

The Future of the GOP

Will the Grand Old Party be stampeded by the behemoth of Robertson's radical right?

By Michael J. Berne

IN THE 1984 PRESIDENTIAL RACE, DEMOCRATIC candidate Walter Mondale was asked to name one issue that separated his views from those of organized labor. Mondale's inability to respond to this request seemed to prove the prevailing orthodoxy of the last thirty years—that the Democratic Party is one hopelessly beholden to "special interests." Democrats are weak and cowardly, Republicans have said, because they refuse to stand up for the common man and confront the narrow and parochial interests within their party. Bill Clinton is weak and cowardly, Republicans say, because he spent the first months of his Presidency advancing a cause (homosexuals in the military) that is supported by only a small minority and opposed by the overwhelming majority.

The Democratic Party has been forced to grapple with a set of outspoken and influential factions whose interests do not necessarily accord with the national electorate. What has emerged as a response to those factions is the Democratic Leadership Council (DLC), the new moderate voice of the middle class, with its prime spokesman, President Clinton. Clinton, in the spirit of the Council, has, at times, moved to demonstrate his determination to distance the Party from its factions. This effort was most obvious in his treatment of the Sister Souljah Jesse Jackson during the 1992 Presidential campaign.

Over the last quarter-century, the Republicans have not had to deal with a loud and influential minority within the Party. In the past few years, however, the Religious Right has emerged as the dominant factor in the future of the GOP. It has the potential to destroy any prospect for a Republican victory in 1996. Presidential hopefuls such as Bob Dole are running scared, unsure of how to approach the extremely delicate task of appealing to conservative Christians while building a coalition capable of winning at the national level. Suddenly, the Republican Party is faced with the same sort of challenge that confronted the Democratic Party of Walter Mondale: how to control the rising faction — and the Republicans seem to be failing.

SUPPORT BY NECESSITY

In a sense, Republicans have little choice but to support the rising religious tide within the GOP. Anti-incumbent and anti-Clintonian sentiment made re-election a very precarious thing

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for several Democratic senators, and Republicans cooperated with the Religious Right to seize control of the Senate. Nowhere was this more apparent than in Virginia, where party luminaries placed themselves squarely behind Oliver North in his battle against pro-Clinton Democratic Senator Charles Robb and Independent candidate L. Marshall Coleman. Republicans realized that a North victory would greatly enhance the power and influence of the conservative Christians that drove his campaign, yet they also understood that the future success of Clinton's legislative agenda could come to rest on one seat. Extremely mindful of this dilemma was Senate Minority Leader Bob Dole (R-Kan.), whose indecisiveness displayed itself in an undesireably public way. Following North's victory in the GOP primary, Dole publicly toyed with the idea of endorsing Coleman, a centrist Republican whose moderate views are a better match for the Minority Leader than North's. But a quick calculation of partisan and personal interests, not the least of which was the idea of being the next Senate Majority Leader, pressured Dole into declaring his support for North and touring the Virginia countryside, however reluctantly, with the hero of Virginia's robust evangelical community.

Many Republicans are looking even further than this November, however. The vaunted electoral strength of the Christian Right leaves Presidential hopefuls with little choice but to court its vote. Thus, the past few months have seen a bevy of 1996 hopefuls move, one after the other, to attract evangelical attention. Even those who have previously shown very little tendency toward the more socially conservative reaches of the Party have joined the competition to enlist Christian support. James Baker of Reagan-Bush fame trotted out rather unenthusiastically to an Ollie North fund-raiser in an not-too-subtle announcement of his Presidential intentions. Dick Cheney, Secretary of Defense in the Bush Administration and a representative of the foreign policy element within the Party, has managed to endear himself to Pat Robertson. Senator Phil Gramm (R-Tex), an ex-professor of economics and a representative of the economic conservative wing of the Party, has tried mightily to impress the Religious Right. The 15-25% of the national vote commanded by the Christian Right looms so large in Republican primaries that any Republican even remotely interested in the chief executive must hit the Bible Belt first, no matter how much the idea repulses him or how little moral issues matter to him. The reality is that any Republican presidential hopeful not supported by the Christian Right stands very little chance of winning much of anything.

OPPOSITION EXISTS, HOWEVER WEAK

Resistance within the Party, however weak, does still exist. Those who have moved to oppose the emerging religiosity of the Party's base have in almost all cases used electoral pragmatism as the prime justification. Many moderates fear that the present locomotive of Republican politics is following the same route traveled in the years preceding the 1964 election, when the Party's conservative fringe seized control of Party machinery and nominated Barry Goldwater, thus bringing about the most lopsided election in the nation's history. Many centrists felt in late 1992 and early 1993 that the Buchanan-led 1992 Convention had sufficiently demonstrated the futility of basing a national campaign on cultural polarization. Soon after George Bush's defeat, many moderates moved to formalize their opposition and created the Republican Majority Coalition as a counterweight to Pat Robertson's Christian Coalition. Yet

after its initial press conference, the organization essentially ceased to exist, allowing Robertson and friends to advance unopposed and seize control of twenty different state Party organizations. This lack of activism on the part of the Party moderates is already having its effects, as shown by the recent Iowa straw poll, which counted less than 10 votes for centrists out of a total of over 200.

The only Republican who has come forward with a more constitutional/moral critique of the Religious Right is Senator Arlen Specter (R-Penn.). Specter's extremely unpopular questioning of Anita Hill appeared to all but finish his political career, and his vulnerability was clearly evident in the tremendous difficulty he encountered in fending off what was a very weak challenge put forth by Lynn Yeakal in his 1992 reelection

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bid. Yet, having barely escaped from the "Year of the Woman," Specter immediately moved to re-establish himself as an important figure in national politics. He was singlehandedly responsible for the creation of the Republican Majority Coalition, and while moderates, one after the other, have developed a very acute form of political laryngitis over the past two years, Specter has remained the loudest and most courageous voice competing with the Religious Right for the attention of the Republican Party. While most centrist critiques of the Christian Right have focused on pragmatic electoral considerations, Specter's analysis explores the constitutional dimensions of this emerging religiosity. Specter has based his attacks on the need to maintain the separation of church and state. Of course, one should not attribute Specter's stand solely to his legal and moral sensibilities, for the Pennsylvanian is positioning himself in a very unorthodox way for a run in 1996. The point is that if 1996 is his intention, he has at this point a near-total monopoly on his political base, a fact which speaks volumes about centrist apathy and inactivity.

MOVING TOWARD THE REALISTIC

Ironically, the ideologues have been the first to realize the realities of the situation and to act accordingly. Conservative Christians have shown increasing reluctance to mention "God" or "Christianity" or to discuss issues of homosexuality and abortion. Instead, they had moved toward main mainstream concerns, such as gridlock, crime, taxes and budgets. The Religious Right has been particularly quiet lately on abortion, traditionally its most sensitive issue. In the interests of the Republican Party, it has supported pro-choice California Governor Pete Wilson in his reelection bid against Democrat Kathleen Brown. "The fact is, if you step back and ask who has won elections since 1992, it is a bunch of pro-choice Republicans like Christine Todd Whitman in New Jersey—liberal, yuppie modern types," said William Kristol, Dan Quayle's former chief of staff. Yes indeed, the Right does consider electoral realities. Reed points to exit polls from the 1992 Presidential elections which show that only 22 percent of born-

again evangelicals considered abortion an important element in their decision. Reed even admits in his new book, *Politically Incorrect: The Emerging Faith Factor in American Politics* that many undecided voters turned away from the "policy-thin" and "value-laden" 1992 Republican National Convention and turned toward Bill Clinton and the Democrats.

Reed's idea of realism, however, has moved beyond simple moderation. The executive director of the Christian Coalition appears interested in an coalition with Ross Perot and his United-We-Stand-America organization. He sees both his and Perot's movements as "outsider-versus-inside, grass-roots, reform-minded, shake-up-the-establishment" movements. Reed notes, "We are demographically the same kind of voters: middle class with kids and mostly white." Reed sees in such an alliance the establishment of the Religious Right as the primary voice not just for conservative Christians but for all voters who feel disaffected, disenchanted, and disillusioned. A Presidential candidate representing such a coalition could prove quite formidable in a three-way race against Bill Clinton and a Republican moderate.

IMPLICATIONS FOR THE FUTURE

Does this all spell realignment for the Republican Party? If the Religious Right does indeed become the prime spokesman for disenchanted Americans, if the Christian Coalition unites with United-We-Stand-America, the moderate branch of the Republican Party will find itself in an extremely awkward situation. If such a unification were to occur, the centrist element would be greatly outnumbered, and thus, in order to survive, it would have to select among two very undesirable options: hop onto the bandwagon and collude with the Religious Right or bolt the Republican Party and ally with the same Democrats whom it has been attacking for the past two years. Of course, it would then represent the swing vote of the 1996 election, its choice very likely determining the winner. Both sides — Bill Clinton and the disenchanted Americans — would thus attempt to court favor with the moderates, the former by tending to the wounds inflicted during this past Congressional term, the latter by moderating its tone and further deemphasizing social issues. Either scenario would have favorable results for American politics, the former by creating a more congenial and constructive setting for the passage of legislation, the latter by relaxing tensions between the combatants of the "cultural war."

This, of course, assumes that the Religious Right will easily assimilate into the mainstream political culture. However, many conservative Christians around the country have shown the destructive tendency of sticking their feet in their mouths and destroying all of the hard work that Ralph Reed has done in trying to move the Christian Right into the political mainstream. Take, for instance, Minnesota gubernatorial candidate and conservative Christian Allan Quist's remark that "men are genetically predisposed to head the household." Statements such as Quist's will alienate many an undecided voter and relegate the Religious Right to the political sidelines, thus bolstering the candidacy of an Arlen Specter or any other moderate yet to commit himself to the Christian Right. The Christian Coalition, unwilling to offer its support to either Clinton or Specter, would then put forward its own candidate, resulting in a three-way race. Perot's supporters, whose doghoul

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schools and good four year institutions. Blacks were concerned with discrimination and the quality of the elementary and secondary education which their children were receiving. Thus, blacks focused on matters which would improve this education. In the middle 1950s and until the 1960s the principal aim of Blacks fighting for equality in education was to improve or to desegregate the elementary and secondary schools which blacks attended. There was some emphasis on entry into colleges, but the numbers of blacks applying at this time was minuscule.

In the arena of housing, Jews were the words of Arthur Hertzberg, "a battle in suburbia" (Hertzberg 335). Jews in America were already strongly represented in the middle class; the issue of discrimination arose as Jews attempted

to move into posh upper-middle class neighborhoods, or into exclusive city apartments against "restrictive covenants" (Hertzberg 335) which directed owners not to sell to Jews or other unwanted minorities. Yet the Jews, unlike the Blacks were not out in the streets without the possibility of even buying livable housing. Blacks faced a far more desperate situation. They were trapped in wretched slums, with huge tracts of working and middle class housing closed to them. The mass drive of blacks to leave the ghettos and slums owed itself to a sheer lack of space (Glazer 107).

Thus although blacks and Jews clearly fought together, they were fighting on opposite sides of the economic spectrum.

The collective history of blacks and Jews has been fraught with unattainable expectations, misunderstanding, disappointment, and disillusionment. The rift which breached that coalition is important to understand. Its destruction says something about the future of alliances and coalitions in our nation, which is why, understanding the past and present, we must ask what the possibilities for the future are.

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in a Catch-22. The black elite realizes the importance of the coalition it maintains with Jews. It is the very coalition which keeps them in power and in office. Yet, simultaneously this elite realizes that their relationship with Jewish organizations and leadership alienates them from the masses of the black community, and makes them more vulnerable to the attacks of the demagogues. The black and Jewish establishments conceive that both groups are dependent upon one another in the framework of the liberal coalition. The result would be the complete destruction of the Democratic party

and a serious reduction of the influence which both groups presently exercise. In reality, neither blacks nor Jews could feasibly sever their ties to the liberal Democratic coalition. Yet, neither do I believe that there is a realistic chance for Jews and blacks to reaffirm the optimism and cooperation of the early coalition. Today that era seems another time and another place. The tragedy of the current circumstances is that the situation can not get better without, in some way, getting worse. In many ways the current relationship between blacks and Jews is one of paralysis, both groups afraid of the dramatic consequences of a real gesture or real action. Jews and blacks are tied to one another in a fatal embrace. 11

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includes, not only Clinton, but also all of Washington, would likely place itself squarely behind the Religious Right candidate.

Whatever does happen, the Republican Party will find itself in an very unfamiliar situation. For twenty years, it has felt little need to worry about sources of division and discord. Even the past two years have seen an amazing display of legislative unity among Republicans. But bubbling underneath the surface of Republican politics is an ideological debate with potentially fatal proportions. A formidable army of crusaders are launching an offensive on the Party's centrist core, and for a party which rarely fails to condemn cowardice in the face of special interests, very few seem to be willing to stand in its way. In the interests of building some sort of electoral

majority, something must be done. But centrists have not done it, and ironically, it is the ideologues which have emerged as the most realistic and the most pragmatic. Conservative Christians have

held the initiative for quite a while, and there exist very few signs that they will be forced to give up much of anything in the near future. The future of the Republican Party is in their hands. II

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