



The Election of 2004 – Collective Memory Project

Interviewee: Leonard Leo

Current: Executive Vice President, The Federalist Society
Chairman, U.S. Commission on International Religious Freedom
In 2004: Co-Chair, Republican National Convention Outreach

Interviewer: Dr. Brian Franklin

Associate Director, Center for Presidential History
Southern Methodist University

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Q: All right Mr. Leo, you were also involved specifically in the 2004 election as a Catholic strategist; I've seen several terms for that, Catholic strategist or Catholic strategy. How did you come to be involved in that particular role?

LEO: Sure. So, before the reelect had heated up, I was asked to preside over an informal group that used to meet to talk about Catholic issues, and we invited some administration people into that conversation as well. It was called the Catholic working group. Deal Hudson, who was really the architect of a lot of President Bush's Catholic outreach effort, had sort of stepped away from that role, [01:00] and they needed someone to step in and take over, which I did. I was asked if I would come in and chair the working group, and I did that. And I think part of that was that the White House knew me from a judicial context, and the outside world knew me from what I do with the Federalist Society, and for the conservative movement. So I think everybody was comfortable having me step in late in the game to sort of do Catholic outreach and try to foster a coalition of Catholic leaders around the country. So it started as just helping with the Catholic working group, and then that turned to the actual elective side. [02:00] So I was asked to co-chair RNC Catholic outreach. So I was co-chair of RNC Catholic outreach with Jack Kelly. And it was a nice combination in the sense that Jack was sort of your long-time political hand, been active in the RNC and the regions for years and years, knew politics, knew brass tacks politics, knew the party structure, and then, you know, I was different in the sense that I



was more the movement conservative who could galvanize Catholics from more of a philosophical or ideological perspective. So we brought a lot of different skills to the table. And so, summer of -- I guess spring and summer of '04, but mostly summer of '04, you know, we end up [03:00] coming into the Republican convention, and that's really my first public appearance as sort of the Catholic advisor to the campaign, and co-chairman of RNC Catholic outreach, was at the convention. And then from there, really trying to build out the second Catholic outreach effort for President Bush. The first one having been built out in '99 by Deal Hudson and Steve Wagner and some other people who were in Catholic circles for some time.

President Bush had a very unique perspective about Catholics. Every presidential [04:00] standard bearer has to campaign for the Catholic vote, because it's such a large segment of the American population. But President Bush did it differently, in the sense that he did it based on ideas. See, most candidates prior to George W. Bush went after the Catholic vote appealing to heritage. So it was about being Italian Catholic, Polish Catholic, Irish Catholic. You went to the San Genarro Festival in New York, you had a sausage sandwich, you looked at the statue, you went to your next political event. You went to the St. Patrick's Day Mass, or the Ancient Order of Hibernians dinner, right? And you did that stuff because it was Catholics showing up. But it was about your heritage as a Catholic. You were a cradle Catholic, or you were -- you went to Church on Sundays [05:00] and you were also Italian or Polish or Irish. And that's how Reagan, you know, campaigned for Catholics. That wasn't George W. Bush. George W. Bush, number one, recognized that he wasn't gunning for the whole Catholic vote. He was gunning for faithful Catholics, by which we meant Mass-attending Catholics, attendance at Mass one day a week or more. So number one, it was a different demographic for him. It was faithful Catholics, those were the ones who probably had the philosophical inclinations that were closest to his. And so that's where he concentrated his efforts. And secondly, it wasn't about just being Catholic. It was about having ideas that were Catholic, and the president being able to communicate those ideas in a way that sounded quite Catholic. Tough, because the Catholic lingo and language is very different from the evangelical and Protestant lingo and language. [06:00] But the president was able to master it. And so, he knew what issues to address, and he knew how to talk about them. The culture of life being the obvious example. Not abortion, culture of life. A very Catholic term, right? Education reform, right? You know, you talked about school choice, you know? Very important to Catholics. So anyway, he approached Catholics in a very different way. And that made the Catholic outreach effort extraordinarily exciting, because it opened up whole new



opportunities and new doors for how you do politics in the space of reaching out to people who are religious.

Q: Well, some of those [07:00] main ideas that you just mentioned, like education or culture of life, how many of those came straight from President Bush and his experience and knowledge, and how many of those came through conversations with you, or with the Catholic working group, or...?

LEO: He had the basics down real well. I mean, it really did come from the heart for him. And we were all very struck by it, because he really did speak our language without a whole lot of prompting. So I do think a fair amount of this did come from his gut, his heart. You know, he understood, for example, that our country was in moral decline, and that there was a crisis in values [08:00] when he was running for office in 1999. He understood that, he saw it, and he understood it. He also understood how to communicate issues with compassion, which is so inextricably entwined with the culture of life, and preserving the dignity and worth of every human person. He understood that in his heart, and so it was easy for him to communicate. So yes, I mean the ideas were there, and I think that's part of the reason why, for him, resonating with Catholics was about philosophy and ideas, because those things were so close to his heart anyway. So it was natural, it was natural. Now to be sure, that blended with the more political. So, it was also very apparent to Deal Hudson and Karl Rove and Steve Wagner and the people who early on [09:00] were developing the Catholic outreach effort that it was kind of a waste to reach out to -- well, of course, there's Kennedy, who reached out to everyone. But it was kind of a waste to try to message to this whole Catholic population, because the Catholic population is just a mirror of the more general population. It has liberals, conservatives, Democrats, Republicans, independents, people who feel lots of different ways about lots of different issues. The Catholic community as a whole is just like America. So the key was, well where can we leverage the Catholic community? Well, it's going to be on those issues. It's going to be those people who believe in those ideals that the president embraces. And that's why he focused on, you know, the culture of life and education reform, and values, decline in values. In 2004, [10:00] culture of life was especially important because he was running against a Catholic who didn't embrace the culture of life, so this was an important wedge issue. And secondly, the Court became important. I mean, Catholics actually, in a very unique way, have a very keen understanding of the crisis that we were having with the judiciary. But not just because of the abortion issue, but because Catholics understood that there's something about following rules, and there's something about humility which are important in human life. And so, when you commun-- when the president communicated about the proper role of a judge, and related that back to living



by a set of formal rules, demonstrating humility, [11:00] that resonated with Catholic teaching, people who are steeped in Catholic teaching. And so yes, culture of life had something to do with the courts, but it was about more than just that. And so, issues really drove the Catholic outreach effort, both in 2000 and in 2004.

Q: Well, you mentioned President Bush's eventual opponent, John Kerry, being a practicing Catholic as well. What were the conversations like, what was the strategy about competing against someone who is practicing, claims to be practicing the faith that you're also advising on? I mean how -- what did that look like? How did that work? Were there specific issues you decided to target?

LEO: First of all, the president rightly would never criticize Kerry [12:00] for his lack of Catholicity in terms of his perspectives. I mean, that wasn't going to happen, that wasn't the president. And he wasn't going to do that, and he shouldn't have done it, and didn't. So it was going to be incumbent upon other people to point out the contrast, and that was what the Catholic outreach effort needed to do. And it needed to do it in a way that again, appealed to faithful Catholics, Mass-attending Catholics, who understood what our duty as Catholics is. And so, of course the really big issue was abortion. And all of those other culture of life issues, stem cell, you know, euthanasia, other sanctity of life issues. And so, those were the ones that were [13:00] touted most often, right? And with good reason. And so, you know, John Kerry had a fairly radical position on these issues. I mean he was in favor basically of abortion on demand. And so it was not hard to paint a picture of him that was so at odds with Catholic teaching. Now what they tried to do, on the Democrat side, was what we called the seamless garment theory, which is basically "Oh, look, you know, to be a Catholic public figure, you know, you have to embrace a broad sense of compassion that captures lots of different issues. So it's not just about abortion, it's about [14:00] compassion towards your fellow man in terms of making sure that everyone has what they need to survive in life, a fair wage, a job, you know, a safety net to take care of people who are in need, right?" Clothe the naked, feed the hungry, you know, so the seamless -- and that all of these issues, right, so health, nutrition, housing, abortion, marriage, education, they're all on a level plane. It's the seamless garment. And that was the way the Kerry campaign tried to communicate his Catholicity. So, what we had to do on our side was find ways of debunking [15:00] that theological approach. That there is, in fact, a hierarchy of values and issues. There are what we call non-negotiable issues, and those are the five culture of life issues, right? So marriage, abortion, euthanasia, you know, being among them. And then there are the negotiable issues, things where Catholics can agree to disagree on the particulars of how to implement. So welfare policy, right? Or education policy. So that was the message that



had to be projected, which is, you know, there's culture of life, dignity of the human person, those are non-negotiable issues. Game, set, match. All the other issues, you can [16:00] have a fair debate about. And so that's the point we had to make. And of course, we had to be delicate about it, we had to make it in a way that, you know, it didn't seem like the president was pontificating about, you know, what it means to be a Catholic, and what issues are negotiable and not negotiable. So quite often, it was incumbent upon the Catholic outreach effort to find third-party surrogates, independent people, you know, who could go out there and project this message without it coming directly from us. And much of what we did was frankly, you know, engage outside individuals and groups to go off on their own initiative and to sort of, you know, project the right messages.

Q: So you worked with RNC also, I guess on a broader scope than just President Bush's campaign. Did these issues come up, not just [17:00] in the presidential election, but in I guess specific Congressional elections or Senate elections? And I guess to tie into that, maybe you could speak a little -- you spoke about the culture of life, and then you mentioned also the marriage issue, and that was the year where same-sex marriage began to come up on state ballots.

LEO: Yeah.

Q: So, did you have any particular involvement or thoughts on how those intersected in those states with both the presidential campaign and also the Congressional campaign?

LEO: We spent, in 2004, very, very little time on the Congressional side of the equation. I can't even remember doing much of anything. It was almost exclusively the presidential effort. I think the idea was basically that if we could, you know, if Bush could carry, you know, very well and very strongly, there'd be coattails. So we didn't waste -- spend is probably a better word, didn't spend a lot of our time thinking about [18:00] the Congressional races. And so we focused mainly on the presidential race. The issues were largely abortion and courts. To some extent, freedom of religion. And education. Not marriage. In fact, I can't remember marriage being much of an issue in '04. I can't explain why, but it just wasn't. [19:00] Interestingly, and I think this says a lot about President Bush and his commitment to these issues in his great strategic sense regarding Catholics, interestingly, and I was still chairman of RNC Catholic outreach in 2006, right, which was the midterm election, and I've got to tell you, the Catholic outreach effort then was abysmal. The RNC did not leverage the Catholic movement, the faithful Catholic movement in 2006. It didn't. And so, I really do think that there was something very unique and important about the president's commitment to the Catholic voter project.

Q: Well, what's your [20:00] assessment of it, having been -- you know, having worked on it, been a strategist for it, having -- and then just told us about how powerful it was,



particularly to the president. What's your assessment of how well that worked, or in what particular ways it worked? Do you know of any measurable ways (overlapping dialogue; inaudible)?

LEO: The faithful Catholic vote was extraordinarily important in 2004. I think a very strong argument can be made that the president won a couple of states because of faithful Catholic voters. In particular, Iowa, I know was one state. New Hampshire, Florida, these are states where we saw significant surges in [21:00] the faithful Catholic vote in 2004. And in fact, if you look at 2008, McCain, Obama's margins of victory in these states that I've referenced and others, his margin of victory is often less than the migration of faithful Catholic voters from Republicans back to Democrats. So, there's a clear, I think in a number of these states, pretty clear evidence that faithful Catholic voters were, if not decisive, certainly a major factor. Certainly a major factor. [22:00] Not on every state, but certainly in probably of the nine key battleground states, probably at least three, maybe as many as four or five.

Q: That's great.

LEO: So, OK.

Q: Thank you.

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