Conservatives not cozying up to GOP's big 3

by John Marelius

SAN DIEGO - The three front-runners for the Republican presidential nomination are trying desperately to ease the suspicions among the party's hard-core conservatives that each of them arouses for different reasons.

Rudy Giuliani promised to appoint "strict constructionists" to the court. John McCain mended fences with the late Rev. Jerry Falwell. Mitt Romney said his past support for the right to have an abortion was wrong.

While there are signs that these efforts are having varying degrees of success, many conservatives are withholding their support in hopes that somebody else emerges.

"What conservatives are looking at here is a group of less-than-perfect candidates," said Lee Edwards, a historian of the conservative movement at the Heritage Foundation. "A lot of them are waiting for Ronald Reagan, and there is no Ronald Reagan."

Reagan may not be available, but former Sen. Fred Thompson of Tennessee and former House Speaker Newt Gingrich of Georgia are talking about joining the race.

Danielle Vinson, a political science professor at Furman University in Greenville, S.C., said either man could find a receptive audience in her state's crucial primary, which will be third in line behind Iowa and New Hampshire next January.

"I think right now (that) if somebody else would come along in South Carolina and cut through the noise generated by the big three, they'd have a chance," Vinson said. "I've heard more Republicans, especially evangelicals, expressing unhappiness with the current field."

The seven other candidates in the Republican field can boast of more solid conservative credentials, but they are attracting only isolated pockets of support because few give any of them a chance of winning.

One of them, former Virginia Gov. Jim Gilmore, expressed his frustration at the situation in a May 15debate in South Carolina as he mocked the efforts of "Rudy McRomney" to cozy up to the party's conservative base.

"I looked back at the California debates," Gilmore said, "and I think that some of the people on this stage were very liberal in characterizing themselves as conservatives, particularly on the issues of abortion and taxes and health care."

In one sense, the bar is lower for the front-runners to demonstrate their conservative bona fides than it would be if there were a traditional conservative among them.

"For any of the top three candidates, the calculus is not necessarily to be completely trusted by conservatives, but just to be more trusted than the other two," said Republican strategist Dan Schnur, who was communications director for the McCain campaign in 2000 but is not involved in the 2008 race.

Giuliani, the former mayor of New York, and Romney, the former governor of Massachusetts, bring similar ideological baggage to the race - liberal stands on social issues that play well in the liberal states that elected them, but not with the Republican primary electorate nationally.

Giuliani got off to a fumbling start in trying to explain his support for abortion rights.

In last month's debate at the Ronald Reagan Presidential Library in Simi Valley, he said it would be "OK" if the landmark abortion ruling Roe v. Wade were overturned and "OK" if it weren't.

"One has to think he knew it was coming, and yet the response was confusion," said Lee Miringoff, director of the Marist College Institute for Public Opinion.

In the subsequent South Carolina debate, Giuliani was more direct.

"There are people, millions and millions of Americans, who are of as good conscience as we are, who make a different choice about abortion," he said.

There were apoplectic voices on the right.

Conservative columnist Pat Buchanan wrote that Giuliani's nomination "would bring the culture war right down to the floor of the Republican convention."

And James Dobson, founder of Focus on the Family, wrote in an online column that he would either vote for a third-party candidate or not vote at all if Giuliani is the Republican nominee.

The Giuliani camp hopes that the resolute image the former mayor acquired in the wake of the Sept. 11 attacks and his well-regarded economic record will trump social issues.

A recent survey of Republican voters by the Pew Research Center found that only 7 percent said they would base their votes on abortion, while 31 percent cited the war in Iraq, and 17 percent said terrorism and national security.

"There are people who look at the whole picture as opposed to one particular issue," said Bill Simon, the 2002 Republican nominee for California governor, who once worked for Giuliani in the U.S. Attorney's Office in New York and remains a close friend.

"I think the way Rudy put it is he doesn't agree with anybody 100 percent of the time, and I think that's true for me, too," said Simon, a social conservative who parts company with Giuliani on the abortion issue.

Giuliani often tries to finesse the abortion issue by saying he would appoint "strict constructionists" to the courts.

The term generally refers to judges who favor a strict reading of the Constitution in order to limit the power of government. In the context of abortion, it is generally viewed as judges who would overturn abortion rights.

"They draw comfort from the mayor's position that when it comes to judicial selection, he would appoint the kind of judges that would make them comfortable," Simon said of abortion opponents.

One authority on religious conservatives wonders if such jargon isn't lost on rank-and-file voters.

"There are people who recognize that as a code word, but there are a lot of people who don't understand what that means," said Bruce Nesmith, a political science professor at Coe College in Cedar Rapids, Iowa.

Romney is taking a different approach. Having proclaimed his support for abortion rights to be "unequivocal" in Massachusetts, he has now renounced that view.

"Roe v. Wade has gone to such an extent that we've cheapened the value of human life," Romney said in the South Carolina debate. "And I believe that a civilized society has to respect the sanctity of life."

McCain branded Romney a cynical flip-flopper.

"I have kept a consistent position on right-to-life," the Arizona senator said. "And I haven't changed my position on even-numbered years or have changed because of different offices that I may be running for."

Romney runs a distant third in national polls, but he polls much higher in the crucial early-voting states where he has campaigned actively.

A recent Des Moines Register poll showed Romney zooming into first place with a solid 30 percent of the vote among Republicans considered likely to attend their precinct caucuses next year, compared with 10 percent in January.

"If you're talking about likely caucus-goers in Iowa, a lot of them are evangelicals," said Nesmith. "Conversion is something that a lot of Republicans seem to be comfortable with."

Still, questions persist about whether Romney's shifts are heartfelt or political calculations.

"Conversion is one thing, but in Romney's case, the conversions are so recent and so dramatic as to raise questions about their sincerity," said Jack Pitney, a professor of government at Claremont McKenna College.

McCain has the most consistently conservative record of the three front-runners. But he arouses suspicion - and more than a little hostility - because of his maverick ways and penchant for antagonizing fellow Republicans, particularly over what he regards as excessive spending.

"We lost our brand," said Rep. Dan Lungren of Roseville, a McCain supporter. "We lost our credibility on

issues like spending, and if there's one candidate out there who's credible on this issue, it's John McCain."

McCain infuriated evangelicals in the 2000 campaign when he branded Falwell and the Rev. Pat Robertson as "agents of intolerance." He met with Falwell last year to smooth things over and delivered the commencement address at Falwell's Liberty University in Lynchburg, Va.

When Falwell died earlier this month, McCain hailed him as "a man of distinguished accomplishment who devoted his life to serving his faith and country."

McCain also is a strong supporter of the war in Iraq, but an outspoken critic of the Bush administration's handling of the war.

And he departs from conservative orthodoxy in other ways. He supports stem cell research and opposed a constitutional amendment to outlaw same-sex marriages.

The campaign finance overhaul that McCain instigated infuriates conservative political organizations, and the Republican grass roots opposes the comprehensive immigration plan he is pushing.

"He seems to be quietly conservative most of the time and loudly a maverick or a liberal," said Nesmith. "I think that's where conservatives kind of get down on McCain, just the general sense that he's more liberal than he is."

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