

commentary

from other pens...

Conservative Christians watching Bush decisions

By Will Lester

Associated Press Writer

WASHINGTON — Conservative Christians say their support for President Bush remains strong, based more on the president’s personal religious background than any outspoken stands or policies.

When the president’s chief political aide said last week that Bush will do more in the future to rally religious supporters, some viewed it as an encouraging sign they will get more rewards for their loyalty.

“They see the president as one of them,” said conservative analyst Marshall Wittman, who said that is the most crucial aspect of their support. Referring to the U.S. campaign in Afghanistan, he added, “And they see him almost on a divine mission in this war.”

On social issues, conservative Christians have mixed responses. They were pleased with the naming of Attorney General John Ashcroft. And they approved of Bush’s stated opposition to cloning. His compromise approach to embryonic stem cell research got a muted reaction.

But they grumbled about his administration’s abandonment of school vouchers in the education debate, and his efforts to use religious organizations to dispense federal help for the poor drew both support and opposition.

With a job approval rating close to 90 percent, they say Bush has the leeway to do more.

“He’s proven himself to be a bona fide leader with resolve, guts, grit and determination,” said Ken Connor, president of the Family Research Council. “He should apply those same qualities to the domestic agenda.”

Karl Rove, Bush’s senior adviser, said, at a forum at the American Enterprise Institute, the Bush campaign “failed to marshal support among the base as well as we should have” during the 2000 campaign. Rove said turnout among “white evangelical Protestants, Pentecostals and fundamentalists” was considerably less than it should have been.

John Green, a political scientist who specializes in religion and politics at the University of Akron, said Rove’s comments appeared to be a way of sending a signal “they’re not forgotten, not taken for granted.”

Conservative Christians say they have been watching closely to see how Bush will handle their issues.

“I think Christians are pleased with what President Bush has been doing,” said Rev. D. James Kennedy, who heads a worldwide ministry from his Coral Ridge Presbyterian Church in south Florida. “But we have concerns. ... We are concerned that he appoint judges who are pro-life. If he does not do that, it would be tantamount to ‘read my lips.’”

Kennedy was referring to the broken “no new taxes” pledge that undermined conservative support for Bush’s father. Kennedy said Bush’s comments about the type of Supreme Court nominee he would prefer have been reassuring.

“The movement’s organizations are no longer the only leaders in the evangelical community,” said Jim Guth, a Furman University political scientist. “Now they’re in Congress and even in the White House.”

Those who identified themselves as Christian conservatives numbered 14 percent of the 2000 electorate, and most of them voted for Bush.

The decision by Pat Robertson, one of the best-known Christian conservative leaders, to step down as head of the Christian Coalition prompted speculation about the decline of Christian political activism.

The coalition’s revenues have fallen sharply in recent years, but the organization’s new president, Roberta Combs, said it gave out more than 70 million voter guides in 2000 and made a million get-out-the-vote calls. “We plan to be very active in the 2002 elections,” she said.

Rove said the lower turnout of Christian conservatives may be because the nation is returning to a point where evangelicals remain “true to their beliefs ... politics is corrupt and therefore we shouldn’t participate.”

Connor bristled at the comment, saying:

“That was a terrible stereotyping of fundamentalists and Pentecostals.”

EDITOR’S NOTE — Will Lester covers politics and polling for The Associated Press.

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Democrats differ on repeal of tax cuts

Top Congressional Democrats believe more than ever President Bush’s tax cuts were too large, but there’s no agreement on whether to call for their delay or repeal.

Sen. Hillary Rodham Clinton, D-N.Y., advocated delaying the cuts a week ago on NBC’s “Meet the Press,” and a group of centrist House Democrats earlier called for repealing cuts for the top 1 percent of taxpayers.

But top House and Senate leaders haven’t sounded the same theme as of yet, and there’s disagreement among the party’s leading pollsters and strategists over whether they should.

In January, the Congressional Budget Office is expected to estimate the projected 10-year budget surplus, thought a year ago to be \$5.6 trillion, will be down to less than \$2 trillion.

Democrats declared from the outset Bush’s \$1.6 trillion in tax cuts ate up too much of the old estimated surplus and crowded out other priorities, such as debt reduction, a prescription drug benefit for all seniors, and aid for persons without health insurance.

Now, led by Senate Majority Leader Thomas Daschle, D-S.D., Democrats are saying “We told you so” with conviction, and others, led by House Minority Leader Richard Gephardt, D-Mo., are accusing Bush of “mismanaging the economy” and diminishing the huge surplus.

The “we told you so” mantra makes abundant sense. “Mismanagement” makes less sense because \$2 trillion of the \$3.6 trillion surplus decline resulted from an economic downturn that began before Bush took office and was exacerbated by the Sept. 11 attacks, which also necessitated huge new expenditures for fighting terrorism.

Besides expecting that a weak economy will help them in next November’s elections, Democrats are fiercely resisting new GOP plans to cut taxes even more as an economic stimulus, which would drain the surplus by an additional \$274 bil-



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lion over 10 years.

But, so far, Democratic leaders have not been willing to follow Clinton in calling for the full or partial repeal of Bush’s original tax cut. Moreover, Democratic strategists differ over whether that’s good politics.

Last week, populist liberals James Carville, Bob Shrum and Stan Greenberg reiterated their argument that calling for delay or repeal of tax cuts would help Democrats in the 2002 elections.

In a new poll of 1,000 likely voters conducted Dec. 2-4, they reported, 37 percent favored delaying the President’s tax cuts, 18 percent supported canceling them and 38 percent said they should be phased in according to the plan.

When a hypothetical Democratic candidate arguing for canceling cuts for those making more than \$325,000 a year was matched up against a Republican calling for further tax cuts, the Democrat won by 56 percent to 38 percent, according to the poll.

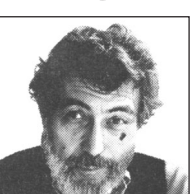
On the other hand, former Clinton White House pollster Mark Penn, in a survey conducted for the centrist Democratic Leadership Council, found voters unenthusiastic about canceling the tax cuts.

In a poll of 800 registered voters conducted in late November, Penn found that by 59 percent to 36 percent, respondents said Bush’s tax cuts should be left in place, although by 51 percent to 48 percent they favored a rollback to avoid pushing the federal budget back into deficit.

“I would not run the election on the theme of rolling back the tax cuts,” Penn said at a breakfast session with reporters.

According to one top Democratic Congressional

Rescuing the Constitution



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Finally, in 1975, the Senate Select Committee on Intelligence Activities (the Church Committee) began to hold hearings and otherwise investigate COINTELPRO. The committee concluded that this FBI operation was “a sophisticated and vigilante program aimed squarely at preventing the exercise of First Amendment rights of speech and association, on the theory that preventing the growth of dangerous groups and the propagation of dangerous ideas would protect the national security and deter violence.”

The Church Committee (named for Idaho Sen. Frank Church, its chairman) added: “The American people need to be reassured that never again will an agency of the government be permitted to conduct a secret war against those citizens it considers threats to the established order.”

But a Dec. 3 Wall Street Journal story headlined “Justice Department Considers Stepping Up Monitoring of Religious, Political Groups” reported that the FBI will, under this proposal, no longer be held to “Justice Department regulations requiring agents to show probable cause that a crime was afoot before spying on political or religious organizations.” Those regulations were put in place after the Church Committee exposed the FBI’s disgraced COINTELPRO record.

On a Dec. 2 episode of ABC’s “This Week,” Attorney General John Ashcroft not only did not deny the advent of a new COINTELPRO, but stoutly maintained that he will pursue whatever has to be done in the war against terrorism. He doesn’t need congressional approval for this assault on the First and Fourth Amendments.

During what passed for a congressional debate on Ashcroft’s anti-terrorism bill, the American Civil Liberties Union organized a Coalition in Defense of Freedom in Time of National Crisis. Opposing parts of that bill, which became law, was the largest array of civil liberties organizations I

aide, a third view on the matter is held by pollsters Geoff Garin and Mark Mellman, who do surveys for House and Senate Democratic leaders.

Citing no poll numbers, this aide said Garin and Mellman contend that Democrats would be vulnerable to Republican attack as “tax raisers” if they called for the cancellation of Bush’s cuts and wouldn’t be able to get the delays passed anyway because of GOP resistance and a likely White House veto.

It’s virtually certain Republicans would charge that Democrats are “the tax party” and also would argue that, as White House political chief Karl Rove said at a conference Tuesday, “Canceling the tax cuts would be the worst possible thing you could do at a time of economic weakness.”

House Republicans, indicating they are worried about their election prospects, came forward last week with a scaled-back stimulus package that might attract centrist support, but it still contained accelerated rate reductions unacceptable to Daschle.

So who’s winning on the tax/economic issue? Even Greenberg admits only 18 percent of voters blame Bush’s tax cuts for the decline in the budget surplus and voters are split, 44 percent to 43 percent, on whether they plan to vote for a Republican or Democrat for Congress next year.

On the other hand, Penn reported voters trust Congressional Republicans over Democrats to get the economy moving again by a margin of 8 points and to maintain fiscal discipline by 9 points. The President’s margin over Democrats is even wider on those issues.

Penn found that, by 41 percent to 36 percent, voters would prefer to have a Republican as president, but by 44 percent to 36 percent, they’d like Democrats to control Congress.

He thinks Democrats should run in 2002 offering themselves as “a check” on Bush. That sounds right to me.

Morton Kondracke is executive editor of Roll Call, the newspaper of Capitol Hill.

have ever seen — from left to right and center. Included were: The Center for Constitutional Rights; the Free Congress Foundation; the American Friends Service Committee; Gun Owners of America; the NAACP Board of Directors; the Rutherford Institute; and Amnesty International USA.

If enough of these groups — and individuals also intent on rescuing constitutional rights — can move from reacting to organize a national coalition, Congress can be moved to act before, as Republican Congressman Bob Barr says, “This massive suspension of civil liberties ... will likely set precedents that will come back to haunt us terribly.”

Nat Hentoff is a nationally renowned authority on the First Amendment and the Bill of Rights.

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