

Book says Bush aides duped religious allies: Criticizes handling of faith-based initiatives

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A book by a former White House official is causing shock waves with its explosive allegations that President Bush's aides mocked religious conservatives and duped them for political gain in the early stages of the faith-based grant programs.

The allegations are in a memoir by David Kuo, *Tempting Faith: An Inside Story of Political Seduction*, the contents of which were first reported on MSNBC prior to the publishing date of October 16.

From 2001 to 2003, Kuo was the number-two person in the White House Office of Faith-Based and Community Initiatives.

The book says high-ranking White House officials referred to prominent conservative Christian leaders as "nuts" behind their backs. Moreover, Kuo charged, the faith-based office organized ostensibly nonpolitical events that really were designed to boost Republican candidates in tough elections and favored religious charities friendly to the administration when doling out grant money.

"National Christian leaders received hugs and smiles in person and then were dismissed behind their backs and described as 'ridiculous,' 'out of control,' and just plain 'goofy,'" Kuo writes. He adds that top political officials in White House aide Karl Rove's office referred to the religious leaders as "the nuts."

The allegations appear as polls indicate that the Republican Party's conservative Christian base has become discouraged by scandals in Washington and problems in the foreign policy in the weeks before the November elections.

(Eryn Witcher, a White House spokesperson, said October 12 that the administration would not comment without reading Kuo's book but that the faith-based program is "near and dear to the president's heart," according to the *New York Times*.)

Kuo described conference calls and meetings that White House officials regularly held with conservative Christian leaders, such as James Dobson of Focus on the Family and Ted Haggard of the National Association of Evangelicals. While Bush officials would assure such leaders that the White House was pushing their concerns, Kuo said, the advice the leaders gave was rarely followed.

Carrie Gordon Earll, speaking for Focus on the Family, said that the book is full of “mischaracterizations” and that it “seems to represent little more than a mix of sour grapes and political timing.”

Kuo, a self-described conservative evangelical, has criticized the White House in recent years for its handling of the faith-based initiative. But his previous criticisms—in congressional testimony and op-ed columns for the Web site Beliefnet—were neither as dramatic nor as specific as those in the book.

However, they do echo concerns of his ex-boss. John Dilulio, the first director of the faith-based office, quit abruptly seven months after he started. In his sole public comments, Dilulio criticized the administration for playing politics with the initiative to drum up support among conservative Christians, but then putting little real muscle behind getting it completed.

Kuo also charged that during the 2002 election season, Ken Mehlman, then Bush’s director of political affairs, told the faith-based office to hold many of their ostensibly nonpartisan conferences in districts where Republican members of Congress were facing tough reelection challenges. *—Robert Marus, Associated Baptist Press*