

Bush's band of brothers

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High-profile rock-stars and a large band of Hollywood entertainers are pledging their time and money to help defeat President George W. Bush in November. Karl Rove, the president's chief political advisor, is looking to the GOP's traditional base – fundamentalist evangelical Christians – to put Bush over the top this year. Will a revived and politically-focused men's movement from the 1990s bail Bush out?

In mid-May, when conservative organizations were heavily courting African American religious leaders – to discredit the argument that same-sex marriage was a civil rights issue – Thomas Fortson, the African American appointed to lead Promise Keepers last October, eagerly joined the chorus. “It would be a historical error to equate the civil rights struggle for racial equality with the movement for civil accommodations based solely upon sexual behavior,” Fortson said in a letter of support sent to the “Not On My Watch” committee, which was organizing a May 22 rally of African American pastors on the steps of the Arlington, Texas, City Hall.

With the presidential election less than three months away, the Promise Keepers, the men's movement that took the nation by storm in the 1990s, appears to be shedding its carefully crafted apolitical veneer and jumping into the political fray. While you won't find it endorsing a particular candidate and jeopardizing its non-profit status, it has already weighed in on an issue that the Republican Party hopes will help galvanize its base, the Federal Marriage Amendment – a constitutional amendment banning same-sex marriage.

“Fortson has been trying to preserve the organization's tax exempt status while at the same time leading the organization into a massive get-out-the-vote drive by inspiring their anti-abortion and homophobic base to enter the political fray, and when they do, on those issues, they will vote Republican,” Al Ross, the executive director of the Institute for Democracy Studies (<http://www.cdsresearch.org>), told me in a recent e-mail interview.

“We predict that their entry into the social movement will be a wonderful addition to what all of us are trying to do,” Tom Minnery, vice president of government and public policy at Focus on the Family, said. “If Promise Keepers tells men that the protection [of the family] must now extend into the public marketplace, into the government sphere, I believe many men will pay more attention to these issues than they ever have before.”

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“Promise Keepers has always been disingenuous about politics,” Fred Clarkson, author of “Eternal Hostility: The Struggle Between Theocracy and Democracy,” said in an e-mail exchange. “While always claiming to be apolitical, many PK rallies (although not all) in its heyday featured prominent conservative politicians and overt political and even electoral content. Denunciations of abortion and homosexuality were routine. It was just a matter of time before PK developed an overt public policy agenda.”

Founded by former University of Colorado head football coach Bill McCartney, Promise Keepers has been chugging along under the radar during the past few years. After its much ballyhooed October 1997 “Stand in the Gap: A Sacred Assembly of Men” rally in Washington, D.C., which drew between 800,000 and one million people, was carried live on CSPAN, and attracted an extraordinary amount of mainstream media attention, the organization hit the skids, experiencing severe financial problems which forced a number of layoffs of paid staff.

“The organization lost some of its momentum a few years ago when Coach McCartney resigned and it underwent some serious financial troubles but they seem to be enjoying a bit of a rebound,” said Ross, who heads the New York-based research institute which specializes on domestic and international right wing challenges to democratic values. “Promise Keepers had a phenomenal growth spurt for a few years after they were founded and it took a while for people to understand that it was more than just a group of men who like to pray together, but was a sophisticated political project that preyed on identity crises which were affecting some men.”

While Promise Keepers' financial problems sent its leadership back to the drawing board and forced it to cut back on the number of large-scale events it scheduled each year, it still managed to draw thousands to weekend rallies at arenas around the country.

In early June of this year, nearly 10,000 men hooked up at the Pepsi Arena in Albany, New York for the year's first Promise Keeper event. Each year's events have a specific theme; this year PK events are called “UPRISING: The Revolution of a Man's Soul.”

“We're calling for an uprising in the hearts of men and expect them to go back home and affect the culture, their communities, their families,” said Fortson, who is celebrating his inaugural year as leader of the 14-year old organization. “It's time to get out of the arena and into the marketplace,” Fortson said.

The “marketplace” that Fortson appears to be referring to is the public policy arena. “I don't think we'll be able, as believers in whatever our walk is, to sit on the sidelines, be able to witness quietly,” PK spokesman Steve Chavis told Family News in Focus, the news service of Dr. James Dobson's Focus on the Family. According to Chavis the PK movement “will call on men in every vocation to stand up and speak out in their field of influence.”

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“We’re very excited about seeing men get that Christianity out of the church and onto the block, out of the church and into the board room, onto the shop floor, in city hall and in the operating room,” Chavis said.

“The radio ads for the organization’s 18 stadium rallies scheduled between June 5 and election day sound like US Marine Corps recruitment blurbs,” said Ross. “Their propaganda is slick and carefully crafted and it is not by chance that the Chairman of PK is US Army General Alonso Short who served as Director of the Defense Information Systems Agency.”

“Karl Rove complained after the 2000 election that Bush got about 4 million fewer votes from conservative evangelicals than he had expected,” said Clarkson, who has reported extensively on the Promise Keepers movement. “The political mobilization of the Promise Keepers, if that’s what this is, could help pick up the slack. It seems to have a more ambitious season of rallies planned for this year which suggests a possible election year uptick in activity combined with a more overt political agenda,” Clarkson added. “PK has not gotten much attention from the media and the political community, which tend to have the nasty habit of failing to pay attention to trends on the Christian Right.”

Can PK’s coming out of the “apolitical” closet effect this year’s elections? Al Ross thinks it could: “I am convinced that effecting the election is certainly the organization’s intention. They are an important part of several of the religious right’s initiatives aimed at turning out its base in support of the Bush Administration, although its lawyers will insist that it stops short of endorsing any candidate.”