

WORD WARS

FORDICE DEFENDS 'CHRISTIAN NATION'



AP/Wide World Photo

By Connie Zhu

Governor Kirk Fordice of Mississippi has been catching a lot of flak for calling America a "Christian nation" at the close of the Republican Governor's Association meeting last November.

"The United States of America is a Christian nation," Fordice told the assembly. "The less we emphasize the Christian religion, the further we fall into the abyss of poor character and chaos in the United States of America." Fordice was responding to what he considered were two days of bashing the Religious Right.

The media and many Jewish and liberal groups, such as the Anti-Defamation League and People for the American Way, immediately pounced on Fordice's comment with a vengeance, charging Fordice with insensitivity, ignorance, and anti-Semitism.

However, the prominent Rabbi Jacob Neusner and Wisconsin Governor Tommy Thompson defended Fordice's statement as innocent and harmless.

"The media rarely represent religion as a normal and important dimension of people's everyday life, but really it is," said Neusner, a professor of religious studies at the University of South Florida in Tampa. "Fordice wants to remind people of that fact. While he might have chosen somewhat more inclusive language, his meaning is clear and entirely constructive."

"Kirk Fordice was speaking from his heart," Thompson said. "This country has some basic values that we have to adhere to and I see nothing wrong with those values. The vast majority of Americans agree with them."

Fordice said that he did not mean to exclude Jews. "I simply made a clear statement of truth," Fordice said. "It has nothing to do with running down anybody else's religion. That's a very far stretch that I just can't imagine people making."

But even from the ranks of his own party Fordice was pressured to recant. Republican National Chairman Rich Bond wrote to Fordice, saying he had received "a demand from the American Jewish Congress for me to repudiate your statements."

Responding to Bond's letter, Fordice said, "We are Christian, and that gives us an anchor to windward — a basis for building

character and a value system. That transfers to what our party is and what it stands for as a course for morals and ethics, without excluding anybody."

Fordice told the *Washington Times*, "We do not capitulate in any way. I stand by my statement. This is a Christian nation, and that's one subject. I also agree the nation was founded on Judeo-Christian ideals, which is another subject."

Fordice also defended his remark on CNN, explaining that "Christianity is the predominant religion in America. The media always refer to the Jewish state of Israel. They talk about the Muslim country of Saudi Arabia, of Iran, of Iraq. We all talk about the Hindu nation of India. America is not a nothing country. It's a Christian country." Fordice cited surveys noting that 86 percent of Americans consider themselves Christian, but praised America's ethnic diversity.

"It's the true melting pot of the world," Fordice said. "That's the strength of our country, and the strength certainly is not enhanced by denying simple facts that Christianity is the predominant religion. That can't possibly be construed as denigrating the Jewish faith."

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In a "Meet the Press" interview in November, David Broder asked Christian Coalition executive director Ralph Reed's reaction to Fordice's statement.

"I think there are two things that have made America great," Reed responded. "The first is her essential moral goodness, which I think is a derivative of faith, and I think it's the kind of thing that Alexis de Toqueville was talking about in the 1830s when he visited America and said it wasn't until I went into the churches of America that I truly understood her greatness, and it is this: America is great because she is good, and if she ever ceases to be good, she will cease to be great," continued Reed. "But you also have to acknowledge diversity and pluralism," he added.

Calling Gov. Fordice "a great governor" who is "more than capable of defending his own remarks," Reed concluded, "I do think that you have to acknowledge the role that Jews have and will continue to play, and I think that there's a commonality between Jews and Christians on a lot of these issues because again, ultimately it's a faith that has a lot of common values." ★