

# commentary

from other pens...

## Conservatives give Bush room to move

By Will Lester  
Associated Press Writer

WASHINGTON (AP) — President Bush has won intense loyalty from conservatives in the first six months of his presidency with tax cuts and tough stands on abortion and missile defense. Many Republicans say he can afford to take some steps to bolster support in the political center without angering his base.

Bush has won Republican loyalty, especially from conservatives, in ways his father could not and that Bill Clinton didn't win from Democrats in the early months of his first term.

"This is the most conservative administration I've seen in my lifetime," says Republican strategist Roger Stone.

The loyalty of Bush's conservative base should survive as long as he sticks to his basic principles, conservatives say.

"As long as he doesn't cave on the really essential questions — taxes, abortion, missile defense ... those kinds of really basic things, he's got a lot of maneuvering room," said Paul Weyrich, the staunch conservative head of the Free Congress Foundation.

Ralph Reed, Georgia Republican chairman, agreed. "There's a recognition after eight years in the wilderness that our expectations are probably more realistic now."

Conservatives have grumbled about education legislation moving through Congress, which many feel costs too much money and doesn't include school vouchers. But the complaints have been muted.

They were so pleased with Bush's initiatives on tax cuts, missile defense and his early signals on abortion, they say they are willing to give him room to move on issues like education and the environment.

"He said the campaign was about character and, boy, has he shown it," said David Horowitz, a conservative activist and author from Los Angeles.

But Bush may have to be flexible to gain political victories in the divided Congress and win back support from independents and conservative Democrats.

"All politics is about the art of compromise and as they move forward they may need to work with a broader spectrum," said Republican consultant Scott Reed.

Bush's job approval in recent polls remains in the mid 50s, though his rate of disapproval was as high as 40 percent in one recent poll. The increase in disapproval of Bush has been focused largely among independents and conservative Democrats, polls suggest. Pollster Andrew Kohut said his strong base of support will give him some latitude.

Bush opponents have taken heart in the rise in his disapproval numbers and the defection of Vermont Sen. Jim Jeffords to become an independent, which gave Democrats control of the Senate.

Republicans say those problems for the GOP have been exaggerated. GOP pollster Neil Newhouse said from a political standpoint: "It's not where he is right now, it's where he is a year from now."

Jim Gilmore, Republican national chairman and governor of Virginia, said he doesn't anticipate there will be a need for the White House to shift much from core beliefs.

"There's nothing wrong with governing as a conservative," said Gilmore, adding that issues like tax cuts and education accountability should help Bush with moderates.

Bush's relationship with conservatives could be severely tested if he has to make a nomination to an opening on the Supreme Court, said Brent Bozell, a conservative activist and media watcher. "A Supreme Court pick that is not pro-life will kneecap his administration," said Bozell. "That's a bellwether."

Republicans have always done best in elections when the conservative base was energized, pointing to 1980, 1984 and 1994, Bozell said.

The conservative solidarity could crack over time, cautioned a political analyst.



## Minds of children are marvels

I don't know about you, but I marvel at the minds of children.

It is a joy to just sit and watch them figure out a problem or analyze something they've heard. We don't enjoy this pleasure nearly often enough; our worlds are too full of more pressing matters. Maybe that's what grandparents are for—to enjoy more than to discipline, to take time rather than rush.

My granddaughter has been visiting. Now that she's gone back to her family, my home is quiet again. The month seemed long at the beginning, but passed much too quickly. It took me two weeks to just slow down the pace of my life. Then I could really enjoy and appreciate the wonderful experience.

I've never known a child, when separated from his/her parents, that didn't at some time cry for Mommy and Daddy. This one didn't even when she was the most upset with me. She seemed to fully understand the need for the separation and thus, the futility of wishing things were different.

The first time her parents called, I just knew it was going to start a "homesickness" session, but it didn't. When her parents would leave a message on the answering machine, she would stand by, carefully listening. She would nod or answer their questions: "Are you being a good girl for Grandma?" "Are you having a good time?" "Have



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you met some friends to play with?" She would then tell them (in response to their statement), "I love you too." When they said goodbye, she would say, "Goodbye!" and go immediately back to whatever she'd been doing.

She did have her spells. She did like to have her own way - just like the rest of us do. I saw that she had definitely inherited a streak of stubbornness - probably through my side of the family, of course. We had a few go-rounds, but that was usually when I was trying to hurry her to fit into my schedule.

Back to seeing her little mind work. Her brain is so quick, and she was curious about everything. "Why?" "Why?" "Why?" When all other explanations failed, I relied on my old standard: "That's just the way God made it." That seemed to work well for quite awhile.

Then one day, she looked at me and asked, "Who is God?" A simple enough question? Well, you try to explain that to a three-year-old!

We played a lot of "Pretend." Outside, she found

a long stick and was enjoying striking dandelions to see the seeds float away. Then the stick broke and a piece was at a right angle to the other part. I commented, "Oh, that's too bad. You broke your stick." She smiled and said, "Now I have a gun." So she shot the birds (& grandma) for awhile, enjoying a new game.

Then she took the "gun barrel" and bent it down to the other part. I said, "Oh, the gun is broken. Now what do you have?" She looked at it, smiled and answered, "Tweezers!"

To keep her occupied in a café, I wrote her name in cursive writing on a napkin. (She knows how to spell her name and can recognize it when it is printed.) When I told her that was also her name, she strongly disagreed. "That's just squiggly lines!" she insisted. So then I printed her name and showed it to her. She said, "Now that's right! Why didn't you do it right the first time?"

She was talking on and on at lunch one day. After awhile, I laughed and said, "You're something else!" She looked back and answered, "And you're a different." "I'm a different?" I asked. She said, "Well, didn't you just call me a 'different'?" (Think about it.)

But the best comment of all was once when I was putting her to bed. I said, "You're a good girl." She smiled at me and said, "You're a good grandma." What greater affirmation could there possibly be?

## Are Democrats anti-religion, or just anti-Bush?

By Morton Kondracke

Al Gore got trounced last year among church-going Americans, and Congressional Democrats seem bent on keeping the trend going by throttling President Bush's faith-based initiative.

Gore tried to improve his party's image among the faithful by picking Sen. Joe Lieberman, D-Conn., an openly devout Jew, as his running mate and by endorsing the concept of federal funding for religious groups to help solve social problems.

The Clinton administration too had advanced the concept, expanding funds and authority for faith-based groups to work on welfare reform, mental health and anti-drug programs.

However, now that President Bush is trying to encourage large-scale involvement in social programs by religiously affiliated groups, an initiative called "charitable choice," most top Democrats can find nothing good to say about it.

Last week, for instance, Sen. Patrick Leahy, D-Vt., opened his tenure as chairman of the Judiciary Committee by declaring he had "grave concerns about where charitable choice may lead us."

He cited every possible argument against the initiative, liberal and conservative, and made it evident that he'll kill it if he can. He seems to be speaking for most Democrats.

Even Lieberman, who has argued for the expansion of religion in American life and has supported or co-sponsored every past charitable choice-like initiative, now says Bush has failed to answer "hard questions" about the plan's constitutionality.

Lieberman told me he thinks there are ways around the problems and that he wants to solve them, but his staff predicts that charitable choice is a goner in the now Democrat-dominated Senate.

The plan will pass the House this summer, so it has a chance to survive in a House-Senate conference.

But then it will be up to Lieberman to convince his Democratic colleagues to accept a compromise measure — a sure test of his leadership.

It's hard to tell whether Democratic hostility is a case of rampant partisanship or rampant secularism — almost religio-phobia.

Perhaps it's both. Democrats were OK with Clinton and Gore allowing church-based charities to participate in social welfare programs.

Suddenly, though, when Bush tries to do this, Democrats raise the specter that the constitutional stricture against an established religion is in jeopardy, and there's a danger that Hare Krishnas will dominate the drug-treatment field.

Leahy cited two cases in Texas in which faith-based programs had mistreated children. He neglected to mention the countless cases of documented abuse by state-run child welfare agencies, foster care systems and correctional centers all over the country.



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Moreover, Democrats have a deeper problem. They are aligned intellectually and politically with liberal groups harboring a deep fear of religion, for whom the prime characteristics of faith are prejudice, exclusionism, judgmentalism and theocracy.

The idea that religion inherently represents love, healing, redemption, generosity and liberation is something many Democratic politicians seem reluctant to acknowledge.

To the extent Democrats appreciate religious values, they tend to consider them something to be kept private and secret rather than the inspiration of America's founders, which they were.

The framers of the Constitution wrote the First Amendment clause forbidding the establishment of a religion in order to foster the free expression of religion, not to suppress it.

In the debate over faith-based initiatives, there are some legitimate questions that need to be answered and language written into law to protect against abuse. But it can be done, and Democrats should try to find a way to do it.

Lieberman, for instance, is concerned about a provision in House legislation on faith-based programs that would expand the proviso that religious groups participating in social programs can favor members of their own sects in hiring. Allowing such

groups to require that employees follow the teachings or tenets or religious practices of the faith could lead to the exclusion of gays and lesbians, for example.

He is also concerned about religious proselytizing by groups receiving federal money. And he questioned whether all religious groups — Scientologists, Hare Krishnas, etc. — should be eligible to participate.

John DiIulio, head of Bush's faith-based initiative, says that under existing programs, religious groups form separate, non-religious entities to do social welfare.

Another option is government vouchers that citizens could take to religious or secular agencies as they wished — the way students take their Pell grants to secular or religious colleges of their choice.

Both traditional religious groups and marginal sects, DiIulio says, should be judged on the basis of whether they can perform social services well.

Lieberman asked a good question in a recent speech: Does society have more to fear from a rehabilitated drug addict who got clean through an explicitly religion-based treatment program, or from an untreated, unrehabilitated addict? It's a question he should pose to his colleagues.

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