

GOP fears for credibility after scandals

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Lust, predation, hypocrisy. These behaviors were observed in humans, including Washington politicians, even *before* Republicans roared to power on Capitol Hill in the 1990s.

But the agony of Sen. David Vitter (R-La.) -- a self-proclaimed social conservative exposed Monday night as a customer of an escort service -- is one more float in a long and flamboyant parade of sexual follies and scandals served up by his generation of congressional Republicans. Previous attractions include former House members Newt Gingrich, Henry Hyde, Bob Barr, Bob Livingston and Mark Foley.



Embarrassment for the GOP was entertainment for many others, as people in Washington and around the nation chortled over the latest stubbed toe for a crowd that took power, and held it, in large measure by decrying the decay of traditional values and by issuing censorious attacks on the personal failings of political rivals.

Beyond the chortling, however, the Vitter scandal is a small piece of a much more significant development: The demoralized state of the social conservative movement on the brink of the 2008 election.

"It's the hypocrisy that people can't stand," said Michael Cromartie, a social conservative himself who chaired the U.S. Commission on International Religious Freedom under President Bush. "It's not the fact that people are frail and given to sinful behavior. It's when they try to pretend to be morally upright and end up being self-righteous because they preach one thing and live another."

The gulf between the professed values of conservative political leaders and the way some actually conduct their lives has sapped energy from a movement that was a powerful engine for the Republican Party over the past three decades.

This gap is shadowing the presidential race. The GOP presidential contest so far has not featured any full-blown tabloid sex scandals.

Yet many social conservative leaders have made clear their ambivalent feelings about the top tier of declared and potential candidates -- in part because of doubts that these politicians are genuinely sympathetic to the aims of their movement.

The modern social conservative movement grew in large measure as a reaction against the dominant cultural developments of the 1960s and 1970s.

Traditional values advocates opposed casual sex, divorce, tolerance of alternative lifestyles and the supposed liberal mind-set that dictated (in the famous phrase), "If it feels good, do it."

Many of this year's crop of candidates, however, have been enthusiastic beneficiaries of

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the sexual revolution and the more lenient cultural mores it ushered in.

Sen. John McCain (R-Ariz.), former Sen. Fred Thompson and former New York Mayor Rudy Giuliani have all been divorced -- twice in the case of Giuliani. All have gone through phases in their lives in which they were known for fast-lane social lives.

Among the candidates waiting in the wings of the presidential race is former Speaker Gingrich, a man who has also been divorced twice and recently acknowledged that he was carrying on an affair at the same time he was leading the charge against Bill Clinton in the Monica Lewinsky scandal.

Like Gingrich, Vitter was a veteran of the GOP conference in the House before being elected to the Senate. This group also included Hyde (whose own "youthful indiscretion" came to light while he was a leader of impeachment proceedings against Clinton).

The political implications of sex scandals were made clear last fall. Many Republican strategists believe social conservative turnout was dampened by the problems of Florida's Foley, who was shown to have made predatory advances toward male interns.

Vitter apologized Monday night after the phone records of the so-called "D.C. Madam" listed his telephone number. Vitter is the first member of Congress, and the second political insider, to be linked to a sex scandal that has dominated Washington scuttlebutt for months.

Social conservative leaders yesterday debated the implications of his behavior -- and how stern to be in their own judgments about it.

"All politicians' private lives should comport with their public policy," said Pat Mahoney, director of the Christian Defense Coalition and a veteran social conservative activist. "Sen. Vitter is known for having very strong conservative moral values; that's what he's known for. Yes, [social conservatives] should be held to a higher standard.

"Is it hypocritical for any candidate like former Speaker Gingrich or Congressman Mark Foley, who actually worked on missing and sexually abused children?" Mahoney continued. "Yes, it is absolutely hypocritical and needs to be challenged."

But some voices said personal characteristics must be viewed in fair context -- not as a one-strike-and-you're-out proposition.

"It is totally legitimate and even preferable for all voters to want to find men and women of good moral character who are running for office," said Gary Bauer, a former domestic policy adviser to Ronald Reagan and longtime social conservative leader.

"If a voter is looking for Jesus on the Republican ticket, they're not going to find him," Bauer continued. "There was only one perfect man, and all others have fallen short. They should look at how a candidate dealt with his moral failures."

But Bauer said he recognized the political peril of hypocritical behavior. "One of the dilemmas we have here is that the left has concluded that if they can find the moral mistake that conservative candidates have made they can peel off enough of the Christian vote to neutralize it," he said.

Meanwhile, the question of which presidential candidates social conservatives will rally around -- if anyone -- continues to percolate.

Giuliani has polled reasonably well among social conservatives, despite supporting abortion rights and gay rights -- results that themselves indicate no traditional candidate is lighting the race on fire.

There is scant evidence that McCain is catching on among cultural conservatives, despite sharing their views against legal abortion.

Former Massachusetts Gov. Mitt Romney, whose views on abortion have shifted over time, now backs cultural conservatives on this and other social issues. In addition, by all evidence to date, he and his wife of 38 years have led highly traditional personal lives, raising five children.

But some GOP strategists have said he faces doubts among Christian conservatives because of unease about his Mormon faith.

"Giuliani and McCain clearly do not come from the social conservative movement," Cromartie said. "Thompson and Romney, at least in language and all the people I know they are surrounding themselves with, are trying to be." But Cromartie warns that "we'll see" whether any GOP candidate succeeds.

One lower-tier GOP candidate said the discussion about how sincere politicians are in their professions to be social conservatives is fair -- and it's a debate he welcomes.

"Many of us became a part of the Republican Party so that we could find a home for traditional beliefs regarding marriage and family and the sanctity of human life," said former Arkansas Gov. Mike Huckabee, who is also a Baptist minister.

"If those things really don't exist in the party, then we have to ask, 'Why are we here?' Yeah, I'm a fiscal conservative as well, but that's not the only thing that motivates many of us to be involved in politics."