POLITICS

Bedeviling the GOP : With 'Stealth' Candidates, Tight Discipline and Cash, the Religious Right Dominated the Republican Agenda. Now, the Battle's On for the Party's Soul -- and Its Future.

L.A. Times Archives

Nov. 29, 1992 12 AM PT

IT WAS MOURNING IN THE REV. PAT ROBERTSON'S AMERICA. On the day after Bill Clinton was elected President, Robertson smiled wanly and consoled the millions who watch his "700 Club" cable TV show. As the pewter-haired televangelist lamented what democracy had wrought, it seemed as though God Himself had lost the election. Plagues and disasters were on the horizon. At the very least, economic collapse and radical abortion laws--baby-killing laws, really--are coming. "The child can be coming out of the birth canal," said the political preacher, "and they'll say it's OK to kill it."

The despairing went on for the better part of an hour. Robertson and his guests described the future as a Christian Right nightmare. "Radical feminists" such as Barbara Boxer and Dianne Feinstein were taking over the Senate. Clinton would allow homosexuals in the military. He would put women in combat and gays in the

Cabinet. “Family values” were dead. “I’m anything but happy,” Robertson said. “But we’ll see what happens.”

For the record:

12:00 a.m. Dec. 20, 1992 *FOR THE RECORD*

Los Angeles Times Sunday December 20, 1992 Home Edition Los Angeles Times Magazine Page 6 Times Magazine Desk 2 inches; 45 words Type of Material: Correction In “Bedeviling the GOP” (by Michael D’Antonio, Nov. 29), a quote taken from The Nation--”We don’t have to worry about convincing a majority of Americans to agree with us”--was misattributed to Ralph Reed, director of the Christian Coalition. The speaker was actually the coalition’s national field director, Guy Rogers.

Robertson and his Christian Right movement--politically conservative fundamentalists, evangelicals and Catholics--could be forgiven a bit of self-indulgent wallowing. Time had finally run out on their crusade to create a Christian America. It wasn’t that they hadn’t had their chance. Since 1980, the Christian Right had been developing into a fearsome political force. It was the key to the Reagan/Bush victories. But what had 12 years of incumbency produced? Abortion is still legal and school prayer is not. There is no voucher plan to benefit private religious schools. Homosexuality has not been pushed back into the closet. Hollywood and the rest of the hated “cultural elite” still dominate the media. And the future of the Supreme Court is now in the hands of a Democrat.

On Nov. 4, the Christian Right movement’s leaders could not accept that America had rejected their brand of “family values.” After all, their agenda is God’s agenda, and God cannot be wrong. Robertson and his allies could only conclude that President Bush had not pushed hard enough. He had been too soft on the gays and the lesbians and the feminists. Now they would have to train their sights on the Republican Party

itself. Their goal: to turn the GOP into a religious/political organization to promote Robertson's vision of conservative Christian America.

So Democrats gleefully compete for window offices in Washington, and the Republican Party faces a civil war the likes of which it has not seen since the Goldwater and Rockefeller forces self-destructed in 1964. Columnist Patrick J. Buchanan, the snarling pit bull of the 1992 convention, may have declared a holy war with Clinton over the future of America. But now that the war is lost, Buchanan and the Christian Right are turning their fury on their own party. They are already blaming traditional, non-religious Republicans for the defeat, and they are preparing to seize the GOP. For their part, equally angry Republican regulars have begun to compare the Christian Right to neo-Nazis. And it could be a decade or more before the looming war between the two camps can be settled.

IN THE DAYS AFTER THE ELECTION, ROBERTSON'S POLITICAL ORGANization--the Christian Coalition--was already maneuvering. By Friday, coalition director Ralph Reed was on the road to Williamsburg, Va., and a summit meeting with other conservative religious political activists. Boyish to the point of looking like a character from "Happy Days," Reed, 31, has already headed a number of organizations for young Republicans. In 1989, Conservative Digest hailed him as "a rising young star" in Republican politics. Though he looks like a choirboy, Reed speaks the blunt, warlike language made familiar by the likes of Lee Atwater and Roger Ailes and has a reputation as a slash-and-burn political operator. He was a driving force behind the anti-gay ordinances that were passed in both Colorado and Tampa, Fla., but failed in Maine and Oregon. He also directed a multimillion-dollar campaign that quietly pushed Christian activists into local offices nationwide.

Reed's ultimate goal is to take over the GOP from the bottom up. To do that, he can tap a $10-million annual budget and call on dues-paying activists in more than 100,000 born-again churches. This fall, more than 1,000 of these people were trained in the ways of taking over precinct-level party committees, foreshadowing a larger effort to dominate every state party organization. The coalition can also count on the support of a host of smaller Religious Right political organizations run by longtime activists, including Paul Weyrich's Free Congress Foundation and Richard Viguerie's United Conservatives of America, both Washington-based, and Lou Sheldon's Traditional Values Coalition in California. These groups provide financial and tactical support for Christian candidates running for everything from school board to Congress.

Robertson's activists practically perfected the art of the political takeover in South Carolina in 1988. There they used churches to quietly send large numbers of people to precinct caucuses. These newcomers overwhelmed party meetings that normally drew just a handful of political veterans. Then, when it came time to vote on delegates and precinct officers, they swept their own people in. Old-time Republicans, who called themselves the "regulars," eventually organized to win back some power, but the Christians have retained their strength.

This year, they used the same takeover tactics to dominate the GOP in a dozen states from Florida to Michigan and Oregon. These state delegations, which made up more than a third of the people at the national convention, then used their solidarity to force their religious views onto the party platform. Robertson's political guerrillas plan to follow this prescription in all 50 states and convert the entire party by the year 2000.

Ultimately, the Christian Right hopes to use the same techniques--discipline and block voting--to win general elections in which low voter turnout magnifies its power. At the coalition's "Road to Victory" conference, hosted by Robertson last spring, Reed explained the strategy to his activist corps. It included flooding precinct meetings, targeting low-turnout elections and hiding the Christian Right agenda until after a candidate is elected. "Is this sinking in?" he said, according to The Nation magazine. "We don't have to worry about convincing a majority of Americans to agree with us. Most of them are staying home and watching 'Falcon Crest.' They're not involved, they're not voting, so who cares?" While Reed's strategy was spoiled by record turnout in this hotly contested presidential race, it should be effective when typically low interest returns in the off-year elections.

Forty-eight hours after the election, as he drove to the Williamsburg summit of these leaders, Reed worked his car phone, talking to allies, consultants and assorted political journalists. "The liberal media got it all wrong," Reed barked. "The convention wasn't too conservative. The problem was that Bush wasn't far enough to the right. And the party has to realize that the evangelical voting block is enormous. One out of every two people who voted for Bush was a white evangelical. No other voting block is bigger, better organized or more disciplined. It's bigger and better than organized labor used to be. We will not be ignored."

Indeed, the Christian Right is the 300-pound gorilla in Republican politics. Anyone who doubts the strength of this movement need only consider Pat Buchanan at last summer's nominating convention in Houston. When Buchanan demanded a prime-

time convention appearance, the Bush forces resisted at first, recalling how Buchanan had lacerated their man through the primaries and fearing what he might say on the podium. But eventually they felt they had to appease their former enemy. They needed the Christian Right vote in November. Buchanan repaid the favor by giving the kind of speech that drove longtime moderate Republicans, George Bush's kind of folks, right out of the hall.

"There is a religious war going on in this country. It is a cultural war, as critical to the kind of nation we shall be as the Cold War itself," he said, "for this is a war for the soul of America." Buchanan was washed with cheers and applause after he finished. On the floor of the Astrodome, someone waved a placard that read, "Family rights forever, gay rights never." The delegates also gave a warm reception to Pat Robertson, who believes that only Christians and Jews are worthy of holding office in America. Robertson warned the delegates that the nation must return to its "Christian roots" or it will "continue to legalize sodomy, slaughter innocent babies, destroy the minds of her children, squander her resources and sink into oblivion."

The convention's platform noted that laws should reflect a "faith in God," the platform attacked "blasphemy" in art and promoted prayer in schools and at public events. The party faithful stood against the rights of homosexuals to marry and adopt children. And though 70% of Republicans support the right of women to choose abortion, the platform called for an all-out ban, even when a pregnancy is the result of rape or incest. These issues got more attention than any others, including the national economy.

But as soon as the convention was over, public opinion polls showed that voters were turned off by the religious overtones and intolerance in the family-values agenda. There was no real "bounce" in the President's approval rating after Houston. Still, Bush, understanding the strength of the evangelical block, went straight from the convention to a meeting of Religious Right leaders--Buchanan, Robertson, Oliver North and Phyllis Schlafly--to seek their approval. From then on, he was tied to the Christian Right leaders and their widely unpopular religious politics like a dog tied to a stake.

Bush was hobbled by the same alliance that Ronald Reagan had used to great benefit. It was Reagan who opened the door and let the Christian Right--mainly in the form of Jerry Falwell's Moral Majority--into the party. Until that point, conservative Christians had been conspicuously absent from national affairs. This could be traced, in part, to a theology that regards politics as unholy and even evil. It could also be a

legacy of the Scopes trial in 1925, when journalist H. L. Mencken succeeded in convincing the rest of the country that Southern fundamentalists and evangelicals were laughable rubes. Scopes was so bruising to the egos of many Christian leaders that for generations they admonished their flocks to avoid politics. Conservative Christians began to come out of their isolation in the 1970s, to oppose the liberal social changes of the time. Then, as now, they were appalled by abortion, the banning of school prayer and the rise of feminism. In 1976, they thought they'd found a savior in Jimmy Carter, the first born-again candidate. When he turned out to be more liberal than they expected, the Christian Right felt betrayed. Reagan, promising to be loyal, received the passionate support of millions of alienated white, conservative Protestants, who were widely credited with having given Reagan his margin of victory in 1980.

Reagan kept the religious activists in line with heartfelt speeches about the evils of abortion and the need for school prayer. But he did not pursue their goals with much vigor, and the religious intolerance of the movement was kept out of public view. In contrast, Bush lacked Reagan's political instincts and was unable to keep the Religious Right at arm's length. In supporting the positions of the Christian right, Bush seemed to be stepping out of character. It was hard for anyone to believe that a Connecticut-born, Yale-bred Episcopalian wanted to wage religious war against fellow Americans.

No one felt Bush's ambivalence more than the evangelicals. In the end, millions of white, conservative Christians deserted him for Clinton and Ross Perot because Bush wasn't pure in his devotion. This is why Ralph Reed and the rest of the group that met in Williamsburg will seek even more power in the GOP. They don't want to follow another George Bush into battle. Many would rather lose with a candidate with firm Christian Right convictions than win with someone who doesn't support their cause. There are a host of conservatives in the Christian Right mold, including Dan Quayle, whose right-wing religious credentials are impeccable. Of course, Robertson, who ran for President in 1988, may put himself forward. And the movement could also support former education secretary William J. Bennett, Buchanan, or acerbic Sen. Phil Gramm of Texas.

While these national figures will be important, the real battle for control of the party will take place, precinct by precinct. And with "stealth" Christian candidates who do not reveal their views until after they come to power, this brand of politics is like guerrilla warfare. "You don't know it's over," Reed explained last year, "until you're in a body bag."

THE BLOODY-CRUSADER APPROACH TO POLITICS HAS OUTRAGED AN INcreasingly vocal number of moderate, longtime Republicans. One of the angriest opponents of Reed and the Christian Right is the man who brought him into politics. Marvin Liebman, 69, founder of more than 30 political groups, helped Reed create his United Students for America and won that group's first award as a distinguished conservative. But today, Liebman, a Washington-based political writer, seeks to prevent heated anti-gay sentiments from taking over his beloved GOP. He's come out of the closet as a conservative homosexual.

"I felt like a Jew in Germany just before the war," Liebman said earlier this year. He chose to go public, in an autobiography titled "Coming Out Conservative," because he "started smelling homophobia replacing the anti-communism which used to hold the conservative movement together." Communism's fall has deprived Republicans of an enemy that conveniently brought every wing of the party together in mutual hatred. Minus the Communists, Liebman says, the Christian Right is focusing on lesbians and gays as a replacement enemy. In a country where gays have enjoyed growing acceptance, that could be flawed politics.

"I am very worried that by 1996, we will have a right-wing, religious maniacs' Republican Party," Liebman says. "These people are very well financed, and the rest of the party is terrified of them. I blame Bush for this because he caved in to these people. Bush was a wimp. He didn't have the balls to stand up to them. He did it for expediency, and now the people who have always been in the center of the Republican Party are terrified. The Christian Right turns off too many voters. We cannot win with them, and no one wants to go through losing time and time again because of them."

This prospect of losing one election after another frightens most traditional Republicans, who are increasingly open about their disdain for the Christian activists. The traditionalists also are angry at Bush, who once supported abortion rights but didn't put the Christian Right in its place. And a clear majority is disturbed by the religious overtones of the rest of the family-values agenda.

The challenge to the religious activists will come from party regulars who believe that the Religious Right will drive mainstream voters away. Once they get organized, they should be able to raise more money than the Christian Right and call upon experienced political pros to guide their counterattack. But Robertson's forces have a three-year jump on the rest of the party, and the fight is likely to be long and bruising.

"They are already a very strong voting block and a major part of the presidential primary process, like the unions in the Democratic Party," says Sam Popkin, a political scientist at the University of California, San Diego. Popkin says that the primary system has given small, well-organized groups an advantage when it comes to moving one candidate to the top of a field of many.

Massachusetts Gov. William F. Weld, whose "Pro-Bush/Pro-Choice" button at the convention symbolized his status as a fiscal conservative and social moderate, is widely considered to be a potential leader of the moderates, as is Gov. Pete Wilson. These traditional Republicans are practical politicians who know their party cannot win the White House with a Christian Right agenda. Similarly, pragmatic Democrats began to rescue their party in 1984, following Walter F. Mondale's disastrous presidential bid. At that time, moderate Democrats such as Sen. Sam Nunn of Georgia, Sen. Al Gore of Tennessee and Arkansas Gov. Bill Clinton formed the Democratic Leadership Coalition to bring the party back to a middle ground. Eight years later, the coalition can be credited with having created a moderate candidate, Clinton, and a moderate party that could win.

In the GOP, people such as Roger Stone are already forming the Republican version of the DLC to fight the Christian Right and win back the party. Several congressmen and GOP consultants are already raising money for a group called the Republican Majority Coalition. California Republican Tom Campbell, who was defeated in a U.S. Senate primary by Christian-backed Bruce Herschensohn, is expected to help lead this group. Campbell, a typical moderate Republican victim of Religious Right organizing, later saw the GOP candidate defeated in a general-election fight with Democrat Barbara Boxer.

"Boxer was probably the most liberal and most vulnerable Democratic Senate candidate in the country, but we couldn't even beat her with a Radical Right agenda," Campbell said days after the election. "That's why Robertson's interpretation of the election is poppycock. We didn't lose because Bush was not far enough to the right. We lost because he didn't disavow the Right. People rejected the message they got from the convention in Houston."

Strict opposition to abortion has become the main problem with the Christian agenda, Campbell adds. Such a position was useful for Republicans when abortion was the law of the land, he notes. Now, however, that stand is a liability, because voters genuinely fear losing the right to choose. Campbell says that some of his colleagues in Congress who privately support abortion rights would like to renounce

the opponents of abortion but fear retribution. “Our group would give them a home, a new power base,” Campbell explains. “We do not support formal school prayer, anti-gay laws or anti-abortion laws. Our emphasis would be conservative economics.”

Campbell, who hopes to raise $5 million in his first year, plans to challenge Robertson state by state, to back specific candidates for local and national offices and unmask the Christian “stealth” candidates who hide their religious politics. On the presidential level, these traditional Republicans would be more comfortable with someone like Jack Kemp, but only if he is not too closely tied to the Christian agenda. “If Jack Kemp runs talking about abortion, corporal punishment in the schools, and lesbians, we can say goodby to the White House,” Campbell adds. Ideally, these moderates would prefer someone like Weld--or former New Hampshire Sen. Warren B. Rudman, who comes from a state where local Republican regulars are also organizing for the first time to try to thwart the Christian Coalition’s attempt to quietly infiltrate and control party organizations.

THE BATTLE FOR THE SOUL OF THE REPUBLICAN PARTY IS ALREADY joined,and its first skirmish is likely to come in January when the GOP picks a new national chairman. Then the theater of war will shift to the 1994 elections and the state party conventions that precede them. The key battlegrounds will be California’s Orange County, Iowa, Oregon, Washington state, and many Southern states. The moderates fear that a drawn-out conflict with the Christian Right will pull the GOP so far from the American political mainstream that the party could lose the base it won in five out of the last seven presidential campaigns. They well recall that after the 1968 convention it took the Democrats 20 years of losing every presidential election but one to change the perception that their party was dominated by radial leftists who had disdain for the middle class.

Ironically, the winning voice that emerged from the Democratic Party after two decades in the wilderness used a subtly religious message to gain ground. Time after time, Clinton called on voters to make a religious-style commitment to others, and he spoke repeatedly of healing the spirit of the nation. Indeed, on the night they were elected, Clinton and Vice President-elect Gore both sounded like ministers preaching a message of reconciliation to a nation/congregation torn by economic problems, racial strife and political differences.

Clinton’s victory suggests that voters rejected not only George Bush but also the political religion of the Christian Right. Every presidential campaign is imbued with either subtle or overt religious values. So though President Bush tried to portray as

heathen the Democrats who left “G-O-D” out of their platform, he was wrong. Clinton and Gore didn’t reject God but simply stood for a God different from the one represented by Robertson, Buchanan and, ultimately, Bush himself. Bush was forced to stand for a fearsome Christian God of judgment and punishment. Clinton offered another familiar Christian vision of God: the God of hope, love and healing. This God appealed to Americans for whom religious tolerance has been a bedrock value since the War of Independence.

But while Clinton and Gore presented a traditional liberal political theology, they also expressed spiritual views that resonate with their own generation in a unique way. Clinton, who was open about being the child of an alcoholic, surely appealed to the self-help, 12-Step spirituality widely popular with people under age 50. Similarly, Gore’s environmentalism and his many references to psychological concepts struck a chord with millions who have embraced some form of the New Age. In his book on the environment, Gore writes about dysfunction as the cause of pollution, and he cites the popular psychotherapist Alice Miller, whose highly sophisticated books have almost a cult following among baby-boomer intellectuals. Gore also calls for an inherently spiritual solution to the environmental crisis. And while Gore’s writings are filled with spiritual references, Clinton’s speeches are frequently filled with biblical allusion. During the campaign, he spoke comfortably from many pulpits, especially those of black churches. Like many baby boomers, Clinton and Gore combine aspects of both traditional Christianity and more-modern spirituality. The appeal of their message is further evidence of a generational shift in political power.

The trend away from the religious political morality of the Christian Right is also apparent in opinion polls, which show that an overwhelming majority believes that abortion and sexual issues are private matters. In both Arizona and Maryland earlier this month, voters supported abortion rights in strong numbers. In other states, many Christian Right-backed candidates lost after their opponents made an issue of the rightists’ religious politics. And while many voters, such as those in Colorado and Tampa, may oppose specific protections for gays, similarly minded constituents in Oregon and Maine eschewed turning the Christian Right’s view of homosexuality as aberrant into law. On the day of the election, fewer than 15% of voters said that issues such as gay rights, abortion or single parenthood were important to their voting decision.

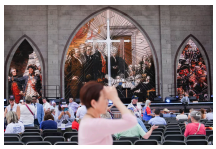
The spiritual mood of the country and the rejection of the family-values platform have led Republicans from Barry Goldwater to abortion rights leader Mary Dent Crisp to speak out against Robertson’s army and its allies. These longtime

Republicans worry most about what the Religious Right could do to the party of Abraham Lincoln, who believed that God abstains from party politics. They know that if the movement wins the fight for control of the GOP, it will guarantee that, barring a Demo- cratic scandal the size of Watergate, the Republican Party will be out of the White House until the year 2000. “The Democrats are seizing the center,” says outgoing Congressman Campbell, “and that’s where the voters are.”

More to Read

Thousands flock to the National Mall for Trump-backed prayer rally

May 17, 2026



Conservatives gather for CPAC with the right openly divided over the Iran war

March 25, 2026

Voices

Contributor: The heart of the American right is on the line

Dec. 25, 2025

POLITICS