

GOP's kingmaker?

Ralph Reed,
now a strategist,
may hold key to
White House

BY RICHARD L. BERKE

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ATLANTA — In the eight years it took Ralph Reed to build the Christian Coalition into one of the most potent forces in Republican politics, he seemed to struggle to keep in check his passion for raw politicking. He injected references to "God" and "Christians" into his speeches and told everyone that the organization he ran was devoted to education, not politics.

But only two weeks into his new career as a Republican strategist based here, Reed, still looking like a fresh-faced choirboy, now favors the shorthand political jargon of fast-talking consultants. He says, for example, that winning presidential candidates need to "bank the dough" — that is, not spend it too early. And after listening to Sen. Richard Shelby of Alabama spin folksy stories the other day, he said admiringly of his potential client, "You get in a fight with that guy and he'll rip your face off."

Reed is well on his way to becoming for Republicans what James Carville is for the Democratic Party: the latest in a breed of consultants who are often more prominent than the candidates for whom they work.

But Reed's success or failure will be a gauge, not just of his own fame or his strategic acumen, but also of the continued importance of religious conservatives in Republican politics. Many politicians who are seeking his help said that their victories could hinge on the enthusiasm of Christians — and that only Reed's star power could energize those voters.

Beyond Reed's personal conversion (or, perhaps, liberation) to unabashed politicking is a grand ambition: to use his celebrity to become a kingmaker for religious, conservative candidates and to use that platform to help elect the next president. Reed said his firm, Century Strategies, plans to establish a farm team of elected officials at all levels of government who will rise to the Senate or governorships "and ultimately the White House."

"I'm not trying to be IBM. I'm trying to be Microsoft," he said. "I'm trying to do one thing better than anybody else. The theory is based on the idea that there's going to be a huge wave of culturally conservative candidates that are going to hit the beaches of the political system."

The prospect of Reed, 36, becoming an overnight sensation in consulting seems more than just hype from the master spinmeister himself. At the opening dinner of the Christian Coalition's annual meeting here on Sept. 12, Reed was regaled with the sorts of fawning tributes that are usually reserved for former presidents.

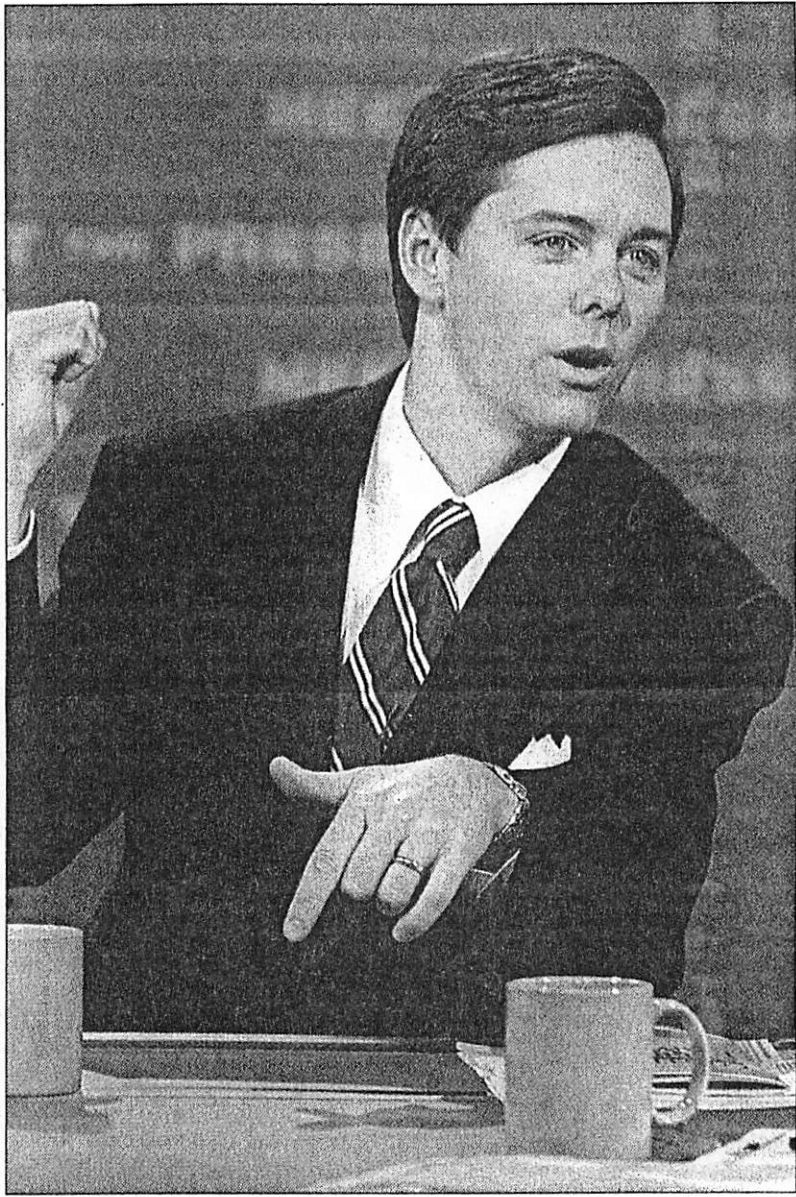
Donald Hodel, the coalition's new president, told the crowd: "The first battle for 2000 will be the candidate who gets Ralph Reed's services."

A parade of the nation's most prominent Republicans offered praise on a slickly produced videotaped testimonial. Typical was a remark by Speaker Newt Gingrich: "I somehow have a hunch that you're going to re-emerge as a national leader."

In his farewell, Reed sounded more like a preacher than an operative as he reminded the audience that "politics may be our calling — but it is not the means for our salvation" and implored everyone to "stay on our knees and aim for heaven."

But just a day earlier, Reed was all politics on a visit to Washington. Sweeping through the halls of Congress, he was not the usual consultant trolling for business. It was as if Reed were seeing whether his eager-to-be clients met his standards.

After sealing a deal with former Rep. Fred Cremeans of Ohio, to help his cam-



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Ralph Reed, former head of the Christian Coalition, is in demand as a consultant.

paign to win back a House seat, Reed joked that he would slip into the district "under the cover of night" because he did not want to upstage the candidate. Bob Kilbanks of Pennsylvania, who is seeking Reed's help in his run for the House, was so awed that he called the consultant, alternately, "Dr. Reed" and "Mr. Reed."

Even Sen. John Ashcroft of Missouri, who was seeking Reed's help in his possible long-shot bid for president, seemed solicitous of Reed as the two sat comfortably, legs crossed, around a coffee table in the senator's office. "I cannot imagine anybody who would not be grateful for an opportunity to share his wisdom," Ashcroft said as he and Reed began to feel each other out about 2000.

Already, Reed said, he has been so deluged with hundreds of inquiries for his services — including nine Republicans who want him to sign up with their possible presidential campaigns for 2000 — that he does not have time to respond to every one. Three candidates for the same post, lieutenant governor of Georgia, are seeking his business.

"I just got my business cards a week ago," said Reed, who is reveling in all the interest. "I don't know how these people got my phone number. I'm averaging 30 to 40 calls a day, just coming in over the transom!"

He has strict guidelines that most potential clients must meet before he will even see them. "You should put in writing what you want me to do," he said. "If it's a candidate, I'll say, 'I want voting history in the district. I want how much money you've raised. I want your campaign plan if you have one. If you don't have one, give me a two-pager on how much money

you expect to be able to raise and what your strategy right now is.' Then, I call them back. If I'm interested after that phone call, then I'll set up a meeting."

Reed's new venture is also noteworthy because many big-name consultants who played a significant role in defining Republican politics in the 1970s and 1980s — including Roger Ailes, Edward Rollins and Roger Stone — are no longer major campaign figures.

A political operative before his years with the Christian Coalition, Reed is not shy about putting himself in the same league as Lee Atwater, the hard-edged strategist who, before dying of a brain tumor in early 1991, said he had found Christ and renounced his tactics. "I used to say I wanted to be a Christian Lee Atwater," he said. "I now think that's the wrong formulation. He came to Christ on his death bed."

Reed said he planned to hire a staff of up to 10 people and would generally favor little-known, up-and-coming politicians and charge them reasonable rates. He said he based his firm in Duluth, an Atlanta suburb, because he wanted to stay out of Washington.

But Reed emphasized that he intended his reach to be national. He has already signed up a handful of candidates around the country for state and congressional seats, including Bob Zemel, a city council member in Anaheim, Calif., who is running against Rep. Loretta Sanchez, a Democrat who ousted the blustery conservative Robert Dornan last year.

Reed also is expected to work on the re-election campaign next year of Gov.

See RALPH REED

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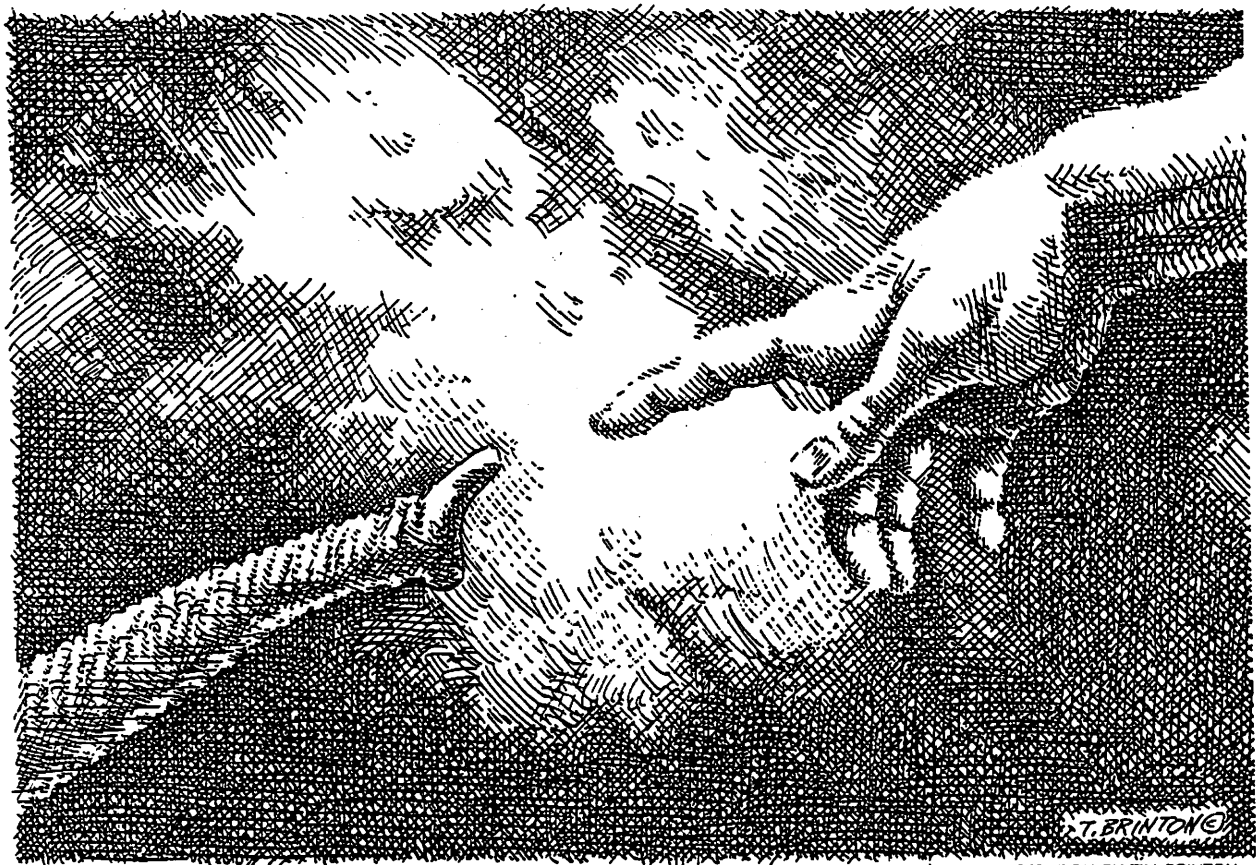


ILLUSTRATION BY TIM BRINTON

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George W. Bush of Texas (whom, in his ultra-insider fashion, he refers to as simply, "W").

In some cases, Reed said, he will help candidates only with his speciality, grass-roots organizing. "But there are other cases," he said, "where they'll call me up and say, 'Look, I'm literally in the cockpit of an F-15 and I don't even know how to drive a stick shift. Help!' So I'll get bids for pollsters. I'll get bids for media. I'll hire the campaign manager. I'll do it all."

When he meets with candidates, Reed quizzes them, rather than the other way around. It seemed almost

painful for Kilbanks, the candidate from Pennsylvania, when he had to turn to other advisers for help in replying to Reed's barrage of queries.

How his possible clients respond, Reed said, "says a lot about their political acumen." But, he added, he would not reject a candidate simply because he or she did not know all the answers. "Those guys need me," he said, "because no one else is helping them."

As much as Reed talks about helping unknowns, his biggest hope seems to be that he can play a major role in the campaign of whoever wins the Republican presidential nomination in 2000. He said he would put off

a decision about whom he will help at least until late 1998; that way, he can keep up contacts with all of them, finding out who has the best prospects and "offering them a lot of free advice." Of the possible contenders at this early stage, Reed has the closest relationships with Bush, Ashcroft and former Vice President Dan Quayle.

Perhaps there is good reason for so many candidates to want Reed on their side. As Rep. Tom DeLay, the House majority whip, said in his tribute on Sept. 12: "His opponents shouldn't rest so easy. Ralph Reed will be back."

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