



Illustration by Ed Sorel

The Crusaders Christian evangelicals are plotting to remake America in their own image By BOB MOSER

It's February, and 900 of America's staunchest Christian fundamentalists have gathered in Fort Lauderdale to look back on what they accomplished in last year's election -- and to plan what's next. As they assemble in the vast sanctuary of Coral Ridge Presbyterian, with all fifty state flags dangling from the rafters, three stadium-size video screens flash the name of the conference: RECLAIMING AMERICA FOR CHRIST. These are the evangelical activists behind the nation's most effective political machine -- one that brought more than 4 million new Christian voters to the polls last November, sending George W. Bush back to the White House and thirty-two new pro-lifers to Congress. But despite their unprecedented power, fundamentalists still see themselves as a persecuted minority, waging a holy war against the godless forces of secularism. To rouse themselves, they kick off the festivities with "Soldiers of the Cross, Arise," the bloodthirstiest tune in all of Christendom: "Seize your armor, gird it on/Now the battle will be won/Soon, your enemies all slain/Crowns of glory you shall gain."

Meet the Dominionists -- biblical literalists who believe God has called them to take over the U.S. government. As the far-right wing of the evangelical movement, Dominionists are pressing an agenda that makes Newt Gingrich's Contract With America look like the Communist Manifesto. They want to rewrite schoolbooks to reflect a Christian version of American history, pack the nation's courts with judges who follow Old Testament law, post the Ten Commandments in every courthouse and make it a felony for gay men to have sex and women to have abortions. In Florida, when the courts ordered Terri Schiavo's feeding tube removed, it was the Dominionists who organized round-the-clock protests and issued a fiery call for Gov. Jeb Bush to defy the law and take Schiavo into state custody. Their ultimate goal is to plant the seeds of a "faith-based" government that will endure far longer than Bush's presidency -- all the way until Jesus comes back.

"Most people hear them talk about a 'Christian nation' and think, 'Well, that sounds like a good, moral thing,' says the Rev. Mel White, who ghostwrote Jerry Falwell's autobiography before breaking with the evangelical movement. "What they don't know -- what even most conservative Christians who voted for Bush don't know -- is that 'Christian nation' means something else entirely to these Dominionist leaders. This movement is no more about following the example of Christ than Bush's Clean Water Act is about clean water."

The godfather of the Dominionists is D. James Kennedy, the most influential evangelical you've never heard of. A former Arthur Murray dance instructor, he launched his Florida ministry in 1959, when most evangelicals still followed Billy Graham's gospel of nonpartisan soul-saving. Kennedy built Coral Ridge Ministries into a \$37-million-a-year empire, with a TV-and-radio audience of 3 million, by preaching that it was time to save America -- not soul by soul but election by election. After helping found the Moral Majority in 1979, Kennedy became a five-star general in the Christian army. Bush sought his blessing before running for president -- and continues to consult top Dominionists on matters of federal policy.

"Our job is to reclaim America for Christ, whatever the cost," Kennedy says. "As the vice regents of God, we are to exercise godly dominion and influence over our neighborhoods, our schools, our government, our literature and arts, our sports arenas, our entertainment media, our news media, our scientific endeavors -- in short, over every aspect and institution of human society."

At Reclaiming America, most of the conference is taken up by grassroots training sessions that supply ministers, retirees and devout churchgoers with "The Facts of Stem-Cell Research" or "Practical Steps to Impact Your Community with America's Historical Judeo-Christian Heritage." "We're going to turn you into an army of one," Gary Cass, executive director of Reclaiming America, promises activists at one workshop held in Evangelism Explosion Hall. The Dominionists also attend speeches by supporters like Rep. Katherine Harris of Florida, who urges them to "win back America for God." In their spare time, conference-goers buy books about a God-devised health program called the *Maker's Diet* or meet with a financial adviser who offers a "biblically sound investment plan."

To implement their sweeping agenda, the Dominionists are working to remake the federal courts in God's image. In their view, the Founding Fathers never intended to erect a barrier between politics and religion. "The First Amendment does not say there should be a separation of church and state," declares Alan Sears, president and CEO of the Alliance Defense Fund, a team of 750 attorneys trained by the Dominionists to fight abortion and gay marriage. Sears argues that the constitutional guarantee against state-sponsored religion is actually designed to "shield" the church from federal interference -- allowing Christians to take their rightful place at the head of the government. "We have a right, indeed an *obligation*, to govern," says David Limbaugh, brother of Rush and author of *Persecution: How Liberals Are Waging War Against Christianity*. Nothing gets the Dominionists to their feet faster than ringing condemnations of judicial tyranny. "Activist judges have systematically deconstructed the Constitution," roars Rick Scarborough, author of *Mixing Church and State*. "A God-free society is their goal!"

Activist judges, of course, are precisely what the Dominionists want. Their model is Roy Moore, the former Alabama chief justice who installed a 5,300-pound granite memorial to the Ten Commandments, complete with an open Bible carved in its top, in the state judicial building. At Reclaiming America, Roy's Rock sits out front, fresh off a tour of twenty-one states, perched on the flag-festooned flatbed of a diesel truck, a potent symbol of the "faith-based" justice the Dominionists are bent on imposing. Activists at the conference pose for photographs beside the rock and have circulated a petition urging President Bush to appoint Moore -- who once penned an opinion calling for the state to execute "practicing homosexuals" -- to the U.S. Supreme Court.

"The other side knows we've got strongholds in the executive and legislative branches," Cass tells the troops. "If we start winning the judiciary, their power base is going to be eroded."

To pack the courts with fundamentalists like Moore, Dominionist leaders are planning a massive media blitz. They're also pressuring Senate Majority Leader Bill Frist -- an ally who's courting support for his presidential bid -- to halt the long-standing use of filibusters to hold up judicial nominations. An anti-filibuster petition circulating at the conference blasts Democrats for their "outrageous stonewalling of appointments" -- even though Congress has approved more nominees of Bush than of any president since Jimmy Carter.

It helps that Dominionists have a direct line to the White House: The Rev. Richard Land, top lobbyist for the 16-million-member Southern Baptist Convention, enjoys a weekly conference call with top Bush advisers including Karl Rove. "We've got the Holy Spirit's wind at our backs!" Land declares in an arm-waving, red-faced speech. He takes particular aim at the threat posed by John Lennon, denouncing "Imagine" as a "secular anthem" that envisions a future of "clone plantations, child sacrifice, legalized polygamy and hard-core porn."

The Dominionists are also stepping up efforts to turn public schools into forums for evangelism. In a landmark case, the Alliance Defense Fund is suing a California school district that threatened to dismiss a born-again teacher who was evangelizing fifth-graders. In the conference's opening ceremony, the Dominionists recite an oath they dream of hearing in every classroom: "I pledge allegiance to the Christian flag, and to the Savior for whose kingdom it stands. One Savior, crucified, risen and coming again, with life and liberty for all who believe."

Cass urges conference-goers to stack school boards with Dominionists. "The most humble Christian is more qualified for office than the best-educated pagan," says Cass, an anti-abortion activist who led a takeover of his school district's board in San Diego. "We built quite a little grass-roots machine out there. Now it's my burden to multiply that success all across America."

Cass points to the Rev. Gary Beeler, a Baptist minister from Tennessee who got permission for thousands of students to skip class and attend weeklong events that he calls "old-time revivals, with preaching and singing and soul-saving and the whole nine yards." Now, with support from Kennedy, Beeler is selling his house and buying a mobile home to spread his crusade nationwide. "It's not exactly what I planned to do with my retirement," he says. "But it's what God told me to do."

Cass also presents another small-town activist, Kevin McCoy, with a Salt and Light Award for leading a successful campaign to shut down an anti-bullying program in West Virginia schools. McCoy, a soft-spoken, prematurely gray postal worker, fought to end the program because it taught tolerance for gay people -- and thus, in his view, constituted a "thinly disguised effort to promote the homosexual agenda." "What America needs," Cass tells the faithful, "is more Kevin McCoys."

While the dominionists rely on grass-roots activists to fight their battles, they are backed by some of America's richest entrepreneurs. Amway founder Rich DeVos, a Kennedy ally who's the leading Republican contender for governor of Michigan, has tossed more than \$5 million into the collection plate. Jean Case, wife of former AOL chief Steve Case -- whose fortune was made largely on sex-chat rooms -- has donated \$8 million. And Tom Monaghan, founder of Domino's Pizza, is a major source of cash for Focus on the Family, a megaministry working with Kennedy to eliminate all public schools.

The one-two punch of militant activists and big money has helped make the Dominionists a force in Washington, where a growing number of congressmen owe their elections to the machine. Kennedy has also created the Center for Christian Statesmanship, which trains elected officials to "more effectively share their faith in the public arena." Speaking to the group, House Majority Whip Tom DeLay -- a winner of Kennedy's Distinguished Christian Statesman Award -- called Bush's faith-based initiatives "a great opportunity to bring God back into the public institutions of our country."

The most vivid proof of the Christianizing of Capitol Hill comes at the final session of Reclaiming America. Rep. Walter Jones, a lanky congressman from North Carolina, gives a fire-and-brimstone speech that would have gotten him laughed out of Washington thirty years ago. In today's climate, however, he's got a chance of passing his pet project, the Houses of Worship Free Speech Restoration Act, which would permit ministers to endorse political candidates from their pulpits, effectively converting their tax-exempt churches into Republican campaign headquarters.

"America is under assault!" Jones thunders as his aides dash around the sanctuary snapping PR photos. "Everyone in America has the right to speak freely, except for those standing in the pulpits of our churches!" The amen chorus reaches a fever pitch. Hands fly heavenward. It's one thing to hear such words from Dominionist leaders -- but to this crowd, there's nothing more thrilling than getting the gospel from a U.S. congressman. "You cannot have a strong nation that does not follow God," Jones preaches, working up to a climactic, passionate plea for a biblical republic. "God, please -- God, please -- God, please -- save America!"

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