

I Told You So



I was right. I told you so.

In these pages, seven months ago, I wrote:

Barring any massive attack on the U.S. home front, or an utterly devastating defeat in Iraq, on a par with, say, a Shi'ite and Sunni uprising that slaughters thousands of American troops, [President Bush's] approval rating will most likely remain stable. ... [H]istory shows that, in times of war, few Presidents are turned out of office, since the electorate rarely changes horses in mid-apocalypse. ... Other things being equal, voters are not going to choose Kerry, when they've already got in Bush a Republican dedicated to all the conventional Democratic planks: an expanding welfare state, budget deficits, and a war abroad. A long and potentially nasty campaign beckons ... But, as of this moment, I still think Bush wins. (*Free Radical*, June-July 2004)

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That prediction was followed by a sequel article, "Caught Up in The Rapture" (*Free Radical*, August-September 2004), in which I explored the cultural dynamics underlying a potentially successful Bush re-election strategy. I argued that the continued growth of Christian fundamentalism would energize the race for Bush. I lamented that Bush had "virtually dropped [Ronald] Reagan's libertarian rhetoric, while embracing a far more pronounced pietistic ideology." This had led him to support "faith-based initiatives" and a Constitutional amendment defining "marriage" in strictly heterosexual terms, while opposing stem-cell research and abortion rights.

Even before the GOP Convention in NYC, it was clear to me that this had to result in a Bush victory. It's not that I believed the religious vote *guaranteed* a Bush win—far from it. Certainly the war and terrorism issues, as well as Kerry's own credibility problems, I argued, would be crucially important factors in crafting a winning strategy. But it is also true that *Bush could never have won the election without the support of his religious constituency*.

That religious constituency has celebrated Bush's perceived "moral certainty," which derives not from a reality-based ethos, but from a messianic Christian triumphalism (something that others have noted too,

including Ron Susskind, "Without a Doubt," *NY Times Magazine*, 17 October 2004). The President views the government as a cultural and religious weapon, one, he says, that must "help foster cultural change."

Based on early post-election reports, I think my projections have proven correct in more than one way: the President's victory owed a lot to the strong support of his religious base. Some pundits had argued that a greater youth vote would have offset that base. But the youth vote was not appreciably different from the 2000 election—running contrary to predictions that it would usher in Kerry Nation. In the end, though exit poll voters named the economy, terrorism, and Iraq as important issues, the issue of "Moral Values" was rated the highest. And while a large percentage of those who fear terrorism voted for Bush, an equally large percentage (80%) of those who chose "Moral Values" as the central issue also voted for Bush. These are not secular moralists; they are overwhelmingly religious voters.

This integrated strategy was decisive for the GOP victory, the brainchild of Karl Rove, whom Bush called "The Architect" in his victory speech and who—surprise, surprise—has had a long history of running gay-baiting political campaigns, going all the way back to Bush's gubernatorial race in Texas. Interestingly, bans on same-sex marriage were approved in 11 states. Two of these states went to Kerry. But the other nine (including Ohio) went to Bush. Such ballot questions brought out religious voters en masse. One might say that they were designed to do so.

And in that crucial Ohio race—the state whose electoral votes would have given a victory to Kerry—the anti-gay marriage amendment was the most extreme proposed measure in the country, barring even gay civil unions that "approximate marriage." The Ohio amendment passed 62%-38%, with a differential of more than 1.2 million votes. Bush won by more than 136,000 votes. Exit polls show that nearly 70% of those voters who approved the Ohio ban also voted for Bush. The GOP strategy here was particularly noteworthy; the Bush campaign asked its operatives to push the anti-gay marriage initiative. Radio spots proliferated, 3 million taped

phone messages and millions of targeted mailings were made, and over 2.5 million church bulletin inserts rallied the religious bloc, tying support of the gay marriage ban to Bush's support of "marriage," "life," and "faith." Bush carried not only the evangelical and Protestant vote in Ohio, but the socially conservative Catholic vote as well, 55%-45% over Catholic Kerry. I think a persuasive case can be made that this initiative was just enough to galvanize the very religious voters who assured a Bush victory in Ohio, and, by consequence, four more years.

Jerry Falwell is already reconstituting his Moral Majority for the 21st century, thanking the "more than 30 million evangelicals [who] 'voted Christian' [on] Nov. 2," in the hopes of increasing that evangelical vote to 40 million by 2008. This is the same Falwell who argued, like the jihadists, that 9/11 was a symbol of God's wrath toward American permissiveness and perversions. And Bob Jones 3rd tells the President that he must "shed" himself of the "liberals" who "despise you because they despise your Christ." For Jones, Bush's election is a sign that "God has graciously granted America—though she doesn't deserve it—a reprieve from the agenda of paganism."

The President, with a Republican House, and a firmed-up Republican majority in the Senate, is on his way. He's won a 51% majority of the votes cast and squeaks out an Electoral College victory. As a social and religious conservative, he is already strengthening support yet again for a federal constitutional amendment banning gay marriage. Worse: Having disowned fiscal responsibility, he is a free-wheeling big spender, who has yet to veto a single bill, and who will extend the welfare state domestically and abroad, as he continues to forge a neo-Wilsonian nation-building crusade to bring "democracy" to that other fundamentalist region of the world: The Middle East. All of this comes at the expense of American taxpayers and American lives, in the name of a "War on Terror" that, in my view, has been damaged seriously by Bush's Iraq misadventure.

In other words: God Help Us.