

Left Behind

The Aug. 16 forum at Rick Warren's Saddleback Church confirmed the role religion plays in the 2008 campaign: both major candidates felt compelled to appear at the

megachurch to answer uncomfortable questions. The event also served as a timely reminder that, come November, the evangelical vote will be just as Republican as in previous cycles.

This was not supposed to be an election dominated by culture-war questions. Foreign policy and economics were expected to drive the debate—or so left-wing commentators hoped. But theology proved to be a live wire for both parties throughout primary season. The campaign has been filled with disputes over religious identity politics, associations with controversial pastors, and the intersections of spiritual confession and Americanism. Far from dying out, the culture wars have blazed hotter than ever.

The Saddleback forum also demonstrated that the more expansive definition of Christian mission represented by a new generation of evangelical leaders does not necessarily come at the expense of social conservatism.

Warren, author of self-help bestseller *The Purpose Driven Life*, has enjoyed praise from liberal pundits on the assumption that his interest in combating poverty and disease implies an endorsement of government action. But for Warren, interest in conservation, social solidarity, and philanthropy need not translate into an embrace of federal intervention. Just the opposite. His higher profile on the political scene has reminded conservatives of a more fruitful and enduring means of moral and social regeneration than the broken model of party political engagement.

Activism on these issues, far from evidencing a drift to the Left, shows a broadening of evangelical interests. While Warren has called for expanding Christian duty, he has made clear in his statements—as he did in the wording of his questions to the candidates—that the old roster of social-conservative concerns holds. He regards protecting the unborn as “non-negotiable.”

The most telling response of the forum was Obama's answer to Warren's question about when a baby is “entitled to human rights.” Consistent with his pro-choice record and rhetorical habit of evading thorny issues, Obama said, “I think that whether you are looking at it from a theological perspective or a scientific perspective, answering that question with specificity... is above my pay grade.”

It is not surprising that pro-life Christians have been unimpressed by such feigned ignorance. But it is significant for the politics of abortion when adamantly pro-choice politicians publicly shrink from the logic of their own position. This may be an acknowledgement of the fact that the youngest cohort of voters is more Democratic-leaning but also more pro-life than their elders.

Democratic outreach to evangelicals has been growing over the past four years, as party leaders and their presidential nominee have courted pastors of the most well-known churches in the country. But despite lacing his rhetoric with biblical references and his campaign's efforts to organize Christian voters through groups such as Joshua Generation and Matthew 25, Obama

remains profoundly disadvantaged with white evangelical voters. No amount of social-gospel language will bridge substantial disagreements on public policy.

So uneasy is the relationship that Cameron Strang, a rising evangelical leader who founded *Relevant* magazine, backed out of his scheduled invocation at the Democratic National Convention for fear his presence might be “perceived as showing favoritism and ... endorsing one candidate.”

That's not to say evangelicals are as comfortable with this year's Republican nominee as they were with George W. Bush. McCain will never cite Jesus Christ as his favorite philosopher. And despite a reasonably consistent pro-life voting record, McCain has made a point of distancing himself from social conservatives and insulting some of their older leaders.

Still, Obama routinely polls some 45 points behind McCain among white evangelicals—worse even than John Kerry's draw of just one quarter of this key demographic. Having wisely taken a hands-off approach to Mike Huckabee during the primaries and avoiding further alienating evangelicals, McCain has now effectively solidified a critical bloc, thanks to Obama's weaknesses and the Religious Right's enduring attachment to the GOP.

And yet, while the Republican-evangelical alliance shows no sign of fracturing, the “new” evangelicals epitomized by Warren do portend a seismic shift in national politics—not in their partisan affiliation but in their growing disengagement from traditional party activism. Warren's forum showed why Republicans and evangelicals still work together politically, even as his emphasis on philanthropy and charity makes activist politics less important. ■

Appetite for Destruction

Never have so many shoppers owed so much ...

By Andrew J. Bacevich

NO LESS THAN IN 1776, a passion for life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness remains at the center of America's civic theology. The Jeffersonian trinity summarizes our common inheritance, defines our aspirations, and provides the touchstone for our influence abroad.

Yet if Americans still cherish the sentiments contained in the Declaration of Independence, they have radically revised their understanding. For the majority of contemporary Americans, the essence of those "inalienable rights" centers on a relentless quest to acquire, to consume, to indulge, and to shed whatever constraints might interfere with those endeavors.

Others have bemoaned the cultural implications of this development. Few, however, have considered how an American preoccupation with "more" has affected U.S. relations with the rest of the world. Yet the foreign-policy implications of our self-indulgence are almost entirely negative. Over the past six decades, efforts to satisfy spiraling consumer demand have given birth to a condition of profound dependency. The ethic of self-gratification saddles us with costly commitments abroad that we are increasingly ill-equipped to sustain while confronting us with dangers to which we have no ready response. As the prerequisites of the American way of life have grown, they have outstripped the means to satisfy them.

The restless search for a buck and the ruthless elimination of anything standing in the way have long been central to the American character. Touring the United States in the 1830s, Alexis de

Tocqueville noted the "feverish ardor" of its citizens to accumulate. Yet even as the typical American "clutches at everything," the Frenchman wrote, "he holds nothing fast, but soon loosens his grasp to pursue fresh gratifications."

To quench their ardor, Americans looked abroad, seeking to extend the reach of U.S. power. The pursuit of fresh gratifications expressed itself collectively in an urge to expand territorially and commercially. This expansionist project was well begun when Tocqueville's *Democracy in America* appeared, most notably through Jefferson's acquisition of the Louisiana Territory and through ongoing efforts to remove (or simply eliminate) Native Americans.

Preferring to remember their story somewhat differently, Americans look to politicians to sanitize their past. When, in his 2005 inaugural address, George W. Bush identified the promulgation of freedom as "the mission that created our nation," neoconservative hearts beat a little faster, as they did when he went on to declare that America's "great liberating tradition" now required the U.S. to devote itself to "ending tyranny in our world." But Bush was simply putting his own gloss on a time-honored conviction ascribing to the United States a uniqueness of character and purpose. From its founding, America has expressed through its behavior a providential purpose. Renewing this tradition of American exceptionalism has long been one of the presidency's primary extraconstitutional obligations.

Yet to credit the United States with possessing a liberating tradition is equivalent to saying that Hollywood has a "tradition of artistic excellence." The movie business is just that—a business. If a studio occasionally produces a film of aesthetic value, that may be cause for celebration, but profit, not revealing truth and beauty, defines the purpose of the enterprise.

The same can be said of the enterprise launched on July 4, 1776. The hard-headed lawyers, merchants, farmers, and plantation owners gathered in Philadelphia did not set out to create a church. They founded a republic. Their purpose was not to save mankind. It was to ensure that people like themselves enjoyed unencumbered access to the Jeffersonian trinity.

In the years that followed, the U.S. achieved remarkable success in making good on those aims. But never during the course of America's transformation from a small power to a great one did the United States exert itself to liberate others absent an overriding perception that the nation had security or economic interests at stake. From time to time, although not nearly as frequently as we like to imagine, some of the world's unfortunates managed as a consequence to escape from bondage. The Civil War did produce emancipation. Yet to explain the conflagration as a response to the plight of enslaved African-Americans is to engage in immense oversimplification. Near the end of World War II, GI's did liberate the surviving inmates of Nazi death camps. Yet for those who directed the American war effort, the