

Special Report

Ralph Reed's reckoning

By Bill Berkowitz

Online Journal Guest Writer

July 23, 2005, ([WorkingForChange](#))—Ralph Reed, the wunderkind of the religious right during the 1990s, recently gathered supporters together for a rally promoting his candidacy for lieutenant governor of Georgia, a campaign, many political observers believe, that is the former executive director of the Christian Coalition's first step on the road toward higher office.

About 1,000 of the faithful showed up in Cobb County, Georgia, to hear Sean Hannity—the popular conservative co-host of the Fox News Channel's *Hannity & Colmes* program—and Georgia's former Democratic Senator, Zell Miller—who, in bashing John Kerry, the Democratic Party's presidential nominee at last year's Republican National Convention, became the darling of Republicans everywhere—give Reed their hearty endorsements.

"What I see in Ralph Reed is the next generation emerging," said Hannity. Referencing the late President Ronald Reagan and other conservative icons, Hannity added, "Everything I see in those men, I see in Ralph Reed."

"I am for Ralph Reed as strongly as I have ever been for anyone," Miller declared. "I know a little something about the lieutenant governor's office, having held it for 16 years. And Ralph Reed will make an outstanding lieutenant governor of Georgia."

Thus far, Reed has raised \$1.4 million for his run, with 20 percent of it coming from out of state, "including dozens of contributions from Washington lobbyists and consultants," the *Atlanta Journal-Constitution* reported in mid-July.

In the 1990s, Reed's boyish good looks and soft-spoken demeanor helped him carve out an image as a squeaky-clean spokesperson for the religious right. In a 1995 cover story, *Time* magazine called him "the right hand of God."

At the Cobb County rally, while Reed was defining himself as "a mainstream, balanced-budget, tax-cutting, pro-family conservative candidate," the winds of scandal were swirling about him.

His name has come up in connection with a federal investigation into the affairs of Jack Abramoff, a conservative lobbyist and one of his longtime pals. The scandal in part revolves around Abramoff's taking of large sums of money from one Indian tribe and using it to kill the gambling operations of another tribe.

According to the *Atlanta Journal-Constitution's* deputy editorial page editor and columnist Jay Bookman, "In 2001 and 2002, Abramoff secretly hired Reed . . . to gin up a morality-based 'grassroots coalition' to pressure Texas officials to close an Indian casino in El Paso. The casino, run by the dirt-poor Tigua tribe, competed with casinos in Louisiana and Mississippi that were clients of Abramoff. He wanted the Tigua casino closed, and he paid Reed \$4 million to do the hit."

Abramoff brought Reed, a longtime public opponent of gambling, on board to run a multi-media campaign—including a series of radio advertisements—aimed at convincing anti-gambling religious folk in

Texas to flood their legislators with anti-casino messages. The *Atlanta Journal-Constitution's* Alan Judd recently reported that, "Reed organized pastors . . . to provide what he called 'cover' for the Texas attorney general, who had filed a lawsuit to close the Tiguas' casino. Reed once wrote an e-mail to Abramoff suggesting they 'budget for an attaboy' for the attorney general."

With the campaign underway, Reed and Abramoff exchanged a series of e-mails, which recently became public:

"I wish those moronic Tiguas were smarter in their political contributions," read one of Abramoff's messages to Reed in 2002. "I'd love us to get our mitts on that moolah!! Oh well, stupid folks get wiped out."

"Got it,' Reed replied."

Reed, along with Abramoff and four others, including Bob Ney, an Ohio Republican congressman, took a trip to Scotland during that period. Although the group shared meals and played golf, Reed denies knowing anything about Abramoff's "effort to reopen the casino, an assertion that leaves his critics incredulous," the *Journal-Constitution* reported.

Reed has denied any wrongdoing, saying that he didn't know the money had come from pro-gambling sources.

"How could he not know?" Carlos Hisa, lieutenant governor of the Tiguas' tribal council, said of Reed. "I'm pretty sure in conversation it had to come up once or twice."

Suzii Paynter, a lobbyist for Texas' Southern Baptists who oppose expanded gambling, also figures Reed must have known what the trip's agenda really was.

"I'm nowhere near as sophisticated a political operative as Ralph Reed is, and I know better than to go too far down the road with an unknown source of money," Paynter told the *Atlanta Journal Constitution*. "I do not believe somebody walks up to you with \$4 million and you don't ask the question, 'Where is this money coming from?' That is just unbelievably naive."

"The suggestion that he didn't understand that this was about promoting gambling doesn't pass the smell test," the Rev. Barry Lynn, the executive director of Americans United for Separation of Church and State, told me in a telephone interview. Lynn added that, he "would be surprised if Reed would ever admit to any wrongdoing. He is now and has forever been interested mainly in promoting Ralph Reed and the wealth and power that would come his way."

After his name surfaced during the Washington investigation, Bob Irvin, a former Georgia Republican state representative and House minority leader urged Reed to withdraw from the lieutenant governor's race to avoid splitting the state's GOP. In an op-ed piece in the *Atlanta Journal-Constitution*, Irvin advised Reed to drop out of the election—which is still more than a year off—"in order to avoid a grievous, majority-wrecking split in the [state's] Republican Party."

As executive director of Pat Robertson's powerful Christian Coalition, Reed did as much as anyone during the past decade to promote the religious right's agenda. He was an articulate spokesperson and was a ubiquitous presence on cable television's talking head programs. More often than not, he had the mainstream media eating out of his hands—even when defending one of his boss Pat Robertson's frequent loopy comments.

In 1997, with the Christian Coalition having apparently reached its political zenith, Reed set off on his own and founded Century Strategies, a political consulting firm based in Duluth, Georgia. Hardball politics was to become Reed's forte.

The Washington Post reported that during the 1998 Georgia lieutenant governor's race between Mark Taylor and Mitch Skandalakis, Reed's company "ran controversial ads showing his Democratic candidate Mark Taylor, with Atlanta's black mayor Bill Campbell as an announcer said: 'First, Taylor . . . fought to preserve discriminatory racial quotas. Then, he was solidly endorsed by the homosexual newspaper, Southern Voice.'" In a race defined by its negative campaigning, Reed's client was forced "to pay [a] \$50,000 fine for libel."

During the 2000 GOP presidential primary, when George W. Bush needed a smashing victory in South Carolina over a hard-charging Sen. John McCain, Reed came through for Bush by delivering the ground troops and votes needed to defeat McCain.

"Reed played an important role in the evisceration of John McCain," the Rev. Lynn said. "He knew that McCain was deeply disturbed about the religious right's hold on the party and he made sure that McCain was taken out of the race through phony push polls and the like. In the same way that Reed has been a great self-promoter, he also has fully understood the politics of personal destruction."

Reed continued to work for the Bush-Cheney team in 2000, and during the 2004 presidential campaign, he served as a senior official.

As chairman of the Georgia Republican Party, Reed was in charge during Saxby Chambliss' successful challenge to incumbent Senator Max Cleland in 2002. That campaign, said to be one of the dirtiest in the history of the state, featured the vicious slandering of Senator Cleland, a Vietnam War hero; A Chambliss television ad showed an image of Cleland together with those of Saddam Hussein and Osama bin Laden, implying that the three were somehow linked.

While Reed's bid for the lieutenant governor's post has hit a bump in the road, it is unlikely he will withdraw from the race. Marshall Wittmann, John McCain's former communications director and a former Reed colleague at the Christian Coalition, told the Associated Press that he thinks Reed wants to be president.

"He knew he couldn't go from the Christian Coalition, so he became a political consultant, then Georgia GOP chairman, then coordinator for the Bush campaign. The next logical step is to win a political office," Wittmann, who currently is a senior fellow at the Progressive Policy Institute, said. "This is what's available, but it's clearly a stepping stone to higher office."

Bill Berkowitz is a longtime observer of the conservative movement. His [WorkingForChange](#) column Conservative Watch documents the strategies, players, institutions, victories and defeats of the American Right.