

Going negative: The Religious Right flexes its muscles

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Just a few years ago the Religious Right was talking about making itself more appealing and effective in mainstream politics. The head of the Christian Coalition at the time, Ralph Reed, declared that the Religious Right needed to tone down its rhetoric, overcome its tradition of racial bigotry, and reach out to Jews, Catholics and ethnic minorities.

That was then. In recent weeks we've seen the Religious Right flexing its political muscles on behalf of George W. Bush, and it has not been an appealing sight. Its activities in the Republican primary in South Carolina included these less-than-shining moments (we rely here on reports by Rod Dreher of the *New York Post* and others):

Bush, trying to appeal to the religious conservatives (and acting presumably on the advice of Religious Right leaders), kicked off his campaign at Bob Jones University, the fundamentalist Christian school that bans interracial dating and has long been known for its rabid anti-Catholic and anti-Mormon views. Meanwhile, a Bob Jones University professor sent e-mail messages around the state alleging, without any evidence, that Bush's chief rival, John McCain, had fathered children out of wedlock. Bob Jones IV published an article in *World*, an ultraconservative Christian magazine, suggesting that McCain was an inattentive husband and that his tax proposals made use of "liberal, even Marxist terminology."

When the campaign moved to Michigan, Pat Robertson, founder of the Christian Coalition, continued the all-out attack on McCain by producing a blitz of phone messages charging that McCain's campaign chairman, Warren Rudman, is "a vicious bigot." The charge turned out to be a deliberate distortion of the truth, based on Rudman's comment that while the Christian Coalition had "some fine, sincere people in its ranks," some members were tainted by "ignorance and bigotry."

In short, prominent leaders of the Religious Right have been appealing to the worst instincts of their constituency; using inflammatory rhetoric; and practicing a tawdry kind of politics. Marshall Wittmann, former legislative director for the Christian Coalition, now at the Heritage Foundation, says that the Religious Right used “gutter tactics” in South Carolina. Its attacks on McCain mostly occurred “under the radar, ” he said: it used “push polling”—the strategy of inserting negative comments about a candidate under the guise of conducting a poll—and spread slurs against McCain via e-mail. Wittmann thinks that Robertson and others on the right are desperately trying to play the role of political kingmaker. Delivering South Carolina to Bush was going to be “Robertson’s ticket to power,” said Wittmann.

Reed ended his 1996 book *Active Faith* by urging Christians not to lose their souls in partisan politics. He wrote that he hoped future historians would remember the religious conservative movement not for its political clout but for its “love, dignity and decency.” With Robertson and friends in charge, that doesn’t seem likely.