

The Christian right and the Republican Party: the dirty secret of American politics

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6 March 2000

The political crisis within the Republican Party has reached an extraordinary level of intensity with the speech given by Senator John McCain February 28 in Virginia Beach, Virginia. McCain's indictment of Texas Governor George W. Bush as a prisoner of right-wing bigots was more than a campaign broadside. He put his finger on the dirty secret of modern American politics—the pervasive influence of extreme-right, racist and fascistic elements in the Republican Party.

Traveling to the city which is the headquarters of the Christian Broadcasting Network and the other business and media ventures of Pat Robertson, McCain denounced Robertson and Reverend Jerry Falwell, founder of the Moral Majority, declaring that the two right-wing fundamentalist preachers were “agents of intolerance.” McCain labeled Bush a “Pat Robertson Republican” whose subservience to the ultra-right would alienate voters and produce a Republican defeat in November.

It is easy to point to the hypocrisy in McCain's attack on the extreme right. Contradictions abound, as McCain blasted Robertson and Falwell while standing side by side with the equally right-wing fundamentalist Gary Bauer, who abandoned his own presidential campaign last month and threw his support to the Arizona senator. McCain proclaimed the Republican Party the “party of Abraham Lincoln, not Bob Jones,” after having refused to condemn the flying of the Confederate flag over the state capitol in South Carolina during the recent primary campaign there.

Barely 24 hours after issuing his denunciation McCain began to retreat, after he was attacked by erstwhile supporters such as Bauer and former Secretary of Education William Bennett. McCain apologized for a later comment to the press in which he sarcastically referred to Robertson and Falwell as “the forces of evil.”

But in an appearance Thursday night in a debate with Bush and Alan Keyes sponsored by CNN and the *Los Angeles Times*, McCain amplified his criticism, saying that unlike Falwell, he didn't consider President Clinton a murderer, and unlike Robertson, he rejected “cockamamie theories about the freemasons.”

McCain's speech may have little effect on the course of the primary campaign—Bush swept primaries in Virginia and Washington and the North Dakota caucuses February 29, and was leading in polls in advance of the March 7 votes in California, New York, Ohio and Georgia. Nonetheless, his attack on the Christian right and the ferocious response from the Republican establishment reveal political fissures within the ruling elite which have far more significance than who wins the Republican presidential nomination.

Like all political developments in contemporary America—where the media and official circles systematically exclude any open discussion of class issues—the Republican Party crisis is a distorted expression of more fundamental social processes. The current conflict has been building up for years, since the unholy alliance of Wall Street and the Christian right was cemented in the early 1980s. Corporate America sought a base of support for the anti-working-class policies spearheaded by Ronald Reagan, under conditions where both big business parties, Democrats as

well as Republicans, were shifting sharply to the right. Both parties embraced, to varying degrees, an agenda of eliminating all restrictions on the pursuit of profit—whether in the form of government regulations, taxation, or union contracts.

This policy, accompanied by corporate downsizing and the wave of union-busting triggered by Reagan's smashing of the PATCO air traffic controllers' strike, had a shattering effect on the working class, especially the lower-paid and minority workers who traditionally supported the Democratic Party. Equally significantly, it accelerated a marked decline in the social position of the middle class layers—small businessmen, family farmers, independent professionals—who once provided a substantial proportion of the electoral base of the Republican Party.

In the course of the 1980s and 1990s, the social base of the Republican Party has narrowed and it has been steadily transformed from the party of the corporate establishment into a party which far more resembles the extreme-right, anti-immigrant and chauvinist parties which have arisen in many European countries. In state after state, Christian fundamentalist groups have taken control of the party organization or exercise effective veto power over the selection of candidates for statewide and even national office. Every presidential election campaign in the past decade has featured a parade of presidential hopefuls at the national convention of the Christian Coalition, seeking the nod of Pat Robertson.

These leaders of the Christian right would have once been regarded as the deranged fringe of American political life. Falwell, as McCain noted in the Los Angeles debate, is the producer and distributor of a video documentary, “The Clinton Chronicles,” which portrays the current occupant of the White House as a Mafia-style capo responsible for dozens of political murders, including the death of Vincent Foster. Robertson has advanced an eclectic and increasingly bizarre set of pronouncements, ranging from predicting the end of the world on January 1, 2000 to ravings of an anti-Semitic character.

The simmering conflict within the Republican Party has come to a head in the wake of the failed impeachment drive against the Clinton White House, which produced an overwhelmingly hostile reaction among the general public to the methods of Independent Counsel Kenneth Starr and the congressional Republicans. The attempt to force Clinton from office by means of an anti-democratic back room conspiracy, backed by media witch-hunting and moralizing, ended in a fiasco.

Powerful sections of corporate America, concerned that the attempted political coup in Washington was undermining the entire big business-controlled political system, sought to put a leash on the radical right forces which had spearheaded the impeachment campaign. However, they have discovered that this is easier said than done. The Republican Party is not simply a mechanical instrument of Wall Street, but a political organism in which, over the past 20 years, extreme right-wing elements have come to play the dominant role.

McCain was pulling his punches when he listed only Bob Jones University, Falwell and Robertson in his litany of bigotry. In Congress,

for instance, the entire Republican leadership is in the hands of individuals with the closest ties to fascist, racist and ultra-right circles. Senate Majority Leader Trent Lott of Mississippi was revealed last year to have close relations with the Council of Conservative Citizens, successor to the White Citizens Councils which organized terrorist resistance to the civil rights measures of the 1960s. The Republicans in the House of Representatives feature such leaders as Majority Whip Tom DeLay and Georgia Congressman Bob Barr, with similar political connections.

McCain himself would appear an unlikely vehicle for the exposure of fascist and extreme-right influence in the Republican Party. His political record in Arizona and Washington is at least as conservative as that of George W. Bush, and he had largely cordial relations with the Christian right until his entry into the presidential race.

It is, however, unlikely that McCain would have issued a public attack on Robertson and Falwell without having first discussed such a move with prominent financial backers of the Republican Party. As one columnist noted: "What the Arizona senator has done is say out loud what many Republican leaders have been saying privately—that they resent the influence of the Christian fundamentalists in shaping both policy and national tickets."

In recent statements about his Bob Jones University speech, Bush has complained that the rules have changed. Ronald Reagan, the elder George Bush and Robert Dole all spoke at the racist and anti-Catholic college without any political repercussions, as did the Democratic candidate for governor of South Carolina in 1998. This only demonstrates that Bush has little understanding of the political factors which propelled him, despite a brief and inconsequential political apprenticeship, to frontrunner status in the Republican Party.

Ironically, Bush's own candidacy was initially promoted by sections of big business and the Washington establishment as a means of repairing the damage inflicted on the Republican Party by the impeachment drive. His early campaign pronouncements laid stress on the creation of a more "inclusive" political atmosphere. While clearly representing more of a marketing strategy than genuine conviction, this posture seemed to distance him from the moralizing and demonizing which are so characteristic of the Christian right.

But Bush was aggressively courted by a section of the fundamentalists, led by Pat Robertson, who declared that only Bush could defeat Gore, retain control of Congress for the Republicans and maintain right-wing control of the Supreme Court. The Texas governor, for his part, moved to cement relations with the extreme right.

After the right-wing presidential hopeful Patrick Buchanan published a book suggesting that the threat of Hitler and Nazi Germany were exaggerated during World War II, Bush rejected calls—most notably by McCain—that Buchanan be read out of the Republican Party. This was followed by Bush's declaration during a debate that Jesus Christ was his favorite political philosopher—a particularly shameless bit of groveling to the fundamentalists.

It is significant that McCain, unlike numerous other Republican hopefuls, was able to raise the enormous sums of money required to maintain the viability of his campaign during the period when Bush was presumed the runaway favorite. Dan Quayle, Elizabeth Dole, Lamar Alexander—all candidates with longer records in presidential politics and more initial recognition within the party—dropped out of the race complaining they could not compete with Bush in fundraising. But McCain raised nearly \$15 million in 1999, and his total fundraising, including federal matching funds, now exceeds \$38 million, an indication of significant backing from big business.

The Republican primary campaign has revealed conflicts and divisions which will continue to intensify in the coming months, regardless of the immediate outcome of the nomination contest. The mutual recriminations are extremely bitter, leaving wounds that will fester. They could presage a

breakup of the party. Certainly if McCain were to confound expectations and emerge with the nomination, a large section of the Christian right would either sit out the election or bolt to the likely Reform Party candidate, Buchanan.

McCain supporters such as *New York Times* columnist William Safire have speculated that there could be an effort to challenge the legitimacy of the California delegation—one-sixth of the total delegates—if McCain wins the popular vote in the March 7 primary but loses the Republicans-only portion of the vote, which is the basis for awarding delegates. Conversely, Bush supporters have denounced McCain's reliance on support from independent and Democratic crossover voters and called for closing so-called "open" primaries, like that in Michigan, in the future. It is within the realm of possibility that the presidential nomination struggle could culminate in a bitter conflict at the party's nominating convention this summer, or a court suit between the rival campaigns.

The deep divisions revealed in the Republican primary elections are indicative of a crisis that goes beyond that one party. The Democratic Party is no less plagued by internal differences and alienated from what once was its mass base of support in sections of the middle class and working class. Last year's impeachment crisis and this year's presidential contest have exposed a crisis of the entire two-party system—a political structure that provided the American corporate elite a virtual political monopoly for more than a century. It is significant that McCain's attack on the extreme right is considerably sharper than anything offered by any of the Democrats, even during the impeachment drive when the far right was seeking to oust a Democratic president through flagrantly undemocratic methods.

Two years ago Hillary Rodham Clinton criticized the media campaign over the Lewinsky affair as the product of a "vast right-wing conspiracy." After that observation, however, she fell silent. Bill Clinton and the congressional Democrats consistently sought to cover up the political character of the attack on the White House, even after the 1998 congressional elections had delivered a public verdict against Starr and his right-wing cohorts.

Now, Mrs. Clinton's characterization of the forces behind the Starr investigation has been confirmed in the speech of John McCain, one of the Republican senators who voted for impeachment!

McCain's attacks on Robertson and Falwell, limited as they are, point up the decades-long conspiracy of silence by the media and the political establishment over the fascistic coloration of the Christian right and this element's enormous influence—out of all proportion to its support in the population at large—over the Republican Party and all levels of government. McCain has simply said aloud what the Washington establishment has known for many years and concealed from the American people.

This only underscores a central lesson of the impeachment coup—there is no significant constituency for defending democratic rights in either big business party or among the leading spokesmen of bourgeois liberalism. Nor, for that matter, is there any concern for such issues in the corporate-controlled media, which still applies innocent-sounding terms like "conservative" to Falwell, Robertson, Buchanan and their co-thinkers, and never alludes to their profoundly anti-democratic and fascistic leanings.

It is not clear what the eventual course of the Republican Party will be, but it is certain that a major realignment of bourgeois politics in the US is in the offing. An even more right-wing political formation is struggling to emerge from the decay of the two traditional parties of big business. At the same time, the objective conditions are maturing for the development of an independent, anti-capitalist political party of the working masses. Only such a party, basing itself on a socialist program, can defend basic democratic rights.



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