

# FAMILY MAN

THE BIOGRAPHY OF



DR. JAMES DOBSON



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DALE BUSS

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### *Family Man*

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## CHAPTER ONE

# CAMPAIGN MODE

*I don't want to sound like a prophet here,  
but we saw this coming.*

JAMES DOBSON, ON *Your World*  
with Neil Cavuto, FOX NEWS,  
NOVEMBER 12, 2004

For James Dobson, the stakes on November 2, 2004—Election Day—couldn't have been higher. The renowned child psychologist, best-selling author, popular radio host, and founder of Focus on the Family had devoted his entire life to the preservation of the family, and now all he held dear seemed to be hanging in the balance. Although he had rarely before campaigned in a way that could be considered strictly partisan, this election year Dobson had become convinced that he had no choice but to jump into the political fray with both feet. And when he did, he determined to give all he had for the cause.

By the time the 2004 campaign was over, Beltway heavyweights from Tom Daschle to Arlen Specter, media pundits, Democratic operatives, *Focus on the Family* listeners, and Dr. Dobson readers from coast to coast had gained a much better appreciation for who Dobson was and what he could accomplish.



During the 2004 election season, Dobson was already in the midst of a full slate of appearances at campaign rallies around the country when pro-family groups in northwestern Iowa urgently summoned him: We need you to come to Sioux City. In 2003, State Judge Jeffrey Neary had approved a “divorce” for two Sioux City lesbians who were united in a civil ceremony in Vermont. Iowa recognizes neither civil unions nor

gay marriages, and traditional-family advocates worried that Neary's action set a back-door precedent for overturning the status quo in their state. He was a married father of three children, served as a Boy Scout leader, and delivered children's sermons at his church, but Neary didn't back down after protests over his decree granting the dissolution. So now, an ad hoc local organization called the Judicial Accountability Center was trying to make Neary pay with his job in a retention vote scheduled for November 2.

Dobson was weary from having crisscrossed the nation for several speeches, and he was due for an important rally in Sioux Falls, South Dakota, the next day. For someone who hoped to influence the election of several U.S. senators, a wayward judge in an obscure precinct of the Great Plains might not have seemed a worthy target. But the invitation to Sioux City for October 2 was red meat because over the previous year, Dobson had invested himself in a relentless effort to get Americans to recognize judicial overreach and its ill effects. So after Dobson agreed to target the bull's-eye on Neary, more than five thousand people gathered for a rally at the Tyson Events Center in Sioux City, where maintenance workers covered the hockey rink with plywood for the affair.

Just as he had in many of Dobson's other appearances during the campaign season, Tony Perkins, president of the Family Research Council, preceded Dobson, exhorting the crowd to go to the polls in November in defense of traditional family values. Then, Sioux City Mayor David Ferris introduced Dobson to the crowd. Federal regulations governing the political activities of charitable organizations restricted any speaker at the event from overtly endorsing particular candidates, but there was nothing to stop Dobson from issuing the criticism he had come to deliver—and he didn't disappoint his hosts.

He started by berating a court system that he described as being led by liberal judges who, seemingly determined to allow same-sex marriages, are creating laws rather than interpreting them. He encouraged the activist and the outraged among his audience to voice their opinions by voting and "maybe find some of these people another line of work. . . . Now judges are telling us they want to redefine the definition of marriage!" he intoned from behind a cherry-wood podium, in a steel-blue suit, his ruddy-blond pate intensely spotlighted against the precisely engineered blackness of the rest of the arena. "We say, 'Not in our lifetime!' I don't mean to be disrespectful," he continued over the

cheers, “but you’ve got one of [those judges] right here—Judge Jeffrey Neary.”

But while Dobson’s message was similar, the logistics of his presentation in Sioux City were different than at the rest of the rallies he led during the campaign season. All of the others were organized by Family Policy Councils, which are state level-affiliates of Focus—meaning that Dobson could dictate conditions in the arena. He always preferred to keep the house lights up during his addresses, so that he could see, read, and draw from the reactions and energy of the crowds. But wanting to ensure that their celebrity speaker could be clearly seen on the overhead video screens by everyone at the large gathering, the independent organizers of the Iowa affair had insisted on a thoroughly darkened house. Reluctantly, Dobson had gone along.

He shouldn’t have. After he finished his speech—pupils still dilated after blinking into the spotlights for a half hour—Dobson turned to his right and began to move at a wide angle, in a direct line to his chair. But he couldn’t see the stage, and Dobson had forgotten that the podium was perched on a promontory perpendicular to the dais. There was no guardrail to signal trouble, and the six-foot-two Dobson plummeted off the edge of the six-foot-high stage as if into a pit. On his way down, Dobson reflexively grabbed a potted plant that marked the edge of the platform. His head could have hit the wood-covered concrete or struck the large speaker boxes located below. But instead, at the last moment, Dobson’s lower leg caught on the edge of the stage as he was falling—flipping him so that he landed on his side and back rather than his head.

The crowd gasped, and Dobson’s wife, Shirley, and daughter, Danae, rushed from their second-row seats to attend to Dobson, as did about two dozen other people from the audience. By the time anyone reached him, Dobson already had pushed himself up to a sitting position, leaning on one of the speakers. Shirley got behind him and cradled his head, and a doctor in the audience reached him seconds later. Blood was pooling beneath him, so the doctor immediately checked for a deep cut on Dobson’s head. He quickly realized that it was Dobson’s leg that had been gashed in the fall, and it was bleeding profusely. But soon, Dobson was hobbling the distance of about a block to the arena’s “green room,” where speakers waited before taking the stage. After about a half hour of emergency attention, family members and aides took him to a hospital emergency room a few blocks away, where a doctor used five stitches to close the nasty slice on his leg.

About two hours later, a patched-up Dobson, grateful that his pratfall hadn't been much worse, boarded a private jet borrowed from a Focus supporter and flew to his next rally in Sioux Falls. Later, Tom Minnery, the Focus vice president of public policy who accompanied his boss to Sioux City, reflected on the near catastrophe. "There he was sitting in a pool of blood," mused Minnery. "I don't know a lot of people who ended up giving blood for what happened on Election Day."



Ultimately, Dobson's sacrifice of blood and sweat, if not tears, paid off. While political mastermind Karl Rove may have been the architect of the reelection of President George W. Bush and of the Republican surge in November 2004, James Dobson could very well be called the construction foreman. Some commentators quickly argued that more than any other single factor, it was Dobson's exhortation of evangelicals and conservative Catholics to flock to the polls and vote their values that informed and motivated their stunning turnout on Election Day. And Dobson wasted little time in serving notice that he would act as a fulcrum for judgment by believers on whether President Bush and Congress were coming through for them during the new terms they had been granted.

Election Day "was a battle not just for the selection of a president," Dobson said on his *Focus on the Family* radio show several days after the November 2004 election. "It was a statement of who we are as a people and what we will be in the future and what our children will value and how they will see right and wrong. All of that was hanging in the balance."

As soon as John F. Kerry finally conceded the presidential vote in the late morning of November 3, Dobson completed an almost perfect box score from the day before. There was Bush's win, of course, in which "moral values" figured more significantly than any other specific motivation, according to exit polls. *New Republic* editor Michael Crowley supposed that "Dobson may have delivered Bush his victories in Ohio and Florida." Bans on same-sex marriage—which Dobson had identified as the single gravest threat to the American family—passed comfortably to overwhelmingly in eleven of eleven states where they were on the ballot.

Shocking the Beltway crowd, South Dakota Senator Tom Daschle fell to evangelical Republican John Thune after Dobson had personally

targeted Daschle for obstructing the confirmation of Bush's judicial nominees. Like-thinking Senate candidates in Louisiana, Oklahoma, and North Carolina also rode Dobson's overt support to victories that surprised many handicappers. Though Iowa Judge Neary was retained by voters, his 59 percent of the ballot was significantly below the support he had garnered in 2000. And even beer magnate Pete Coors lost his Senate bid in Colorado, a defeat some attributed to Dobson's clear lack of support.

The only blotch on Dobson's personal scorecard was California's approval to issue a \$3-billion state bond to fund embryonic stem-cell research. At the eleventh hour, Dobson had allied with actor and conservative Catholic Mel Gibson to put together a California-only radio broadcast opposing the measure, but they weren't able to stop its passage.

Dobson didn't waste any time, however, before he tried to leverage his winning touch into a boost for what would be his most important post-election issue: gaining the appointment of pro-lifers to the Supreme Court. Just a day after the election, pro-abortion Republican Senator Arlen Specter predicted trouble for any known pro-life nominees, and Dobson and his allies immediately began trying to derail Specter's ascendance to the chairmanship of the Senate Judiciary Committee. Specter survived the challenge, but only after days of backpedaling and making unprecedented promises to Senate conservatives that he would help Bush's nominees—pro-life or otherwise—get approval.

One person who wasn't surprised by Dobson's impact was Charles Colson, the founder of Prison Fellowship and a close confidant. "Clearly, he played a major role in this election," Colson says. "More than anyone else, he mobilized the evangelical base."



It took Dobson about twenty years to reach the point of exercising such unvarnished partisanship and practicing such aggressive politicking. In the eighties, he had veered from writing family-advice books and doing his radio show into fulminating on public policy, but only when he felt that legislators, judges, entertainers, and journalists had begun giving up on and even trespassing on the traditional values he was trying to protect. He served on federal commissions that addressed ills such as pornography and gambling and developed the ability to overwhelm Capitol Hill switchboards with his listeners' plaintive phone calls.

After spending much of the nineties unsuccessfully prodding the GOP to join him in his concerns about eroding social values, Dobson backed away from Republican presidential candidate Robert Dole in 1996, largely because of his mushy views on abortion. In 2000, Dobson welcomed the pro-life and openly Christian George W. Bush but did little to generate votes for him—and by Karl Rove’s estimate, about four million evangelicals stayed home, nearly costing Bush his first term.

But four years later, events had transpired that propelled Dobson onto the campaign terrain in an unprecedented way. For one thing, he had more freedom than ever, having recently turned over the day-to-day administration of Focus on the Family to Don Hodel. Dobson was also feeling completely healthy again after battling some serious medical problems over the previous two years. And finally, Dobson had been able to free up more of Focus’s resources from Internal Revenue Service rules that restrict political advocacy by not-for-profit institutions.

Nevertheless, his decision to accelerate himself and Focus to the next level of political involvement was a difficult one for Dobson. He was well aware of how previous lunges into the political arena had tarnished the ministries of others, including Jerry Falwell and Pat Robertson. And he well understood his friend Colson’s staunch opposition to partisan political involvement for figures like them. “I’ve always argued,” Colson says, “that religious leaders should remain, not above moral issues of course, but above partisan issues so that you don’t make the Christian movement hostage to one political party. Either that, or they should step down from their Christian position, as Robertson did when he gave up his ordination” to run for president in 1988.

Dobson widely acknowledged both his own hesitance to take this step and the perils therein. “There are dangers [in becoming too partisan],” Dobson said in a *New York Times* story in May 2004, “and that is why I have never done it before. But the attack and assault on marriage is so distressing that I just feel like I can’t remain silent.”<sup>1</sup> Yet even as late as a few days before the election, he was still telling the *Times*: “I have been very reluctant to use my influence in the past, because if you marry a politician, you could be a widow in four years.”<sup>2</sup>

But in the end, Dobson took the plunge. “His position, as he put it to me,” Colson says, “was that you don’t live or die by elections, but if ever there were a decisive election involving the future of the family, this was it. I agreed with him on that and didn’t try to discourage him,

because if he felt the freedom to do it and that it wasn't putting his ministry in jeopardy, then he should do it."

Actually, Dobson sensed no freedom regarding the decision to cross the great divide into partisanship and take Focus with him. Instead, he felt absolutely compelled to do so, coming to believe that this decision was at the same time a logical, necessary, and even divinely inspired culmination of everything he had accomplished and everything else he had strived for over the previous quarter century.

Dobson reached his moment of reckoning in August 2003, after making the keynote speech at a rally outside the Alabama state judicial center in Montgomery. The crowd was protesting a decision by a federal judge to remove from public view a monument there called The Ten Commandments, which had been commissioned by Judge Roy Moore after he was elected the state's chief justice in 2000.

"When I saw what that [federal] judge was trying to do despite the will of the people of Alabama and I participated in that rally, that's where my determination to try to make a difference in the 2004 election originated," says Dobson. "I saw the excitement of the people. I saw how they longed for a voice and how frustrated they were by having their views overridden by leftist judges and by the inability of the Congress to get anything done to protect their values. It was an exhilarating experience.

"While we were still in Montgomery, I said [to aides] that I have tried to remain out of the political arena for twenty-six years, because I didn't want to drag Focus into the mucky-muck of presidential elections and all that that means. I had never endorsed a presidential candidate in my life. But in Montgomery, I said that's got to change. For the first time, I felt an obligation to do what I could through direct involvement in an election. I didn't know what influence I could have, but I was going to use whatever God had given me, because I simply couldn't sit this one out."

Less than a month later, in a banquet hall at The Broadmoor resort in Colorado Springs, Dobson gave the first clear public signal that he had reached such a decision. He had been invited to deliver the keynote address to the Council for National Policy, five years after he had prodded the group with his speech accusing its powerful Republican members of abandoning evangelicals.

Though he was targeting the other side this time, Dobson's speech was just as forceful. He held forth about judicial tyranny much as at

Montgomery, complaining specifically about how Democrats in Congress had filibustered in a politically motivated attempt to prevent the confirmation of several of President Bush's judicial nominees to the federal appellate courts. But toward the end of his speech to the Republican movers and shakers who had gathered from across the country, the *de facto* host declared something he hadn't said anywhere before.

"If we can't get attention any other way," Dobson said, "I'm prepared to go to South Dakota and see if we can get the attention of at least one [person]."<sup>3</sup> He didn't mention by name Senator Daschle. But it was clear that Dobson was threatening to campaign against Daschle in the senator's own home state of South Dakota. During his last term, Daschle had fought hard against the appointment and confirmation of constructionist, often conservative, judges. The Democratic superstar had done more than anyone else in Washington, for example, to defeat the nomination of Miguel Estrada, who had withdrawn his name as nominee for the U.S. Court of Appeals just a few weeks before the Broadmoor event because he was facing certain defeat. And Dobson wanted to see Daschle removed from office.

The CNP crowd gave Dobson a standing ovation at that point and cut short the conclusion to his speech. "I'd have to take a leave of absence, and it couldn't involve Focus, and I was going to clarify that," he said later. "But in those cases where we might be able to influence this horrible injustice that's occurring," Dobson concluded his speech, "Let's see what we can do. I don't want to do it, but I might."



By early 2004, Dobson left little room for doubt that he indeed had decided to thrust himself to the forefront of efforts to elect like-thinking Republicans and to defeat frustrating Democrats in November.

In April, he sent mailings, made radio commercials, and stumped for the candidacy of U.S. Representative Patrick Toomey, a conservative in Pennsylvania who tried in a Senate primary that month to defeat Specter, the Republican incumbent. His efforts "weren't quite enough," Dobson notes, because Specter won that election by just 1.6 percent of the vote. The next month, Dobson appeared along with Colson, other national evangelical leaders, and local pastors before more than twenty thousand at a "Mayday for Marriage" rally at Safeco Field in Seattle.

Yet overall, Dobson was increasingly frustrated by the tethers on

his ability to speak freely on political issues. These restrictions included not only the tax-favored status of Focus on the Family, which precluded partisanship by its executives, but also new limits imposed by federal campaign finance reform.

"It had gotten to the point where Focus could send out only one or two letters to our constituency advocating a legislative call to action, and our entire budget limitation for the year would be expended," about a quarter-million dollars, says Paul Hetrick, Focus's vice president of media relations. "And this was during a crucial election year, and at a time when the country was being moved further than ever toward a moral and cultural precipice."

Dobson was also growing tired of the timidity on gay marriage and other issues that was being displayed by all too many of his allies on Capitol Hill. So by May, Focus on the Family's board authorized an unprecedented break with the organization's structure of the previous twenty-five years and created Focus Action, which would serve as an overtly political ministry. Focus Action would still be restricted by tax laws from explicitly endorsing specific candidates. And contributions to Focus Action would not be tax-deductible. But neither would the IRS be able to limit Dobson and others when they were speaking out for Focus Action's positions. "All the funds contributed [to Focus Action]," Dobson wrote in a letter to supporters, "go straight to the battle for righteousness."<sup>4</sup> Also, Dobson had decided to become much more proactive in making personal endorsements of candidates as a private citizen, even though he well understood that there would still be a fuzzy line in public perceptions between his personal position and that of Focus.

Not wasting any time, Focus Action placed ads in the home newspapers of many senators opposed to the defense-of-marriage legislation on Capitol Hill. The group also organized get-out-the-vote efforts to thwart these same senators. And it put together voters' guides with information on the scores of judges who would be on state ballots across the country in November. Meanwhile, Focus on the Family initiated a nonpartisan voter-registration drive called iVoteValues.org, a campaign it hoped would register more than one million Americans to vote.

With all this going in the background, in June Dobson took the National Press Club podium in Washington, D.C., for the first time. Dobson prelabeled his speech there as one of the most important he would ever deliver because he was speaking both to media elites and to

politicians, and also because the address would be rebroadcast several times on C-SPAN and other national cable-TV networks.

Massachusetts officials had begun issuing “marriage” licenses to homosexual couples in mid-May after the state Supreme Court’s six-month waiting period had expired. Beating back gay marriage “is the most important social issue that we will ever face,” Dobson told the Press Club audience, which seemed mostly friendly because many Republican aides and other sympathetic Beltway denizens had joined the meeting. “Family is the ground floor. It’s the foundation: Western civilization itself seems to hang on this issue. If you undermine [marriage], weaken it, tamper with it, you necessarily threaten the whole superstructure of the family.”

Yet, Dobson told the audience, the fight to get Congress to back the Defense of Marriage Act was going poorly at that point, and he was saddened by the difficulty of persuading even some of his usual allies on Capitol Hill to go along. Shortly after this speech, in fact, the U.S. Senate proved unable to muster the sixty votes needed to endorse the amendment.

Indeed, in answer to a written question at the Press Club speech about whether he believed the American culture was “beyond hope,” Dobson concluded, “I don’t believe it’s beyond hope. The pendulum of the culture swings back and forth, going to one extreme, and tends to come back. I’m hopeful and prayerful that it may return. It may take social upheaval to make it happen.” But then Dobson seemed to fudge that conclusion with his next bit of soliloquy: “I don’t know what’s necessary to have people see things differently. As of right now, we’re heading in the wrong direction, especially with relation to the family—which is the sum total of everything I believe in my life.”

Yet just eight days after the Senate acted, the House of Representatives did pass its own defense-of-marriage legislation. Then in August, the California Supreme Court voided the nearly four thousand same-sex unions that had been created in San Francisco earlier in the year. Voters in Missouri that same month also heartened Dobson and his allies by approving a state constitutional amendment that banned gay marriage. The vote was an overwhelming 72 percent to 28 percent.

While Dobson may not have realized it at the time, the electoral momentum for the autumn was swinging back decisively in favor of the truths and candidates he supported. And it would continue to come their way right through November.