

GOP faces an ideological meltdown

The religious right is out of step with most voters and on its way out the door of American politics.

By Terry Michael

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Should the mother-in-law moment be mocked or embraced?

When Secretary of State Condoleezza Rice used the term while swearing in the new international AIDS coordinator, referring to the mother of Dr. Mark Dybul's partner, the easy response was, "more Republican hypocrisy."

It was a curious utterance by Rice in the presence of first lady Laura Bush — the two highest profile women in a party officially defining marriage as a one-man, one-woman kind of thing.

It was no accident. There is no way Rice's speech was not pre-cleared with Republican leaders, just weeks before partisan control of Congress was at stake in midterm elections.

It was a calculated, triangulating maneuver, appealing to the center of the electorate, lots more liberal on social-cultural questions than politicized evangelical Christians who have comprised a solid part of the GOP's base since the 1970s.

Religious right on its way out the door

It is yet another piece of anecdotal evidence that the gay marriage glass is half full — and the religious right is on its way out the door of American politics.

That may surprise many active in gay politics. In fact, some may regret they won't have the Jerry Falwells and Pat Robertsons of the political underworld, comprising the GOP's Taliban wing, to use as foils for organizations that work for gays and lesbians in politics.

But national Republican leaders know the handwriting is on the wall for the religious right.

Evangelicals became politicized in the 1970s, in response to the counterculture values of the '60s and *Roe v. Wade*. Historically, it was unusual for those who take the Bible literally to enter politics. Traditionally, they rendered unto Caesar the things that were his, not His.

Politicized evangelicals showed clout in the 1980 election, when the National Conservative Political Action Committee (NCPAC) and Falwell's "Moral Majority" helped tip the Senate to the Republicans, as well as elect Ronald Reagan. Ironically, NCPAC was headed by Terry Dolan, a closeted man who later died of AIDS.

The "religious right," as it came to be known, was paid lip service by Reagan, despite his and Nancy's Hollywood comfort level with many (closeted) gay men.

Religious conservatives reached their apogee in the 1994 election, turning out in great numbers when Democrats were demoralized by the declining fortunes of Bill Clinton. Robertson's Christian Coalition helped mobilize a huge showing through evangelical churches.

But it has been downhill ever since for the TV preachers who play politics with the lives of gays and lesbians and cloak their bigotry in religious garments, much as did 19th and 20th century preachers who sanctioned slavery and segregation from the pulpit.

Center of American politics has shifted

There is a simple reason why the religious right is moving off the stage: the center of American politics has shifted.

In the 1970s and 1980s, when we witnessed the phenomena of “Nixon Democrats” and “Reagan Democrats,” the center was populated by Depression/World War II-generation voters, more conservative than their sex, drugs and rock ’n’ roll kids who comprised the early Baby Boom generation born after the war.

Boomers are now at the epicenter of American politics. They and their Gen. X offspring have very different attitudes about sexuality. Even as they tried to mine the churches for votes in 2004, Republican leaders knew that very well.

It was no accident that George Bush found he could live with civil unions 10 days before he was re-elected.

Republicans are now in an ideological meltdown, not dissimilar to the one Democrats experienced in the '70s, when they abandoned their “liberal” ideology and started using the mushy word “progressive” to describe poll-tested political positions.

Coming off a disastrous midterm, the four branches of the Republican Party are circling wagons, but they’re beginning to shoot inward. Libertarians and Main Street/Wall Street branches of the GOP, and even many neo-Cons who gave us this disastrous elective war, understand the religious right is a drag on the party in appealing to the center in coming presidential campaigns.

That may be hard to appreciate for those who have been conditioned to think the national GOP is owned and operated by Falwell, Robertson and company.

As Republicans laugh both behind the backs of the religious right and in public mother-in-law moments, there is good reason to believe evangelicals will retreat to their mega-churches and, perhaps even eagerly, render unto God that which is not the Republican Party's.

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