

The Anti-Madalyn Majority:
Secular Left, Religious Right, and the Rise of Reagan's America

A Dissertation
Presented to the Faculty of the Graduate School
of
Yale University
in Candidacy for the Degree of
Doctor of Philosophy

by
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May 2004

UMI Number: 3125302

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Abstract

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Benjamin Eric Sasse

2004

In the 1960s and '70s, millions of Americans credited Madalyn Murray O'Hair with masterminding a plot to criminalize school prayer, and thereby to drive God from the land. This analysis was wrong on multiple counts, starting with the fact that her supposedly unprecedented suit against Baltimore was only the third most important church-state case of 1962-63. But the factual errors of those outraged by the school prayer decisions are less consequential than the realities for which the "myth of Madalyn" stood as a place-holder: Public institutions *did* de-Protestantize in the middle third of the century; the ACLU and other actors *did* scheme to facilitate this shift; and many constitutional experts *did* share popular doubts about the evolving interpretation of the establishment clause and the consequent legal secularization.

Grassroots Americans cried out against their nation's "hijacking" at a nearly unparalleled volume, immediately inundating both the Supreme Court and Congress in mail. The House of Representatives evaluated an unprecedented 145 proposed constitutional amendments in 1964 to reestablish school prayer by changing the First Amendment, followed up by scores more proposals in 1966 and 1970. Polls showed that nearly 85% of citizens supported a pro-public religion alteration of the Constitution. O'Hair quickly became, to quote a *Life* headline, "the Most Hated Woman in America"—a role she relished.

This dissertation is not about Madalyn, but about the culture-warring entrepreneurs who ascended partly by inflating her importance so they could denounce her cause and build their empires. It is also about Republican pollsters and politicians who stumbled across the widespread discontent about the apparent willingness of many Democrats to tolerate atheists. Most of all, though, by examining lay correspondence to elected officials during a series of related controversies over religion in public life, this project is about the vast middle of America sitting between the aggressive secularizers and the professional anti-secularizers. There may never have been a moral majority, but Cold War America surely contained an overwhelming anti-Madalyn majority concerned about the national soul.