

COMMENTARY

DONALD LAMBRO

Ralph Reed's decision to leave the Christian Coalition and become a national political consultant frees him to singlemindedly pursue his lifelong ambition to manage a presidential campaign.

This is not only the unanimous forecast being voiced by Republican Party advisers and Reed allies who have followed and nurtured his steady ascent up the ladder of leadership in the grass-roots conservative movement since he stepped into the national political spotlight nearly a decade ago. It is also the hope of many throughout the party who are searching for new leaders who know how to win elections.

He has told his closest confidants that he wants to become the next Lee Atwater, the high-powered and cunning Southern-born political adviser who was the undisputed master political tactician of the 1980s. And for many conservative leaders and grass-roots organizers, his entry onto the larger national political stage is welcome news in a troublesome time for their party and the movement.

We have fallen into a lackluster, directionless and factionalized era in Republican politics, despite the GOP's remarkable political success, which all too often goes unnoticed: control of Congress after four decades in the minority. Control of 32 governorships, including the biggest electoral states in the country (except Florida). Control of nearly half of the state legislatures. And a populist agenda based on limited government, low tax rates and the renewal of traditional values that has to some measure even influenced parts of the Democratic Party.

Yet the conservative movement seems to be coming apart at its political seams, fighting among themselves over ideological purity, bickering over economic and cultural issues that once united them under Ronald Reagan — at the cost of ignoring their enemies on the left, who have blocked much of their reform agenda.

There are many reasons for this dreary state of affairs. But the chief one is lack of leadership — both in the national party hierarchy and among the professional strategists who are critical to the process of identifying and elevating leaders who can reinspire and reunify the GOP's once-mighty coalition and give voice to the nation's hopes and aspirations.

In a party that once had an abundance of brilliant political strategists, it now seems to be overpopulated with overpaid pollsters and consultants who couldn't win an election for dog catcher. Ralph Reed is part of a new generation of grass-roots, activist strategists who took Pat Robertson's Christian Coalition and forged it into one of the mightiest political armies of the last half-century of American politics.

While Mr. Reed's work in that endeavor has narrowly identified him as a leader of the religious right, his influence has actually stretched beyond the Christian Coalition into a much broader political menu. He widened its agenda beyond the cultural, moral, pro-life issues that Mr. Robertson has long championed to issues

Rescue mission in mind

embracing higher economic growth, family tax cuts, urban revitalization and racial and religious unity — exploring new, fertile ground for his growing movement.

Perhaps his most important legacy was his strategic decision to support conservatives who were not in 100 percent agreement with the Christian Coalition on every issue. His organization's support was crucial in helping to elect Sens. Kay Bailey Hutchison of Texas and Paul Coverdell of Georgia, among others who did not support the Coalition on adding a right-to-life amendment to the Constitution.

Mr. Reed argued that if the Christian Coalition hoped to build a successful governing majority to effect change, it had to build alliances around many issues based on fundamental core principles. But it could not afford to turn its back on political candidates who supported them just 95 percent of the time.

In the last couple of years he has reached out even further, building new coalitions and political bridges to Catholics with the founding of the new Catholic Alliance and to conservative Jews, offering help to black leaders to help rebuild burned churches, a new program to address problems in our inner cities through school choice, spiritual and moral revitalization and local, self-help community activism.

In addition to his skills as a grass-roots organizer, Mr. Reed is a gifted political message-maker and polemicist. He has sharpened these skills over the past half-dozen years, and he is now ready step to leave the narrower confines of the religious right and move out into the much larger national political arena and ply his skills.

He is ready to plunge into the midterm elections, working in some of the gubernatorial and congressional races to show what he can do in the real, rough-and-tumble world of hardball political campaigning. But longer term, he is looking for the next national conservative leader with presidential ambitions and the political talent to recapture the White House.

My guess is Mr. Reed is going to be a player in the presidential sweepstakes of 2000 and beyond. After the electoral disasters of 1992 and 1996, the universal complaint throughout the GOP's rank-and-file was how much they needed strategists of the caliber of Lee Atwater. Well, Ralph Reed is now ready and eager to step into his shoes.

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