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The Washington Post
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Monday, August 25, 2003

A Section

For Pryor, Religious, Legal Rights in Conflict; Senators, Bible Belt Criticize
Ala. Attorney General [CORRECTED 22 Sept 2003]
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PUBLISHED CORRECTIONS: The Washington Post reported on Aug. 15, Aug. 23 and Aug. 24 that Coral Ridge Ministries, a Florida evangelical Christian group, used proceeds from the sale of videotapes to help pay the legal expenses of Alabama Chief Judge Roy S. Moore, who lost a lawsuit demanding that he remove a Ten Commandments monument from the state court building in Montgomery. The organization donated \$375,000 to Moore's defense but said that proceeds from sales of the tape, which depicted Moore installing the monument after business hours, did not go to his defense. On Aug. 25, The Post reported that Coral Ridge helped Moore install the monument. The organization did have advance knowledge of Moore's plans, agreed to assist with his legal defense and had a video crew present when Moore installed the monument, but did not directly help with the installation. (Published 9/16/03)

Bill Pryor once seemed to be the charmed wunderkind of Alabama politics. Clean-cut and articulate, he was celebrated as the youngest attorney general in the nation when he was appointed to the post in January 1997 at age 34. Since then, the conservative Republican has been elected twice, the second with 59 percent of the vote last year.

But Pryor now finds himself walking a precarious political tightrope.

He is trying to keep alive his nomination for a federal appeals court judgeship, which has been blocked by Senate Democrats who accuse him -- among other things -- of blurring the lines between church and state. At the same time, he is being accused of betraying Christian fundamentalists by backing the removal of a two-ton Ten Commandments monument from Alabama's Supreme Court after two years of applauding the controversial display placed there by Chief Justice Roy S. Moore.

"Bill Pryor probably has the most complex political life in the country right now, other than [California Gov.] Gray Davis," said Marty Connors, chairman of the Alabama Republican Party.

Until last week, Pryor, 41, was considered a darling of fundamentalist Christians, whose political might is unquestioned in this heavily conservative Bible Belt state. He wrote newspaper opinion pieces defending what he said was Moore's right to place hand-carved Ten Commandments tablets in a state courthouse north of Birmingham. Later, he spoke at a rally of supporters of the Supreme Court monument, which Moore installed late one night in the summer of 2001 with the help of the Florida-based Coral Ridge Ministries evangelical group.

But Pryor's relationship with Christian conservatives in Alabama has been unraveling since it became clear that he would not support Moore in defying a federal court deadline of midnight last Wednesday to remove the monument because it

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was ruled unconstitutional.

Increasingly, Pryor -- who has long been linked ideologically with Moore -- is becoming the public face of the effort to comply with the federal court order and remove the chief justice's monument. Pryor called a news conference Thursday, just hours after all eight associate Supreme Court justices overruled Moore by ordering the monument to be shifted to a nonpublic area or removed.

"The rule of law means that no person, including the chief justice of Alabama, is above the law," Pryor said into a bank of microphones.

Pryor's nuanced explanation of his position -- he believes courthouse displays of the Ten Commandments are legal but does not approve of violating federal court orders -- will surely be lost on most people, Connors said.

"The attorney general is going to have to do some repair work with a great number of Alabamians," said John Giles, president of the Alabama Christian Coalition. Giles has participated in a series of vigils that continued today as the Supreme Court building manager assessed options for moving the heavy monument.

Mending ties with Christian conservatives will not be simple. In the coming months, Pryor and his attorney general's office could veer toward an even more direct confrontation with Moore, whose crusade has made him one of the most popular political figures in the state. Pryor's office is expected to handle the prosecution of Moore in the state's Court of the Judiciary, which could discipline or remove the chief justice after his suspension Friday by a judicial ethics commission.

Republicans here are hopeful that Pryor's stance in the Ten Commandments case will soften his image and send a message to Democratic opponents in Washington who have filibustered his nomination that he is willing to set aside personal beliefs.

"Isn't this a good example of how the guy is a strict interpreter of the law, even when he's taking heat from the right?" Connors said.

But the Ten Commandments case is unlikely to have any bearing on a host of other issues that have prompted criticism of Pryor from Democrats during a confirmation process that few here give much chance of succeeding. Pryor has been attacked for saying that a Texas law legalizing consensual gay sex could lead to state-sanctioned "prostitution, necrophilia, bestiality and possession of child pornography" and for teaming with evangelist Pat Robertson to defend student-led prayer in public schools. He also has been criticized for calling the U.S. Supreme Court's Roe v. Wade decision legalizing abortion "the worst abomination of constitutional law in our history" and for urging the repeal of portions of the Voting Rights Act.

Pryor, who declined through a spokeswoman to be interviewed for this article, has not backed down, though. He told Fox News on Friday: "I'm honored to be a nominee of the president, and I will be one as long as he wants me to be his nominee."

While being lambasted by Democrats in Washington, Pryor has maintained pockets of

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support from the opposing party here in Alabama. His nomination is supported by Joe Reed, the influential chairman of the Alabama Democratic Party's African American caucus.

And Pryor even drew rare praise -- though well short of an endorsement for the appeals court job -- from Morris Dees, the liberal icon and founder of the Southern Poverty Law Center, which represented one of three Alabama attorneys who challenged the constitutionality of the Supreme Court monument.

"The heat of this battle certainly matured this young man," Dees said of Pryor. "His actions behind the scenes to orchestrate the state officials handling these things saved Alabama from constitutional crisis."

----- INDEX REFERENCES -----

NEWS SUBJECT: (Crime/Courts (GCRIM); Domestic Politics (GPOL); Judicial Branch (GVSUP); Political/General News (GCAT); Government Bodies (GVBOD); Corrected Items (NCRX); Content Types (NCAT))

REGION: (United States (USA); North American Countries (NAMZ))

EDITION: FINAL

OTHER INDEXING: NAT

Word Count: 1092

8/25/03 WASHPOST A05

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