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Political Science

Faith and Politics
John Danforth
Senator John Danforth
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The author, a former Republican Senator from Missouri, begins his discussion on faith in American politics by describing a weekly event now all but extinct: the formerly *non-political* Senate prayer breakfast. Once, according to Danforth, it was an occasion where religion could bring "otherwise combative Senators together." Now, says Danforth, religion is used to divide his Republican Party, members of Congress, and the American people as well.

This book is both a political memoir and a mature theological exposition. Danforth is part of the self-described "political center" and gently but firmly disdains the divisive extremes of both the political left and right. Early chapters outline the current state of faith and politics; he then analyzes many of the most divisive of topics, the "wedge issues," including abortion, stem cell research, and family values. His concluding chapters outline an approach for a different kind of activism, one focused on reconciliation. His call to action at the conclusion of the book reminds Americans that the power of reconciliation requires an earnest search for common ground, rather than the pursuit of extremes.

Danforth was first elected to the Senate in 1977, and was previously Attorney General in Missouri; he retired from politics in 1994 after serving as U.S. Ambassador to the United Nations. He holds both law and divinity degrees, is an ordained Episcopal Priest, and has managed simultaneous careers in the secular and sacred worlds throughout his adult life.

The Senator's descriptions of the collegiality of his Senate years will likely make readers nostalgic for the less vicious political climate of the recent past. The Jerry Falwell-sponsored "Vote Christian" bumper sticker, which he cites in several contexts, would never have made the discussion agenda, he says, and would have been considered "at least strange and probably offensive" to his Republican Party. According to Danforth, the Terry Schiavo case signaled "total victory" over traditional Republican values, and was employed by the Republican Party

and the Christian right as a nothing more than a cynical strategy.

Danforth reads the audio version of the book in the reserved tones of a parish minister, rather than a political orator. While the memoir portions illustrate his challenges as both priest and politician, his call to action and practical blueprint for reversing “divided Christianity” (which he calls a “scandal”) are the most effective parts of the book.

Creating an “atmosphere of mutual affection” in the halls of Congress and in American life, rebuilding the center, and understanding the true nature of humility and reconciliation are the calls Danforth puts forth in *Faith and Politics*. Readers will find his introspection and scholarship illuminating as well as hopeful.

Chris Arvidson