

In the Eye of the Storm

All eyes were on Florida during the contested 2000 presidential election. And Katherine Harris—a Spirit-filled Christian—found herself in the center of the controversy.

When U.S. Rep. Katherine Harris first entered politics as a Florida state senator in 1994, she had no desire to be in the limelight. In fact, she says she made every effort not to be; all she wanted was to help pass laws that would benefit the people in her state. She had no way of knowing that the 2000 presidential election would thrust her into the public eye in a big way.

But on November 7, 2000, as the nation waited breathlessly for the final results of the presidential race, the spotlight began to swing in Harris' direction. Democratic candidate Al Gore and Republican George W. Bush were running neck and neck, and poll results gradually made it clear that Florida would be the swing state: Whichever candidate won its 25 electoral votes would be the next leader of the country.

The networks initially reported Gore as the winner, but when the final votes were tallied, Bush came out ahead in Florida by a slim margin—less than one-half of 1 percent. Supporters had no time to rejoice before a storm of controversy began.

In the midst of the storm, the nation turned to Harris, then secretary of state for Florida, whose job was to certify the vote. It was up to her to determine how to lay the controversy to rest and declare the winner. As she later wrote in her book, *Center of the Storm*, her duties as Florida's chief elections officer "thrust [her] into the eye of an electoral tempest of historic dimensions."

For 36 days Harris, a Republican, braved a tumult of political pressure, personal criticism and legal actions that buffeted her without reprieve. The courts, the candidates, the press and the people of the United States scrutinized every decision she made. Harris could not escape the attention she had always sought to avoid.

“As a politician I have eschewed the spotlight,” she told Charisma in an interview at her home on Capitol Hill, a few blocks from her congressional office. “I’m happy to get out and speak if it’s my issue, but I don’t chase the cameras, ever. And everyone knew that, so there was quite a bit of irony that I should be getting all this attention when I don’t enjoy that.”

Harris was in a position to take advantage of the situation if she had chosen to. “If I had wanted the spotlight, I certainly could have commanded it. But I only went out and spoke four times—twice on the same subject,” she says.

In an interview with CNN’s Larry King aired shortly after the election results became final, King questioned Harris about her response to becoming famous. “I don’t think my interest has ever been in becoming famous,” she told him. “My only position in this entire election morass ... was simply to follow the law.”

And, Harris still maintains, follow the law she did. Despite pressure from both political parties, criticism from the press and her own fears, she refused to make any decision not supported by Florida law. In order to demonstrate her integrity and pre-empt accusations that she was purposefully aiding the Republican cause, she hired a Democratic lawyer to advise her and set up a firewall between her office and any

partisan activity.

Ironically, neither party was happy with her nonpartisan approach. She says some of her decisions “made the Republicans crazy” while at the same time Democrats were fuming.

“But my sole role as secretary of state ... was to honor the law,” she adds. “You could not step to the left or right on that. And they were really scary times. ... There was enormous pressure on both sides, and I made both sides angry.”

Difficult Days

Being in the center of the storm wasn't easy for Harris, now 49, who had to fulfill her duties no matter how intense the pressure became. Yet she did not face the crisis alone. From the moment the election skirmish began, her husband, Anders Ebbeson, offered encouragement and counsel, she says. Early on he confirmed that her only choice was to uphold her oath of office.

“You have to honor the law and do what is right,” he told her, “because you have to live with yourself for the rest of your life, and you have to protect your staff.”

On November 26, 2000, Harris certified the Florida election and declared Bush the winner of the state's 25 electoral votes. But the next day Gore filed suit to contest the results, and it wasn't until December 13—following debates over recounts, overseas absentee ballots and felon scrub lists, as well as rulings by both the Florida Supreme Court and the United States Supreme Court—that he conceded the race. Bush had won Florida—and the presidency—by a margin of 537

votes.

For those who did not support Bush, Harris became the scapegoat. Suddenly her face was everywhere, and her political opponents were dragging her name through the mud. Though she says she wasn't too shocked by the political slurs she received from Democrats, who referred to her as "a crony of Jeb Bush," "a lackey for the Bush campaign" and even "a crook," she was surprised—and pained—by the way the media portrayed her and her family.

"It was just bizarre that they would attack my appearance," she says, referring to doctored photographs that showed her with garish makeup, including blue eye shadow. "I didn't even recognize the pictures of myself in the newspaper. ... I don't wear blue eye shadow!"

Cartoonists and late-night comedians had a field day at Harris' expense. And reporters seemed bent on mischaracterizing her. One newspaper wrote her off as a "foxy, fashion-crazed, Floridian jet-setter" and a "big-haired multimillionairess" who was "born to old money." Her family was called a "baronial dynasty" in one report, "privileged blue bloods" in another.

What was the point of all this emphasis on heritage? Harris explains in her book: "The implication was clear: I was not to be taken seriously because I was a spoiled rich kid. The fate of the nation's electoral integrity had somehow fallen into the hands of a pampered incompetent."

A Harvard graduate with experience in both business and government, Harris could not understand the intentional

misrepresentation. Though unquestionably wealthy in their later years, both her father, a small-town banker, and her grandfather, a citrus and cattle man, knew the value of hard work and had built their businesses from the ground up. Harris' sister, Fran, wife of Christian singer-songwriter Wes King, once joked that they were hardworking "rednecks," not "blue bloods."

In the face of what Harris believed to be unfounded attacks, she did not cave in or fight back. Yet she admits she didn't make it through the ordeal in her own strength. She attributes her ability to stand her ground to several factors: the support of her family; the prayers of millions of people around the country; and her relationship with God.

"It was totally a God-thing," she says.

A Woman of Faith

To Harris, most everything she experiences is "a God-thing." She claims to look at her entire life through the lens of faith.

Raised as a Presbyterian by parents who led family devotions in their home and took their children regularly to church, Sunday school and youth group, she gave her life to Christ at age 8 after watching the Billy Graham film *Run Baby Run*. After completing her undergraduate degree, she spent time studying at the L'Abri International Fellowship community in Switzerland, founded by authors Francis and Edith Schaeffer. It was there that she learned to integrate her Christian faith into every aspect of her life—including politics.

“Everything I do politically is animated by my faith,” she says. That includes the bills she proposes, the issues she addresses and the way she votes. And that’s because she’s keenly aware of her responsibility to please God above everyone else.

“First and foremost I’m accountable to God,” she says of her political role. “And then I’m accountable to those who put me there. Not to a party, not to the press, not even to what’s popular. ... I have a clear set of marching orders, and that’s to put the Lord first.”

Realistically, Harris adds, legislators can’t always wait for everything about a bill to be perfect before they will support it. But they have to know what they believe and make decisions based on their convictions.

“There are some core values you just don’t compromise on,” she says. “I may compromise on how much funding I get. ... I may compromise on how many miles off-shore drilling [can occur]. ... You work to get the best opportunity for Florida. But you’re not going to compromise on issues of life; you’re not going to compromise on issues concerning your faith; you’re not going to compromise on issues concerning Supreme Court justices.”

Harris keeps her faith vibrant through prayer, Bible study, devotional reading (she takes a copy of Brother Lawrence’s *Practicing the Presence of God* with her everywhere she goes), and relationships with godly friends and mentors—including charismatic Christian leaders such as Dutch Sheets, Cindy Jacobs and Kimberly Daniels. She also prays weekly with a group of House and Senate members.

But she attributes much of her spiritual growth to regular attendance at her church, Calvary Chapel in Sarasota, Florida, where she and her husband have been members for 12 years and where she says she has encountered the Holy Spirit's renewing power. Even though Harris spends part of every week in Washington, D.C., she tries to be home on the weekends to attend services.

She describes her pastor, Carl Dixon, as a phenomenal teacher. "My husband and I cannot wait to get there every Sunday," she says.

Dixon, who has known Harris since before she was in politics, is impressed that she's maintained her association with his church through the years.

"This is not the church that a prominent, well-known politician would come to if she wanted to be seen," Dixon told Charisma. "Yet she is here, week after week. I see her at the altar praying, and she doesn't put on airs. She's one of us."

Her Biggest Battle

Though Harris is not uncomfortable as a politician talking about her faith, she says in the past she was more eager to share in small circles than in large groups because she has been put off by the way some politicians have used their faith as a way to win votes—even if they don't live what they profess. And she has avoided speaking in churches because, in addition to missing her own church on Sunday, she becomes emotional when discussing her passion for God.

But now Harris is taking a different tack. As a candidate for

U.S. senator in the 2006 election, she knows that if she wants to oust liberal Democratic incumbent Bill Nelson she must reach evangelical voters. She must let them know who she is and where she stands on the issues.

Her new approach is not a ploy to get votes. It's part of her response to a mandate she received in 1993 when someone prayed for Harris and told her she would "be like Esther" and "change the hearts of angry kings."

That word of encouragement has carried her through many difficult moments in her political career. She knows God can give her favor, as He did the biblical Esther, and use her to enact righteous legislation.

More and more Christians in Florida have been learning about Harris' faith in recent months. In March she was a keynote speaker at the Reclaiming America for Christ conference sponsored by D. James Kennedy, pastor of 10,000-member Coral Ridge Presbyterian Church in Fort Lauderdale.

At the conference, Harris encouraged attendees to "win back America for God." She believes the United States is in a battle, and it must be fought in the spiritual realm as well as in the natural.

"We're in an enormous war today from within and without," she says, "and I don't think we really recognize the enormity of the enemy we face. Unless the people in the churches of our nation repent so that we can win this battle within and return to our Founding Fathers' issues of morality and faith, I don't know how we will withstand the battle from without."

"It's easier not to be involved," she continues, "because this is a difficult process. But I think God is calling us to retake this nation. He's saying, 'Are [you] going to stand?' The righteous in this country have to take a stand."

Harris believes Florida, already a forerunner state in many areas, will lead the way in this fight. Frequently in speeches she declares, "As Florida goes, so goes the nation."

Colorado pastor Dutch Sheets, whom Harris refers to as her "Mordecai" because of his ongoing counsel and encouragement, recently gave her a large metal key as a symbol of Florida's role in turning the nation around. That role highlights the importance of Harris' campaign.

"With this U.S. Senate race, whoever wins this seat will largely influence the presidential race in 2008 for Florida," Harris says. "Whoever wins Florida will win the presidency. So this is enormously vital—politically and for the kingdom."

Harris knows the odds are stacked against her. They have been since the day she entered politics 12 years ago. But despite a lack of support by her own party; being down at the polls (at press time she was trailing Nelson by 37 points); a host of staff resignations; ongoing bad press; and continuous reviling by the Democrats for her role in the 2000 recount, Harris remains confident she will win.

"As impossible as the liberals try to make it sound," she says, "nothing's impossible with God." She believes the prayers, votes and financial support of Christians will turn the tide in her direction. And she is convinced she will have a testimony to share after the November election.

Says Harris: "Someone said early on in the campaign, 'It would take a God for you to win,' and I said, 'You know, you're right. So that when I win, you're gonna know Who to give the credit to.'"

Maureen D. Eha is the features editor of Charisma. She interviewed Rep. Katherine Harris in Washington, D.C., in July. To find out more about Harris or her campaign, go to .

The Real Katherine Harris

The media has painted an image of Harris that doesn't bear up in view of the facts.

Before Election Day 2000, few people outside the state of Florida had heard of Katherine Harris. Not long after that day, few people in the country who listened to the news had not heard of her. She became a national figure practically overnight—one whose image was grossly distorted by the media during the coverage of the election controversy.

A review of some of the accounts from that period reveals a consistent tendency to overlook Harris' extensive education, years of public service, chairmanship of key committees, passage of important bills and other accomplishments in favor of misrepresenting her family background, her appearance, her motives and her decisions. The result has been misunderstanding in the minds of Americans about who she really is. Charisma has compiled the facts below to help set the record straight.

Name: Katherine Harris

Date of birth: April 5, 1957

Place of birth: Harris was born in Key West, Florida, and raised in the small town of Bartow, Florida.

Education:

1975–High school diploma, Bartow High School, Bartow, Florida

1979–Bachelor's degree in history, Agnes Scott College, Decatur, Georgia

1996–Master's degree in public administration, Harvard University, Cambridge, Massachusetts

During her undergraduate years, Harris also studied at the University of Madrid in Madrid, Spain, and after receiving her bachelor's degree, spent time at the L'Abri community outside Geneva, Switzerland, studying under Francis Schaeffer.

Political affiliation: Republican

Political experience:

1976–Worked as the Lyndon Baines Johnson Congressional Intern for U.S. Rep. Andy Ireland

1994–Elected to the Florida Senate

1998–Elected Florida secretary of state

2002–Elected to U.S. House of Representatives for Florida's 13th congressional district

2004–Re-elected to the same seat in the U.S. House of Representatives

2006–Running for U.S. Senate against Democratic incumbent Bill Nelson

Voting record:

Harris is a conservative Republican who has voted against abortion and embryonic stem cell research and for awarding legal status to the unborn. She is against granting amnesty to illegal immigrants and supports securing our borders to help prevent the increase of terrorist acts in our country. She

also supports free trade, tax cuts, reduction in government spending, school vouchers, the Federal Marriage Amendment and the United States' backing of Israel.

Accomplishments:

During her term in the Florida Senate (1994-1998), Harris passed more than 100 bills, including an economic development package that helped move Florida from 42nd place to first place in the nation as a state to start a new business or grow an existing business.

As secretary of state for Florida, she proposed legislation that became the foundation for Florida's nationally acclaimed Election Reform Act.

As a congresswoman in the U.S. House of Representatives (2002-present), Harris has sponsored numerous bills, among them the American Dream Down Payment Act, which helps people with low incomes buy their first homes; Carlie's Law, which classified sexual abuse as an act of violence against a child, paving the way for longer prison terms for offenders; and a bill that seeks to refine methods of preparing for hurricanes and handling the damage caused by them.