's anti-LGBTQ record. As a state representative in South Carolina, Mulvaney cosponsored a bill to ban same-sex marriage in his state. Later, as a member of Congress, Mulvaney supported a Constitutional amendment to ban same-sex marriage, advocated for the Obama administration to defend the Defense of Marriage Act in court and, after the Supreme Court decision in *Obergefell v. Hodges*, endorsed religious exemptions for citizens who wanted to refuse to acknowledge the validity of these marriages.<sup>62</sup> After Mulvaney inadvertently confirmed during the impeachment process that Trump had demanded a quid pro quo from the president of Ukraine, Trump replaced him as acting chief of staff with Congressman Mark Meadows. Mulvaney was named special envoy to Northern Ireland.<sup>63</sup>

Former Kansas governor **Sam Brownback**, a prominent Christian conservative, was appointed by Trump and confirmed by the Senate to serve as the ambassador at large for international religious freedom. Brownback served in the House of Representatives and in the Senate before becoming governor of Kansas. As governor, Brownback instituted a series of economic policies and reforms that made him one of the most unpopular governors in the US.<sup>64</sup> Brownback has been an opponent of LGBT civil rights throughout his career, opposing same-sex marriage as well as nondiscrimination policies, and LGBTQ organizations opposed his confirmation to serve as ambassador. One of Brownback's most significant accomplishments as ambassador is the International Religious Freedom Alliance and International Religious Freedom (IRF) Fund, first announced during the 2019 Ministerial to Advance Religious

Freedom and launched in early 2020.<sup>65</sup> In its structure and function, the IRF Fund is the religious freedom version of the Global Equality Fund.<sup>66</sup> An irony of such a global alliance is that Christian conservatives have frequently repudiated international organizations and multilateral cooperation between governments that conservatives cast as undermining national sovereignty.

The intensity and consistency of Brownback's opposition to LGBT rights was on display in 2006 when he blocked the nomination of Michigan Court of Appeals judge Janet Neff to be a US district judge because she had attended the same-sex wedding ceremony of a family friend. As the *New York Times* put it in an editorial on the standoff, "Whether someone has attended a same-sex commitment ceremony is not a worthy litmus test to impose on someone seeking an important office. Whether someone holds hateful views toward gay people certainly is."<sup>67</sup> During his confirmation hearing in 2017, Democratic senator Tim Kaine, who had been Hillary Clinton's running mate in 2016, was unable to elicit a clear response when Kaine asked Brownback whether he could imagine a "circumstance under which religious freedom can justify criminalizing, imprisoning or executing people based on their LGBT status."<sup>68</sup>

Trump fired his first secretary of state, Rex Tillerson, and the Senate confirmed Trump's next choice, **Michael (Mike) Pompeo**, on May 1, 2018. A former member of Congress from Kansas and director of the Central Intelligence Agency, Pompeo had spoken publicly about his faith with Christian conservative media outlets and was welcomed by the Christian right as Tillerson's replacement.<sup>69</sup> Before heading the State Department, Pompeo had developed a reputation as an anti-LGBTQ policymaker. After the Supreme Court decision in *Obergefell v. Hodges*, he issued a statement characterizing the ruling as a "shocking abuse of power":

I am deeply saddened by the Supreme Court's ruling that imposes legalized gay marriage on the 70% of Kansans who voted to honor and protect the traditional definition of marriage as the union between one man and one woman. Creating, out of nowhere, a federal right to marry, flies in the face of centuries of shared understanding of our constitution. It is a shocking abuse of power. It is wrong. I will continue to fight to protect our most sacred institutions; Kansans and our nation deserve no less.<sup>70</sup>

During his confirmation hearing, Pompeo was "grilled" by New Jersey senator Cory Booker about his views on gay people and identity. Citing comments