

The John and Jerry Show

by *Bill Berkowitz*

On Saturday, May 13, when Senator John McCain (R-AZ) showed up to speak to the graduating class at the Reverend Jerry Falwell's Liberty University, hand shakes, smiles and hugs abounded. The key words of the day were "tolerance," "respect," and "understanding," and the Senator's overarching theme was his defense of President Bush's War on Iraq. The Senator was nice; the Reverend was nice, the audience was nice.

The bitter Republican Party presidential campaign of 2000 seemed like a distant memory.

In the fall of 2000, Sen. McCain was battling it out with Texas Governor George W. Bush for the Republican Party's presidential nomination. The candidates were headed for a showdown in South Carolina, and McCain, then seen as something of a maverick and party outsider, clearly had the momentum. Coming off a huge victory in the New Hampshire primary, McCain had emerged as the only candidate that might be able to derail Bush. But the wheels came off the McCain campaign in South Carolina. He never recovered from that defeat, and the rest is history. McCain fell victim to political hardball. Understanding its vulnerability, the Bush team brought in Ralph Reed, the former executive director of the then still-powerful Christian Coalition, to mobilize evangelical voters. "Reed played an important role in the evisceration of John McCain," the Rev. Barry Lynn, president of Americans United for Separation of Church and State, later pointed out. "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 (where respondents are asked leading questions on candidates or issues) 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." A week after the South Carolina primary, an angry McCain delivered a speech slamming two of the religious right's most venerable leaders, the Rev. Jerry Falwell and the Rev. Pat Robertson. Both had campaigned vigorously against him. McCain called them "agents of intolerance" who were "corrupting influences" in U.S. politics. The following day, McCain continued his attack, blasting them for "the evil influence that they exercise over the Republican Party". Although McCain later retracted the "evil" part, Christian evangelicals have not forgotten those words. Will they not only finally forgive him, but will they support his run for the Republican presidential nomination in 2008? By most press accounts and recent polls, McCain appears locked-in as the front runner, ahead of the charismatically-challenged Senate Majority Leader Bill Frist, the relatively unknown Sen. George Allen of Virginia, and Massachusetts Governor Mitt Romney, whose Mormon religion may prove to be a huge barrier. Yet to some on the religious right, the memory of the aftermath of the 2000 South Carolina primary lingers on. In mid-May, McCain will make a pilgrimage to Lynchburg, Virginia to deliver the commencement address at Liberty University, the college founded and presided over by Falwell. Created in 1979, Falwell's Moral Majority was one of the first and most significant Christian evangelical organizations to emerge from what was then called The New Right, standing out for its active cadre of foot soldiers in support of conservative causes. The rise of the cable television news networks gave Falwell a ready-made platform to spew his surprising and sometimes outrageous sound-bites. At a pastor's conference, Falwell, who has been a strong supporter of Israel, angered

the Jewish community by claiming that the Antichrist, the archenemy of God, may be a Jew. While Falwell's reputation was soiled when it was revealed that in 1994 he had accepted a 3.5-million-dollar donation for his Liberty University from the Unification Church's Rev. Sun Myung Moon, his personal low point came in the hours after Sep. 11, 2001 when Falwell claimed on television that the terrorist attacks were caused by gays, lesbians, pro-choice activists, the American Civil Liberties Union and a host of other liberal likely suspects. The scheduling of the McCain speech has surprised people on both sides of the political spectrum. "Are you freaking out on us?" asked Jon Stewart, the liberal/iconoclastic host of the Comedy Channel's "The Daily Show" and an avowed McCain admirer. "Are you going into the crazy-base world?" Evidently, according to Byron York, who covers the White House for National Review and is the author of "The Vast Left Wing Conspiracy", "It was Falwell that approached McCain, not the other way around." And while McCain's visit is definitely aimed at showing Christian conservatives that they would have nothing to fear should he become the party's standard bearer, the politically savvy Falwell appears to be "willing to be flexible". Falwell displayed that flexibility last fall when after not speaking to him for years, he initiated a meeting with McCain. "I made it clear that I wanted to talk to him about the future, not the past," Falwell told York. "It took about five minutes in the meeting to bury all our little differences of six years ago, and then we talked about the future." The situation can be a win-win for both McCain and Falwell. The address gives McCain an opportunity to be seen and heard at the conservative university -- perhaps the first step toward receiving Falwell's political stamp of approval. "If McCain's outreach succeeds," York argued in an op-ed piece in the Washington Post, "the effort could pay off not only in South Carolina, where the senator's defeat in the 2000 primary doomed his presidential bid, but also in Iowa, a state with many politically active Christian conservatives and a crucial role once again in the next election. In short, Liberty University could help make John McCain the Republican presidential nominee in 2008. In recent interviews, McCain has clearly stated that he thinks of himself as a "traditional values" conservative. He is opposed to abortion and same-sex marriage, although he voted against the federal marriage amendment that banned gay unions in 2004 and says he will do so again if Sen. Frist brings it to a vote. He supported the president's nominations of John Roberts and Samuel Alito to the U.S. Supreme Court, and he is a supporter of the president's initiative in Iraq, although critical of certain aspects of that policy. In addition, McCain's compromise position on immigration -- as enunciated by the co-sponsoring of the Kennedy-McCain bill, which provides a several-year pathway towards citizenship -- may in fact not veer that far from the feelings of many conservative religious leaders, some of whom have thus far stayed away from declaring their position on the issue. By seeking out a relationship with McCain, Falwell undoubtedly sees an opportunity to once again re-inject himself into the Republican Party's national conversation over its nominee, as well as to regain some of the political clout he had during his halcyon days as founder and president of the Moral Majority two decades ago. According to York, "Many conservatives in Washington, especially younger ones, roll their eyes at the mention of Falwell's name. Nobody listens to him anymore, they say; his time has passed, his audience is shrinking, and he has been supplanted by younger, less overtly political evangelists such as Rick Warren and Joel Osteen." One GOP strategist remarked: "When a guy who called you an agent of intolerance comes down and kisses the ring, it's both a symbolic and a substantive gesture that you and the constituency you represent are vital. That's never a bad signal to send." Bend Oregon Central Oregon

Photo of Mr. Berkowitz by Earl Richardson

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