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Religion and The Nixon Presidency

By John Dart
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Evangelist Billy Graham was a close friend of Richard M. Nixon for much of his presidency.

But in the final months of the Nixon administration, when Graham tried to reach the President, he was unsuccessful.

"I did call twice just to let him know I was praying for him, but I could not get through," (to the White House) Graham said in a telephone interview this week from his Montreat, N.C., home.

"I hope to remain a friend of President Nixon; I don't know what my relationship is now," Graham added.

The disconnected relationship with Graham is an example of why the Nixon presidency will hold a fascination for historians of American religion for years to come.

Mr. Nixon's successor, Gerald R. Ford, quickly established his spiritual credentials with the American people during his first week in office. He attended church on Sunday and called for God's help in his address to Congress on Monday.

But questions linger from the Nixon years, perhaps the chief one being whether religion and religious figures were "used" by the White House as an image-building device.

Last May, the Rev. M. G. (Pat) Robertson, a Southern Baptist minister who heads a religious broadcasting network, said the Watergate tapes showed Christians were the victims of a cruel hoax.

"We were led to believe that the man who appeared as a confidant of Billy Graham . . . was in truth a man of personal piety," the Rev. Mr. Robertson said.

"We can surmise that Dr. Billy Graham has been used for political image building."

Graham, a friend to several presidents, said it was difficult for him to say whether Mr. Nixon was "using" religion.

"There is a fine line between using religion and feeling that (one) must set an example to the country," Graham said.

Graham indicated he believes it is admirable for an American President to set a religious example for the public, and that that was one of the reasons for Mr. Nixon's series of White House worship services.

On the other hand, Graham said, "Those tapes revealed a man that I never knew. I never saw that side of him.

"Perhaps that came out after Watergate, or the presidency did that to the man . . . Sometimes a man can become more proud in the White House or he can become more humble."

The turning point in Mr. Nixon's relationship with Graham seemed to come last December.

At that time, Graham interrupted a European tour to preach at the December 16 White House services in which he called for every citizen to "repent" at this time of spiritual crisis.

A few days later, in a lengthy interview, Graham was quoted as saying that many of Mr. Nixon's "judgments have been very poor" in the Watergate affair.

Meanwhile, Mr. Nixon was receiving enthusiastic support and defense from three other men from the world of religion:

• The Rev. John McLaughlin, a Jesuit priest on the Nixon staff.

• Rabbi Baruch Korff, organizer of the National Citizens Committee for Fairness to the Presidency.

• The Rev. Sun Myung Moon, whose full-page newspaper ads proclaimed that the office of president is sacred and only "God has the power and authority to dismiss him."