

The rise of evangelical influence in America

► Faith in the Halls of Power

By D Michael Lindsay
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Reviewer: Paul Goodliff

THIS IS a sophisticated analysis of the influence of evangelicals in American public life, as indicated by its sub-title, *How Evangelicals Joined the American Elite*.

Based upon extensive interview data from leaders of evangelical institutions, seminaries and those in public life, from Fortune 500 executives to the political elite (including President Jimmy Carter) Lindsay has charted the rise in influence that evangelicals have exerted, despite a stable numerical base.

Gallup polls show that those Americans who describe themselves as evangelical numbered 35 per cent in 1976 and 41 per cent in 2006.

Building a movement around a common enemy (in the 1950s

to 1960s it was communism, in the 1990s it was the Clintons) American evangelicals became a sophisticated political power. More often than not they were allied in the early days to the Democrats, but latterly to the Republicans (after Lyndon Johnson signed the Civil Rights Act of 1965) with a socially conservative agenda.

Every US president since has been in some way allied to the evangelical fold: Nixon, certainly, and Jimmy Carter, but both Bush presidents, and even Bill Clinton, espouse a form of Christianity that is conservative and markedly evangelical. The many Bible study groups that build relationships of trust and influence within the Washington governmental machine are

testimony to the way in which religion and politics are related in American political life.

Lindsay also demonstrates how in academia, evangelicals have become well placed to challenge the secular world view. In part due to the seminal work by the evangelical historian Mark Noll (*The Scandal of the Evangelical Mind*, 1994), a younger generation of evangelical scholars have entirely eschewed the older prejudices within evangelicalism against the intellect.

Evangelicals 'can be found at the top of nearly every social institution in America, and their influence can be seen in public policy, commerce and the media' (p 226) and, concludes Lindsay, its 'leaders have brought evangelical faith – once confined

to the lower ranks of society – into the very halls of power' (p 231).

More than anything else, that, I think is why Americans fail to understand British society and the place of religion within it. That kind of influence is much reduced in Britain, perhaps almost absent. Influential Christians within public life are rare (it took Tony Blair's departure from office before he found the freedom to speak of his Christian faith) and it seems the secular humanists are the dominant influential group.

It is time to resolve as a Church in Britain that if the decline, so publicly trumped recently, is to be reversed, a commitment to Christian faith in the public square has never more urgently been needed. It's time committed Christians joined the British elite.

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