

GOD AND THE GOP

BY JUDY KEEN

THE COURIER-JOURNAL • THE FORUM • SUNDAY, SEPTEMBER 10, 1995

The writer is with *USA Today*.

RALPH REED calls the presidency "the most over-rated prize in American politics" and says he's not really interested in anointing the GOP nominee.

"I would rather have a thousand school board members and 2,000 state legislators than a single president," says Reed, executive director of the Christian Coalition.

But GOP presidential candidates can't afford to ignore an organization with 1.6 million members who could hold the key to the outcome of GOP elections in up to 21 states.

This weekend, seven of the nine GOP candidates and House Speaker Newt Gingrich are attending the annual meeting of Reed's grass-roots group, which in only six years has acquired proven political clout.

Only Pennsylvania Sen. Arlen Specter, who has strongly criticized the religious right's sway in the party, wasn't invited to the Washington, D.C., gathering. [However, Specter was asked to speak to the group's executive committee.] Specter fought all week for a chance to speak to delegates to challenge the group's opposition to abortion.

California Gov. Pete Wilson, who also supports abortion rights, was invited, but state business keeps him there.

But this is more than another parade of candidates before another interest group. The coalition is a formidable political power and candidates are competing for the group's activists in key states like Iowa and New Hampshire.

In fact, the Coalition's influence, according to a 1994 survey by *Campaigns & Elections* magazine, is "dominant" in Republican parties in 18 states, and "substantial" in 13 more.

Reed ticks off numbers that ensure the coalition will matter in 1996: "42 percent of all Republican primary voters are self-identified born-again evangelicals and about 22 percent are members of the coalition... We're looking at somewhere in the neighborhood of 18 to 20 million primary votes."

The group at first focused on classically conservative issues like its opposition to abortion and support for school prayer. But it has broadened its agenda to include debates on taxes, welfare and Medicare.

It is widely credited with helping the GOP sweep in 1994 congressional elections, but it's not invincible. Some Republicans still balk at taking on controversial social issues, and backing Virginia GOP U.S. Senate candidate Oliver North wasn't enough to elect him in the group's home state.

But the group's success in the voting booth, and Reed's mastery of media is more than enough to have the White House's attention.

"It's pretty clear that (founder) Pat Robertson and the Christian Coalition are pulling the strings in the Republican primary process," says George Stephanopoulos, senior adviser to President Clinton.

More evidence of the Coalition's political might can be found in the number of its foes: a variety of abortion rights and civil liberty groups plan protests this weekend.

The Christian Coalition's real agenda, critics charge, is an extremist move to erase the separation of church and state.

"They want the presidency so they can create what would functionally be a theocracy," says Democratic Party chairman Don Fowler. "They have a very conservative, right-wing agenda... wrapped in a religious cloak."

Says Reed: "I take issue with those who would suggest that religion and politics don't mix... We don't have to pretend to be mainstream. We are mainstream."

Reed, 34, who once aspired to be a college history professor, compares his crusade with the anti-slavery, temperance and civil rights movements: "The foundation of their message was their faith tradition and their faith commitment."

odist church, his first love was history and his first goal a law degree.

He was a competitive swimmer and Little League player, but gravitated in grade school to biographies of Woodrow Wilson and Theodore Roosevelt.

He remembers being "fascinated at what a consequential enterprise public service was... that the entire destiny of nations and peoples hung in the balance in the decisions that were made by those who held the reins of power."

Two events changed his life. The first was his 1983 "faith commitment." Exposure to the "seamy underside of politics... the pursuit of power and the vanity" was the catalyst for his religious rebirth.

Although Reed seems more comfortable talking politics than religion, his relationship with God is most important in his life — his family is second and work third — but he says he doesn't seek direct strategic guidance through prayer.

"That's just not the way my personal faith life works," he says with a laugh that's surprisingly hearty coming from his slight frame. "I don't generally say, 'We've got this tax bill, you know, what do I do?'"

The second epiphany was at a 1989 inaugural party for George Bush, where Reed sat next to Robertson. The televangelist asked Reed for a memo outlining how he'd organize a new grass-roots movement.

Reed's gift for precinct-level organizing helped the group blossom into a force that emphasizes old-fashioned political skills: A memo to members by the South Carolina chapter warns involvement in the Republican Party in 1996 "will be severely limited unless you attend your local party precinct meeting in September."

The Coalition holds training sessions, distributes voter guides in churches and produces campaigns volunteers.

"That's where they make the big difference," says Iowa GOP Chairman Brian Kennedy. "They have people power."

Republican pollster Glen Bolger asks candidates two questions when they call him about working for them: "How much money can you raise and can you get the support of the Christian Coalition?"

Although Reed revels in his starring role, he seems eager not to let himself or his movement become too ambitious.

He calls this weekend's GOP presidential auditions "a very, very critical turning point. I think the thing that messes people up is when they become fascinated by the pursuit of power and corrupted by a desire to obtain power."

So although Reed will say that his members are "evenly divided among the top three or four" candidates, there will be no endorsement.

"If we so chose, we could exercise a tremendous amount of influence over the selection of the Republican nominee," he says. "If we are smart... we will not exercise that option."

"It sounds a little crazy to say you're more ambitious than winning the White House," Reed says, "but what we want is to see people who share our values... sitting in mayoralities, city council seats, county commissions, state legislatures and Congress."

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Ralph Reed: Coalition director

AT A GLANCE

History: Founded in 1989 by religious broadcaster and presidential candidate Pat Robertson to give "Christians a voice in their government."

Headquarters: Chesapeake, Va.

Membership: 1.6 million members organized in 1,500 local chapters in all 50 states.

Budget: \$25 million a year, up from \$14.8 million