

The Political Forum

*A review of social and political trends and events
impacting the world's financial markets*

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WILL THE CHRISTIAN RIGHT DESTROY THE GOP? Mark L. Melcher

Without a doubt, the question I am asked most frequently these days during the Q&A on the speech circuit is, "What is the Republican Party going to do about the Christian right?"

Invariably, this question is asked by a concerned Republican who is afraid that the GOP is about to be taken over by "religious fanatics." In the short run, the specific concern usually is that all chance of a substantial GOP victory in the November elections is about to be destroyed. Over the longer term, the fear is that the Christian right will split the party and thus assure Democratic domination of the United States for years to come.

The short answer to the question is that the threat to the GOP from the Christian right is overblown. In fact, it looks increasingly to me like the Republicans will pick up a minimum of 25 seats in the House in November, and that they have an outside chance at gaining control of the Senate. This is hardly the picture of a party in the throes of internal disintegration.

But this week, I thought I'd take a stab at a more extensive reply to the question. This is, I think, especially appropriate in light of recent remarks by Bill Clinton criticizing some leaders of the Christian right, and by the Chairman of the Democratic Congressional Campaign Committee, Rep. Vic Fazio's (D., Calif.) charge that the Christian right is a "radical," "intolerant" fringe force that threatens to take control of the Republican Party. This possibility, Fazio adds, "is what the American people fear most."

For starters, I think it is important to point out that the Christian right is not some sort of new cult that will eventually "go away," or whose members will someday commit mass suicide or all be killed by federal agents.

On the contrary, as I said in an article several weeks ago, I think that religious controversy will dominate American politics in the years to come in a manner and intensity that is unprecedented

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in U.S. history. Furthermore, I think the outcome will determine the kind of economic system under which the nation will operate in the 21st century.

I intend to write more about this latter point in a future article. In the meantime, let me say that my prediction that religious controversy is going to intensify and last for a long time is based on the belief that its origin lies in the on-going collapse in the American social order.

Evidence of this breakdown can be found in rapidly rising rates of violent crime, drug abuse, venereal disease, out-of-wedlock births, divorce and teenage suicide, among other things. Such periods of societal decay inevitably generate greatly increased religious activity in all facets of the social order, including politics. This one is no exception.

The cause of the on-going societal rot is debatable. But, like it or not, a large number of Christians believe it to be directly related to what they see as a take over by the secular left of society's principal political and social institutions. These include the elected federal government, the huge and rapidly growing federal bureaucracy, state and local governments across the nation, the media, public school systems and academia.

There are, in my opinion, two possible outcomes to the on-going effort by the Christian right to "take back" control of these institutions. The first is that they will win. The second is that their movement will run out of steam, due to the fact that the "secular" opposition has managed to arrest the social decay and to establish an orderly society with broad support among a majority of America's middle class. It can be safely assumed, I think, that neither of these possibilities is likely to occur any time soon.

Having established that the fight will almost certainly be around for a long time, let me now say that I think there is almost no chance that the GOP will be split into warring factions by the Christian right. On the contrary, I think the GOP will come to appreciate this group in much the same way as the Democratic Party does the labor movement: as a source of raw votes and solid, dependable organizational and financial support.

Speculation that a GOP rift is inevitable is, in my opinion, based on the erroneous assumption that the religious right is so uniformly intolerant, fanatical and incapable of compromise that people who don't share their beliefs entirely will be forced to disassociate from them. Frankly, I think this is wishful thinking on the part of some Democrats. In fact, I think Democrats, and some Republicans, will be surprised at how "reasonable," how willing to compromise, (how "canny," if you will) much of the Christian right has become on political matters.

It is worth noting here that traditional Christians believe that man is by nature imperfect, and thus cannot create a utopia on earth. For this reason, American Christians have not been particularly interested in the past with mixing their religion with political action. In fact, the source of today's political activism by the Christian right had little to do with national politics, but grew out of a concern about changes that were taking place in the public schools that they believed were antithetical to the values they were trying to teach their children.

In theory at least, this makes the Christian right more ideologically inclined toward political compromise than their radical counterparts from the secular left, for whom social engineering via political action is as near to a religious experience as many have ever felt.

Whether this will play out in practice remains to be seen. But it should be noted that Christian-right groups were active in the recent victories of Senators Paul Coverdell of Georgia and Kay Bailey Hutchison of Texas, and of Governor Christine Todd Whitman of New Jersey, despite the fact that all three hold pro-choice positions on abortion.

Also, in California, the Christian right recently significantly softened its abortion platform in order to help pro-choice Republican Governor Pete Wilson in his campaign against Democrat Kathleen Brown. Two years earlier conservative Christians demanded and won a strict anti-abortion plank on the party's platform only to see their candidates widely rejected by voters.

It is, in fact, in their attitude toward abortion that one can see early signs of a change in the Christian right's political strategy. Recently, the conservative think-tanks, "Project for the Republican Future," and the "Ethics and Public Policy Center," jointly proposed a new political position paper for pro-life Republicans that would represent a significant departure from their past, adamant efforts to include a call for a constitutional amendment banning abortion in the party's platform.

What these two organizations, headed by William Kristol and George Weigel respectively, suggest is that the GOP continue to publicly declare its opposition to abortion, but shift its tactical role away from attempting the overturn of *Roe v. Wade* and concentrate instead on efforts in the individual state legislatures to "curb the incidence of abortion by seeking maximum feasible legal protection for the unborn."

"We support," their statement reads, "efforts to return to the people their constitutional right to deliberate on this question in their legislatures. We endorse state-based efforts to expand the boundaries of legal protection for the unborn. And we flatly reject the use of public funds, at the state or federal level, to pay for or encourage abortion."

Such a position basically acknowledges current law, which allows states to impose some legal restrictions on abortion. According to Kristol and Weigel, both of whom are pro-life, their strategy "recognizes the need for an extensive and ongoing process of public persuasion." Kristol claims the strategy is Lincolnian, in the sense that Lincoln wanted to turn away from slavery gradually while preserving the union. He and Weigel, he says, want to end abortion gradually, without further injuring a society that he says has been "deeply divided by the abortion debate for over a generation."

Whether the efforts of Kristol and Weigel will prevent a GOP intra-party war remains to be seen, but it is worth noting that Gary Bauer of the adamantly pro-life Family Research Council greeted the proposal warmly, saying "it's desperately needed and well timed." Ralph Reed of the Christian Coalition also appeared to approve of the idea, noting that all he asks is that the GOP be pro-life and on record as in favor of eventually overturning *Roe v. Wade*, which of course, the Kristol-Weigel proposal is.

It is worth pointing out here that there is a theological argument for a temperate approach to abortion by the Christian right. I found it in the June/July, 1992 issue of one of my favorite magazines, Richard John Neuhaus' First Things. The article is entitled "Abortion and Political Compromise" by Christopher Wolfe, Professor of Political Science at Marquette University.

Space does not permit a detailed account of Wolfe's argument, but basically he says that a good way to find what he calls a "morally acceptable political compromise on abortion" would be to look at St. Thomas Aquinas' answer to the problem of "whether it belongs to the human law to repress all vices?" Note, Wolfe says, that the term "vices" here is specifically defined by St. Thomas to refer not to personal foibles but to clear moral evils.

Anyway, according to Wolfe, St. Thomas "says that laws imposed on men should be in keeping with their condition, for (quoting Isidore) law should be 'possible both according to nature, and according to the customs of the country.'" In addition, Wolfe says, St. Thomas also maintains that "the danger of imposing on imperfect men precepts that they cannot bear is 'the precepts are despised, and those men, from contempt, break out into other evils, worse still.'"

In closing, let me stress that I am not saying here that everything within the ranks of the GOP is hunky-dory. While I think the growth of the Christian right will on balance benefit the party, there is no doubt that Christian right contains within its ranks a number of people who are well outside the mainstream of American public opinion, who are adamantly opposed to compromise on any issue about which they are interested, and whose identification with the GOP will cost the party some individual political battles and some portion of their natural constituency. The same can, of course, be said about the Democratic Party.

The full extent of the damage these individuals can do to the Republican Party depends at least in part on whether the GOP can convince middle America that their more extreme members are less dangerous than the ultra left wing contingent of the Democratic party. After all, in the final analysis, the war we are discussing here is for the hearts of mind of the uncommitted mainstream America. More than likely, the November elections will provide some clues to where these hearts and minds are headed on the issue of religiosity.

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