

Southern Baptist Land roving

by *Bill Berkowitz*

Richard Land, president of the Southern Baptist Convention's Ethics and Religious Liberty Commission, stands solidly behind President Bush

More often than not, he is a proud defender of all things Bush. When his name comes up you don't usually associate it with the word "maverick," but recently Richard Land, president of the Southern Baptist Convention's Ethics and Religious Liberty Commission has, in one way or another, strayed, not so much from the Bush Administration line, but from some of his conservative Christian brethren.

Land refused to sign on to the early-March letter Focus on the Family chairman James Dobson, Family Research Council president Tony Perkins, and 23 other conservative evangelicals sent to the National Association of Evangelicals calling for the resignation of Richard Cizik, the organization's vice president for governmental affairs. In late-March, Land appeared at a Capital Hill press conference calling for comprehensive immigration reform alongside several Hispanic evangelical leaders and congressional representatives, including Sen. Ted Kennedy (D-Mass.). And in a new book, he argues that both liberals and conservatives are off the mark.

However, in keeping with his deeply conservative credentials, Land has also reiterated his support for President Bush's War on Iraq -- four years ago he called it an example of a "just war" -- unequivocally backed Gen. Peter Pace's recent remarks opposing gays in the military, and called the fight against abortion "the transcendent moral issue of our time."

"Cizik and others are using the global warming controversy to shift the emphasis away from the great moral issues of our time," read the March 1 letter to NAE board chairman Roy Taylor. "In their place has come a preoccupation with climate concerns that extend beyond the NAE's mandate and its own statement of purpose."

The sharply-worded letter also claimed that Cizik -- who maintains that dealing with global warming is central to the Christian mandate to care for creation -- was not authorized to speak for the 30 million-member NAE. "If he cannot be trusted to articulate the views of American evangelicals on environmental issues," the letter read, "then we respectfully suggest that he be encouraged to resign his position with the NAE."

Land, who didn't sign on to the Dobson letter and has not joined the Evangelical Environmental Network -- a group of evangelicals working to show that global warming adversely affects the poor -- pointed out that he "felt it [the letter] was not in any way a productive or redemptive way to deal with the issue."

"First of all, I don't think the way you treat people you disagree with is to publicly reprimand them and put their job in jeopardy," Land said. "It's not how Christians should treat each other."

He also voiced concern that Cizik's work related to global warming "has led to the impression that the NAE has taken a stand when many evangelicals have not," Christianity Today reported in late March.

"I do think Rich [Cizik] is well in advance of his constituency on the issue," Land said. "I don't think there is anywhere near that kind of consensus on the issue, at least among the evangelicals I know. ... They're not ready to accept it is a settled fact that human beings are the major cause of global warming."

Immigration reform

Land's position on immigration -- strong control of the borders and a process toward citizenship -- separates him somewhat from the strong borders only crowd. The fact that he appeared on the same platform as Sen. Kennedy -- one of the historic symbols of liberalism -- must have sent chills up the spines of Dobson, and the Reverends Jerry Falwell and Pat Robertson.

"[Congress needs], consistent with national sovereignty and with our security, to find a way to resolve this moral problem in a moral way consistent with the ideals of our nation," said Land. "This is a profoundly moral issue, and it goes to the core of who we are as Americans."

According to a Baptist Press report "Land read most of the SBC 's 2006 resolution on illegal immigration," during the press conference. "That measure, approved by an overwhelming majority of the messengers, urged increased border security and enforcement of the laws, while encouraging Christian outreach to immigrants regardless of their legal status.

"For a year, Land has promoted an approach that includes controlling the borders, enforcing immigration laws inside the country and no amnesty for law breakers," Baptist Press reported. "He also has said reform should consist of a 'guest-worker' program that calls for illegal immigrants to undergo a criminal background check, pay a fine, agree to pay back taxes, learn English and apply for permanent residence behind legal immigrants after a probationary period of years."

Land acknowledged that he wasn't supporting any particular bill yet, and he refused to see that his position was tantamount to supporting amnesty. Labeling a proposal that would require a person "to learn to read and write and speak English and ... go through a series of processes to earn your way off sort of a probationary period to earn legal status and citizenship" amnesty is "to do violence to the English language," Land said.

Land predicted a majority of Southern Baptists and other evangelicals will support reform that is truly comprehensive. "They will not embrace reform that is not [committed] to securing the borders," Land told reporters after the news conference. "But if the government [shows] they are serious about securing the borders, they will embrace comprehensive reform."

The book

"God has more to do with America than Liberals may think, and less than Conservatives assume," writes Land in his new book, "The Divided States of America ? What Liberals AND Conservatives are Missing in the God-and-Country Shouting Match!" (Thomas Nelson, 2007).

According to a press release dated March 30, Land "dares to critique his own 'side' as well as those who disagree with him on the role God has played in America's past and the role God should play in America's future. Land describes [the book] as 'an equal opportunity offender' with a constructive critique of all sides in this pivotal societal tug-of-war."

"In what he calls the 'God-and-country shouting match,' Land explores the heated debate between more traditional religious believers, those with a more liberal faith, and those hostile to religious faith."

"The country needs a new way to think about this question,' suggests Land. 'When neither side is interested in listening to the other, but each side responds by shouting so loudly that their opponents either can't or won't listen, you generate a lot of heat, but very little light.' At the extremes of the debate, Land explains, are those who assume that America is God's chosen nation and those who wish to purify the public square of any reference to God. Both positions are fraught with danger, he cautions."

The press release pointed out that the book "tackles questions that are sure to be reignited with the unofficial launch of the 2008 presidential race: 'How should we address the concept of separation of church and state? How has religion influenced this country's past, and why does it matter now? Does the U.S. have a special 'role' to play in the world, and how have U.S. presidents answered this question? In a pluralistic society, how do we strike the right balance in the role of religion in American public life?' The principle of religious freedom once united this country, Land maintains, warning it would be tragic if Americas allowed it to split the nation apart."

Today's Land

Meanwhile, responding to a "God and country shouting match" of another stripe, Land appeared to stand solidly behind the recent remarks of General Peter Pace, the chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff who said that gays should not be allowed to serve openly in the military because homosexuality is "immoral":

"If 'don't ask, don't tell' were to be jettisoned, you would have a larger number of homosexuals and lesbians volunteering to serve, but at what cost? For every additional 'gay' person induced to serve ... how many potential soldiers, sailors, Marines and airmen would be less likely to enlist (from the more than 90 percent of the population which is not 'gay')?" Land asked. "Additionally, how many current military personnel would resign from the service in protest because they too believe homosexual behavior is immoral and would not choose to be in close unit contact with such behavior?"

At a recent meeting of the Kalamazoo , Michigan Right to Life chapter, Land told the crowd that "We are winning [the fight against abortion]. This is a long twilight struggle. ... The civil rights movement had a long twilight struggle, and so do we.'

Four years ago, Land supported President Bush's invasion of Iraq , calling it an example of a "just war. "In late March of this year, Land appeared on PBS' "Religion & Ethics Newsweekly" where, according to Bob Allen of EthicsDaily.com, "he stuck to the Bush Administration's Talking Points on the quagmire that is the Iraq War." In a recent essay about Land's defence of Iraq war, Robert Parham, Executive Director of the Baptist Center for Ethics, wrote that Land continuously "misstated the rules of just war." Parham added that Land "Either ... doesn't understand the rules or he misuses them because he is more politically loyal to President Bush than morally faithful to the biblical call for the prophetic voice."

"Having demanded a wedding ring from the Republican Party, Richard is now so wed to the president's failed war than he is a court priest for a pro-war denomination."

Focus on the Family's James Dobson, the Rev. Jerry Falwell and the Coral Ridge Ministries' D. James Kennedy have all suffered from a serious illnesses over the past few years. Anyone monitoring the antics of Pat Robertson will no doubt find it hard to take him seriously. The Rev. Ted Haggard, once the symbol of the new breed is now out of the picture. This leaves an opening; while many are vying to show that they've got political clout, few have as formidable a platform as Richard Land.

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