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Robertson backs Rudy despite abortion differences

BY KATIE THOMAS

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10:47 PM EST, November 7, 2007

Rudy Giuliani won the endorsement of evangelical Christian leader Pat Robertson Wednesday, scoring a big boost in his effort to lure conservative voters. But the move shocked other religious activists who couldn't believe the prominent TV preacher backed such a socially moderate Republican.

"The typical conversation among evangelical leaders has been, who can stop Hillary? And the question before that is, who can stop Giuliani?" said Oran Smith, president of the Palmetto Family Council in South Carolina, referring to Hillary Rodham Clinton.

Robertson said Wednesday he set aside his differences with Giuliani on issues such as abortion because he believes that fighting the war against terrorists is more urgent.

"To me, the overriding issue before the American people is the defense of our population from the bloodlust of Islamic terrorists," Robertson said. "We need a leader with a bold vision who is not afraid to tackle the challenges ahead."

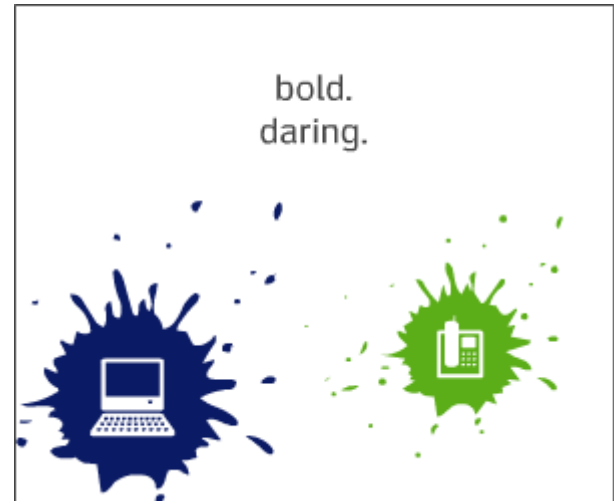
The announcement was a victory of sorts for Giuliani, who has struggled to convince conservative Christian leaders that he would be an acceptable Republican nominee despite his long-standing support of abortion rights and gay rights, plus his somewhat messy personal life.

With a Christian conservative like Robertson in his camp, Giuliani might persuade otherwise hostile voters to take another look. "It provides cover for religious conservatives to go his way," said Republican pollster Whit Ayres. "And it provides a great rebuttal for the Giuliani campaign to pull out when someone says, 'You can't unite the party.'"

Yet the endorsement also raised questions for Giuliani, including how much the aging Robertson's influence has waned among religious voters, and whether those voters could overlook their surprise at Robertson's move to consider backing Giuliani themselves.

The endorsement could also backfire on Giuliani, especially among moderate voters who may be turned off by Robertson's far-right stances and past controversial statements, such as once endorsing the view that Sept. 11 was caused in part by God's anger over abortion.

"Rudy is going to get asked this question a lot: Why did you get it, and why did you seek it?" said Merle Black, a political science professor at Emory University in Atlanta.



But for Giuliani, those are worries for another day. In many ways, Robertson's remarks yesterday echoed Giuliani's pitch to conservatives as he seeks his party's nomination -- that while they won't agree with him on every issue, he is the strongest candidate on topics such as terrorism and fiscal conservatism.

And on beating Clinton. Robertson denied that he was deciding purely on "electability" but also made clear, "Rudy Giuliani is, without question, an acceptable candidate."

Giuliani said, "His advice is invaluable and his friendship is even more invaluable."

Robertson's endorsement came as Sen. John McCain's campaign announced yesterday the endorsement of conservative Kansas Sen. Sam Brownback, and Mitt Romney won the backing earlier this week of Paul Weyrich, the godfather of the religious-right movement.

That's a sign that Christian conservative leaders haven't been able to coalesce behind any one candidate -- which works in Giuliani's favor.

Asked about the Robertson endorsement, McCain, at a news conference with Brownback in Dubuque, Iowa, said: "Every once in a while, I'm left speechless. This is one of those times."

Some Robertson observers said yesterday's news highlights his pragmatic side. He ran for president in 1988 and worked to elect Republican candidates through his Christian Coalition in the 1990s, and is as much as political operative as he is a religious leader, they said.

Washington bureau chief Craig Gordon contributed to this story.

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