Falwell’s beliefs damaged America

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By the time of his death last week, Falwell had become a caricature—a victim of his own paranoia and self-exposure. The organization he founded in 1979, the Moral Majority, had long since disintegrated and his name had become associated with right-wing dogma. He will be remembered as a figure for his ridiculous pronouncements—such as blaming gays and feminists, among others, for the 9/11 attacks—as for anything else.

Nevertheless, his influence on American political culture has, sadly, been profound. He and his fellow televangelists have created a climate of intolerance for diversity, dissent, and democracy, all in the name of the separation of church and state. They have sought to weaken the Supreme Court, even as the justices have sought to strengthen the rights of the individual. This is the legacy he left behind.

Falwell was among a handful of Christian leaders who had the potential to shepherd the Republican Party to a more moderate and inclusive vision of Christianity, a vision that might have influenced the future of American politics. He was a leader of the movement that supported the impeachment of President Bill Clinton and the resignation of President George W. Bush.

Ascendant Christian conservative forces turned on these leaders, those who believed in a more inclusive and diverse vision of Christianity, a vision that stands in stark contrast to the narrowly defined vision of Falwell and his allies. The Grand Old Party has become not just a party of theocrats who defy evolution, mock gay marriage, demonize stem cell research, and oppose any compromise on social issues. It is a party of the right wing of the Republican Party. And what is left of the party is a party that has no future.

And that’s not all. When Bush ascended to the White House, he allowed Falwell to continue to lead it and to continue to use the White House to promote his agenda. This is the legacy he left behind. And it is a legacy that we must work to overcome.

Outlook once was good

A little over a year ago there were high hopes for B.G. Sulli, the surgical manufacturer in Salinas, due to close within the next 18 months. In February 2006, Angiotech Pharmaceuticals Inc., of Vancouver, British Columbia, announced it had purchased the company that employs 200 people. Sulli’s offices were planned. “Angiotech has been a leader in the drug industry and we wanted to stay with medical devices,” said David Steward, Sulli’s controller. “That there was a competitive advantage to be had there. Out of the opportunity here is a real positive event.”

But on Wednesday, former CEO Robert Pirofita said Sulli’s, which employs 200 people at its facility, was closing. The company’s plant manager would not comment, and an employee said workers were mourning not to talk. What a difference a year makes. Unfortunately, not a positive difference for employees, or the area.

Outlook once was good

Any one can win a gun

The Bloomfield Gun Giveaway in Virginia has hit a snag.

It was billed as a reaction to New York City Mayor Michael Bloomberg’s efforts to curb the “straw purchase” of firearms for criminals in law-controlled New York City. And it was begun by gun dealers in Virginia and four other states after undercover agents filled out the required forms for gun purchases in order to test the gun laws in place within the states. In New York City, a gun dealer was given a gun in exchange for a deposit of $1,000. The gun was to be returned if the gun dealer could not sell it within 30 days. But the gun dealer failed to sell the gun within the 30 days, and the gun dealer was charged with a felony.

The Virginia guns were to be sold back to the gun dealer for the same amount of money. But the gun dealer was not able to sell the guns, and the gun dealer was charged with a felony. But the gun dealer was not able to sell the guns, and the gun dealer was charged with a felony.

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Our Opinion

Unfinished Business

We don’t do much to reform the drug laws passed this month without fanfare.

Yet the more than 15,000 mostly African-American and Hispanic offenders incarcerated under some of the harshest drug laws in the land would surely have liked someone to notice. Too many non-violent drug offenders remain imprisoned under laws that in some cases require stiffer penalties for possessing small amounts of cocaine than for committing rape or manslaughter.

And although almost every political leader, past and present (including those who drafted the lock-em-up-and-throw-away-the-key statutes in 1973), believes the laws are archaic, the momentum for change seems to have slowed considerably. Three years ago, the Drop the Rock campaign by celebrities such as hip-hop mogul Russell Simmons, and other efforts from lawmakers and advocacy groups like the Drug Policy Alliance, brought some changes, but they didn’t go far enough.

Under the reforms, which were further amended in 2005, some drug offenders with Class I and II felonies could apply for resentencing, which could make them eligible for release. Some sentence times were shortened. But many non-violent drug offenders did not benefit from the changes, and Gov. Pataki and legislative leaders agreed that the reforms were only a first step.

The Assembly seems motivated to continue the work. Last month, it passed more reforms, including the much-needed provision that gives judges discretion in sentencing, which would allow them to send non-violent offenders to drug treatment programs, where many belong. The Assembly plan also lengthens sentences for drug kingpins.

But the Senate, which had resisted drug law changes for so long, has not moved on the issue. Some critics have suggested the Senate doesn’t want to change the laws because Upstate communities would lose some of their prison populations, which are included in Census counts. Communities with lower Census counts could face redistricting.

It is doubtful that senators are that callous or calculating. But whatever their reasons, they have not been pushing the reforms.

The Senate and Gov. Eliot Spitzer, who has backed drug law reform, need to re-engage in this effort. It would also be nice to hear Attorney General Andrew Cuomo’s voice on this issue; he has a history of fighting for the cause.

Next year, there should be no 35th anniversary commemoration of drug laws that have punished some non-violent offenders more than child rapists and killers.