

US presidential campaign: George W. Bush speaks at racist university

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The appearance by George W. Bush last Wednesday at Bob Jones University, in Greenville, South Carolina, is an event which deserves more attention and analysis than the perfunctory reports provided by the American media. The leading candidate for the Republican presidential nomination, endorsed by the vast majority of Republican senators, governors and congressmen, spoke before several thousand students at an institution which is a bastion of Christian fundamentalist bigotry.

Founded by Baptist evangelist Bob Jones Sr. in 1927, who was succeeded by Bob Jones Jr. and now Bob Jones III, the university has been notorious for decades for providing a Biblical sanction for old-fashioned Southern racism. Until 1971 the school refused to admit blacks; for a number of years after that it would only admit married blacks, in order to forestall the possibility of interracial relationships.

In 1975 Bob Jones University adopted campus rules which explicitly forbid interracial dating, a ban which remains in effect to this day. A letter from the university in 1998 defended the ban on religious grounds, citing the Biblical story of the Tower of Babel: "God has separated people for His own purpose. He has erected barriers between the nations, not only land and sea barriers, but also ethnic, cultural, and language barriers. God has made people different one from another and intends those differences to remain. Bob Jones University is opposed to intermarriage of the races because it breaks down the barriers God has established. It mixes that which God separated and intends to keep separate."

During the Carter administration (1977-81) the federal Justice Department mounted a legal challenge to the school's tax-exempt status, winning a court ruling that a religious institution could not claim a First Amendment right to engage in racial discrimination.

This ruling was upheld by the US Supreme Court in 1983, despite attempts by the Reagan administration, which supported Bob Jones University, to undermine the case.

The university is equally hostile to gays, and recently sent letters to gay alumni (whose sexual orientation became known after graduation) warning that they would be charged with trespassing if they ever attempted to set foot on the campus of their alma mater. A university spokesman defended the policy, saying that it applied only to graduates, not to visitors to the campus. He compared gays to cult members, criminals and others who might have graduated from the university and then broken with fundamentalist doctrine.

Bob Jones University is not simply an isolated enclave of extreme prejudice and backwardness. The institution has high-level connections with the state's political establishment, still headed by 98-year-old Senator Strom Thurmond, who was the presidential candidate of the segregationist States Rights Party in 1948, and is now President Pro-Tem of the Senate, fourth in line of presidential succession.

Although the college now has neither tax-exempt status nor accreditation because of its racist policies, the South Carolina state government has provided it with important financial support. In 1998, when the state legislature enacted a program to provide \$2,000 tuition scholarships to South Carolina students attending in-state colleges, private or public, a provision was included in the bill by the Republican-controlled lower house permitting these scholarships to be used at Bob Jones University. The Democratic-controlled Senate initially balked at the proposal, but eventually adopted it.

Last year, after an incident in which the school denied

admission to a married couple because they were of different races, several black legislators introduced legislation to bar the use of the state-financed scholarships at Bob Jones. The bill has been bottled up and seems likely to be defeated.

As in the rest of the South, race relations in South Carolina have undergone profound changes since the civil rights movement of the 1950s and 1960s. Today black-white marriages are four times as frequent in South Carolina as in the US as a whole, in part because of the state's large black population, in part because of an influx of new residents. Two years ago the state's ban on interracial marriages—not enforced since a Supreme Court decision three decades ago—was removed from the state constitution by referendum. But nearly 40 percent of those voting opposed repeal of the ban, one of the last such relics of Jim Crow still on the statute books. (The very last state anti-miscegenation law faces a similar referendum vote in Alabama this year).

In the opening months of the presidential campaign, George W. Bush postured as a “compassionate conservative” who advocated the politics of “inclusion.” His campaign staged frequent photo-ops with black school children, and the Texas governor addressed Hispanic audiences in Spanish and publicly opposed anti-immigrant legislation in California. But now, faced with a serious struggle for the Republican nomination, Bush is openly appealing for the support of racial bigots like those at Bob Jones University. “The governor doesn't agree with that policy,” declared Bush campaign spokeswoman Mindy Tucker. “But this is a school that has a lot of conservative voters, and it's a common stop on the campaign trail.”

And not for Bush alone. Two other Republican presidential hopefuls, billionaire Steve Forbes and black anti-abortion candidate Alan Keyes, are scheduled to make appearances at Bob Jones University next week, following in the footsteps of former President Ronald Reagan, Senator Bob Dole, and the current governor of South Carolina, Democrat Jim Hodges.

The parade of candidates only underscores the extraordinary influence which extreme right elements wield within the political establishment, and especially the Republican Party. Last month, when the question of flying the Confederate flag over the South Carolina

state capitol was raised in the presidential race, both Bush and McCain pronounced the issue a matter of states' rights. Now no Republican candidate can publicly disavow an institution which has become a byword for racism and intolerance.



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