

## BOOK REVIEW

*Faith in the Halls of Power: How Evangelicals Joined the American Elite*, by D. MICHAEL LINDSAY. New York: Oxford University Press, 2007, 352 pp.; \$16.95 USD (paper).

It is not often in academia that we can honestly describe a book as an engaging read, but D. Michael Lindsay's *Faith in the Halls of Power* is a deeply engaging—and genuinely interesting—book. Its greatest strength lies in its tremendous practical relevance to understanding life in the contemporary United States. The most significant story of religion in late twentieth- and early twenty-first-century America undoubtedly has been evangelical Protestantism's rise to social prominence and, correspondingly, to political and economic power. Lindsay's book explores this societal transformation in compelling, personalized detail.

He asks a straightforward but compelling question: how did evangelical Protestants make their way into positions of power in American society after many decades of exclusion—at least some of it voluntary—from such status? To answer this question, he interviewed 157 elites from many walks of life across the public and private sectors, all of whom identify themselves as evangelicals. Lindsay makes advantageous use of his interviews in weaving a detailed, interesting narrative of how and why American evangelicals have come to enjoy greater prestige and acceptance over the past several decades.

Lindsay's book is organized thematically around evangelicals' ascent to power in four key social contexts: politics; academia; popular culture; and private enterprise. In each section, he recounts how evangelical faith played a role in people's

professional and personal lives. Lindsay's highest-profile interview was with the former President Jimmy Carter, who explains in detail how his faith informed his actions as president and continues to fuel his work for world peace. He also spoke with the former President George H. W. Bush via e-mail. Many other well-known figures—who under most circumstances would probably not agree to be interviewed by an academic, much less for a dissertation project—are profiled here, including several Fortune 500 CEOs, former presidential chief of staff James Baker, former Surgeon General C. Everett Koop, entertainer Kathie Lee Gifford, syndicated columnist Cal Thomas, and megachurch pastor and bestselling author Rick Warren. He even talked to a handful of famous evangelicals from the world of sports, including NFL quarterback Kurt Warner and retired NBA great David Robinson.

Lindsay does a particularly fine job treating his subjects and their views with evenhanded respect; their stories are allowed to stand on their own without heavy-handed normative comment from the author. He enjoyed extraordinary access to American elites for this project, in part because of his innovative and clever take on snowball sampling. He labels his methodological approach "the leapfrog method." He began with a list of "the nation's largest organizations within American evangelicalism" (248) and used various personal connections to begin interviewing leading representatives of a handful of these organizations. At the end of each interview, he asked the subject to suggest other evangelical elites with whom he might speak. Using an ever-expanding web of connections created by interviewing more and more evangelicals,

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Lindsay was able to secure unprecedented access to people who (again) normally would not be likely to make time for an hour-long interview with an academic.

Although the book has distinctive strengths, especially its sheer readability and great density of fascinating detail, academic readers might want more obvious connections to existing theory and literature throughout Lindsay's account. Copious endnotes alleviate this concern to an extent, but it must be said that the book has an intentionally mass-market presentation and style. Reading the book made me long for even more "data" from this project, especially since Lindsay illuminates aspects of the evangelical experience that heretofore have gone unexplored in the scholarly literature. It would also have been useful for Lindsay to include more analysis of the years preceding Carter's presidency. The role of mid-century evangelical titans such as Billy Graham in paving the way for today's powerful, mainstream evangelicals is perhaps a bit underplayed here.

Setting these small quibbles aside, this book is a genuine substantive landmark. We learn more about how faith can facilitate one's climb up the ladder of power than we have ever known before. The book has no equal in this regard, nor should we expect it to be rivaled anytime in the near future. Lindsay's access—as well as his careful, nuanced use of the information he gathered—will be difficult to match. The book has attracted many superlative accolades, including nominations for the Pulitzer Prize and the National Book Award, and deservedly so. Often, social scientists fail to make their work *relevant* to the broader world within which we live and work, but Lindsay's work is a remarkable exception to this general (and unfortunate, in my view) rule.

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