

Robertson infringes on GOP

By Sen. Arlen Specter

In the "Contract With the American Family," we see the work of a powerful fringe group that is seeking to impose its religious beliefs and morality on all Americans. This fringe is now demanding adherence to a radical agenda, which includes a return to school prayer and the end of a woman's right of choice on abortion.

From outside the political mainstream, this fringe challenges the most basic of American freedoms by trying to tear down Thomas Jefferson's First Amendment wall of separation between church and state. As the leader of this fringe, the Rev. Pat Robertson has repeatedly told his followers that there is no constitutional doctrine of separation of church and state in America — that it is "a lie of the left."

Robertson's spokesman, Ralph Reed Jr., has insisted that the Republican Party maintain an anti-choice platform and have an anti-choice candidate for president in 1996. They insist on these extreme positions despite polls showing that they would effectively disenfranchise the 71 percent of Republicans who support a woman's right to choose, and a recent study in the University of Texas' Journal of Politics, which showed that it was the anti-abortion issue that cost Republicans the 1992 election.

When Reed was on *Good Morning America*, he described the "contract" as "suggestions," not demands. At the same time, Robertson talks of applying "real pressure on Congress to pass our contract."

Robertson and his followers have made no secret of their plan to capture the Republican Party. So far, they have succeeded in taking control of 18 state party organizations, and they wield considerable influence in 13 others.

Nationally, the strength of Robertson's and Reed's influence can be seen in the fact that, except for my opposition, every other candidate for the 1996 Republican nomination for president expressed immediate approval of their "contract."

If the Robertson/Reed contract becomes the centerpiece of the Republican agenda, it will truly be a case of a tiny fringe seizing power through intimidation.

Why do I view the Robertson/Reed group as a tiny fringe — possibly a 4 or 5 percent factor? I do so because of polls showing that the overwhelming majority of Republicans,

as well as other Americans, disagree with them on their key issues.

Robertson and Reed are, in fact, out of step with the overwhelming majority of religious people and Christians in America. Within days of its announcement, their "contract" was repudiated by leaders of Baptist, Episcopalian, Presbyterian, Methodist, United Church of Christ, Quaker and Jewish organizations.

So if Robertson and his 4 to 5 percent fringe are permitted to call the tune for the Republican Party, or for America, we won't have the tail wagging the dog; we'll have the tip of the tail wagging the dog.

When I speak out in my opposition to the fringe, I am careful never to speak critically of the "Christian right," the "religious right" or the "Christian Coalition" — because I believe very strongly that there is an important place in American public life for people with deep religious and moral convictions — and I am one of them.

When you consider the number of teenage pregnancies, the crime rate and the continuing war on drugs, there is no doubt that we need more, not less, in the way of religious values, personal morality and individual re-

sponsibility in our country.

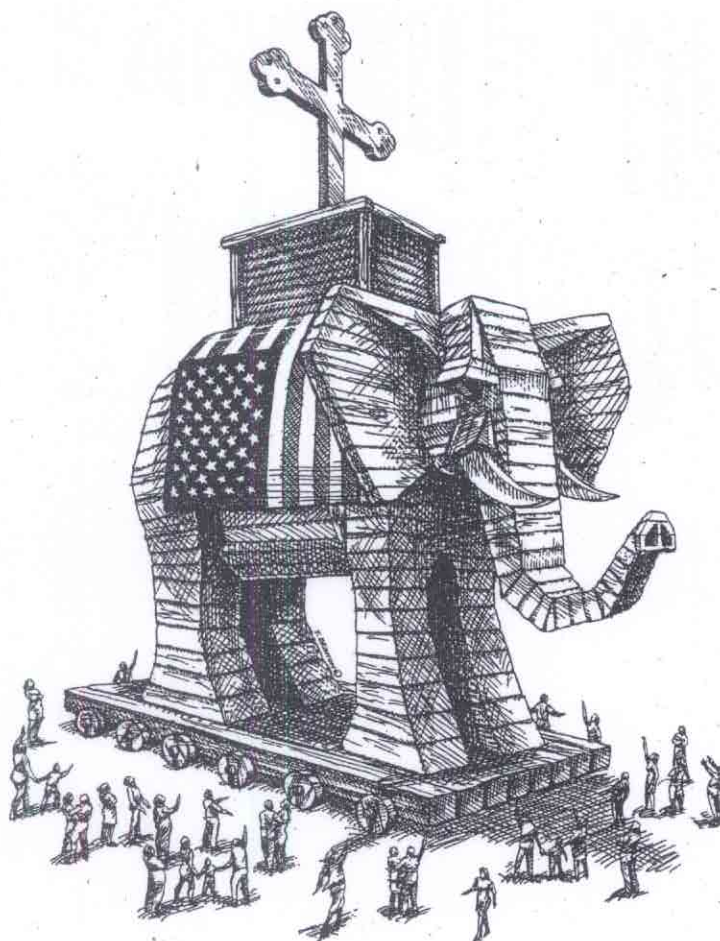
But it is not religious, not Christian and not Judeo-Christian to bring God into politics. There is nothing moral in promoting exclusion or spreading intolerance — nothing spiritual in saying to pro-choice Republicans at a political convention that "if you don't agree, you don't belong."

Today, Americans find themselves very much at risk of being dominated by a fringe that wants to tell the rest of us how to live our lives based on their religious beliefs — and which is willing to write the First Amendment principle of church-state separation out of the Constitution in the process. The risk comes not from the size of the fringe but the fear it inspires in political leaders.

Edmund Burke said it best when he declared that the only thing necessary for the triumph of evil is for good men [and women] to do nothing.

It is time for the rest of us to do something.

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