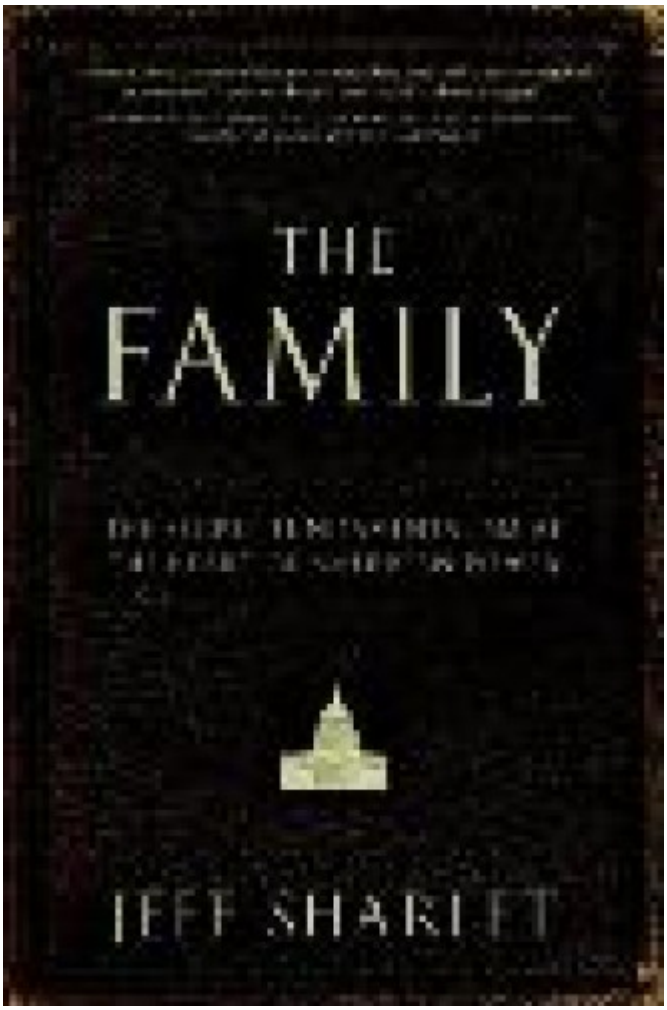
The Family: The Secret Fundamentalism at the Heart of American Power

reviewed by James Guth in the October 21, 2008 issue

In Review



The Family: The Secret Fundamentalism at the Heart of American Power

Jeff Sharlet

HarperCollins

Principalities and powers are always hard to see, but from time to time intrepid explorers stumble upon empires so imposing that they must be hidden from the view of almost everyone else. Whether truly conspiratorial or just secretive, these powers shape the course of history and public policy in ways unknown to most citizens and, of course, in directions contrary to their true interests.

In the past half-century, the American right has often discovered various secretive forces that they claimed were in control, whether communists in the 1950s, secular humanists in the 1980s or multinational designers of “new world orders” in the 1990s. So it is refreshing to find a full-bodied conspiracy theory from the left. Jeff Sharlet, an investigative reporter, sometime academic and contributing editor at *Harper’s Magazine* and *Rolling Stone*, has uncovered an “invisible network” of followers of Christ in government, business and the military. Unlike the Christian right folks who have repeatedly been “discovered” by Michelle Goldberg, Dan Gilgoff, Chris Hedges and a host of others, “the Family” is an elite movement little concerned with such mundane tasks as mobilizing rank-and-file traditionalists against abortion or gay marriage. Rather, it exercises power by controlling the heights of American institutions.

All great conspiracies have great histories, of course, and the story of how the Family got where it is today constitutes much of Sharlet’s meandering narrative. The Family originated in the 1930s, when Abraham Vereide, a Norwegian immigrant preacher, abandoned his charity work with Goodwill Industries to organize Seattle businessmen into Unit 1 of his “new world order.” Vereide envisioned his project as a way to restore conservative order amid Depression-era social unrest: he would baptize the local economic elite with Christian values.

Over the next decades, Vereide took his movement to business and government leaders in other cities, eventually allying with the Moral Re-Armament movement in the United States and especially postwar Europe, where he and his allies shaped the Christian Democratic reconstruction of politics and economics. Always flirting with fascist temptations, movement leaders rehabilitated questionable Germans into farsighted founders of the new West German state and encouraged their cooperation with French and Italian counterparts by exploiting Vereide’s connections among Washington politicians, especially in Congress.

By the 1950s and 1960s, the Family had lured even more powerful elements of official Washington into its fold. A major catch was Dwight Eisenhower, whose endorsement of the presidential prayer breakfast—a Family innovation—provided a critical entrée to the executive branch, a beachhead that only expanded in subsequent administrations as Vereide and his chosen successor, Doug Coe, assiduously cultivated political and business elites through a series of shadowy organizations such as the Christian Embassy, the Fellowship, congressional Values Action Teams and Capitol Hill prayer networks.

With its assiduous network building, the Family has been able to draw on an impressive array of members, sympathizers and fellow travelers. Among business executives, the roll call yields Henry Ford, Conrad Hilton, J. A. Farrell of U.S. Steel and Howard Coonley of the National Association of Manufacturers. Religious allies have included clerics as different as Harry Emerson Fosdick, Norman Vincent Peale, Billy Graham and Carl F. H. Henry. And the list of politicians is just as formidable. Although the Family favors Republicans, from Homer Capehart, Alexander Wiley and Frank Carlson in the 1950s to Sam Brownback, Rick Santorum and Chuck Grassley today, there have always been Democratic members and sympathizers, from Brooks Hays in the 1950s to Tony Hall and Hillary Clinton today.

From this broad base of influence, the Family's "Worldwide Spiritual Offensive infused America's global mission—the economic reconstruction of Western Europe and the militaristic destruction of Southeast Asia alike—and that imperial project in turn sparked the imagination of elite fundamentalists, providing them with an alternative to traditional fundamentalist separatism." Indeed, the messianic direction of U.S. foreign policy since the 1960s is largely the handiwork of the Family's person-to-person spiritual diplomacy with foreign autocrats. At home the Family formed a "popular front" with mass fundamentalism in the 1980s to advance a cultural agenda that would divert public attention from "hunger, poverty, the greed and blindness that drives global warming."

In this fashion, according to Sharlet, the Family has created a vacuum where real public policy ought to be, reinforcing conservative dominance. The result is:

> foreign policy on a near-constant footing of Manichean urgency for the last hundred years; "free markets" printed on the American mind as some sort of natural law; a manic-depressive sexuality that puzzles both prudes and libertines throughout the rest of the world; and a schizophrenic sense of

democracy as founded on individual rights and yet indebted to a higher authority that trumps personal liberties.

This summary hardly does justice to the ambitious range of Sharlet's story. Jonathan Edwards, Charles G. Finney and Billy Sunday make more than cameo appearances, joined later by Stonewall Jackson and the eminent sociologist of religion Rodney Stark. Other readers will have to figure out all the connections; I couldn't. Indeed, Sharlet finds a place for almost every significant religious personage in American history and places the Family's fingerprints on every major political development since the 1930s. Add in pages of firsthand observations based on Sharlet's residence in various Family institutions and you have a truly mind-boggling compendium.

What is one to make of nearly 500 pages of intrigues, invisible networks, theological oddities, political conspiracies, ethnographic description and high-stakes politics? The critic will observe quickly that Sharlet uses all the standard operating procedures of the conspiracy theorist: he breathlessly turns casual acquaintance, common presence at events, and ceremonial affirmations of common interest and mutual esteem into evidence of disciplined political networks.

Sharlet never demonstrates the power of these networks but rather asserts it, and his assertions are backed only by the self-serving or self-congratulatory statements of the supposed power brokers themselves. Indeed, this formula becomes so tiresome that I was surprised by the author's occasional lapses into more conventional description of people and events. Few professional observers of the Washington scene, whether journalists or academics, are likely to be convinced by most of Sharlet's discoveries. Nor are the standard academic accounts of the cold war or recent U.S. foreign policy likely to be revised in light of them.

This is not to suggest that religious beliefs, networks and interests are irrelevant to American political life. Quite the contrary: religious values influence voters' choices, shape executive decisions and structure the behavior of legislators. Anyone who has spent a lifetime trying to delineate the complex links between religion and political power always appreciates the help of astute journalists. The problem is that books such as Sharlet's suggest answers that are far too easy—and too alarmist. Although these qualities will probably win this volume the same fleeting popularity enjoyed by many previous exposés of the Christian right, they do little to advance our understanding of the role of conservative religion in American public life and institutions.