

Former White House insider urges Christian political 'fast'

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WASHINGTON (ABP)—A tell-all book by a former White House insider is roiling the conservative movement with its charge that top officials in President Bush's administration have been pandering to Christian conservatives for their votes while delivering little of lasting value to the constituency.

But [David Kuo's](#) memoir of his years in the White House and elsewhere in the conservative movement is also notable for its afterward. In it, the author—who has impeccable Religious Right credentials—calls on all Christians, conservative and otherwise, to take a two-year “fast” from political activity to re-focus on the gospel.

“Maybe Christians need to begin a fast—from politics,” Kuo wrote, in [*Tempting Faith: An Inside Story of Political Seduction*](#).

“We need to eschew politics to focus more on practicing compassion,” Kuo,

former deputy director of the [White House Office of Faith-Based and Community Initiatives](#), wrote.

“We need to spend more time studying Jesus and less time trying to get people elected. Instead of spending hundreds of millions of dollars every year in support of conservative Christian advocacy groups ... let’s give that money to charities and groups that are arguably closer to Jesus’ heart. And we Christians should spend less time arguing with those on the other side and more time communing with them.”

Kuo’s book caused an uproar a few days before its release, when excerpted sections in which Kuo alleges Bush officials used the faith-based issue for political gain became the basis of news stories.

Among Kuo’s more explosive allegations was that, while Bush was a man of deep evangelical Christian faith, many top White House officials ridiculed prominent Christian leaders behind their backs.

“Christian leaders, Christian media, and Christian writers...didn’t dare question or challenge (Bush) or the White House. He wasn’t a political leader to them, he was a brother in Christ,” Kuo wrote.

“What they didn’t get to see was what the White House thought of them. For most of the rest of the White House staff, evangelical leaders were people to be tolerated, not people who were truly welcomed. No group was more eye-rolling about Christians than the political affairs shop. They knew ‘the nuts’ were politically invaluable, but that was the extent of their usefulness.”

He continued: “National Christian leaders received hugs and smiles in person and then were dismissed behind their backs and described as ‘ridiculous,’ ‘out of control,’ and just plain ‘goofy.’ The leaders spent much time lauding the president, but they were never shrewd enough to do what Billy Graham had done three decades before, to wonder whether they were

being used. They were.”

Top White House aides would hold weekly conference calls with some of the most prominent leaders of the Religious Right, ostensibly to solicit their advice, Kuo said. In reality, he said, the calls were mainly to humor those leaders and keep them quiescent.

The calls regularly included leaders such as [Richard Land](#), head of the Southern Baptist Convention’s Ethics and Religious Liberty Commission, [Ted Haggard](#), president of the National Association of Evangelicals; high-level representatives from groups such as the [Family Research Council](#) and [Focus on the Family](#); and conservative Christian radio hosts.

“This network of people covered virtually every area of evangelical Christianity,” Kuo wrote. “The calls began with an overview of what the president would be talking about in the coming week. If necessary, participants were asked to talk to their people about whatever issue was pending. Talking points were distributed and advice was solicited. That advice rarely went much further than the conference call. There wasn’t any malice or negligence behind this. It was just that the true purpose of these calls was to keep prominent social conservatives and their groups or audiences happy.”

Kuo also asserted the White House both heavily politicized and woefully underfunded the faith-based push, which was an effort to increase the ability of churches and other sectarian charities to receive government funding for social services.

He related the story of a meeting Bush had with a group of African-American pastors to discuss the initiative. Kuo, called in to brief Bush on the meeting, said Bush should speak to the group about how he had implemented reforms to make it easier for churches to apply for government funds.

“He interrupted me. ‘Forget about all that. Money. All these guys care about is money. They want money. How much money have we given them?’” Kuo quoted Bush as saying. “For two years I had bitten my tongue and toed the line. We in the faith-based office didn’t speak too loudly or thunder too much. We were nice. I wasn’t angry now, but I was no longer willing to lie. ‘Sir, we’ve given them virtually nothing because we have had virtually nothing to give.’”

Kuo said Bush and Karl Rove, his senior political adviser, appeared stunned when he told them there were only a few million more dollars in grants available to faith-based groups. Rove pointed to an \$8 billion figure.

“He was remembering our own spin from the winter,” Kuo wrote. “Yes, I told the president, because of new regulations there was technically about \$8 billion in existing programs that were now eligible for faith-based groups. But, I assured him, faith-based groups had been getting money from those programs for years.”

Kuo said Bush responded: “Eight billion. That’s what we’ll tell them. Eight billion in new funds for faith-based groups. OK, let’s go.”

Kuo said that, while Bush probably personally believed in the “compassion agenda” that included government funding for faith-based social services, he and his surrogates were not willing to expend much political capital to push an agenda that would increase social spending through Congress.

Because of those experiences, Kuo wrote, he became increasingly disaffected with pushing the agenda of the White House and the conservative Christian groups it depended on for votes. He left the faith-based office in 2003 after developing a brain tumor and now is an editor for the website [Beliefnet](#). In opinion pieces and testimony before Congress, he has criticized the way the faith-based initiative was handled.

But, in the book, Kuo goes farther than that: He calls on Christians of all

ideological stripes to abstain from politics for the next two years in order to re-evaluate our priorities.

“Patriotism—a good thing—has become part of our religion. So has partisanship,” he wrote. “We have been quietly and gradually nursed to the point where our faith and God himself are merely part of a political cause. Invoking God’s name is just a rhetorical device.”

But, he said, the moment presents “an opportunity. For the next 24 months, candidates for president, senator, representative, governor, judge, county clerk and sheriff will be seeking the conservative Christian vote, our money and our energy,” Kuo wrote. Every politician needs evangelicals. And like a teenage boy on a date with a beautiful girl, they will say anything and everything to get what they want.”

He continued: “Let’s not give it to them. Let’s tell them we are fasting from politics for a season.”

That may not be as easy as Kuo hopes. Since the book’s revelations [were first publicized by MSNBC](#) prior to its release, White House allies have shot back at Kuo. White House Press Secretary Tony Snow and former colleagues of Kuo’s from the faith-based office have disputed some of the book’s allegations.

One of the nation’s most prominent Christian groups, meanwhile, reacted by dismissing both Kuo and the “big media” publicizing the story. [Focus on the Family](#) issued a statement calling the furor over Kuo’s book “little more than a mix of sour grapes and political timing,” and said Kuo’s allegations and the timing of their release “paint the picture of a dissatisfied federal employee taking shots at the White House.”

in the BGCT, the Southern Baptist Convention (SBC) and around the world.