

# The faith-based thing

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David Kuo's *Tempting Faith: An Inside Story of Political Seduction* is the rare political tell-all that is actually better than its pre-release quotes suggest. Not only for its glimpses of powerful people that are sometimes funny (Sandra Day O'Connor teaching Kuo to fly fish) and sometimes frightening (Bush speechwriter Michael Gerson saying he prefers benevolent dictatorship to democracy), but because Kuo comes off as a sincere believer.

Kuo believes that Republicans were right to seek to help the poor by aiding the "little platoons" of social-service providers, many of them faith-based, already doing heroic work. Religious programs that are effective in turning lives and neighborhoods around should not, he says, be fettered by government bureaucracy and secularist objections and should be given government money to further their work. When Kuo first met George W. Bush, he thought he had found a Christian leader in the tradition of Robert Kennedy or Martin Luther King Jr.—someone ready to empower the poor over the objections of old-style wealthy Republicans. He went to work for Bush's Office of Faith-Based and Community Initiatives.

Kuo is now a jilted lover. But not a spiteful one. He makes no derisive judgment of Bush and maintains a soft spot for his old boss Ralph Reed. But he tells how the White House repeatedly denied the faith-based initiative funds and access to Bush—except when election time rolled around.

Splashy campaign events featuring faith-based programs helped win battleground states in 2002 and 2004, but Kuo estimates that in Bush's first two years in office "we were actually spending about \$20 million *less* on [federal social service programs] than before he had taken office." The White House quietly killed a congressional initiative to increase tax breaks for charitable giving while claiming credit for proposing that very initiative. In the book's most famous and damning quote, Karl Rove demanded that Kuo's boss roll out a faith-based initiative for the cameras. When asked how he could do that without a budget, office or plan, Rove replied, "I don't know. Just get me a f---ing faith-based thing. Got it?"

The faith-based initiative was politically valuable, especially for peeling off African-American votes from the Democrats. Bush praised it publicly, "but he didn't seem to mean it. All the public talk rested on no private works by him, and in private he could have made it happen." This duplicity has Kuo reaching for the most derisive epithet imaginable for someone on the right: Bush's sleight-of-hand was positively "Clintonian."

The wisdom of the government funding faith-based programs has been hotly debated since Bush and Al Gore both praised the idea in 2000. Six years later we don't know much more about either the benefits or the flaws of such an initiative, since Bush barely lifted a finger to pursue it. The real victims, for Kuo, are the pastors and faith-based workers who were so eager to believe the politicians and who were spoon-fed an appealing story. "Christians should have demanded a whole lot more. But all too often, when put before power, Christian leaders wilt."