

A Report from People For the American Way's Research Department

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The Huckabee Surge: Why Religious Right Activists Like Mike

Mike Huckabee's rise from second-tier candidate to frontrunner in Iowa started after he was the top-ranking candidate to appear at the "Values Voter Debate" organized by a group of lesser-known Religious Right leaders on September 17. The event was a near parody of itself, from the opening choir singing "Why Should God Bless America?"

[http://www.rightwingwatch.org/2007/09/why_should_god_bless_america.html] to the parade of far-right activists seeking pledges from the candidates. Huckabee, who was right at home, assured participants that he is one of them, professing that "the language of Zion" is a "native tongue" not a "second language" to him, and making a populist critique [<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=XokDqMNTGyQ>] of the more established GOP candidates.

Huckabee's performance confirmed for the Religious Right audience that he shares their views on a range of issues. On marriage, he said he would lead an effort to pass a constitutional amendment affirming marriage as "one man, one woman, for life." On abortion, he needled the missing candidates and said "on this issue, our culture rises or falls." He backed the Iraq war, calling it a "theological war" against people "whose religious fanaticism will not be satisfied until every last one of us is dead, until our culture, our society, is completely obliterated from the face of the earth."

In the yes or no segment of the debate, Huckabee pledged himself to a long far-right wish-list, including:

- support for ousted Alabama Chief Judge Roy Moore's court-stripping bill to keep federal courts from meddling with public officials who use their office to promote religion;
- vetoes of hate crimes legislation, ENDA (anti-discrimination law), and the fairness doctrine;
- stripping schools of federal funding for exposing children to "homosexual propaganda"; repealing IRS restrictions on churches endorsing candidates;
- bringing back Bush's social security privatization plan;
- imposing a ban on federal funding for any U.S. group that performs or advocates for abortion; boosting federal abstinence spending to match contraceptive funding

Huckabee was the runaway winner of the straw poll taken among the organizers' hand-picked attendees. More than that, he was declared an answer to prayer by organizer Janet Folger (author of "The Criminalization of Christianity"), who said Huckabee had been revealed by God to be the "David among Jesse's son's." Folger has only ramped up her rhetoric since then, insisting that God's hand is on Huckabee and that he will be the next president of the United States. Folger was recently named to co-chair Huckabee's Faith and Family Values Coalition.

Hard Right Beneath the "Nice Guy" Schtick

Part of Huckabee's rise has relied on him (and the media) playing up a cheerful sense of humor and contrasting himself to "angry" candidates, and staking out some different positions on some issues. But he has a long record of rhetoric and actions that reveal an ideologue's agenda and a zealot's intolerance for differing opinions.

In 1992, many years after science had definitively ruled out the possibility of HIV/AIDS being passed through casual contact, Huckabee called for a quarantine of people infected with the virus:

"It is the first time in the history of civilization in which the carriers of a genuine plague have not been isolated from the general population," he said. "This deadly disease, for which there is no cure, is being treated as a civil rights issue instead of the true health crisis it represents.

"If the federal government is truly serious about doing something with the AIDS virus, we need to take steps that would isolate the carriers of this plague."

*[Huckabee: Cure Health Cost Hikes in Marketplace; Isolate AIDS Victims
13 October 1992, The Associated Press Political Service]*

As governor, he violated federal law and defied an order from a federal judge and barred the use of Medicaid funds to pay for an abortion for a 15-year-old mentally retarded girl impregnated by her stepfather.

At the 2000 Christian Coalition Road to Victory conference [<http://www.pfaw.org/pfaw/general/default.aspx?oid=3298>], Huckabee criticized the Clinton Administration by saying that they will "suck your brains out" when you're born and "suck your pocketbook" when you die.

In a speech to high school students at the Arkansas' Governor's School, he offered his prescription for solving problems with welfare: "When you quit giving a check to a guy to sit on his butt, he'll get off his butt." He went on to say that those people who weren't able to take care for themselves should be institutionalized rather than put into society and given welfare.

Today Huckabee's more moderate stand on the environment, at least as compared to some right-wing activists, is held up as an example of his appeal to a broad range of voters. But a few years ago, his statements were straight out of the Religious Right's talking points. In a speech to the Arkansas Farm Bureau Federation in 1998, he accused environmentalists of being anti-God. "God made us, and God made the Earth... He gave us the privilege to use it and enjoy the resources, but never to worship it. We're to worship Him, not the thing He made. To me, environmentalists are those who worship the things that He made rather than He who made them." In an earlier speech he ridiculed, "wacko environmentalists, who get out of their concrete towers one weekend a month and go look at a tree, believe they know more about the care of the land than farmers. They want to tell us what deodorant we can use and what kind of gas to put in our car."

Proud "freeper" at home with the Religious Right

When Huckabee is speaking before a Religious Right audience, he likes to remind them that he appears "not as one who comes to you but as one who comes from you." And that's not just a politician's rhetorical flourish. Huckabee is an ordained minister with degrees from Ouachita Baptist University and Southwestern Baptist Theological Seminary. One of his first jobs was staff assistant for televangelist James Robison, a fiery orator and early advocate of conservative Christian involvement in politics. Huckabee served as pastor of several Baptist congregations during the 1980s and headed up a religious television station. And he became the youngest president ever of the Arkansas Baptist State Convention, the largest denomination in Arkansas.

As a Republican Governor from a Democratic state, not to mention one with the right religious associations, Huckabee was a frequent and popular speaker at Religious Right events such as the Christian Coalition's annual Road to Victory Conference, returning to speak several times over the years. At the 1996 conference, he and the late Sen. Strom Thurmond were featured guests at private receptions for big donors. He joined then-presidential candidates Sen. Phil Gramm, Pat Buchanan and Alan Keyes as a featured speaker at the 1995 Eagle Forum leadership conference. Huckabee's band has performed twice at inaugural events sponsored by FreeRepublic.com, a right-wing forum known for its extreme views. After 2001's "Count the White House Silverware Party," Huckabee posted a message on the forum calling himself a "confirmed and proud Freeper."

Huckabee has proved himself on the issues that Religious Right leaders use to measure other candidates' suitability for office. On abortion rights, gay rights, and church-state issues, he's not only said the right things, but actively promoted Religious Right's agenda. Also as governor, he successfully led a push for "covenant marriage," which makes it harder for couples to divorce. On marriage equality for gays, Huckabee offers the usual red meat rhetoric: "Until Moses comes down with two stone tablets from Brokeback Mountain saying he's changed the rules, let's keep it like it is."

Huckabee sees no apparent division between religion and politics. His recent television ad [<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=BjtGgfhKlvo>], which was also aired on the CNN/YouTube debate, proclaims in large letters that he is a "Christian Leader" and shows the candidate saying "Faith doesn't just influence me – it defines me."

At the 1995 Road to Victory Conference [<http://ffrf.org/fttoday/1995/october95/listen.html>], he said, "Once Gideons would give bibles to 5th graders. Now school nurses are handing out condoms to 7th graders." At that same conference, he railed against the "culture of abortion" saying, "Now we have people who believe it's a parent's fundamental right to lay down the lives of their children for their own selfishness, and that is wrong."

In 2001, as governor, Huckabee proclaimed October "student Religious Liberty Month" and sent a letter urging school districts to allow students to pray and providing information about recent Supreme Court decisions on religion in the classroom.

In 2004, at a Republican Governors Association dinner, he pretended to take a phone call [http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=2yj_okz7Zwl] from God, jokingly but undeniably implying divine endorsement for the reelection of President George W. Bush.

As Governor, Huckabee encouraged the teaching of creationism in public school science classrooms. He has said [<http://youtube.com/watch?v=n-BFEhklujA>] he does not believe in evolution, and when pushed on whether he accepts the young-earth creationist believe that the earth is 6,000 years old, he defers, saying that "we don't know."

We Like Mike

Huckabee's surge in the polls has been driven by Religious Right voters and growing support from individuals who have their own influences or audiences but are not the movement's big names. Values Voter Debate sponsors Janet Folger and Rick Scarborough are now enthusiastically talking him up in Religious Right media outlets. In late November, Huckabee's campaign announced a Faith and Family Values Coalition co-chaired by Folger and featuring

several former Southern Baptist officials. Among team members is Star Parker, a favorite speaker at Religious Right conferences known for Coulteresque rhetorical excess.

Scarborough recently wrote an open letter

[http://worldnetdaily.com/news/article.asp?ARTICLE_ID=58437] explaining his support for Huckabee. He rebutted many of the most widely heard criticisms of the candidate and ended by saying, "I suggest that God may be sending us a lifeline. Who better to lead a nation nearing moral collapse and perhaps World War III than a president who is also a pastor with 10 years of senior executive experience as a governor?"

Don Wildmon, head of the American Family Association, the group behind many of the boycotts of television advertisers and Disney theme parks said he was backing the former minister. Wildmon may be the campaign's biggest Religious Right catch to date, as the AFA has a significant national network.

Actor and fighting machine Chuck Norris

[http://www.wnd.com/news/article.asp?ARTICLE_ID=58255] announced his support and borrowed Folger's comparison of Huckabee to King David. Huckabee's first TV ad [<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=EjYv2YW6azE>] in Iowa was a goofball celebration of Norris's hyper-masculinity as a sign of the candidate's toughness on terrorists. Also on the macho entertainer front, professional wrestler Ric Flair joined the team.

An indication that Huckabee's support was growing among Religious Right grassroots activists was Huckabee's runaway victory among those who voted at the Values Voter Summit sponsored by the Family Research Council in Washington in October. FRC officials declared Romney the victor in the poll by counting votes cast since August over the Internet (where Romney's campaign had urged supporters to make small contributions to FRC Action to be eligible to vote) even though those who voted on site favored Huckabee by far over any other candidate.

Among the most electorally significant Huckabee backers may be former South Carolina Gov. Beasley, who is actively campaigning in that state, which follows close on the heels of the New Hampshire primary, and where Religious Right voters helped stop John McCain's presidential bid in 2000.

Religious Right Leaders Not Feeling the Love

Though more conservative evangelical voters seem to be jumping on the Huckabee bandwagon each day, there is still a reluctance among many movement leaders to endorse his candidacy. Throughout the GOP primary, evangelical eyes have been on James Dobson, head of the Focus on the Family empire. Dobson has publicly slammed a number of GOP candidates as unacceptable, though he has remained silent so far about Huckabee's candidacy. When a rumor that he was on the verge of endorsing Huckabee was published, Focus on the Family officials publicly swatted it down.

Dobson ally Tony Perkins, who heads the Family Research Council, like Dobson insists that abortion and marriage are the non-negotiable issues for the Right. But Perkins has indirectly criticized Huckabee's electability by citing the "three-legged stool" analogy that Romney has also used – that for a Republican to win the White House he must have the support of social conservatives, economic conservatives, and foreign policy conservatives. And Huckabee has harsh critics on the economic and immigration fronts.

Phyllis Schlafly, leader of the Eagle Forum and an icon among Religious Right voters makes no bones about her hostility towards a Huckabee candidacy. She says [<http://www.newswithviews.com/baldwin/baldwin411.htm>], "he destroyed the conservative movement in Arkansas, and left the Republican Party a shambles... Yet some of the same evangelicals who sold us on George W. Bush as a 'compassionate conservative' are now trying to sell us on Mike Huckabee." No wonder she looked so uncomfortable in September while Janet Folger, standing next to her, declared that Huckabee had been revealed as God's candidate.

Of course, some Religious Right leaders have endorsed other candidates: televangelist Pat Robertson and his lawyer Jay Sekulow have endorsed Rudy Giuliani, while Moral Majority co-founder and Religious Right godfather Paul Weyrich has thrown his support behind Mitt Romney. Kansas Sen. Sam Brownback, once viewed as Huckabee's competition for the Religious Right vote, dropped out of the race and endorsed John McCain.

Huckabee-Hating: Anti-tax and Anti-immigrant Zealots

The reason some Religious Right leaders fear Huckabee's electability is that some stalwarts of the current GOP coalition are vehemently opposing his candidacy. Jim Boulet, Jr., executive director of English First said [<http://www.newswithviews.com/baldwin/baldwin411.htm>], "Rudy Giuliani spent years defending the right of New York City to remain a sanctuary for illegal aliens. Yet Giuliani was a veritable Lou Dobbs Jr. on illegal immigration in comparison to Mike Huckabee."

The Club for Growth represents the anti-tax, anti-government fringe of the conservative coalition; it is proud of its reputation as a bully, earned by aggressively targeting and sending to primary defeat some members of Congress deemed insufficiently committed to the CFG's anti-tax dogma. CFG's Pat Toomey warned [<http://article.nationalreview.com/print/?q=YzNiY2M5NzIxZDJlMDUxNzUwYmQ4ZDU5ZDAzY2U3YWUJ>]: "Given his folksy charm, social conservative credentials, and embrace by the mainstream media, it is not surprising that some are increasingly enamored with him. But this flirtation does a great disservice to the conservative movement if it overlooks Huckabee's stunning record of big-government liberalism... Before conservatives jump on that train, however, they should consider the likelihood that the presence of such a big government backer on the ticket would hurt the party's prospects more than it helps."

Other Huckabee opponents on the right include pundits Robert Novak, John Fund, and Jonah Goldberg.

What Next?

Huckabee's rise in the polls hasn't yet turned into the kind of boost in fundraising he'll need to keep a campaign going – though a win in Iowa would give him a flood of coverage that could spur contributions from the grassroots. Meanwhile, his growing popularity is preventing any of the other candidates from staking a strong claim to conservative evangelical voters – and may make Huckabee himself rather than a Religious Right figure the ultimate broker for that vote. And that may have other candidates thinking more seriously about the benefits of having him as a running mate.

