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FUNDAMENTALIST ACTIVISTS TARGET PRO ARTS CONGRESSMAN IN MONTANA

The Christian Coalition is working to defeat Representative Pat Williams of Montana.

Rep. Williams is a staunch supporter of public funding for the arts.

In his role as a chairman of the House subcommittee which originates legislation on the National Endowment for the Arts, he emerged as a champion for the beleaguered agency in 1990. At that time the NEA was being attacked by politicians and fundamentalist religious figures for funding so called "obscene" art.

This year, due to the loss of a Congressional district from the 1990 Census, Rep. Williams is facing the other incumbent Montana Congressman, Rep. Ron Marlenee. Rep. Marlenee is extremely conservative and opposes funding for the National Endowment for the Arts as well as a host of other progressive issues.

The Christian Coalition is a national grass roots political organization headed by Reverend Pat Robertson. Robertson, a candidate for the 1998 Republican Presidential nomination, has built the Christian Coalition into a powerful force for political action.

The Christian Coalition has 250,000 members in 49 states and is dedicated to electing "pro-family" Christians and gaining control of the Republican Party by the 1996 elections. Their goal is stated by executive director Ralph Reed, "What Christians have got to do is take back this country, one precinct at a time, one neighborhood at a time, and one state at a time."

They are getting pretty good at it.

In 1990 the Christian Coalition distributed 750,000 voter guides and made 30,000 voter contacts to help the re-election of ultra-conservative Senator Jesse Helms of North Carolina. The Coalition distributed 4 million voter guides during the 1990 elections in Florida, Michigan, Pennsylvania, North Carolina, Kentucky, Iowa and Nebraska.

In 1992 the Coalition raised over \$13 million. It achieved majorities or near majorities on Republican central committees in seven states and placed 300 members as delegates to the Republican National Convention.

In 1990 the Christian Coalition surfaced in Montana. It bought a series of radio ads and mailed thousands of letters to Montanans opposing Rep. Williams. A national Coalition state-by-state political guide distributed during the fall described the Montana race as "the mother of all 1992 House battles."

Rev. Robertson has referred to Rep. Williams as "Porno Pat" because of his support for the NEA.

Christian Coalition National Director Ralph Reed closed his keynote remarks at the January 1992 convention of the Montana Christian Coalition with his promise, "...to see Pat Williams sent bags packing back to Montana in November this year and I'm going to be here to help you do it."

In addition, the Montana Christian Coalition has been conducting an extensive telephone voter identification program. The survey inquired about attitudes towards abortion and whether laws should be passed in the state to further

restrict abortions. The survey also inquired whether the respondent voted Democrat or Republican and the 1988 candidate choice.

The Christian Coalition has been charged with violating its tax-exempt status by conducting these partisan political activities.

But such challenges have not slowed down the aggressive agenda of the Christian Coalition.

They are hard at work attempting to defeat one of Congress' few champions of the arts. (By the way, Rep. Edwards also has an exemplary record in support of the environment, education and labor).

According to Pam Egan, Finance Director to the Edwards campaign, "All indications are that this will be a close race. Our opponent and associated groups like the Christian Coalition have a great deal of resources at their disposal."

Friends of the arts have responded to this challenge and a few weeks ago Garrison Keeler gave a benefit concert for Rep. Williams in Montana.

But what of the larger question raised by the Christian Coalition's determined political activism?

What is the arts and culture community, along with the civil liberties and media community communities doing to protect the arts and freedom of expression from this political threat? What are religious leaders, who wish to see church and state remain separated, doing to oppose the dogma based activists of Pat Robertson?

The answer is, precious little. Certainly nothing on the scale being accomplished by Robertson and the Christian Coalition.

In 1990, at the height of the controversy over re-authorizing the NEA, Rep. Williams said during debate on the House floor, "We Americans have a pluralistic society. We place great value on the variety of our origins, the hues of many colors, our cultures, our politics. We understand that America's pluralism is our bulwark against tyranny. The arts embody our differences, our individual viewpoints, our varied aspirations as a people. The arts and artists explore the many layers of our society."

In the July/August 1992 of "The Montana Christian," Doug Kelly, the Chairman of the Christian Coalition of Montana said "There is no question that there is a war going on against traditional family values. The heterophobics are busy waving their finger at us while condoning open deviant sexual acts, including homosexuality and bestiality."

Who represents your values?

It is high time for folks in the arts, cultural, and information industries to get serious about our politics.

If you would like to support Rep. Williams, you may reach his campaign at P.O. Box 1992, Helena, Montana 59601, or at 406-443-7488.

Closer to home, you can find out about pro arts candidates by calling Greater Chicago Citizens for the Arts at 312-280-1025. (I freely confess to a columnist's conflict of interests here. I am the unpaid volunteer President of GCCA).

Register to vote (the deadline is October 4th) and vote on November 3rd for candidates who will support the arts and freedom of expression in America.

P.S. The Christian Coalition is active in Illinois. It has a state director and chapters in Cook, Lake, McHenry, McLean and Winnebago Counties.

Sources: "Congressional Digest" Jan. 1991, "The Montana Christian," New York Times, Washington Post, Los Angeles Times, "Christian American" Winter 1990, The Almanac of American Politics 1990.

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Tom Tresser is a consultant, producer, educator and trainer who can help individuals, companies and communities leverage and amplify their creative assets in order to solve problems, create economic value and trigger civic engagement. Tom has been a long-time advocate for an increased appreciation for the role of creativity in the life of the community. In 1991 he started an organization that organized artists and cultural workers for political activism and taught "Arts and Public Policy" at Roosevelt University, where he organized a center for the study of cultural policy. Tom was Director Cultural Development at Peoples Housing, a nonprofit community development corporation operating in northeast Chicago, where he organized a community arts program that combined culture and economic development. Tom served as lead organizer for the Chicago Park District for two years in a pilot project that transformed a major regional park into a community cultural center. In April 2004, Tom was elected to a two-year term for the Local School Council for the Abraham Lincoln Elementary School in Chicago's Lincoln Park neighborhood. He lectures on "The Politics of Creativity" and conducts leadership training sessions for artists and creative professionals. He teaches classes on arts and civic engagement at DePaul University and Loyola University.



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