



C Street: The Fundamentalist Threat to American Democracy

Jeff Sharlet

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C Street - where piety, politics, and corruption meet

Jeff Sharlet is the only journalist to have reported from inside the C Street House, the Fellowship residence known simply by its Washington, DC address. The house has lately been the scene of notorious political scandal, but more crucially it is home to efforts to transform the very fabric of American democracy. And now, after laying bare its tenants' past in *The Family*, Sharlet reports from deep within fundamentalism in today's world, revealing that the previous efforts of religious fundamentalists in America pale in comparison with their long-term ambitions.

When Barack Obama entered the White House, headlines declared the age of culture wars over. In *C Street*, Sharlet shows why these conflicts endure and why they matter now - from the sensationalism of Washington sex scandals to fundamentalism's long shadow in Africa, where Ugandan culture warriors determined to eradicate homosexuality have set genocide on simmer.

We've reached a point where piety and corruption are not at odds but one and the same. Reporting with exclusive sources and explosive documents from C Street, the war on gays in Uganda, and the battle for the soul of America's armed forces - waged by a 15,000-strong movement of officers intent on "reclaiming territory for Christ in the military" - Sharlet reveals not the last gasp of old-time religion but the new front lines of fundamentalism.

C Street: The Fundamentalist Threat to American Democracy Details

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Linda Stoner says

While Sharlet is one of the newer breed of journalists who is unopposed to offering his own opinion, his subject is a disquieting one. The level of substantiation he provides makes the case compelling indeed. In some places poorly organized, the book shows signs of being rushed for publication prior to the Nov. 2 election. (It was published Sept. 27.) The number of Kansas politicians involved with C Street is frightening -- Brownback, Moran, Tiart, and Slattery are the ones at the top of my memory; more Kansans are mentioned, I believe, than any other state.

Nita says

Jeff Sharlet, an investigative journalist, turns the light on a frightening outfit that calls itself "The Family" whose headquarters is "C Street" One of the first rules of C Street is you don't talk about C Street. Nevertheless, Sharlet has been able to gather enough information, much of it from C Streeters that will talk, to put together an extraordinary picture of this group. C Street has a roster of well-known names of Senators, Congressmen, governors and assorted "spiritual advisors" streaming through - John Ensign, Mark Sanford, Chip Pickering, Robert Aderholt, Tom Coburn - the list goes on. The underlying goal of these (mostly) men is to re-make this, and other, countries' governments into ones that are "Christ and Christ Only" centered. They have the disturbing belief that they have been chosen by God to reshape the world in their very extreme fundamentalist Christian view. Nothing else they do in their lives counts. From the book: David Coe (a "spiritual trainer"): "Beau, let's say I hear you raped three little girls. What would I think of you, Beau?" Beau supposed that Coe wouldn't think well of him at all. But that wasn't so, Coe answered. Beau, he explained, was one of God's tools; that's what it means to be chosen. The normal rules don't apply. Morality - a human construct - doesn't even apply. "Moral orders," he said, "that's for kids. God's will is beyond morals." Coe uses Genghis Khan as a good teaching example; according to Coe, Genghis Khan had conquered not for greed, but because God told him to. When asked to explain his bloody conquests, Khan answered, "I don't ask. I submit." There is a large group of policy-makers applying this belief in contemporary politics, here in the US, and also exporting it to other countries (contributing to the torture and killings of homosexuals in Uganda, for instance). (Maybe this explains a number of the misdeeds by politicians lately, and why they seem surprised that they are held accountable.)

This was a hard book to read - there was so much information to process, and so many names, but I think we all should be aware of this group and how they are shaping our country, and world. Scary stuff.

“The fundamentalist threat to American democracy isn’t a person...it’s an idea. In its most modest shape it’s the question posed by a future air force officer: ‘Who are we to question why God builds up nations?’—imperial narcissism so blind that the questioner believes his fatalistic acceptance of his own power is a form of humility. In its bluntest expression it’s the ‘government by God’ preached at C Street. In its most awful, it is the ‘God-led politics’ of Uganda, the nightmare scenario of fundamentalism in power.” -- Sharlet

Steven Williams says

This book tells of "The Family," a fundamentalist political organization made up of politicians, ministers, and other like minded people. They had/have a townhouse on C Street on Capitol Hill in Washington, DC. It is a follow up to his book by the titled *The Family*. Jeffrey Sharlet relates a handful of ways the organization works from dealing with infidelity of politicians, funding, foreign missions, and the shenanigans in the arm forces.

On a whole it is kind of scary what this group and its allies have been able to accomplish so far. How far can it go? I do not think it is likely that they could implement their whole program, either here in the United States or abroad, but they could certainly do a lot of further damage.

I would recommend this book to those who are curious about how some fundamentalists go about trying to get their agenda implemented. It may also be important to those that would seek to combat this or any other religious right group; although, this is certainly not the whole story, so further investigation would probably be needed for those that would want to follow this path.

Judie says

The most important word in the title of this book, C STREET: THE FUNDAMENTALIST THREAT TO AMERICAN DEMOCRACY, is "threat." According to the leaders and members of The Family, the group that owns and uses the former convent on C Street as a headquarters, the most three most important things are faith, family, and country, in that order.

Near the end of the book, Jeff Sharlet has a picture of a placard worn by his wife at a demonstration outside the Republican convention in New York City in 2004. It shows a seated Jesus with his head leaning on one hand and saying, "That's not what I meant." It sums up what the author describes as how American leaders have taken control of our government and pushed their conservative, fundamentalist, evangelistic ideas into many facets of our lives and governments.

In foreign countries, congressmen, senators, and other government leaders have convinced the leaders of those countries to embrace Jesus (if not actually converting at least saying they believe in following what the Americans say are Jesus's principles). They have been very successful, excusing the murders of thousands of civilians, by promising financial aid to the dictators if they fall into line. No wonder many Muslims think the US is trying to convert them. It is.

One of the big issues is homosexuality. Until the US and its funds became involved, Uganda had been very successful in lowering the number of AIDs cases. With US influence, very stringent anti-homosexual laws, including punishment for people who did not turn in suspected homosexuals, managed to curtail the use of condoms and increase the spread of the disease.

In this country, they have inserted their interpretation of religion into many areas of our lives. They have severely limited the ability of women to utilize planned pregnancy services and have abortions. In 2010, a Utah law even allows a prosecutor to determine if a woman's miscarriage was deliberate. They have worked to disallow cities from gun control laws while allowing gun owners to carry concealed weapons almost anywhere they want. They are against environmental laws and regulation of businesses. They pushed for laws to regulate freedom of speech and peaceful protests and their supporters on the Supreme Court ruled that corporations, unnamed donors, and individuals could buy elections.

In the military, the majority of chaplains are evangelistic fundamentalists and have harassed, or worse,

service members with differing religious beliefs. Many of those with other beliefs left the service. Women who joined the movement resigned their positions because they came to believe they should stay at home and raise children.

In 2005, US military officers were caught appearing in uniform while proselyting. They were forbidden to do so, but the acts have now gone underground. Hundreds of US service personnel are converted on a regular basis. The Air Force Academy buses recruits to religious services. The superintendent had no idea what "the Establishment Clause and Free Exercise Clause" of the Constitution, which he had pledged to uphold, even meant.

This book, a sequel to THE FAMILY, should be studied by everyone who believes in America and its Constitution and all of us be aware of the threat from within.

Sue says

This is a scary book. Not Stephen King scary, but real life scary. Sharlet does a good job explaining how a group of egomaniacal dolts (my term, not his) think they are chosen by God to reshape the world in their very extreme fundamentalist Christian view. The person who began the group, known as the Family, apparently believed the Bible and religious scholars got it all wrong for 2000 years -- that Christ was really more concerned with helping the rich and powerful get richer and more powerful, and damn the poor who get in the way. (I have come to personally believe Yertle the Turtle is about the Family, but Yertle has a happy ending. The turtle king falls from grace when the poorest turtle on the bottom burps and shakes up the foundation of the turtle king's worldview. Real society could use a massive belch about now.) Oh yeah, and the Family can do whatever the hell they want because they are chosen by God (really, do they think they are the Blues Brothers?) and their affairs, their screwing over the public, their breaking laws, their unethical behavior, it's all good.

This book, along with The Family, made me angry, made me worried, made me a little scared. We need to take notice of what these people are doing, and I commend Sharlet for his work bringing this national attention in detail. If there is any chance he is reading this, Jeff, could you update us on who among the Republicans running for POTUS might be affiliated with the Family.

Caroline says

I finished it after bookclub, and I'm pretty happy about that as it meant I got to the last chapter having digested other people's viewpoints.

As a militant atheist, I find books like this pretty straightforward. The message for me is always "look at the fucked up crap that other people's religion is doing to my government". It is fascinating to me that there are people who will read this and think that this is about Evangelical churches being somehow worse than others. To me that is just like evangelical people thinking that Muslims are worse than Christians. I think the last chapter was in part intended to mollify criticisms of religion in general, which fell flat for me.

Religion contaminates government. Evangelical Christianity is the one contaminating ours.

David Melbie says

I really like Sharlet as a writer and how well he covers this subject. I look forward with pride to be able to someday say, "Why are you so surprised? Jeff Sharlet has been telling us about this for years!"

Of course, he's not the only one. There are several of us who are keeping watch. Sharlet has his finger on the pulse when he says:

"The Family is not a conspiracy. A conspiracy is a secret agreement to break the law. It is not interested in law. God-led government is not a specific agenda but rather a perspective through which all decisions, personal as well as political, should be evaluated. The Family is not a conspiracy but a religious worldview, . . . The Family believes it values the "least of these," the poor; which is why it must serve the powerful, those blessed by God with the authority to dole out aid to the deserving.

. . . The idea that the powerful are powerful because they have been "given" their rank and position -- that they did not grasp for it, that they did not politick -- is as deceptive as "*noblesse oblige*," a moral sleight of hand that exists to preserve social class. So, too, its corollary, that the poor should be grateful for whatever blessings trickle down to them." (pp. 81-82)

This point was made in Sharlet's previous book, *The Family*, and it is this kind of twisted thinking that concerns me. Although, I must say that nothing that the fundamentalist elite does comes as a shock to me anymore, when their entire religion has been shaped and molded for centuries by those in power, always "making it up" as they go along. "Jesus plus nothing" my ass! These people are greedy and manipulative, and they will not be satisfied until all of us nonbelievers are locked up and rotting away in some labor camp!

Elizabeth Roebling says

BUY this book. BUY TWO copies and give one to a friend. Find out who has been behind lots of the stuff that has been going on.... Gays getting persecuted in Uganda? The folks running the National Prayer Breakfast in Washington, DC... Think not? This is a wonderful piece of TRUE journalism. These power brokers are now deeply embedded in both the Republican and Democratic parties and NOW in the TRUMP administration. Think Sharia law is bad? How about Christian Fundamentalism? Ignore this at your peril.

Bob says

One ought not to throw the word "cabal" around too loosely but it's hard to know what else to call the Christian dominionists of the quite secretive organization known variously as The Fellowship or The Family. They own quite a bit of property near the centers of power, including the titular building in Washington. Founded in the mid-1930s by a Norwegian businessman who saw union-busting as next to godliness, the organization has evolved in name, statement of principles and public profile. Currently, the National Prayer Breakfast is their most visible manifestation.

Sharlet has written about the organization before. The focus on the C Street building allows him to detail the extramarital affairs that several congressmen used both the building and its tenants to facilitate - entertainingly salacious but not the reason to read the book. The way in which Christian right types tend to justify all their transgressions as somehow part of God's plan is more worrisome - in general, they regard

themselves as having been "called" into public life in an inarguable way by a being who can't be double-checked with (you knew this but hearing it reiterated in direct quotes is useful).

The chapters on The Fellowship's tentacle-spreading throughout the Middle East and Africa are particularly alarming and there is considerable detail on Uganda and its Anti-Homosexuality Act.

Jay Babcock says

I am over 140 pages in, and feel I should point out that the title is a bit of a misnomer, as the theology of the Fellowship/Family members is distinct from the fundamentalist Christianity practiced by regular folks (i.e., not the "kings" or "chosen" or "key men" who are the focus of the organization's ministry). Not that popular figures don't appear -- Rick Warren makes an appearance as an enabler of the homo-cidal Uganda campaign.

Fascinating, enraging, and composed of wonderful prose, I will give it 4 stars provisionally, as a welcome update to the history Sharlet established in his previous book, "The Family."

Kelly says

As someone who has been pretty diligent about reading Jeff Sharlet's work over the years, I was a little disappointed in this follow-up to "The Family." In its defense, it is a follow-up and not the main course. Sharlet spends a considerable amount of time restating his previously published research, making this feel like a compilation of greatest hits instead of a new contribution. This isn't necessarily a bad thing, and he acknowledges that some chapters are indeed revisited versions of old magazine articles... but the downside of this is that the content loses its luster (at least for those who keep abreast of the subject matter) as well as its value (for those of us who paid for it). To its credit, the writing is excellent and the thoughtfulness with which Sharlet approaches his work is often inspired. The section on Uganda greatly expands the reader's understanding of that country's anti-homosexual politics beyond the confines of conventional reporting.

The greatest strength of this book, unlike perhaps that of "The Family," is in the cogency of its assessment of evangelical power. Sharlet repeatedly makes the case that the Christian Right in America is primarily a political force, bending its theology to fit the aspirational demands of its self-appointed ruling class. Even though Sharlet himself shies away from theological argument, it cannot, alas, be excised from this ruthless story about the acquisition of power.

Trin says

Guess what was kind of a bummer? Finishing this on election day.

Scott Rhee says

This book was read and the review was originally written in June 2012. It is actually a follow-up to a much-better and more in-depth reportage by Jeff Sharlet called "The Family". I read the second book first only because I was unaware that it was a "sequel". The book is fascinating, although I'm sure reading it now, I

might actually find it even more terrifying, especially with everything going on in states like North Carolina and Mississippi, and all this ridiculous "religious freedom" bullshit. I never thought I'd live to see a day when Christian fundamentalists could find a new, widely-used, and widely-accepted euphemism for both "discrimination" and "an excuse to refuse to do your damn job".

The main title of Jeff Sharlet's book, "C Street", meant nothing to me when I first picked it off the shelf. It was the sub-title, "The Fundamentalist Threat to American Democracy", that intrigued me.

I consider myself a Christian, but I must be a pretty awful one (According to fundamentalists, I should probably be ashamed to even call myself one, which I'm not...) because I automatically cringe and feel the hairs on the back of my neck stand up when I see or hear the words "fundamentalist".

To me, "fundamentalist" brings to mind the type of Christian I do NOT want to be, the type of Christian that represents everything I detest about religion, and the type of Christian that I fear has become the majority within our government and churches.

Sharlet's book (which is apparently a follow-up to a previous book called "The Family" which I have not read yet) is a very calm reportage of a quietly sinister conspiracy, although "conspiracy" is not the right word because it is going on seemingly within plain sight.

Arguably, Sharlet may be making a mountain out of a molehill (a criticism that, I'm sure, many conservatives and/or fundamentalists have made with the book already) or, as I believe, has merely tackled the tip of the iceberg. It is an extremely well-written book, and it is a very disturbing book.

C Street is the name given to a non-profit entity based in Washington, D.C. (its full name is the C Street Center, Inc.) which, at times, houses, entertains, and is the headquarters to a religious movement known simply as The Fellowship, a.k.a. The Family (the subject of Sharlet's previous book), comprised of senators, congressmen, state representatives, governors, judges, and other people within positions of authority in the D.C. area. While there are a few Democrats within its ranks, a vast majority of members are Republicans.

What do they do at C Street? Well, by most accounts, the place seems to be a place where Christian men (and very few women) of power can just go to pray, have devotional time, study the Bible, and seek fellowship with other Christian men of power. This, of course, is by most accounts, which is unfortunately not a lot, because, as Sharlet writes, "one of the first rules of C Street is that you don't talk about C Street." If the allusion to the film (and Chuck Pahlanuk's book that the film is based on), "Fight Club", is unsettling, it is meant to be.

What could be wrong with a group of stressed-out Christian men who simply want to come together for Bible study and prayer? Well, Sharlet's answer seems to be, It depends on whether those Christian men (all of whom would be described as having fundamentalist views) are "simply" there to pray and study the Bible, or if there are policy decisions and deal-making going on. The inevitable question would be, So what if there is?

It wouldn't be a big deal, except for what IS known about the Family and its edicts and dogma, told to Sharlet by a few Family members (whose identities have been protected by Sharlet) who seem to be afraid of what the Family has become and by a few Family members who aren't afraid to share their identities because they are pretty excited about what the Family is becoming: a stepping-stone to the creation of a Christian fundamentalist-run government. A government controlled by a select few who, as Sharlet writes, "believes

that its members are placed in power by God; that they are his "new chosen".

It would be a government in which the poor stay poor and the rich get richer because one of the edicts of Christian fundamentalism is that God has chosen the poor to be poor (that's why they're poor) and the rich to be rich (because they are obviously morally superior). It would also likely be a government that would outlaw homosexuality, adultery, and divorce. It would also likely be a government intent on eradicating the false religions of Judaism and Islam within this country and abroad through pre-emptive wars (much like the war on Iraq initiated by Bush, who, not surprisingly, is a member of the Family) intent on forcing countries to convert to Christianity. Granted, this all sounds pretty far-fetched and worst-case scenario, right?

Unless one looks across the ocean to Uganda, a country in Africa (a continent that many Americans don't give two shits about), which has already begun to institute strict anti-homosexuality laws. Homosexuals caught in the act would face prison or worse. Even people who "harbor" or fail to inform law enforcement about homosexuals could face prison themselves. Needless to say, many gay men and women in that country have gone underground or fled.

Sharlet clearly shows links between Ugandan government officials (newly converted to Christian fundamentalism) and several Family members. While he never comes out and says it (perhaps because it is an unfounded accusation), Sharlet cleverly implies that Uganda is, in many ways, an experiment to determine how anti-homosexuality laws could be implemented in this country.

This book is very scary, assuming one believes that the Family is as calculating and corrupt as Sharlet seems to imply. My initial impression is that these Christian men aren't evil, simply misguided. They truly believe that their intentions are good, and they honestly believe that they are morally right. But if history has shown us anything, it is that some of the most horrific acts of injustice and barbarism have occurred with the best of intentions.

aPriL does feral sometimes says

Some very interesting information, but primarily a political walkabout in various countries and amazing interviews with very scary politicians and soldiers who have huge authority over either powerless people or ignorant supporters unaware of the true nuttiness behind the mostly hidden Fundamentalist religious agendas. Despite the delusional religious anxieties and paranoia, the researched and interviewed individuals and NGO's present a smooth persuasive front of normalcy.

This book reveals the incredible weirdness going on behind closed doors and the far-from-cameras activities taking place under the name of faith and religious rituals demanded by the Bible. These activities are plainly freaky and bizarre. Yet, military leaders and congressmen are doing them in all earnest faith, utterly aware that their bizarre beliefs and anti-democratic activities would lose them their constituents if someone made available a YouTube video exposing their prayer meetings and discussions. They are knowingly toning down their real agenda for the public.

While I think the average voter would be horrified at the extent of Fundamentalist philosophy driving some American politicians and military leaders, who, by the way, are completely open that they are on a Crusade exactly like the ones in the Middle Ages, many of the richest men in America and biggest corporations are giving millions - MILLIONS - of dollars to these messianic crusaders, buying votes and influence for their causes. Only a few of the usual Republican supporters are as besotted with Fundamentalism as these

Congressmen and certain non-government organizations (NGOs) are, but those few wealthy supporters, and they are almost all rich white men, are as extreme Fundamentalist believers as the politicians and organizations they pour their money into.

While fascinating and terrifying in the exposé of hidden Christian Fundamentalist agendas which are propagating narrow, hate-based Christian religious beliefs under the false flag of moral leadership, I felt the book was 75% ranting. My low rating of the book is not because I think the facts or stories are untrue, or that I disagree that powerfully placed Christian fundamentalists are using deception to get rid of the freedoms America allows its citizen's to enjoy. (I feel even worse for those converts described in Africa who've accepted Christian fundamentalism, because it makes it easier for resource-stealing despots to beguile their off-the-grid populations into accepting their deprivations because 'it's god's will.') I disliked the author's constant, irritable editorializing and complaining about the lunatic prosthelytizing. Yes, I share Sharlet's views and opinions, but he too often interrupted his narrative with inflammatory commentary and overheated insults. I got very annoyed and skimmed a lot as a result. Plain investigative exposition was sufficiently demonstrative of his theme. Crazy religious people are in charge of key committees and jobs, they are promoting a Fundamentalist agenda in plain sight, and they are often successful because of powerful friend networking, duplicitous wordplay and hidden sleight-of-hand financial tricks, as well as boldfaced lying and superstitious blackmail.

The ranting rage of the author really dragged down the reading of the book, but the facts are irrefutable.

Anne says

This is one of the most frightening books I've ever read. And I believe every word written.
