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Conservatives hold their fire for Thompson

By Jonathan Martin, The Politico

The sound of silence tells an interesting tale when it comes to Fred Thompson. A week after reports emerged suggesting that the former Tennessee senator once lobbied for an abortion rights group, few leaders of the GOP's conservative wing have expressed concern.

In fact, the fallout in conservative circles has largely been confined to defending Thompson and attacking the *Los Angeles Times*, which broke the story. And this comes, as reported by Politico.com's Mike Allen, as Thompson has dropped his flat denial of the charge and now instead says he can't remember.

The muted reaction illuminates a larger point: just how hungry many on the right are for a Thompson candidacy and their inclination to overlook evidence that the soon-to-be candidate may be something less than a true believer.

"I think it's a non-issue for two reasons" observed Gary Bauer of the allegation that in 1991, Thompson represented the National Family Planning and Reproductive Health Association in their effort to ease the rule barring federal funds to clinics that offered abortion counseling.

"First, the facts are in question," said Bauer, a social conservative leader, "and second, this took place before he was in the United States Senate."

In an evolving response to the story, Thompson has tried to shrug it off as, if true, an inconsequential incident in a 30-year career in public service that by definition sometimes involved complicated alliances. He told conservative talk show host Sean Hannity last week that "you need to separate a lawyer who is advocating a position from the position itself."

"I'm not going to get down into the weeds with everything they dredge up over the next six months," Thompson said.

If he continues to get a pass from conservatives, he may not have to.

"If you add up everything Thompson has done in past, I don't know that this sufficient to hurt him," said Oran Smith, head of South Carolina's Palmetto Family Council and an influential social conservative in the state.

Asked if he was concerned about the *Times* report, Tony Perkins, head of the Family Research Council and somebody who has extolled Thompson, said, "No, I'm really not."



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"This is becoming so old," Perkins scoffed. "They find somebody who has staked out a pro-life position, and the first thing they say is that he's supported a pro-abortion group."

What's more, Perkins said, there has been no "indication that it's getting traction."

"People are considering the source."

Bauer said much the same thing, pointing out that he had received no phone calls or e-mails of concern. "The leak came from a pro-abortion group," Bauer noted. "The intention is to torpedo his campaign."

Richard Land, president of the Southern Baptist Ethics & Religious Liberty Commission, has offered perhaps the most effusive praise on Thompson of any conservative leader, deeming him "Southern-fried Reagan." He said much by saying nothing at all. Asked repeatedly for an interview on the revelations that Thompson may have once worked on behalf of an abortion-rights group, Land declined to talk.

"In addition to his busy schedule, Dr. Land is also not fully aware of the reports or the validity of the reports," said his spokeswoman, Jill Martin. "He believes that most voters are interested in Thompson's stance now."

Such is also the hope of [Mitt Romney](#), who previously backed abortion rights but now calls himself pro-life.

But the former Massachusetts governor has encountered much more difficulty in convincing conservatives that his change of heart on the issue has been genuine and that he's committed to the cause.

Recognizing the Thompson threat, Romney's campaign has sought to shine a light on the *Times* piece.

"FYI — wanted to make sure you were all updated as this story develops and we all seek to discern the truth of these allegations against Fred Thompson," wrote Gary Marx, Romney's social conservative outreach director, in a blast e-mail.

The message, obtained from a source on the list who insisted on anonymity, was sent to an undisclosed number of social conservative leaders atop Allen's story on Politico.com on Thursday showing that Thompson was backing away from his spokesman's strong denial.

Thompson representatives declined to comment on the Romney campaign's pushing of the story, but have pointed to Thompson's Senate voting record on abortion as proof of his pureness of heart on the issue.

Perkins did much the same.

"Based on his record, there is a willingness to give him the benefit of the doubt," Perkins said.

That is also what many in the conservative blogosphere are doing. Even before the piece was published, the website of the conservative *American Spectator* magazine got wind of the reporting and sought to go after the assumed source of the story, blaming it on "well-known left-wing activists."

Linking to the *Spectator* leak, Ed Morrissey of the widely read "Captain's Quarters" blog opined, "If the *Times* and its sources want to launch attacks on Thompson, they'll have to do better than this."

"Lawyers represent clients, and sometimes they do so for ideological support — but most of them do it to earn a living."

That Thompson has been able to say much the same — he took to the blog "Powerline" last Wednesday to mount a defense for lawyering — has frustrated his soon-to-be rivals.

"Of course I am not a political hack — I am just a country PR guy who tries to help people trying to get their message out and everyone deserves to get their message out," said one adviser to another GOP candidate in a mocking imitation of Thompson. "I know what people will say about some of my clients — they try to do it all the time. But gosh, I am just trying to help people tell their story."

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