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Public Records (Updated

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Ron Freeman was a black fundamentalist "stealth" candidate who suddenly emerged in Kansas City, Missouri, to run for Congress in both 1992 and 1994. Although he was ultimately defeated both times, his political career thus far sheds an interesting light on the electoral strategies being pursued by Pat Robertson's Christian Coalition.

The term stealth candidate was first coined by the coalition's executive director, Ralph Reed, to refer to a political unknown with no previous record who conceals his or her radical religious support and loyalty. Reed said that running stealth candidates is "just good strategy. It's like guerrilla warfare. . . . It's better to move quietly, with stealth, under cover of night."

As the Kansas City Star reported in its August 25, 1992, edition:

Republican Ron Freeman came out of nowhere {in the 1992 Republican primary} to nearly capture the 5th District Congressional primary from a better known candidate. . . . How did he get more than 9,000 votes? Some say it was the support of his church, the Metro Vineyard Fellowship in Grandview. . . . Nationally, religious beliefs and political issues have found themselves in the same speeches and sermons. Here pastors of the religious right are preaching the issues. Church members are running for office. Congregations are going from door to door to get their candidate elected.

Freeman did not win the 1992 primary, but he succeeded in the 1994 primary and thereafter attracted national attention. The possibility of a handsome, articulate black Republican in Congress excited the party regulars, so that such COP heavy-hitters as Jack Kemp, Richard Armey, and Newt Gingrich all journeyed to Kansas City to raise money for Freeman.

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Interestingly, Ron Freeman did not grow up in an urban African-American community but moved to Kansas City in 1987 after various unsuccessful efforts to become a professional football player. He graduated from a state university in Pittsburg, Kansas, with a B.S. in physical education, with an emphasis on track and a minor in history. He tried out with the Chicago Blitz in 1983 and then in succession with the Buffalo Bills, the Pittsburgh Maulers, the Jacksonville Bills, and the Orlando Renegades. He also worked for a moving company in Orlando, Florida, before moving to Kansas City.

After an equally unsuccessful tryout with the Kansas City Chiefs, Freeman started work with the Fellowship of Christian Athletes, registered to vote, and in 1992 bought a sprawling ranch house in one of Kansas City's more expensive white

suburbs. This was also the year of his first, unsuccessful may run.

In February 1994, Freeman left the Fellowship of Christian Athletes, in which he had worked as a youth minister, and on March 15 officially announced a second candidacy for Congress. He did much of his early campaigning on Christian radio and TV programs, stressing family values and opposition to abortion. He was also a speaker for Youth for Christ.

After Freeman won the 1994 Republican primary, the Kansas City Star for July 25 reported:

His showing this year was largely boosted by his help from voters who appreciated his religious background. Freeman again has drawn heavy backing from Christian conservatives and citizens who believe in individual empowerment instead of government handouts.

Before long, Freeman's campaign had shifted gear, in line with Christian Coalition directives to soft-pedal religious positions on issues such as abortion. The August 4 Kansas City Star reported:

Freeman said he is a born-again Christian, a member of a non-denominational church, and has made speaking at church gatherings an important part of his campaign. But his organizers emphasized they are not running as religious radicals. "We're doing everything in the world to distance ourselves from any kind of labeling as religious anything," campaign manager Steve Dennis said.

Nevertheless, his basic support did not change, and a fundamentalist pastor who claimed Freeman as his prayer partner and signed his letters "Brother Royce" solicited other pastors to provide volunteers to put out Freeman political yard signs and organize other volunteers to aid the campaign.



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The official deemphasizing of things religious included denials that Freeman was involved with or supported by the Christian Coalition or its allies. However, when I visited the large church attended by Freeman, I found voter-registration information inserts in the Sunday church bulletin urging members to register and vote, as well as right-wing literature on church tables, notably Dr. James Dobson's Focus on the Family Bulletin. In one of these bulletins, Dobson advocated prayer in public schools and asserted deceptively: "The Supreme Court decision banning non-specific school prayer (or even silent prayer) is an extreme measure. . . ." Of course, the Supreme Court has never prohibited any student or teacher from engaging in individual silent prayer; it banned school-sponsored prayer services, including specific periods for silent prayer.

Despite his attempts to conceal it, Freeman's identification with the Christian Coalition was evident in his required financial disclosure. He sent \$78 to Christian Coalition headquarters for "association fees" that were also listed as a "campaign fund raiser." In trying to explain this entry, Freeman told the Kansas City Star that he registered to attend a Christian Coalition conference, where he hoped to meet and recruit support from William Bennett. Freeman said that ultimately he decided not to attend the event; as the November 3 issue of the Star noted, he "has declared more than once that the Christian Coalition is not involved in his campaign."

However, the very next day, the Star published a story headlined: "Freeman Campaign Spreads Literature of Christian Coalition." A Presbyterian minister, the Reverend Kirk Perucca, who is also a cochair of Planned Parenthood's Religious Affairs Committee, had ordered (out of curiosity) 100 copies of the Christian Coalition voter guide. Suddenly, a Freeman campaign worker showed up at the Presbyterian church and said, "I'm with the Freeman campaign and here are your voter guides that you ordered. Will you use them Sunday?" Moreover, he had Perucca's original order form, which Perucca had sent to coalition headquarters in Chesapeake, Virginia. As Perucca noted in the Star article, "Freeman has continually said that they are completely disassociated with the radical religious right [but] there is an absolute direct connection between the Freeman campaign and the Christian Coalition . . . so they're not telling the truth."

Not surprisingly, Ron Freeman's political positions parallel those of the radical religious right. He believes in home schooling and has educated his four children at home where they will not be in contact with children from other religious and cultural backgrounds. He favors tax credits for home schooling, as well as government-funded vouchers to pay for private schools from the public-school budget. In fact, the church he attends has just such a private school, called Dominion Christian School. (Dominion comes from the Dominion Theology espoused by radical religious groups which want to rule with and under the dominion of Jesus prior to and during his expected "second coming.")

Freeman's stated rationale is that public schools need competition to make them better. Actually, of course, public schools have always had competition from private religious and secular schools. What he really wants is a requirement that

taxpayers pay for private schools. He also advocates prayer in public schools.

Home schooling deprives the public schools of state education grants per child in attendance, and funding of vouchers for private religious schools would also come out of the public-school budget. Thus, stealth candidates in effect support Jerry Falwell's declaration: "I hope to live to see the day when, as in the early days of our country, we won't have any public schools. The churches will have taken them over again and Christians will be running them."

One of the problems with the Christian Coalition's attempts to achieve political power is not only that its members actually deny their associations, as their executive director Reed has asked them to do, but that they also hide or distort the truth at other points. For example, Freeman's campaign literature said that after college he went "on to play professional football" and has "developed national educational programs." Yet he provided no evidence that anyone has ever made use of his football talents or his "national educational programs."

Likewise, he campaigned on the statement that he "is willing to battle the system in Congress," yet he signed the Republican Contract with America, pledging his vote to Newt Gingrich, who has been a powerful member of that very "system" for nearly two decades. Freeman also accepted support from the National Rifle Association and committed himself to repeal of the Brady law requiring a waiting period on gun sales so that teenagers' and criminals' records could be checked. He also opposed the ban on assault weapons.

The radical religious right supports the more established and "mainstream" Republican right in its opposition to health-care reform and a minimum-wage increase and in favoring welfare "reform" and tax-reduction for the rich. Ron Freeman shares these goals, including no government immunization of children. Instead of Medicaid, he advocates small government handouts to the poor in the form of vouchers so that they may establish "savings accounts" to pay for medical expenses. This is called "Medi-save" and is likely to furnish the poor with truly pitiful amounts with which to purchase their health care in our wildly overpriced system.

And though single mothers caring for small children at home already do socially useful work, Freeman wants to force them to work outside the home. Even worse, he also says they should be forced into a compulsory savings program so they can "accumulate capital" - yet, he opposes attempts to turn the minimum wage into an actual "living wage." This means that, for a working mother with two or three children, her weekly income of \$4.25 per hour at 40 hours a week amounts to \$170 or \$736.67 a month or \$8,840 a year. If we subtract from that \$676.26 in Social Security tax, \$400.67 in city, county, and state sales tax, and \$88.40 Kansas City earnings tax, she would have a grand total of \$7,675 each year for housing, utilities, food, clothes, shoes, health, transportation, and child care during working hours. That leaves no margin at all for "accumulated capital."

Despite Freeman's radical religious right voter base and the general trend of the 1994 congressional elections, when the votes in Kansas City were tabulated, Freeman's opponent had won with 57 percent of the vote. Karen McCarthy, who is white, was endorsed by the major black political organization, Freedom, Inc.; by Emanuel Cleaver, the black mayor of Kansas City; by the two black newspapers; by the Kansas City Star; and by a coalition of Kansas City's business leaders. McCarthy had been in the Missouri legislature for nine terms, was chair of the House Ways and Means Committee, and was then president of the National Conference of State Legislators. Her experience counted. By contrast, Freeman campaigned on the slogan, "Experience - Who Needs It?"

But there was one more important factor that influenced the election results. An Interfaith Voter Education Project was organized by prominent clergy who produced and distributed to 32,000 families a leaflet exposing Freeman's radical religious connections. Jesse Jackson spoke at a large rally for Freeman's opponent and for Alan Wheat, a senatorial candidate. (I followed Jackson at the rally with a brief description of the radical religious right, and I also spoke at churches and on a black radio station to expose Freeman's stealth candidacy.)

Freeman's defeat was a significant loss for the radical religious right, although the allies of the Christian Coalition won a number of seats in the Missouri legislature (though not enough to control it).

Much more could be said (and no doubt will) of the linkage between the Republican Party and the Christian Coalition and its allies. The danger - both to Christianity and U.S. politics - is enormous. As John Judis so eloquently wrote in the September 12, 1994, issue of the New Republic:

Christianity does not provide a political agenda but rather an underlying social conscience with which to approach politics. Religion plays its most constructive role precisely when church and state are separate. When the two are focused, however, when organizations acting in the name of Christianity seek political power, then religion becomes subordinate to politics. It becomes infected with the darker egoism of group and nation; it no longer softens and counters our ungenerous impulses but clothes them in holy righteousness.

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