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Presidential hopefuls seek blessing from Religious Right

By Mark Wingfield

MEMPHIS, Tenn. (ABP) -- Politics, preaching and prayer flowed in a single stream at a Jan. 19-20 gathering alongside the Mississippi River as presidential candidates came to Memphis, Tenn., to seek a blessing from the Religious Right.

The National Affairs Briefing, organized by Baptist layman Ed McAteer, was held at the Pyramid, an imposing 32-story-high structure on the banks of the Mississippi in downtown Memphis.

Six Republican candidates and one Libertarian candidate mounted the platform to explain their positions on abortion, school prayer, taxation and foreign relations. In between, prominent conservative preachers and lobbyists spoke about the ills that have befallen America and what must be done to change the course.

President Clinton was invited to address the conference but declined. Republican candidates Bob Dole, Lamar Alexander and Steve Forbes also declined to attend.

Despite the absence of several prominent candidates and lower-than-expected turnout, McAteer insisted the importance of the National Affairs Briefing is not diminished. The event gained prominence with a 1980 meeting in Dallas which drew 20,000 people and established then-candidate Ronald Reagan as the darling of the Religious Right.

Fewer than 5,000 people were in the 22,000-seat meeting hall for any one session of this year's briefing, far below the 20,000 McAteer had predicted earlier.

Those who did come were influential pastors and decision-makers in the Religious Right movement, McAteer asserted. The event's impact also will be stretched by distribution of audio and video tapes of the sessions.

Asked about the candidates who chose not to appear, McAteer said, "That's their craziness." He compared their decision to how foolish he would have been in his previous career as a toothpaste salesman to have neglected invitations to pitch his product at Wal-Mart and Kroger.

Across the four sessions of the briefing, speakers ranged from the sedate, like Sen. Richard Lugar, R-Ind., to the sensational, like Texas-pastor and televangelist John Hagee.

"When the government condones what God condemns, it's time for Christians to stand up and speak out against government," Hagee shouted to a thundering ovation.

Hagee, pastor of Cornerstone Church in San Antonio, Texas, outlined a platform touched on in some way by virtually every other speaker.

"We want a president who can stand against abortion," he said as his first point.

"We want a president who will stand against the welfare system as we know it," he added next. "The Bible says those who will not work should not eat."

"We want a president who will stand against crime," he continued.

Remaining planks in Hagee's platform included protection for private property, speaking against the "toxic poison of Hollywood," giving families a \$500 tax break, implementing a flat tax, supporting Israel and standing by the Bible.

"If evangelical Christians cannot find a man or a party who will stand with us, we have the power and authority to form a third party which will honor Judeo-Christian values," Hagee warned.

References to abortion, school prayer and the United Nations repeatedly drew the loudest ovations from the crowd.

Opposition to abortion was portrayed as the most essential plank in the Religious Right's checklist for presidential candidates.

"Legalized abortion on demand is the core problem affecting our body politic," said Wanda Franz, director of National Right to Life.

"We must focus on abortion and make it once again a crime under the law," she said, asserting that Christians are "morally obliged to be single-issue voters regarding the issue of abortion."

Republican candidate Pat Buchanan called himself the "pro-life candidate you can trust," saying most other candidates who talk about opposition to abortion don't actually have a track record to support their campaign promises.

"I will be the most pro-life president in history," Buchanan pledged.

Sen. Phil Gramm, R-Texas, positioned himself as the one candidate who can deliver on abortion and other issues conservatives want in a presidential candidate.

"Republicans want the answer to two questions," he said. "First, who can beat Bill Clinton? Second, who would change America if elected? The answers are Phil Gramm and Phil Gramm."

Gramm portrayed Dole, the front-runner for the Republican nomination, as a compromising moderate who can be found "on three sides of a two-sided issue," particularly when that issue is abortion.

The school-prayer issue took center stage in the Saturday afternoon session, when about 1,500 residents of Pontotoc County, Miss., marched into the meeting hall carrying placards and wearing T-shirts emblazoned with the words "Religious Freedom."

The group was introduced by Rep. Ernest Istook, R-Okla., who has proposed a Religious Equality Amendment to the Constitution. He has said such an amendment is necessary to ensure that children have the right to pray in public schools and to protect religious expression in general.

Pontotoc County's public school system currently is engaged in a legal battle over school prayer. The dispute over whether the district's practice of allowing students to deliver prayers and Bible readings over the school intercom system is constitutional could make it to the Supreme Court.

Criticism of the United States participating with the United Nations drew shouts and claps of support every time the subject was mentioned.

"The United Nations wants to take over our country," warned Beverly LaHaye, president of Concerned Women for America. "This is the most anti-family organization in the world today. Nothing they do supports the family."

Other issues cited by candidates and speakers included reinstating a ban on gays in the military, abolishing the U.S. Department of Education, shutting down the National Endowment for the Arts, protecting the unrestricted right of citizens to bear arms and cracking down on crime.

Despite much talk about balanced budgets, flat taxes and foreign relations, several speakers emphasized that the roots of America's problems are more spiritual than political.

The most important issue today is not the economy but morality, said Ralph Reed, director of the Christian Coalition.

"We're in the moral shape we're in because of apathy in churches," added Donald Wildmon of the American Family Association.

"Who's to blame for this enormous decline?" asked James Kennedy, pastor of Coral Ridge Presbyterian Church in Coral Ridge, Fla. "A great part of the blame has to be placed right at the doorstep of the church."

The church today "needs courage to face a godless world and proclaim the claims of Jesus Christ," Kennedy asserted.

Richard Land, executive director of the Southern Baptist Christian Life Commission, agreed. "The problem in America begins with us," he said. "We must be a moral disinfectant in society."

Nevertheless, conservative-evangelical Christians have demonstrated in the past that they can make a difference in the political system, several speakers said. The 1996 elections are a crucial time to show that strength again, they added.

"We are on the threshold of the most important election of our lifetime," said Reed of the Christian Coalition. "We will elect a president for the next millennium."

Jerry Falwell related how he formed the Moral Majority in 1979 to invigorate evangelical and fundamentalist Christians toward political involvement.

"The 1980 National Affairs Briefing and Ronald Reagan put a stop to the headlong fall of our nation," Falwell asserted, but new problems have surfaced today.

"We had a glorious awakening back in 1980. But it seems to me we've fallen into a slumber."

Reed of the Christian Coalition issued a warning to all candidates about the continued importance of the Religious Right: "We are here to stay. We are not going to go away."

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Former SBC president says nation must repent

By Mark Wingfield

MEMPHIS, Tenn. (ABP) -- The United States must turn from its wicked ways, humble itself and pray anew for God's deliverance or else face extinction, Adrian Rogers said at the National Affairs Briefing Jan. 19.

Rogers, pastor of Bellevue Baptist Church in suburban Memphis, Tenn., and three-time president of the Southern Baptist Convention, delivered a keynote message during the first session of the briefing, organized by one of his church members, Ed McAteer.

"God has sounded the alarm, and we dare not touch the snooze button," Rogers declared. "The nation that was born in 1776 must be born again or it will join the graveyard of the nations."

The problem is an attack from the inside rather from the outside, he said. "If America dies, it will be not be by homicide but by suicide."

America still ranks No. 1 among the nations, Rogers said, but unfortunately is No. 1 in "homosexuality, radical feminism, divorce, destruction of family values, the occult, crime and violence."

He called for a return to the founding principles of the nation. "Our Declaration was founded on belief in God," he said. "You don't have to be a Greek scholar or a rocket scientist to figure that out."

This national problem boils down to failures on the individual level, Rogers said.

"Americans today are more concerned about a balanced budget than they are righteousness," he declared. "We're trying to make America a better place to go to hell from."

While he's not against a balanced budget, Rogers said, the problem is much deeper than a government-prescribed fix. "Government cannot make us good; only God can do that."

The answer to America's problems is found in II Chronicles 7:14, Rogers said. That verse, familiar to many Christians, says, "If my people, who are called by my name, will humble themselves and pray and seek my face and turn from their wicked ways, then will I hear from heaven and will forgive their sin and will heal their land."

The future of America is not hopeless, as bad as things may seem, Rogers asserted. "As long as there's a God in glory, there's a hope for America."

But because of America's sin, God has turned away from the nation he once blessed, Rogers said.

Natural disasters such as blizzards, mudslides and earthquakes, along with medical disasters such as AIDS, are not signs of God's direct judgment on America as some believe, Rogers said. "When God judges, he will judge with much more exactness than that."

"It is just simply that God has ceased to protect this nation as he was. The hedge has been broken down," he said.

And the longer God's protection is withheld from America, the worse things will get, Rogers predicted. "America needs a peace treaty with the Prince of Peace."

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Speakers blast Clinton at Religious Right event

By Mark Wingfield

MEMPHIS, Tenn. (ABP) -- President Bill Clinton didn't come to the Jan. 19-20 National Affairs Briefing in Memphis, Tenn., but that didn't stop participants from talking about him.

Clinton and his wife, Hillary Rodham Clinton, were the favorite targets of criticism by Republican presidential candidates and other speakers at the briefing, which was billed as a forum neither to endorse nor denounce any candidate.

"I do not want a president representing me who would not serve his country in a time of war," said John Hagee, a Texas pastor and televangelist. "I do not want a president who wants to lead American in a new covenant but cannot keep the old covenant with his wife."

Republican presidential contender Pat Buchanan said Americans could make an improvement by voting for any one of the Republican candidates running for the presidency this year. "Every single one of 'em would make a better president than that character we've got in there now," he said.

Later in his speech, Buchanan told the story of Michael New, an American soldier who refused to serve under the command of the United Nations and now faces a court-martial and dishonorable discharge.

"Michael New isn't the one who needs a dishonorable discharge," Buchanan asserted. "Bill Clinton is the one who needs a dishonorable discharge."

Beverly LaHaye, president of the Concerned Women for America, blasted Hillary Clinton as being part of a United Nations effort to create one world government that will control families and children.

"When you see Hillary Rodham Clinton on TV promoting her book, 'It Takes a Village,' do not be deceived," LaHaye warned. "Her village is not your community. Her village is the government. ... Yes, I believe they're trying to create a one-world government."

Gary Bauer, president of the Family Research Council, a political-action wing of James Dobson's Focus on the Family, criticized President Clinton and Vice President Al Gore for changing their positions on the abortion issue. Bauer said both men in the past had opposed abortion rights.

"Clinton and Gore sold their souls for political gain, and they ought to be ashamed," he said.

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EDITOR'S NOTE: A number of Baptists participated in the National Affairs Briefing program, even though not all are quoted in these stories. Audio tapes of all presentations are available. Some of the other Baptists involved include Nancy Schaefer, Richard Lee and James Merritt (Ga.); Tim LaHaye (Md.), and Rick Scarborough (Texas).

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Baylor plans to raise \$1 billion over 10 years

WACO, Texas (ABP) -- Baylor University officials have adopted a 10-year plan that calls for raising \$1 billion for the school.

Regents of the Baptist university in Waco, Texas, adopted a long-range plan called "Bold Visions for a New Century" Jan. 19.

The plan includes fund-raising goals of \$720 million in endowment, \$130 million in capital projects and \$150 million in other gift categories, for a total of \$1 billion by the year 2006. It is the largest project of its kind in Baylor's history, officials said.

New buildings included in the plan are a student-life complex featuring health and recreational facilities, a school of law and a permanent home for the George W. Truett Theological Seminary.

The plan is part of a goal for Baylor "to become the foremost university in the world committed to excellence in Christian higher education," said Gwin Morris, vice president for university relations.

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-- By ABP staff

CORRECTION: Please replace the sixth paragraph of the Jan. 19 ABP story, "Creed named dean at Truett Seminary," with the following.

He has been pastor of First Baptist Church of Natchitoches, La., and of McCart Meadows Baptist Church and Wheatland Baptist Church, both in Fort Worth, Texas.

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