

# AFTER THE FALL

By Stephen Glass

Every morning after breakfast, Steven Tellis, still wearing his white terrycloth robe, makes his way to an enclosed back porch that he has converted into an office in his Virginia home. He is almost always working at his desk by 8:32 a.m., when the clock radio kicks on—preset to a local Christian station. Over the next eight hours Tellis, an elderly freelance journalist, types *The Tellis Times* on a decade-old Macintosh computer. He works without stopping until 4:30 p.m., when he emails the three-page newsletter to fewer than 800 subscribers.

The *Times* is a chatty newsletter, full of gardening tips and grammatical errors, and it reflects the author's idiosyncrasies. In one week during April, the front-page stories ranged from Tellis's reflections on *Great Expectations* to an "investigation" into Vince Foster's death that was written in rhyming couplets. There is only one constant in *The Tellis Times*: the author's complaints about media bias against Christians.

"The media thinks we're all a bunch of Jesus freaks," Tellis says, sounding a theme that makes frequent appearances in the daily column he writes called "Christ's Defender!!!" "They don't treat minorities that way. But it's okay to say lies about us. Well, I've been put on this earth to stop that." Tellis can find ample evidence to support his view. "Christ's Defender!!!" began after a 1993 *Washington Post* article, which became infamous among Christian conservatives, labeled evangelicals "poor, uneducated and easy to command." The *Post's* language was particularly offensive, but otherwise an unexceptional example of the mainstream media's coverage of the Christian right's political rank and file.

So Tellis was, to understate the matter, surprised at the way the media covered the recent resignation of the Christian Coalition's executive director, Ralph Reed. "I CAN'T! believe this!!!" read the April 25 column under a banner headline. "The media is complimenting Reed. They're beginning to recognize how Reed is GOOD and SPEAKS OF TRUTHS."

Tellis's surprise was unsurprising. Like Hatfields eulogizing an unexpectedly deceased McCoy, normally critical columnists lavished praise on Reed's tenure. *New York Times* columnist Frank Rich cooed: "I found near unanimity of opinion. Few believe that the Christian Coalition will find a new front man with the same

extraordinary talent..." *The Washington Post's* E.J. Dionne called Reed's departure "a milestone in American politics." Reliably liberal newspapers like *The Los Angeles Times* praised Reed for being one of the right's most skilled politicians.

But it is Reed's political adroitness that should make the media second-guess his resignation. If Reed has built, as the press says, a mighty political force, why is this consummate politician stalking off on his own? One reason (and one reason why liberal pundits have discovered a sudden love for Reed) might be that the Christian Coalition is quietly crumbling. Internal schisms have left the organization's factions so hostile to each other that they no longer speak. Postal evidence indicates the group has wildly overstated its membership. And recent surveys suggest that its membership is not growing at all. Federal probes threaten to tie up the organization's leadership for years. Worst of all (or maybe best of all, from Frank Rich's point of view), the Christian Coalition under Ralph Reed has so far failed to achieve virtually any of its major policy goals.

"Everyone has basically been down in the dumps for a while," says one prominent Christian Coalition state organizer. "We all know the group is in big, big trouble. He must know as well—who'd blame him for trying to save his own hide?" Adds a senior official in the national office who is also looking to leave: "Think of Reed like he's a really good speculator. Here, he bought low and sold really high. All evidence shows this stock is going to go bearish quick."

"Reed seems to be getting out at just the right time," says Clyde Wilcox, a government professor at Georgetown University who has studied the Christian right since the 1970s. "Their membership has peaked, and they haven't really accomplished much." Wilcox, who has extensively polled the Christian right, says his data indicate that the group has no new pools of members to tap into. His surveys found 40 percent of white evangelicals don't support the group, and that Reed has already signed up or attempted to sign up most of those who might support it. Reed's most ballyhooed recent growth initiative has been to court blacks, in a drive he calls the Samaritan Project. But Wilcox's polls show most black voters are not interested in joining the Christian Coalition.

Reed's claim to leadership has always rested on his ability to attract recruits. When he joined Pat Robertson's fledgling Christian Coalition eight years ago, there were virtually zero members. Today, Christian Coalition spokesman Larry Cirignano boasts the organization has 1.9 million members. But, as has been widely reported, U.S. Postal Service records from September 1995 indicate the organization only mailed 310,296 copies of its magazine, *Christian American*, which is sent to everyone who contributes \$15 annually. At the time, they boasted more than 1.7 million members. And, according to the group's tax returns, contributions fell to \$18.7 million in 1995 from \$21.2 million the year before. Then there are the group's legal woes. The Senate, the Federal Election Commission and federal prosecutors in Virginia are investigating the Christian Coalition. The FEC's lawsuit seems the most serious. The commission claims in the suit that the Christian Coalition violated campaign finance laws by spending \$1.4 million on GOP candidates' campaigns, including that of former President George Bush. Reed has said the group did nothing illegal.

In June, the Coalition suspended with pay chief financial officer Judy Liebert after she told federal authorities about possible criminal activities by a direct-mail subcontractor. Liebert has also said that Reed told her to hide as "anonymous" a \$60,000 donation from a wealthy Ohio businessman who wanted the money to be used to help re-elect Bush. Reed and the Christian Coalition have repeatedly denied the allegation.

Reed's resignation at this impropitious moment comes in the midst of what is becoming an increasingly open battle for control of the organization. Reed's supporters say that, by blending secular issues like tax cuts with traditional religious concerns, he has turned the Christian Coalition into the most powerful force in the Republican Party, while papering over the huge, natural division between the party's Christian social conservatives and its business-rooted money men (the one rails

against no-fault divorce; the other sports trophy wives). Reed's opponents say his strategy has abandoned the organization's religious roots, making it indistinguishable from many secular rightist groups.

The Christian Coalition's problem is that dissenters have a point. During the first 100 days of the new Republican Congress in 1995, the Coalition gave moral support to Newt Gingrich and the Contract with America. Even though the group had delivered the GOP crucial votes, it waited until the Contract legislation was completed before pushing its own agenda. Patience, the Christian Coalition assumed, would be rewarded. So, in

May 1995, Reed announced his own ten-point Contract with the American Family, a list of socially conservative initiatives that the Coalition asked Congress to pass that year. Two years later, the Contract with the American Family largely languishes. Demands such as eliminating the Department of Education, tightening restrictions on abortion and defunding the National Endowment for the Arts are the fanciful hopes of only the most conservative Republicans. Just two items on the Coalition's Contract have been fully realized, and these were actually proposed first by the House Republican leadership: the establishment of a \$500 per child tax credit and restrictions on Internet pornography.

"The Republicans got our votes, and they got their contract," says a Christian Coalition state organizer. "Reed promised we'd get something back. You read it and look at the votes, and you'll see we got dirt."

The Christian Coalition's lackluster legislative record has given rival organizations with like constituencies but a more aggressively moralist thrust—organizations like the Washington-based Family Research Council—an opportunity to lure away disaffected Coalitioners. And, over the past two years, the more moralist factions of the Christian Coalition have started talking with increased seriousness of defecting. This March, the heads of several large California chapters met to discuss seceding from the national leadership. Ultimately, the



RALPH REED BY VINT LAWRENCE FOR THE NEW REPUBLIC

splinter group voted to stay with Reed, but they warned that they wanted to see more action on the social front.

Less formally, dozens of members in the past year have quit the Coalition to build local moralist groups. Consider Rachel Hamford, a San Diego housewife who set up an online community for Coalition members who believe Reed has gone astray. "I agree with the secular goals also," she says. "But the Ten Commandments have to come first. At times it seems Ralph Reed has forgotten his Bible." On the Monday after Reed's resignation, more than fifty people filled three of Hamford's "Click for Christ" chat rooms, ranting:

"We're done with Reed so we can get back to doing God's good deed."

"Reed was an impostor."

"If God = :- ) then Ralph Reed = :- (" (internet novices: tilt your head to the left and :- ) becomes a smiley-face).

"In three years, it's never been this much," says Hamford. "It's usually very lonely; once in a while it's just me and my husband."

The most serious defection came last September, when the Christian Coalition's Catholic wing, the Catholic Alliance, quit to form an autonomous group. Reed started the alliance in 1995, hoping the Vatican's stance on abortion and gay rights would bring new members to what was (and remains) a mainly evangelical Protestant organization. The Christian Coalition claims to have brought in 30,000 Catholics in the alliance's first year, but pollsters say the real figure is somewhere around 10,000. Either way, it was far less than Reed hoped. Several studies indicated that the principal reason for the poor results was that Catholics, particularly religious Catholics, do not identify themselves as Republicans. One study by Notre Dame Professor David Leege found that half of weekly Mass attendees are Democrats. The Christian Coalition's close ties to the GOP may have turned off Catholics.

**I**n this schismatic context, Reed's departure is seen by all sides as an opportunity to redefine the Christian Coalition. Six staffers for prominent religious-right congressmen are working to persuade Pat Robertson to replace Reed with someone more socially conservative. The staffers, including one from Majority Whip Tom DeLay's office, met for almost an hour in the Longworth House Office Building the day after Reed resigned. "What we all could agree on was that we were going to push Christian legislation fast and furious in the next few months," one of the staffers explained. "We want it to look like it's coming from everywhere." One languishing measure identified for a big push is Oklahoma Representative Ernest Istook's constitutional amendment to allow religious symbols in schools. Other bills targeted by the moralist staffers require restrictions on abortion, the legalization of school prayer and equal time for the teaching of creationism.

"It's not important if it's duplicate legislation or even if it could ever really pass," said a senior House Education and Workforce Committee staffer. "Our goal is just

to get the drumbeat going, to rally up some of the Christians who are sleeping between elections. If they get excited, Robertson will listen to them and maybe respond." The response the staffers have in mind is the appointment of a staunch moralist to succeed Reed, a non-Reedian leader who would force the GOP Congress to take on social issues.

Arrayed in opposition are Coalition pragmatists, who, recognizing the depth of the division between the moralist wing of the Republican Party and the party's money wing, hope Robertson will choose the virtually unknown Charles Cunningham to succeed Reed. Cunningham currently directs the Christian Coalition's highly successful voter education program, which in the past election year distributed 45 million "voter guides" to over 100,000 churches nationwide. Cunningham is considered a Reed-style pragmatist, with ties and interests beyond the world of the religious right. Before coming to the Christian Coalition, he served as a lobbyist on Capitol Hill for the National Rifle Association. But most pragmatists believe that Robertson is searching for a higher-profile replacement.

The moralists would prefer someone from outside the Coalition, someone with a stronger religious background, someone who isn't under "Ralph Reed's spell," as one Colorado Christian Coalition activist puts it. Among the names floated have been those of Oklahoma Congressman J.C. Watts, former U.S. Secretary of Education William Bennett, Indiana Senator Dan Coates and former Virginia Secretary of Health and Human Services Kay Coles James, a teacher at Robertson's Regent University.

**W**hoever gets the job will inherit what Reed walked away from—a stagnant membership, legal and financial difficulties and, above all, the unresolved tension between the passionate moralists and the moneyed pragmatists. Cirignano, the Christian Coalition's spokesman, says no one should expect the organization to change dramatically when Robertson picks Reed's replacement. "When a church loses its pastor, it gets another one, but the church continues," he says. "Ralph Reed is stepping over, not out—he'll remain on the board."

And, for now, the Christian Coalition is still treating the GOP's economic agenda as equally important to its social one. When I first left a message for the Christian Coalition's press office it was accidentally logged as if I had made a donation to the group. A few hours later, Earlene, a volunteer, called me. After I declined her invitation to pray for me, she asked me to pray instead. "Could you pray for legislation to end partial-birth abortion and a balanced budget agreement?" she asked.

A balanced budget? You pray for that?

"Every day when I wake up and when I go to sleep."

Do you pray for higher taxes or less government spending? Or for other causes, like repealing gun control laws?

"Oh, sure we do," said Earlene, "but these are the two I'm supposed to tell you about." •