

Ohio's governor race spotlights role of Arlington Group: The new litmus test

by [Ted Wendling RNS](#) in the [June 13, 2006](#) issue

In June 2003, a group of evangelical Christian leaders met in Arlington, Virginia, to map strategy for a clash they viewed as the political equivalent of Gettysburg, the most significant battle ever fought on American soil.

The group members—veterans of the culture wars and the birth of the religious right that followed the U.S. Supreme Court's 1973 ruling legalizing abortion—coalesced around an issue that they felt crystallized the depths of depravity to which America had sunk: same-sex marriage.

For Ohio secretary of state Ken Blackwell, the timing is perfect.

Thought to have little chance of winning the Republican primary for governor, Blackwell seized the moment and led a successful, high-profile campaign to outlaw gay marriage in Ohio in 2004. In the process, he helped hand President Bush a second term.

Largely as a result of that effort, Blackwell now is the Republican nominee for Ohio governor, the first black man nominated for that post. He will oppose the Democratic nominee, Representative Ted Strickland. Blackwell also is a member of the Arlington Group, a by-invitation-only organization whose roughly 60 members have direct access to the White House.

Arlington Group members and their spouses have donated \$18,400 to Blackwell, and their organizations have provided vast quantities of money and assistance to him in other ways. Some of them could even be helpful beyond this fall's gubernatorial election, and on a larger stage.

"I think he'd make a good presidential candidate," said Mathew Staver, president of the Florida-based Liberty Counsel, a nonprofit litigation and policy organization

affiliated with Jerry Falwell, who is a member of the group.

“He’s a man of strong social and moral convictions, and I think people in America like to have someone who has strong convictions and would protect traditional marriage.”

Citizens for Community Values, whose president, Phil Burrell, sits on the Arlington Group’s executive committee, poured nearly \$1.2 million into the campaign to ban gay marriage in Ohio. He was assisted by Arlington Group member Colin Hanna of Let Freedom Ring in West Chester, Pennsylvania, which spent nearly \$1 million organizing “pastor policy briefings” in Ohio and Pennsylvania.

Blackwell was invited to join the Arlington Group in the summer of 2004 after he was identified as a leader in the movement against gay marriage by Arlington Group cofounder Donald Wildmon, board chairman of the American Family Association.

“One of the reasons I’m so high on Ken Blackwell, and he shares this perspective, is that this is not just another skirmish in the culture war,” said Stephen Crampton, an Arlington Group member who serves as chief counsel at Wildmon’s Center for Law and Policy. “This is the ultimate battle. He who wins the same-sex marriage battle in effect wins the culture war.”

Now that the primary is over, Blackwell is reluctant to discuss the Arlington Group and social issues such as gay marriage, saying he wants to focus on job creation and the state’s economy.

The Arlington Group’s other cofounder besides Wildmon is Paul Weyrich, chairman of the Free Congress Foundation, a conservative think tank in Washington. The Arlington Group has no formal business structure; its meetings are private and members are prohibited from releasing a membership list, although many have talked openly about their membership.

Among other Arlington Group members identified by the *Cleveland Plain Dealer* are Tony Perkins, president of Family Research Council in Washington; Bishop Harry Jackson, chairman, High Impact Leadership Coalition, College Park, Maryland; and Rick Scarborough, president, Vision America, Lufkin, Texas, who hosted a controversial “War on Christians” conference in Washington this year.

John Green, director of the University of Akron's Ray C. Bliss Institute of Applied Politics and an expert on religion and politics, said the group was spawned by two legal rulings in 2003—the U.S. Supreme Court's overturning of Texas's sodomy law and the Massachusetts Supreme Court's sanctioning of gay marriage.

"Many of the deep thinkers among Christian conservatives had long worried about traditional marriage being changed by gay-rights advocates and others, but it wasn't until 2003 that it became a pressing issue," Green said.