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The Latin American Bullring: US Evangelicals and the Reception of Anti-Protestant Violence from Cold War Colombia

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In the shadow of the Cuban Revolution, American Baptist preacher Billy Graham and US President John F. Kennedy barnstormed South America through overlapping tours in 1961 and 1962. Kennedy's presidency has often been presented as an intermission in the drama of evangelical political power, but grassroots activism provides new angles for analysis at the intersection of the US and Latin America. While claiming an apolitical stance, Graham worked alongside the US State Department, planting spiritual seeds on the tilled ground of foreign policy. Graham – and Protestant leaders orbiting him – curated acts of violence, painting a picture of persecution for a watching public. This narrative employed violence to draw lines of worldwide spiritual affiliation and political obligation. US evangelicals placed themselves as custodians of America's most sacred values at home and abroad, responsible for upholding democratic values, including religious tolerance, the rule of law, and anticommunism. Graham's tactics created an entangled relationship with Kennedy, where Graham arose as a metaphorical matador, fighting for persecuted Christians. Here, American evangelicals could flex their growing political muscle, while operating as an imagined religious minority community. Narratives, discourses, and representations of violence circulated transnationally and acquired differing meanings depending on the political interests of those mobilizing them.

Freshly slaughtered animal carcasses swung on taugth ropes as a stiff breeze pushed through the bullring. The sound of bleating sheep and Brahma steers rustled in the corner alongside bloody horns strewn across the floor.¹ Outside the arena, a “carnival atmosphere” appeared with “food vendors and bright signs” filling the square.² Nearly ten thousand supporters pushed through turnstiles, filling seats normally reserved for watching a grisly battle. A hush fell over the crowd as a shadow appeared in the matador's entrance;

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¹ Billy Graham Center Archives (BGCA), Wheaton College, CN 506, Box 11, Folder 3.

² Ibid.

a tall, strikingly handsome American ascended the makeshift stage. Billy Graham's booming baritone voice opened his pathbreaking 1962 tour in South America.

Graham, along with evangelical Protestants, struggled for hearts and minds in Cold War Latin America and they tussled in surprising and overlooked arenas, including in a fetid Colombian bullring. In organizing the tour, the Billy Graham Evangelistic Association (BGEA) confronted discrimination and sporadic violence, scrambling to replace their stadium reservation after Catholic pressure forced the local government's hand. The *New York Times* quoted the mayor saying, "Only the Roman Catholic Church was allowed to propagandize in Colombia."³ The BGEA protested directly to the President of Colombia, Alberto Lleras Camargo, a close ally of the United States.⁴ The request was ignored. This was just the beginning of challenges Graham faced in his tour across the region.

After Graham's crusade, one local Catholic newspaper claimed, "Graham oratory failed to move crowd." The BGEA blamed the commentary on erroneous expectations of "bull fight enthusiasm."⁵ As Graham toured Venezuela, Colombia, and Ecuador, he faced significant opposition – media blackouts, canceled reservations, violent protests, and pressure from Catholic leadership. During his Andean tour, Graham, therefore, appeared at once as the bull *and* the matador – a powerful white American representing a religious minority community. Local coreligionists, however, felt the brunt of anti-Protestant fervor.

The Lleras Camargo administration was well aware of Protestant persecution in Colombia. In January 1959, Lleras Camargo commissioned a report to reveal the extent of violence against religious minorities in the country during La Violencia, a period of widespread political violence between 1948 and 1959. The report concluded, "Between 1947 and 1959 Colombian Catholics had destroyed 88 Protestant churches and murdered 114 Protestants in purely religious violence."⁶ Even armed with this data, Lleras Camargo was reluctant to address violence against Protestant minorities, fearing that appealing to a tiny minority community would result in the loss of a hard-won political coalition and reignite violence besides.⁷ The US government had also muted its protest at Protestant persecution, as decades of pressure had done little to alter the status quo in Colombia. Ambassador

3 "A City Bars Graham: Barranquilla, Colombia, Will Not Let Him Hold Service," *New York Times*, 24 Jan. 1962, 3. See also BGCA, CN 17, Box 2, Folder 3, 17 Jan. 1962.

4 BGEA Crusade News Bureau, press release, 26 Jan. 1962.

5 Ibid.

6 Colombia, Ministerio de Gobierno, *La minorías religiosas ante el Congreso de Colombia* (Bogotá: Imprenta Nacional, 1959), 10–11. Cited in Bradley Lynn Coleman, *Colombia and the United States: The Making of an Inter-American Alliance, 1939–1960* (Kent: Kent State University Press, 2008), 184.

7 Coleman, 184.

John Moors Cabot, for example, wrote in 1958 that Colombia “flagrantly violated” religious freedom but the US should avoid confrontation with the Colombian government.⁸ Graham thus faced significant restrictions on Protestant evangelistic efforts in Colombia (and similar countries in the region) alongside a reluctant US State Department.

Graham’s intervention was particularly salient for Colombian Protestants, as they were often linked to, and portrayed as soft on, communism. Historians, including J. D. Henderson and James Goff, have shown that Protestants often supported liberals at this time, and that Colombian Catholics did not hesitate to link them to communism in an effort to justify violence against them.⁹ This discursive connection helps explain why violence against Protestants could often go unpunished, as in the case of Colombia, as well as in Mexico, Brazil, and others. It also helps explain why Graham’s efforts at marshaling support for Colombian evangelicals could have a manifest impact.

In the United States, attempts to portray Catholics as weak on democracy, social order, and communism, while often successful within US borders, would have little staying power on the ground in Latin America, particularly in Spanish publications or among the general public. The Catholic hierarchy in most countries was instrumental in fighting *against* so-called communist forces (which were often wrongly associated with Protestant minorities) in Latin America. In the case of Colombia, as noted, they were often closely aligned with the US and its goals in the region. Dueling narratives, then, north and south of the Rio Grande, shaped perceptions and coalitions across borders.

Billy Graham’s tour of South America reveals hidden networks and negotiations in the story of transnational evangelicalism and its access to global spiritual and political power as well. As Graham gathered information for his tour, the sources – John F Kennedy’s US. State Department, US missionaries, and local Latin American Protestant leaders – ushered violence to the front row of his mind. Here, Billy Graham became the barometer of Cold War pressure and a measure of evangelical reach into a transnational public square. But recent studies have also demonstrated that “less powerful entities found innumerable opportunities to harness, reject, manipulate, or accentuate the Cold War in order to advance their particular agendas.”¹⁰ In the case of Protestant evangelicals, their influence was layered and complex, reflecting the realities of cross-

8 Ibid.

9 James David Henderson, *When Colombia Bled: A History of Violence in Tolima* (University: University of Alabama Press, 2012); James E. Goff, “The Persecution of Protestant Christians in Colombia, 1948–1958, with an Investigation of Its Background and Causes,” PhD thesis, Centro Intercultural de Documentación, Cuernavaca, Mexico, 1968.

10 Coleman, 184.

border religious growth. Colombia, as a conservative bastion of Catholic influence, arose as central to these hopes, dreams, setbacks, and challenges.¹¹

Of course, Colombia was not alone in creating a hostile environment for Protestantism. Historian Erika Helgen has shown Catholic priestly promotion within the Brazilian church hierarchy tied to the success of anti-Protestant campaigns, including those that used violence.¹² In Mexico, even during periods of relative peace between church and state, especially under the Ávila Camacho (1940–46) and Alemán (1946–52) administrations, scholars have often taken this as de facto peace between religion and state. But political shifts in fact produced the opposite effect for Protestant minorities. According to historian Todd Hartch, “The regime’s decision to pursue better relationships with the Roman Catholic Church ... opened the door for a widespread pattern of anti-Protestant violence and intimidation.”¹³ Protestants found themselves caught in the crossfire between radical anticlericalism and Catholic religious fervor. Protestant schools, churches, and pastors were especially targeted, and both administrations failed to protect a Protestant minority during persecution. Both administrations also denied Protestant requests to open new churches. This is simply one example of many where broader scholarly narratives overshadowed the grassroots reality for religious minority communities and relegated violence to the periphery.¹⁴

What follows is an accounting of grassroots Protestant evangelical pressure on US foreign policy and how this affective material shaped internal understanding of transnational evangelical communities. The focus of this article, while relevant to Colombian area studies, moves beyond localized readings of these events and processes. Evangelical Protestants in the US took real and verifiable violence and abstracted it. Latin American violence was

11 Recent books have expanded our understanding of violence in Colombia. See Mary Roldán, *Blood and Fire: La Violencia in Antioquia, Colombia, 1946–1953* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2002); Robert Karl, *Forgotten Peace: Reform, Violence, and the Making of Contemporary Colombia* (Oakland: University of California Press, 2017); Henderson; and Helwar Hernando Figueroa, “Historiografía sobre el protestantismo en Colombia: Un estado del arte, 1940–2009,” *Anuario colombiano de historia sociocultural*, 37, 1 (2010), 191–225.

12 Erika Helgen, *Religious Conflict in Brazil: Protestants, Catholics, and the Rise of Religious Pluralism in the Early Twentieth Century* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2020), 89–119; Helgen, “Holy Wars: Protestants, Catholics, and the Struggle for Brazilian National Identity, 1916–1945,” PhD dissertation, Yale University, 2015, 161, 188.

13 T. Hartch, *Missionaries of the State: The Summer Institute of Linguistics, State Formation, and Indigenous Mexico, 1935–1985* (Tuscaloosa: University of Alabama Press, 2006), 62–63.

14 Gema Kloppe-Santamaría’s new book *In the Vortex of Violence* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2020), 58, explores the few decades following, with fascinating examples of lynchings in Mexico. In one example, a policeman was mistaken for a Protestant pastor, and was stoned, knifed, and clubbed to death, with his face and skull skinned.

wielded across borders by US actors, especially when framed in the language of religious freedom and extracted and removed of nuance. Most readers and politicians lacked the sufficient knowledge of local and contextual realities that precipitated violence. In other words, violence was not always religiously motivated but could reflect ethnic or class conflicts. A lack of knowledge of contextual realities did not blunt the affect that moved across borders and shaped the views of US evangelicalism.

In this story, Billy Graham reflected the views and shifting loyalties of American evangelicals, rather than primarily shaping them himself. For this reason, those orbiting Graham, alongside religious print media and missionary prayer letters, are an important piece in the development of our story. Yet, long before Graham and Kennedy raised the profile of overlooked South American countries in the minds of many Americans, violence in the region filled evangelical prayer letters, print media, and church sermons. This “decade of violence,” as one American missionary in Colombia put it, provides crucial background on both sides of the border.¹⁵ All types of violence preoccupied evangelicals – Cold War, Catholic, indigenous – each piece providing construction materials to construct and divide the world into friend and foe alike. Using his rising popularity and connections, Graham funneled this violence to John F. Kennedy.

The relationship between postwar evangelicalism and the Cold War state was symbiotic. American evangelical advocacy for persecuted Christians in Latin America mingled with an embrace of US soft power and global humanitarianism. In historian Axel Schäfer’s words, evangelicals “learned to stop worrying and love the state.”¹⁶ As the BGEA planned their tour, overlapping with Kennedy, one associate wrote, “We are in touch with our own State Department officials who deal with Latin American problems and with the National Association of Evangelicals who deal in international problems.”¹⁷ At times, the lines between evangelicals and the State Department blurred. In an official press release, the BGEA bragged about praise received from “[m]issionaries, state department representatives and other officials.”¹⁸ While publicly rejecting political language and identification, American evangelicals leveraged relationships with oilmen, politicians, media, and military leadership to advance their goals.

In his antipersecution and anticommunist advocacy, Billy Graham continued an ongoing practice rather than inventing it. According to historian

15 BGCA, Robert Savage, interview by Bob Shuster, Collection 250, TI.

16 Axel Schäfer, *Piety and Public Funding: Evangelicals and the State in Modern America* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press), 1–11.

17 Name withheld to Frank Means, 12 June 1961, Foreign Mission Board, BGCA, CN 17, Box 2, Folder 1.

18 BGEA Crusade News Bureau, press release, 9 Feb. 1962.

American evangelicalism's) relationship with Kennedy. All of this speaks to the long-term demographic changes in Latin America, a shifting understanding of Graham's political maneuverings and influence, and the intertwining of religious groups with political power.

LATIN AMERICAN PROTESTANT EVANGELICALISM AND COLD WAR PRESSURE

Prior to the First World War, Protestant communities in Latin America were mainly the product of early nineteenth-century immigration.²⁵ As the nineteenth century progressed, three realities converged in the fields of politics and religion: the independence of Latin American nations from the colonial powers of Spain and Portugal, early nineteenth-century Protestant revivalism, and increasing interventionism on the part of the United States in the region. Those factors gave rise to new missionary initiatives from the north, with especially an influx of Protestant missionaries from the United States into Latin America.²⁶ An increase in religious work coincided with an increasingly aggressive US foreign policy in the region, which reflected the values outlined in the "Monroe Doctrine," first articulated in December 1823. In his address to Congress, US President James Monroe outlined three core tenets: "separate spheres of influence for the Americas and Europe, non-colonization, and non-intervention."²⁷ Monroe's address was strategically "paradoxical and ambiguous," placing a rhetorical hedge around perceived European recolonization efforts, but placing no expectations on American actions.²⁸ In a sense, it articulated a process that had already begun and would continue in renewed focus, laying explicit claim to influence on the Americas and acting upon this assertion with increasing vigor over the following century. The development and application of the ideas were key to the US moving from disparate colonies to global empire.²⁹ Anti-Protestant violence in Latin America is impossible to separate from the political power the US exerted across borders, while remaining not fully explained by US foreign relations.³⁰

25 Justo L. González and Ondina E. González, *Christianity in Latin America: A History* (Cambridge and New York: Cambridge University Press, 2008), 184–206.

26 *Ibid.*, 206–7.

27 US Department of State, Office of the Historian, at <https://history.state.gov/milestones/1801-1829/monroe> (accessed 20 March 2015).

28 Jay Sexton, *The Monroe Doctrine: Empire and Nation in Nineteenth-Century America* (New York: Hill and Wang, 2011), 3–4.

29 *Ibid.*, 5.

30 In certain cases, anti-US imperialism does not explain anti-Protestant violence. In Mexico, for example, revolutionaries who were against US imperialism, for instance, could promote alliances with Protestants because the latter supported the revolution and its liberal, socialist, anticlerical, and secular impetus. Hartch, *Missionaries of the State*.

After the Second World War, political developments accelerated across Latin America alongside an emerging urban religious economy. Domestically, rural–urban migration increasingly shifted populations to the urban centers, stretching cities to their structural capacities.³¹ For the first time in Latin American history, Protestantism began gaining a demographic foothold as urbanization provided a new social context for religious life.³² Protestant churches found acceptance at the margins of this new urban environment, growing in places that traditional Roman Catholic structures largely struggled to reach. Tensions between Catholics and Protestants thus arose from local and global realities.

Within an increasingly contested religious environment, anti-American sentiment was thick in the air. The United States was often blamed for persistent economic malaise and – perhaps most loudly – for daily atrocities committed by US-backed military regimes. By implication, many Latin American Protestants were often seen as foreigners in their own land – labeled gringos and yankees.³³ Roman Catholic priests and authorities often viewed Protestant evangelistic efforts as imposing on their religious turf. Priests and religious leaders sometimes played into these fears by stoking up mobs for violence against Protestants. Latin American evangelicals thus shared the socio-political context while negotiating a unique path as a religious minority community in an overwhelmingly Catholic continent.³⁴

The intense ideological struggle of the Cold War was an extension of European colonialism and an imagined proving ground of ideologies forged in Moscow and Washington.³⁵ The rivalry was a global one and Latin America and the Caribbean became a hot spot for their perceived competition. As a result, the US actively intervened within internal Latin American politics through covert CIA operations. These included the 1954 CIA-backed coup and removal of the Guatemalan President Jacobo Arbenz, the Bay of Pigs invasion of 1961, and Operation Power Pack – the second US invasion and occupation of the Dominican Republic in 1965. National security concerns

31 David C. Kirkpatrick, “C. René Padilla and the Origins of Integral Mission in Post-war Latin America,” *Journal of Ecclesiastical History*, 67, 2 (April 2016), 351–71; Kirkpatrick, *A Gospel for the Poor: Global Social Christianity and the Latin American Evangelical Left* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2019).

32 Todd Hartzch, *The Rebirth of Latin American Christianity* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2014), 96, 97.

33 Carlos Mondragón, *Like Leaven in the Dough: Protestant Social Thought in Latin America, 1920–1950* (Madison: Fairleigh Dickinson University Press, 2010), 19; researcher’s fieldwork throughout Latin America.

34 Kirkpatrick, “C. René Padilla and the Origins of Integral Mission.”

35 O. Westad, *The Global Cold War: Third World Interventions and the Making of Our Times* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2007), 3–4.

brought the United States and Colombia into a closer partnership during the Second World War. After the war, this partnership continued and expanded, eventually forming “the basis of a modern internal security partnership.”³⁶ On a governmental level, Colombia was a close ally that aligned with US goals in the region. Similarly, “with the possible exception of Rómulo Betancourt, the Venezuelan president in the early 1960s, Lleras Camargo was the most aggressively anti-Castro, anti-Communist, and pro-U.S. democratic leader in Latin America during this period.”³⁷

At a governmental level, by the 1960s “the problems of religious freedom in Colombia had largely disappeared from U.S.–Colombian correspondence.”³⁸ If, by the Colombian government’s own admission, this violence was widespread prior to the 1960s, what changed? At the intersection of a Colombian government reluctant to help a religious minority community and a US government that needed Colombia to prove the successes of the Alliance for Progress, evangelicals pressed for change.

JOHN THE BAPTIST (JUAN EL BAUTISTA)

“When you go to South America, I will be your John the Baptist.”³⁹ With a striking biblical metaphor, US President John F. Kennedy emerged from his private White House office alongside “America’s pastor,” Billy Graham. Given their often conflicting religious and political loyalties, what prompted Kennedy’s promise to prepare Graham’s way in the wilderness, a reference to John the Baptist’s role before Jesus Christ in the Gospel accounts? A telephone left off the hook in Kennedy’s office, alongside recently unrestricted documents, reveals a tense but generative encounter between the first American Catholic President and an evangelical Protestant constituency jostling for postwar political influence.⁴⁰

Behind closed doors, Graham confronted Kennedy with firebombings, lynchings, stonings, kidnappings, assassinations, and mob violence – raging, anti-Protestant violence in Colombia. Kennedy would not have been surprised by tumult in the region; he often called it “the most dangerous area in the

36 Coleman, *Colombia and the United States*, xiii.

37 Jeffrey Taffet, *Foreign Aid as Foreign Policy: The Alliance for Progress in Latin America* (Florence: Taylor and Francis, 2012), 153. 38 Coleman, 184.

39 BGCA, CN 685, VIP Notebooks, “John F. Kennedy file,” CN 19, Box 5, Folder 65; BGCA, CN 141, Box 26, Folder 9, interview with Luis Palau by Lois Ferm, 12 Jan. 1978. Ferm was the longtime personal assistant of Billy Graham.

40 After Graham’s death, his personal papers have been widely unrestricted. Franklin Graham, his son and president of BGEA, is reobtaining the papers, with no plan to release them again. Within this tight window of Billy’s death and Franklin’s, I visited twice and obtained key documents for this project.

world.”⁴¹ Yet, according to BGEA associates, Kennedy bristled at Graham’s description: “This is a false accusation. I will not buy that. Where are [Protestants] persecuted?” he reportedly replied.⁴² Graham’s description of a war against evangelicals did not comport with Kennedy’s perception. Kennedy’s staff frequently updated him on Latin American religion and politics through memos and curated data. In one instance, Brooks Hayes, special assistant to the President, described a Latin American Catholic bishop who dreamed of a Protestant church in every Latin American town.⁴³ Kennedy’s staff painted a rosy picture of religious freedom in the region; Graham’s account threatened the peaceful veneer.

Former US President Dwight D. Eisenhower, who was also in the room, shared his own story of endemic guerilla violence during his tour the prior year, contributing to the conversation on Latin American violence while mixing in his own fears over communism.⁴⁴ After confirmation of anti-Protestant violence from his presidential aides, Kennedy picked up the phone and directly intervened on behalf of Protestants, calling religious and political leaders regarding religious violence. Kennedy wielded his soaring popularity and most likely threatened to tighten the financial spigot of the Alliance for Progress, connecting religious freedom to financial uplift.⁴⁵ When Graham returned to the White House, Kennedy vowed to end the violence against Protestants in Latin America: “I can assure you that it is going to stop and it’s going to stop right now.”⁴⁶ On the political stage, the relationship between American evangelicals and global violence was symbiotic and often overlooked.

Graham’s views reflected those of his evangelical Protestant constituency. While Graham had publicly pounded the drum of apoliticism, his private actions belied his conservative politics. Graham also preached a sermon on his *Hour of Decision* radio program addressing the unfolding crisis of communism in Latin America. Graham wondered aloud whether the Kennedy

41 Stephen G. Rabe, *The Most Dangerous Area in the World: John F. Kennedy Confronts Communist Revolution in Latin America* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1999).

42 BGCA, CN 141, Box 26, Folder 9, interview with Luis Palao by Lois Ferm, 12 Jan. 1978.

43 Brooks Hayes memo to JFK, 13 June 1962, Series 06, JFKPOF-063a-004.

44 Papers of John F. Kennedy, Boston, President’s Office Files, Telephone Recordings, Dictation Belt 3A, 8.

45 This hypothesis is given more weight by Eisenhower’s presence in the room. In 1958, his administration offered financial aid to Colombia in exchange for reopening Protestant churches. Paul Claussen and N. Stephen Kane, US Department of State, Office of the Historian, Foreign Relations of the United States 1958–1960, American Republics, Volume V, at <https://history.state.gov/historicaldocuments/frus1958-60v05/d303>.

46 The reader should note that this was a second-hand recollection from BGEA evangelist Luis Palao, who heard the story from Billy Graham.

administration had acted too late and complained that “for years the policy has been to compromise, talk, retreat, and appease.” According to Graham, these events caused the “rose-colored glasses” to be removed but he argued that the US was paying for its naivety and trust of the Soviet Union.⁴⁷ Elsewhere, Graham would explicitly mention the Andes region as crucial in the battle against communism:

In my opinion, there will be an intensification of the battle between Christianity and Communism for the minds and souls of men. In Greenland’s icy mountains, along India’s coral shores, through the heart of darkest Africa, through the Andes of South America ... the outcome will determine what kind of a world the next generation will live in.⁴⁸

Graham was certainly not alone in his anticommunist views. His convictions represented an increasingly influential Protestant evangelical constituency.⁴⁹

Graham’s overlapping tours with Kennedy were not his first encounters with Latin America. Graham most famously accompanied Martin Luther King Jr to the Baptist World Alliance in Rio de Janeiro in Brazil in 1960.⁵⁰ During the Eisenhower administration, Graham backed the government’s goals at home and abroad, quickly becoming an ambassador of sorts. This role emerged mostly clearly during his 1960 Safari for Souls tour across the continent of Africa, where a newly postcolonial region was pulled between Moscow and Washington.⁵¹ If Graham’s role emerged during this earlier work in Africa, why not Latin America, a region toward which Americans held even greater fears regarding communist infiltration?

American evangelicals planted spiritual seeds in the tilled ground of American foreign policy. The proximity between violence, anticommunism, and evangelical salvation was often intimate. Chuck Ward, Graham’s director of arrangements for the 1962 South American crusade, shared his view of this American cocktail and Latin American readiness in January of that year: “In this suddenly awakened continent are people who have enjoyed their ‘siesta’ for centuries. Now they are *ready for revolution*. They are aroused – ready to receive any new ‘Messiah’ who will promise to satisfy their gnawing hunger

47 BGCA, Billy Graham, sermon, *Hour of Decision*, “The Bridegroom Is Coming,” 28 Oct. 1962, Tape T668g, *Hour of Decision* radio program. Jay Douglas Learned, “Billy Graham, American Evangelicalism, and the Cold War Clash of Messianic Visions, 1945–1962,” PhD dissertation, University of Rochester, 2012, 304.

48 BGCA, Billy Graham, “Communism and Christianity,” 8 March 1953, T165f, Collection 191, *Hour of Decision* radio program.

49 Robert S. Ellwood, *The Fifties Spiritual Marketplace: American Religion in a Decade of Conflict* (New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press, 1997), 50.

50 Steven P. Miller, *Billy Graham and the Rise of the Republican South* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2011), 84. 51 *Ibid.*, 84.

... There is no barrier to communism but the Gospel of the risen Redeemer.” Ward then turned to his American readers with striking military language: “Won’t you go with us in your prayer and in your support on this spiritual invasion? This is the hour of Gospel opportunity.”⁵²

Violence in Latin America was also a crucial lens through which American evangelicals viewed the Kennedy candidacy for President. Billy Graham and the BGEA rode the coattails of Kennedy’s soaring popularity: many Latin Americans posted Kennedy’s picture in their homes and embraced him as the answer to growing inequality and violence. The first Catholic US President, John F. Kennedy, aggressively courted Latin America especially through the Alliance for Progress, a robust financial and diplomatic outreach announced in his 1961 inaugural address.⁵³ This outreach can be quantified in real economic terms. Under Harry Truman, the US distributed only 3 percent of its foreign aid to Latin America. Eisenhower tripled the percentage to 9 percent. Under Kennedy, Latin America soared to 18 percent of the foreign-aid budget.⁵⁴ Graham and Kennedy’s tours took place immediately after a transformed Colombia and US relationship. Colombia had received \$500 million in US economic assistance between 1957 and 1960. Under Kennedy between 1961 and 1965 Colombia received \$833 million in US economic assistance through the Alliance for Progress.⁵⁵ Overall, between 1961 and 1969, Colombia was the second-highest aid recipient in the region. Kennedy hoped Colombia would prove the successes of the Alliance for Progress.⁵⁶

Billy Graham also *needed* Kennedy’s reach: his handsome face, diplomatic efforts, and Catholic identity. While Graham was increasingly popular in the United States, even a household name, he was almost entirely unknown in Latin America. As a result, when they planned Graham’s 1962 tour, the BGEA actively paired Kennedy and Graham by placing a photograph from their recent meeting on billboards and promotional material, describing their friendship and cooperation in intimate terms. One advertisement for the Asunción, Paraguay rally (27 September to 4 October 1962) showed a picture of Graham and Kennedy shaking hands and smiling from the prior year. Emblazoned on the front was the John the Baptist quote mentioned above – Kennedy promising to prepare Graham’s way in the wilderness. The advertisement concluded, “Dr. Graham and President Kennedy have had long conversations on spiritual and moral matters and have built up a strong friendship between them. They are both of nearly the same age.”⁵⁷

52 Charles Ward, “Expectancy in South America!”, *Decision*, Jan. 1962, BGCA, CN 506, Box 11, Folder 3, original emphasis.

53 For more on the Alliance for Progress see Taffet, *Foreign Aid as Foreign Policy*.

54 Rabe, *The Most Dangerous Area in the World*, 154.

55 Coleman, *Colombia and the United States*, 199.

56 Taffet, 149.

57 BGCA, CN 19, Box 5, Folder 64.

This was intentional marketing on the part of the BGEA. Robert Savage, American missionary to Latin America and then vice president of World Radio Missionary Fellowship, played a key role here. He wrote to Graham and Charlie Ward, the BGEA Latin America Office director, saying, “Copies of the picture with Billy and President Kennedy would be of inestimable value.”⁵⁸ As a key contact for the BGEA, Savage was also intimately aware of anti-Protestant violence from his time in Colombia – one of many contacts who channeled a context of violence to Graham, carefully sifting data for his image of the region. In the estimation of the Colombian government (the Lleras Camargo administration), much of this violence did, indeed, take place, though the stories would be abstracted and applied in disparate ways.⁵⁹

These violent stories in Latin America took place at the edge of Vatican II and the heart of the Kennedy presidency. Not least, this story provides key background to Kennedy’s famous Catholic speech and lingering anti-Catholicism in American politics. Kennedy inadvertently opened doors for evangelical Protestants on both sides of the border, polishing Protestantism’s image in Latin America. After his victory over Graham’s preferred candidate in Nixon, evangelicals worked with Kennedy’s administration – an overlooked story of symbiotic church and state. With the United States so intimately connected to Protestantism in the minds of most Latin Americans, rehabilitating one saved the other as well. While Kennedy did not reshape the image entirely, or intentionally, he helped soften views of US religion by his outreach and popularity. Jacqueline Kennedy also played a key role here, speaking fluent Spanish to cheering crowds. The Kennedy administration took time to learn and respect the intricacies of local cultures and customs. While the Alliance for Progress was a failure in terms of policy goals, it paved wider avenues for religious advance – in this case, Protestantism. Perhaps more importantly, Catholic violence in the global South shaped views of American Catholics. This provides crucial background to evangelical opposition to Kennedy’s 1960 campaign and Protestant evangelical understandings of US foreign policy in the region. None of this was possible without a longer history of evangelical engagement with Latin America and with violence in the region.

MARKETING COLOMBIAN VIOLENCE

After the Second World War, US missionaries injected energy, tension, and money directly into the spiritual bloodstream of Latin America. East Asia

⁵⁸ James Savage to Billy Graham and Charles Ward, undated, BGCA, CN 17, Box 2, Folder 3.

⁵⁹ See above in this article.

and Africa had long dominated evangelical Protestant missions, locations desired by aspiring American missionaries. Yet shifting political winds and a renewed sense of spiritual opportunity pushed personnel into Latin America in the postwar period. One precipitating factor was from the Chinese government, which had expelled all Protestant missionaries from the country by the year 1953. Former missionaries to China overwhelmingly chose Latin America as their new home and so-called mission field.⁶⁰

As Cold War competition accelerated, Americans flooded the market. Internal conversations within evangelical religious publications reflect this reality. *Christianity Today*, the flagship magazine of conservative evangelicals founded by Billy Graham in 1956, published a surplus of op-eds and articles on the pressing need for and fruit of evangelistic efforts in Latin America in the late 1950s.⁶¹ American evangelicals would not wait or defer to the Catholic Church. On the contrary, the Catholic nature of countries like Colombia only served to motivate them. “Unlike many former Protestant leaders,” the Methodist C. Stanley Lowell wrote in *Christianity Today* after a visit to Colombia in 1960, evangelicals “do not regard Latin America as a Roman Catholic preserve where her ‘no poaching’ signs must be respected. They believe that freedom of religion should be a universal concept, and view every nominal Catholic – and every practicing one, too – as the legitimate object of their appeal.”⁶² American evangelicals were not ashamed of their broad scope; they knew whom they wanted to target and embraced American religious freedom as justification of their advance.

Catholic officials often fiercely resisted the advance of Protestantism. In the country of Colombia, where Kennedy began his tour in 1961, violence was a preferred and continuous method for Protestant removal; the entire preceding decade was bloody for Protestants. Colombia lagged behind other Latin American countries who had taken concrete steps toward religious freedom, even maintaining an official concordat with the Vatican. The Colombian concordat signed in 1928 divided the country into mission territories, provided government funds for Catholic missions, and placed the entire educational structure under Catholic control. This calcified Catholic power and provided massive backing for their religious goals. Protestant missionaries, with their schools and churches, were quite literally imposing on Catholic religious turf. By the time of Graham’s tour, the grassroots reality for Protestant

60 Christian Smith, *The Emergence of Liberation Theology: Radical Religion and Social Movement Theory* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1991), 75.

61 See, for example, “Latin American: An Open Door,” “Tomorrow’s Task in Latin America,” and “New Protestantism in Latin America.”

62 C. Stanley Lowell, “New Protestantism in Latin America,” *Christianity Today*, 18 Jan. 1960.

minorities had significantly improved in Colombia, but the history of violence spoke strongly to the context in which he found himself.

This South American country with a tiny Protestant population, and the grueling spiritual work of US and Latin Americans there, provides crucial background to the rise of evangelical rhetoric surrounding global violence. Violent encounters *abroad* shaped American evangelicals as they grasped for custodial control of US culture *at home*. This transnational existence allowed competing paradigms to operate in their minds: they could be persecuted *and* thriving, shaping culture while losing their rightful place in the American public square.⁶³

The National Association of Evangelicals (NAE), founded in 1942 as the lobbying and public-policy arm of nearly fifteen evangelical denominations, wielded these violent stories to exclude Catholics from kinship in a global family of Christianity. In one instance, US Congressman Carl Curtis of Nebraska wrote to Donald McAlpine, NAE assistant secretary of affairs, sharing “vivid stories of the known persecution in Colombia.” But McAlpine worried that the accounts would not be accepted as credible due to exaggeration and “supernatural phenomena.”⁶⁴ The NAE curated violent stories for a watching public, shaping testimonies to fit religious and political ends. In the case of Latin America, Graham maintained constant contact with the NAE, appointing its leaders to key positions in the BGEA, and using them as sources of information.

American missionaries experienced, packaged, and exported images of religious violence to a rapt audience across the border. They pushed major media outlets to cover the story, and with the spotlight, they demanded that the US government intervene. *Time* magazine picked up the story in April 1950, as violence raged against Protestants: “The Roman Catholic Conservatives had been systematically trying to drive the Protestants out by beatings, bombings, arson and intimidation.”⁶⁵ In the district of Cali, ten churches had recently been burned and their local pastors thrown in jail. *Time* also described beatings and police intimidation that were endemic to the country. The article also cited remorse from some local Roman Catholics, “The ... dynamiting of the church in Dabeiba has led ... numbers of people of Dabeiba, many of them Catholics, [to express] their regrets at what happened and testify that they are not in sympathy with such violence.” Later articles in *Time* described violent protests against the opening of new Protestant churches, mainly mobs

63 This is what McAlister calls “victim identification.” See Melani McAlister, *The Kingdom of God Has No Borders: A Global History of American Evangelicals* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2018).

64 Donald Scott McAlpine personal notes, 28 May 1951, BGCA, CN 165, Box 84.

65 Time staff, “Religion,” *Time*, 24 April 1950, 85.

whipped up by local priests. In many cases, stones were thrown through the newly installed stained-glass windows. In one particular case, the signs among the mob read, “Colombia is Catholic,” and “We will not be robbed of our religion.”⁶⁶

Outside the spotlight of major print media, evangelical prayer letters brimmed with violence. That year, 1950, Ken Strachan, head of the Latin America Mission, close friend of Billy Graham, and one of the most influential missionaries in Latin America, wrote a prayer letter focussing on violence in Colombia.⁶⁷ The following year, Strachan updated American evangelical supporters again on the Colombian work:

From the human standpoint, things looked black in Colombia. With stories of evangelical chapels destroyed, congregations scattered, burning, looting, killing, schools being closed, entry to new missionaries forbidden, and restrictions increasing daily, perhaps it was excusable that we should have been thinking in terms of retrenchment, defensive measures, and hanging on until the storm lifted.

Strachan utilized military language to speak of the threat of discouragement. But his conclusion was a stark contrast to doom and gloom: “Last year we saw the highest number of new members baptized in the entire history of the work.”⁶⁸ The organic connection between violence and church growth was the expected pattern of evangelical testimonies. In another prayer letter, Strachan reflected on the violence: “It helped me realize again that beyond our talents, time or money, *we have to give ourselves.*”⁶⁹ American evangelicals gazed across the border and filled their minds with motivation for religious activism. The “we” in Strachan’s letter expanded through trial and tribulation. While American missionaries often suffered alongside, most of the violence was against local adherents themselves. But this violence, too, circulated through American bodies – physically through missionary involvement and emotionally through US religious readership.

Local Latin Americans experienced the brunt of violence while American missionaries curated the stories, interweaving their own. In a 1987 interview, Robert Savage, an influential American missionary to Latin America, key BGEA contact, and then vice president of World Radio Missionary Fellowship, reflected on his missionary experience in Colombia, including “pots of urine dumped in [the] doorway to show ... antipathy toward us,” polemical tracts written and distributed against them, and verbal abuse. In a

66 Time staff, “The Hemisphere,” *Time*, 7 Jan. 1952.

67 Ken Strachan prayer letter, Nov.–Dec. 1950, BGCA, Box 17, Folder 17, SC 20.

68 Ken Strachan prayer letter, 23 July 1951, BGCA, Box 17, Folder 17, SC 20. Today Colombia calls Bolívar State a department.

69 BGCA, SC 20, Box 17, Folder 43, italics mine.

moment of somber recollection, Savage concluded, “Surprising, the number of close missionary colleagues we’ve had who have suffered martyred ... martyred deaths.”⁷⁰

Vivid accounts of violence were not just buried in an archive, but shared at churches, in sermons, and in missionary prayer letters. Evangelical stories of suffering were also often meticulous in their macabre details. The Confederación Evangélica de Colombia (CEDEC) compiled a list of those “killed in Colombia 1949–1958 because of their religion.” CEDEC was an interdenominational organization comprising a wide range of evangelical Protestant denominations.⁷¹ Their eleven-year toll was 116 martyrs.⁷² Documented cases were staggering in their detail, with names, method of death, and location: “Sr. Boadilio Isaza, while kneeling in prayer shot through chest by Conservative Catholics in attack on his home, San José del Palmar, Choco.” American missionaries sought to capture each bloody detail: “Exposure and starvation”; “shot after ears cut off”; “burned to death in her home”; “shot during massacre of Protestant family”; “while kneeling in prayer shot through the chest”; “shot and throat cut out in home of Protestant pastor by police & Conservative Catholics in massacre of 4 Protestants”; “Shot in his home ... in massacre of 7 members of a Protestant family”; “seized by police as they broke up Protestant religious service; beaten in the chapel; taken to jail, where he was beaten with gun butts, stabbed with bayonets and drowned in a tank of cold water.”

The reply from Catholic authorities around the world was nearly univocal: accounts were exaggerated or even fabricated.⁷³ In a guest editorial, the *Catholic Bulletin* shared their own story: “In one instance, for example, these crusaders were poking fun at Catholics during a Marian parade. The natives became agitated, picked up stones and threw them at the intruders. The American missionaries cried, ‘persecution.’”⁷⁴ While doubting Protestant accounts of violence, the editorial wished more Protestants would act like Billy Graham, “who never once ... has attacked the Catholic church.” In part due to the doubt of American Catholics, the National Association of Evangelicals carefully edited these stories, deciding not to share certain stories, such as castrated boys and womb removal, which they

⁷⁰ Ibid.

⁷¹ The list includes the Christian & Missionary Alliance, the Evangelical Union of South America, the Foursquare Gospel Church, the Synod of the Presbyterian Church in Colombia, and the Wesleyan Methodist Church, among many others.

⁷² Camino Global Archives, Kansas City, MO, box “Colombia,” Buletín 50.

⁷³ E.g. Eugene K. Culhane, “Colombia and U.S. ‘Missionaries,’” *America*, 28 March 1958, 656–59; “A Leftist Lie,” *Ave Maria*, 23 Feb. 1952, 227.

⁷⁴ “Evangelicals Ruffle Latins,” guest editorial, *Catholic Bulletin*, 16 Feb. 1962.

reported as too fanciful to be believed; they were clearly concerned with the reception of these stories back in the United States.⁷⁵

For many American evangelicals, violence against their religious family *abroad* confirmed their fears of Catholics *at home*. Some questioned whether Catholics were able to participate in a modern democracy with religious freedom at its core – of course, a freedom for especially Anglo-Saxon Protestant forms of religion. None questioned whether Catholics needed to be converted to their form of Christianity. When a lack of religious freedom threatened their conversionistic goals, American evangelicals turned to the government to enforce their homegrown values. They claimed to be apolitical, eschewing public displays of partisanship. But behind the scenes they embraced the power of the American state, pushing for intervention south of the border. Perhaps surprisingly, this also opened the door for evangelicals to later collaborate with a Catholic President in Kennedy. What matters here in terms of internal impact was how this story was received by US readers, how it motivated their missionary efforts and shaped their language as they lobbied their government – more than the lack of nuance in their minds or particular context of any given Latin American country.

EXPORTING RELIGIOUS FREEDOM

Embodying the persecution of global Christians was simply one piece in the construction of a global evangelical imagination. Violence also carved lines of spiritual affiliation, speaking of family and foe in the same breath. While anti-Catholicism had long characterized many evangelical communities, this story in the global South confirmed many fears. It also confirmed in many evangelical minds their role as managers of America's spiritual and political compass. Violence, then, fueled evangelical political ambitions alongside a changing internal discourse about the contours of their community.

As postwar violence persisted in Colombia, Clyde Taylor wrote to Dean Acheson, US Secretary of State under Harry Truman.⁷⁶ Taylor was the secretary of affairs for the NAE and executive secretary of the Evangelical Foreign Missions Association (EFMA), as well as a former missionary to Latin America from 1925 to 1941 in both Peru and Colombia. Taylor was far from a marginal figure. When Billy Graham sought to understand Latin America, he turned to Taylor as one of his main sources. During his tenure at the NAE, Taylor fixated on violence against Protestants, and the complicity of Catholic authorities in these acts. Taylor wrote to Acheson protesting unabating violence

75 Donald Scott McAlpine to Clyde Taylor, 28 May 1951, BGCA 165, Box 84.

76 Taylor was EFMA executive secretary from 1945 to 1974.

against Protestants.⁷⁷ Taylor concluded one letter to Acheson with an incredulous tone: “Why did it take Bogotá officials so long to answer the urgent call for police protection of American lives and property, from the official of the United States Department of State?”⁷⁸ Taylor attempted to arouse the American government to defend their interests and US Protestants in the region.

Taylor’s activism with the NAE and EFMA provides crucial background to the beliefs of American evangelicals leading up to Kennedy’s candidacy for President. As the violence continued seemingly unabated, Taylor and the NAE were frustrated by the lack of intervention by the US State Department, so they tried a different strategy. The following year, on 19 January 1952, Taylor and the NAE took out a full-page advertisement in the Washington *Evening Star* directly appealing to American Catholics to stop the “persecution” of Protestants in Colombia. Taylor’s connection of American Catholics to violence in Colombia reflected his deeply held anti-Catholicism and the broader fears in the American public of Catholics in public life. From his experience in the global South, Taylor turned toward the role of Catholics within American democracy. In a New York City speech that year, Taylor connected the persecution of Protestants in South America to the threat of American Catholics in the American public square. Catholics were wolves in sheep’s clothing, he argued, only appearing as allies in a global fight against communism. “What would you do,” Taylor asked, “if such a thing happened in America? Some of the proof of these things can be observed in Washington, D.C. I am not an alarmist.” He then concluded, “If we just sleep a little longer, we will lose our freedom here too!”

While Billy Graham did not publicly share these anti-Catholic views, he trusted Taylor and turned to him for advice at crucial points in the story. When Graham planned influential global gatherings – Berlin in 1966, the Latin American Congress on Evangelization (CLADE, Congreso Latinoamericano de Evangelización) in 1969, and Lausanne in 1974 – he turned to Taylor for the planning committee.⁷⁹ Taylor was also on the board of World Vision, a massive global evangelical humanitarian organization, and was later promoted to general director of the NAE in 1963.⁸⁰ On 7 June 1961, Taylor planned a month-long fact-finding tour of Latin

77 Acheson was a veteran diplomat and played a key role in defining a widening role for the US in Cold War Latin America.

78 Clyde W. Taylor to Dean G. Acheson, 29 Dec. 1951, BGCA Cn 165, Box 84.

79 For more on these global gatherings, see Kirkpatrick, *A Gospel for the Poor*.

80 David King, *God’s Internationalists: World Vision and the Age of Evangelical Humanitarianism* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2019), 88.

America and the BGEA saw an opportunity for strategic planning for their future crusades. Personal letters reveal Graham's concern regarding tumult in the region and requests for more information from BGEA sources.⁸¹ Taylor stepped into this gap, filling minds with images of violence. As a result, Taylor, alongside other tour members, produced "country descriptions" that were widely distributed in the BGEA organization. Characteristic of Taylor's style, they shared dangers, fears, opportunities, and a sense of Catholicism's lostness in the region. Colombia proved crucial to perceptions of Latin America as a region in need of US intervention – politically and spiritually. BGEA planning memos and private correspondence described Colombia as including "highly organized physical persecution."⁸² The BGEA would later enter a "maelstrom of persecution" that had recently descended on "evangelical schools, Bible Institutes and Churches ... [which were] closed, burned or bombed out of existence." The culprits? "Bands of Romish fanatics, many times led by priests, attacked evangelical Christians ... thousands of pages of documented evidence testify to atrocious beatings, rapings and killings." This violence was generative, both for local evangelicals in the region and for Americans watching intently from across the border. When threatened with violence by a newspaper in neighboring Ecuador, the BGEA called evangelicals there "the Lord's despised few."⁸³ They counted themselves among the few. Taylor's views provided a central piece of Graham's picture of the region. Taylor became a key confidant, wielding his experience in Latin America as a cudgel.

Evangelical print media and prayer letters brought random acts of violence into the consciousness of everyday American Christians. Competing paradigms arose in many minds: sanctifying persecution and identifying with violence, while lobbying the state to intervene. In other words, American evangelicals could claim political neutrality, while pushing political intervention. No other evangelical leader from this era embodied this as clearly as Billy Graham.

IN THE BULLRING

Billy Graham's encounter with Latin American violence shaped his own view of the region and, through him, US evangelical views of how to respond. Graham put a face on persecution for Catholic authorities and a watching public. In doing so, he accelerated shifts in public opinion in major Latin

81 Jerry Beavan to Charlie Riggs, 7 June 1961, BGCA, CN 17, Box 2, Folder 1. Riggs was the director of counseling and follow up in the BGEA from 1957 to 1989.

82 BGCA, CN 17, Box 2, Folder 2.

83 Shirwood Wirt, "Report on the Billy Graham Crusade in Quito," BGCA, CN 506, Box 11, Folder 3.

American cities as many voters became embarrassed by the daily discrimination that Protestants faced. In this way, Graham's tour reverberated across the region.

The timing was either impeccable or fortuitous: many Latin American cities had doubled and tripled in size over the preceding decades. Lima City, for example, contained nearly 300,000 inhabitants, according to the November 1931 government census.⁸⁴ Less than a decade later, the population had increased nearly twofold to over 500,000 inhabitants in 1940. This trend only continued, as Lima's population reached over 800,000 in 1950. Protestant churches sprouted at the edge of these sprawling urban areas, places that traditional Roman Catholic structures struggled to reach or ignored altogether. Protestants were thus ascendant and hopeful, while increasingly aggressive in their evangelistic campaigns. This was a crucial advantage against Catholic lay believers, who were increasingly admonished to evangelize their neighbors, but in an overwhelmingly Catholic continent the target was unclear.⁸⁵

When Billy Graham's plane touched down on Venezuelan soil, he was at once a diplomat, fund-raiser, and religious actor. Graham sent out an "urgent plea for definite prayer" for his tour as the Organization of American States met concurrently in Uruguay – raising Graham's awareness of the political situation surrounding him.⁸⁶ And while he launched his Latin American crusade in the highly symbolic space of a bullring in the capital city, Caracas, he was also never far from American power; he threaded a needle of religious hostility and fragile foreign relations, fronted by John F. Kennedy's aggressive effort at mending relations between the United States and Latin America. As Graham's tour wove through Latin America, the bullring followed him.

To his closest confidants, Graham expressed hesitation, amid concerns of anti-American sentiment in the region.⁸⁷ His closest staff deliberated, constantly aware of the place of the American state in the region. Even while noting anti-US sentiment, Chuck Ward, BGEA director of arrangements for the South American Crusade, wrote to Jerry Beavan in 1961, "*These meetings will be the greatest thing that South America has ever seen in the spiritual realm.*"⁸⁸

84 For one example, see M. Epstein, ed., *Statesman's Yearbook, 1933* (London: Macmillan, 1933), 1176, 1193.

85 See also Hartch, *The Rebirth of Latin American Christianity*, 21.

86 Billy Graham telephone conversation with Walter H. Smyth, BGEA associate and director of the Greater Chicago Crusade, BGCA, CN 19, Box 5, Folder 65.

87 Jerry Beavan letter to Chuck Ward, Ward response, 21 Feb. 1961, BGCA, CN 17, Box 2, Folder 1.

88 Chuck Ward to Jerry Beavan, 21 Feb. 1961, BGCA, CN 17, Box 2, Folder 1, italics mine.

By April, Graham still did not share Ward's optimism. Graham wrote to James Savage, one of the most prominent American missionaries in Latin America, gauging the impact of canceling the crusades. Savage responded, "Dear Billy: Thank you for your recent word concerning the situation in Latin America resulting from the Cuban crises. All of us are keenly aware of the disturbing factors not only in Latin America but around the world." Savage then urged Graham to press on, "continue to make plans for reaching this lost world as long as the doors are open before us," he argued.⁸⁹ Graham persisted but with major reservations. He planned to enter the heart Latin America preaching a gospel of evangelical salvation and political stability.

Privately Graham spoke often of Kennedy and these neighborly relations, while publicly denying any political motivations or affiliation. Graham was also constantly aware of the potential for violence. In Graham's retelling, one Catholic newspaper captured it well at the time: "Never once, at least in our memory, has [Billy Graham] attacked the Catholic Church ... In view of past history [in South America], where violence has so often prevailed, it is well to remember that the slightest disturbance could easily make tempers flare again. Billy Graham seems to sense this."⁹⁰ Graham's tour created a sense of expectation and worry, all at the same time.

In his public ministry, Graham often operated in close proximity to wealth and power, even in the global South. Graham always made time for political figures and governing bodies; he was invited to speak in Maracaibo to the state legislature, where he braced himself for a "very volatile" political situation.⁹¹ As Graham stood up to speak in the legislative assembly, he noticed soldiers unloading weapons from a truck outside. A mob of protestors had formed, chanting anti-American slogans. As he glanced out of the window, a rock shattered the glass in his face. Newsweek said Graham hid under a table, "praying the Lord's prayer," narrowly escaping through a back alley. "Yankee no, Castro yes!" they reportedly chanted. In Graham's autobiography, he recalled his escort's chilling advice: "If anyone starts shooting at you, just stop. Don't move: they're very poor shots, and if you start moving, they might hit you!"⁹² In private BGEA memos, associates thought the protests did not involve Graham but were simply coincidental. Once again, the BGEA sought State Department advice for their tour. But the State Department was also careful to avoid an official recommendation, which would provoke protests in the region.⁹³

89 James Savage to Billy Graham, 26 April 1961, BGCA, CN17, Box 2, Folder 1.

90 Billy Graham, *Just as I Am: The Autobiography of Billy Graham* (San Francisco and Grand Rapids: HarperSanFrancisco and Zondervan, 1997), 368.

91 *Ibid.*, 362.

92 Graham, *Just as I Am*, 363.

93 BGCA, CN 17, Box 2, Folder 3, internal memo on Venezuela.

Religion was not the only disagreement between the Kennedy administration and the BGEA. Conflict over Colombia would also arise over US foreign policy and evangelical expansion on both sides of the border. For Kennedy's State Department, Colombia was also a sore spot on Graham's tour, as they sought to manage the tenuous and complex political alliances that had been forged. But to the BGEA, Colombia became their proudest accomplishment. The Colombian crusade, however, almost did not happen. The Billy Graham Evangelistic Association maintained open communication with the Kennedy administration as they planned their tour, while also withholding crucial information at critical points. On 1 August 1962, Brooks Hayes, special assistant to the President, wrote to Billy Graham, "I know [the President] will be particularly interested in your forthcoming trip to the four countries in South America." The only problem was that Graham was planning *five* countries. Graham and the BGEA had carefully omitted Colombia from their letters to the administration. Kennedy's State Department wrote forcefully to ask them to reconsider after the official itinerary reached their desks.⁹⁴ Telegrams arrived in October and again in November, urging cancelation. After Kennedy's own tour in the prior year, the administration made diplomatic strides in Colombia and feared that a firebrand evangelical preacher might revive religious tensions between a perceived Catholic Latin America and a Protestant United States. But in personal letters the BGEA staff were adamant: Colombia *must* remain on the schedule.

Violence motivated and scared evangelicals, creating a cocktail of missionary motivations. Violence was also a seed planted in the ground, whose fruit Graham could harvest:

In spite of the persecution, the Church in Colombia has grown dramatically during the past twelve years. There are a reported 65,000 evangelicals today whereas at the beginning of the violence there were only 12,000. Many of the stories in regard to Christian witness and heroism during this time read like another chapter in the Book of Acts.⁹⁵

Inside the BGEA, many were convinced that violence and the spreading of the evangelical message were organically connected. The specter of violence loomed over even hopeful accounts. Americans gazed at Colombian Christians who had persevered through significant attacks and discrimination, longing for their faith.⁹⁶

After the Andes tour, the BGEA could not resist a victory lap aimed toward donors in the United States. At times, associates drifted into stereotypes as

94 Hoke Smith to Billy Graham, 21 Nov. 1961, BGCA, CN 17, Box 2, Folder 3.

95 BGCA, CN 17, Box 2, Folder 2.

96 McAlister, *The Kingdom of God Has No Borders*.

they shared their jubilation: “The siesta is over. Yesterday’s ‘sleeping peon’ that was South America has come to life ... they have thrown over the institutions and traditions of the past. They are ready for revolution. What a climate into which to introduce the revolutionary message of Jesus Christ.”⁹⁷ North of the Rio Grande, Graham’s *Decision* magazine shared, “There was never anything like it in the history of the great sub-continent and there may not be again.”⁹⁸ Billy Graham estimated that a quarter of a million people attended their crusades, with nine thousand “decisions” for Christ. While Graham noted that this was not as large as others around the world, in *The Hour of Decision* he would recall, “I have never seen such spiritual hunger in all of our travels around the world.”⁹⁹ Beyond a spiritual harvest, evangelical access to political power rose on both sides of the border as well. Luis Palau, perhaps the most influential Latin American Protestant evangelist today and then BGEA associate evangelist, reflected on the broader implications of Graham’s crusade. While Palau did so unintentionally, in 1978 he pondered the symbiotic relationship between political power and evangelical conversion, arguing that Graham taught Latin American evangelicals “Christian statesmanship” through his tour.¹⁰⁰

The affect of violence from Latin America shaped how evangelicals spoke to and lobbied the US government. North of the Rio Grande, Graham pushed evangelicals to flex their expanding political muscles. When Graham returned from his South American tour, he pressed John F. Kennedy on dealing with Cuba (more on this below). We can also observe shifts in Graham’s thinking. Writing from a hospital bed in Hawaii that year, Graham wrote to the Kennedy administration, urging them to “settle” the “Cuban affair,” warning that inaction would hurt the President politically. “I do not believe the American people will tolerate a Communist military base only a few miles from our shores,” Graham concluded.¹⁰¹ While Graham commented on the foreign policy of the United States, he also pondered out loud his future in the political sphere:

However, I am not speaking out on these issues at the moment as I do not want to hurt or hinder the President in any way. I am thinking more and more that my job is to preach the gospel and to leave the affairs of the state to those who are responsible to conduct them.

97 Ward, “Expectancy in South America!”.

98 Sherwood Wert, *Decision*, Jan. 1963, CN 506, 11–13.

99 Cited in Graham, *Just as I Am*, 363.

100 Interview with Luis Palau by Lois Ferm, 12 Jan. 1978, BGCA, CN 141, Box 26, Folder 9.

101 Billy Graham to John F. Kennedy, 4 March 1962, BGCA, CN 685, VIP Notebooks, “John F. Kennedy file.”

While Graham may have personally questioned his own role in the “bullring” of politics, many American evangelicals were just beginning to throw their weight into political advocacy.

CONCLUSION

For US evangelical Protestants, the imagined space of Latin American religion and politics provided tools to shape the world in their image. Billy Graham and influential US evangelical leaders viewed Latin America as an opportunity to define their Christian identity through violence and persecution, conceiving of the region as dangerous but an opportune location for the growth of evangelical Protestantism. Evangelical discourse on worldwide persecution edited images and experiences of Christians, stoking fear at home and intervention overseas. In this wider rhetoric, Christianity became the primary victim of violence worldwide and religious freedom the language of opportunity and intervention. Politicians in the West could then weaponize the affect of anti-Christian violence, channeling emotive responses towards both national and international political ends by garnering support on behalf of their Christian constituents’ beleaguered coreligionists.¹⁰² When viewed in this way, anti-Christian violence facilitates the imagination of a global Christianity where American evangelicals played an outsized role.

No one had greater influence on this immediate story than the American Baptist preacher Billy Graham. Graham drove evangelical advances on both sides of the border, fueled by the affect of violence in Latin America. During the Kennedy administration, Graham arose as a metaphorical matador, fighting for persecuted global evangelicals and embodying their suffering. In the global bullring, American evangelicals could flex their growing political muscles, while operating as a religious minority community – “the Lord’s despised few,” in the BGEA’s words.¹⁰³ Here, Graham’s life, alongside the leaders in Graham’s ever-growing orbit, allow for preliminary conclusions in multiple directions. To the north, Graham constructed a framework for American evangelicals to perceive worldwide persecution and identify themselves in the narrative. This, of course, derived from actual, indisputable violence against evangelicals in certain Latin American countries. But US evangelicals abstracted it, broadening its appeal, and providing flexibility for

102 John Corrigan, *Religious Intolerance, America, the World: A History of Forgetting and Remembering* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 2020); Sara Ahmed, *The Cultural Politics of Emotion* (New York: Routledge, 2015); Kathleen Stewart, *Ordinary Affects* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2007); Lauren Berlant, *Cruel Optimism* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2011).

103 Shirwood Wirt, “Report on the Billy Graham Crusade in Quito,” BGCA, CN 506, Box 11, Folder 3.

geopolitical goals. In other words, when Graham identified with the suffering of global South Christians, he also paved wider paths for evangelical advocacy within US foreign policy. Graham mirrored the hopes, fears, and political aspirations of a growing white evangelical constituency. An “evangelical internationalism” arose alongside American global hegemony, synthesizing humanitarianism with the evangelical offer of salvation. In historian Andrew Preston’s words, “As the planet itself was undergoing revolutionary changes, evangelicals had adopted a thoroughly global consciousness that wedded a belief in America’s global manifest destiny with a faith in the redemptive power of world Christianity.”¹⁰⁴ Violence is a crucial piece here, but one that is often overlooked.

To the global South in Latin America, Graham put a face on persecution for Catholic authorities and a watching public. Graham’s fame and stature changed everyday life for this religious minority community in Latin America and, through them, American evangelical politics. Perhaps more importantly, Graham’s tour was one of the most important events in the rise of Protestantism as a religious and political force in the region. Graham’s efforts in opening up media avenues and shaming the marginalization of Protestants is crucial here. Scholars are still grappling with how this minority religious community has seized demographic and political power from Guatemala to Brazil.¹⁰⁵ The rise of Latin American evangelicals from persecuted religious minority to political power today remains a subject of fierce debate.

Graham was a powerful and recognizable actor, but he was not the only one. Widely overlooked is the everyday experience of American missionaries who were impacted alongside their Latin American coreligionists. This explains why the influence of missionaries continued well after postcolonial waves lapped on the shores of a revolutionary region. While power and politics hold a degree of explanatory potential, violence and the shared experience of it are just as, if not more, important. A space of solidarity for missionaries and local converts developed in the first half of the twentieth century, helping move the needle from a foreign imported religion to a widely accepted one. The work of white evangelicals in the global South is a salient piece in the construction of their global religious hegemony. Historian Todd Hartch clarified, “Because they had endured the costs of conversion, including social

¹⁰⁴ Preston, “Evangelical Internationalism,” 232.

¹⁰⁵ One thinks of early books from David Martin, *Tongues of Fire: The Explosion of Protestantism in Latin America* (Oxford and Cambridge, MA: Blackwell, 1990). See also R. Andrew Chesnut, *Born Again in Brazil: The Pentecostal Boom and the Pathogens of Poverty* (New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press, 1997). And more recent books such as Hartch, *The Rebirth of Latin American Christianity*.

stigmatization and violent persecution, Protestants were especially committed to their faith.”¹⁰⁶ I argue that we can also expand this analysis into the construction of Protestant evangelical community and its contours. In other words, anti-Protestant violence confirmed the faith of evangelical adherents and often the exclusion of Catholics from their global spiritual family. American political power also played a parallel role alongside crucial ecclesiastical developments such as the Second Vatican Council, which softened rhetoric against Protestants.

In the postwar period, Latin America represented a strategic political region for American foreign policy and increasing focus for the spiritual mission of American evangelicals. The Latin American sociopolitical tumult – including violence – caused Graham to rethink his political partisanship as well.

In the present literature, Graham was fiercely political prior to the Nixon Watergate scandal. It was there that he was caught with his hand in the metaphorical cookie jar. But Graham was already questioning his political engagement under Kennedy, beginning to embrace what is now a common evangelical refrain: focussing on spiritual, not political, themes. This arose most prominently in the civil rights debates, where evangelicals often claimed to be apolitical in the face of growing calls for racial justice. Violence in the global South showed American evangelicals that they could embrace state intervention while claiming nonpartisanship in their spiritual activities. Anti-Protestant violence, then, illuminates a hidden history at the intersection of US foreign relations and Graham’s global ministry.

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¹⁰⁶ Hartch, *The Rebirth of Latin American Christianity*, 20.