



You ain't seen nothing yet

COLORADO SPRINGS, MANASSAS AND WASHINGTON, DC

Christian America's political arm is more complex and more dynamic than it first appears. And it will be hard to stop

THIS week, for the fourth year in a row, President George Bush broke from affairs of state to address the Southern Baptist Convention. He promised the strict evangelical group, which has 16m members, that he would work hard to ban gay marriage and abortion, and that their "family values" were his values, too.

After the Scopes Monkey trial in 1925, where creationist ideas were widely discredited, the idea of fundamentalists from the Bible Belt ruling the roost would have looked foolish. In the 1960s, many liberal Americans thought they had banned religion from the public square for good. Yet nowadays the president, the secretary of state and the House speaker accept the evangelical label. A packed prayer breakfast takes place every Thursday in Congress. And liberals regularly contend that one of America's two great parties is bent on creating a theocracy—backed by a solid core of somewhere between a quarter and a third of the population.

From the left, Howard Dean, the Demo-

cratic chairman, has derided the Republicans as "a party of white Christians". John Danforth, a former Republican senator and champion of "moderate Christians", noted in the *New York Times* last weekend that the two main political developments of the past ten years have been the rise of the Christian right and bitter partisanship—and that the two are connected.

Certainly the first five months of the second Bush presidency would seem to bear that out. The religious right played a leading role in Congress's last-minute intervention to "save" the life of Terri Schiavo, a brain-damaged Florida woman, as in the attempt to axe the filibuster tactic that Democratic senators have used to delay Mr Bush's judicial appointments. And it is likely to get much more bloody pretty quickly. In Massachusetts, Mitt Romney, the state's ambitious Republican governor, is battling to get rid of gay marriage. In California, an initiative is on the ballot to require "parental notification" for minors seeking abortion. The two most intriguing

racers next year both involve religious politics: in Pennsylvania, Bob Casey, one of the very few pro-life Democrats, stands a good chance of unseating Rick Santorum, the Senate's most outspoken social conservative; in Georgia, Ralph Reed, the *Wunderkind* of the Christian right, is running for lieutenant-governor.

Above all, the Schiavo and filibuster battles were mere skirmishes before the all-out war, which will erupt when Mr Bush nominates a new Supreme Court justice (or two). That could happen as early as June 27th, when the court's current session ends and the ailing chief justice, William Rehnquist, may announce his retirement.

In the beginning

Why is the religious right as powerful as it is? The question puzzles even Americans. Their country, as a whole, is not getting more religious. The gap between it and European countries has increased, but largely because of Europe's growing godlessness. Most Americans say that religion is very important (60%) or fairly important (26%) in their lives, but Karlyn Bowman, a polling analyst at the American Enterprise Institute, points out that the figures were 75% and 20% in 1952.

What has changed is, first, the make-up of Protestant America and, second, the realignment of religious America's politics. The generally liberal mainline churches have declined, while harder outfits like the ▶▶

► Southern Baptists have spurred forward. White evangelicals, who see the Bible as the literal truth (or darned close to it), now make up 26% of the population.

It is not just a matter of numbers but of confidence. Born-again Christians are no longer rural hicks; they are richer and better educated than the average American. There are now 500 Christian colleges in America and evangelical chapters at the Ivy Leagues. Go to one of the 1,000 gleaming megachurches and the people stepping out of the four-wheel-drives in the Wal-Mart-sized car parks are software engineers, doctors and teachers.

Take, for instance, Mr Bush's friend Richard Land, who heads the Southern Baptists' public policy arm. He has stern views on moral issues; but this Princeton and Oxford-educated preacher can happily discuss the Indian economy and the flat tax. Mr Land claims that one in three of the baby-boomers now identify themselves as evangelical.

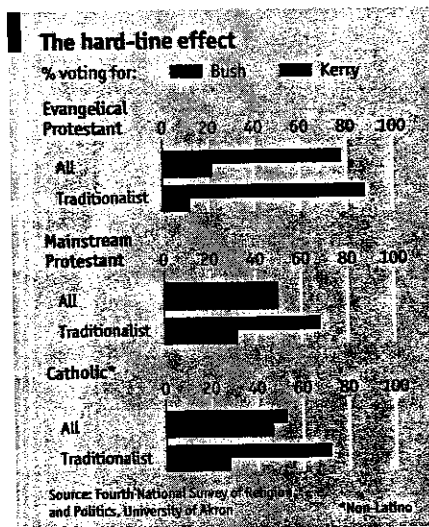
Nor, to lose another stereotype, are all the righteous white. There are some 25m black evangelicals, who seem to be moving slightly more to the right; and new immigrants, too, provide plenty of recruits. Larry Eskridge, of the Institute for the Study of American Evangelicals at Wheaton College, guesses there may be 8m Latino evangelicals. A huge number of Asian-Americans are fervent Christians, too.

The religious right also represents more than just evangelicals. At the last election Mr Bush won the Catholic vote by snaring 72% of self-styled traditionalist Catholics. Private polls also suggest that he won significant numbers of Orthodox Jews. Rather than being split between the parties, religious people of all faiths are now pretty anchored in the Republican Party. A Zogby poll last November put the national figure for "religious traditionalists" at 29%, but they accounted for 58% of Republicans.

The power of organisation

Religious America's switch to the right is rooted in two things: liberal over-reach and conservative organisation. The consistent whinge from the Christian right about "liberal activist judges" exceeding their mandate contains a kernel of truth. In the 1960s and 1970s, judges changed America from a country where every school day began with a prayer, and abortion and pornography were frowned on, to a country where school prayer was banned and both abortion and pornography were protected by the constitution.

The fact that the courts were running so far ahead of public opinion in a generally religious country bolstered the religious right in two ways. It provoked white evangelicals to join the political fray. And it persuaded all religious types to bond together. Protestants and Catholics, who



used to be at loggerheads, have now found common ground, especially on abortion.

But conservative organisations have also created their own momentum. Take Focus on the Family, a sprawling empire that employs 1,400 people in Colorado Springs and claims a global audience of 220m people for its TV and radio shows, books, mass e-mails and counselling. Its founder, Jim Dobson, a former child-psychology professor, points out that the focus of his ministry's considerable energy remains family life, but its public-policy arm is growing. Focus set up a political action committee last year that spent \$9m on the election, and it hurled another \$1.2m at the filibuster issue earlier this year.

Focus exemplifies two of the movement's hallmarks: innovation and competition. This sophistication also extends to politics. On abortion, social conservatives have had much more success now they have stopped screaming for the practice to be made illegal (which few Americans want) and tried to limit it (which most want). There are now laws in 34 states requiring parents to be notified when a minor applies for an abortion. And Congress is considering requiring doctors to tell any woman having an abortion after 20 weeks that it will cause the fetus pain.

"You eat an apple one bite at a time," argues Mr Land, who points out that with both gay marriage and abortion the religious right's current position is to leave decisions to state legislatures, as they are left in Europe. Messrs Land and Dobson both personally oppose gay civil unions; but their planned federal marriage amendment does not ban them because, in Mr Land's words, "it could then become a civil-rights issue rather than a marriage issue." Mr Land enjoys turning civil-rights language back on the left, accusing the American Civil Liberties Union, for instance, of "anti-religious bigotry".

Another sign of the religious right's sophistication is the new, and formalised,

emphasis on co-ordination. The Arlington Group, a coalition of some 60 pro-family groups, began with an informal meeting of 23 leaders in Arlington, Virginia, in May 2003, but it was given a spur by a Massachusetts court's decision to uphold gay marriage in November. Now housed in the building of the Family Research Council in Washington, DC, it provided help with the state initiatives banning gay marriage last November. In January this year the group added more issues, including abortion, faith-based initiatives and judicial confirmations. Arlington also works in an ad hoc way: for instance, it brings together legal experts from its members to study court judgments.

This drive towards co-ordination is complicated by an attempt to broaden the message to issues such as the environment ("creation care") and poverty, both traditionally associated with the left. Many leaders are suspicious about cosy-ing up to leftist types; others see it as a way of strengthening the coalition. So far, the main alliances with the left have been in the relatively safe field of foreign policy. Rick Warren, a preacher whose "Purpose Driven Life" has sold 20m copies, recently wrote to Mr Bush urging him to cancel the debts of poorer countries, and the religious right joined up with black Democrats to pass the Sudan Peace Act in 2002.

Can't always get what you want?

The religious right's organisational prowess is impressive. But it still leaves a movement that represents a minority point of view on many issues and is just as capable of over-reaching as liberal judges are. "Some leaders of the religious right think they are far more powerful than they actually are," argues one Republican veteran. "As religious as this country and this president are, neither wants a theocracy."

The religious right certainly has deeper tentacles into the Bush team than into any previous administration. There is a weekly conference call with officials, and Tim Goeglein, Mr Bush's point man for social conservatives, is ubiquitous at their gatherings in Washington. But the Bush administration, which is highly sensitive to public opinion, never quite gives the religious right what it wants.

This year opened with a fairly typical dance. In a pre-inaugural interview in January, Mr Bush, citing political realities, said he would not push a federal gay-marriage amendment (which needs 60 votes in the Senate to pass). The Arlington Group then warned the White House that "this defeatist attitude" would make it impossible for the movement to unite on other difficult issues, such as privatising Social Security. The White House promptly said it was a priority, though it did not appear on a list of ten legislative priorities put forward by Republicans in the Senate. ►►

The religious right has won some victories, from getting PBS not to show a spin-off from "Arthur" in which his friend Buster visited a lesbian couple in Vermont, to the president dashing back across the country to sign the Schiavo bill. But there are also frustrations. Focus on the Family wants the Justice Department to do far more to enforce federal laws on obscenity. The administration wants to prosecute only the most outrageous material; Focus would rather it began prosecuting mainstream porn, which would automatically rein in the hard stuff.

Paradoxically, the very thing that worries liberals about Mr Bush—that he is an evangelical himself—gives him some room for manoeuvre with social conservatives. Too many of their footsoldiers see the president as one of their own for the leadership to beat him up. The religious right's power lies in the lower parts of the Republican machinery, in precinct meetings and the like. An incumbent Republican senator can probably stand up to them, as Senator Mike DeWine of Ohio did over the filibuster. But junior figures like his son Pat, who was defeated in a primary in Ohio shortly thereafter, are vulnerable.

What about the three big battles: abortion, gay marriage and the Supreme Court? The abortion argument is changing: Ms Bowman, the polling expert, points to a tiny increase in pro-life sentiment, which can be put down to the grisly nature of late-term or "partial-birth" abortion (which has been banned by federal law, although courts have struck the law down), the ubiquity of ultrasound equipment and maybe worries about fertility. Yet the right's opposition to embryonic stem-cell research is not popular. And when it comes to the question of overturning *Roe v Wade*, the ruling that legalised abortion, American public opinion is still against social conservatives; so Mr Bush, when asked about abortion, always waffles about appointing judges who respect the constitution. Having pushed American a little closer towards a Republican majority, Karl Rove, the president's chief strategist, does not want to throw it away on one issue.

On gay marriage, the religious right has racked up a string of successes at state level: amendments defining marriage as being between a man and a woman have passed with thumping majorities even in liberal states such as Oregon. Yet the chances of passing a federal constitutional amendment look slim.

Most Americans dislike the idea of changing the constitution. The Catholic Church, which is still recovering from its paedophile scandal, is much less trenchant on gay marriage than it is about abortion. So are young evangelicals, who dislike any appearance of intolerance. The religious right is targeting them through

groups like Teen Mania Ministries, but, as Mr Eskridge points out, even the students at his own Christian university "have grown up watching 'The Simpsons'."

Tony Perkins, the president of the Family Research Council, insists that those liberal judges will inadvertently come to the right's help by overturning either the federal Defence of Marriage Act or one of the state constitutional amendments. Nebraska's law, which won the backing of 70% of voters there, recently fell foul of one federal judge. The prospect of courts overturning popular rules will force senators like Bill Nelson, a Florida Democrat who faces a tough re-election next year, to back the federal amendment.

Both abortion and gay marriage point to the centrality of the judiciary, which Mr Bush is indeed conservatising. "The average age of the judges the president has appointed is 46," one White House adviser tells a private gathering of social conservatives. "They are going to last a long time." Despite the howls from social conservatives about the filibuster deal, the Senate allowed through three judges with extremely conservative social views.

All this is a prelude to the Supreme Court. If Chief Justice Rehnquist goes, the right is confident that Mr Bush will replace him with another conservative, and probably appoint Antonin Scalia to the chief justice slot. But what happens if, say, San-

dra Day O'Connor, the swing voter on many religious issues, goes as well? Mr Bush may well put up a slightly less conservative figure to reassure moderates.

And so the dance with the administration continues. But there is no doubt which way it is leading American politics, especially from a liberal perspective. Mr Land's apple is being gradually chewed away. Can the Democrats change things?

The fightback

It could happen if the religious right overreaches itself dramatically—by getting *Roe v Wade* struck down or, more likely, by pushing the Republicans too far to the right in the next set of presidential primaries. One reason why Congress's and Mr Bush's approval ratings have dropped is because the American public thinks they do not share its worries.

Yet if the polling numbers on matters of faith carry some warnings for the Christian right, they carry many more for the Democrats. If the last election proved anything, it was that middle America found an overtly religious party much less weird than an overtly secular one. Few lines got Mr Bush a bigger cheer on the stump than jeering at Mr Kerry's "Hollywood values".

Some liberal types now want to claim the mantle of the religious left. Hillary Clinton recently made a speech complaining about the number of abortions. The new Clintonite Centre for American Progress has a faith and progressive policy project. Jim Wallis, a chummy anti-war evangelical who wrote the best-seller, "God's Politics: Why the Right Gets it Wrong and the Left doesn't Get it", points to the huge audiences he gets around the country as evidence that many Christians want a more varied version of moral politics than just abortion and gay marriage.

There is probably something in this, but it is hard to see the Democrats seizing it. The pro-life Mr Casey in Pennsylvania is a far less typical Democrat than Mr Dean, who casually located the Book of Job in the New Testament when he ran for president. If the Republicans are the party of the over-pious, an aggressive secularism pervades many of their rivals' policies.

It seems that the religious right cannot fail to win. Either the Democrats continue to get more secular, in which case middle America will continue to vote Republican, or they will embrace religion a little more fully, and then the religious right will get a little more of what it wants.

In the hallway of the Family Research Council, there is a slightly macabre-looking exhibit of a wedding dress. Beside it is a sculpture of an eagle, with a quote from Isaiah: "Those who hope in the Lord will renew their strength. They will soar on wings like eagles; they will run and not grow weary." The religious right has a long way to go before it starts to feel tired. ■



The next wave