

# The Republican Party and the Christian right: sowing the seeds of an American fascist movement

The Editorial Board  
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Sunday's appearance by Republican Senate leader William Frist on a nationwide telecast of Christian fundamentalists, organized to brand opposition to the Bush administration as "anti-Christian," is an unprecedented step. For the first time in American history, the attempt is being made to make religion the basis for a major political party.

The Republican Party is being transformed into the political arm of the religious right, with the White House and the congressional Republican leadership pledged to make evangelical doctrine the law of the land for the entire American people. This has the most ominous implications for the US constitutional structure and for democratic rights.

The event, entitled "Justice Sunday: Stopping the Filibuster Against People of Faith," brought 2,000 people to the Highview Baptist Church in the suburbs of Louisville, Kentucky, and was televised to churches and households over a national satellite hookup. Frist delivered a six-minute address by videotape and made no specific religious references in his remarks. But his appearance itself was an act of solidarity with the organizers of the hour-long telecast, which brought together the most reactionary elements of the Christian fundamentalist right, including Tony Perkins, president of the Family Research Council, James Dobson, chairman of Focus on the Family, and William Donahue, president of the Catholic League.

In the face of the political offensive of the religious right via the Republican Party, the Democrats demonstrate their inability to conduct any serious struggle. They dare not call the Republican-fundamentalist alliance what it is: an attempt to overthrow the constitutional separation of church and state and move America in the direction of a theocracy.

On the contrary, congressional Democratic leaders accept the political framework set by the fundamentalists, only protesting that they, too, are "people of faith." Thus Senator John Kerry, the defeated Democratic presidential candidate, has joined with Republican Senator Rick Santorum, a supporter of the Catholic fascistic Opus Dei group, to introduce legislation to allow pharmacists to refuse to fill birth control prescriptions on the grounds of their religious beliefs.

In the current struggle over Bush's judicial appointments, the Democrats demonstrate the same qualities as in previous conflicts, including the impeachment of Clinton and the 2000 presidential election: impotence, unseriousness, and a lack of interest in making any appeal to broad masses of people in defense of democratic rights. The reason for this lies, in the final analysis, in the class character of the Democratic Party. It is a political instrument of the capitalist elite. It acts as a dead weight on the working class, smothering the development of an independent political movement of working people that would threaten the profit system.

The premise of "Justice Sunday" was a political libel that rivals the "big lie" technique of Hitler's Nazis. The organizers of the event claim that

Christian fundamentalists—who dominate the Republican Party, which in turn controls the White House, both houses of Congress, and the governments of half of the 50 states—represent a persecuted minority in America. They declare that America, the most religion-saturated country in the industrialized world, is a hotbed of "secular humanism" in which "people of faith" are systematically victimized.

The supposed proofs of this persecution are the role of the federal courts in the Terri Schiavo case and the effort by Senate Democrats to block a handful of Bush's right-wing nominees to federal court judgeships.

In the Schiavo case, the Christian right intervened to enforce its religious dogma against the decision of Michael Schiavo, Terri's husband, to terminate life support for his severely brain-damaged wife. Both the Bush White House and the Congress immediately bowed to the fundamentalists, with Congress passing extraordinary legislation to order a federal court review of the Schiavo case, and Bush rushing back from his Texas vacation to sign the bill into law.

However, federal judges at every level—the majority of them appointed by Republican presidents—refused to go along with the overthrow of all previous legal precedents. A district court judge upheld Terri Schiavo's right to die, as expressed to her husband and two other witnesses, and this decision was ratified by both a federal appeals court and the same Supreme Court that installed Bush in the White House. None of these federal courts was willing to simply rubber-stamp a decree by Congress to overturn the decision reached by the Florida state courts on the basis of seven years of exhaustive litigation.

This resistance from the judiciary produced an explosion of outrage among congressional Republicans, several of whom—including House Majority Leader Tom DeLay and Senator John Cornyn of Texas—made incendiary remarks endorsing political retribution against judges, even bordering on incitement to outright violence.

At a conference of Christian fundamentalist groups two weeks ago in Washington, the organizers of the Louisville rally discussed Congress cutting off funding to the courts involved in the Schiavo case—essentially using the power of the purse to impeach judges without a trial—or passing legislation to deny the courts jurisdiction over a broad range of social issues.

Dobson, head of the largest and best-funded fundamentalist lobby, suggested simply disbanding the 9th Circuit Court of Appeals, the most liberal appeals panel, which covers the Pacific coast and Mountain states. "Congress can simply disenfranchise a court," Dobson said, according to a tape-recording of the event obtained by the *Los Angeles Times*. "They don't have to fire anybody or impeach them or go through that battle. All they have to do is say the 9th Circuit doesn't exist anymore, and it's gone."

Perkins, the principal organizer of the Louisville rally, expressed the

level of hysteria that prevails in the religious right, declaring that federal judges were a greater threat to America than foreign terrorists. “Activist courts, aided by liberal interest groups,” he said, “have been quietly working under the veil of the judiciary, like thieves in the night, to rob us of our Christian heritage and our religious freedoms.”

In this context, the intensifying conflict in the Senate over Bush’s appointments to the federal bench has taken on enormous symbolic significance. Democrats used the threat of a filibuster to block ten of these nominees during Bush’s first term, and have threatened to continue this campaign against seven of the ten whom Bush renominated earlier this year.

Last week the Senate Judiciary Committee voted to approve two of the seven ultra-right nominees previously rejected, Priscilla Owen of Texas and Janice Rogers Brown of California. The straight party-line vote, 10-8, sets the stage for a renewed Democratic filibuster when the two nominations reach the floor of the Senate some time in May.

The Democratic policy of selective filibuster has never been more than a half-hearted act of token opposition to the White House. As Senator Joseph Biden, the senior Democrat on the Judiciary Committee, reiterated in a television interview Sunday, the Democrats have ratified the nomination of more than 200 anti-abortion judges, while objecting to only a few of the most provocative of Bush’s right-wing nominees.

Nonetheless, at the Louisville rally, speaker after speaker portrayed the blocking of five percent of Bush’s judicial nominations as deliberate discrimination against Christians and virtual treason against the republic.

Perkins sounded the theme of victimization, declaring, “Just because we believe in the Bible as a guidepost for life does not disqualify us from participating in our government. As American citizens, we should not have to choose between believing what is in this book and serving the public.” The Catholic fundamentalist Donahue added, “We will not be told to shut up and give it over to the secular left. They claim to be the high priests of tolerance, and yet they practice intolerance against us.”

In reality, not a single one of the judicial nominees was rejected because of his or her religious views. In only two cases was an issue related to religion—their attitude to laws restricting abortion rights—even seriously raised in the Senate. The other eight were blocked because of extreme right-wing views on states’ rights, the powers of the federal government, the environment and race, or because of procedural objections, such as the failure of the White House to consult senators from the nominee’s home state, as has been traditional for many years.

The claim of a generalized bias against “people of faith” is both pernicious and absurd. It is pernicious because it seeks to panic and inflame the most politically ignorant and prejudiced sections of the American population, and use them as a battering ram in the service of the ruling elite. As the rally in Louisville, Kentucky demonstrated, these layers are being mobilized on the basis of openly unconstitutional policies, directed at smashing all resistance to the program of the ultra-right within the major institutions of the American government.

The claim of “anti-Christian” persecution is absurd because it is made under conditions of a stifling atmosphere of religious conformity in official bourgeois circles. Virtually every US senator and congressman professes a religious affiliation, and not a single one would admit to being an atheist or non-believer. It is the millions of Americans who reject religious dogma who are unrepresented and virtually unacknowledged by the official two-party system.

Senate Majority Leader Frist has repeatedly threatened to strip the Democratic minority of the right to filibuster nominations, an action which Frist’s predecessor, Trent Lott, once described as “the nuclear option.” It would involve a flagrantly illegal and unconstitutional intervention by the executive branch into the affairs of the legislature. Vice President Dick Cheney, acting as the Senate’s presiding officer, would rule the Democratic filibuster out of order, and seek to be upheld

by a simple majority vote.

Such an effort would mark a sharp break with 200 years of Senate precedent. It would be an act of monumental political hypocrisy, given that Republicans successfully filibustered the nomination of Abe Fortas as chief justice of the Supreme Court in 1968, and systematically blocked the judicial nominations of Bill Clinton for six of his eight years in the White House. It would also be deeply unpopular. A poll published Tuesday by the *Washington Post* showed that two thirds of the public opposed such an effort to suppress opposition in the Senate.

The potential pitfalls of such a confrontation, including the possibility of a complete breakdown of the functioning of the Senate, has produced trepidation among a small group of Republican senators who could deny Frist and Bush the 50 votes required to sustain Cheney’s ruling from the chair. With the Republicans holding a 55-45 majority, six Republican defectors would doom the “nuclear option,” and it remains to be seen whether Frist will succeed.

The immediate political purpose of the Louisville rally was to intimidate this group of wavering Senate Republicans. Large poster-style photographs were displayed of Republican senators such as John McCain of Arizona, Richard Lugar of Indiana, and others believed to be potential defectors. Speakers like Dobson called for pressure to be exerted on those he described as “squishy soft” Republicans.

Despite posturing by Frist about reasserting “majority rule” in the Senate, there is nothing democratic about the proposed elimination of the filibuster. Frist is acting on behalf of a president who was reelected with barely 51 percent of the vote, whose party controls 53 percent of the House of Representatives, and 55 out of 100 Senate seats, but demands 100 percent of the lifetime appointments to the federal bench.

The Republican position is not even truly majoritarian, since it demands total control of the Senate by a party that actually won fewer votes than its opponents. Senate seats are distributed extremely undemocratically, two per state, regardless of population. California’s 36 million people have two Senate seats, as do Wyoming’s 500,000 people. As a result, the Republicans control the Senate 55-45 despite having received two million fewer votes for their senators than did the Democrats (97.5 million to 99.7 million in the elections of 2000, 2002 and 2004 combined, by one calculation).

Even more preposterous is the suggestion that the Republican campaign against the filibuster is a revival of the tactics employed in the 1960s to beat back opposition to civil rights laws by racist senators from the South. This ignores the inconvenient fact that the same social forces—and some of the same individuals—who howled about the threat to “our southern way of life” (i.e., segregation and racial oppression), are now involved in the campaign against supposed threats to “our Christian heritage.” Both the language (claims of “judicial tyranny”) and the religious symbolism are the same. As *Washington Post* columnist Colbert King commented, members of the Ku Klux Klan also marched under the cross.

There is one profound difference, however, between the segregationist resistance of the 1960s and the fundamentalist reaction of today. During the civil rights era, the ultra-right was fighting against the authority of the federal government, which intervened in the South to overturn Jim Crow. The Kennedy and Johnson administrations backed desegregation in part to forestall a revolutionary upsurge from the mass of black working people, in part to serve the geopolitical needs of American imperialism. They were seeking to posture as the defenders of the “free world” against the Soviet Union, a pretense deeply compromised by the existence of racial apartheid in the South.

Today, the ultra-right is largely in control of the federal government, and it seeks to employ this power to dictate social policy to the vast majority of the American people who do not share the views of the Christian fundamentalists. As one perceptive letter-writer to the *New York Times* observed, “A religious conservative who doesn’t want an abortion

is not denied any rights under *Roe v. Wade*. There lies the problem: religious conservatives think that it's their democratic right to deny other people their right to get an abortion."

Whatever the immediate outcome of this conflict over a handful of judges, the political marriage of the White House, the Republican congressional leadership and the Christian fundamentalist groups represents a growing danger to democratic rights. It is a new stage in the development of an incipient fascist movement in the United States, based on religious hysteria, racism and anti-Semitism. It demonstrates the potential for an escalation of political conflict within the United States to the point of civil warfare.

A fascist movement could not win a significant popular base in America by marching under swastika banners or peddling Nordic racial myths. It will have its own peculiar national character, utilizing Christian fundamentalism as well as racism and nativism. But if the external trappings will differ from that of the German Nazis or the movements of Mussolini in Italy and Franco in Spain, the historical significance of fascism is the same: it represents the effort of the ruling class, under conditions where the old bourgeois-democratic methods of rule have broken down, to defend its property and power by whipping up a mass movement and hurling it against the democratic rights and organized resistance of the working class.



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