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The Religious Lobbies

A Book Review by Larry Witham

Had President Clinton owned a copy of this new handbook on churches and politics, he might have revised the guest lists for his six or so White House sessions with clergy.

Near the end of *Prophets and Politics*, a comprehensive guide to Washington lobbying by 15 Christian denominations and ecumenical groups, author Roy Howard Beck shows table tops with 40 place settings.

If U.S. population share was the president's concern, he'd be dining mostly with Roman Catholics (58 million) and evangelicals (47 million), with fewer seats for mainline Protestants (33 million), Orthodox, Jews and others.

This "meal" is one of countless ways Beck's handbook illustrates the interface of churches with Congress and the White House. The term "handbook" is key here, for it is more a user-friendly reference with charts, lists, street maps and subheadings, than a monograph on history and policy.

"The church office representing them in Washington is probably the last thing most [people] would think about when deciding to join a church," Beck writes. But for some 130 million Americans, the 15 offices are their Washington voices, and the book is a gateway for them to understand those distant operations. It also is a call for church members to get involved, once the system is understood.

"Perhaps the greatest value of this handbook is the immediate analysis available from seeing the 15 offices lined up together on spectrums or divided into categories based on their styles of action, size, theological underpinnings and accountability," the author says.

This is clearly the volume's unique accomplish-

ment, requiring a lot of gumshoe reporting by Beck, a seasoned journalist in the church and secular press. The handbook is one of only three serious treatments of religious lobbies in Washington, beginning with Allen Hertzke's *Representing God in Washington* (University of Tennessee Press, 1988), and followed by the forthcoming *In Washington But Not of It* by Daniel Hofrenning (Temple University Press, 1995).

The 18 topical chapter headings (for example, "Diversity in Activism," or "Staffs") look simple enough to follow. But in reading cover to cover one can easily get lost on the road, probably because nearly every chapter

looks at all 15 groups — adding up to about 250 snapshots. For a reference work like this, the modules of data are a plus. They also are necessary since there is no index in which to look up "Mennonite," "health care reform" or "United Methodist Building." Cover-to-cover readers can be assured, however, that Beck's writing is clear and light, often with a dash of wit.

The author touches on, if only briefly, nearly every religious lobby dynamic at work. These range from how a church's theology translates into a social agenda, its histories and personalities, to who picks the staff and how alliances come and go.

"The 15 church lobbying offices have little power when they are in sharp disagreement," Beck writes. "But when most of the 15 speak in unison ... it is almost impossible for an opponent to beat them."

Examples abound. Beck argues that open immigration policies "hold the moral high ground" because of church voices. These same voices have kept religious freedom a priority in Congress, and they certainly drove civil rights reform, withdrawal from Vietnam, and the abortion debate.

PROPHETS AND POLITICS:
HANDBOOK ON THE WASHINGTON
OFFICES OF U.S. CHURCHES
by Roy Howard Beck
Institute on Religion and Democracy: 1994
193 pages, \$8.95

Yet on most other issues, from defense spending and genetic engineering to pollution and pornography, the church impact is far less clear. As one chart reveals, these churches have taken up 97 different causes — no wonder the prophet's voice gets hoarse.

Some of the topics lend themselves well to Beck's charitable humor. He explains, for example, that Baptists came to Washington in fear of Catholic clout, and evangelicals arrived to counter mainline Protestants. Later, Baptists and Lutherans split their family voices, liberal and conservative. "Whew!" writes Beck.

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Beck visited the 15 offices to learn their budgets, staff numbers and priorities. By such quantifying, he has been able to limn trends, both obvious and obscure. Large churches — Catholic (\$2.4 million) and United Methodist (\$2.6 million), for instance — outstrip others on annual budgets.

However, the massive Southern Baptist Convention has a small office of four staff members, while the tiny Society of Friends (Quakers) have a considerable operation with 17 on staff. The reasons are what fascinate. Quaker activism on peace makes Washington a priority target, while the recent rise of conservative Southern Baptist leadership makes their office a newcomer in 1989. Baptist polity, moreover, puts limits on what a Washington office can say on behalf of Baptist consciences.

Though the book's focus is the 15 church groups, Beck also points out that Washington is populated by an array of religious coalitions and issues offices, such as Witness for Peace or Concerned Women for America. These groups, he

says, "have much more ideological clarity because they are formed around agreement on certain issues." An in-house church debate of the past decade has been on who controls their bureaucracies, and thus the Washington voice. The process by which activists, agendas and quotas gain influence in denominations has been likened to the patterns of change in political parties. This was a founding concern of the Institute on Religion and Democracy (IRD), publisher of the handbook. The IRD wants religion to speak to power, but with accountability to constituents — not as free ranging "prophetic" voices.

"Most church democracy," Beck writes, "is more akin to the way officials were elected in the early days of the country when the common people were felt to be too poorly informed to directly elect national leaders." National church committees, he continues, by their nature fail "to reflect the nuance and complexity that the grassroots could have provided." And for other practical reasons, retirees, singles, activists and persons of means tend to reach policy-making levels. "Substantially under-represented," he writes, "are the men and women with full-time laboring, service and professional jobs, the largest group among church members."

The author eventually moves to a more prescriptive analysis of where the lobbies are going, for good or ill. Of their priority issues, he says the prevailing category is "rights," a leaning that was set by the 1960s civil rights milieu. What is almost completely lacking, he argues, is lobbying about "responsibilities" for society and churchgoers. Amid much lobbying against institutional evil, personal battle lines such as illegitimacy and divorce are absent, despite how much they fuel the family and welfare crises.

In tone and purpose, Beck is wholly respectful of these important voices in Washington. "This book is not an exposé [but] a factual handbook, designed to help church members," he says with accuracy. The slim volume should also be on the desks of church executives, and at arm's reach for religion and political reporters in the national media. ■

Brent Nelson has written extensively on immigration-related issues. His latest book is *America Balkanized: Immigration's Challenge to Government*, published in 1994 by the American Immigration Control Foundation, Monterey, Virginia.

The Struggle for American Nationhood

A Book Review by Brent Nelson

Only those few Americans who regularly read reviews of political opinion follow the battle of ideas which is being waged between paleoconservatives and neoconservatives. Even many readers of the reviews do not fully appreciate the practical difference between the two ideological parties of conservatism. Reading their favorite review, they are apt to conclude that it represents simply "conservatism." That the difference "makes a difference" (i.e., is a matter of practical importance, not simply a focal point for ideological wrangling) becomes most obvious when the immigration issue is raised. Oversimplifying slightly, it can be argued that neoconservatives consider only the economic impact of immigration, while paleoconservatives see that economic impact as affecting but one dimension of a larger American identity.

Chronicles is the only review (with the possible exception of *Modern Age*) which is wholly dedicated to the paleoconservative cause. Paleoconservatives can find space in the pages of other reviews, but only *Chronicles* is dedicated to paleoconservatism as *Commentary*, for example, is dedicated to neoconservatism. *Immigration and the American Identity*, therefore, is more than just another anthology of articles culled from a conservative review. Rather, it is a book which may make a difference in the battle of ideas because it analyzes a highly divisive issue from a paleoconservative standpoint.

Taking the writings of twenty-three different contributors and assembling them into a coherent and comprehensive survey of the reciprocal concepts of immigration and American identity is no easy task.

Thomas Fleming, editor of *Chronicles*, seems to have done this as ably as anyone could. He has arranged the selections under four basic headings: "The American Identity," which defines that identity as independent of immigration; "The Immigration Crisis," which proves the existence of such a crisis; "The Multicultural Society," which describes the devolution of American identity under the impact of immigration; and "Citizenship," which examines the political problems generated by the immigrant influx.

Fleming's "Introduction" is frank. He sharply takes issue with those for whom "America has never been a nation, but only an opportunity to pursue happiness." With one deft turn of phrase, Fleming reveals the common ground on which neoconservatives and liberals meet, regardless of their disputes about whether the free market economy or governmental intervention is to be the primary means employed in the pursuit of that happiness. Fleming's criticism becomes almost barbed when he laments that "the influx of talented refugees from the Third Reich nipped the native growth of our civilization perhaps not in the bud but in the flower," and warns that "One evil empire has already collapsed, and the days may be numbered for its opposite number in the West." Yet he warns against searching for scapegoats because "the problem is not so much the cultural wreckage inflicted by too many Third World immigrants who are, after all, only looking for a better life, but in the apparent inability of Europeans and Americans to defend their civilization."

In considering the American identity, contributors dare to argue that it is a matter of content (ethnic

IMMIGRATION AND THE
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