

As Republicans unveil VP candidate

Democrats silent on threat from religious right

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The Republican National Convention entered its third day Wednesday with the acceptance speech of the party's vice presidential candidate, Alaska Governor Sarah Palin, as the main event.

Palin's candidacy, which was announced to general surprise if not outright incredulity last week, has been rolled out in a peculiar political atmosphere. The Republican leadership has kept her completely under wraps, canceling all of her public events and denying any access by the media.

The only report of any political activity by Palin at the convention before her Wednesday night speech, which was drafted by a former speechwriter for George W. Bush, came from AIPAC, the Zionist lobbying group. AIPAC said that she had met with its members in private, promising to "work to expand and deepen the strategic partnership between the US and Israel."

Meanwhile, Republican operatives have been dispatched to Alaska, where they have instructed Palin's friends and family members not to speak to the media.

For their part, the Democrats have largely maintained a discrete silence on the candidate and her political views. The Democratic Party has avoided any political confrontation with the Republicans during the latter's convention in Minneapolis.

While initially announcing that they were setting up a center in the city to counter the Republicans, dubbing the operation "More of the Same" in a reference to Republican presidential candidate John McCain and the Bush administration, in the first three days of the convention it has barely functioned. Invoking the theme of bipartisan unity in the face of Hurricane Gustav, the Democrats cancelled daily press briefings and other scheduled events. The effect has been to give the controversial Palin candidacy a free ride.

In the context of this political vacuum imposed by the two major parties, there has been intense media focus on the candidate's personal life, particularly the pregnancy of her 17-year-old daughter, which was revealed just days after she was named to the number-two spot on the Republican ticket.

The turning of this personal event in the life of an adolescent girl and her family into a media circus is symptomatic of the unhealthy character of American politics and of the media itself. Nonetheless, the Republicans have secretly welcomed the controversy as a means of diverting public attention from more substantive political questions and enabling it to lash out at the traditional villains of its right-wing populist demagoguery—the "liberal" media and the Washington "elites."

That Palin herself chose to thrust her daughter into the national

media spotlight by accepting the nomination and that she is identified with the extreme right's anti-sex-education, anti-contraception and anti-abortion policies that threaten the well-being of countless other teenage girls is brushed aside.

The media and the Democrats have tip-toed around the most important political implications of the Palin nomination: the fact that one of America's two major political parties is effectively controlled by forces that can be best described as theocratic fascists, who see her nomination as a means of imposing their ideology on the country at large.

While there has been a torrent of media coverage concerning the pregnancy of Palin's 17-year-old daughter Bristol, very little attention has been paid by the mainstream media to the Alaska governor's political-religious affiliations.

Since her nomination as the Republican Party's vice presidential candidate, it has been revealed that Palin and her husband were supporters of the Alaskan Independence Party (AIP), a far-right outfit advocating secession from the US and dissolution of the federal government.

While Republican officials have countered these reports by citing voter registration records indicating that Sarah Palin was a registered Republican going back to 1982, the same records indicate that her husband Todd was indeed a member of the AIP, and leading members of the party report that the couple attended its 1994 convention and supported its program. Sarah Palin likewise attended the party's 2000 convention, for which the Republicans have offered the unconvincing alibi that it was a purely ceremonial appearance which she made as mayor of the Anchorage suburb of Wasilla.

They have not accounted for the fact that earlier this year Palin sent a video message to the AIP convention, which was introduced by the party's vice chairman George Clark, who described her as "an AIP member before she got the job as a mayor of a small town."

What attention has been paid in the mass media to this political connection has centered largely on the "Alaska first" motto of the party, which stands in formal contradiction to the McCain campaign's slogan of "country first." Far more significant, however, is the fact that the AIP is the Alaskan affiliate of the Constitution Party, an ultra-rightist electoral party that emerged out of the militia movement, anti-tax extremism and the Christian fundamentalist right.

The Constitution Party puts forward a program that can be accurately described as theocratic fascism. Its commits the party "to restore American jurisprudence to its original Biblical common-law foundations." This is the program commonly identified with a

movement known as “dominion theology,” which demands the subordination of every government and institution to Christian fundamentalism, not only in the US but all over the world, together with the outlawing of all other religions and the suppression of atheism.

In addition to establishing severe criminal penalties, including death, for homosexuals, doctors who perform abortions and adulterers, the believers in this Biblical state also propose a social agenda that dovetails completely with the aims of the most reactionary sections of big business. It calls for the elimination of virtually every social reform instituted over more than a century, including minimum-wage laws, Social Security, environmental and health and safety regulations, public education and virtually any form of public assistance.

There is little doubt that Palin is extremely close to these elements. Revelations that have surfaced in recent weeks include the fact that she ran for mayor of Wasilla, a town of barely 5,000, on a right-wing Christian agenda opposing abortion and promoting gun rights, while including in her literature the promise that her victory meant the town “will have our first Christian mayor.”

After becoming mayor, Palin attempted to fire the town’s librarian for refusing to ban certain books. Opposition from residents forced her to drop the plan.

Videos have surfaced of Palin speaking before her church barely three months before she was tapped for the number-two spot on the Republican ticket, extolling the US intervention in Iraq as a holy war.

Addressing the congregation at the church, the Wasilla Assembly of God, in June, Palin declared: “Pray for our military men and women who are striving to do what is right. Also, for this country, that our leaders, our national leaders, are sending [US troops] out on a task that is from God. That’s what we have to make sure that we’re praying for, that there is a plan and that that plan is God’s plan.”

She went on to suggest that her proposal for a natural gas pipeline from Alaska was also part of “God’s plan.”

The pastor of her church, Ed Kalnins, has been recorded warning his parishioners in 2004 that those who voted for Democratic presidential candidate Senator John Kerry could be damned to hell. Similarly, he denounced those who criticized the Bush administration for its criminal neglect in the face of Hurricane Katrina, stating: “I hate criticisms towards the president, because it’s like criticisms towards the pastor—it’s almost like, it’s not going to get you anywhere, you know, except for hell. That’s what it’ll get you.”

Kalnins is also a subscriber to the “last days” belief held by a section of Christian fundamentalists that the apocalypse is at hand. He has urged his congregation to be prepared for a mass migration to Alaska, which he believes will be one of the last “refuges” for those fleeing destruction.

In one sermon, Kalnins preached: “We need to think like Jesus thinks. We are in a time and a season of war, and we need to think like that. We need to develop that instinct. We need to develop as believers the instinct that we are at war, and that war is contending for your faith. ... Jesus called us to die. You’re worried about getting hurt? He’s called us to die.”

The rhetoric is consistent with that of a growing faction within the Pentecostal church known as “Joel’s Army,” which directs its appeal primarily to youth in their teens and 20s, casting them as the final generation before Armageddon that must be organized into an army of God. In some cases, military terminology extends to referring to preachers as “commanders” and clearly suggests that the mission is to

impose Christian dominion by force.

A recent article on this tendency prepared by the Southern Poverty Law Center cited critics within the church warning that “actual bloodletting may only be a matter of time for a movement that casts itself as God’s avenging army.”

The clear threat is that, under the mantle of religion, fascist forces are being prepared to attack the working class.

While the implications of this toxic mix of religious fundamentalism and right-wing politics are ominous, there is little indication that Palin will be on the receiving end of the kind of frenzy that was unleashed against Barack Obama earlier this year over the statements made by the minister of his own church, Reverend Jeremiah Wright, mixing black nationalist rhetoric with criticisms of US foreign policy.

Within the Republican Party, none of these revelations has had any discernable impact on the immense popularity of Palin’s nomination among those attending the Minneapolis convention. This is because the party’s “base” is made up to a large extent of the Christian right, which sees in Palin one of their own.

This layer has largely dictated the Republican platform, including an immigration plank that calls for mass deportations, the building of the US-Mexico wall and the recognition of English as an official language, stopping just short of stripping citizenship from children of undocumented immigrants born on US soil. Now it is savoring the prospect that a right-wing Christian fundamentalist will be a “heart beat away” from assuming the office of “commander-in-chief.”

More importantly, neither Obama nor any section of the Democratic Party leadership has the stomach for making these connections a political issue.

Clearly, a campaign could be waged to expose the threat that such religious-based politics pose to basic democratic rights in America. A poll done by the Pew Research Center just last month showed a clear majority of Americans favoring the separation of church and state and expressing the view that churches should stay out of politics.

There are millions upon millions of working people who are fed up with having Christian fundamentalism shoved down their throats by right-wing politicians using religious rhetoric to justify social inequality, wars of aggression, tax cuts for the rich and every other political demand of the financial elite.

Yet the Democrats have no intention of appealing to these sentiments and challenging the Christian right. Rather, their aim is to compete for votes by adapting to it. This is the real source of the kid-gloves treatment given the Palin nomination.

The Republican convention, the extreme right-wing character of the party’s presidential campaign and the cowardly and complicit silence of the Democratic Party underscore the immense danger to the working class resulting from the political monopoly of two corporate-controlled parties.



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