

BOOK REVIEW

REED PARRIES LIBERAL ASSAULT

Christian Political Involvement Comes of Age

By Thomas Atwood

Watch out!

They're coming — those intolerant, fire-breathing, Bible-thumping, fervent, hate-mongering, homophobic, theocratic, poor, uneducated, easy to command, Wal-mart-shopping, lime green leisure-suited, Church Lady imposers of their own morality on the rest of us.

(Did I miss anything?)

Anyone who believes this absurdity should look at Ralph Reed's famed "cherubic" face on the cover of his fine new book, *Politically Incorrect: The Emerging Faith Factor in American Politics*.

He hardly lives up to the specter of the "Religious Right Bogeyman." Fortunately, this specter soon will be irrelevant to the political scene, except in the fundraising appeals of the radical left.

The liberal establishment's exploitation of this caricature is taking on the quality of crying "wolf." Religious conservatives are not about to establish a theocracy. Religious liberty is a Christian principle. Evangelicals and Roman Catholics always have felt that religious belief, worship and personal redemption are matters between an individual and his Creator.

Religious conservatives are kind, pleasant, dedicated people trying to do the right thing. Love of God, country, family and community motivates them. Moreover, we live in a democracy. If some religious conservatives go too far, they will be defeated.

Americans are beginning to realize they agree with us. Ralph Reed is right. "Mainstream values are no longer politically incorrect." The tide is turning. Faith and morality are experiencing a revival in public life. Americans have tried everything, and are finding that family life is the most satisfying lifestyle after all. Children born today probably will grow up to be more conservative than we are.

And after more than 15 years in the school of hard political knocks, we are growing up as a movement. Religious conservatives are doing a better job of living up to our Christian calling to responsible citizenship. No one has done more than Ralph Reed to lead and inspire this maturing process.

In this, his first book, Dr. Reed records many of the religious conservative movement's lessons and presents an inspiring vision for the future. The book is a valuable resource and guide for any religious conservative serious about public service and political involvement. It is also an important book for anyone outside the movement interested in understanding it.

Politically Incorrect assembles a wealth of historical and current information about the players, events and trends in the religious conservative movement and American politics. It explains the importance of the full range of issues to the family and details a well-thought-out political and cultural agenda for the pro-family movement.

It advocates building a winning coalition by uniting religious conservatives of all faiths and colors. It elaborates some of Dr. Reed's technological expertise in grassroots organization and mobilization. It describes the development of the "religious right" caricature and advises religious conservatives on ways to overcome it.

Politically Incorrect articulates a mature vocabulary for a maturing movement. The terms "religious right" and "Christian right" appear rarely in the book, and then with quotation marks around them to indicate disapproval of the stereotype as-

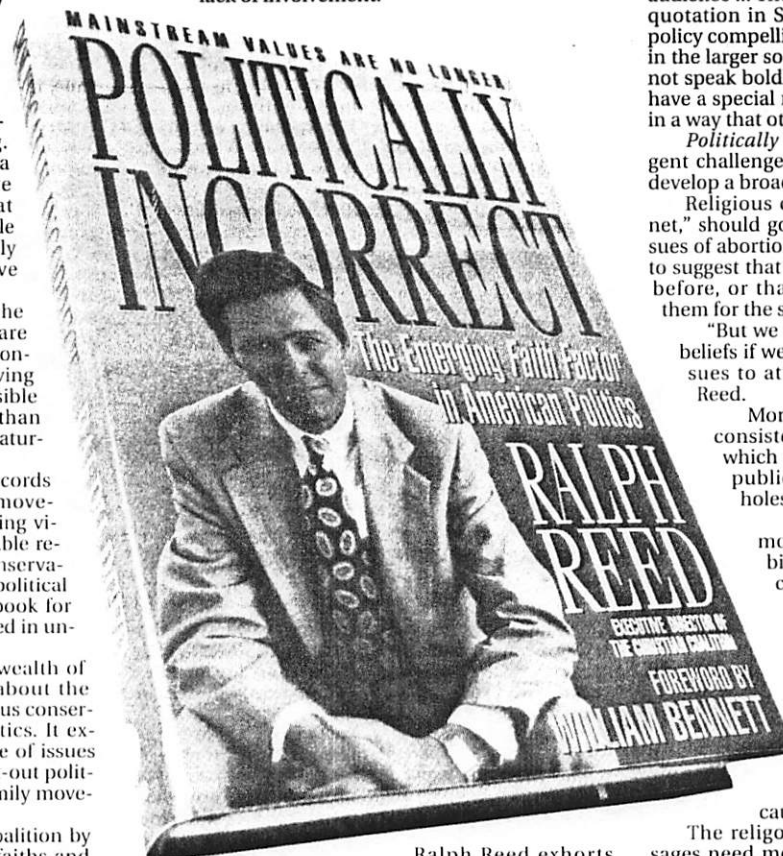
sociated with these terms. Reed's preferred terms are "religious conservatives" and "pro-family," concepts with considerable popularity.

Ralph Reed bases his outlook on government and politics on the Christian's call to responsible citizenship:

"Citizenship is not a hobby, but a way of life ...

Simply declaring the word of the Lord is not enough. We should care about the effectiveness of our communications.

In order to restore America to goodness, Christians must become fully engaged in the duties of citizenship ... [P]astors and priests must not shy away from teaching the responsibilities of citizenship. Our responsibility as Christians does not end at the four walls of the church, nor can we treat politics as 'dirty business' best left to others. If those of faith are not involved in the civic process as voters, activists and candidates, others will take their place, and the entire society will pay a heavy price for our lack of involvement."



religious conservatives to replace political triumphalism with commitment to public service. "Victory" for its own sake is meaningless, Reed insists. It is what we do with our leadership opportunities that counts. Will we love our neighbors, even misguided ones? Will we lead with hearts of servants rather than "rule" or "lord over" them with hearts of masters?

Gone is the take-over rhetoric. *Politically Incorrect* exhorts us to "Apprenticeships in public ser-

vice" to bring about a "caring society." Reed's vision for a world in which religious conservatives led, which is to say, served, has the same features your average American hopes for: smaller government, low taxes, healthy economy, strong families, respect for parental authority, successful schools, safe streets, sure justice, freedom of speech, religious liberty, civility in a public debate, a vibrant voluntary sector and a culture of responsibility and compassion.

Politically Incorrect advises religious conservatives to focus more on persuasion and less on preaching. Simply declaring the word of the Lord is not enough. We should care about the effectiveness of our communications. Our objective is to change hearts and minds regarding our public policy agenda.

Inappropriate use of the Scripture and "Christianese" puts us in the position of having to convert someone to our religion before they can respect our public policy argument. Much of God's truth is written not only in Scripture, but also on our hearts (Romans 2:15). This "general revelation" is generally the most effective reference point for social and political arguments.

"[I]n order to receive a fair hearing, [the pro-family movement] should speak in the dialect of its listeners, using language suited to a largely secular audience ... Those who share our faith may find the quotation in Scripture in support of a particular policy compelling, but it is likely to fall on deaf ears in the larger society. This does not mean we should not speak boldly for our faith. But it does mean we have a special responsibility to articulate our views in a way that others can hear..." Reed explains.

Politically Incorrect argues that "the most urgent challenge for the pro-family movement is to develop a broader issues agenda."

Religious conservatives should "cast a wider net," should go beyond the red-flag, polarizing issues of abortion and homosexual rights. This is not to suggest that these issues are not as important as before, or that the movement should abandon them for the sake of political expediency.

"But we do not compromise these cherished beliefs if we expand the cluster of pro-family issues to attract a majority of voters," argues Reed.

Moreover, the red-flag issue focus is not consistent with the idea of public service, which requires attention to the full range of public concerns, right down to the potholes in the streets.

I would fault the movement a bit more, and the liberal establishment a bit less, for the "Religious Right" caricature than Ralph Reed does. Some groups contribute greatly to the problem, with their over-reliance on red-flag issues and excessive appeals to anger and fear. Clearly there are dangers deserving our grave concern. But inflammatory and apocalyptic messages often have set the wrong tone for grassroots activists who repeat them in town meetings, to their causes' detriment.

The religious conservative movement's messages need more balance between alarming and edifying. Ralph Reed's appeal to the motives of citizenship and public service, and his advice concerning the goals of persuasion and connecting with a wider audience, provide appropriate balance for today.

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