

Ex-senator Danforth slams harsh rhetoric: Hefty cost of using religion to fuel political agenda

by [G. Jeffrey MacDonald](#) in the [November 1, 2005](#) issue

As a three-term U.S. senator and a former ambassador to the United Nations, Missouri Republican John Danforth has all the credentials and connections to savor the spoils of his party's dominance in Washington.

Instead, at age 69, Danforth is combining his status as an elder statesman with his lesser-known role as an Episcopal priest to raise uncomfortable questions about what he sees as the hefty costs paid for using religious rhetoric to fuel a political agenda.

Since publishing two confrontational op-ed pieces in the *New York Times* earlier this year, Danforth has accepted a series of invitations to take his provocative questions on the road. His fall schedule had him as a panelist at Notre Dame, a guest preacher at Harvard and Yale and a featured speaker for Catholic and Episcopal groups in Washington.

He ascended the ornately carved oak pulpit at Harvard's Memorial Church in September and let it fly before about 300 people. "I've been away from [the Senate] for more than ten years, and I see politics from a distance. And I'm appalled by what I see," said Danforth, who uses the nickname Jack.

"Right there in the midst of all the partisanship, in the midst of all the nastiness, right there with their wedge issues and litmus tests and extreme rhetoric, right there as the most divisive force in American life, are my fellow Christians."

For examples, Danforth notes how Jerry Falwell urges voters to "vote Christian" and James Dobson compares stem cell "research at Harvard to Dr. Mengele's experiments on Jews." (Though Dobson has likened embryonic stem cell research to experiments performed in Nazi Germany, his spokesperson said, he has not singled

out research at Harvard.)

In an interview, Danforth took religious liberals to task as well for sometimes being “snide” and “dismissive” of religious conservatives who make points “worth talking about,” on such topics as “the coarsening of our culture and the collapse of standards.”

In framing his central question— “Is religion essentially divisive or uniting?”—Danforth said his goal is to stir an overdue national discussion. When asked what’s at stake, he answered: “One of the biggest issues of our time is the role of religion in creating divisiveness to the point of bloodshed. And so what’s the future?”

In terms of eliciting response, he seems to be succeeding. He said “scores” of Republicans—including top fund-raisers, ambassadors, senators and cabinet secretaries—have privately encouraged him with such comments as, “It’s about time somebody said this.”

Yet the chord Danforth is striking isn’t music to everybody’s ears. Carrie Gordon Earll, a spokeswoman for Dobson’s Colorado-based group, Focus on the Family, accuses Danforth of being a “liberal” who is merely “criticizing those he disagrees with as being divisive.” She also said that the purpose of religion is to speak truth. “And in pointing truth to people and people to truth, there will be division because there are different ideas within these world religions of what truth is.”

That religion has played a divisive role in history Danforth acknowledges. Yet he argues that the apostle Paul envisions a higher, attainable ideal when he advises in Philippians 2:2: “Do nothing from selfish ambition or conceit, but in humility regard others as better than yourselves.”

Danforth until now never wore his vestments prominently. Ordained since 1964, he always held low-key, part-time church duties, even when serving in the Senate from 1976 to 1994. For example, at 7:30 a.m. on Tuesdays, parishioners at St. Alban’s Church in Washington would take communion from Danforth when he was a senator.

Between Senate events and occasional meetings with the president, Danforth would bring communion to the bedsides of two or three shut-ins from the parish.

Now Danforth said he's thinking more about the meaning of his ordination, which he regards as "incarnational . . . a sign of the church in the world." After questioning over four decades whether becoming ordained "was the right thing to do"—largely because he hasn't made the sacrifices of most clergypersons—he finds the collar is opening new doors. "I don't think they'd be inviting me to preach in places if I weren't ordained."

Still, Danforth's clout on his chosen topic may come largely from his persona as a "respected Republican" who has dared to denounce tactics that have unarguably helped his party secure the White House and both houses of Congress, according to David Gutterman, author of *Prophetic Politics: Christian Social Movements and American Democracy*.

"There are other people who are raising similar questions but don't have the credentials to speak across the political spectrum," said Gutterman, a political scientist at Linfield College in McMinnville, Oregon.