

Right-wing US senator quits Republicans, to run for president as independent

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Senator Robert C. Smith (R-N.H.) announced Tuesday that he was quitting the Republican Party and would continue his presidential campaign as an independent candidate. In an hour-long speech on the Senate floor he denounced the Republican Party as insufficiently right-wing on issues like gun control, abortion, foreign policy and taxes.

A realtor and former high school coach, Smith has long been identified as one of the most hidebound reactionaries on Capitol Hill. He is expected to seek the nomination of the far-right US Taxpayers Party, which has ballot status in a handful of states, and to have his name placed on the ballot as an independent in other states.

The defection of the New Hampshire senator is an expression of the growing crisis within the Republican Party. A large section of the Christian fundamentalists and other far-right elements who have become the main political base of the party are in rebellion over the attempt by the party establishment to back Texas Governor George W. Bush for the presidential nomination.

Smith has criticized both Bush and the Republican congressional leadership as too soft on the social issues espoused by the extreme right. In his Senate speech, Smith declared that Republican opposition to gun control and abortion “is a fraud and everyone knows it.” He complained of the lack of alternatives in American politics, saying, “There's one party made up of Democrats and moderate Republicans, and the conservatives are locked inside.”

National Republican Party leaders are worried that Smith's decision might prompt other disaffected Republicans to bolt the party and support third party or independent candidates. The past year has seen a trickle of defections from the Republicans to the US

Taxpayers Party, including Grover Coors, a grandson of the brewing billionaire, and Ellen Caswell, who was defeated in 1996 when she ran as the Republican nominee for governor of Washington state.

Some Republican officials called for candidates to sign a loyalty oath pledging that they would reject all proposals that they run as third party candidates. According to Stephen Duprey, the party's chairman in New Hampshire: “If you're going to run in our primary, seek our party's nomination and use our party's resources, then you owe us your support and loyalty for the nomination of our choice. I have no tolerance for people who run in our primary and then leave.”

The initial reaction of Republican Senate leader Trent Lott was to suggest that Smith be stripped of his membership in the Republican caucus and his positions on Senate committees. But Lott backed away from such threats after several prominent far-right Republicans came to Smith's defense, a warning sign that other, more visible representatives of the extreme right, such as Patrick Buchanan and Gary Bauer, might also leave.

Buchanan issued a statement declaring: “When a man as conservative and principled as Bob Smith walks away from the Republican Party, perhaps the problem is not with Senator Smith but with the Republican establishment.” Millionaire publisher Steve Forbes, another Republican presidential hopeful, said, “It's a bad omen for the GOP when a solid Reagan conservative like Bob Smith would even consider leaving.”

While Smith had been a minor presidential candidate, with no hope of winning the nomination, he is not an insignificant figure in the Republican Party. He is currently chairman of the Senate Ethics Committee, and is the prospective chairman of the Senate Environment Committee. He also authored the

amendment banning “partial birth” abortions, and was one of three senators to vote against the nomination of Ruth Bader Ginsburg to the Supreme Court.

The US Taxpayers Party is one of several of the extremist and semi-fascist parties that exist on the periphery of the Republican Party. The USTP is particularly aware of the ongoing crisis in the Republican Party, and is seeking to attract disgruntled party members who believe the party has moved too far to the left.

Senator Smith shares this view. He is one of a number of leading Republicans with close ties to the right-wing Christian Coalition. Smith addressed a Christian Coalition convention in 1998, where he declared that no financial support should be given to any candidate that supports abortion.

In his address before the Christian Coalition, Smith said he considered the Bible as an American document to be placed alongside the Constitution and the Declaration of Independence (but made no mention of the Bill of Rights). He is opposed to federal aid to education and supports anti-union “Right to Work” legislation.

Like Buchanan, Smith is an extreme nationalist who opposes any US military actions under the auspices of the United Nations. He is an advocate of what the USTP, in its platform, calls “national sovereignty,” in opposition to US participation in international organizations and treaties, as the international conventions on human rights, which might subject US social conditions to international scrutiny.



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