

Lack of traction, funds end Smith's White House bid

Exit makes more news than campaign

By Sean Scully
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Sen. Robert C. Smith's quixotic quest for the presidency gained more attention in its death throes yesterday than it did at any time during its short life.

Before a throng of reporters on the Capitol lawn, Mr. Smith ended the yearlong campaign, which had drawn reactions ranging from indifference to outright ridicule from political activists and analysts.

"I guess I ought to be flattered by the turnout," the New Hampshire independent said cheerfully as he surveyed a phalanx of TV cameras. "If I had these kinds of crowds when I was running, I might have been elected."

Mr. Smith, who was running on a conservative, pro-life platform, blamed his woes on fund-raising problems. He struggled to raise \$1.5 million for his campaign, while Republican front-runner Texas Gov. George W. Bush raised nearly \$60 million with apparent ease.

"Obviously, we've had a lot of great support, but it wasn't enough," he said. "When you enter a political contest, you have to be prepared to lose."

As of now, he said, the campaign has about \$200,000 left, just enough to shut down all operations and still break even.

"I don't have any personal wealth and I don't want [the campaign] to go into the red," he said.

Mr. Smith's campaign had an odd trajectory, even by the increasingly strange standards of the 2000 race so far. He began as a Republican, but failed to break out

of low single digits in polls, even in his own native state of New Hampshire.

In July, he abandoned the Republican Party and launched an independent bid for the White House, saying he would seek the nomination of the U.S. Taxpayers Party.

"I've come to the cold realization that the Republican Party is more interested in winning elections than supporting the principles of its platform," Mr. Smith said in a July speech explaining his decision to abandon the Republicans. "It's just a charade. The Republican platform is a meaningless document that has been put out there so suckers like me — and maybe suckers like you out there — can read it."

Yet just weeks later, without any clear explanation, he abandoned the U.S. Taxpayers Party as well, deciding instead to go it alone.

He then briefly suspended his campaign when his wife fell ill, but she soon recovered and he vowed to press ahead vigorously. Neither decision drew much media attention.

"It didn't mean anything when he was in the race. It's hard to contend it means anything [now that] he's out of the race," said political analyst Stephen Hess, senior fellow at the Brookings Institution.

Mr. Smith pointedly refused to talk about whether he would move to rejoin the Republican Party, which he denounced furiously in his parting speech. He confirmed that he had discussed the matter with party officials.

The question is potentially important. The death this week of Sen. John H. Chafee, Rhode Island



Photo by Kenneth Lambert/The Washington Times

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Republican, left open the chairmanship of the Environment and Public Works Committee. If Mr. Smith were still a Republican, he would be the next eligible member to take over the lead of the committee.

It is unlikely, however, that Republican leaders would give the chairmanship to an independent, especially one who has denounced the Republicans in such unusually bitter terms.

"I'm not going to talk about anything to do with [rejoining the party] with the obvious implications, because of the death of Sen. Chafee," Mr. Smith said, offering to discuss the matter next week after the funeral.

After Mr. Smith's brief remarks, an unrelated group of young schoolchildren sitting on a nearby wall broke into vigorous applause.

"What channel am I going to be on?" one asked.

"I want to find out what that was about," another said.

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