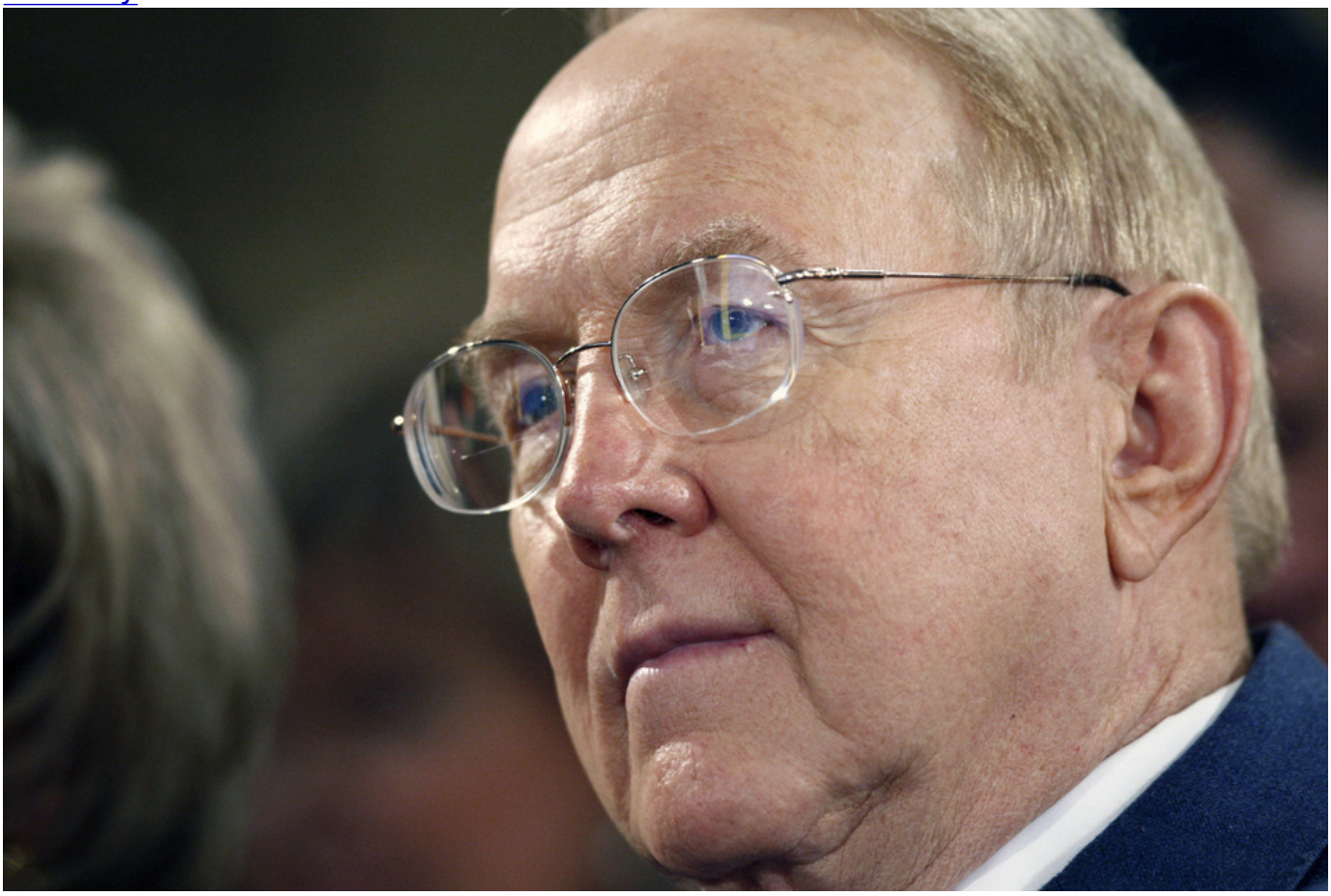
News
Obituary



In a Tuesday, March 11, 2008 photo, Christian evangelical leader and founder of "Focus on the Family", James Dobson, listens to President Bush, not pictured, address the National Religious Broadcasters 2008 Convention at the Gaylord Opryland Resort and Convention Center in Nashville, Tenn. (AP/Charles Dharapak)

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James Dobson, who founded the conservative Christian ministry Focus on the Family and was a politically influential campaigner against abortion and LGBTQ+ rights, died on Thursday. He was 89.

Born in 1936 in Shreveport, Louisiana, Dobson was a child psychologist who launched a radio show to counsel Christians on parenting and started Focus on the Family in 1977. Alongside fundamentalist giants like Jerry Falwell and Pat Robertson, he became a force in the 1980s for pushing conservative Christian ideals in mainstream American politics.

At its peak, Focus on the Family had more than 1,000 employees and gave Dobson a platform to weigh in on legislation and serve as an adviser to five presidents. His broad reach includes authoring more than 70 books, being translated into 27 languages, and airing on 4,000 radio stations, according to the Dr. James Dobson Family Institute.

His death was confirmed by his institute. He is survived by his wife of 64 years, Shirley, as well as their two children, a daughter-in-law and two grandchildren.

'Mount Rushmore' of conservatives

Dobson interviewed President Ronald Reagan in the Oval Office in 1985, and Falwell called him a rising star in 1989. Decades later, he was among the evangelical leaders tapped to advise President Donald Trump. in 2016.

In 2022, he praised Trump for appointing conservative U.S. Supreme Court justices who allowed states to ban abortion.

"Whether you like Donald Trump or not, whether you supported or voted for him or not, if you are supportive of this Dobbs decision that struck down Roe v. Wade, you

have to mention in the same breath the man who made it possible," he said in a broadcast.

Dobson belongs on the "Mount Rushmore" of Christian conservatives, said Tony Perkins, president of the Family Research Council, another group Dobson founded. He promoted ideas from "a biblical standpoint" that pushed back against progressive parenting of the 1960s, Perkins said.

Weighing Dobson's legacy

In his 1970 parenting book "Dare to Discipline," updated in 1992, Dobson said parents should spank kids to discipline them and enforce boundaries. Children should not be struck in anger, but "the spanking should be of sufficient magnitude to cause genuine tears."

"I know that some of my readers could argue," he wrote, "that the deliberate premeditated application of minor pain to a small child is a harsh and unloving thing to do. To others, it will seem like pure barbarism. I obviously disagree."

John Fea, an American History professor at Messiah College in Pennsylvania, is critical of Dobson's ideas. However, he recounted how his father — a tough Marine — was a better parent after becoming an evangelical Christian and listening to Dobson's radio program.

"Even as a self-identified evangelical Christian that I am, I have no use in my own life for Dobson's politics or his child-rearing," he said. "But as a historian what do you do with these stories? About a dad who becomes a better dad?"

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Possible presidential run

After developing a following of millions, Dobson considered running for president in 2000, following in the footsteps of former television minister Pat Robertson's surprise success in 1988.

"He was not afraid to speak out," said Ralph Reed, a Christian conservative political organizer and lobbyist who founded the Faith and Freedom Coalition. "If Jim had

decided to run, he would have been a major force."

Still, Reed's enduring memory is traveling through rural America as a younger political organizer, with Dobson's voice as his sole companion.

"I'd be out there somewhere, and I could go to the AM dial and there was never a time, day or night when I couldn't find that guy," Reed said. "There will probably never be another one like him."

Focus on the Family moved from California to Colorado Springs, Colorado, in the 1990s, establishing the city as a hub for evangelicals sometimes nicknamed the "Vatican of the West."

A political juggernaut for decades

James Bopp, a lawyer who has represented Focus on the Family, said Dobson could rally public support like few other social conservatives.

Dobson helped create a constellation of allied Family Policy Councils in around 40 states that push a socially conservative agenda and lobby lawmakers, said Peter Wolfgang, executive director of one such group in Connecticut.

"If there is one man above all whom I would credit with being the builder — not just the thinker — who gave us the institutions that created the space for President Trump to help us turn the tide in the culture war, it would be Dr. James Dobson," Wolfgang wrote in an online column last month.

Records compiled by the watchdog group Open Secrets show Focus on the Family and Family Research Council together spent more than $4 million on political ads and nearly $2 million lobbying Congress since the late 1990s.

Opposition to abortion and LGBTQ+ rights

Dobson left Focus on the Family in 2010 and founded the institute that bears his name. He continued with his nationally syndicated radio show Family Talk, carried by 1,500 radio outlets with more than half a million listeners weekly, according to the institute.

Guests on his show have discussed the importance of embracing religion and promoting the idea that people could change their sexuality.

"The homosexual community will tell us that transformations never occur. That you cannot change," he said in a 2021 video posted on his institute's site that touted "success stories" of people who "no longer struggle with homosexuality" after attending a ministry. He said there is typically "pain and agitation" associated with homosexuality.

Conversion therapy is the scientifically discredited practice of using therapy to "convert" LGBTQ+ people to heterosexuality or traditional gender expectations.

The practice is banned in 23 states and the District of Columbia, according to the Movement Advancement Project, an LGBTQ+ rights think tank.

The U.S. Supreme Court agreed in March to hear a Colorado case about whether state and local governments can enforce laws banning conversion therapy for LGBTQ+ children.