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## God, Country and McCain

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At Liberty University, Republican Students Campaign Hard, Fearing a New Era of Liberal Activism if Obama Prevails

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LYNCHBURG, Va. Claire Ayendi is dealing with the fading kick of two double shots of espresso. It's the eve of homecoming weekend at Liberty University, and Ayendi, the president of the college Republican club, is trying to rig up a parade float in support of Sen. [John McCain](#). She whips around Lynchburg in her Infiniti SUV, a pink [iPod](#) shuffling a mix of indie tunes as she mobilizes her fellow soldiers via cellphone: "If you happen to see a big 'Virginia is McCain Country' sign, could you, perchance, ask to, like, *borrow it* a few hours?"

Ayendi spots the perfect sign in front of an office building at a busy intersection half a mile from campus and turns into the parking lot. Wearing a faux-alligator headband and pouring on the charm, the pre-law senior talks her way past two secretaries and gains permission from a third to borrow the sign before calling a friend who has a pickup truck. Inside of 12 minutes, the job is done.

To be a college Republican in the face of Obama Nation takes a measure of fortitude. For Ayendi, it also requires tons of prayer and caffeine. McCain's poll numbers are sliding. Sen. [Barack Obama](#)'s presidential campaign is a bottomless pit of money and energy. Even the hay bales on the rolling hills of once solidly GOP Lynchburg are painted red, white and blue with the name "Obama." And at Liberty University, founded by the Rev. [Jerry Falwell](#) in 1971, the first student Democratic club has sprung up.

For eight years, Liberty students have had one of their own in the [White House](#) with [George W. Bush](#): a conservative Christian who has spoken about his conversion experience and funded abstinence-only sex education, appointed two antiabortion Supreme Court justices and supported a constitutional ban on same-sex marriage. A pipeline of jobs stretched from evangelical colleges such as Liberty to the executive branch.

Now a new dawn threatens, and young activists such as Ayendi are fighting hard to the final hour, in part to prepare for the new phase of activism they foresee in the event of an Obama victory.

"It's the same impulse that Democrats have, the same passion," Ayendi says. "Aside from moral issues -- homosexuality and abortion -- I advocate small government."

Her friend Meghan Allen is more direct. "If Obama wins, I'm gonna want someone to get in there and reverse it ASAP," she says.

Obama has energized the youth vote, but he also has provoked a counter-movement. An astonishing 80 percent of Liberty's 11,400 residential students are registered, and most are Republicans. With polls showing Virginia on the verge of going Democratic, Liberty has canceled classes on Election Day and will provide buses to the polls. The school has also encouraged out-of-state students to switch their registration to Virginia.

Besides taking a full load of classes, Ayendi has been putting in 40-hour weeks on behalf of McCain. She makes phone calls, canvasses, operates a database of student volunteers, uses [Facebook](#) as her bully pulpit and will talk to anyone about how she thinks that Obama's promise to redistribute wealth is an affront to the Constitution. The campaign has galvanized her friends and served as an excellent primer on what lies ahead in their adult lives.

Ayendi and Allen playfully dog one of their Liberty friends for wanting to go into the seminary.

"If you want to get anything changed around here, you have to go through the courts," Ayendi says. "You gotta be a lawyer."

Totally, Allen agrees. "My goal is not to make laws Christian but to make government as small as possible so you can be as biblically Christian as you so choose," she says.

Both plan on spring internships abroad and then law school. But an Obama victory would not send these them into the wilderness. To the contrary, the fight would begin anew.

## **New Generation of Evangelicals**

For now, the fight for McCain is still on.

On the cold and bleak Friday of homecoming weekend, Liberty holds a 10 a.m. church service for students in the 10,000-seat basketball arena. Convocation is mandatory three times a week, and this morning's service features a parade of sleepy students lugging laptops and coffee mugs. They wear skinny jeans and hipster high-tops and Ugg boots, but Liberty operates in a parallel universe from other colleges. Alcohol and sex are prohibited. Students caught watching R-rated movies are brought before a court of their peers. Bulletin boards around campus advertise "Pre-Marital Workshops" and the bookstore sells T-shirts that say "I [Heart] Christian Boys." An ad flashes on the screen at morning convocation for a workshop aimed at "Beginning the Process of Lust-Free Living."

Liberty's founder died last year, but a red basketball jersey with the name

"Falwell" hangs front and center in the arena. The ghost of the fiery minister is everywhere, most prominently in his 46-year-old son, Jerry Jr., who now serves as the university's chancellor and carries out his father's vision of blending faith and politics. While the younger Falwell has not publicly endorsed a presidential candidate, he reminds students of the importance of their vote. "So much is at stake," he says from the stage. He announces that the Obama campaign has been in touch with Liberty about a possible appearance and he urges courtesy. "If they come, I hope you show them respect and don't shout them down like they do our folks," he says.

McCain was not the first choice for many at Liberty, owing in part to his strained history with the Christian right. While campaigning against Bush in the 2000 primaries, McCain accused the elder Falwell of being an "agent of intolerance" along with [Pat Robertson](#) and said both preachers were pulling the [GOP](#) toward extremism. But when McCain began gearing up in 2006 for another run, he accepted Falwell's invitation to deliver Liberty's graduation speech.

Claire Ayendi supported former Massachusetts governor [Mitt Romney](#) in the Republican primaries but is now fully behind McCain. For the Nigerian who grew up in lefty Silver Spring, her spiritual journey began when she was 12 and went on a church mission trip. After graduating from James Hubert Blake High School in 2005 she decided on Liberty, and as a freshman in this politically conservative environment her ideals took shape. In addition to opposing abortion and same-sex marriage, she is against social welfare programs and overtaxation by the government.

In any other campaign, Ayendi's views would be in synch with those of most Liberty students, but in a year when the nation has its first black presidential nominee -- a candidate with an African father -- Ayendi is taking enormous heat. Black students make up 9 percent of Liberty's population, and many are putting aside their convictions on abortion to vote for Obama. And there is Ayendi sitting behind the "Vote for McCain" table. She has been accused of racial betrayal.

In the fall, she attended an Obama rally to see what the Democrat was all about. "It's amazing and historical," she says of his candidacy. "I would be so excited if he were a conservative. But we're looking at the appointment of two, maybe three Supreme Court justices."

Rumors fly around campus that Ayendi is a plant for the Obama campaign. The pressure comes from all sides, and her face is showing the strain. Her friend Allen gives her daily pep talks and says the campaign is God's way of making her dig deep. "No one works harder for McCain than Claire," Allen says.

The two friends balance each other out: Ayendi is quiet, judicious and guarded, while Allen is a smoking pistol who says things like "God is sovereign, man is fallen, I'm not gonna be perfect, get over it!" As part of a new generation of

young evangelicals, Allen rejects the impersonal mega-churches of her youth in favor of mission work and a connection with those she is helping. They both gulp chai tea, eat vegan and listen to [Vampire Weekend](#) like other college students, and their career agendas are just as sharply focused as those of their Democratic counterparts. Both are hesitant to criticize Bush but share disappointment that the size of government has swelled under his watch. Neither support Washington's \$700 billion bailout of [Wall Street](#) and believe that churches, synagogues and mosques -- and not the federal government -- should provide help to the needy.

Ayendi in particular believes that welfare programs promoted by Democrats hold back African Americans. "You go out there in this country and you work hard and you can make it," says Ayendi, the daughter of a diplomat and a nurse. "You can have your white picket fence." At the same time, she often finds herself explaining the complications of race to her white Republican friends.

After convocation, Ayendi and Allen walk to their 11 a.m. government class and unpack their books. "Did anyone watch 'The Office' last night?" a student asks. "It was SO good."

"Has anyone watched the British version?" Allen asks. "It's way more *ha-larious* and way more out of bounds."

"Hey, Meghan?" a student says.

"Yeah, babe?" Allen says. Just then, Tom Metallo, an associate professor at Liberty's Helms School of Government, calls the class to order. He opens with a prayer: "Father, we thank you for the rich heritage you've given us. As we approach this election season, we pray that you give us the wisdom as we choose the next representatives of our government, some for four years, some for two years. We pray that they serve the general interests and not the special interests."

Metallo says he has a treat for the culturally deprived. A recent "[Saturday Night Live](#)" clip featuring [Sarah Palin](#), the GOP vice presidential nominee, as a guest, with cast member [Amy Poehler](#) filling in on a caribou-rap number when the Alaska governor demurs.

*How you feel, Eskimo?*

Ice cold!

*All the mavericks in the house put your hands up!*

Students laugh; some wave their hands.

*When I say Obama*

## *You say Ayers*

"I love that part," says Allen.

Metallo takes the class through Britain's government structure, at one point explaining how voting rights were gradually widened, and not always for good. "The expansion of the electoral franchise led to the growth of the welfare state," the professor says. "People are able to vote money out of your pocket and into their own." Before dismissing the class, Metallo invites everyone to his house over homecoming weekend for coffee and dessert.

Ayendi and Allen swing by the dean's office at the Helms school. George E. Buzzy welcomes them and they sit in wingback chairs. Buzzy says he sees Liberty students more engaged in presidential politics than ever before, and he predicts their activism will not end after the election. "Health care, the economy, the appointment of Supreme Court justices, right to life -- these issues don't change on November 4," he says.

Outside the dean's office, Allen paraphrases one her favorite quotes by Tolstoy: "Without knowing my purpose, life is impossible."

Ayendi signs up two students for the final weekend of McCain canvassing in Virginia Beach. "It will be amazing," she promises her new recruits.

## **'God Is More Important Than This'**

Late Friday afternoon, Ayendi makes her final stop at [Starbucks](#) for a grande green tea. She takes a table by the window and works her cellphone. While the campaign is a full-time job, she has no desire for a political career. "I'd turn into a shrewd person," she says. "If you don't continually check yourself, it's easy to fall into. I've seen a pro-life candidate change. As they gain momentum, they lose values and answer to money interests."

Not all of Ayendi's friends at Liberty are in political lockstep, made evident by the arrival of Ray Woolson, a biology major who pulls up a chair. Woolson is ripe for ribbing: His Razor scooter is in the back seat of his [Volvo](#), which bears an Obama bumper sticker. And not just any scooter.

"A scooter with a cup holder!" Ayendi teases. "When you want to come over to the real world, you can come over to my side. How can you be a liberal?"

Woolson is calm. "I think being a liberal is the most compassionate thing you can do," he says. "Jesus was a pacifist who chose to spend his time with the poor people. They weren't Big Oil, they were prostitutes."

Ayendi shakes her head in pity. Woolson gives it back. "There are a lot of kids at school who are blindly conservative," he says.

"Americans have gotten too soft and expect too much," Ayendi says.

"Like affordable health care?" Woolson asks. "The conservatives want to have tax cuts for Big Oil CEOs."

They could debate for hours, and they often do, but Woolson has to take off. When he leaves, Ayendi says: "Ray is so random. I'm not. I do as I'm told. I'm really proper. Liberals are very indie, very emo, just very fun. When we go out, we put on button-downs and Sperrys. I think ahead. I'd rather dress like this now, because when I'm in law school this is how I'll be dressing. Liberals are like, 'Live, take a load off!' My friends at home say I have to be perfect 24 hours a day. It's just who I am."

She pauses. "I should recycle more."

Ayendi's cellphone rings. It's one of the leaders of the newly formed Democratic club on campus. Ayendi tries to pry from him how big the Obama float will be in the homecoming parade. "We don't have all the money and the flashy cool things you guys have," she tells him.

Then she makes a proposal. "The Monday night before the election, we are gonna do a day of prayer at the Helms school," she says. "It's not a Republican or a Democrat thing. It's not an Obama or McCain or whatever thing. It's just, 'Let His will be done.' Ultimately what matters is that we are all Americans. I know, Monday night we are all supposed to be phone-banking, but God is more important than this."

Inside, Ayendi is trying to prepare herself for whatever happens. She acknowledges that evangelicals have had a long golden moment in the sun. What now?

"When things don't go your way, you get on your knees and pray to God," she says.

*Staff researcher Julie Tate contributed to this report.*

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