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McCain hangs a right, heads to Falwell's school

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WASHINGTON - Blessed are the political peacemakers, for they shall inherit . . . the White House?

Sen. John McCain's graduation speech this morning at Jerry Falwell's Liberty University in Virginia is not just an olive branch to a Baptist preacher whom McCain described six years ago as among the "agents of intolerance" corrupting American politics.

It's a symbolic outreach to millions of religious conservatives who could be crucial to the Arizona Republican winning the GOP presidential nomination in 2008. Some of them doubt his commitment on social issues they view as important, such as same-sex marriage and abortion.

At the same time, there are signs McCain's decision to speak today in Lynchburg and other moves to the right are hurting his crossover appeal among some independent and Democratic admirers.

McCain's office on Friday declined to comment on assertions that he is pandering to the Religious Right. Details of what he will say in his speech were not released.

Supporters of the four-term senator are quick to point out that the senator actually is a social conservative despite his maverick image.

For instance, he has backed South Dakota's new law that, if allowed to take effect, will virtually ban abortion. And he backs a proposed Arizona ballot initiative that would ban same-sex marriage.

He also has supported President Bush's conservative nominees for the U.S. Supreme Court.

He favors teaching the theory of intelligent design alongside evolution in schools but mainly so students can learn about both views of how the universe began.

"I've found that both the left and the right misunderstand him. He is a pretty hard-core conservative, though independent," said Marshall Wittmann, a former McCain aide and 2000 presidential campaign adviser, who also has worked as the Christian Coalition's director of legislative affairs.

Although McCain's appearance at Falwell's school may "open the eyes" of people who didn't realize how socially conservative McCain is, Wittmann said he believes the important message McCain will deliver is "how strongly the senator believes in the notion of reconciliation."

Six years ago, McCain had blamed Falwell and fellow evangelist Pat Robertson for

using smear tactics to derail his campaign against then-Texas Gov. George W. Bush, at one point even lashing out at them for what he called "the evil influence they exercise over the Republican Party."

But if "reconciliation" is really McCain's intended message, it is one being lost on those who suggest the self-dubbed "straight talker" is pandering to religious conservatives in an effort to secure the party's presidential nomination two years from now.

Polls indicate he is an early party front-runner.

"So glad you've seen the light, sir," teased Stephen Colbert, comedic host of television's *The Colbert Report*, during a routine two weeks ago at the White House Correspondents Dinner.

Colbert even went so far as to urge McCain to "look me up when you go speak to Bob Jones University," a joking reference to perhaps the nation's most famous bastion of hard-core Christian fundamentalism and located in Colbert's home state of South Carolina.

McCain's appearance at Liberty and other recent efforts to reach out to conservatives also have led to protests from students and faculty members at two other colleges in New York where McCain is scheduled to speak next week.

They say his stands on such issues as abortion and gay rights do not reflect their own.

Students at the New School, headed by former Democratic Sen. Bob Kerrey of Nebraska, have asked Kerrey to disinvite McCain from delivering the commencement speech next Friday.

At Columbia College, students have launched a Web site message board to administrators titled "John McCain Does Not Speak for Us," urging that McCain be disinvited from speaking Tuesday.

Along with criticizing some of McCain's positions on abortion and gay marriage, the Columbia message board questions the senator's involvement with Falwell, whom it says has defined his career by radical and intolerant views toward homosexuals, Jews, feminists, civil rights activists and victims of AIDS.

"Senator McCain's politics may not be as radical as Rev. Falwell's, but when he congratulates Liberty's student body, he will effectively acknowledge Rev. Falwell's hateful teachings as a legitimate voice in the American political dialogue," the Columbia message board states.

The senator earlier this week said he considered it an "honor" to speak at Liberty University.

Falwell said he is not among the doubters about McCain's views on issues important to religious conservatives.

In an interview Friday, the Baptist preacher said that "anybody who studies Senator McCain would be hard-pressed to say he is one inch to the left of George Bush on any of the social issues."

Falwell acknowledged there remains what he calls some small disagreements. For instance, Falwell supports a federal amendment to ban same-sex marriage. McCain favors letting states pass their own such laws.

As for the harsh words of 2000, Falwell said that he understands they "were made in the midst of some hardball politics" and that he has not asked for any apology

from McCain. Nor does he believe one is necessary.

"I have to say that I do feel very warmly to him. It is possible - and I have not said this before - that I may be helping him in the primary," Falwell said, referring to McCain's still-unannounced possible bid for the GOP presidential nomination.

At the same time, much skepticism remains within the Religious Right and among other conservatives, said Betty Glad, an expert in political psychology at the University of South Carolina.

This, she said, is more a reflection of McCain's career of political independence and clashes with other Republicans on such issues as campaign finance, tax cuts or U.S. torture policies.

It creates a fine line for him to walk, she said.

"I think that McCain's strong point is that he has some solidity and sort of stays in a spot and doesn't shift his positions," Glad said.

"Going to Liberty University gives him a chance to speak at a potentially hostile audience. He can either say what he believes, which will be good, or he can cater to them, which will be bad.

"It'll be interesting to see what route he takes."

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