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By GERALD F. SEIB

Who Will Muster Christian Army In Reed's Wake?

A couple of years ago, congressional Democrats embarked on a dubious strategy. They decided to launch a public attack on Christian conservatives, seemingly painting them all as Republican extremists.

Ralph Reed, executive director of the Christian Coalition and the very personification of Christian conservatism, responded immediately. But then something interesting happened. Privately, congressional Republicans urged Mr. Reed to pull back and let them take the lead in defending Christian conservatives.

Shrewdly, Mr. Reed agreed. That produced two results. First, the defense of Christian conservatives was more credible because it was coming from somebody else. Second, the bonds between Republicans and the Christian conservative movement grew tighter, because activists saw people in the suspect Washington establishment actually rising to their defense.



It was a small turn in the political wars, to be sure, but one that shows why Mr. Reed has been so good at his job with the Christian Coalition. Now, though, Mr. Reed has said he's leaving to form his own political consulting firm. The big question now is this: Can somebody else in the social conservative movement take Ralph Reed's place?

For now, the answer is probably no. Mr. Reed brings to the table a unique mix of political savvy, grass-roots power and soothing telegenic presence. Others share pieces of this package, but nobody has quite the same combination.



Gary Bauer

Pat Robertson, Mr. Reed's boss at the Christian Coalition, has grass-roots power, but an aura many find frightening. Christian broadcaster James Dobson also has grass-roots power through his formidable radio network and his Focus on the Family organization, but nothing like Mr. Reed's political savvy. Empower America's William Bennett has political savvy and telegenic power aplenty, but his roots are Catholic rather than evangelical Protestant. Mr. Reed's successor as daily manager of the Christian Coalition will have the grass-roots network, but without the Reed political reputation.

The man who may come closest to matching the Ralph Reed package is Gary Bauer, the head of Washington's Family Research Council. He has been alternately a rival and ally of Mr. Reed, and now seems likely to become a more visible spokesman for Christian conservatives. But in important respects, even he is no Ralph Reed.

Mr. Bauer is a former Reagan White House policy adviser whose principal aim is to make his organization a player in Washington policy debates. He has battled GOP abortion-rights advocates, championed the Supreme Court nomination of Clarence Thomas, pushed family tax cuts and, recently, led the charge of social conservatives against China's favorable trade status. "I've been policy oriented," Mr. Bauer summarizes.

Which isn't to say that he is without political assets. He sits today in a gleaming new headquarters building built by a few wealthy backers, including the DeVos family of Amway Corp. fame. His Family Research Council once was a part of Mr. Dobson's empire and still has access to his powerful radio megaphone. Mr. Bauer regularly tapes programs that are played on some 1,500 radio stations reached by Mr. Dobson's programs and writes a column for his newsletter. Daily, Mr. Bauer faxes out a policy memo to 4,000 supporters, who fax it on to tens of thousands more.

What Mr. Bauer doesn't have is Ralph Reed's political network or political style. Ultimately, Mr. Reed's power stems from the tens of thousands of Christian Coalition activists who plop down voter guides in church pews coast to coast just before every election. Mr. Bauer has 350,000 financial backers, but no such network. He has only begun moving in a similar direction, by just launching his own political action committee that has taken in \$600,000.

The most important difference, though, may be stylistic. Many Republicans see Mr. Bauer as more rigid and uncompromising than Mr. Reed. He's also more ready to openly criticize Republicans. In fact, he's willing to rock the boat in lots of ways. He acknowledges that his campaign to curb China's trade privileges places him at odds with the DeVos family, one of his big financial backers.

At heart, Mr. Bauer seems more frustrated that change in American politics and society isn't coming faster, and less willing to wait for incremental change. "At the end of the day," he says, "what Ralph [Reed] is saying by leaving, and what I'm saying by starting my PAC, is that what we've been doing in the last few years hasn't been satisfying enough."