

# Mr. Right

The conservative case for George W.

RALPH REED

**I**N Republican circles, the common rationale for nominating George W. Bush for president is, "We have to win"—an understandable sentiment. After eight years of Clinton-Gore, there is a palpable yearning among GOP activists for a Republican in the White House.

In purely electoral terms, the case for Bush's candidacy is formidable. He is the first governor of Texas this century to be elected to consecutive terms. In 1998, on his way to a landslide reelection, he won an estimated 49 percent of the Hispanic vote, 27 percent of the black vote, and 66 percent of the women's vote. His charisma is Reaganesque, and his stump skills are already legendary.

Bush's lead over Al Gore in recent national polls ranges from about 17 to 25 points. He beats Gore even among women and independents, and he is out front in every state except Hawaii, New York, and the vice president's own Tennessee. This margin will no doubt tighten, but a much larger percentage of Bush supporters than Gore supporters say they are certain to vote for their man. Also, Bush will have the funds to win. He is expected to shatter the record for fundraising when he files his latest finance report on June 30, banking over \$18 million—more than twice the amount likely to be raised by his nearest GOP challenger.

Yet for all this overwhelming sense of inevitability, the strongest case for Bush is based on his conservatism, not his viability. He is, in fact, the most electable conservative presidential candidate in a generation. More conservative than his father, George W. has a proven record of conservative accomplishment that the media have largely ignored. A Bush victory in November 2000 would be a conservative triumph, not a moderate one.

Many conservatives are understandably wary of another Bush in the White House. But while Gov. Bush is apparently a loyal son, he has

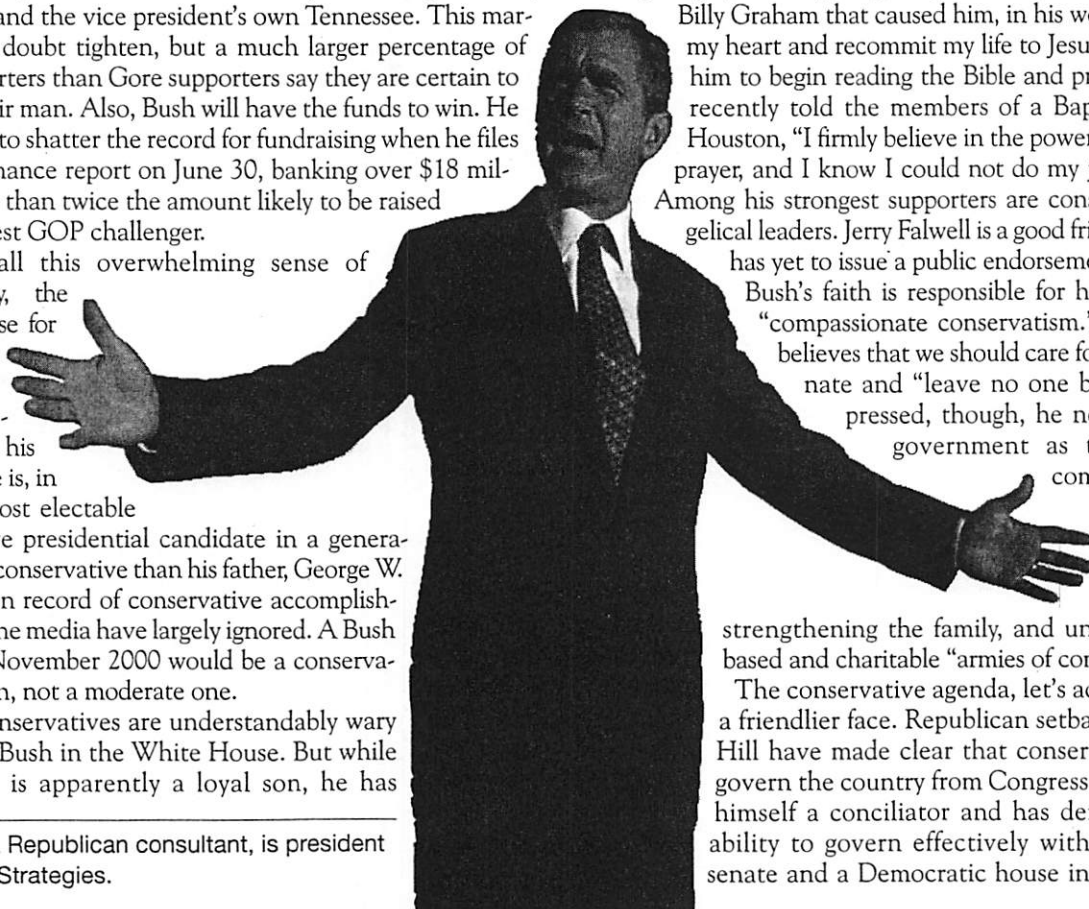
blazed his own trail and has his own ideas. When asked what he thinks of his father's 1990 tax hike, he replies, "It was a big mistake by a good guy."

His conservative preferences are reflected in the advisors he has chosen. Nowhere to be seen are the likes of Richard Darman, President Bush's budget director and a conservative bogeyman. Instead, George W. has tapped Larry Lindsey, a Reaganite and supply-sider, as his top economic advisor. Another advisor is Indianapolis mayor Steve Goldsmith, a celebrated tax-cutter and supporter of faith-based alternatives to welfare. Bush has also consulted Marvin Olasky, whose book *The Tragedy of American Compassion* provided the intellectual framework for conservative welfare reform.

Bush's beliefs are clearly rooted in his Christian faith. After giving up drinking at age 40, Bush had a conversation with Billy Graham that caused him, in his words, to "search my heart and recommit my life to Jesus Christ." It led him to begin reading the Bible and praying daily. He recently told the members of a Baptist church in Houston, "I firmly believe in the power of intercessory prayer, and I know I could not do my job without it." Among his strongest supporters are conservative evangelical leaders. Jerry Falwell is a good friend, though he has yet to issue a public endorsement.

Bush's faith is responsible for his emphasis on "compassionate conservatism." He obviously believes that we should care for the less fortunate and "leave no one behind." When pressed, though, he never advocates government as the source of compassion. He emphasizes cutting taxes, reforming welfare, strengthening the family, and unleashing faith-based and charitable "armies of compassion."

The conservative agenda, let's admit, could use a friendlier face. Republican setbacks on Capitol Hill have made clear that conservatives cannot govern the country from Congress. Bush fashions himself a conciliator and has demonstrated an ability to govern effectively with a Republican senate and a Democratic house in Texas. With a



Mr. Reed, a Republican consultant, is president of Century Strategies.

GOP Congress, he would be even better positioned to lead.

As president, Bush would prod Congress to move on his priorities: cutting taxes, modernizing entitlements, and restoring values. As governor, he signed the largest tax cut in state history in 1997, a \$1 billion property-tax rollback. In 1999, he pushed through the state legislature an even larger tax cut of nearly \$2 billion, a parental-notification bill on abortion, and a bill ending "social promotion" in the schools. He also championed a \$25 million initiative that included funds for an abstinence campaign—a program he believes will not only dramatically reduce teen pregnancy and abortions, but usher in "a new era of responsibility."

As to abortion, Bush's views have been consistently pro-life. He favors, again, parental-consent laws, a ban on partial-birth abortion, and ultimately a constitutional amendment. He supports the pro-life plank in the Republican platform as a laudable statement of the party's principles. He recently recorded a videotaped statement to this effect that satisfied officials of the National Right to Life Committee. Small wonder he has attracted the support of some of the most respected pro-life leaders in the party, including Rep. Chris Smith of New Jersey.

Bush recently took hits from the right for refusing to promise that he would require his Supreme Court nominees to commit to overturning *Roe v. Wade*. But no Republican presidential nominee has ever made such a pledge. Instead, Bush says he will appoint judges who reflect his conservative views—solid constructionists who will "strictly interpret the Constitution, as opposed to using the bench to legislate." According to judicial ethics, judges who promised in advance to vote against *Roe* would be required to recuse themselves

from any decision, defeating the whole purpose of the pledge. Indeed, Clarence Thomas—who said in testimony under oath before the Senate Judiciary Committee that he did not know how he would rule on *Roe*—never met this requirement and could not have been confirmed if he had.

On gun control, Bush favors instant criminal background checks but opposes mandatory trigger locks or other attempts to eviscerate the Second Amendment. In the aftermath of the Littleton tragedy, he instinctively gave sound answers, asserting that the most effective gun control is locking up violent criminals who commit crimes with guns. He has vowed to Americans for Tax Reform that he would not raise taxes. He supports a missile-defense system and has boasted that he doesn't believe in "the new world anything" (a reference to the "new world order" associated with his father).

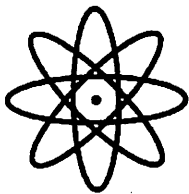
And most refreshingly, Bush has shown a willingness to engage his liberal foes. In 1998, he filed a brief to deny a group of trial lawyers a multibillion-dollar payoff as part of the state's tobacco settlement. He made tort reform a central issue in his first campaign for governor in 1994, and it appears likely he will do so in his presidential campaign. He has been highly critical of Bill Clinton's tendency to "subcontract out public policy to the trial lawyers." This aggressiveness, as much as his stands on the issues, is vital to the future of conservatism.

Even where Bush occasionally disappoints some conservatives, such as on racial preferences, the distance is bridgeable. He maintains that his vision for racial harmony is based on privately led "affirmative action," not government-mandated "affirmative action." At the University of Texas, Bush-appointed trustees phased out quotas but saw the number of

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Critics argue that Bush is running a campaign of platitudes, not specifics. In fact, he has indicated precisely where he stands on taxes, abortion, gun control, and Kosovo. A presidential campaign is like an Apollo rocket launch: It arcs across the sky in booster-like stages. Bush has passed through the exploratory and announcement stages, and will flesh out his positions with ten-point plans and the like in a series of major speeches this fall. No presidential candidate releases his budget plan in his announcement speech; he must first establish broad themes and introduce himself to the electorate.

Bush understands the Republican nomination must be earned and not inherited. And he is prepared to earn it by making clear that, in his words, "I won't use my office as a mirror to reflect public opinion. And I'll be guided by conservative principles." NATIONAL REVIEW's William Rusher once observed that Barry Goldwater and Ronald Reagan believed the same things—only Goldwater said them with a frown, while Reagan said them with a smile. Bush believes what conservatives believe, and he will give conservatism a smile again. That will make all the difference. NR

## Leap of Faith

How W. injected religion  
into public life.

JOE LOCONTE

**J**UST as Bill Clinton once declared the era of big government over, Al Gore now claims that the "hollow secularism" of liberal government has run its course.

In this, he pays homage to his chief rival, George W. Bush. The Texas governor has made the charitable work of churches and other religious groups the engine of his "compassionate conservative" agenda. Indeed, no political leader has used his bully pulpit more effectively to give religion a central role in reversing cultural decay. In the process, Bush has set off a bold—and risky—experiment in church-state cooperation, one that is likely to become an important issue in the presidential race.

During a recent interview, Bush explained his rationale: "I'll put it to you this way: Republicans have asked for the welfare system as we know it to be dismantled. The question is, Will we promote, encourage, and foster social entrepreneurship to take the place of government?"

Bush's challenge echoes one made a decade ago by Marvin Olasky, author of *The Tragedy of American Compassion*. Olasky argued that conservatives should reclaim compassion from the Left—not by enlarging the welfare state, but by tak-

ing a cue from the poverty-fighters of the 19th century, who emphasized character and faith. "The better you understand what real, Biblical compassion demands of the poor and those helping the poor, the more conservative you are in terms of social policy," says Olasky, now an informal advisor to Bush.

In 1996, Bush became the first governor to issue an executive order prohibiting state agencies from snubbing or secularizing religious charities. He assembled a task force charged with unprying the state's regulatory grip on faith-based groups. He intervened in behalf of Teen Challenge, a Bible-based drug-rehab center in San Antonio, when a state agency tried to shut it down for not bowing to state licensing rules. Today the organization is mostly free from state oversight.

Bush passed legislation in 1997 that promotes prison ministries, deregulates religious drug-treatment programs, and allows child-care centers, most of them church-based, to seek private accreditation. And, in the most recent legislative session, he pushed through a religious-liberty bill that makes it harder for government to muzzle religious expression. "Every time I hear the governor speak, he brings up religious programs and the importance of them," says Jim Heurich, the executive director of Teen Challenge. "It's not only had an impact on us, but on every faith-based organization in Texas."

Some conservatives worry that state support invites state control. Experience is on their side: Charities on the public dole tend to look just like their government counterparts—therapeutic, judgment-free, and secular. Bush is clearly alive to the dangers. "There's a huge reluctance by people of faith to interface with government for fear of having to lose their mission," he says. "But government's role is to provide fertile ground for those entrepreneurs to flourish."

Central to his strategy is the "charitable choice" provision of the 1996 welfare law, which prohibits government from bleaching the religious content from programs that receive federal money. At Bush's order, the Texas Department of Human Services added the law's protections to all of its contracts with private providers. Claims department official Elizabeth Darling Seale: "We have altered the whole environment of an enormous agency."

This approach is beginning to bear fruit. Bush's plan to voucherize welfare services—inviting more congregations to provide child care, job training, and housing—is catching on with agencies throughout the state. Lutheran Social Services recently won a contract to train church volunteers as mentors who help keep ex-welfare recipients employed. At least two dozen religious drug-treatment centers have secured exemptions from state licensing laws, while a peer-review group has formed to grant private accreditation. The newly created Texas Association of Christian Child-Care Agencies is helping day-care providers bypass state rules unrelated to health and safety.

At Bush's invitation, Prison Fellowship has set up a Christian prison—the first in the United States—within a state facility. Privately funded and completely voluntary, the 18-month regimen makes Christian conversion and character training its explicit goal. The program is being hailed as a powerful way to cut recidivism rates among convicted felons.

Mike Doyle of the Cornerstone Assistance Network, a coalition of 120 churches helping the homeless, is a convert to the new thinking. "I considered government the enemy, but

Mr. Loconte is William E. Simon Fellow at the Heritage Foundation and a commentator on religion for National Public Radio.