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Taxpayers Party Urges Christians to Prepare to Bolt GOP

Dissident Seeks Third Party, Antiabortion Candidate From Republican Conservative Wing

By Laurie Goodstein
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In a confidential memo, Howard Phillips of the U.S. Taxpayers Party is urging conservative Christian leaders to be prepared to abandon the Republican Party if it compromises on the abortion issue and to back a solidly antiabortion candidate on a third-party ticket.

The memo is a sign that even though Republican candidates such as Sens. Robert J. Dole (Kan.) and Phil Gramm (Tex.) have recently sounded themes appealing to religious conservatives, some in that constituency fear those candidates would betray them if elected president.

Pro-family conservatives need "a political 'insurance' policy," Phillips wrote, because it is "unlikely" that an antiabortion stalwart such as Patrick J. Buchanan, Alan Keyes or Rep. Rob-

ert K. Dornan (Calif.) will become the Republican nominee. The other Republican candidates all have a "pro-abortion voting record," he said, and in the past have supported funding Planned Parenthood, the Legal Services Corp. and the National Endowment for the Arts, and have voted to confirm three Supreme Court justices who support abortion rights.

In the memo last month to James C. Dobson Jr. of Focus on the Family in Colorado Springs, Phillips asks Dobson's help in getting the U.S. Taxpayers Party on the ballot in all 50 states. "More than anyone else in America today," Phillips wrote to Dobson, "you have the power to make this happen. If I may presume to say so, I believe you also have the duty."

Dobson, head of an influential Christian ministry, hosts radio programs carried on more than 2,000 stations and publishes 11 magazines

on family issues. In March, he warned Republican leaders that religious conservatives will bolt the party if the party "skirt[s] the moral issues" in the 1996 presidential election.

Phillips's memo to Dobson was leaked by a worker at Focus on the Family to the Institute for First Amendment Studies, a Massachusetts group that researches religious right activity. Skip Porteous, vice president of the institute, said that his group maintains contact with "informants" in several of what he called "radical Christian right groups," including Focus on the Family and the Christian Coalition.

Phillips said in a telephone interview that he had had "a number of private communications" with Dobson and other "prominent Christian leaders," but would not comment on specific discussions.

"There are some in key positions of

leadership in the Christian right or the conservative leadership that have misgivings about [front-runner] Dole . . . sufficiently profound that it could lead to a walk or a nonendorsement," Phillips said.

"In 1992, the idea of running the risk of a George Bush defeat seemed so ominous that virtually all [conservative Christian leaders] scorned the prospect," he said. As the 1996 election approaches, Phillips said, "there are significantly more people . . . than there were in 1992 prepared to consider the break" with the Republicans.

In his memo to Dobson, Phillips said a truly committed antiabortion president could veto funding for all abortion programs, instruct U.S. attorneys to prosecute those who perform abortions and withhold funding for courts and judges "who have vio-

lated the laws of God with respect to abortion.”

Conservative religious leaders say they are determined not to repeat their experience in the Reagan and Bush years, when they supported presidential candidates who sounded conservative themes but failed to act on them.

Many conservative Christians say they have been encouraged in recent months because the Republican Congress has taken up their agenda on issues such as abortion, pornography on the Internet and a constitutional amendment on religious equality.

“I’m pleased about where the party leadership appears to be going on social and cultural issues,” said Gary Bauer, a former aide to President Ronald Reagan, who now heads the Family Research Council, a Focus on the Family affiliate. “But I understand the need for the pro-family movement to have options in case the party goes off the rails. . . . I think all parts of the Republican coalition ought to have fallbacks in case they’re taken for granted.”

Paul Hetrick, vice president of Focus on the Family, said that because

the group is a nonprofit educational and religious organization with an IRS tax exemption, it is restricted from endorsing political parties or candidates.

However, Hetrick said that no Republican nominee should take for granted the votes of religious and social conservatives because “those people care far more deeply about pro-life issues than they do about Republican politics. . . . And there very well may be a third party that emerges when the dust has settled.”

The U.S. Taxpayers Party, which claims members in all 50 states but does not keep membership rolls, was founded in New Orleans in 1992. That year the party managed to get on the ballot in 21 states on a budget of less than \$400,000, Phillips said.

The group will hold its 1996 convention in San Diego, on the heels of the Republican National Convention there. In his memo, Phillips said that his party could then nominate Buchanan, Dornan or Keyes as its candidate should the Republicans pass them over.
