

Carter's criticism of Bush draws reactions: Huckabee withdraws from New Baptist Covenant engagement

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Republican presidential candidate Mike Huckabee has canceled plans to speak at the New Baptist Covenant Celebration next January because of organizer Jimmy Carter's recent criticism of President Bush. The Democratic ex-president later softened his evaluation of Bush after Huckabee and other Republicans decried Carter's denunciation of Bush's White House performance.

Carter criticized Bush's foreign policy in a May 19 interview with the *Arkansas Democrat-Gazette*. "I think as far as the adverse impact on the nation around the world, this administration has been the worst in history," Carter said.

A Huckabee spokesperson confirmed that the candidate and former Baptist pastor is withdrawing from the unprecedented pan-Baptist gathering January 30-February 1, organized by Carter and Mercer University president Bill Underwood to promote unity among the continent's Baptists.

"While I continue to have great respect for President Carter as a fellow Christian believer and Baptist, I'm deeply disappointed by the unusually harsh comments made in my state this past weekend regarding President Bush," Huckabee, former governor of Arkansas, told the *Florida Baptist Witness*, a conservative newspaper affiliated with the Florida Baptist Convention.

Carter, in a May 21 appearance on NBC's *Today Show*, said his remarks were "careless or misinterpreted." When he made the comment to the Arkansas newspaper, Carter said, he was responding to a question comparing the Bush administration's foreign policy to that of President Nixon.

Huckabee was one of three prominent Republican politicians added to the New Baptist Covenant lineup May 17 in an announcement by Carter and others. The

other Republicans are senators Lindsay Graham of South Carolina and Charles Grassley of Iowa. Among those already on board to speak are Carter, former president Bill Clinton, former vice president Al Gore and journalist and author Bill Moyers.

Organizers hope to attract 20,000 people to the Atlanta gathering, billed as the broadest Baptist meeting in North America since Baptists split over slavery before the Civil War. But the largest Baptist denomination, the Southern Baptist Convention—of which Huckabee is a member—has declined to participate.

Though the meeting will occur amid the presidential-nomination season, Carter eschewed any political intent for the gathering. Bill Clinton's involvement sparked criticism contending that the event would become a campaign rally for his wife, Hillary Clinton, the Democratic presidential front-runner.

Carter acknowledged May 17 that the Covenant effort was slowed initially by criticism that the group was dominated by Democrats.

In Carter's interview with the *Arkansas Democrat-Gazette*, he also said that Bush's efforts to expand government funding of churches and other religious organizations that provide social services—the so-called faith-based initiatives—violate the former president's religious principles. "As a traditional Baptist, I've always believed in separation of church and state and honored that premise when I was president," he said, adding, "and so have all other presidents, I might say, except this one."

The White House, asked May 20 about Carter's criticism, dismissed the former president as "increasingly irrelevant." The brush-off from Bush spokesperson Tony Fratto came during a regular press briefing at Bush's ranch in Crawford, Texas, where Bush was on vacation. -*Associated Baptist Press*