

White House Christians: Faulty assumptions about faith and party affiliation

by [John Buchanan](#) in the [November 6, 2002](#) issue

I am not immune to the seduction of being invited to a White House briefing, nor of being called a “religious leader,” so I flew to Washington in mid-October (at my own expense) and showed up as instructed at the Executive Office Building. There were more than a hundred of us. I recognized three Presbyterian peers, pastors of large churches. Our group included women, racial minorities and lots of young people. Someone had done some homework on the guest list.

Tim Goeglin, special assistant to the president and deputy director of the White House Office of Public Liaison, introduced the first speaker, Stephen Biegun, executive secretary of the National Security Council. Biegun, who was extraordinarily bright and articulate, works directly for Condoleezza Rice. He carefully outlined the Bush administration’s assessment of international threats and then introduced a document, the National Security Strategy of the United States of America. The document asserts the U.S.’s right to take preemptive action to counter a threat to national security. That provision is obviously controversial and deserves public debate. Biegun encouraged that debate: “Read the document, debate, disagree, push back; we welcome debate,” he said. The document is available at www.whitehouse.gov, on the National Security Council page.

Then Brent Cavanaugh, associate counsel to the president, took us into the rough and tough world of national politics. The administration is very impatient with the Senate Judiciary Committee’s refusal to approve President Bush’s nominees for federal judgeships. Only 11 of 32 nominees have been approved and several prominent ones have been turned down. Cavanaugh began to express the administration’s frustration with “liberal” political and moral values in a way that made me uncomfortable.

Jim Towey, director of the Office of Faith-Based and Community Initiatives, was next. It's hard not to like and admire him. A self-described "Pro-life Catholic Democrat," Towey worked closely with Mother Teresa and was head of Florida's Health and Social Services Agency. He is engaging, lively and passionate. "We can do better with the poor, the underserved, the sick and homeless," he says. I don't agree with him on reproductive rights, but I like him and I'm glad he's in this position. He didn't make the ideological assumptions that other speakers did.

The fourth speaker was Ken Mehlman, the White House political director and the person expected to run Bush's 2004 reelection campaign. He made it clear that in his view, our health, security and goodness as a nation depend on electing Republican candidates.

Goeglin closed the morning with the political equivalent of an altar call, asking us to go home and help elect Republican candidates in November. By this time, I was thoroughly resenting the clear assumption that a person of Christian faith will necessarily vote Republican. That attitude was very much in the air at the Executive Office Building auditorium that morning.

People of good will, integrity and honest faith can and do differ on issues of public policy, international strategy, education, tax policy. It is simply not true and not helpful to assume that the designation "liberal Democrat" captures all that is wrong and destructive of community values and national security.

My own political convictions grow out of my faith. They are often different from the political convictions of my Republican friends. It doesn't occur to me that those friends are less than faithful Christians. I would have been grateful for evidence of that same recognition on the part of the White House Office of Public Liaison.