

Republican presidential candidates appeal to an ever-narrower right-wing base

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In three televised debates over the past month, together with speeches delivered to a conference of Christian fundamentalist groups last weekend in Washington, the Republican presidential candidates have sought to outdo each other in fidelity to ultra-right nostrums.

Less than a year after the Republican Party lost control of Congress, with President Bush's approval rating at record lows in opinion polls, all the major Republican candidates are positioning themselves as even more right-wing than the Bush administration—more belligerent in foreign policy, and in domestic policy, more conservative on “social issues” like abortion and gay rights or more hostile to federal spending on medical care, education and other public services.

This has forced each of the four “top-tier” presidential candidates to foreswear past positions on issues where they had strayed from a hard-line stance, engaging in increasingly awkward maneuvers to appease the most frenzied sections of Christian right.

New York Mayor Rudolph Giuliani has the most difficult task in that respect, because of his support for abortion rights and gay rights. He has sought to offset this disadvantage by affirming his zeal for budget-cutting fiscal conservatism and espousing a strident militarism in relation to Iraq, Iran and other potential targets of American aggression.

At the evangelical conference in Washington, Giuliani declared his opposition to having the words “under God” removed from the Pledge of Allegiance, and his support for home schooling (in which religious households withdraw their children from the public schools and indoctrinate them at home). He said, effectively repudiating the First Amendment, “Freedom of religion is not freedom from religion.”

Former Massachusetts Governor Mitt Romney has twin obstacles in courting the Christian right: his record of social liberalism in Massachusetts, and his adherence to the Mormon Church, regarded by the more bigoted fundamentalists as a non-Christian cult. Romney has tried to outdo Giuliani in fiscal and foreign policy conservatism, while declaring himself a born-again opponent of abortion

and gay rights.

Senator John McCain of Arizona has a different problem with the Christian right: the bad blood from his failed 2000 campaign for the Republican presidential nomination when Bush had the backing of the fundamentalists, particularly in the key South Carolina primary. McCain was then the target of a “dirty tricks” campaign that including leaflets and telephone calls to voters alleging that he had fathered a black child out of wedlock. (He has an adopted daughter from Bangladesh). After that South Carolina campaign, McCain denounced television preachers Jerry Falwell and Pat Robertson as “agents of intolerance,” a piece of truth-telling that the Christian right has never forgiven him.

The fourth of the leading candidates, former Senator Fred Thompson of Tennessee, was initially thought to be the default candidate of the Christian right. He has been publicly dismissed, however, by several prominent evangelists for apparent disinterest in their political agenda during his brief Senate career, and for a lackluster performance since he left his job on the television program “Law and Order” and entered the race in early September.

At the “Values Voters” conference in Washington, which all the Republican candidates addressed October 19-20, the overwhelming choice of those attending was none of the above—more than 50 percent voted in a straw poll for former Arkansas Governor Mike Huckabee. A former Southern Baptist minister who has up to now been an also-ran in the presidential campaign, Huckabee has received a noticeable buildup in the media over the past month as a potential alternative for sections of the far right dissatisfied with the frontrunners.

Judged within the conventional framework of big business politics, the five Republican candidates all have crippling weaknesses that would seem to make it unlikely they could win the nomination, the presidential election or both. This political fact is a reflection, not so much of their individual mediocrity—they are, after all, seeking to fill the shoes of George W. Bush—but of the enormous shift in public opinion in the United States over the past two years, particularly on

the question of the war in Iraq.

At the most recent Republican presidential debate, held Sunday night in Florida, however, the panel of three questioners from Fox News, which broadcast the event, did not ask a single question about the war in Iraq. This omission is all the more extraordinary given the fact that the Republican Party lost control of Congress last year because of popular opposition to the war.

Perhaps the only real moment of truth on this subject came when Chris Wallace of Fox News asked Congressman Ron Paul, the only avowedly antiwar candidate among the Republicans, whether his position wasn't the same as Hillary Clinton's.

Paul sharply disagreed, pointing to Clinton's pro-war stance: "Seventy-some percent of the people in America want the war over with. They're sick and tired of it and they want our troops to come home. Now, Senator Clinton has nothing new to offer. She's endorsing the same policy. She said that the troops would be there for another five years, continue to build this embassy that's going to be bigger than the Vatican, continue to build 14 air bases as are going on there."

None of the Republican candidates was asked how to convince the majority of the American people to support the war. Nor were they asked how the government could continue to wage a war, which has already lasted longer than US involvement in World War II, without public support.

This demonstrates the consensus in Washington political and media circles that the war will continue for years, regardless of popular sentiment or the change of administration in January 2009. Both big business parties aim to exclude the war as a serious issue in the presidential campaign. They will nominate candidates—Clinton, Obama or Edwards for the Democrats, any of the five Republicans—who, despite rhetorical differences, oppose the pullout of American troops from Iraq.

Instead of discussion on the war, the Republican candidates engaged in a series of demagogic attacks on the Democratic frontrunner, Senator Hillary Clinton, whose name was invoked dozens of times. In contrast, the eight candidates mentioned the name of the incumbent Republican president only twice in the course of nearly two hours.

Romney, when trying to elaborate his attitude to the war in Iraq, avoided the name of the author of the war and instead invoked the Democrats, declaring, "Hillary Clinton is trying to rewrite history, that somehow he did this all by himself, going to Iraq. He went to Congress and got their support. Let's not forget that."

Chris Wallace set the tone for the debate with an initial series of questions which pitted the four leading candidates, Giuliani, McCain, Thompson and Romney, against each

other, inviting each to explain who was the most conservative and to reply to charges from their rivals of softness towards the positions of Clinton, Senator Edward Kennedy, or some other Democratic Party boogieman. This provoked an explosion of vitriolic attacks on Clinton, in which this political representative of the American financial aristocracy was presented as the personification of socialism.

The same pattern was continued as the candidates waded through questions on gay marriage, abortion, health care, education, Medicare and Social Security. In addition to pandering to the prejudices of the religious right, they discussed the crisis of public services entirely from the standpoint of opposing any government measure to solve pressing social problems. All offered the same solution: the "free market," i.e., continuation of the capitalist status quo which rations health care on the basis of income and excludes tens of millions.

The Republican candidates repeatedly demonstrated the immense social distance that separates the US political establishment in both parties from the lives and concerns of the vast majority of working people and young people. The crassest expression came last month when the four leading Republicans all boycotted a debate scheduled at Morgan State University in Baltimore, Maryland, a historically black college, and hosted by Tavis Smiley of the Public Broadcasting System. The debate was to focus on topics of concern to blacks, but Thompson, Romney, Giuliani and McCain all skipped it to attend fundraisers with well-heeled supporters.

While Democrats like Clinton, Obama and Edwards claim—entirely falsely—to represent the interests of this oppressed minority—the Republicans don't even bother to pretend. They uphold the interests of the multimillionaires and make no bones about it. As Giuliani gushed in a debate last month in Michigan (perhaps thinking of his recent accumulation of a \$30 million personal fortune), "The free market is a wonderful thing."



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