

The Right Re-Tools as a ‘Resistance Movement’

The failure of right-wing leaders to coalesce behind a presidential candidate early in 2008 led some pundits to write, yet again, an obituary for the political influence of the religious and political right. But the movement maintained enough strength within the Republican Party to keep John McCain from choosing his preferred running mate and used the nomination of Sarah Palin as a way to energize its base. It also was able to exercise significant political muscle in state-wide ballot initiatives banning marriage equality in California, Arizona, and Florida and outlawing adoption by gay people in Arkansas.

Now that the Religious Right and the Republican Party are regrouping from significant electoral defeats, many progressives as well as pundits are tempted once again to dismiss the movement or the continued threat it poses to the constitutional principles of equality, privacy, and separation of church and state. But the legal, political, grassroots, and media infrastructure that has been built steadily over recent decades is still largely in place. It maintains a powerful ability to shape public debate and mobilize millions of Americans. And it is finding a renewed focus in opposing the Obama administration and obstructing progressive change.

Right Declares War on the Obama Administration

Last week more than 8,000 right-wing political leaders, media personalities, and activists gathered in Washington D.C. for the annual Conservative Political Action Conference (CPAC). Watching GOP officials and other speakers made it clear that the movement sees its future not in cooperating with the Obama administration but declaring war on it. Mike Huckabee warned that the U.S. was becoming the Union of American Socialist Republics, while Sen. James DeMint claimed that Americans were ready to take to the streets to stop America’s slide into socialism. CPAC made it clear that right-wing media, religious and political organizations are seeking renewed energy as a “resistance movement” – and are mobilizing their supporters by denigrating the Democratic Party and the Obama administration as enemies of American values.

That effort began as soon as the votes were counted last November. “I knew, moments after the election results came in, that I was now part of the resistance movement,” says Wendy Wright of Concerned Women for America. CWA is mobilizing religious conservatives with the claim that “We face a president and Congress more hostile to unborn children, to marriage, to religious freedom, to free speech, to protecting our country than has ever existed in our history.” Right-wing Catholic leader Deacon Keith Fournier similarly pledged to be part of a “massive resistance.”

Republican Party leaders are being successfully egged on by the likes of Rush Limbaugh and Newt Gingrich to do what they can to try to make the Obama administration a failure. The fruits of this right-wing campaign and its embrace by national Republican leaders can be seen in the near-total party-line opposition to the economic stimulus bill and opposition to new Obama budget proposals. And the strategy of repeatedly referring to President Obama’s economic plans as a “socialist” plot is echoed throughout the right wing media machine. The strategy is gaining some success with the recently reported decline in support for Obama among Republicans even as his overall public support remains high.

There is clear historical precedent for this strategy. The Religious Right and its right-wing political allies have been declared dead after every election setback, but the Right has instead used those times to regroup, focus its energies on building strength in the grassroots, and work with right-wing media allies to savagely attack those in power. Actually, the Right as a movement has often thrived more in open opposition than as part of a governing coalition. When the GOP ran Washington for much of the past eight years, right-wing leaders often found themselves frustrated that the allies they helped put in power did not see their core issues, such as a constitutional ban on marriage for same-sex couples or opposition to abortion, as high priorities. In contrast, there was no confusion about the Right’s goals when Bill Clinton took office for the first time. A network of right-wing legal and political organizations went to work seeking to destroy his presidency almost before it began,

and helped Republicans take power in Congress two years later.

Speaker after speaker at this year's CPAC conference made it clear that the Right is embracing this strategy with relish.

Recycling Old Arguments about Silencing Critics, Hijacking the Constitution and Destroying Religious Freedom

During the Clinton Administration, right-wing media jumped on presidential comments critical of their tirades to claim falsely that the administration was intent on silencing its critics. Sound familiar? Maybe that's because right-wing organizations are now claiming that the Obama administration is trying to silence its critics as well. Focus on the Family is running a video on its website claiming that President Obama is trying to "silence" Rush Limbaugh. It suggests that criticism of Limbaugh and other conservatives is comparable to the threat to freedom posed by the Nazis. A young woman on the videotape paraphrases the famous "First they came for..." remarks attributed to Martin Niemoller and concludes, "When they came for me, well, actually, they didn't come for me, because by then, I was living in a socialist country, where my preacher's sermons are approved by the U.S. Department of Orthodoxy."

In addition, groups like the Family Research Council are sending mailings warning of the dire threat to free speech supposedly posed by Democratic plans to resurrect the Fairness Doctrine, weeks after President Obama made clear he would not support any such moves.

Charges that the administration is silencing its critics are not the only echo of Clinton-era attacks. Religious Right legal and political organizations are preparing to mount an all-out campaign to convince Americans that President Obama is hijacking the Constitution. As examined in depth in a previous Right Wing Watch In Focus, they are arguing against President Obama's well qualified and widely respected nominees to Justice Department positions, setting the stage to attack the President's nominees to the federal judiciary as hard-left radicals bent on twisting the law to serve their ideological ends. The Alliance Defense Fund, a right-wing legal group, is one of many organizations leading the charge against several DOJ nominees.

Similarly, Religious Right leaders and organizations have long made a habit of portraying Democrats, liberals, women's rights advocates, and supporters of gay equality as enemies of religious freedom. This "big lie" strategy,

used effectively in the Clinton era, is now being deployed against the Obama administration.

For example, a routine provision in the economic stimulus bill to prevent tax dollars from funding houses of worship was distorted beyond recognition by right-wing organizations who insisted that Democrats and the Obama administration were hostile to faith and bent on eliminating any religious presence on college campuses. The campaign, launched by Religious Right legal activist Jay Sekulow, turned into a frenzied online campaign. Where were responsible Republican Party officials to assure conservative Christian activists that the President was not an enemy of their faith? Not to be found on the Senate floor, where an amendment by the fearmongering Sen. James DeMint to strip the provision from the bill got 43 votes on a near-party-line vote. Sekulow, who heads the American Center for Law and Justice, has vowed to challenge the provision in court.

Portraying the Obama administration's support for equality as an effort to undermine religious freedom and silence churches is a strategy being employed throughout the religious and political right. Charges that hate crimes legislation would result in pastors being dragged off pulpits and into jail for preaching against homosexuality are a staple of opposition arguments. Marriage equality is similarly and falsely portrayed as a threat to the freedom of the pulpit. In a recent letter to activists, the Family Research Council's Tony Perkins, reportedly considering a run for the U.S. Senate from Louisiana, where he once served as a state representative, insists that:

We must be silenced, the Left says, and "The Agenda" lays out their plans to do that.

- Hate crimes laws that could lead to penalties for Christians who publicly criticize homosexual behavior
- Employment laws forcing businesses, even churches, to hire homosexuals (and indoctrinate employees)
- Abolish the federal Defense of Marriage Act and other laws against counterfeit marriage

Demonstrably false charges about religious liberty are, unfortunately, not disavowed by other religious and political conservative leaders, who find it useful to position themselves as strong protectors of religious freedom. Look for these charges to continue to be leveled against the Obama administration and congressional leaders as

long as they're successful at generating contributions for right-wing organizations and frightening their base into believing that their faith and freedom are at stake.

The Right and the GOP

Right-wing leaders are pushing hard to assert their continued leadership within the Republican Party and resist any suggestion that the party needs to moderate its positions to win elections. Newly elected RNC chief Michael Steele was not the first choice of many right-wing activists, but he was elected only after Religious Right favorite Ken Blackwell threw his support to Steele, who also enjoyed the support of right-wing media megastar Sean Hannity. Steele has trumpeted the symbolic significance of his election as the GOP's first African American standard bearer, but has generally gone out of his way to ensure party stalwarts that he'll promote conservative policies down the line, suggesting that the Party doesn't need a new direction, just more effective marketing. In fact, Steele recently told a radio interviewer that it would be "crazy" to even consider civil unions for same-sex couples, saying, "you put lipstick on a pig, it's still a pig." Steele was among the speakers at CPAC.

Louisiana Governor Bobby Jindal, a conservative Catholic and close political ally of conservative evangelical activists, was touted as a potential vice presidential candidate in 2008 and has often been cited as one of the GOP's rising stars. Jindal was widely seen as having bombed while giving the GOP response to President Obama's address to the joint session of Congress, but the movement moved quickly to circle the wagons and protect Jindal's political future. Limbaugh, increasingly acting as an ideological enforcer for the GOP, threatened conservative leaders that they would, in effect, be dead to him if they joined the bipartisan criticism of Jindal's remarks.

Religious Right leaders are also looking to the states, where conservative activists play an important and sometimes dominant role in Party politics. In Texas, Religious Right luminaries are lining up to support the reelection of Gov. Rick Perry against a potential challenge by U.S. Sen. Kay Bailey Hutchison. Perry has endeared himself to movement leaders by embracing right-wing social policies and going so far as to hold a legislative signing ceremony in a conservative church. Phyllis Schlafly's Eagle Forum, pseudo-historian and GOP activist David Barton, and former Mike Huckabee booster Rick Scarborough are among those backing Perry and denigrating the potential candidacy of the more moderate Hutchison.

There's some similar jockeying going on within the

leadership of the Religious Right. Richard Cizik, who had long headed the policy arm of the National Association of Evangelicals, survived demands for his firing from Religious Right leaders like James Dobson when he encouraged the NAE to take a more visible role in promoting a Christian approach to environmental protection. But Cizik could not survive the outpouring against him when he suggested in an interview that he was becoming open to the idea of civil unions that would offer legal recognition and protection to same-sex couples. He was quickly forced out.

For his part, Mike Huckabee is set on turning backers of his presidential bid into a grassroots political movement, the way that Ralph Reed built the Christian Coalition into a formidable political force in the 1990s out of the ashes of Pat Robertson's failed 1988 presidential bid. The Arkansas Gazette recently reported that Huckabee's network "with foundation-laying parties set for more than 120 homes Thursday night, is meant to push conservative causes forward and to fight much of the work supported by a similar - and larger - coalition topped by President Barack Obama."

Meanwhile, Religious Right strategists continue to seek ways to use their traditional wedge issues -- opposition to affirmative action, abortion and gay rights -- to build their base. We are likely to see continued efforts to highlight anti-choice and anti-gay voices among conservative African American clergy as well as continued campaigns to introduce state legislation and ballot initiatives to restrict equality and reproductive choice.

Massive Resources Even in a Time of Tight Budgets

Right-wing organizations are not immune from the economic realities and financial pressures facing the economy and advocacy groups across the political spectrum. Focus on the Family, the Colorado-based media empire created by James Dobson, has recently let go about 20 percent of its staff -- but that's from a 2008 budget of \$151 million and more than 1000 staff. So even a downsized Focus on the Family, which is associated with more than three dozen Family Policy Councils, is still a huge part of the massive media and organizing infrastructure that is committed to thwarting progressive policies and rebuilding right-wing political power.

It's worth noting that Focus didn't let its budget concerns prevent it from donating some \$700,000 to California's Prop 8 campaign to strip same-sex couples of the right to marry, and that Religious Right groups and their members and activists helped raise tens of millions of dollars for

successful anti-gay initiatives in California, Florida, Arizona, and Arkansas last year.

Although public budget figures from the latest IRS 990 forms available, usually covering fiscal years 2006 or 2007, are slightly out of date, they demonstrate the huge political infrastructure controlled by Right wing groups. Among other elements of that infrastructure:

Religious Right legal organizations including the Alliance Defense Fund, which reported an annual income of \$31 million in 2007; Sekulow's American Center for Law and Justice, with a nearly \$12 million dollar annual budget; and others including the Rutherford Institute and the Becket Fund, with budgets all dedicated to eroding separation of church and state and advancing right-wing values through the courts.

The Missouri-based American Family Association, which took \$500,000 out of its reserves to back Prop. 8 and reported revenue of \$23 million in FY 2007; the Family Research Council, among the primary sponsors of the annual "Values Voter Summit," a Religious-Right dominated counterpart to the more secular CPAC, which took in more than \$12 million in 2007; the California-based Traditional Values Coalition, which reported revenues of \$8.5 million; and a long list of allied organizations, including Phyllis Schlafly's Eagle Forum, Concerned Women for America, and more.

An array of state and national think tanks designed to give right-wing public policy prescriptions intellectual heft and marketing muscle. The Heritage Foundation alone has an annual budget of more than \$50 million; the American Enterprise Institute another \$28 million.

In addition to the array of right-wing religious, legal, and political advocacy organizations, the movement's infrastructure includes not only the huge reach of media personalities like Rush Limbaugh and Sean Hannity, but the massive audiences for religious media outlets, including Pat Robertson's Christian Broadcasting Network (which took in \$263 million in 2005), and the Trinity Broadcasting Network, which in 2006 reported a budget of some \$200 million and assets of \$800 million.

Not 'Misunderestimating' the Right

There is no question that the outcome of the national elections in 2008 was a major blow to Religious Right organizations and their political allies. But they will not wither and disappear in the wake of an electoral defeat. Both the movement's history and the events of recent weeks indicate that they will aggressively seek to shape public opinion and media coverage and rally their followers

to give time and energy to rebuild the movement's political strength. To achieve those goals they will intensify their claims of religious persecution and relentlessly attack the Congress and the Obama administration as enemies of faith and freedom. The over-the-top rhetoric from elected officials, GOP operatives, and pundits at CPAC was a clear signal of what's to come.

These efforts are designed to blunt the momentum for change, obstruct progressive policy advances, and sow confusion, cynicism, and fear among the public at large. To prevent right-wing leaders from achieving these goals, progressive advocates and activists must give public officials, journalists, online activists, and individual citizens the information and tools to expose the dishonesty and hypocrisy of the right-wing movement and discredit its leaders.