Kenneth Blackwell's 2004 presidential election shenanigans in Ohio

by Bill_Berkowitz

Landslide Republican gubernatorial loser moves on to Washington to work with Tony Perkins' Family Research Council

Over the years he's carried enough water for the GOP to fill up a good part of Lake Erie. He's done enough dirty work to pave the Interstate from Cleveland to Columbus. He is credited with being part of the team that helped double President George W. Bush's vote count among Blacks in Ohio in 2004, and is charged, by critics, of having tampered with that vote. So despite his humiliating defeat in the state's gubernatorial election last November, he remains a darling of both religious and economic conservatives.

J. Kenneth Blackwell J. Kenneth Blackwell, the former undersecretary at the U.S. Department of Housing and Urban Development, U.S. Ambassador to the U.N. Human Rights Commission, mayor of Cincinnati, Ohio, and, most recently, that state's secretary of state, has landed on his feet in the nation's capital.

In mid-March, the Family Research Council (FRC) announced that Blackwell had been hired on as a Senior Fellow for Family Empowerment at Washington's premiere right wing religious lobbying outfit. "Over the years, we have known and worked with Ken Blackwell on the toughest issues facing families and our country," said FRC President Tony Perkins in a news release dated March 14. "We have witnessed Ken's willingness to stand and fight for preserving marriage and defending the unborn. His unwavering commitment to tax relief and conservative fiscal policies has supported family enterprise."

Blackwell speaks out against the Fairness Doctrine

In one of his first public appearances as an FRCer, Blackwell spoke out against congressional efforts to reinstate the Federal Communications Commission's (FCC) lapsed Fairness Doctrine, at a forum sponsored by Paul Weyrich's Free Congress Foundation (FCF). "If it passes [The Media Ownership Reform Act, which would bring back the Fairness Doctrine] radio stations that air conservative talk shows to also air liberal shows, regardless of their listener interest or sponsor support," he explained. "It is a strategy that intends to silence ... voices with whom the left disagrees."

According to OneNewsNow.com (a news site run by Donald Wildmon's American Family Association), "Blackwell said liberals are 'terrible' at talk radio, noting that liberal spokesman Al Franken never competed with Rush Limbaugh and fellow liberal Jerry Springer never competed with Sean Hannity, as they promised -- and that Air America Radio, the left's failed attempt at liberal radio, 'became a better punch line than a bottom line.'"

"While liberals hold a virtual monopoly on broadcast television and print news, many on the left just can't stomach the reality of a dominant conservative presence on talk radio," Blackwell stated. "They want to give Mr. Franken or Mr. Springer and their talk-radio comrades something they cannot obtain on their own: market share." If they aren't able to effectively compete with the likes of Limbaugh and Hannity, Blackwell suggested that "they should focus on what they do best -- make ice cream."

Also appearing on FCF's panel were New York Post columnist Dick Morris, Cliff Kincaid of the right wing

media watchdog group Accuracy in Media and America's Survival, and conservative talk show host Alan Nathan.

In addition to being a contributing editor for Townhall.com, Blackwell, praised in the FRC news release for his expertise in the fields of economics, tax reform and education, was also recently named the Ronald Reagan Distinguished Fellow at the Buckeye Institute for Public Policy Solutions in Columbus, Ohio.

Blackwell: 2004's Katherine Harris?

As popular as he's been within Republican Party circles for being a dependable anti-gay, anti-abortion, pro-gun, pro-school vouchers Black conservative -- he once called himself "Jesse Jackson's worst nightmare" -- Blackwell became the Katherine Harris of the 2004 election cycle when he was both the Chief Elections official of Ohio and the honorary co-chair of the "Committee to re-elect George W. Bush."

In a recent post at indybay.org, Steven Rosenfeld and Bob Fitrakis once again raised questions about whether "Blackwell or other GOP operatives inflate[d] the president's vote totals to secure George W. Bush's margin of victory?" Fitrakis is a political science professor and attorney in the King Lincoln Bronzeville civil rights lawsuit against Blackwell, and Rosenfeld is the co-author, along with Harvey Wasserman, of "What Happened in Ohio? A documentary record of theft and fraud in the 2004 election" (New Press, 2006).

According to Wikipedia, "Allegations of conflict of interest and voter disenfranchisement led to the filing of at least sixteen related lawsuits naming Blackwell. Regarding voter disenfranchisement, the US Court of Appeals ruled, in agreement with Blackwell, that provisional ballots cast in the wrong polling location should not be counted in the election."

Two years later, "Blackwell was also named in a 2006 lawsuit related to his office's public disclosure of the Social Security numbers of Ohio residents."

Blackwell served in the administration of President George H.W. Bush as undersecretary in the Department of Housing and Urban Development from 1989 to 1990. After losing a run for a congressional seat, President Bush appointed him ambassador to the United Nations Human Rights Commission, where he served from 1992 to 1993. Blackwell was elected treasurer in 1994 and was elected Ohio Secretary of State in 1998, and re-elected in 2002.

Blackwell bucked the GOP establishment by supporting an amendment to the state constitution to prohibit same-sex marriage in 2004, which passed with more than 60 percent of the vote.

In coming out so forcefully against gay marriage, Blackwell became the darling of the religious right, both locally and nationally. According to the Cleveland Plain Dealer's Ted Wendling,

"Blackwell was invited to join the Arlington Group in the summer of 2004 after he was identified as a leader of the anti-gay marriage movement by Arlington Group co-founder Donald Wildmon, chairman of the American Family Association in Tupelo, Miss." (Paul Weyrich, chairman of the Free Congress Foundation, is the group's other founder.)

Wendling pointed out that the Arlington Group "a powerhouse, by-invitation-only organization whose roughly 60 members have direct access to the White House." In a recent story in the New York Review of Books, Frances Fitzgerald described the Arlington Group as "a forum [headed by Focus on the Family founder James Dobson] where the leaders of more than seventy 'pro-family' organizations meet to discuss strategies."

"One of the reasons I'm so high on Ken Blackwell, and he shares this perspective, is that this is not just another skirmish in the culture war," Stephen Crampton, an Arlington Group member who serves as chief counsel at Wildmon's Center for Law and Policy, told the Cleveland Plain Dealer.

In addition, Phil Buress, head of Citizens for Community Values, the group that poured nearly $1.2 million into the campaign to ban gay marriage in Ohio, and who sits on the Arlington Group's executive committee, became a major Blackwell backer.

His run for governor was also strongly supported by two very controversial right wing pastors, the Rev. Rod Parsley, head of the World Harvest Church, and the Rev. Russell Johnson, the senior pastor of the evangelical Fairfield Christian Church -- key organizers of the state's so-called "Patriot Pastors" and the "Ohio Restoration Project." (For more on the rise of Parsley and Johnson, see "The Evangelical Surprise" by Frances Fitzgerald, the New York Review of Books, April 26, 2007.)

Before the 2006 election, Paul Weyrich, who headed the Heritage Foundation, where Blackwell was an analyst in 1990, said that he "represents the only chance the Republicans have in Ohio."

Blackwell was also the subject of an extensive and glowing pre-election profile by Steven Malanga in the Manhattan Institute's City Journal (Winter 2006). At the time of his story, Malanga pointed out that Blackwell had "taken an early lead in the race for governor of a state that was key to reelecting George W. Bush and that may well be even more crucial in picking the next American president," and that he stood "at a pivotal point in American politics."

"Blackwell," Malanga noted, "built his early lead not by tacking toward the center of this swing state but by running on an uncompromisingly conservative platform that's won him grassroots support from both Christian groups and taxpayer organizations..."

Ken Blackwell has so many people worried because he represents a new political calculus with the power to shake up American politics. For Blackwell is a fiscal and cultural conservative, a true heir of the Reagan revolution, who happens to be black, with the proven power to attract votes from across a startlingly wide spectrum of the electorate. Born in the projects of Cincinnati to a meat-packer who preached the work ethic and a nurse who read to him from the Bible every evening, Blackwell has rejected the victimology of many black activists and opted for a different path, championing school choice, opposing abortion, and staunchly advocating low taxes as a road to prosperity. The 57-year-old is equally comfortable preaching that platform to the black urban voters of Cincinnati as to the white German Americans in Ohio's rural counties or to the state's business community.

However, despite support from both the religious and secular right, Blackwell lost in a landslide to Democratic Congressman Ted Strickland by a 24 percent margin (he received only 20 percent of the Black vote.)

In his post election analysis Joe Hallett, senior editor at the Columbus Dispatch and a long-time watcher and admirer of Blackwell, wrote: "Of his campaign, almost no campaign Blackwell could have conducted would have won. But the campaign he waged arguably made him lose by such a wide margin. It was an in-your-face campaign bereft of humility, a campaign of controversial moves and proposals, and one that personally vilified anyone who dared to push back, even fellow Republicans."

The tone was set on February 20, candidate filing day, when Blackwell held a news conference to unveil the television attack ad he was airing against his GOP primary opponent, Attorney General Jim Petro. The attacks never stopped, and Blackwell came out of the primary victorious but broke and with a negative image among voters.

Before leaving office in early January Blackwell generously gave state funds "including bonuses or severance packages ... to 23 employees ... and [there was also] unplanned or one-time expenses such as attorney fees to settle lawsuits filed against Blackwell's office," the Associated Press recently reported. The "current state Controlling Board approved ...added funds that Secretary of State Jennifer Brunner requested to run her office until the new two-year state budget takes effect July 1 .... [because] Brunner, a Democrat, "said her office needed the additional $2.5 million because ... Blackwell spent two-thirds of the secretary of state's budget

halfway through the fiscal year."

In a Townhall.com post-election analysis written earlier this year, Blackwell said: "Our conservative causes are just as true and worth fighting for as they were on November 6 (the day before the election). So, we must keep perspective, and continue. We must encourage others to also remain engaged in the struggle -- to be a force for living change. In more than thirty years of pubic service one thing I have learned is that the only way a cause is truly lost is if the army is scattered and resolved to defeat."

During a late-April speech in Columbus, Ohio, Blackwell attributed GOP losses in November to what the blog A Good Choice termed "protecting the status quo" and "not liv[ing] and act[ing] by their conservative principles." A Good Choice noted that Blackwell "also said that we should never let any defeat or failure be a period, but only a comma and to continue to be involved."

According to blog of Ned Ryun -- the son of Jim Ryun (the former Kansas Republican Congressman) and the former presidential writer for George W. Bush and Director of the Generation Joshua home-schooling program -- the "Word on the street is that ... Blackwell is thinking about running for Senate in 2008 [sic -- Voinovich's term is up in 2010] or Governor in 2010." Now that he has a major league platform at the Family Research Council, expect to hear a lot more from Blackwell in the coming months and years.

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