Ups and downs of the Religious Right: Divisions and personalities

by Leon Howell in the April 19, 2000 issue

It's a puzzle: the Christian Coalition is fighting off extinction, but the Religious Right seems as powerful as ever. "Christian Coalition losing clout" headlined the (Norfolk) *Virginian-Pilot* on February 19, the day of the pivotal South Carolina Republican presidential primary. The article quoted Furman University professor James Guth, a longtime chronicler of the coalition: "If there's any organizational activity going on, it's very low key." Yet religious conservatives turned out in record numbers that day—they totaled about 30 percent of the vote—and by an almost 3-1 margin supported George W. Bush, providing the Texas governor with a tidy victory over Senator John McCain.

In the Virginia Republican primary on February 29, religious conservatives represented 20 percent of the turnout, and they voted 8-1 for Bush. In the Republican primaries on Super Tuesday, March 7, 24 percent of Ohio voters identified themselves with the Religious Right, 20 percent in California, 16 percent in New York and 8 percent in Massachusetts. Bush was the choice in all the states except Massachusetts.

The Christian Coalition had done it again, exulted coalition president Pat Robertson and former executive director Ralph Reed, now a political consultant to Bush and others. Not so fast, said Guth. "What South Carolina showed," he told me, "was that there is no diminution in religious conservative participation in the Republican Party. But many of those groups have little to do with the coalition itself."

Guth pointed to Southern Baptists, the locally strong Presbyterian Church in America, and the supporters of Bob Jones University as examples of conservative religious groups that are distinct from the coalition but whose members vote Republican. The National Right to Life Committee also played a strong role in South Carolina in mobilizing voters against McCain (who was labeled soft on abortion, though he and Bush have virtually identical positions on the issue).

If the Religious Right is to make a significant contribution to a Bush victory in November, it may do so without strong leadership from the Christian Coalition. Founded in 1989 by Pat Robertson, the coalition says on its Web page that it represents a “growing group of over 2 million members and supporters” and that it has 2,000 local chapters. The site provides e-mail contacts for all 50 states.

But the reality is quite different. The coalition is about $2 million in debt, said Roberta Combs, its executive vice president, as reported by Liz Szabo of the *Virginian-Pilot* in December. At the time the coalition was being sued by Steven Winchell and Associates for $386,000 which the fund-raising firm said it was owed for the $7 million it had collected for the coalition.

Organizationally, it’s been tough-sledding for the coalition since Ralph Reed left as director in July 1997. Cause and effect are much debated. Reed combined charisma and organizing skills that gave the coalition focus and drive. He had a measured style more soothing than Robertson’s. But according to Combs, Reed left the coalition with a $3 million debt.

Public tax forms reveal that the coalition had income of $26 million in 1996, but only $18 million in 1997. The two people who succeeded Reed as director were both gone by the end of 1999, when Robertson assumed control again. About a dozen other key staff members have left or been fired, some because of budget shortfalls. More than one blame Combs (who headed the South Carolina chapter until last summer, when she was brought to headquarters as Robertson’s deputy) for dismissing anyone who disagreed with her.

Last June the coalition announced that it had given up its ten-year quest for tax-exempt status from the Internal Revenue Service. The IRS rejected the nonprofit bid in 1996, but the coalition did not admit this until March, when Jay Sekulow of the American Center for Law and Justice (Robertson’s answer to the American Civil Liberties Union) filed a suit against the IRS to gain tax exemption for the coalition. The IRS by law is not permitted to comment on the case, but it is widely assumed that the coalition’s strong ties to the Republican Party and its all but formal endorsement of Republican candidates disqualified it from tax-exemption. One result of the IRS’s stance may be that individual congregations, fearing the loss of their own tax exemptions, will decline to pass out coalition voter guides.

The coalition has a strong presence only in about seven states, including South Carolina, Texas, Florida and Oklahoma, Laurie Goodstein of the *New York Times* reported last August. As for its membership and the vaunted voter guides, Goodstein wrote: “The Coalition, former leaders say, distorted the size of its base by keeping thousands of names of dead people, wrong addresses and duplicates on its list of supporters, printed millions of voter guides that [they] expected never would be distributed, and hired temporary workers to look busy in the mail room and phone banks to impress reporters and camera crews.” An internal coalition document revealed that only 428,000 membership renewal notices were mailed out in 1998, *USA Today* reported. *Fortune* magazine, in its annual survey of the most powerful Washington lobbying groups, in 1999 ranked the coalition (ranked seventh in 1998)as 35th among the 114 it listed—“a surprising fall from grace.” The magazine continued: “The Coalition apparently was so eager to hide its decline that Randy Tate,” former executive director, had filled out forms in such a way that *Fortune* disqualified two of them.

Among the casualties of the sharp budget cuts that began at the end of 1997 were two much-touted outreach programs that Reed had hoped would expand the definition of the Religious Right. One was the Samaritan Project to encourage minority, largely African-American, participation. The other was the Catholic Alliance. As recently as March, Charles Colson wrote in a *New York Times* op-ed piece that a Catholic-evangelical coalition could change politics dramatically in this country. But six years of effort on this front have ended with little organizational success.

When the coalition reorganized last summer after losing the tax battle, it borrowed its Texas affiliate’s nonprofit status to continue its work from Chesapeake, Virginia. (Whether that will entangle the coalition with the IRS again is an open question.) And it announced the creation of the Christian Coalition International (CCI), a for-profit group that might establish a political action committee (PAC) to support candidates and create chapters around the world. Szabo reported that in December CCI had one employee.

The coalition announced in November that it planned to move its headquarters from Chesapeake to a Virginia suburb of Washington, D.C., by the end of the year. The move hasn’t yet happened.

The coalition held a much-publicized “Women Changing America Conference” outside Washington in early March. In her invitation, Combs wrote that at this

meeting “an army of dedicated workers, impassioned and prepared for battle, will be formed to lift up their voices in government again.” No more than 200 turned up, and Robert Boston of Americans United for Separation of Church and State said it was a “low-energy gathering.”

The tale of unanswered phone calls is one small sign of the problems besetting the coalition. In the past when I have called its press office, I got immediate professional responses. Those press people are no longer employed. Now only Combs talks to the media. And she never returned multiple requests for information. I didn’t take it personally. State coalition directors also complain that the very busy Combs does not answer their calls either. Some things continue. Biweekly online newsletters alert recipients to hot subjects, legislation and events. The annual Road to Victory conference brought as many as 3,000 people to Washington in early October to hear all the Republican presidential candidates (except McCain) and Republican congressional leaders. The conferees also were told of ambitious plans for the 2000 elections: “Victory 21” would spend $21 million to mobilize tens of thousands of people to deliver 70 million voter guides and mobilize church members to vote. That seems highly unlikely now. Who will do the work? Whence will come the money? Could the controversy created by John McCain’s attack on Robertson and Jerry Falwell help the coalition? It’s possible, said John C. Green, University of Akron professor who has long analyzed the Religious Right. “They thrive on adversity.” In any event, the Religious Right consists of much more than the Christian Coalition. The Religious Right is deeply rooted in American life. Many of its adherents have become politically active because they believe society does not reflect their core beliefs—which include returning officially sanctioned prayer to schools, restoring traditional families and opposing abortion. They have energy, grievance, motive, opportunity. They will express their views, regardless of what happens to the Christian Coalition or the Moral Majority or Focus on the Family.

Robertson, Falwell and James Dobson continue to jockey for national leadership of the movement—with Gary Bauer also part of the drama. Robertson himself is much more than the Christian Coalition and is not defined by it. He appears almost daily on *The 700 Club*, the most successful religious television show in history; he is chancellor of Regent University; and he heads the aggressive American Center for Law and Justice. On March 24, Robertson celebrated his 70th birthday with a party at the Washington Hilton and Towers. Apparently it took some effort to bring in the announced crowd of 3,000. The original ticket price was $100, but by mid-March that

was reduced to $50. The day before the event, a friend of mine was offered several tickets for free. Robertson, who surrendered his Southern Baptist ordination in 1987 to run for president, was reordained March 27 not by a church but by an “ordination council” of six at Regent University.

Falwell has not been a major force in national politics lately. He devoted most of the 1990s to stanching the financial bleeding at his Liberty University in Lynchburg, Virginia. He got a reprieve when Art Williams, a retired insurance executive, made a $70 million donation to the school. He also received $3.5 million from a group related to the Unification Church of Sun Myung Moon. He made a couple of attempts to put together new national organizations, but they went nowhere. So it was something of a surprise that McCain linked him with Robertson as “evil influences” on the Republican Party. The attack had unexpected consequences. Falwell announced in late March the founding of The People of Faith 2000, an organization designed to distribute voter registration cards through churches and direct mail. His intention is to raise $10 million, register 10 million “pro-family, pro-life voters” and energize millions more. He will offer donors tax-exemption through Jerry Falwell Ministries.

It’s also a surprise (except that Bauer likely suggested it) that McCain cited James Dobson as a positive example of evangelical presence in the party. Dobson had harshly attacked McCain. McCain, he said, not only has waffled on opposing abortions, but “has a violent temper . . . can be extremely confrontational and profane when angry . . . was implicated in the so-called Keating scandal with four other senators,” among other things.

Dobson’s Focus on the Family is a colossus. It has a budget of about $130 million for 2000, according to the FOF press office—more than seven times as large as the Christian Coalition’s. It claims 2.1 million members. FOF, with a staff of 1,300 at its Colorado Springs home, handles about 55,000 letters a week asking for advice. Millions hear Dobson dispense advice on child raising every day and his column appears in 550 newspapers, more than any save “Dear Abby” and “Ann Landers.”

He and Bauer—who left the Washington-based Family Research Council in January 1999 to launch his bid for president—have worked closely together through the years. Their organizations were legally joined from 1988 to 1992. Dobson and Bauer coauthored *Children at Risk* in 1990. The two groups separated legally in 1992 but remained “soulmates,” in Bauer’s phrase. Observers think the division occurred to

protect Focus on the Family's tax-exempt status and to allow Bauer to be more directly political.

Bauer and Ralph Reed had many differences as they competed for influence in Washington. Reed welcomed pro-choice Colin Powell into the presidential race in 1995, which appalled Bauer, who is staunchly opposed to abortion. Nor was he excited that Reed and the Christian Coalition supported Robert Dole in 1996. Bauer criticized Reed's pragmatism. "Nobody's going to put on your tombstone, 'He had a place at the table,'" Bauer once jibed. "The thing you want on your tombstone is, 'He liberated the slaves' or 'He stopped the slaughter of the innocents.'"

Unlike others on the right, Bauer has made China's human rights violations a campaign theme. He sounds like Ralph Nader on that topic, charged Robertson, who himself is involved in a joint venture in Chinese television with Indonesia's Riady family (the family that was featured in the investigation of Clinton-Gore fund raising in 1996). Bauer also supports campaign finance reform—something firmly resisted by the Christian Coalition and the National Right to Life Committee, which is why they have opposed McCain so vigorously.

So it was no surprise that when Bauer ended his campaign, he was attracted to McCain's efforts to redefine the GOP. This put him in direct conflict with Reed and Robertson. "I don't know why Gary is doing this," said Robertson on *The 700 Club*. "He didn't do well in the primaries. Maybe he's looking for a job." Dobson and Falwell issued stinging public criticisms of Bauer for endorsing McCain.

Bauer stood with McCain at Virginia Beach during the attack on Robertson and Falwell. But two days later Bauer backtracked, calling McCain's words "unwarranted, ill-advised and divisive." He campaigned no more for McCain.

What's next for Bauer is not clear. He's burned a lot of bridges. He is not going back to the Family Research Council. Last September *Christianity Today* reported on its Web site that more than 60 percent of FRC staff voted against his return. The primary reason: a desire not to have a highly partisan political figure at its helm.

Bauer could use as his base Campaign for Working Families, a PAC he founded in 1997 that raised a remarkable $7 million for the 1998 elections. He might employ that list and one from his campaign to follow Robertson's model to build a new group. Yet he indicated that he was unlikely to return to the nonprofit world when he withdrew from the presidential campaign.

Has Dobson’s criticism of Bauer created distance between the two? When asked, Paul Detrich, longtime spokesperson for Focus on the Family, said that as an FOF employee he did not comment on political matters. But he could state that there was “no deliberate attempt by FOF to separate from Gary. His activities in running for president naturally separated him from us. Because he was engaged in a political campaign, we could no longer interview him on the radio or run his columns in our magazines. Now that he has resigned from the Family Research Council, it’s not clear what ties we would have.”

The fortunes of the Religious Right are now closely tied to George W. Bush. The Religious Right expects that a Bush victory—and a Republican Congress—will allow it to fulfill a large part of its agenda. But the Religious Right couldn’t accomplish much under Reagan, and it’s possible that Bush will pay only lip service to the cause. What’s more certain is that a Bush defeat will lead to yet more division and recalculation.