



Tempting Faith: An Inside Story of Political Seduction

J. David Kuo

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David Kuo came to Washington wanting to use his Christian faith to end abortion, strengthen marriage, and help the poor. He reached the heights of political power, ultimately serving in the White House under George W. Bush, after being policy adviser to John Ashcroft and speechwriter for Ralph Reed, Pat Robertson, and Bob Dole. It was a dream come true: the chance to fuse his politics and his faith, and an opportunity for Christians not just to gain a seat at the proverbial table but to plan the entire meal. Kuo spent nearly three years as second in command at the president's Office of Faith-Based and Community Initiatives. Yet his experience was deeply troubling. It took both the Bush White House and a severe health crisis to show him how his Christian values, and those of millions of Americans, were being corrupted by politics.

Instead of following the teachings of Jesus to serve the needy, Kuo found himself helping to manipulate religious faith for political gain. Public funds were used in battleground states, for Republican campaign events. The legislative process was used as a football, not to pass laws but to deepen purely symbolic fault lines. Grants were incestuously recycled to political cronies. Both before and after 9/11, despite lofty rhetoric from the president claiming that his faith-based program was one of his most important initiatives, there was no serious attempt to fund valuable charities.

Worst of all was the prevailing attitude in the White House and throughout Washington toward Christian leaders. Key Bush aides and Republican operatives spoke of them with contempt and treated them as useful idiots. It became clear, during regular conference calls arranged from the White House with a key group of Christian leaders, that many of these religious leaders had themselves been utterly seduced by politics.

It is time, Kuo argues, for Christians to take a temporary step back from politics, to turn away from its seductions. "Tempting Faith" is equal parts headline-making expose, political and spiritual memoir, and heartfelt plea for a Christian reexamination of political involvement.

Tempting Faith: An Inside Story of Political Seduction Details

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Bob says

David Kuo was an assistant in the Faith Based Initiatives office during the first three years of George W Bush's presidency. This book tells the story of the seductive power of politics, not only in Kuo's life but in the lives of evangelicals who Kuo helped lure to the party through his office, despite the lack of concrete funding or action to support faith-based social initiatives.

He brought this home to me in talking about the increase in the black vote for the Republican party in 2004, including in Ohio, that contributed to Bush's victory here. He argues that this was a result of an "under the radar" campaign consisting of conferences for pastors and ministry leaders attended by 1000 from Ohio alone, and countless thousands around the country.

I wonder when the church will learn that all you get when you mix faith and politics is politics. Kuo argues for neither more political involvement nor a complete withdrawal, but rather for a fast from political involvement for the church to seek the Lord and re-focus our efforts on the things that matter to Jesus.

A postscript: a friend of mine (mentioned in the book) told me that the author's brain tumor (which he describes at the beginning of the book) has returned in a more serious form and that he needs our prayers.

Maureen says

kuo worked in the bush administration's office for faith based initiatives. this is his account of the work and the politics to accomplish it.

i found the book to be humble and honest, written by a man who admits that he was part of the pandering machine of politics and their attempt to woo evangelicals in modern history.

this book inspired me to talk less politics in the 2008 election and DO more mercy and justice- like Jesus.

Jackie says

I have become more and more concerned at the increasing presence of religion and religious leaders in politics. Although I believe that every citizen should participate fully in our democracy, I also believe that mixing religion and politics is a sad and dangerous thing. I am more and more convinced that politicians are using religion to further their political gains while doing little or nothing to help citizens. David Kuo was an active member of Pres. George Bush's Office of Faith-Based and Community Initiatives and his experience was deeply troubling. He speaks about how his Christian values were being corrupted by politics.

This would be a good resource book for students writing about religion and politics. Kuo offers his own experience and his observations for why the two don't work well together. May be eye-opening for some students.

Sarah says

I have a friend (who did not read the book herself, but was forced to sit through my "blow-by-blow" account of it) who knows someone currently working in the Office of Faith Based Initiatives in Washington where David Kuo worked. When asked her take on his book, she said his characterization of the Evangelical leaders was not fair or accurate. I'm not sure if those were provided talking points or what, but if that's what anyone takes away from this book as Kuo's message, that only serves to bolster his claims.

Ben says

Interesting look into money and power and their invasion of the clash of faith and politics on capitol hill.

J says

A self-proclaimed compassionate conservative finds that his party doesn't exactly do what the Jesus would do (except for hating the gays and birth control, of course). Kuo essentially confirms that federal funds were sent to vulnerable Republican districts for purely political reasons. The lengths taken to exploit federal dollars makes Tammany Hall look like amateur hour.

Jeremy says

A very good and readable book from the inside, not just of the Bush administration, but the Christian right movement in Washington. Kuo writes compellingly of his becoming a born-again Christian, and of what that eventually did to his politics. Hearing Chuck Colson speak at Brown in the late 80s convinced him to shift to the Republican side, and put his faith in touch with his politics.

You get some nice portraits of various rightwingers, like Ralph Reed, Jerry Falwell (Kuo REALLY doesn't like him), James Dobson, William Bennett, Jack Kemp...

I have to say that there were some problems. For example, Kuo praises the intellectual abilities of certain people well beyond their demonstrated competences. Speechwriter Michael Gerson, who spews lame conventional wisdom in the Washington Post and has yet to really write a deep speech, is talked of as if he were the second coming of John Stuart Mill. He also gets some facts wrong--the Cedars in Arlington was not built by George Mason--it's not nearly that old. Probably several other things Kuo heard from the Christian group that runs it now aren't true, either. A few other factual errors do mar the book.

But the overall point is that Kuo feels that Christians were cynically manipulated by a White House that revolved entirely around politics. It's one thing when a liberal says this--they typically never sympathized with the Christian right agenda anyway. But when someone of Kuo's stature says it, with documentation and persuasion--hey, it's very convincing.

Both conservatives and liberals (those who don't limit themselves to propaganda, that is) will enjoy this

book.

Paul says

A great book for Christians considering politics, warning that simply because one is Christian does not protect them from being seduced by the power of politics. Also describes how the tenuous relationship between evangelicals and the Republican Party.

Heather says

Definitely a must read for Christians in America. Kuo exposes the dark political manipulation of the modern day church by both government officials and well-respected Christian leaders. The power play between money and faith is at the forefront of Kuo's sincere portrayal of what life at the top is really like and his own humbling journey of self-exploration.

Patrick Sprunger says

David Kuo has two books here. One deals with the thesis. The other deals with his personal, Christian journey. Though the author would clearly feel otherwise,* the average reader may not feel like the two necessarily complement each other.

Just like the wall of separation that should divide church and rock, I prefer a separation of church and history.

I suppose a member of the (G.W.) Bush White House, writing a book about spiritual realizations, is entitled to assume his readers will be political conservatives. I nevertheless found an unnecessary amount of time given to confidential asides, meant to gain the readers' acceptance. As someone going into *Tempting Faith* fairly objectively, I do not particularly care about (or stand to be much won over by) the author's testimony.** I'm also a little confused by why Madonna's unshaven armpits are objectionable, but Michael Jackson's eccentric personal behavior isn't.*** I don't see what either has to do with the topic at hand.

If I could give *Tempting Faith* the lobectomy it deserves, I'd give the political half a solid four star rating, on the strength of its good logic. I'd either score the parts that flirt with speculating on President Clinton as the antichrist a generous two or throw them out altogether. I think the Christian testimony/narrative is compelling to a lot of people (witness the independent Christian bookstore to independent secular bookstore ratio in my city), but this field is more saturated than Bush White House memoirs. Generally speaking, there is greater need of the latter than the former. *Tempting Faith* is a good study in its way, but could have been much leaner.

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**Tempting Faith* is part memoir. Since this is literally the author's *life* and the events informed his policy advice, Kuo probably doesn't find a mingling of the two topics dissonant.

**"Testimony" is the term given to the story of an evangelical Christian's personal acceptance of Christ.

***This was written around 2005, around the time Jackson was acquitted of child sexual abuse allegations. It was written before his death.

Heather says

This book by a former White House official is critical of the marriage of Christians and Republicans, the lack of compassion for the poor among both groups, and the lack of policy commitments in the Bush Administration. I have a few quibbles--his tone is sometimes whiny and self-important. But I think his critiques are just and his history chilling, particularly his account of the Bush tax cuts. Oh, for more Christians like Billy Graham, willing to minister to power without courting it or believing in its ultimate efficacy.

Margot Friedman says

A wonderful behind-the-scenes look at President Bush's faith based initiatives and how they were used for political purposes. Author David Kuo is also very honest about his own struggles with living by his faith. I wish more conservatives cared about the poor which, of course, is at the core of Jesus' teachings.

Eric Wright says

David Kuo describes in concrete modern terms why thoughtful western nation-builders have always insisted on the separation of church and state.

He describes his desire to use his Christian faith to end abortion, strengthen marriage and help the poor. He worked for John Ashcroft, Ralph Reed, Pat Robertson and Bob Dole. Ultimately he spent 3 years as second in command of President Bush's Office of Faith-Based and Community Initiatives. He dreamed of fusing his faith and his politics. Bush, as a believer in Jesus, trumpeted compassionate conservatism. And yet the rhetoric never crystallized into action.

No matter how hard Kuo worked to help the Bush team get votes by scheduling conferences with faith leaders, the money never materialized.

Not only the Republicans but the Democrats promised much but delivered little or nothing. All was politics. Many of Bush's aids ever spoke of faith leaders with contempt, as pests. The attitude he discovered in Washington was totally political; blase, indifferent, inactive unless some political end could be served. He found Bush to be a believer in Jesus, a good man, but a very smart and shrewd politician concerned most about perception, less about doing good.

Disillusioned twice and faced with a terrible health crisis he left to take up bass fishing...then to write about his experiences. Sadly, nothing seems to change in Washington.

If you're a political junkie this book is for you. If you are a sincere Christian wanting to make a difference, this is also for you--a warning to avoid political involvement. The ultimate hope is not in politicians but in

God...and as Christians we should serve him sincerely where we are. Power corrupts. The Christian faith is about humble service.

Amy says

I watched an interview with David Kuo and was instantly attracted to his sincerity. I treated the book a little like a textbook about the dance the Republican party has been playing with the Christian church in America. It was enlightening and, in a way, encouraging.

Seytin says

Even though I widely disagree with the author's political views, I have a deep respect for his honesty and courage in writing this book. It takes a lot of conviction to realize when you are involved in something that is wrong. This book is a powerful account of how the Bush administration has corrupted and used people of faith for their own ends. Definitely worth reading.
