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POLITICAL MEMO

Reaganite by Association? His Family Won't Allow It

By SHERYL GAY STOLBERG

WASHINGTON, June 14 - As Republicans try to cloak [President Bush](#) in the mantle of Ronald Reagan, their biggest obstacle may be Mr. Reagan's own family.

Even before Mr. Reagan died, Nancy Reagan and her daughter, Patti Davis, made their opposition to Mr. Bush's policy on stem-cell research well known. But on Friday, at the culmination of an emotional week of mourning for the former president, his son Ron Reagan delivered a eulogy that castigated politicians who use religion "to gain political advantage," a comment that was being interpreted in Washington as a not-so-subtle slap at Mr. Bush.

The remark has provoked intense debate among Republicans about precisely what the younger Mr. Reagan meant. Some saw the reference to religion as a message to the administration on stem-cell research. Others saw it as a possible critique of the war in Iraq. Still others insist there was no deeper message at all.

But a friend of the Reagan family, speaking on condition of anonymity, said Mr. Reagan, who did not return a call seeking comment on Monday, was deeply uncomfortable with the way the Bush administration intertwined religion and politics and felt compelled to say so at the burial of his father, a ceremony watched by millions.

"I think he was making a more profound statement about style," this friend said, "and the danger of religion in politics."

First families often cause trouble for presidents. Jimmy Carter, Richard M. Nixon and Bill Clinton each had brothers who made them uncomfortable from time to time. But rarely does the family of one president step on the toes of another. The Reagans and Bushes, who have had famously strained relations throughout the years, may be an exception, as Nancy Reagan and her children guard Ronald Reagan's legacy, fending off efforts by both the right and left to trade on it for political gain.

"I think Nancy would not want that," said Barbara Kellerman, a Harvard expert on leadership who has written a book on first families. "She is not mad about the Bush family, and the last thing she intends is for W. to inherit her beloved and sanctified husband's mantle."

Ron Reagan, a television commentator who has frequently been critical of Mr. Bush, has already said as much. In 2000, he fired a shot at Mr. Bush in Philadelphia during the Republican convention, which featured a tribute to his father. "What's his accomplishment?" Mr. Reagan asked then. "That he's no longer an obnoxious drunk?"

Last year, in an interview with the online magazine Salon, Mr. Reagan renewed his critique, making clear his distaste for the Bush administration.

"The Bush people have no right to speak for my father, particularly because of the position he's in now," Mr. Reagan said then. "Yes, some of the current policies are an extension of the 80's. But the overall thrust of this administration is not my father's - these people are overly reaching, overly aggressive, overly secretive and just plain corrupt. I don't trust these people."

Mr. Reagan was not quite so pointed on Friday night. "Dad was also a deeply, unabashedly religious man," he told mourners gathered at sunset at the Reagan presidential library. "But he never made the fatal mistake of so many politicians - wearing his faith on his sleeve to gain political advantage. True, after he was shot and nearly killed early in his presidency he came to believe that God had spared him in order that he might do good. But he accepted that as a responsibility, not a mandate. And there is a profound difference."

The remarks caused jaws to drop in California and Washington. One Republican strategist, who would not be identified for fear of repercussions to his business, said he interpreted the remarks as a clear reference to stem-cell research, which Mr. Bush opposes on moral grounds because they require the destruction of human embryos.

"I thought clearly Ron Jr. was sending a message to the administration to be tolerant and understanding of this issue," the strategist said.

He said he was also struck by Mr. Bush's eulogy during the service at the National Cathedral. "I thought his speech was deliberately biographical in nature about Reagan, to try to show people that his biography is close to Bush's."

A number of Republicans are openly making that association. "Bush's name may be Bush," said Kenneth M. Duberstein, Mr. Reagan's former chief of staff, reiterating a comment he made last week, "but his heart belongs to Reagan."

But Mr. Duberstein, who is close to Nancy Reagan and guided her in her advocacy of stem-cell research while her husband was suffering from Alzheimer's disease, said that did not mean Mrs. Reagan would let the stem-cell issue subside.

"Nancy Reagan is not somebody who walks away from anything," Mr. Duberstein said. "When she takes on a cause and a belief, she is very much like her husband. I think this one is very dear to her heart."

It is also dear to her family. Ms. Davis wrote passionately about her father's illness in the online version of Newsweek, this week and last month. "A messy, horrible war that has spun out of control could very well determine the next election," Ms. Davis wrote before her father's death. "So should the miracle of stem-cell research - a miracle the Bush White House thinks it can block."

Such pronouncements could spell trouble for the president, said James A. Thurber, director of the Center for Congressional and Presidential Studies at American University. "Nancy Reagan is now an icon, related to someone that America thinks very highly of who had the disease that might be cured by stem-cell research," he said. "That's pretty powerful."

But Republicans who are promoting the idea that Mr. Bush is Mr. Reagan's political heir say the dispute over stem cells and the Reagan family's comments will not put a dent in the association.

"Ronald Reagan has to be looking down from heaven and smiling at the way the current president, generally speaking, stands and the things he's doing, even though they might well disagree on some specifics," Newt Gingrich, the former speaker of the House, said Monday. He added, "In eight days of nonstop nationwide focus, you get on the ninth day a slight hiccup."

Funeral Draws 35 Million Viewers

Just over 35 million viewers tuned in to the channels carrying the funeral of President Ronald Reagan on Friday night, the high viewing point for the coverage on the Reagan funeral events last week.

That was a big increase for the cable news networks that carried the events, though it represented a small decline compared with the entertainment programming on the broadcast channels the previous week. Among the broadcast networks, ABC had the largest audience, with 8.1 million viewers. On cable, Fox News had by far the biggest audience with about 5 million viewers.

Compared with other news events covered by all the broadcast networks, plus CNN, Fox News, MSNBC and CNBC, the funeral did not have an especially high number of viewers. The last State of the Union address, for example, was watched by 43.4 million viewers on those channels.