

Discounting Values Voters

Christian conservatives invite the candidates to ignore their demands.

By Michael Brendan Dougherty

IN AN UNCHARACTERISTICALLY nervous speech to the Values Voters Summit, Rudy Giuliani nearly flubbed his most important line: “I’ve made a commitment to decrease adoptions and increase...” He paused awkwardly then took a breath, collecting himself: “to decrease abortions and increase adoptions.”

He smiled and the audience of over 2,000 conservative activists smiled back at him, then laughed and applauded. They were warming up to him. They have to.

While the Family Research Council and their socially conservative allies designed the conference to impress upon the candidates the power of the Christian Right within the Republican coalition, the summit accomplished just the opposite. It revealed an evangelical movement that cannot reject candidates it dislikes or rally around an electable alternative. It also demonstrated that the Religious Right’s leadership lacks resolve compared to the fiscal conservatives and war hawks who dominate the Republican big tent

In the blue glow of their laptops at the back of the ballroom, over 400 members of the media tapped on their keyboards. Giuliani’s speech came just a week after Focus on the Family’s James Dobson floated the idea of supporting a third party. It also came just hours before the Arlington Group—a coalition of Christian Right leaders—would meet to discuss which candidate they should support.

Under that pressure, and under the projected red, white, and blue stars,

Giuliani made a virtue of his disagreements with the values-voters set: “If I come out here and I take a poll and I try to figure out what you all believe, and then I just repeat to you what you all believe, then I’m a follower. With me, you’re going to always know where I stand. You will always know that I will not bend and sway with the political winds, if they conflict with what I believe is right for our nation. And I see clearly the value of people of faith in forming the political debate with their ideas and ideals.”

After those subtle jabs at Mitt Romney and Fred Thompson’s authenticity, Giuliani delivered a line for the cameras and front pages: “I come to you today ... with an open mind and an open heart, and all I ask is that you do the same. Please know this: you have absolutely nothing to fear from me.” While high-profile journalists like David Brody and Margaret Carlson declared this “the headline,” *CQ*’s Chris Lehmann provided a more accurate translation of Giuliani’s message to values voters: “I have nothing to fear from you.”

But the pressure social conservative put on Giuliani was showing results. For the first time, he promised to veto any changes to the Hyde Amendment, which prohibits federal funding for abortion. It was a small but real concession. Fr. Frank Pavone, the head of Priests for Life, declared it a “good first step and an invitation to dialogue.” But pro-lifers want more. Pavone continued, “The mayor understands that we cannot tolerate a little bit of terrorism—

a little bit of the destruction of innocent life. We also cannot tolerate a little bit of abortion.”

Family Research Council insiders maintained their smiles for the cameras after Giuliani’s speech, but privately conceded that the summit was not going as they had hoped. Joe Carter, the director of web communications for FRC and a blogger at the influential *EvangelicalOutpost.com*, admitted that the leadership had hoped Giuliani would decline their invitation to speak: “It was savvy on his part to show up.” Giuliani deftly put the onus on FRC to reject him, saying, “I’ll continue to extend my hand to you, and I hope that you’ll take it.”

Even if the Christian Right’s leadership couldn’t publicly slap Giuliani’s hand away, they hoped to grab on to a strong alternative. By giving Mitt Romney the primetime spot on Saturday night, FRC and the Arlington Group telegraphed their next move. Unfortunately for Romney, Mike Huckabee also came to the conference.

Despite his anemic third-quarter fundraising—just \$1 million in contributions—the former governor of Arkansas and Baptist preacher came fired with Biblical fervor: “I was led to believe that it was a lot better to be with David—that little shepherd boy with five smooth stones—than it was with Goliath with all his heavy armor.” The atmosphere in the ballroom changed immediately. Robert Lalka, a blogger for *Faithful Democrats*, reported getting chills as Huckabee preached. “I come today as one not who comes to you, but as one who comes

from you. You are my roots.” Standing ovations occurred after every few lines. “It’s important that people sing from their hearts and don’t merely lip-synch the lyrics to our songs. I think it’s important that the language of Zion is a mother tongue and not a recently acquired second language.” The crowd began to shout “Amen!” as they stood up and waved their hands.

Huckabee had convinced the attendees to go with their hearts. While the leadership’s preferred candidate, Romney, edged out Huckabee by a tenth of a percentage point in online voting, voters at the conference awarded the man from Hope, Arkansas five times as many votes as the Mormon with the money. The Baptist’s popularity stymied any effort of the Arlington Group to get behind Romney, lest they seem at odds with the grassroots.

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By failing to reject Giuliani forcefully or rally their troops around a viable alternative, Christian conservatives are in danger of losing their power to determine the orthodoxy of the Republican Party on social issues. Allowing a pro-choice candidate to be the GOP’s presidential candidate would undo much of the work the Religious Right did to establish its importance and strength in the party in the 2004 election, when increased turnout by evangelicals was widely credited with securing Bush’s second victory.

Other factions in the GOP coalition have been able to identify their potential enemies and reject them. Within a week of the Values Voters Summit, Pat Toomey, the president and CEO of the Club for Growth, anathematized Huckabee’s deviations from the free-trade,

low-tax creed in a piece for *National Review Online*. The Club even set up a website, TaxHikeMike.com, to torpedo his chances.

Hawks, too, have put pressure on candidates who are insufficiently zealous in the support of Bush’s war on terror. After drawing criticism for their slight gestures toward foreign-policy realism, Romney and Huckabee have begun including sharp references to the “threat of Islamofacism” in their speeches. While both candidates had previously hinted at an exit strategy for Iraq, they now rattle their sabers at Iran.

Since the Religious Right’s positions on abortion and gay marriage enjoy more support in the grassroots of the GOP than free trade or the Iraq War, the only explanation for the inability of social conservatives to exercise discipline on the party is a failure of leadership.

David Kirkpatrick in a recent feature for the *New York Times Magazine*, wrote, “James C. Dobson, the founder of Focus on the Family, was poised to play kingmaker in 2008, at least in the Republican primary.” But the evangelical leader’s public statements about a potential third-party run, should Giuliani capture the nomination, have only advertised his weakness in determining the GOP’s course. Joe Carter of FRC admitted privately that Dobson, “never was a kingmaker and isn’t one now.”

The dithering of Christian Right leadership has allowed a no-hoper like Huckabee to absorb evangelical support in the early primary states. He told *Slate* after the summit, “The rank and file are no longer waiting to be given the nod by people who are perceived to be their leaders. Many are frustrated they’re not get-

ting more of a sense of leadership from the organizations they’ve supported.”

Jerry Falwell, a pioneer of the Moral Majority, has died, and his sons, Jerry Jr. and Jonathan, do not possess his political drive. Dr. James Kennedy, another pastor who helped Republicans collect three out of four white evangelical votes in the last presidential election has died. Dobson himself is soon to retire from his public ministry.

And even if the evangelical movement recruits a fresh generation of leaders, it is becoming less monolithically Republican. The president’s approval rating among white evangelicals has fallen to below 45 percent from over 90 according to the Pew Research Center. As Kirkpatrick reported in the *Times*, “white evangelical identification with the Republican Party has dipped below 50 percent, with the sharpest falloff again among the young.”

Just outside the ballroom after Giuliani’s speech, a scrum of Washington reporters gathered around the diminutive former FRC president Gary Bauer, thrusting their tape recorders into his face. Bauer explained, “There is not one person [in the field of candidates] who is head and shoulders above everybody else.” Then he firmly announced that the various leaders would be released to support whomever they like best. “We all have our own view, and we are doing the best we can under somewhat challenging circumstances.”

He may not have realized it, but Bauer was declaring his own movement’s irrelevance: the Christian Right would not exercise decisive influence in the Republican primary.

But that’s not what values voters came to hear. Back in the ballroom, yet another invited speaker told the audience that they were winning the long battle, that they were taking back America. Clapping and cheering, they still believed. ■

Pakistan's It Girl

Can Benazir Bhutto hold her country together?

By Eric S. Margolis

IT TOOK ONE suicide bombing in Karachi to undermine the short-lived political marriage of convenience that Washington engineered between Pakistan's embattled president, Pervez Musharraf, and former prime minister, Benazir Bhutto.

The Musharraf government immediately blamed the usual Islamic suspects for the deadly explosions that greeted Bhutto's long awaited return to Pakistan from self-imposed exile. At least 139 people died, and hundreds were injured in the Oct. 18 attack on her cortege. Two days later, however, Bhutto told me her security advisers were convinced high-ranking security officials of the Musharraf regime were behind the attack. So much for the honeymoon in Pakistan.

The military-dominated government of President-General Musharraf, as he styles himself, has run onto the rocks. The general, who came to power after overthrowing then Prime Minister Nawaz Sharif in a 1999 coup, is deeply unpopular in all sectors of Pakistani society, save the tiny, pro-Western wealthy elite. He has held on to power for the past eight years by rigging elections, packing the national and state assemblies with yes-men, using courts to punish critics, muzzling Pakistan's once feisty media, and silencing opponents by bribery or arrest.

So far, Pakistan's highly disciplined armed forces have remained loyal to Musharraf. The military establishment is the only national institution that still commands public respect and has not been engulfed by corruption. But there is growing unrest as Musharraf increas-

ingly accedes to U.S. pressure to use Pakistan's soldiers to battle pro-Taliban Pashtun tribesmen in Northwest Frontier Province and Baluchistan. Both important provinces are now in a state of rebellion against Islamabad. Musharraf is being accused by growing numbers of Pakistanis of being a "puppet of Washington" and waging war against his own people at America's command.

Alarmed that the most important ally in President Bush's war on terror was foundering, the administration sought to shore up his rule through a backroom deal with Bhutto, Pakistan's most popular politician. A series of outstanding criminal corruption charges against her were dropped, and she was permitted to return home supposedly free from prosecution in exchange for her agreement to some sort of power-sharing pact with the military junta. But Pakistan's increasingly independent-minded Supreme Court vowed to review this unseemly arrangement.

I asked Benazir Bhutto during an afternoon we recently spent together in London how could she make such a tawdry deal with the man she had so long denounced as a usurper, dictator, and enemy of his own people? Bhutto's answer: she will reinstate democracy and it will eventually replace military rule and defeat spreading Islamic extremism.

Not good enough, I challenged her. Such a deal would sully her reputation, damage her cause, and expose her to charges of crass political opportunism. She shrugged off my concerns with her mantra: "democracy is the answer to Pakistan's problems."

But what kind of democracy? That of Thomas Jefferson or George W. Bush? When Bhutto was prime minister, she complained that the military was excluding her from all national security issues and foreign policy. She used to scold me—an admirer of Pakistan's military—"There you go again, Eric, you and your beloved Pak generals..." The generals, in turn, and the religious leaders, too, despised Bhutto, and dismissed her as "that girl." She ended up controlling only about a quarter of the government.

If Bhutto becomes prime minister for a third time, to paraphrase Stalin's famous quip about the Vatican, how many divisions will she have? Even if Musharraf relinquishes his position as commander of the armed forces, as he promised, his hand-picked military allies—all vetted and pre-approved by the Pentagon and CIA, according to my Washington sources—will control the military's command structure. Last March, senior Indian intelligence sources told me that Washington had already selected Pakistan's next chief of staff of the armed forces—and possible future leader—Gen. Ashfaq Kayani. They were right.

With Musharraf and his generals retaining complete control of military, intelligence, foreign affairs, financial, security, and cash-flow from Washington, what will be left for reincarnated Prime Minister Bhutto? Education, public sanitation, receiving visiting bigwigs? This is the kind of ersatz democracy the Bush administration supports in Egypt, Morocco, Algeria, Palestine, Jordan, and Turkey, where a junta of reactionary generals runs a state within the state.