

# Opinion & Analysis

## Defining moment as bell tolls for fundamentalism



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The hold of the radical Christian right on US politics is one of the important issues in the presidential election

**W**HEN GOD is on your side, who can possibly stand against you? For at least 50 million Americans, that question can be answered in two words: Barack Obama. The most eagerly awaited US election in a generation is now just five days away. The stakes could hardly be higher, and the choices have rarely been so stark.

The US president remains by far the most powerful politician on earth. Given the global influence this person will exercise, perhaps this election shouldn't be restricted to US citizens. The *Economist* took this view a step further, and opened up a virtual Global Electoral College on its website some weeks ago. Of the 9,390 possible votes, all but 270 have been won by Obama. Some 89 per cent of Irish respondents have plumped for the Democratic candidate.

Film-maker Michael Moore once satirised the Democrats and Republicans as being "Tweedledum and Tweedledumber". He could hardly be more wrong. President Bush, who became a born-again Christian when recovering from alcoholism, has spent his eight years attempting to reframe the world along the simplistic good versus evil lines so favoured by fundamentalists of all hues.

When asked to name what philosopher had influenced him the most, Bush replied: "Jesus

Christ, because he touched my heart." While many snickered that the real reason for this answer was that Bush couldn't name a single actual philosopher, the reply does, quite literally, go to the heart of the malaise now afflicting America's Grand Old Party (GOP).

When ostensibly democratic leaders boast about taking their instructions directly from God, as Bush has done repeatedly, you know something is dangerously awry. That this is not just tolerated but positively celebrated by tens of millions of Americans is equally alarming.

Since the inauguration of Ronald Reagan in 1981, the Republican party has entered into a Faustian bargain with America's powerful right-wing evangelical movement. Getting Bush into the White House should have been their crowning achievement, but his monumental incompetence and zealotry have instead led to foreign policy fiascos and economic humiliation.

The fact that a religious moderate, Senator John McCain, secured the Republican nomination for 2008 ahead of the evangelist candidate Mike Huckabee suggested that the GOP had learned its lesson from palling around with religious extremists. By late summer, with McCain trailing in the polls, the evangelists were back to claim their pound of

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flesh, with the insertion of Sarah Palin on to the ticket.

Palin has been a member of the Wasilla Assembly of God for almost all her life. Among its teachings are that whole countries can be possessed by demonic spirits. Speaking at the assembly during the summer, Palin referred to the US troops deployed in Iraq, saying: "We are sending them out on a task that is from God". She also invited the congregation to pray that "God's will be done in getting the [\$30 billion gas] pipeline built".

Today, one in six Americans literally believe that the biblical Armageddon will

occur in their lifetime. And since the end of the world is nigh, why fret about such trivia as global warming? As James Watt, secretary of the interior under Reagan, said when asked about the need to conserve natural resources for our children: "I do not know how many future generations we can count on before the Lord returns."

Evangelical Christians including Palin are, in essence, praying for the end of the world. The so-called "End Times" movement preaches that true Christian believers will, in their millions, be "raptured", that is, physically lifted straight into heaven. Seriously. After this, the Antichrist will take control of the world and a bloody "period of tribulation" will ensue. Luckily, Jesus then returns to earth to finally vanquish the forces of evil – including Russia, the EU, all Muslims and liberals generally.

Books promoting this claptrap have sold well over 60 million copies in the US. Rather than being concerned about environmental collapse and climate change, most evangelists are instead rubbing their hands in glee and using it to support their thesis that the end times are upon us.

What must be understood about evangelical Christians is how profoundly undemocratic they are. They espouse bigotry,

racism, xenophobia and contempt for the US constitution, believing (just like their Islamic counterparts) that they answer only to God. In essence, they are a Fifth Column within the world's most powerful democracy.

Their stated aim is to create a narrow theocracy. The recent crude racially tinted demonisation of Barack Obama, egged on by Palin's demagoguery, is putting down a marker that, should he prevail next Tuesday, the Christian right will never accept Obama's authority. In most countries, such views would pass for treason, but instead in the US – once the citadel of democracy – these evangelical groups get huge tax breaks and dominate the airwaves with impunity.

"Democracy is not, as these Christo-fascists claim, the enemy of faith," wrote *New York Times* journalist and author Chris Hedges. "Democracy keeps religious faiths in the private sphere, ensuring that all believers have an equal measure of protection and practise mutual tolerance."

Hedges describes the radical Christian right as "a sworn and potent enemy of the open society", and warns against the folly of trying to appease a philosophy that is bent on wiping out secular democracy.

November 4th may yet be the defining moment of this new century.