

Running Against Sodom and Osama:

The Christian Right, Values Voters, and the
Culture Wars in 2006

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by Chip Berlet and Pam Chamberlain

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With its eye on the 2006 mid-term elections, a coalition of Christian Right groups has launched a national campaign against same sex marriage featuring nasty, alarmist, and often bigoted rhetoric that demonizes gay men and lesbians. Speakers at various recent electoral mobilization events have warned of sinister forces threatening America from without and within. The external threat is said to be from Islamic terrorists and “Islamofascists,” who embrace a culture of death as symbolized by the attacks on 9/11. The same culture of death poses an internal threat through gay rights, abortion, and pornography. Godly Christians must confront these threats in order to protect families, and especially children.

These sets of beliefs are not new, but there are times when they are submerged into

the Christian Right subculture, and there are times when they surface as part of a public campaign. Although leaders of the Christian Right almost universally deny it, the goal of this revived public campaign is to elect Republicans to office in 2006, 2008, and beyond. The enemy being denounced is sometimes generic: gays, liberals, secularists, the left-leaning media, Hollywood; and sometimes specific: Ted Kennedy, Nancy Pelosi, Rosie O’Donnell, the ACLU; but the actual target is the Democratic Party and its candidates.¹

If they could help achieve firm Republican control of both houses of Congress and the White House, Christian Right strategists envision the appointment of proper conservative federal judges to replace aging liberal “activist” ones. They foresee this victory resulting in the eventual banning of same sex

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marriage, the rollback of gay rights, and the outlawing of abortion. The ultimate goal for many in this aggressive *dominionist* effort is to “restore” America as a Christian nation.²

Polls show that most Americans—indeed most Christians—seldom rank abortion, gay rights, and other social issues high on their list of priorities.³ When Christian evangelical “values voters” think about values, they don’t limit themselves to gay rights and abortion; they also think about such issues as the economy, education, health care, poverty, and the environment. In terms of foreign policy, all Christians are pulled in two directions by different theological emphases on military strength and the pursuit of peace. So too, theological considerations apply when Christian evangelical voters evaluate particular candidates on a range of issues. Not all evangelicals are conservative politically or theologically; and some evangelicals who are theologically conservative (or even fundamentalist) are politically liberal or progressive.

This is easier to understand when looking at the difference in voting patterns between White Christian evangelical voters and Black Christian evangelical voters. More than 90% of Black evangelical voters have picked Democrats in recent Presidential elections. Many are opposed to same sex marriage and abortion, but their other values—the economy, social justice, health care—outweigh the gender-related social issues.

Be this as it may, highly-motivated core groups of predominantly White evangelical voters mobilized around social issues by a coalition of the Christian Right and the Republican Party can tip the vote tally in a handful of key states. There is a Culture War in America, but most voters are non-combatants. It is a guerilla war in which Christian Right institutions help win national elections for Republican candidates through micro-targeted grassroots mobilizations of voters. To be precise, there is compelling sta-

tistical evidence that the Christian Right is able, in *some elections*, to shift a *small but decisive number* of White Christian evangelical voters *in specific states* towards the Republican Party.⁴

We suggest that in this election cycle, Christian Right strategists have selected certain social issues with care, foregrounding those that resonate with conservative evangelical “values voters;” and are micro-targeting those voters in key states. Highly respected demographer John C. Green explains, “White evangelicals are the most likely to have social issue priorities.” The way voters concerned about values lean in any specific election after weighing social and economic issues “may simply be differences in values prompted in large measure by campaigns where the GOP stresses morality with success and the Democrats fail to stress the economy effectively.”⁵ In 2004, there was even evidence that in some states, Black evangelical “values voters” were pulled into the voting booth for Republicans through this strategy. The same small trend may be occurring with Hispanic voters.⁶

This report takes you inside recent Christian Right electoral mobilization events to explore the messages and strategies of a new coalition that is claiming leadership of the Christian Right; explains how their micro-targeted election mobilizations work; and explains why the Christian Right will continue to play a major role in U.S. political and cultural life for decades to come.

What Culture War?

Some dismiss the idea of a Culture War that pits Christian dominionists against secularists.⁷ Others suggest that “values voters” span the political spectrum, and thus may not be a critical factor in future elections.⁸ One extensive recent poll found that “Social issues such as abortion and same sex marriage rank last in importance to the vast majority of

Americans when deciding how to vote.”⁹ The poll also established that:

- “An overwhelming majority of Americans, including at least three-quarters of every major religious tradition, say issues like poverty and health care are more important than hot-button social issues.”
- “When people think about “voting their values,” more people think of the honesty, integrity, and responsibility of the candidate than any other values.”
- “Americans overwhelmingly agree that too many religious leaders focus on abortion and gay rights without addressing more important issues such as loving our neighbors and caring for the poor.”

In the lead up to the 2006 election, the White House has been said to be worried that Republican voters might not be motivated enough to go to the polls.¹⁰ There have been reports of declining support for the Republicans within evangelical ranks. Some Christian Right leaders have grumbled that the Republicans have not delivered on enough of the promises made after the 2000 and 2004 elections when they helped elect George W. Bush.¹¹

Can the Christian Right legitimately take credit for Bush’s 2004 victory? Didn’t the pundits declare false the initial reports that “Moral Values” voters were Christian Right activists who had swarmed to the polls for the Republicans? They did, and it is true that the initial reports of a broad national trend were wrong in making certain sweeping assumptions. Since 2004, however, sophisticated studies of the exit polls in past elections have revealed that in some states, the voters who said they were concerned about “moral values,” and who were also conservative Christian evangelicals, did indeed vote in significantly higher numbers for Bush, and

almost certainly helped provide a margin of victory in key states such as Ohio.

According to John C. Green and religion professor Mark Silk, regional variations in how voters ranked their concerns over social issues demonstrate that “moral-values voters were more important to the president’s victory than the national totals imply.” And in Ohio especially, Christian evangelicals and “regular worship attenders and less regular attenders were both more likely to be Bush moral values voters.” Green and Silk conclude that as “Moral Majority founder Jerry Falwell hoped, the coalition of the moral has expanded beyond evangelicals, but for the most part more in the evangelical heartland than elsewhere.” This group of “religious folks were more likely to choose moral values in the Bush regions than in the Kerry regions.”¹²

In a more extensive study in the *British Journal of Political Science*, political scientist Geoffrey C. Layman and John C. Green found the following:

“ [T]he usefulness of the culture wars thesis varies by policy, religious and political context. The culture wars strongly influence mass political behaviour when religious perspectives are logically related to policy issues, communal experiences encourage these connections and electoral actors emphasize and differentiate themselves on such matters. Outside of these contexts, the culture wars have little political impact....The culture wars are waged by limited religious troops on narrow policy fronts under special political leadership, and a broader cultural conflagration is just a rumour.¹³

There may be no broad Culture War sweeping the country, but there is a very real guerilla Culture War in which Christian Right institutions help win elections for Republicans by targeting key states with grassroots mobilizations of voters. In 1991 the Christian Coalition described the strategy of mobilizing small but decisive numbers of voters as the

“15% solution,” referring to the share of voters generally needed to tip an election. Realizing that they do not have to convince a majority to agree to them, they focused on mobilizing enough Christian voters to make a difference.¹⁴

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Same sex marriage is the current hot button topic in which, through the Christian Right, “religious perspectives are logically related to policy issues” as Layman and Green put it. These topics vary over time across a range of conservative social issues, although the two main themes since the late 1970s have been anti-abortion and antigay. Since the early 1980s, after helping elect Ronald Reagan by using abortion as a wedge issue, Christian Right strategists have grazed across conservative social issues linked to “moral values.” They carefully track what topic and what type of rhetoric raises more money in targeted direct mail campaigns, and what turns out voters to the polls. For example, Republican strategists will take a close look at the voting patterns in the eight states that will vote on marriage restrictions this November.

In 2003 there was a similar antigay campaign launched, aimed at influencing the 2004 Presidential election.¹⁵ Antigay campaigns are a recurrent theme in the Christian Right, and have been used for electoral voter mobilizations before.¹⁶ Christian Right leader James Dobson, founder and current chairman of the board of Focus on the Family, campaigned actively in 2004, citing the “assault on marriage” that he saw as being waged by those who supported same sex marriage. Republican strategist and Bush advisor Karl Rove was reported as making the mobilization of conservative Christian evangelicals a key priority for the campaign.¹⁷ Given the initial uncertainty over the influence of the Christian

Right in the 2004 elections, it was not clear if Rove would once again encourage a high visibility Christian Right pre-election campaign using social issues. We now know the Christian Right efforts in 2004 had an effect, and we know this tactic of demonizing same sex marriage is being employed once again.

The Christian Right’s anti-gay strategy, framed as “an assault on the family,” is directly aimed at electing Republican candidates in the 2006 midterm elections. This same strategy could be used for the 2008 Presidential race, because it has worked before in concert with statewide ballot initiatives and candidate framing issues.

The decision about this will not be based on the overall outcome of the 2006 midterm elections, but on sophisticated analyses by Republican strategists of exit polls and other data that will reveal whether or not the grassroots micro-target techniques were effective in specific states. If it turns out that antigay rhetoric pulled some conservative evangelicals into voting booths in targeted races, then the reliance on antigay rhetoric will be continued through 2008. If not, then other issues will be field tested to identify the most effective hot-button social issue.

Micro-targeting is the technique used by Republicans to mobilize grassroots voter participation on Election Day.¹⁸ As journalists Mike Allen and James Carney explain:

Republicans hope to close the deal in tight races with a get-out-the-vote strategy that was developed in the wreckage of the 2000 presidential campaign. Bush’s team was led then, as it is now, by Rove, Bush’s political architect and now White House deputy chief of staff, and [Ken] Mehlman, then White House political-affairs director.

The G.O.P. says their volunteer forces in ‘04 proved to be more effective than the paid workers contracted by Democrats, unions and Democrat-oriented fundraising groups.¹⁹

At the Christian Right's "Values Voter Summit" Washington Briefing held in Washington, DC, in late September 2006, several speakers openly touted the fact that the Christian Right had played a major role in electing Bush in 2004. It was clear from conversations with attendees that many felt the statewide initiatives to block same sex marriage had drawn many evangelical voters to the polls, and that the vote for Bush in some cases came along for the ride. Judge Charles W. Pickering, Sr., made this same point when he said that Bush might not have won Ohio if the Marriage Amendment had not been on the ballot. Pickering, who Bush unsuccessfully tried to appoint to the federal appeals bench in 2004, said there was a culture war in America, with the battle over the confirmation of federal judges a central front. One conference workshop (discussed in detail later in this report) was based on applying micro-targeting techniques to local churches.

State ballot initiatives are one way to generate grassroots interest in a national election. In the 2006 elections, according to the Associated Press, "The fate of hundreds of ballot initiatives will be decided. Several states will vote on proposals to ban same-sex marriages and raise the minimum wage. Republicans hope the former will boost turnout in crucial congressional races, and Democrats have similar plans for the latter."²⁰ In the 2006 elections, eight states will vote on marriage restrictions banning same sex marriage, and Republican strategists hope this will pull conservative voters to the polls. The states are Arizona, Colorado, Idaho, South Carolina, South Dakota, Tennessee, Virginia and Wisconsin.

Professor Mark Rozell, quoted in Religion News Service, said both the Republicans and the Democrats realize that moral values and religion help shape how elections turn out:

"We have motivated groups, both on the right and the left, trying to mobilize their

constituencies, in large part because they believe values matter but they also understand that the two political parties are very closely competitive in Congress right now," said Rozell, a professor of public policy at George Mason University in Fairfax, Va.

"Affecting a few electoral outcomes could be the difference between Democratic and Republican party control."²¹

In 2004, *The Nation* columnist Katha Pollitt warned progressives that they should not be complacent about values voters because the Christian Right has so far been unable to push its full agenda through a Republican-controlled Congress. That is "like saying the left got nothing from FDR because it didn't get socialism," she quipped.²² The Bush administration has placed representatives of the Christian Right throughout the Executive Branch, affecting social, economic, scientific, and foreign policy.

That the current Christian Right set of issues and frames might well have been crafted by Republican strategist Karl Rove is a reasonable suspicion, and whether or not Rove actually helped devise the strategy, it is congruent with what the White House sees as advantageous. Leaders of the Christian Right certainly have access to key Republican politicians in Washington, DC. Just prior to the 2006 midterm elections, James Dobson of Focus on the Family told the Values Voter Summit audience that he had just spent two weeks in the nation's capital meeting with Congressional leaders.²³ It is unlikely that many Democrats were on his dance card. MSNBC reported that Ralph Reed, "former executive director of the Christian Coalition and an unsuccessful candidate for lieutenant governor in Georgia ... got 18 [White House] meetings, including two events with Bush, between 2001 and 2006."²⁴

It would be easy to picture Rove as the mastermind of all of this, but although he is skillful, the strategy was formulated by key right-wing strategists in the late 1970s in a

multi-faceted plan that brought Ronald Reagan to office.²⁵ Rove came up through the political institutions created in part by this network that built the New Right as a coalition that included the growing Christian Right. Sara Diamond points out that this overall strategy relies on loosely-structured projects, in which a specific set of institutions and leaders on the political right agree to a handful of hot button issues on which to focus, and a few key frames through which issues are presented.²⁶ With this type of symbiotic project—linking a Christian Right social movement to a Republican political movement – the actual implementation requires no central coordination. Participating groups agree to be on the same page, but they get to write their own text, often using the rhetorical style of right-wing populism.²⁷ Jean Hardisty refers to this process as “mobilizing resentment,”²⁸

While the Christian Right likes to pretend this is not about partisan politics, the reality is quite different. Even the ultraconservative *Washington Times* reports the obvious:

Mr. Dobson and Family Research Council President Tony Perkins sought to rally the troops for the midterm elections by reminding them that Republicans helped get two new conservative justices on the Supreme Court and that Democrats are still blocking legislation and President Bush’s judicial nominations.

Mr. Dobson evoked applause and cheers when he reminded the crowd that “we do have two new very, very exciting Supreme Court justices,” referring to Chief Justice John G. Roberts Jr. and Justice Samuel A. Alito Jr.

The crowd was urged not to be convinced of reports that Republicans will lose control of Congress.

“Don’t believe everything you’re hearing out there,” Mr. Dobson said.²⁹

Rather, Dobson, Perkins and other Christian Right leaders reserved to themselves the

right to tell the attendees at the Values Voter Summit exactly what to believe.

The FRC Action Values Voter Summit Washington Briefing

Built around the slogan “Family, Faith, and Freedom,” The Washington Briefing: 2006 Values Voter Summit used the Culture War as a central theme.³⁰ These sorts of Christian Right pre-election voter mobilization conferences used to be hosted by the Christian Coalition, with the title “Road to Victory.” Now that the Christian Coalition has unraveled as a national group, a new coalition has stepped in to fill the void. The conference was coordinated by FRC Action, the political action arm of the Family Research Council, with Tony Perkins at the helm. Co-sponsors included the political action arms of three other Christian Right groups: Focus on the Family Action (Dr. James Dobson), Americans United to Preserve Marriage (Gary Bauer), and American Family Association Action (Donald Wildmon). Most of these groups have close historical ties. Dobson’s Focus on the Family created the FRC to lobby Congress. Gary Bauer ran the FRC from 1988-1999. The wild card in this coalition is Wildmon, known for his inflammatory anti-gay rhetoric and occasional detours into veiled anti-Semitism. His American Family Association is located in Mississippi, and Wildmon’s participation pulls this coalition further to the right.³¹

Parts each pep rally, church service, and TV show, the September 2006 event held in Washington, DC attracted over 1700 Christian Right grass roots activists from 48 states. The audience, primarily conservative Protestant evangelicals, was a mix of heartland cultural warriors, grassroots Republican political activists, and local church staff,

including ministers and lay ministry workers. They were rewarded for their attendance with a series of speeches from their leaders. In fact, one of the purposes of the event was to signal a passing of the torch, from older figures like James Dobson and New Right strategist Paul Weyrich to their successors, men like Tony Perkins and Alan Sears of the Alliance Defense Fund. The event also showcased 2008 Presidential hopefuls like governors Mitt Romney of Massachusetts and Mike Huckabee of Arkansas, and Virginia Senator George Allen, who had the chance to float some political trial balloons over the crowd.

A majority of attendees were White, with a sprinkling of African-Americans, many of them pastors. Only a tiny handful of Latinos or Latinas were present. There were roughly equal numbers of men and women in the audience, with somewhat fewer women onstage; yet the fact that there were women, and even a women's panel, is an ironic testament to the cultural shift leveraged by the feminist movement.

There were a few Catholics and Jews. If there were Muslims, secularists, or mainstream Christians present, they kept a low profile, with the exception of the tall, lanky Rev. Barry W. Lynn, executive director of Americans United for Separation of Church and State. A well-known critic of the Christian Right, Lynn walked through the crowd trailing event staff like a file of ducklings. And it was a crowd that hissed every time Lynn's name was mentioned; booed when the American Civil Liberties Union was trashed; and groaned at the mere mention of the city of San Francisco. The otherwise polite and attentive crowd was treated to one speech after another in the hotel ballroom, in a didactic style and hierarchical format typical of Religious Right rallies—tightly orchestrated logistically, skillfully crafted in framing and messaging. Top down/bottom sore...even in upscale convention seats.

The visual aesthetic was slick, modern, and high tech, including two huge projection screens and a booming sound system. Two side stage areas were designed to mimic television news stage sets, one with stools for interviews, another with a table for panel discussions. The proceedings comfortably accommodated the over 100 members of the media with plenty of riser space at the back of the room for network and cable cameras, and even a bloggers table with high speed Internet connections. A "Radio Row" of live broadcasting of reports and interviews sent to Christian stations was set up on a dais in the exhibit space. Tables in the exhibit area sprouted audio CDs and DVD videos.

There were special pay-per-meal breakfasts and luncheons where focused pitches were made. There was a breakfast for pastors hosted by FRC Action, and a breakfast hosted by American United to Preserve Marriage. Day two of the meeting dawned with the Alliance Defense Fund (ADF) breakfast, where there was much food, little tolerance for same sex marriage, and no room to get in. An overflow crowd of 250 sat through what was essentially an extended advertisement for the Alliance Defense Fund, which seeks to position itself as the major adversary to the American Civil Liberties Union (ACLU). Another luncheon was designed to introduce Donald Wildmon and his Tupelo, MS-based American Family Association, but by a show of hands, the majority of diners were already on his mailing list. The four cosponsors positioned themselves as the unified national voice of the Christian Right.

Family, Faith, & Freedom: To Protect the Children

Tony Perkins established the main frame of the event, using scare tactics when he said, "we are facing threats from within and from without."³² Against these threats conference

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organizers promoted a variety of ideas under the event slogan: “Family, Faith, & Freedom.” Although these three values seem benign, the framing strategy constructed by the FRC painted a dire picture in which same sex marriage and abortion are threatening America from within, while terrorism is threatening the family from without—a frame that points to the terrorist attacks on 9/11, while leaping over criticism over the war in Iraq, other specific military interventions and the economy.

Here is how it works:

Family is most important societal unit, sanctioned by God, limited to “traditional” heterosexual forms and designed for the procreation and protection of children.

Faith guides our lives, and defines our politics.

Freedom requires eternal vigilance and support for the war on terror.

Let’s review what specific speakers actually said, and what they implied. The two main thematic areas we will dissect are domestic, primarily gay rights but also abortion; and foreign policy, centered on the 9/11 terrorist attacks and “Islamic fascism.”³³ We’ll examine the messages, frames, and their subtexts, to understand what resonates for supporters of these groups and, potentially, other “values voters.”

Families At Risk

Echoing many at the Summit, George Allen (R-VA), running in a close race to maintain his Senate seat, said, “The most important institution in our society is the family.” Massachusetts Governor Mitt Romney announced that the “culture of America is under attack” by same sex marriage.³⁴ According to Romney:

Now my state’s Supreme Judicial Court, about a year ago, struck a blow against that family unit, in my view. It said that our Constitution, written long ago by

John Adams, requires people of the same gender to marry.

Every child has a right to have a mother and a father....the impact on children will be felt not just in a day or two or a year or two but over generations as we think about the development and nurturing of children.

And as a way to explain his exclusive support of heterosexual marriage Tony Perkins said, “Marriage gets benefits because it benefits society.”

According to these speakers, same sex marriage is the major threat to the institution of the family. Gay men and lesbians threaten the family by raising children in homes without both a mother and a father. Gay adoptions and foster care are also unacceptable. “The ultimate child abuse is placing a child in a gay home,” said Jennifer Giroux of Citizens for Community Values. Tony Perkins observed, “There’s nothing in American politics today that brings people together than [*sic*] the defense of marriage.”

Some speakers implied that just being gay is an insult to people with values and is the embodiment of evil. Two African-American pastors spoke about their views on homosexuality. Startling statements came from the Rev. Dwight McKissic of Cornerstone Baptist Church in Arlington, Texas. “I believe it’s from the pit of hell itself that this movement is inspired, that it has a satanic anointment,” said McKissic.³⁵ Citing a passage from the Book of Daniel which states that the anti-Christ will have no desire for a woman, he asked rhetorically, “Could it be that the antichrist himself may be homosexual?” Linking his tirade to defense of the Christian family, McKissic told the crowd, “I don’t think there is any issue more important than how we are going to define the family.” He said that television shows portraying homosexuality in a positive light have put us “on the road to Sodom and Gomorrah,” and “God’s got another match...He didn’t run out of matches.”³⁶

Bishop Wellington Boone, from Norcross, GA, equated being gay with being weak on values: “Back in the days when I was a kid, and we see guys that don’t stand strong on principle, we call them ‘faggots.’ We say you sissified out. You a sissy. That means you don’t stand up for principles. God hadn’t called us to be sissies, we’re called upon to stand up, called up on a principled level.”³⁷ Standing for the traditional family is supporting Christian values.

The Summit maintained a much stronger focus on same sex marriage than it did on another topic that conservatives often cite as a threat to the family: abortion. Surprisingly, speakers did not often refer to abortion as a direct reason for voting. Instead they used it as way to talk about other issues, such as the opportunity for evangelism or their dissatisfaction with activist judges.

Georgette Forney, “abortion recovery” advocate, spoke about the Silent No More awareness campaign, which encourages women who regret having had abortions to speak out. She praised the many types of recovery programs as chance to practice evangelism, noting that they are all Christian based. “It is the opportunity to reach out and find people who are out there and don’t know of God’s love and meet them where they are in their pain,” she said.

When right wing pundit Ann Coulter referenced abortion, she implied that the killing of seven reproductive health providers was a restrained response to court rulings unfavorable to anti-abortion activists:

For two decades after Roe, no abortion clinic doctors were killed. But immediately after Planned Parenthood v. Casey, after working within the system did not work, produced no results...for the first time an abortion doctor was killed. A few more abortion clinic workers were killed in the next few years. I’m not justifying it, but I understand when you take democracy away from people, some of them will react violently. The to-

tal number of deaths attributable to Roe were seven abortion clinic workers and 40 million unborn babies.³⁸

These critiques of abortion were met politely but without the enthusiasm and energy the anti-gay comments were able to generate.

Faith Under Fire

A common theme of the conference was the centrality of Christian values in American culture. “Christians create a core of conviction in this society,” said Tony Snow, White House press secretary.

According to many speakers the ability to practice one’s religion in the United States is being threatened by secularist movements. Panelists and a special exhibit booth addressed the alleged “War on Christmas,” which refers to disputes over the boundaries of bringing the religious aspects of the holiday into the classroom and shopping mall. References to IRS examinations of church political practices and other enforcements of the separation of church and state were seen as attempts to limit religious expression.

Judging from the strength of the attendees’ applause, many felt their ability to express their faith in everyday life was being threatened by secular forces. They were, therefore, appreciative of speakers who acknowledged their faith and its link to political power.

Bishop Wellington Boone asked, “How can someone who doesn’t feel a need for God lead me?” It is the Christian’s duty to participate in the democratic process. When Mike Pence (R-IN) reminded the audience that “God placed the miracle of democracy on these shores,” he asked the audience to translate “timeless principles into timely action” by voting.

Freedom at Risk

At the Values Voters Summit, defending freedom meant supporting the war on terror. Overlooking the enormous problems in Iraq

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and Afghanistan, speakers encouraged the crowd to rally against a common enemy, terrorists, wherever they are found. In an astonishing declaration that provoked loud applause, author and radio host William Bennett said, “When four Americans are burned, torched, stomped on, and hung and the city cheers, you take out the city. You level Fallujah.” He suggested the country’s leadership has sometimes been too tentative. “The discussion that is taking place, it is culturally weak.... We are probably going to have to talk more about the more we have to do to win this third world war. These should be the terms of discussion.... You’re either on offense or you’re on defense. And right now, the good guys are too much on defense.” Quoting Alexander Hamilton, Bennett said, “When the government and the military appear anywhere in the world, they should appear like Hercules.... America, along with the rest of civilization, in this war, is our mission.”³⁹

James Dobson, of Focus on the Family, said of George W. Bush “When it comes to the war on terror, he gets it.”⁴⁰ Dobson told the crowd that they should face the fact that millions of Muslims want to kill Americans.⁴¹ “When the point of negotiation is that the other person wants to kill you, there’s not a whole lot to talk about. We’re in a war, and it’s time that we recognized it.”⁴² According to a report in Agape Press, Wildmon’s news outlet, in a neat linkage of freedom to family, “Dobson said he views the war on terror as a family issue because without security for today’s children and those in future generations, there is no future for the family.”⁴³

Gary Bauer, president of American Values and leader of Americans United to Preserve Marriage, described how passengers of United Flight 93 heroically ran toward the cockpit on 9/11. As a way to protect our freedoms he reminded the audience, “All you have to do is run to the voting booth.”⁴⁴ Agape Press reports that Bauer suggested that

“the left-wing appears to hate conservatives and George W. Bush more than they hate al Qaida [sic], the Taliban, and Osama bin Laden.”⁴⁵

Ann Coulter picked up on this theme, suggesting that “the Democrats hate George Bush because he is fighting the war on terrorism.” Tony Perkins linked liberal evildoers with Islamic militants.⁴⁶

This linkage of liberalism with a failure to confront terrorism is effective. Cass R. Sunstein in the *New Republic* points out that “by stoking fear, Republicans gain an edge over Democrats.” Sunstein reports:

The London air terrorist plot has touched off endless debate, much of it centering on politics: Will it help Republicans or Democrats in 2006 and beyond? Republicans say that national security is a winning issue for them; Democrats say the same thing. Social science evidence strongly suggests that the Republicans are right, because the politics of terrorism touches a chord that produces much more support for them than for Democrats: our own mortality. A crucial question is whether Democrats will be able to change the underlying dynamics.⁴⁷

Swimming in Subtext

The event was overripe with subtle undertones of meaning. These subtext messages to the audience appeared designed to direct, motivate, and reassure the audience. Here is a sample:

- Godly Christians must be involved in politics to take back America from the Godless secularists and liberals. Godly Christians must vote, and vote for candidates who win our approval and these candidates must come to us; we do not go to them begging. We may not always agree with the Republican leadership, but we need them on our side to win our cause. Aware of being criticized for be-

ing too partisan toward Republicans, Tony Perkins issued a statement claiming that, “The Washington Briefing... was not an opportunity for us to endorse candidates but rather an opportunity for candidates to endorse us and our values.”

- Our version of Christianity is correct, dominant, triumphant, defines the political center, and is politically powerful. Every other worldview is wrong, and unconnected to the real God. This is a struggle between good and evil. Our opponents are witting or unwitting agents of Satan. Former Florida Secretary of State Katherine Harris—famous for her role in the 2000 Florida Presidential election fiasco and now an elected U.S. Representative running for the Senate⁴⁸—planted herself firmly in the dominionist wing of the Christian Right.⁴⁹ At the final banquet of the conference, Harris emphasized the importance of the proper candidates winning in November, and suggested it was a battle against “principalities and powers.” Many in the audience surely recognized this as a Biblical reference to “spiritual warfare”—in their view a struggle with the demonic agents of Satan.⁵⁰ Just in case they missed the point, the emcee closed the banquet by reminding the audience that they were engaged in “spiritual warfare.”
- Our faith, our moral superiority, and the fact we are persecuted by our opponents justify hatred of the enemy, and even violent resistance. Our God may be merciful, compassionate, and the God of justice; but our God is a zealous and vengeful God, and we are his agents on earth. Sin invokes punishment. This worldview emerged from several speakers. Colin Hanna, President of Let

Freedom Ring, a 501 (c) (4) anti-immigration group, reinforced his interpretation of this dual nature of a Christian God when he said that mercy and justice must be blended in public policy. He described amnesty for undocumented immigrants as “sin without consequences” and that “Amnesty is therefore not Christian.”

- We need a Christian counter-culture to overcome the depravity of secularized modern life. One of the most secularized arenas for evangelicals has been Hollywood. For instance, Donald Wildmon’s AFA was founded to address immorality in the entertainment industry. At the Summit, an especially high energy panel, “Hollywood in the Heartland,” introduced the audience to the work being done by Christian film producers and the alternate infrastructure that will support this counter-culture. Ted Baehr, who runs the Biblically based film review service, MovieGuide, highlighted the work he and others have undertaken to steer Christians towards more acceptable, family friendly popular culture. Rev. Tommy Tenney previewed his new film, a reworking of the story of Esther, “One Night with the King,” and the audience learned that Hollywood has specific Christian movie studios, like FoxFaith.
- We will win, because God is on our side.

Midterm Election Partisanship

The Values Voter Summit was clearly part of a larger plan by the Christian Right to help elect Republican candidates to office in the midterm election. The highly-visible event was staged to position the Christian Right as a

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viable electoral player with a powerful self-image. The Christian Right sees itself as still on ascendancy in U.S., but it feels the need to work hard to hold onto the power it has and to make future gains. Part of this involves staging local events around the country

Just prior to the midterm elections, Focus on the Family Action also ran three “Stand for the Family” political action “rallies designed to educate and motivate pro-family conservative Christians in three states where there are important races on November’s ballot”: Pennsylvania, Minnesota, and Tennessee.⁵¹ On September 20, 2006, Max Blumenthal, reports:

A day before appearing at the summit in Washington, Dobson held a stadium-sized get-out-the-vote jamboree in Pittsburgh, disguised as a supposedly nonpartisan “Stand for the Family” rally, on behalf of one of his staunchest backers, Senator Rick Santorum, who trails his Democratic opponent, State Treasurer Bob Casey Jr. There, Dobson took to the podium to warn wavering “value voters”: “Whether or not the Republicans deserve the power they were given, the alternatives are downright frightening.”⁵²

Tony Perkins, Family Research Council President, was emcee for the evening, held because “the values vote is crucial this November because of the internal and external threats facing our nation.” According to Perkins, “It’s important for Christians to vote because that’s how we register our opinions by who we vote into office. People who either reflect our values, or people who abhor our values.”⁵³

Dobson invited Christians to the event stating that the main issues for 2006 are preserving the family, protecting children and pursuing peace through strength. “We’re here to do something about the dangers and threats that are out there.”⁵⁴ The other two rallies were held in St. Paul, Minnesota October 3rd and Nashville, Tennessee October 16th.⁵⁵ Although smaller than originally hoped by

organizers, they still drew thousands of committed activists in each state.

Meanwhile, the Internal Revenue Service has launched an investigation of partisanship—aimed at progressive Christians. The target is the All Saints Church in Pasadena, California, which is well-known as a voice of progressive Christian values that extends throughout the Los Angeles area. The investigation, which threatens to pull the church’s tax-exempt status, is based in part on a sermon by the Rev. Dr. George F. Regas in 2004, titled “If Jesus Debated Senator Kerry and President Bush.”⁵⁶

Micro-targeting in the Pews

One of the most extraordinary partisan moments came in the workshop “Voter Identification and Turnout: A Church Plan,” run by Connie Marshner. Not a name known to most on the political Left, Marshner was one of the earliest key architects of the “pro-family” movement that helped mobilize the Christian Right, which in turn became a major sector of the New Right coalition.⁵⁷

Marshner announced at the start of the workshop that in 2000 she had used the set of techniques in her 17-page workshop handout to help re-elect Rick Santorum (R-PA), one of the staunchest allies of the Christian Right in Congress.⁵⁸

She outlined her very practical nuts-and-bolts techniques, which she plainly stated was based on first obtaining the list of members of a church, parish, temple – or mosque if there are any pro-life Muslims, she added with a smile. She explained that if your pastor does not want to have the church involved in politics, this is a people-to-people campaign that does not expose the church to IRS sanctions regarding tax exempt status, a dubious claim at best.

The process starts with anonymous cold calls to members of the church to determine their voting leanings. Marshner suggested the

caller be someone from outside the congregation who could pose as being from a polling company. Here is the script: “Hello, I’m with ABC Polls. We’re calling in your area to find out the level of interest in the upcoming [U.S. Senate/House of Representatives/state assembly/town council/school board/etc.] election.” Responses would be tabulated and as Election Day approaches only congregants supportive of the “pro-life candidates,” as Marshner put it, would be contacted for the get-out-the-vote campaign.

Someone in the audience asked what to say if the person being called wanted to know where the caller got their name and phone number.

Say you got it from the list of registered voters, advised Marshner, it is a public record.

What if the number is unlisted?

Here Marshner seemed to suggest that the good Christian folks in the room just tell a fib. And not surprisingly, there were some grumbles from the crowd. Sensing discontent, Marshner said individuals should leave it up to their conscience on how to answer the question. Perkins indicated he was “upset” with Marshner’s suggestions and denounced any dishonesty in the session.⁵⁹

Gay Bashing on Liberty Sunday

Another pre-election event strategically tied to the Summit was a nationally simulcast rally dubbed “Liberty Sunday.” This FRC-sponsored event was promoted at the Values Voters Summit, with which it shared some speakers, and targeted a similar audience: churchgoers with conservative social values. Some 1,000 people filled the Tremont Temple Baptist Church, where the event was held, while simulcasts were aired in churches across the country and beamed into homes through Christian satellite television, radio, and Webcasts.⁶⁰

The event was billed as “Defending Our First Freedom.” Promotional materials used the slogan, “Preserving the light of the Church,” along with an image of the famous Old North Church, where lanterns were hung to warn colonists of the arrival of British troops.⁶¹ Liberty Sunday took place October 15, 2006 in Boston, which, the organizer FRC reminded the audience, is the “Cradle of Liberty” and the home of religious freedom in America. A welcoming video showed scenes of Plymouth Rock and a replica of the Mayflower and reminded the audience that Colonial Governor William Bradford had a vision, in his words, to “advance the cause of the gospel of the kingdom of Christ in those remote parts of the earth” by settling in the New World. Boston is also the capital of the only state to have legalized same sex marriage, and the Tremont Church was the site of protests at a Focus on the Family “ex-gay” event held almost a year before Liberty Sunday.

The FRC promised to “tackle one of the most divisive debates in the culture wars,” same sex marriage. FRC head Tony Perkins claimed that same sex marriage threatened freedom of religion as guaranteed by the Constitution by limiting freedom of religious expression. Sky Angel Christian satellite broadcasting published a pre-event interview with Perkins by conservative author Nancy Christopher, in which Perkins claimed:

“What we’ve seen in the last two years since Massachusetts [approved] same-sex marriage is the evidence of what we were projecting would happen, that there was a coming conflict between the homosexual agenda and Christianity that was vibrant and active in the public square.”

According to Perkins, a “hate crimes bill” making it a crime to speak out against homosexuality is imminent if Christians don’t continue to be engaged in this issue.

“The ability to preach the Gospel is at risk because the Gospel fully preached is of-

Running Against Sodom and Osama

fensive,” says Perkins. “Same-sex marriage is the vanguard of the homosexual agenda. If it becomes the law that you cannot speak anything that offends, it’s just a matter of time before the Gospel itself will be unwelcome public speech.

Stating the obvious, Christopher commented that it is “certainly no coincidence that the event is being held less than one month before mid-term elections, being that there are eight constitutional amendments related to marriage on the ballot across the country.”⁶²

Massachusetts governor Mitt Romney appeared in person, introduced by his wife, Ann, who revealed that she is a direct descendant of Colonial Governor William Bradford.

Sky Angel is also broadcasting two specials on same sex marriage after Liberty Sunday and before the midterm elections, “No Tolerance for Truth,” about the danger of school programs normalizing homosexuality, and “Veil of Deception: The Impact of Same Sex Marriage on American Youth”:

Veil of Deception investigates the impact of same-sex marriage on today’s youth. It aims to show concerned citizens how critically important it is to stand up and oppose efforts to legalize same-sex marriage for the sake of the children. The special also reveals homosexual activism in schools and communities across America, how experimentation is encouraged to children, and how parents, community leaders and teachers are speaking out.⁶³

At Liberty Sunday, the audience was presented with a line of reasoning that would make sense to them and to their fellow parishioners.

Catholic Action League Executive Director CJ Doyle asserted:

“When religious freedom is imperiled, it never begins with a direct frontal assault on the liberty of worship. It always begins with the attempts to marginalize the church and to narrow the parameters of the church’s educational and charitable activities, and that is exactly what is

happening in Massachusetts right now.”⁶⁴

Former Boston mayor Raymond Flynn added,

“But because the church has been diminished in the civic arena, this other side is more powerful and more influential, and those are the consequences of losing your strong moral voice.”⁶⁵

James Dobson appeared by video and made the case for the importance the battle over same sex marriage:

“We are at a crisis point in this nation. What will happen on November 7 will have profound implications for the future of our country.”

Dobson said the idea of marriage originated in the garden of Eden and warned that if same sex marriage is permitted,

“The family as we know it will die and with it will go everything else that sits on that foundation.”

Romney and Wellington Boone appeared at both the Summit and Liberty Sunday. Each varied his address little between the two events, and their different styles, although at opposite ends of the anti-gay spectrum, reinforced the same core message: a vote to ban same sex marriage is a vote of conscience and Christian principle.

The Liberty Sunday crowd was more racially integrated than that at the Values Voters Summit, with significant numbers of African-Americans and Latinos in the audience and a predominantly Black choir onstage throughout the event. The program drew on the multiracial coalition that has been built among conservative evangelical pastors on such issues as opposition to same sex marriage, with appearances by local Black and Latino ministers. Significantly, Tremont Temple Baptist Church was involved in the Underground Railroad and claims to be the first racially integrated church in the United States.

Some of the harshest anti-gay rhetoric came out of the mouth of Bishop Wellington

Boone, the well-known Promise Keepers speaker from Georgia, who also appeared at the Values Voters Summit. In Boston Boone summoned the legacy of the Civil Rights Movement and the African American freedom struggle as he dismissed any claim to civil rights by lesbian, gay, bisexual or transgender communities:

“I called this whole idea of trying to get rights and trying to get over there on the African-American side - I called it the rape of the civil rights movement and that’s an issue to me.” (Applause.)⁶⁶

Having positioned himself as an arbiter of legitimate rights, Boone took up the sword of judgment. He eschewed the words “gay” and “lesbian” in favor of “sodomite,” remarking with approval that in colonial times sodomy laws invoked capital punishment for transgressors. Back then, he said, “The Bible was the book.” He added, to audience applause, “If God calls homosexuality an abomination, if he calls it vile affections, if he calls it wickedness, I can’t call it inappropriate behavior.”⁶⁷

The FRC has successfully field tested the strategy of single issue simulcasts before. Liberty Sunday is modeled on a previous set of three simulcasts each titled “Justice Sunday,” which focused on mobilizing churches to support conservative appointments to the courts. Indeed, the Web address www.justicesunday.com connects visitors to the website for Liberty Sunday.⁶⁸

Conclusions

The Durability of the Christian Right

The strategy laid out at the Values Voter Summit and Liberty Sunday is for Christian Right activists to fly under the media radar and contact potential voters in the evangelical community who are already inclined to vote

Republican, and motivate them to actually go to the polls on Election Day 2006 in order to preserve Republican control of Congress. The Christian Right—and Rove—hope that by micro-targeting constituencies in specific key states, they can make the difference. The bait they are using in this election is the issue of same sex marriage, both through a rhetorical framing approach and the use of statewide ballot initiatives. As of a few weeks before the election, public opinion seems to favor Democratic gains, however the Republican voter mobilization techniques could be effective in the typically lower-turnout midterm elections. There is no way to know at this point if that strategy will be successful.

Every few years—following an electoral defeat of Republicans, the collapse of a Christian Right organization, or the expose of a leader’s shady past, the death of the Christian Right is announced in the media. Reports of its death have been, as they say, greatly exaggerated. The Christian Right will survive and remain a powerful factor in U.S. social, cultural, and political life. That is because the Christian Right is a large and durable social movement, with a complex and diverse set of autonomous institutions that are linked to political campaigns through the Republican Party. The rising or falling fortunes of the Republican Party in any election cycle do not control participation in the Christian Right as a social movement. If one set of tactics fails, others will be field tested by skilled Christian Right leaders. Many of today’s tactics have been in use for decades. Win or lose, skilled Christian Right activists will emerge from the 2006 midterm elections with stronger grassroots organizations and longer lists of names of potential recruits.

Fissures and Wedges

Progressive social change activists can’t win the Culture War, because it is a guerilla

action, with the central frames established by the Christian Right. George Lakoff correctly points out that if you stay within the frame established by your opponent, you are more likely to lose the debate.⁶⁹

New frames can be developed by progressives that stress wedges in the current configuration of the coalition that emerged with the New Right. Possible fissures, or cracks in the cement that binds sectors of the political Right together, do exist: The Christian Right, as one sector of the U.S. Right, shares some positions with other conservative political interests.

Neoconservatives: The Christian Right has been building a coalition with the Neocons around the anti-terrorist (and anti-Islamic) aspects of the “clash of civilizations” thesis, but some neoconservatives are nervous about the anti-modernist theocratic aspirations of some Christian Right leaders. In addition some in the Christian Right are growing tired of war in the Middle East, their Holy Land.

Conservative Business Interests: Calvinism and capitalism have long been partners, but the way some in the Christian Right chastise unrestrained materialism makes some business entrepreneurs nervous.

Libertarians: The Christian Right can agree with economic libertarians on lowering taxes and government regulations and raising individual initiative and responsibility; but most libertarians want the Christian Right out of their bedrooms.

By reframing the debates and shifting the political terrain on which these debates occur, progressives can engage the multitude of Christian evangelical voters who are not consolidated around the issues outlined by the Christian Right. This recognizes that the Christian Right is a powerful force on the political and social scene, but that it is not nearly as powerful as it would have us believe.

An Effective Progressive Response

The Christian Right, although significant, is not a monolithic force and has its own internal issues. The leaders of the Christian Right sometimes argue for policy positions that make their own followers uncomfortable. This is especially true in terms of the quest for dominionism. While some Christian Right leaders envision a theocratic Christian nation, few rank and pew evangelicals allied with the Christian Right want a theocracy, much less a fascistic one.

Although they would love us to believe they represent all Christians, in reality the Christian Right does not speak for all Christians or even all evangelicals. The idea of God is too big to shackle to narrow minds.

The Christian Right is a primarily a White subset of evangelicals who embrace fundamentalist or dominionist beliefs and are currently being mobilized around certain issues framed as “values.” Many evangelicals, however, do not hold identical values to the ones touted at the Values Voters Summit or at Liberty Sunday. They may see God on their side, but sometimes they can be persuaded to vote in favor of issues important to progressives.

Certain groups of White evangelicals can be seen as potential swing voters, depending on the issues and how they are framed. For instance, the Summit called for support for Bush’s War on Terror based on patriotism and Christian principles; but the growing dissatisfaction with the war in Iraq across all segments of the population can become a wedge, which could be framed in effective ways to counter the arguments of the Christian Right.

The Christian Right has already attempted to lure Black and Latino evangelical Protestants with their campaign against same sex marriage and abortion. But these groups also share similar concerns as progressives on

a variety of issues. Progressives of all races, and holding various beliefs, can and must reach out to all these groups.

Using phrases such as “religious political extremist,” “radical religious right,” or “Christofascists,” therefore, is counterproductive, because many evangelicals, not to mention Christians or religious people in general, find these terms offensive.

A shared respect for the Constitution could be one unifying principle. If progressives want to defend the Constitution, we must learn the religious beliefs of those evangelicals who dominate the Christian Right, treat them respectfully, and yet engage them in a critical public conversation over the appropriate boundaries for civic political debate set by the founders and framers of our nation.⁷⁰

Demonizing rhetoric from the Left not only pushes evangelicals away from the Democratic Party, but also pushes them out of potential partnerships around progressive issues. And from a progressive standpoint, the issue is not electing Democrats, but holding all politicians accountable for advancing social and economic justice. ■

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