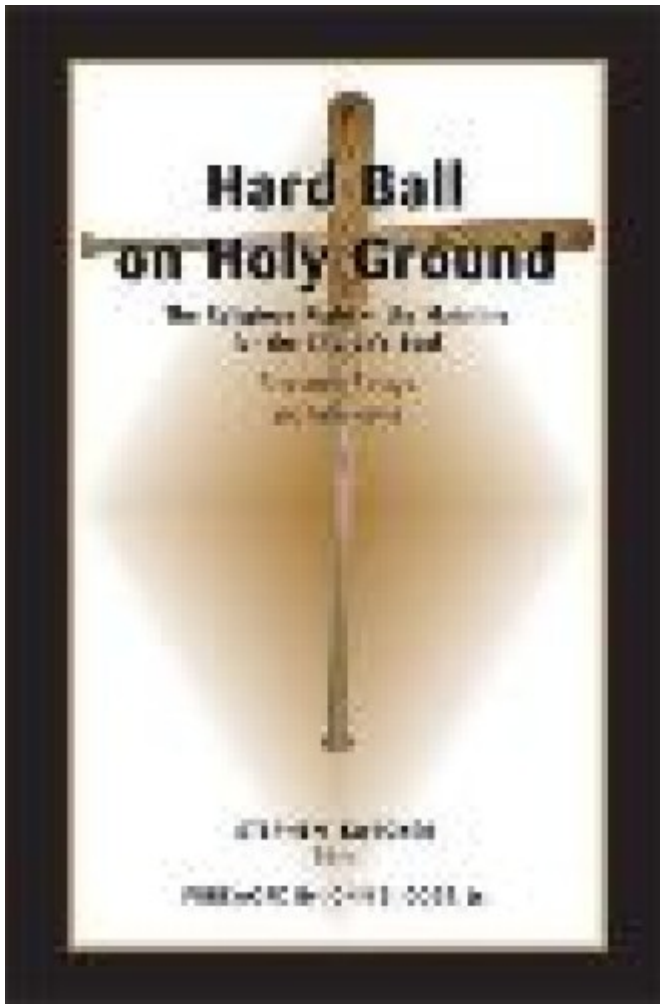


Hardball tactics

By [Jason Byassee](#) in the [May 16, 2006](#) issue

In Review



Hard Ball on Holy Ground: The Religious Right v. the Mainline for the Church's Soul

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Just after the Iraq war began, a parishioner said to me, “I hear that the National Council of Churches is funding the war protesters! That’s money I put in the plate—now it’s paying for those people to disrespect our country!”

That story was false, as best I could tell, though the NCC along with most United Methodist bishops was on record as opposing the war. When I preached against the war my church members were angry. Yet through conversation, prayer and lots of visits to their mamas, all of us learned to live together in disagreement. But when a bureaucrat in New York or Washington uses money from church offerings to lobby for a political position that local parishioners loathe—that’s a wound without pastoral salve. When it happens, the Institute on Religion and Democracy tells them about it, and seeks donations in return.

For three decades the IRD has been monitoring mainline churches for political statements that are out of step with the views of rank-and-file members. The IRD has a division for each of the three denominations in its crosshairs: the United Methodist Church, the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.) and the Episcopal Church. Each division sends out unsolicited mailings that are critical of ecclesial leaders and invite support for the IRD. The program works because often there is indeed a gap between the views of church leaders and those of people in the pews. The more controversy this gap generates, the better for the IRD.

When the UMC’s bishops condemned the U.S. military presence in Iraq, a fax arrived almost immediately at *the Century* from the IRD’s top Methodist watchdog, Mark Tooley. Like some kind of Methodist pope perched over the bishops, Tooley dressed them down: “How woefully absurd that church prelates condemn the United States for attempting to build democracy in Iraq.”

And precisely who is Mark Tooley to pass such judgment on the Methodist Council of Bishops? A former CIA operative with no formal theological training. Journalists often use Tooley’s material when they report on church squabbles, since he offers a “conservative” soundbite to balance the bishops’ “liberal” voice. Tooley doesn’t care that the bishops said nothing in their statement to suggest that they oppose building democracy in Iraq. But that doesn’t stop the IRD from accusing them of such a position.

The IRD has operated largely under the radar. But now some Methodists are fighting back. The essays in *Hard Ball on Holy Ground*, produced by the publishers of *Zion’s*

Herald, a liberal Methodist magazine, explore the IRD's history, goals and tactics. The editors graciously solicited responses from the IRD and include two lengthy interviews with IRD representatives. The intention is clearly to make the IRD squirm by shining the sort of floodlight on its dark corners that it has beamed at mainline denominations.

The effort falls flat in places. Often the writers express the very knee-jerk theological and political liberalism that the IRD is keen on exposing. If the writers had concentrated on describing the IRD's tactics rather than on attacking "conservatism" or "orthodoxy" as such, their case would have been a great deal stronger.

The work still performs a valuable service, especially in describing the foundations and think tanks that fund the IRD. Richard Mellon Scaife, Howard and Roberta Ahmanson and the John Birch Society are among those that have given the IRD millions of dollars over the years. Scaife also funded much of the litigation against President Clinton in the 1990s. (Swecker and colleagues report that Scaife is on public record as claiming that Bill and Hillary Clinton have murdered dozens of friends and colleagues.)

The Ahmansons have been supporters of a Christian Reconstructionist organization that seeks to impose Levitical law on America. The Birch Society seeks to eliminate virtually all government regulation of business and any requirement for corporations to negotiate with unions. The IRD may complain about mainline elites, but clearly it needs its own set of financial elites to pay the bills. The authors of *Hard Ball* rightly ask what these groups expect in return for their investment. They conclude that the bottom line is support for neoconservative economic policy, by which they mean the shredding of governmental regulation of business and of any social safety net, as well as the elimination of almost all taxation.

Stephen Swecker, the editor of *Zion's Herald*, and his colleagues also score when they point to the odd ecclesial makeup of the IRD's board. It includes several prominent Roman Catholics, including Richard John Neuhaus, editor of *First Things*, and George Weigel, biographer of Pope John Paul II. (After *Hard Ball* was published, the IRD selected as its new president James Tonkowich, a pastor in the nonmainline Presbyterian Church in America.) Why, the writers ask, should those who are not even members of mainline Protestant churches play such a prominent public role in criticizing those churches?

The IRD's reply—that these people are ecumenists who care about the entire church's social witness—seems disingenuous. *Ecumenism* normally means Christian churches working together toward a mutual goal, or even ecclesial reconciliation. A member of one denomination tearing down another suggests the sort of interecclesial warfare to which the ecumenical movement signaled a truce.

The IRD's tactics often seem based more on Tooley's CIA experience than on Christian behavior. The strongest piece in the volume is from Linda Rhodes, who describes how a stranger attended the retirement dinner for Methodist bishop Joseph Sprague—one of the IRD's favorite targets. The man was snapping pictures of each speaker, tape-recording the event, and speaking with no one amid the general conviviality. Bishop Sprague recognized him as John Lomperis, Tooley's assistant at the IRD. One would think that such an event would not be a target for monitoring, but apparently those responsible for the "renewal" of the church can neither slumber nor sleep.

When the Century mentioned Rhodes's report some months ago, the magazine shortly thereafter received a letter from Lomperis defending himself. Lomperis also renewed the attack on Sprague, asking "why someone who attacks such beliefs as the . . . authenticity of John's Gospel . . . should be allowed to hold a leadership position in any Christian church."

Here again we see the IRD method on display. The notion that of the four Gospels the Gospel of John is the least like a historical account is a claim widely accepted by nonfundamentalist Christians and routinely taught without controversy in Methodist seminaries. It is not so widely known in the pews, however—a circumstance which enables the IRD to sound the alarms and wait for the checks to roll in. (John Cobb, in his preface to *Hard Ball*, describes mainline ministers' hesitation in teaching historical-critical scholarship to church people.)

The IRD does plenty that warrants criticism, but the authors of *Hard Ball* frequently overplay their hand. They consistently quote a *New York Times* report to the effect that "the mainline denominations are a strategic piece on the chess board that the right wing is trying to dominate"—so that pulpits, denominational literature and missionaries will be turned into propaganda sources for the religious right. The doomsday prediction is supported with ominous graphs outlining the ties between conservative political and religious organizations and persons and the IRD. A chapter titled "Working on a Coup d'Etat" hypothesizes that the IRD's goal is a "hostile

takeover of mainline denominations.” Let’s tone down the alarm bells to suggest an alternative explanation: perhaps conservatives just think they’re right, and are fighting for their views.

The essayists suggest that the only thing standing between the right-wing destruction of American democracy (or at least the nation’s social welfare and environmental regulations) is the mainline church. If the IRD and its friends succeed, “they will have muted America’s social conscience. . . . At risk is the soul of the church and the nation.” On this view, the United Methodist bishops are the last line of defense against the barbarians. But the Goths (read: Republicans) are already inside the walls and even at the helm, and have been for some time.

The volume mocks the IRD’s “sophomoric” and “amateurish” policy analysis. But the IRD is not exactly amateurish. It is usually careful to maintain some form of plausible deniability regarding its political stances. Tooley, for example, insists that he is not endorsing the war in Iraq but is simply urging the church to be more modest in its political pronouncements; it should leave the political stuff to politicians while it goes about saving souls. (That’s actually a discordantly modern view of the separation of faith and politics for one who claims to be a traditionalist!) This stance is disingenuous. The IRD advocates political positions when it uses Republican talking points in excoriating those on the opposite side. But one has to admire the cleverness.

The authors repeatedly insist that they are traditional Methodists hoping to “leave a church to our children and children’s children that will honor the fullness of our Wesleyan heritage.” But that’s precisely the question: What is the Wesleyan heritage? Traditionalists who feel that the heritage is in danger will not be comforted when Swecker complains that the IRD supports “enforcement of a fifth-century form of church doctrine, which it calls Orthodoxy. This extends to insisting on adherence to specific ancient creeds.” Is Swecker saying that the Apostles’ Creed, which is recited over every baptism and intoned at ordination services, is a form of mindless zealotry?

The writers press what they see as a contradiction between the IRD’s support of religious freedom around the world (one division in the IRD is devoted to this) and its pursuit of doctrinal and moral conservatism at home, implying that the organization opposes totalitarianism in Sudan but supports it among American denominations. This is a comparison between apples and oranges. It is also an insult to those who

are persecuted around the world for the practice of their faith to use them to claim the moral and religious high ground in the U.S.

Church trials are repeatedly brought up as evidence of the IRD's hardball tactics. But somebody has to resolve disputes over morals and doctrine. That's why church structures exist. And though the writers repeatedly praise the "open" and "democratic" nature of the UMC's government, it's easier to get in touch with the IRD than with the elected officials on the church's various boards and agencies. It is no small thing that the IRD returns e-mails immediately, while church leaders often ignore critical inquiry altogether. (On the other hand, church leaders have other tasks to attend to, while the IRD lives to encourage dispute). Those who feel that church leadership is elitist and out of touch have a point.

The writers of *Hard Ball* have not just made the tactical mistake of trying to beat the IRD at its own game. (This volume reveals that the IRD is better at the one-line zinger and the bob-and-weave of plausible deniability than the people at *Zion's Herald*.) Their book is also no more Christian than what it attacks. Each side screams, face red and veins bulging, at the other's evil, nowhere confessing its own sin or admitting its own susceptibility to grabbing power within the denomination for its own gratification. Just once I would like to hear one side say, "I may be wrong about this," or, miracle of miracles, "Forgive me." If both sides humbly realized that they have more in common with one another by virtue of their common ecclesial and sacramental life than with those of similar political persuasions at Fox News or Air America, we could have a far less dreary argument.

The two sides are allied rather than opposed in another key way: both assume that the conservative and liberal fault lines in American politics and culture coincide with the divisions between conservative and liberal theology. This is a mistake in description, and insofar as it is accurate, it is not something to be encouraged.