CHRISTIAN HISTORY

Issue 99: Faith & the American Presidency

"As God gives us to see the right"

Jennifer Trafton

Throughout both the Republican and Democratic primaries and the ongoing presidential campaign of 2008, the religious beliefs and associations of presidential candidates have been at the forefront of public discussion. But the importance that Americans place on the faith of their leaders is nothing new in American history, as this issue of ***Christian History & Biography*** shows.

What follows is not a comprehensive survey of the religious beliefs of America's presidents. It is not a series of spiritual biographies of the most pious presidents. The men included here are not necessarily the "most Christian" occupants of the White House, nor do we necessarily endorse their beliefs or policies. What we have done, in consultation with historians Gary Scott Smith and Mark Noll, is to pick seven representative moments in American history—speeches, foreign policy decisions, and in one case an election that sparked a famous metaphor—when the religious perspective of the president intersected with national/ political issues in a significant and influential way. Of course, there are many other historic moments we could have chosen as well, if we had space.

These events are windows. They reveal something about the personal faith of each of these presidents, and how each understood the relationship between that faith and their presidential duties. They also reveal the important, complex role religion has played in the American political scene since the earliest days of the republic.

As editor in chief David Neff explains in more detail on page 42, with this issue ***Christian History & Biography***, as a print magazine, comes to an end. CH&B's 26-year journey has blessed thousands of people, and perhaps none more so than those of us who have had the great privilege to be part of the editorial and design staff. Our sadness at this transition is matched only by our gratitude for having been able to participate in such a unique publication and to know that it has helped history come alive for you. Just this past spring, the magazine received several merit awards from the Evangelical Press Association. But even more rewarding has been the incredible loyalty of our readers.

Thank you so much for your long and fervent support of this ministry. We invite you to continue the journey with us online at www.christianhistorymagazine.org.

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"I am Cyrus"

Harry Truman's support for the creation of the State of Israel was rooted in his interpretation of Scripture.

Paul Charles Merkley

In November 1953, just a few months after leaving the presidency of the United States, Harry S. Truman was brought to the Jewish Theological Seminary in New York to meet a group of Jewish dignitaries. Accompanying him was his good friend Eddie Jacobson, a comrade from his Army days and former business partner in a short-lived men's haberdashery 30 years earlier. Jacobson introduced his friend to the assembled theologians: "This is the man who helped create the State of Israel." Truman retorted, "What do you mean, 'helped to create'? I am Cyrus. I am Cyrus."

Truman was the only president of the 20th century who did not have a college education. In his generation, however, a secondary school education included the study of the Bible and ancient history, and therefore his audience would have known what few graduates of university history departments today know—that Cyrus II ("the Great") was the Persian king who overthrew the Babylonian empire in 539 B.C. and subsidized the return to Jerusalem of the Jewish population that been held captive in Babylon for 70 years. Cyrus's successors permitted the rebuilding of the Jerusalem Temple and city walls. Throughout the two-and-a-half millennia of historical calamities that followed, Cyrus served as the symbol of the righteous gentile ruler who would make possible the ultimate and irreversible return of the Jewish people to the Land of Israel—the restoration of their nationhood and security against their enemies.

Truman's self-identification with Cyrus had nothing to do with self-glorification. It followed from his understanding of history and of the Bible. His Sunday School teachers had taught him that someone, someday, would be called upon to be a second Cyrus.

Truman had joined a Baptist church in Kansas City at the age of 18 and maintained membership in a Baptist church throughout his life. At the time of his baptism, he wrote out a prayer on a card that he carried in his wallet for the rest of his life:

> Oh! Almighty and Everlasting God, Creator of Heaven, Earth, and the Universe: Help me to be, think, to act what is right, because it is right; make me truthful, honest and honorable in all things; make me intellectually honest for the sake of right and honor and without thought of reward to me. Give me the ability to be charitable, forgiving, and patient with my fellowmen—help me to understand their motives and their shortcomings—even as Thou understandest mine!

Truman regarded himself (with justification) as a well-read man. Although he never went to college, he had as good a grounding in classical literature and the Bible as any other president in the 20th century—and in fact better than most. He was thoroughly convinced of God's direction of his own life, and of everyone else's. He pondered the extraordinary circumstances that had brought him into the Oval Office. He studied soberly his own strengths and weakness—fully at peace about the fact of his humble origins. And he came to the perfectly calm conclusion that he ***was Cyrus***.

Keeping Britain's promises

Few Americans were prepared for the sudden death of President Roosevelt on April 12, 1945, and fewer still for the succession to his office of the little-known vice-president Harry Truman. Buried within the enormous pile of projects on Roosevelt's desk when he died was the matter of how to dispose of Britain's Mandate over Palestine. Truman knew that the United Nations would inherit the promise of the League of Nations and Great Britain expressed in the Balfour Declaration of November, 2, 1917: "That His Majesty's Government view with favour the establishment in Palestine of a national home for the Jewish people …" Truman knew, too, that Prime Minister Lloyd George and Foreign Secretary Arthur Balfour, the British statesmen who devised this formula, and President Woodrow Wilson, who endorsed it fully, understood that they were fulfilling the mandate that religious Jews associated with Cyrus.

The Balfour project had been compromised, however, in the 1930s. The local Arab population had proved unwilling to accept a Jewish state in its midst. It had been necessary for Britain to keep a substantial military presence there, precisely as Hitler's war was putting Britain's own continued existence in doubt. To appease the Arabs, the British government had retreated from the Balfour pledge and by the mid-40s were threatening to walk away entirely from the region. To deal with the vacuum of power, the U.N. General Assembly decided on November 29, 1947, that Palestine should be divided into a Jewish State and an Arab State. The Jews reluctantly agreed to the arrangement, but the Arabs vowed never to accept the existence of a Jewish state. And so, on the very day that Israel declared its independence, armies representing the entire Arab world descended upon it.

On Truman's desk the day he had entered office was a pile of memos from the State Department, the War Department, and other advisers counseling him that the Balfour pledge should be abandoned—and that if the Jews persisted in their suicidal intention to declare statehood, they should be left to face the consequences. This advice was, indeed, based on realistic calculation of the facts: The Arabs vastly outnumbered the Jews and were better armed. Great Britain had already attached herself to the Arab cause through sales of arms and provision of military advisers.

But at a crucial meeting, Clark Clifford, the President's Counsel, had the task of presenting the argument in favor of recognizing Israel. He rehearsed the history of the Jewish diaspora since the destruction of the Second Temple, the Balfour Declaration, the recent Holocaust, and the present desperate situation of displaced persons. He even introduced restorationist texts from Scripture, notably Deuteronomy 1:8: "See, I have set the land before you; go in and possess the land which the Lord swore to your fathers—to Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob—to give to them and their descendants after them."

Defying the experts' advice and confident in the rightness of the Zionist cause, Harry Truman exerted his presidential prerogative and directed his U.N. delegation to lobby America's friends and clients to support the Partition Resolution in November 1947. Then, on May 14, 1948—again defying the uniform advice of his State and War Departments—he issued a ***de facto*** recognition of the State of Israel within hours of its declaration of independence.

Truman's decision came from a profound conviction that Israel belonged in the world as surely as the United States of America belonged in the world. Moreover, in this matter he had reason to believe that popular opinion would sustain him, and so it did.

The man and his motives

Some revisionist historians, pointing to a few swaggering one-liners and racial epithets in Truman's papers, have argued that he did not really like Jews or Zionists. "The Jews claim God Almighty picked 'em out for special privilege," he once remarked. "Well I'm sure he had better judgment." But as his close friendship with Harry Jacobson demonstrates, Truman got along famously with Jews of his own social milieu. When contemplating the self-important, highly-placed spokesmen for American Jewry, however, he was moved by the same instinct to puncture and deflate that he felt towards Roosevelt's big business cronies. In this mood, he wrote to Eleanor Roosevelt (then a member

of his delegation to the U.N.) in 1947, "I fear very much that the Jews are like all underdogs. When they get on top they are just as intolerant and cruel as the people were to them when they were underneath." A little thought will show that this is not an anti-Semitic remark but a sensible and demonstrably correct comment on human history.

Truman explained his attitude toward the State of Israel to Israel's Foreign Secretary, Moshe Sharett, who visited the president in 1952. Sharett reported that Truman's view was "the result of his knowledge and study of Israel's history from the days of Abraham" and rested on the promises made to the Jewish people in the First World War (that is, the Balfour Declaration), which "must be kept." Furthermore, Truman believed that there was a certain philosophical affinity between Israel and America. Israel, he said, "had already been once an example of democracy in antiquity. Were not the judges of Israel the first rulers anywhere in the world to have been elected by the people?"

Of course, many other less grand motives operated in Truman's policy-making with regard to Palestine and the Jews. These included his calculation that most American citizens, and not least American Jews, would reward at the polls a president who undertook to bless America by blessing the Jews. But given that in preferring the cause of the Jews he acted in defiance of the diplomatic, military, and economic advice available to him, we must assume that personal commitment tipped the balance.

Presidents Wilson and Truman are the only American presidents who explicitly identified themselves with the symbol of Cyrus, and who ought therefore to be called "Christian Zionists." But all presidents of the United States in the last century have been made to understand that large segments of the American public believe that there is a connection between the nation's willingness to "bless Israel" and God's willingness to bless America.

Paul Charles Merkley is the author of three books on Christian attitudes towards Israel, the most recent is American Presidents, Religion and Israel ***(Praeger, 2004).***

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A Nation on a Mission

William McKinley saw America's unexpected opportunity in the Philippines as a sign from God—and set the U.S. on a new course of global influence.

Richard V. Pierard

On November 21, 1899, five clergymen representing the General Missionary Committee of the [Northern] Methodist Episcopal Church called on President William McKinley at the White House. After presenting a resolution of thanks to their fellow Methodist, they turned to leave. Suddenly, McKinley said earnestly, "Hold a minute longer! Not quite yet, gentlemen! Before you go I would like to say just a word about the Philippine business. I have been criticized a good deal about the Philippines, but don't deserve it. The truth is I didn't want the Philippines, and when they came to us, as a gift from the gods, I did not know what to do with them. … I sought counsel from all sides—Democrats as well as Republicans—but got little help. … I walked the floor of the White House night after night until midnight; and I am not ashamed to tell you, gentlemen, that I went down on my knees and prayed Almighty God for light and guidance more than one night."

Finally, he said, the answer came to him "that there was nothing left for us to do but to take them all, and to educate the Filipinos, and uplift and civilize and Christianize them, and by God's grace do the very best we could by them, as our fellow-men for whom Christ also died. And then I went to bed, and went to sleep, and slept soundly, and the next morning I sent for the chief engineer of the War Department (our map-maker), and I told him to put the Philippines on the map of the United States [pointing to a large map on the wall of his office], and there they are, and there they will stay while I am President!"

This is one of the most remarkable religious statements ever made by a sitting president, even in an age when people more openly displayed their personal convictions than today. The context of the statement, the Spanish-American War, marked the emergence of the United States on the world scene as an imperial power. McKinley, regarded by many historians as the "first modern U.S. president," was a devout man whose Christian rationale for overseas expansion harmonized with American civil religion of the time—which saw America as a nation through which God had chosen to manifest his will and power in the world. McKinley's personal faith and his vision of the nation's divinely appointed mission were inseparable.

Nothing but a Christian

Born on January 29, 1843 in Niles, Ohio, William McKinley Jr. was the son of an ironmaster of modest means. His mother was a fervent Methodist and did all she could to inculcate an evangelical faith in her nine children. At age 10, William went forward at a camp meeting to "profess conversion," and at 16 he became a full-fledged member of the Methodist Episcopal Church.

Even after becoming president in 1897, McKinley made no effort to hide his faith. In his Inaugural Address he declared, "There is no safer reliance than upon the God of our fathers, who has so singularly favored the American people in every national trial, and who will not forsake us so long as we obey His commandments and walk humbly in His footsteps." During his years in Washington, he regularly worshiped at the Metropolitan Methodist Church and often entertained guests with Sunday evening hymn sings in the executive mansion. He told a delegation from his denomination, "I am a Methodist and nothing but a Methodist—a Christian and nothing but a Christian."

His speeches, especially during the time of the Spanish-American War and the ensuing peace

negotiations, were filled with affirmations of Christian faith and civil religion. On July 6, 1898, after hostilities had ceased, he said that Americans should "offer thanksgiving to Almighty God, who in his inscrutable ways" led American forces "to unscathed triumph in strange lands and distant climes" and "has watched over our cause and brought nearer the success of the right and the attainment of just and honorable peace."

A splendid little war

The Cuban revolt against Spanish rule began in February 1895, and all McKinley's attempts to alleviate the situation through negotiations with Spain failed. Lurid reports of abuses in Cuba inflamed Americans' feelings in favor of the insurgents. In February 1898, the sinking of the U.S. battleship ***Maine*** in Havana harbor by a mysterious explosion (later found to be the result of spontaneous combustion in the ship's coal bunkers) further heightened tensions. When Spain refused to withdraw from Cuba, the situation rapidly deteriorated, and both countries declared war.

With no military planning, the U.S. embarked on a war whose outcome was not at all certain. Yet public opinion was solidly behind it, and the nation's preachers proclaimed it a holy war in which all the forces of righteousness were lined up on the American side. In a little over three months, the country's ill-prepared military and naval units decisively defeated the even more decrepit forces of Spain in the Caribbean and the Philippine Islands. With its quick victory and minimal loss of American lives, the crisis was, as John Hay, the U.S. ambassador in London at the time, put it, "a splendid little war." In an armistice signed on August 12, Spain agreed to the independence of Cuba, the cession of Puerto Rico and Guam to the U.S., and the right for the U.S. to deal with the Philippines as it saw fit. Representatives from the two sides convened in Paris in October to draw up the final peace settlement.

Although public enthusiasm for the establishment of a free Cuba under American protection was enormous, the country was deeply divided over the Philippines. An anti-imperialist movement, especially among members of the Democratic Party, maintained that annexing the Philippines was unconstitutional and inimical to American democratic values, would lead to further wars in the Far East without providing any significant trade benefits, and would confer citizenship upon inferior, half-civilized peoples. Proponents of annexation advanced arguments about American national mission and destiny. Still others said that it was in the country's economic interests to exploit opportunities in East Asia. Youthful imperialists like Albert Beveridge and Theodore Roosevelt insisted that America must assert its vigor and manhood on the world stage.

McKinley was torn by the issue. He kept his ear to the ground and carefully measured public sentiment. During the combat phase of the Spanish-American War when public enthusiasm about overseas ventures was at a fever pitch, he moved to take control of the Hawaiian islands, which had been a hot issue for some time. Seeing that wartime success had enhanced the popularity of his Republican Party and mid-term elections were coming up in November, he edged toward taking a part and finally all of the Philippines as well.

His interview with the Methodist ministers substantiates this. He wrestled for weeks and finally reached a decision. On October 28, John Hay, now Secretary of State, sent a message to the peace commissioners in Paris confirming that the U.S. had destroyed Spanish power in every part of the Philippines and "the President can see but one plain path of duty—the acceptance of the archipelago. Greater difficulties and more serious complications, administrative and international, would follow any other course." He claimed that the president had "been influenced by the single consideration of duty and humanity."

Manifest destiny

After heated debates, the Senate ratified the Treaty of Paris on February 6, 1899, by a margin of one vote. In a speech in Boston ten days later, McKinley declared that the islands "were entrusted to our

hands by the war, and to that great trust, under providence of God and in the name of civilization, we are committed. It is a trust we have not sought; it is a trust from which we will not flinch. … We were obeying a higher moral obligation which rested upon us. We were doing our duty by them [the Filipinos] as God gave us the light to see our duty, with the consent of our own consciences, and with the approval of civilization." The Filipinos, McKinley said, were now committed into the guiding hand, liberalizing influences, generous sympathies, and uplifting education "not of their American masters, but of their American emancipators." They would be given peace, order, and beneficent government and would "bless the American republic because it emancipated and redeemed their fatherland and set them in the pathway of the world's best civilization."

One writer in 1899 flatly stated that it was "the duty and the manifest destiny of the United States to civilize and Christianize" the Filipinos. They, of course, did not see things this way. An insurgency by Philippine nationalists against U.S. rule took three years to suppress, cost far more American lives and money than the brief war with Spain, and discredited the justifications for the takeover. Yet Americans continued to believe that "Providence" had chosen their nation to bring liberty, democracy, freedom, and economic development to peoples throughout the world. Americans saw themselves as God's elect nation, which had done great deeds thanks to the strength of his mighty arm. Now the national mission would shift to leadership on the world stage.

Richard V. Pierard is professor of history emeritus at Gordon College in Wenham, Massachusetts and at Indiana State University in Terre Haute.

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Civil Religion in America

Presidents have often served as chief pastors of the nation's shared beliefs.

Gary Scott Smith

In his seminal 1967 essay, sociologist Robert Bellah argued that the United States had "an elaborate and well-instituted civil religion," which existed "alongside of" and was "rather clearly differentiated from the churches." Also known as civic piety, religious nationalism, public religion, and the common faith, civil religion provides a religious sanction for the political order and a divine justification of and support for civic society and a nation's practices. It is the "state's use of consensus religious sentiments, concepts, and symbols for its own purposes." "As a system of established rituals, symbols, values, norms, and allegiances," civil religion functions as a social glue to bind people together and "give them an overarching sense of spiritual unity."

Civil religion involves beliefs (but no formal creed), events that seem to reveal God's purposes (most notably the American Revolution and the Civil War), prophets (especially Washington, Jefferson, and Lincoln), sacred places (shrines to Washington, Lincoln, and Franklin Roosevelt; Bunker Hill; and Gettysburg), sacred texts (the Declaration of Independence, the Constitution, and Lincoln's Gettysburg Address), ceremonies (Memorial Day, Independence Day, Veterans' Day celebrations, and the pageantry of presidential inaugurals), hymns ("God Bless America" and "My Country, 'Tis of Thee"), and rituals (prayers at public events such as inaugurals and the beginnings of sessions of Congress and national days of prayer).

By presiding over the nation's rituals and reaffirming its creeds, presidents have served as the prophets and priests of this civil religion. They have employed civil religion to unite Americans and to frame and win support for specific policies. Regularly invoking God in inaugural addresses and on other solemn occasions, the president has functioned as the nation's principal preacher and chief pastor. America's presidents have usually employed broad religious language and have typically avoided mentioning Jesus or Christian doctrines. They have minimized theological differences, urged religious communities to work together, and sought to strengthen citizens' commitment to America's core values.

Scholars distinguish between priestly civil religion, which offers God's comfort and solace to people in the midst of tragedy and affliction, and prophetic civil religion, which uses biblical themes to challenge citizens to change their attitudes and actions. Presidents have operated more as priests than as prophets. They have frequently asserted that God has chosen and blessed the United States, provided spiritual inspiration, and consoled their countrymen after tragedies. However, they have sometimes used the rhetoric of civil religion to exhort Americans to reevaluate the nation's goals and actions and to seek to implement its best values.

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Did You Know?

Pop Quiz: Which U.S. President does each of these statements describe?

1. He was the first president to use the phrase "this nation under God."

2. The words "under God" were added to the Pledge of Allegiance while he was president.

3. He was in favor of removing the motto "In God We Trust" from new minted coins because he thought that the association of God and money was "sacrilegious" and that it "cheapened and trivialized the trust in God it was intended to promote."

4. A group of Baptists in western Massachusetts was so grateful for this president's defense of religious liberty that they presented him with a 1,235-pound cheese made from the milk of 900 "Republican" cows.

5. He was the nation's first Quaker president, winning the election over Al Smith, the first Catholic to run as a major party candidate.

6. His claim to be "born again" drew national media attention and led Newsweek magazine to proclaim his election year "The Year of the Evangelical."

7. He was frequently compared to Moses, Joshua, King David, and sometimes even Jesus.

8. Though earlier presidents set aside days of prayer and thanksgiving, this president's wartime proclamation of a national day of thanksgiving to be celebrated on the last Thursday of November set the precedent for our modern Thanksgiving Day.

9. He was given a Torah by Israeli President Chaim Weizmann as thanks for his recognition of the new State of Israel.

10. Long before the "Jesus Seminar" was conceived, he created his own version of the Gospels by cutting out any passages that related to Jesus' miracles and divinity and leaving in those that showed his moral teachings.

11. He called the Bible "the Magna Charta of the human soul."

12. His wife said during his election campaign, "I think it's so unfair of people to be against [him] because he's Catholic. He's such a poor Catholic."

13. As commander-in-chief of the Continental army, he helped arrange military chaplains of all denominations for his troops and commanded his soldiers to attend Sunday services.

14. He argued that appointing tax-supported chaplains for Congress and the military violated the First Amendment, which he had helped to draft.

15. He was a Disciples of Christ preacher before becoming an anti-slavery politician, military general, Congressman, and finally president for only six months.

16. He was accused of conspiring to establish Presbyterianism as a national church. And he wasn't even Presbyterian.

17. He claimed to have made the decision to annex the Philippines after praying fervently about what to do.

18. Winston Churchill jokingly promised to recommend this president for the position of Archbishop of Canterbury if he lost the next presidential election.

19. He was the first president to appoint an ambassador to the Vatican.

20. He coined the phrase "a wall of separation between church and state."

Pop Quiz answers

1. Abraham Lincoln
2. Dwight Eisenhower
3. Theodore Roosevelt
4. Thomas Jefferson
5. Herbert Hoover
6. Jimmy Carter
7. George Washington
8. Abraham Lincoln
9. Harry Truman
10. Thomas Jefferson
11. Woodrow Wilson
12. John F. Kennedy
13. George Washington
14. James Madison
15. James Garfield
16. John Adams
17. William McKinley
18. Franklin D. Roosevelt
19. Ronald Reagan
20. Thomas Jefferson

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Hot Words in the Cold War

In his controversial "Evil Empire" speech, Ronald Reagan sought to re-moralize America's conflict with the Soviet Union.

Paul Kengor

O n March 8, 1983, at 3:04 P.M., President Ronald Reagan stepped to the podium before a group of evangelical Christians at the Sheraton Twin Towers Hotel in Orlando, Florida. Knowing he had a friendly crowd, he began by thanking all those present for their prayers. He cited a favorite quote from Lincoln, about often being driven to his knees by the overwhelming conviction that he had nowhere else to go. He then commended the role of religious faith in American democracy.

That was all nice enough—standard fare, no surprise, preaching to the choir.

Reagan then took a sharp theological-philosophical turn. He spoke of sin and man's fallen nature: "We know that living in this world means dealing with what philosophers would call the phenomenology of evil or, as theologians would put it, the doctrine of sin." He then gave a glimpse of where he was heading: "There is sin and evil in the world, and we're enjoined by Scripture and the Lord Jesus to oppose it with all our might."

Particularly possessed of that sin and evil, he told the National Association of Evangelicals, was America's principal foe: the Soviet Union was the "focus of evil in the modern world"; it was an "evil empire."

Reagan's audacious assertion was a shot heard 'round the world—and certainly within the packed Citrus Crown Ballroom of several hundred people. "It was a surprise to all of us," said Thomas McDill, president of the Evangelical Free Church, "but especially to the reporters down in front." It did not take long for the ripple effect to make waves outside the auditorium. In the ***Washington Post***, Richard Cohen asked, "Question: What does Ronald Reagan have in common with my grandmother? Answer: They are both religious bigots." Historian Henry Steele Commager asserted, "It was the worst presidential speech in American history, and I've read them all." A damning indictment came from ***The New Republic***, the political bible of the American left, in a sarcastic editorial titled "Reverend Reagan." "He is not in the White House to save our souls," the editors objected, "but to protect our bodies; not to do God's will, but the people's."

Not all reactions were negative. Upon learning what Reagan had said, Anatoly Sharansky, an inmate of U.S.S.R. Permanent Labor Camp 35, jumped for joy inside his prison cell and tapped in Morse Code to his fellow gulag residents the good news that "someone had finally spoken the truth" about the U.S.S.R. Once the communist collapse came, Russian government officials were eager to talk openly and even to affirm the president's characterization. Arkady Murashev, Moscow police chief and a leader of Democratic Russia, who was close to Russian president Boris Yeltsin, told the ***Washington Post***'s David Remnick: "He [Reagan] called us the 'Evil Empire.' So why did you in the West laugh at him? It's true!"

A voice for the voiceless

Why did Reagan say what he said on that day in March 1983? As he explained after the presidency, "Although a lot of liberal pundits jumped on my speech at Orlando and said it showed I was a rhetorical hip-shooter who was recklessly and unconsciously provoking the Soviets into war, I made the 'Evil Empire' speech and others like it with malice aforethought."

Reagan's chief motivation was laid bare in the speech itself. He believed he had no choice—morally or spiritually—but to condemn the Soviet system because it was evil. He would be remiss in his Christian duty if he did ***not*** denounce and oppose the Soviet Union.

This thinking was rooted in Reagan's spiritual upbringing. His mother, Nelle, made an indelible impact in numerous ways. She gave her son a Christian novel that he would always cite as the most influential book of his youth: Harold Bell Wright's ***That Printer of Udell's***. The protagonist is a "practical Christian" driven by a sense of duty to speak out against and to oppose evil. "I want to be like that man," an 11-year-old Ronald told his mom. "And I want to be baptized."

Reagan was also heavily influenced by his family's Disciples of Christ pastor, Ben Cleaver, in Dixon, Illinois. Cleaver was very patriotic, very anti-communist, and knowledgeable about early Disciples of Christ leaders like Alexander Campbell (1788-1866) who believed America had a "special mission in the world as a nation and a people." In fact, averred Campbell, it was "for this purpose [that] the Ruler of nations has raised us up and made us the wonder and the admiration of the world." Campbell spoke of America as a "beacon," a "light unto the nations," with a duty to "overthrow" "false religion [and] oppressive governments."

From such religious instruction, and, later, his own reading, Ronald Reagan came to view America as "A Shining City Upon a Hill" with a duty to cast light into the dark corners of the world. Reagan wanted America to be model for all others, a guiding light, a beacon—"wind-swept, God-blessed," as he put it—that would lead the world to freedom. He said only weeks before the NAE speech, "I've always believed that this blessed land was set apart in a special way, that some divine plan placed this great continent here between the two oceans to be found by people from every corner of the Earth—people who had a special love for freedom."

Reagan saw himself as a voice for the voiceless in the Soviet empire, those he called the "captive peoples" in the "captive nations." He saw the U.S.S.R. as the "heart of darkness" that imprisoned what was once a richly religious population. His was a public voice on behalf of the captives, with the potency of the presidential bully pulpit behind it.

War of words

Reagan also had tactical motivations. After his presidency he explained: "For too long our leaders were unable to describe the Soviet Union as it actually was. The keepers of our foreign-policy knowledge … found it illiberal and provocative to be so honest. I've always believed, however, that it's important to define differences, because there are choices and decisions to be made in life and history. The Soviet system over the years has purposely starved, murdered, and brutalized its own people. Millions were killed; it's all right there in the history books. It put other citizens it disagreed with into psychiatric hospitals, sometimes drugging them into oblivion. Is the system that allowed this not evil? Then why shouldn't we say so?"

Reagan believed such candor was needed to eliminate illusions and to "philosophically and intellectually take on the principles of Marxism-Leninism." Though he could not and would not fire weapons at the adversary, he understood that words could be extremely effective in a Cold War confrontation in which good vs. evil were at the very core. Such rhetorical cruise missiles would not knock down buildings, blast holes in the soil, or produce corpses, but, Reagan hoped, they might be lethal to the Soviet body in the long-term.

Herein, then, was another central motivation behind the speech: Reagan aimed to denounce moral equivalency. This doctrine, popular among segments of the political left, held that both the United States and the Soviet Union were equally responsible for the Cold War, and that neither country, nor their

system of government, could be judged more (or less) good or evil than the other. The United States could not claim a moral high ground any more than the U.S.S.R.

Reagan called this "rubbish." He had always understood the U.S.S.R. as not just vicious but as an inherently atheistic system. Lenin had compared Christianity to venereal disease and established groups like the League of the Militant Godless. Speaking on behalf of the Bolshevik state, he declared in 1920, "We … do not believe in God." Stalin naturally followed suit, blowing up churches and gulaging nuns and priests. Marx himself had called religion the "opiate of the masses" and said that "communism begins where atheism begins."

It was the U.S.S.R., Reagan said, that repressed humans' God-given rights and killed tens of millions of its own. America, on the other hand, was a democratic country where "all people enjoy the right to speak, to worship God as they choose, and live without fear." As he told in a crowd in Miami, "don't let anyone tell you we're morally equivalent with the Soviet Union. … We are morally superior, not equivalent, to any totalitarian regime, and we should be darn proud of it."

After a decade of détente, in which both Republican and Democratic presidents had urged Americans to accept their differences with Soviet Union, Reagan was seeking to re-moralize the conflict. He wanted to make the case to the public that the Cold War was not a "giant misunderstanding" but a just war. And on a number of occasions, including a speech to the National Religious Broadcasters in January 1984, he said that while he prayed that he and his country were on the right side and doing the right thing, he was at least sure his country was not the evil one.

Fittingly, it was those who subscribed to moral equivalency who took greatest offense at Reagan's Evil Empire speech.

A larger plan

Finally, Reagan's speech needs to be placed in the context of what we now know was happening at the time: Reagan and a group of close advisers were laying out a multi-layered assault on the Soviet Union from numerous angles—from economic warfare to rhetorical warfare—in order to undermine the empire without nuclear war and direct military confrontation. The Evil Empire speech was a significant part of the plan, one that reflected both deeper personal motivations and far-reaching global ambitions.

Only now, decades later, as emotions and partisan inclinations have cooled—and knowing the story had a good (not tragic) ending—can we fully understand the Evil Empire speech and its purpose. Ronald Reagan told Nancy Reagan a few days after the speech, as she expressed misgivings over his bellicose language, "It ***is*** an Evil Empire. It's time to close it down."

In those private comments by Reagan, we see the direct connection between that first and second sentence. Calling it an Evil Empire was one step to something much larger.

Paul Kengor is professor of political science at Grove City College in Grove City, Pennsylvania.

CHRISTIAN HISTORY

Issue 99: Faith & the American Presidency

Looking Back and Moving Forward

***Christian History & Biography* magazine has come to an end. But our commitment to making history come alive for a new generation continues.**

David Neff

I love history. And now that I'm 60, I've started to enjoy nostalgia as well. But I know that history and nostalgia are not the same.

Nostalgia is trying to relive something that is departed. Some things gain in our affections after they leave us. And thus nostalgia pays its wages in sentiment—though not necessarily in wisdom.

History, however, pays off in wisdom and insight. It involves sober reflection on the past in a way that helps us know who we are, where we are, and how we got here. It gives us perspective on the present that helps us avoid taking the same unnecessary detours two or three times. Indeed, by being clear-eyed about the past, we are helped to move forward.

You are now reading the last issue of ***Christian History & Biography***, at least as we know it. And I'm trying to avoid nostalgia and keep moving forward.

There have been a lot of great moments over the past 26 years since the magazine was first published by Kenneth Curtis as an adjunct to his filmmaking at Vision Video. After Ken screened a film he had made about Czech reformer and martyr Jan Hus for a couple of groups, including a group of seminary-educated pastors, he discovered that very few knew who Hus was.

(Even if you don't know Jan Hus, you've probably heard about him: He was the goose in the saying, "His goose is cooked." For more about that, look up Thomas Fudge's article "To Build a Fire" on www.christianhistory.net.)

That experience led Ken to print a 16-page study guide to accompany the film. Every medium has its limitations, and motion pictures are best at grabbing attention and building curiosity. They are not as good as print or the internet at conveying information. That study guide about Jan Hus grew into a magazine that developed its own information-hungry readership.

What was a delight for Ken Curtis also became a burden that stretched the capacities of his staff, and after discussing the possibilities with Christianity Today Incorporated president Harold Myra, the magazine came here to its present home.

But even in a company where magazine publishing is our mainstay, we can't always guarantee success when the business environment changes radically. We have now come to the point where we can no long publish a highly visual print magazine that carries only minimal advertising for a devoted niche readership.

But that economic reality does not mean that we are just going away. We are too passionate about church history to do that. Instead, we are embracing the still new (from a historical perspective) medium of the internet and overhauling our website to make it a more attractive destination for our readers. Our expanded web efforts will present you with delightful and engaging new pieces for church history lovers.

There will be fresh articles, interviews, book reviews, quizzes, and Christian History classics—all designed to keep you up-to-date and engaged with Christian history. So keep visiting us at www.christianhistory.net to see how we are continuing to change.

But why are we so concerned to keep history alive? Here is what Ken Curtis told then CHB editors Kevin Miller and Mark Galli when ***Christian History*** celebrated its 10th birthday in 1992: "History gives us hope that one person can make a difference. But it also gives us a humility that recognizes others have come before us to prepare the way and others will follow to further our work. … [W]e each are just part of a larger tapestry of God's handiwork."

Here's another lesson of history. Magazines come and go—and come back. Major newsstand titles like ***Life***, ***Look***, ***Colliers***, the ***Saturday Review***, and the ***Saturday Evening Post*** all went out of print (in a pre-internet era that offered few options). But several of those magazines came back in altered form.

Maybe we could too—someday. But as our founder said, "We are each just part of a larger tapestry of God's handiwork." And we accept our place in that fabric.

David Neff is editor in chief of the Christianity Today Media Group.

Recommended Resources

Dig deeper into this issue's theme.

Thomas Jefferson

- Daniel Dreisbach, ***Thomas Jefferson and the Wall of Separation between Church and State*** (New York University Press, 2002)
- Edwin Gaustad, ***Sworn on the Altar of God: A Religious Biography of Thomas Jefferson*** (Eerdmans, 1996)
- Charles B. Sanford, ***The Religious Life of Thomas Jefferson*** (University of Virginia Press, 1984)
- Eugene R. Sheridan, ***Jefferson and Religion*** (Thomas Jefferson Memorial Foundation, 1998; distributed by University of North Carolina Press)

Abraham Lincoln

- Allen Guelzo, ***Abraham Lincoln: Redeemer President*** (Eerdmans, 1999)
- Lucas Morel, ***Lincoln's Sacred Effort: Defining Religion's Role in American Self-Government*** (Lexington Books, 2000)
- Kenneth W. Thompson, ed., ***Essays on Lincoln's Faith and Politics*** (University Press of America, 1983)
- Ronald C. White Jr., ***Lincoln's Greatest Speech: The Second Inaugural*** (Simon & Schuster, 2003) and ***A. Lincoln: A Biography*** (Random House, 2009)
- William Wolf, ***Lincoln's Religion*** (Pilgrim Press, 1970)

William McKinley

- Richard F. Hamilton, ***President McKinley, War and Empire*** (Transaction, 2006)
- H. Wayne Morgan, ***William McKinley and His America*** (Kent State University Press, 2003)

Harry Truman

- Paul Merkley, ***American Presidents, Religion and Israel*** (Praeger, 2004)
- Elizabeth Edwards Spalding, ***The First Cold Warrior: Harry Truman, Containment, and the Remaking of Liberal Internationalism*** (University Press of Kentucky, 2006)
- Allen Weinstein and Moshe Ma'oz, eds., ***Truman and the American Commitment to Israel*** (Jerusalem: Magnes Press/Hebrew University, 1981)

Theodore Roosevelt & Woodrow Wilson

- John Milton Cooper, ***The Warrior and the Priest: Woodrow Wilson and Theodore Roosevelt*** (Harvard, 1983, 2007)
- Richard M. Gamble, ***The War for Righteousness: Progressive Christianity, the Great War, and the Rise of the Messianic Nation*** (ISI, 2003)
- Joshua David Hawley, ***Theodore Roosevelt: Preacher of Righteousness*** (Yale, 2008)
- Arthur S. Link, "Woodrow Wilson and His Presbyterian Inheritance," and "The Higher Realism of Woodrow Wilson," in ***The Higher Realism of Woodrow Wilson*** (Vanderbilt, 1971)
- John Mulder, ***Woodrow Wilson: The Years of Preparation*** (Princeton, 1978)

Ronald Reagan

- Paul Kengor, ***God and Ronald Reagan: A Spiritual Life*** (HarperCollins, 2004) and ***The Crusader: Ronald Reagan and the Fall of Communism*** (HarperPerennial, 2007)

General

- Robert S. Alley, ***So Help Me God: Religion and the Presidency, Wilson to Nixon*** (Westminster John Knox, 1972)
- Randall Balmer, ***God in the White House: A History*** (HarperCollins, 2008)
- Daniel Dreisbach, Mark D. Hall, and Jeffry H. Morrison, eds., ***The Founders on God and Government*** (Rowman and Littlefield, 2004)
- David Holmes, ***The Faiths of the Founding Fathers*** (Oxford, 2006)
- Richard Hutcheson, ***God in the White House: How Religion Has Changed the Modern Presidency*** (Macmillan, 1988)
- Richard V. Pierard and Robert D. Linder, ***Civil Religion and the Presidency*** (Zondervan, 1988)
- Mark Rozell and Gleaves Whitney, eds., ***Religion and the American Presidency*** (Palgrave Macmillan, 2007)
- Gary Scott Smith, ***Faith and the Presidency: From George Washington to George W. Bush*** (Oxford, 2006)
- Steve Waldman, ***Founding Faith: Providence, Politics, and the Birth of Religious Freedom in America*** (Random House, 2008)

George Washington

- Paul Boller Jr., ***George Washington and Religion*** (Southern Methodist University Press, 1963)
- Michael Novak and Jana Novak, ***Washington's God: Religion, Liberty, and the Father of Our Country*** (Basic Books, 2006)
- Tara Ross and Joseph C. Smith, Jr., ***Under God: George Washington and the Question of Church and State*** (Spence Publishing, 2008)

CHRISTIAN HISTORY
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The American Moses

In his 1796 Farewell Address, George Washington argued that religion and morality were essential pillars of the new republic.

Gary Scott Smith

As commander-in-chief of the Continental Army and the first president of the United States, George Washington played an indispensable role in achieving American independence and safeguarding the infant republic. Risking his reputation, wealth, and life, he commanded an undermanned and poorly supplied army to a victory over the world's leading economic and military power. As president, he kept the new nation from crashing on the shoals of anarchy, monarchy, or revolution.

But he longed to return to his beloved Mount Vernon. In September 1796 he published his "Farewell Address" in a Philadelphia newspaper to make clear he would not consider a third term and to offer his prescription for how best to preserve the fragile republic. To prevent their nation from unraveling or being conquered by England, France, or Spain (which still laid claim to land in North America), he warned, Americans must avoid political factions and entangling alliances.

Moreover, the nascent republic could flourish only if it were grounded on religion and morality. These were the "indispensable supports" of "political prosperity" and human happiness. "Virtue or morality," he maintained, "is a necessary spring of popular government."

Under the Constitution framed in Philadelphia in 1787, Americans had embarked on what Thomas Jefferson labeled "the fair experiment": Was freedom of religion "compatible with order in government and obedience to the laws"? The First Amendment mandated that the United States could not establish a national church. Could such a nation endure? If the government did not provide financial and political support for Christianity, as had been done in the West since Theodosius made Christianity the official religion of the Roman Empire in 391, would it still be a vital force in public life? If religion was voluntary, would citizens still act in the morally upright ways that were crucial to a republic's success?

Washington argued that popular government depended on virtuous citizens and that only religion, which in the American context meant Christianity, could inspire such selfless behavior. He frequently asserted that religion helped promote virtue, order, and social stability, and praised the efforts of churches to make people "sober, honest, and good Citizens, and the obedient subjects of a lawful government." He maintained that "general prevalence of piety, philanthropy, honesty, industry and economy" were necessary to America's happiness and success. God had so designed the universe that there was "an indissoluble union between virtue and happiness." Religion and morality "are the essential pillars of Civil society."

In his Farewell Address, Washington urged his countrymen to "observe good faith and justice toward all nations." "Religion and morality enjoin this conduct, and can it be that good policy does not equally enjoin it?" The president sought to promote harmony and positive exchanges with all nations, which prudent policy, American self-interest, and concern for humanity all recommended. In voicing these arguments, Washington spoke for many founders and for almost all his successors as president.

Enigmatic saint

To a certain extent during his life and even more after his death, Washington was elevated to sainthood.

An American civil religion arose that revered him as God's instrument and a larger-than-life mythological hero. He has been seen as "the deliverer of America," the savior of his people, the American Moses, and even a demigod. For more than 200 years, Washington's faith has been closely scrutinized, distorted by folklore, endlessly debated, and used by various groups to support their own positions. Many of the hundreds of books, articles, sermons, and essays published about his faith since 1800 have advanced ideological agendas and recounted pious fables about Washington that have little basis in historical fact. Unlike some other founders, Washington was very private about his faith, so unearthing what he believed is very challenging.

Many have extolled the first president as "a Christian hero and statesman," "the founder of a Christian republic," "Christ's faithful soldier and servant," and a "man of abiding faith." Mason Locke "Parson" Weems, the pastor of the Pohick Church near Mount Vernon which Washington sometimes attended, as well as other enthusiasts insist that he regularly attended church services, said grace before all meals, actively participated in church work, and filled his public and private statements with religious exhortations.

These authors argue that Washington served diligently as a vestryman, contributed liberally to churches, had private devotions habitually, strictly followed biblical moral principles, and relied strongly on God's providence. They emphasize his exemplary prayer life, extensive knowledge of Scripture, and repeated calls for public and private piety. They add that Washington served as a godfather for eight children and often led projects to improve the church.

Others counter that Washington's faith was not very deep or meaningful. They label his interest in religion as perfunctory and insist that his practice of Christianity "was limited and superficial because he himself was not a Christian." They stress that he refused to take Communion during the last 25 years of his life, frequently used deistic terms for God such as "the Grand Architect," and seldom referred in his public addresses or private correspondence to Christianity and almost never to Jesus. They argue that Washington never mentioned that Christ was his savior or redeemer and did not even call Jesus a great moral teacher.

Although Washington offered substantial advice to his stepchildren and nephews on moral subjects, he said nothing about religion. Moreover, the Virginian expressed no hope of eternal life and on his deathbed did not call for a minister to pray. Scholars also disagree sharply about the level and nature of his involvement with Freemasonry.

An all-powerful Providence

Washington was raised in the Anglican Church (Episcopal Church after 1783) and maintained a lifelong relationship with this denomination. He recruited chaplains for his troops in the Continental Army, required his soldiers to attend Sunday worship, and held thanksgiving services after victories. Washington attended worship services sporadically before becoming president, due in part to distance and pressing military obligations, but as president he attended church almost every Sunday. He frequently cited biblical passages in his letters to friends and acquaintances and asked religious bodies to pray for him. For example, he thanked Methodist bishops in 1789 for their promise to present prayers "at the Throne of Grace for me" and pledged to pray for them as well.

Washington firmly believed that God controlled events. In both his public and private writings, he constantly praised God for helping the United States win its independence against incredible odds, create a unified country out of diverse and competing interests, establish a remarkable Constitution, and avoid war with European powers that still had territorial ambitions in North America. Throughout his life, Washington appealed to "an all-powerful Providence" to protect and guide him and the nation, especially in times of crisis. During the War for Independence, he asked for and acknowledged God's providential guidance and assistance hundreds of times.

He told Reverend William Gordon in 1776 that no one had "a more perfect Reliance on the all wise and powerful dispensations of the Supreme Being than I have nor thinks his aid more necessary." Because God had fashioned and actively ruled the universe, Washington insisted, people must revere, worship, and obey him. He also repeatedly rejoiced that God was infinitely wise, just, and benevolent.

Washington's faith is difficult to classify. Some scholars label him a deist. However, deists deny three tenets that Washington affirmed: God's active involvement in the world, the value of prayer, and the Bible as God's revelation. Washington may have been a Unitarian, but he never clearly delineated what he believed about Jesus. His faith became unmistakably deeper as a result of his trying and sometimes traumatic experiences as commander-in-chief and as the nation's first president, and it significantly affected his understanding of life and his duties in both roles.

Liberty of conscience

Washington used his enormous prestige and influence to promote freedom of worship and to cultivate positive relations among America's various religious bodies. Along with Jefferson and Madison, who led efforts to establish religious liberty in Virginia and frame the First Amendment, he helped ensure that religious freedom prevailed in the United States. Washington played a leading role in America's shift from state-established religion to the prohibition of a national church.

As commander-in-chief, he refused to tolerate religious prejudice among his soldiers. "While we are contending for our own Liberty," the general declared as his troops prepared to invade Canada in 1775, "we should be very cautious of violating the Rights of Conscience in others," because "God alone is the Judge of the Hearts of Men." In 1782, he argued that Americans had fought for independence because "our Religious Liberties were as essential as our Civil."

As president, Washington promised that he would strive to preserve "the civil and religious liberties of the American People" and to be "a faithful and impartial Patron of genuine, vital religion." He frequently insisted that freedom of conscience was a right, not a privilege. He rejoiced "to see Christians of different denominations dwell together in more charity, and conduct themselves in respect to each other with a more christian-like spirit than ever they have done … in any other nation." The liberty Americans enjoyed to worship "Almighty God agreeable to their consciences," Washington told Quakers in 1789, "is not only among the choicest of their ***blessings***, but also of their ***rights***."

Washington sought to protect the religious rights of America's Catholics and Jews. He countered arguments that the federal government should give Protestants special consideration because of their role in founding the republic and urged citizens not to "forget the patriotic part" Catholics had played in winning the Revolutionary War and in establishing the new government. Washington assured the Jews in Newport, Rhode Island, that in the United States all citizens possessed "liberty of conscience."

Piety and patriotism

Washington was the first major spokesperson and practitioner of American civil religion, and after his death he became a principal figure in its development. In his first inaugural address, the president thanked God for his past guidance and sought his favor for the nation's future. He offered his "fervent supplication to that Almighty Being who rules over the universe, who presides in the council of nations, and whose providential aids can supply every human defect, that His benediction may consecrate to the liberties and happiness of the people of the United States."

Throughout his presidency, Washington's public pronouncements continued to link piety with patriotism and God's benevolence with the welfare of the nation. In his annual message to Congress in 1794, he asserted, "Let us unite … in imploring the supreme Ruler of nations" to protect the United States. He urged Americans to confess their corporate sins. He also set aside days for national thanksgiving, a

custom almost all his successors followed.

Moreover, Washington helped develop the creed and moral code of American civil religion, along with its forms and objects of devotion. The creed asserted that God had chosen the United States to incarnate and promote republican government throughout the world. The code demanded that all Americans, especially their political leaders, act virtuously to help accomplish this mission. This civic faith created national saints and shrines, sacred objects, ritual practices, and patriotic holy days.

Not only did Washington help mold and popularize the nation's civil religion, but he also became a significant part of it. Having no established church, the new nation needed a common faith that transcended political and religious differences to direct its public life. Because of his colossal contributions to American independence and his exalted reputation, Washington provided a unifying center and symbol for the new nation.

Almost overnight, Washington became a "'blessed object," "a sacramental center" who pointed to and personified the spiritual power of the fledgling country and exemplified its moral values. After the British surrendered at Yorktown in 1781, Washington was saluted as a demigod and the nation's savior. Worship services, community bonfires, songs, addresses, and cannon fire commemorated his exploits.

Contemporaries frequently compared the general to both biblical and Roman heroes. Like Moses, he liberated his people from bondage; like Joshua, he led them into the Promised Land. Appealing to the biblical archetypes of Moses and David, Washington's eulogists pictured him "as a model republican prophet and king." Like Moses, Washington was depicted as a great lawgiver, an outstanding civil leader, and a virtuous man. He became an ideal type, "a standard of republican leadership" by which his successors could be judged. For many, Washington's life and death helped verify that Americans were God's chosen people who must faithfully follow his laws and serve as an example of true religion and liberty for the world.

The role of religion

Washington's life and convictions illustrate many of the main religious themes in American presidential history: concern about the character and religious commitments of chief executives, the relationship between religion and civic virtue, the meaning of the separation of church and state, the United States as a chosen nation, the nature and importance of religious liberty, and the contours of civil religion. The faith of Washington and many of his successors influenced their philosophy of governing, their relationship with religious constituents, their electoral strategies, and their approach to public policies.

As the United States has become more religiously and ideologically diverse, Washington's conviction that religion is indispensable to both morality and the republic's success has been increasingly challenged. Reexamining the views of the nation's founders and presidents can shed light on the heated debate over what role religion should play in American public life.

Gary Scott Smith is professor of history at Grove City College in Pennsylvania and author of Faith and the Presidency ***(Oxford, 2006).***

CHRISTIAN HISTORY
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The Most Democratic Book in the World

Theodore Roosevelt and Woodrow Wilson were champions of both the Bible and progressive reform.

Mark Noll

When in 1911 the English-speaking world celebrated the 300th anniversary of the King James Version (KJV) of the Bible, a remarkable outpouring praised this epochal translation. President William Howard Taft declared that the KJV was simply "the Bible of our American forefathers. … Its spirit has influenced American ideals in life and laws and government." King George V from Britain added similar words that many others echoed.

In this chorus to honor the Bible, two political luminaries were unusually significant. Within days of each other in the spring of 1911, the sitting governor of New Jersey and the former governor of New York both made substantial addresses on the KJV. The former governor of New York, and also former president of the United States, was Theodore Roosevelt, who presented his address at the Pacific Theological Seminary in Berkeley, California. The sitting governor of New Jersey, and soon to be president, was Woodrow Wilson; he gave his speech before a crowd of 12,000 in Denver where he was exploring a run for the White House.

The two speeches say a great deal about the Bible and its immense place in American history. They also reveal a great deal about these two leaders whom historians regularly rank as the greatest presidents between Abraham Lincoln and Franklin Roosevelt.

A guide to conduct

For Roosevelt, the King James Version was "the book to which our people owe infinitely the greater part of their store of ethics, infinitely the greater part of their knowledge of how to apply that store to the needs of our every-day life." The former president was characteristically dramatic in what he wanted to say about this translation: "No other book of any kind ever written in English—perhaps no other book ever written in any other tongue—has ever so affected the whole life of a people as this authorized version of the Scriptures has affected the life of the English-speaking peoples." Roosevelt based his conclusion less on specific Christian reasoning than on broad humanitarian appeal. He urged his auditors to study the Bible, not necessarily "as an inspired book," but as an essential volume for every person "who seeks after a high and useful life."

And what could readers derive from reading the Bible? In answering this question, Roosevelt quoted "the great scientist Huxley" who had called the KJV "the Magna Charta of the poor and the oppressed … the most democratic book in the world." To Roosevelt, the democracy that Bible reading encouraged was a robustly moral enterprise. Scripture was to be, in his phrase, "a guide to conduct."

Roosevelt acknowledged that the Bible's content was important for doctrine and that its language was important aesthetically. But since for him all other purposes fell far short of the ethical, he concluded: "Of course if you read it only for aesthetical purposes, if you read it without thought of following its ethical teachings, then you are apt to do but little good to your fellow-men; for if you regard the reading of it as an intellectual diversion only, and, above all, if you regard this reading simply as an outward token of Sunday respectability, small will be the good that you yourself get from it." The better way, and the way that Roosevelt himself pursued, stressed morality: "Our success in striving to help our fellow-men, and therefore to help ourselves, depends largely upon our success as we strive … to lead our lives

in accordance with the great ethical principles laid down in the life of Christ, and in the New Testament writings which seek to expound and apply his teachings."

The people's book

Woodrow Wilson's speech to the Denver throng was just as forthright. Wilson summarized matters to a correspondent afterwards: "I spoke on the Bible and Progress … . The Bible (with its individual value of the human soul) is undoubtedly the book that has made democracy and been the source of all progress." To Wilson, as to Roosevelt, the KJV revealed "men unto themselves, not as creatures in bondage" but as "distinct moral agent[s]." And so he could argue that "not a little of the history of liberty lies in the circumstance that the moving sentences of this book were made familiar to the ears and the understanding of those peoples who have led mankind in exhibiting the forms of government and the impulses of reform which have made for freedom and for self-government among mankind."

What Wilson called "the people's book of revelation" was for him a foundation and norm of American democracy. He exalted the Bible as the source of what distinguished the United States in the world: "America is not ahead of the other nations of the world because she is rich. Nothing makes America great except her thoughts, except her ideals, except her acceptance of those standards of judgment which are written large upon these pages of revelation." At the end of his address, Wilson, like Roosevelt, conflated his view of the Bible as a general guide for American civilization with his own stance as a Christian reader of the Scriptures.

Roosevelt and Wilson were making bold claims for the influence of the Bible on American life. In 1911, they could speak without nuance or qualification because they knew that the era's mainstream opinion agreed.

A commitment to righteousness

The public lives of Roosevelt and Wilson illustrate both the substantial reality of what they claimed for the Bible and raise difficult questions about their vision of Christianity. The two grew up in households dominated by educated, energetic, pious fathers. Joseph Ruggles Wilson was a respected minister in the Southern Presbyterian Church who communicated a special love of Scripture to his son; Wilson would read the Bible and attend church regularly for his entire life. Theodore Roosevelt, Sr., was a public-spirited New York City businessman who devoted much of his great energy to voluntary religious organizations aimed at evangelizing, educating, and improving the urban poor. He too inculcated habits of regular devotion that his son sustained; the younger Roosevelt, like later president Jimmy Carter, taught Sunday School through much of his life.

Roosevelt and Wilson also identified themselves, at least intermittently, in distinctly evangelical terms. After the early death of his father, Roosevelt wrote that "nothing but my faith in the Lord Jesus Christ could have carried me through this, my terrible time of trial and sorrow." When he sought to discipline himself with physically demanding tasks as a cowboy and a soldier, he was following the model of "muscular Christianity," a pattern promoted in this era by the YMCA, which was still strongly evangelical. In 1910 Roosevelt wrote a letter of warm commendation to the great Edinburgh Missionary Conference.

Wilson experienced a conversion as a 16-year old, took part regularly in prayer meetings while an undergraduate at Princeton, was deeply moved by the preaching of D. L. Moody while teaching at Wesleyan University in Connecticut, and at crucial times in his life spoke of Christ's love as his greatest inspiration.

The solid rooting in Scripture that both presidents enjoyed clearly influenced their political lives. Both were foes of corruption. Both tried to use government to protect those most in need of protection. In their era, progressive support for an active government came mostly from Roosevelt's wing of the

Republican party. As president, he made an effort to clean up the civil service, protect the public against monopolies, and preserve Western land for public use.

When Wilson became president in 1913, he justified many of his appeals for new legislation by the necessity to help people in actual need. This motive led him to back restrictions on corporate trusts, to create a Federal Reserve for ensuring stability in banking, to secure an eight-hour day for railroad workers, and to establish the first national standards protecting child labor.

Such progressive measures fleshed out what both men (especially Roosevelt) described as a commitment to "righteousness." They came from their conviction (especially Wilson's) that the ideals of democratic liberty could be translated into reality. The worldview behind their confidence in positive government action came in large part from their reading of Scripture.

As presidents, Roosevelt and Wilson were renowned for trying to use the United States' rising power for peace among nations and liberty for oppressed peoples. In 1906 Roosevelt was awarded the Nobel Peace Prize for his success at brokering peace between Japan and Russia. Wilson was even more admired for the idealism of the plan he proposed toward the end of World War I to create an international peace-keeping order. In foreign as in domestic policies, the two worked hard to translate into practical policy the ideals articulated in their speeches on the Bible.

Ethics without dogma

Today, however, Christians might pause before following the lead of these larger than life figures. Roosevelt (throughout his life) and Wilson (after he became president) were both champions of what their era called the Social Gospel. Both shared much with clerical activists like Washington Gladden, who defined the biblical "Kingdom of God" as primarily a set of ethical axioms. Roosevelt and Wilson mostly practiced a Christianity guided by what their era considered a progressive spirit. That spirit was scientifically informed, politically energized, and probably too confident in the progressives' own ability to reform the world.

Even as the two presidents continued to draw inspiration from Scripture, they seemed to change traditional convictions about what scriptural religion meant. For the biblical sense of sin as an ever-present reality threatening even the best efforts of the most noble political actors, they substituted a nearly utopian confidence in what disciplined human effort could accomplish by itself. Instead of a biblical sense of humanity joined alike before God's law and alike before the offer of salvation, they allowed the era's theories on race, eugenics, and Social Darwinism to delude them into thinking that "Anglo-Saxons" or "Teutonic peoples" had qualitatively surpassed all others. This thinking had an immediate effect on their racial attitudes. Although Roosevelt made a few moves toward treating the races fairly—for example, by welcoming the black leader Booker T. Washington to the White House—neither president followed biblical teachings on human equality with respect to blacks, Native Americans, or Asian Americans. And for the Bible's words of warning and reassurance for all nations, they substituted supreme confidence in the United States as uniquely qualified to lead the world through sheer moral effort to a new day of universal peace.

The result, even in their own lifetimes, was frustration. Roosevelt became so disillusioned when the Republican party under his successor, President Taft, did not pursue reform as Roosevelt desired, that he ran again for president in 1912. After World War I, Wilson became bitterly disappointed at the failure of the U.S. to join the League of Nations he had proposed as a means of keeping the world's peace. The way both looked on the U.S. as God's chosen instrument of righteousness and liberty in the world created unrealistic expectations that simply could not be fulfilled.

Roosevelt and Wilson were sincere in what they said about the Bible. Both men brought much from Scripture to their tasks as presidents. But neither seemed to think that the biblical story might challenge

as well as support American political ideals. Neither took seriously that biblical dogmas—especially about sin and salvation—might be as relevant to the modern age as biblical ethics. In a word, two of the nation's most sincerely biblical presidents were also two who had more to learn from the pages of Scripture.

Mark Noll is the Francis A. McAnaney Professor of History at the University of Notre Dame.

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The Wall of Separation

The rancorous presidential election of 1800 brought religion to the forefront of public debate and had lasting repercussions for the relationship between church and state.

Daniel L. Dreisbach

Thomas Jefferson was inaugurated the third president of the United States on March 4, 1801, following one of the most bitterly contested presidential elections in American history. He had faced the unpopular incumbent, Federalist John Adams of Massachusetts—his confrere in the independence struggle and longtime rival. The electorate was deeply divided along regional, partisan, and ideological lines. Acrimonious campaign rhetoric punctuated the polarized political landscape.

In few, if any, presidential contests has religion played a more divisive and decisive role than in the election of 1800. Jefferson's religion, or alleged lack thereof, emerged as a critical issue in the campaign. His Federalist opponents vilified him as a Jacobin and atheist. (Both charges stemmed from his notorious sympathy for the French Revolution, which in the 1790s had turned bloody and, some said, anti-Christian.) In the days before the election, the ***Gazette of the United States***, a leading Federalist newspaper, posed the "grand question" of whether Americans should vote for "GOD—AND A RELIGIOUS PRESIDENT [John Adams]; or impiously declare for JEFFERSON—AND NO GOD!!!"

Jefferson's Federalist foes did not invent the stinging accusation that he was an infidel. Years before, his ardent advocacy for disestablishment in Virginia had led many pious Americans to conclude that Jefferson was, if not an enemy of religion, at least indifferent towards organized religion's vital role in civic life. The publication of his ***Notes on the State of Virginia*** in the mid-1780s exacerbated these fears. He wrote, "It does me no injury for my neighbor to say there are twenty gods, or no God. It neither picks my pocket nor breaks my leg." This passage came back to haunt him in the 1800 campaign. Detractors said this proved he was an infidel or, worse, an atheist.

Jefferson described himself as "a real Christian," although he was certainly aware that his beliefs were unconventional. "I am of a sect by myself," he said. He believed that human reason was the arbiter of religious truth and rejected key tenets of orthodox Christianity, including the Bible's divine origins, the deity of Christ, original sin, and the miraculous accounts in Scripture.

Despite his deviations from orthodoxy, he rejected suggestions that his views were of "that anti-Christian system imputed to me by those who know nothing of my opinions." His religion was very different, Jefferson conceded, from the leading churchmen of his day who called him an "infidel and themselves Christians and preachers of the gospel." He believed that Jesus Christ's moral teachings, stripped of the fiction and artifice carefully crafted by those calling themselves Christians, were "the most perfect and sublime that has ever been taught by man."

An infidel in office?

Jefferson's faith provided an early test of religion's place in national politics. His heterodox beliefs raised doubts about his fitness for high office. In 1798, Timothy Dwight, a Congregationalist minister and the president of Yale College, warned that the election of Jeffersonian Republicans might usher in a Jacobin regime in which "we may see the Bible cast into a bonfire, the vessels of the sacramental supper borne by an ass in public procession, and our children … chanting mockeries against God … [to] the ruin of their religion, and the loss of their souls."

In an influential pamphlet published in 1800, William Linn, a Dutch Reformed clergyman, warned that a vote for Jefferson "must be construed into no less than rebellion against God." He added ominously that the promotion of an infidel to high office would encourage public immorality and lead to the "destruction of all social order and happiness."

Presbyterian minister John Mitchell Mason similarly declaimed that it would be "a crime never to be forgiven" for the American people to confer the office of chief magistrate "upon an open enemy to their religion, their Redeemer, and their hope, [and it] would be mischief to themselves and sin against God." Jefferson's "favorite wish," Mitchell charged, is "to see a government administered without any religious principle among either rulers or ruled." He repudiated the notion gaining currency among Jeffersonians that ***"Religion has nothing to do with politics."***

Jeffersonian partisans denied that their candidate was an atheist and advanced a separationist policy that would eventually exert much influence on American politics. "Religion and government are equally necessary," said Tunis Wortman, "but their interests should be kept separate and distinct. No legitimate connection can ever subsist between them. Upon no plan, no system, can they become united, without endangering the purity and usefulness of both—the church will corrupt the state, and the state pollute the church."

Republicans extolled Jefferson as a leader of uncommon liberality and tolerance—an enlightened man who zealously defended constitutional government, civil and religious liberty, and the separation between religion and politics. "[M]y information is that he is a sincere professor of Christianity—though not a noisy one," Wortman wrote.

The campaign rhetoric was so vitriolic that when news of Jefferson's election swept across the country, housewives in Federalist New England were seen burying their family Bibles in their gardens or hiding them in wells because they expected the Scriptures to be confiscated and burned by the new administration.

Anybody but a Presbyterian!

Although Jefferson's beliefs drew the most attention, John Adams was not immune from political smears on account of religion. When President Adams recommended a national "day of solemn humiliation, fasting, and prayer" in March 1799, political adversaries depicted him as a tool of establishmentarians intent on legally uniting a specific church with the new federal government. This allegation alarmed religious dissenters, such as the Baptists, who feared persecution by a state church.

"A general suspicion prevailed," Adams recounted a decade later, "that the Presbyterian Church [which was presumed to be behind the national day of prayer] was ambitious and aimed at an establishment as a national church." Although disclaiming any involvement in such a scheme, Adams ruefully reported that he "was represented as a Presbyterian and at the head of this political and ecclesiastical project. The secret whisper ran through all the sects, 'Let us have Jefferson, Madison, Burr, anybody, whether they be philosophers, Deists, or even atheists, rather than a Presbyterian President.'" Adams thought the controversy, which drove dissenters into Jefferson's camp, cost him the election.

Both men were deeply wounded by the vicious attacks on their characters and the ruinous campaign tactics. An anguished Jefferson compared his persecution at the hands of critics—especially among the New England clergy—with the crucified Christ: "from the clergy I expect no mercy. They crucified their Saviour, who preached that their kingdom was not of this world; and all who practice on that precept must expect the extreme of their wrath. The laws of the present day withhold their hands from blood; but lies and slander still remain to them."

The bitterness lingered long after both men had left public office. In their declining years, they resumed a

correspondence, slowly repairing their ruptured friendship.

Church and state

Jefferson enjoyed one pocket of support in staunchly Federalist New England: the Baptists. In October 1801, the Baptist Association of Danbury, Connecticut, wrote to congratulate the recently inaugurated president. The Danbury Baptists were a beleaguered religious minority in a state where Congregationalism was the established church. They celebrated Jefferson's advocacy for religious liberty and chastised those who criticized him "because he will not, dares not assume the prerogative of Jehovah and make Laws to govern the Kingdom of Christ." They expressed a heartfelt desire "that the sentiments of our beloved President, which have had such genial Effect already, like the radiant beams of the Sun, will shine & prevail through all these States and all the world till Hierarchy and tyranny be destroyed from the Earth."

On New Year's Day, 1802, President Jefferson penned a reply. The carefully crafted letter reassured the Baptists of his commitment to their rights of conscience and struck back at the Congregationalist-Federalist establishment in New England for shamelessly vilifying him in the recent campaign. The First Amendment, he wrote, denied Congress the authority to establish a religion or prohibit its free exercise, "thus building a wall of separation between Church & State."

Jefferson's wall, according to conventional wisdom, represents a universal principle on the constitutional relationship between religion and the state. To the contrary, this wall had less to do with the separation between religion and ***all*** civil government than with the separation between national and state governments on matters pertaining to religion. The "wall of separation" was a metaphoric construction of the First Amendment, which Jefferson time and again said imposed its restrictions on the national government only (see, for example, Jefferson's 1798 draft of the Kentucky Resolutions).

How did this wall, limited in its jurisdictional application, come to exert such enormous influence on American law and politics? Jefferson's metaphor might have slipped into obscurity had it not been "rediscovered" by the U.S. Supreme Court in 1947. Asked to interpret the First Amendment's prohibition on laws "respecting an establishment of religion," the justices declared: "In the words of Jefferson," the First Amendment "erect[ed] 'a wall of separation between church and State' … [that] must be kept high and impregnable. We could not approve the slightest breach."

This landmark ruling laid the foundations for a long line of legal decisions restricting religion's place in public life. The "wall" metaphor, in particular, provided the rationale for censoring religious expression in schools, stripping public spaces of religious symbols, and denying public benefits to faith communities.

The bitterness of the election of 1800 has long faded from public memory. The partisanship and rancorous rhetoric that characterized the contest, however, have become familiar features of the political culture. An enduring legacy of the campaign is the perennial debate regarding the constitutional place of religion in civic life. Religion, argues one side, is an indispensable support for political prosperity, providing a vital moral compass in a regime of self-government. The other side, echoing Jeffersonian partisans, asserts that social cohesion and democratic values are threatened whenever bricks are removed from the wall of separation between religion and politics.

This debate is as old as the Republic and as current as the morning newspaper.

Daniel L. Dreisbach is professor of justice, law and society at American University.

CHRISTIAN HISTORY
Issue 99: Faith & the American Presidency

War and the Will of God

Abraham Lincoln's Second Inaugural Address pointed a grieving nation to the mystery of divine providence.

Ronald C. White Jr.

Abraham Lincoln was hopeful as inauguration day, March 4, drew near in the spring of 1865. The Confederacy was splintered if not shattered. The president, who had been besieged by critics for much of the war, was finally beginning to receive recognition for his leadership. But beneath the outward celebrations lay a different emotion. Many citizens were filled with anger as much as hope. Death and despair reached into nearly every home. An estimated 620,000 men died in the Civil War, almost equal to the number killed in all subsequent wars.

Noted photographer Alexander Gardner was poised to record the event for posterity. The Second Inaugural Address would be the only occasion in which Lincoln was photographed delivering a speech. (He was assassinated 41 days later.) Police estimated between 30,000 and 40,000 people gathered at the east entrance of the Capitol. The correspondent for ***The Times*** of London estimated that "at least half the multitude were colored people." In the crowd, Lincoln recognized Frederick Douglass, the articulate African-American abolitionist and newspaper editor. The actor John Wilkes Booth, seething with hatred, stood up behind the right buttress. When Lincoln was introduced, the crowd exploded in expectation. He rose from his chair and stepped from underneath the shelter of the Capitol building and out past the magnificent Corinthian columns. At 56, he looked older than his years.

The separation of church and state in the United States has never meant the separation of faith and politics. But how are they to be put together? Lincoln's Second Inaugural Address opens up windows into his own faith as he attempted to make sense of the tragedy of the Civil War. The precise nature of his faith is contested; we do not know enough to define or confine him. But the Second Inaugural can help us appreciate the profundity of Lincoln's biblical and theological insight as we wrestle with how to talk about faith and politics today.

No tribal God

Lincoln's overarching strategy was to emphasize common actions and emotions. He acknowledged, "Both [sides in the war] read the same Bible and pray to the same God." The Bible had been quoted only once in the inaugural addresses of the previous 18 presidents (by John Quincy Adams). Lincoln's introduction of the Bible signaled his determination to think theologically as well as politically about the war.

Many visitors to the White House reported that Lincoln read the Bible frequently. Noah Brooks, correspondent for the ***Sacramento Daily Union***, wrote that Lincoln "fixed in his memory" whole chapters from the New Testament as well as from Isaiah and the Psalms. In the summer of 1864, Lincoln invited his Kentucky friend Joshua Speed to spend an evening with him. When Speed arrived, he found Lincoln reading the Bible. Speed said, "I am glad to see you profitably engaged." "Yes," replied Lincoln, "I am profitably engaged." "Well," Speed continued, "If you have recovered from your skepticism, I am sorry to say that I have not." Lincoln rose, placed his hand on Speed's shoulder, and said, "You are wrong, Speed. Take all of this book upon reason that you can and the balance on faith, and you will live and die a happier and better man."

But Lincoln knew that the Bible and prayer could also be used almost as weapons to curry God's favor. On one side stood those who steadfastly believed that the Bible sanctioned slavery. On the other side were those who believed that the Bible encouraged abolition. Lincoln had become troubled by those who said, "God is on our side." In his Second Inaugural Address, he was inveighing against a tribal God who took the side of a section or party. God, he would explain, was inclusive both in judgment and reconciliation.

Lincoln pointed out that it was "strange that any men should dare to ask a just God's assistance in wringing their bread from the sweat of other men's faces" (alluding to Genesis 3:19). How was it possible to read the Bible and come up with the practice of slavery? But he quickly balanced judgment with mercy by quoting the Sermon on the Mount: "Let us judge not that we be not judged" (Matt. 7:1, Luke 6:37). "Blessed are those," Jesus said, who do not follow the way of the world—in this case, judgment—but the new way of grace and mercy. Lincoln rejected a legalistic attitude and instead appealed to Jesus' ethic of humility and compassion.

God's inscrutable purposes

"The Almighty has His own purposes." With these words, Lincoln brought God to the center of his address. Generals might think they were managing the war, but human agency would not decide its outcome. In quick strokes, Lincoln described God's actions: "He now wills to remove … He gives to both North and South, this terrible war … Yet, if God wills that it continue …"

In Lincoln's own day and ever since, people have questioned how a president who never joined a church could use such language about God. Some have argued that Lincoln adapted his words to the language of his audience. Others point out that religious values were a part of his heritage. Finally, some claim that Lincoln excluded beliefs or language that would have put off his audience—such as enlightenment ideas about God. None of these proposals is adequate because none takes into account the evolution of Lincoln's thinking during the turbulent years of the Civil War.

Several years earlier, Lincoln had written a private reflection on God's purposes:

> The will of God prevails. In great contests each party claims to act in accordance with the will of God. Both ***may*** be, and one ***must*** be wrong. God cannot be ***for***, and ***against*** the same thing at the same time. In the present civil war it is quite possible that God's purpose is something different from the purpose of either party—and yet the human instrumentalities, working just as they do, are of the best adaptation to effect His purpose. I am almost ready to say this is probably true—that God wills this contest, and wills that it shall not end. By his mere quiet power, on the minds of the now contestants, He could have either ***saved*** or ***destroyed*** the Union without a human contest. Yet the contest began. And having begun He could give the final victory to either side any day. Yet the contest proceeds.

One of Lincoln's private secretaries found this musing after the president's death and gave it the title "Meditation on the Divine Will." This private meditation anticipated the affirmations of God's purposes at the core of the Second Inaugural Address. Lincoln, convinced of God's activity, did not speak about God in the language of triumphalism. He was always suspicious of visiting church delegations or ministers who knew exactly when, where, and how God was on their side. Lincoln, who did not wear his faith on his sleeve, never spoke glibly about God.

Preaching providence

In both his hometown of Springfield and later in Washington D.C., Lincoln was drawn to two Presbyterian churches. In Washington, Lincoln's participation at the New York Avenue Presbyterian Church coincided with his deepening struggles to understand the meaning of God's activity in

the maelstrom of war. The pastor at New York Avenue was Phineas Densmore Gurley, one of the best models of Old School Presbyterian preaching. A handsome man of large frame and voice, he graduated first in his class in 1840 from Princeton Theological Seminary, where he was a student of Charles Hodge. Central to this American Reformed tradition was providence—the belief that a loving God acts directly in history. In defense of providence, Hodge and his students were prepared to combat deviations from historic Christianity.

Many modern biographers have wrongly interpreted Lincoln's religious thought as fatalism—the belief that all events take place in accordance with unvarying laws of causation. Historians have too often equated fatalism with providence. But 19th-century writers would not have made that judgment. In 1859, Episcopal minister Francis Wharton wrote ***A Treatise on Theism and the Modern Skeptical Theories*** in which he characterized fatalism "as a distinct scheme of unbelief" because it failed to recognize the personality and action of a loving God.

In 1862, Lincoln's 11-year-old son Willie died of typhoid fever. Pastor Gurley presided at a funeral service for Willie at the White House. Gurley centered his sermon on what was finally "very comforting," namely "to get a clear and a scriptural view of the providence of God." Gurley, in the spirit of Hodge, acknowledged the perplexity of providence, calling it "a mysterious dealing." In his final words of comfort, Gurley invited the president to "bow in ***His*** presence with an humble and teachable spirit; only let us be still and know that He is God." Gurley's teachings on biblical providence later undergirded Lincoln's statements about God acting in the Civil War.

Sin, forgiveness, and humility

Though praising the inscrutable intentions of God in his Second Inaugural Address, Lincoln did not retreat to agnosticism about the specific content of those divine purposes. He invoked a fiery biblical quotation: "Woe unto the world because of offences! For it must needs be that offenses come; but woe to that man by whom the offense cometh!" (Matthew 18:7). Lincoln used Scripture this time as an indictment of slavery and a formal charge against the American people.

By saying ***American*** slavery, he asserted that North and South must together own the offense. Lincoln understood that the people of the South would never be able to take their full places in the Union if they alone were saddled with the guilt for what Lincoln asserted was the national offense of slavery

As the address built towards its final paragraph, Lincoln made an unexpected political and rhetorical move. Speaking on the eve of military victory, when many expected him to celebrate the successes of the Union, he called upon his audience to recognize evil in their midst. Instead of self-congratulation, he asked his fellow citizens for self-analysis. No president before or since has so courageously pointed to a malady that resides at the very center of the American national family.

Lincoln had come to believe that where there was evil, judgment would surely follow: "until every drop of blood drawn with the lash, shall be paid by another drawn with the sword, as was said three thousand years ago, so still it must be said 'the judgments of the Lord, are true and righteous altogether.'" Lincoln carried to his speech the scales of justice. He did so knowing that Americans had always been uncomfortable facing up to their own malevolence. In any war, evil always seems to be relegated to the other side.

"With malice toward none, with charity for all." Lincoln began his conclusion by asking his audience to enter into a new era, armed not with enmity but with forgiveness. Well aware of the feelings of both despair and hope, he asked his listeners for acts of incredible compassion. As a response to his earlier political and theological indicative, Lincoln offered an ethical imperative in the pastoral tone of a sermon: "to bind up … to care for …" He was specific about the objects of ethical duty: "him who shall have borne the battle, and for his widow, and his orphan." Portraits of widows and orphans

now balanced the images of blood and swords.

In a total of 701 words, Lincoln mentioned God 14 times, quoted Scripture 4 times, and invoked prayer 3 times. Lincoln's address provides a model for how Christians can speak of faith and politics together. First, he began by expressing respect for the positions of each side, even those whom his audience would deem the enemy. Second, he grounded his thinking in the Bible, using the Bible not simply as an illustration but as a foundation for his political arguments. Third, he affirmed that God acts in history. The "biblical providence" he heard about in the preaching of Pastor Gurley, not fatalism, was the substance of the Second Inaugural. Fourth, Lincoln was comfortable with ambiguity. He prefaced his affirmations in the "Meditation on the Divine Will" with "it is quite possible" and "I am almost ready to say." Finally, he spoke not in arrogance but in winsome humility. In the final paragraph of the Second Inaugural, Lincoln offered the ultimate surprise. Instead of rallying his supporters in the name of God to support the war, he asked his listeners, quietly, to imitate the ways of God.

Ronald C. White Jr. is the author of Lincoln's Greatest Speech: The Second Inaugural***, and the forthcoming*** A. Lincoln: A Biography.

"This Mighty Scourge"

An Excerpt from Lincoln's Second Inaugural Address

Neither party expected for the war the magnitude or the duration which it has already attained. Neither anticipated that the cause of the conflict might cease with or even before the conflict itself should cease. Each looked for an easier triumph, and a result less fundamental and astounding. Both read the same Bible and pray to the same God, and each invokes His aid against the other. It may seem strange that any men should dare to ask a just God's assistance in wringing their bread from the sweat of other men's faces, but let us judge not, that we be not judged. The prayers of both could not be answered. That of neither has been answered fully. The Almighty has His own purposes. "Woe unto the world because of offenses; for it must needs be that offenses come, but woe to that man by whom the offense cometh." If we shall suppose that American slavery is one of those offenses which, in the providence of God, must needs come, but which, having continued through His appointed time, He now wills to remove, and that He gives to both North and South this terrible war as the woe due to those by whom the offense came, shall we discern therein any departure from those divine attributes which the believers in a living God always ascribe to Him? Fondly do we hope, fervently do we pray, that this mighty scourge of war may speedily pass away. Yet, if God wills that it continue until all the wealth piled by the bondsman's two hundred and fifty years of unrequited toil shall be sunk, and until every drop of blood drawn with the lash shall be paid by another drawn with the sword, as was said three thousand years ago, so still it must be said "the judgments of the Lord are true and righteous altogether."

With malice toward none, with charity for all, with firmness in the right as God gives us to see the right, let us strive on to finish the work we are in, to bind up the nation's wounds, to care for him who shall have borne the battle and for his widow and his orphan, to do all which may achieve and cherish a just and lasting peace among ourselves and with all nations.

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We Shall Answer to God

Every elected president has referred to God, providence, or a "higher power," in an inaugural address. Whether this says more about the president's personal faith or the expectations of the audience, such statements show the close connection between American politics and the public expression of religious belief.

"And may that Being who is supreme over all, the Patron of Order, the Fountain of Justice, and the Protector in all ages of the world of virtuous liberty, continue His blessing upon this nation and its Government and give it all possible success and duration consistent with the ends of His providence."
—JOHN ADAMS

"Finally, it is my most fervent prayer to that Almighty Being before whom I now stand, and who has kept us in His hands from the infancy of our Republic to the present day,that He will so overrule all my intentions and actions and inspire the hearts of my fellow-citizens that we may be preserved from dangers of all kinds and continue forever a united and happy people."
—ANDREW JACKSON

"I should not dare to enter upon my path of duty…did I not permit myself humbly to hope for the sustaining support of an ever-watchful and beneficent Providence."
—MARTIN VAN BUREN

"I deem the present occasion sufficiently important and solemn to justify me in expressing to my fellow-citizens a profound reverence for the Christian religion and a thorough conviction that sound morals, religious liberty, and a just sense of religious responsibility are essentially connected with all true and lasting happiness …"
—WILLIAM HENRY HARRISON

"I can express no better hope for my country than that the kind Providence which smiled upon our fathers may enable their children to preserve the blessings they have inherited."
—FRANKLIN PIERCE

"In assuming responsibilities so vast I fervently invoke the aid of that Almighty Ruler of the Universe in whose hands are the destinies of nations and of men to guard this Heaven-favored land against the mischiefs which without His guidance might arise from an unwise public policy… ."
—JAMES POLK

"And let us not trust to human effort alone, but humbly acknowledging the power and goodness of Almighty God, who presides over the destiny of nations, and who has at all times been revealed in our country's history, let us invoke His aid and His blessings upon our labors."
—GROVER CLEVELAND

"The Almighty God has blessed our land in many ways. He has given our people stout hearts and strong arms with which to strike mighty blows for freedom and truth. He has given to our country a faith which has become the hope of all peoples in an anguished world. So we pray to Him now for the vision to see our way clearly—to see the way that leads to a better life for ourselves and for all our fellow men— to the achievement of His will to peace on earth."
—FRANKLIN D. ROOSEVELT

"At such a time in history, we who are free must proclaim anew our faith.This faith is the abiding creed of our fathers. It is our faith in the deathless dignity of man, governed by eternal moral and natural laws.This faith defines our full view of life. It establishes, beyond debate, those gifts of the Creator that are man's inalienable rights, and that make all men equal in His sight."
—DWIGHT EISENHOWER

"Under this covenant of justice, liberty, and union we have become a nation—prosperous, great, and mighty. And we have kept our freedom. But we have no promise from God that our greatness will endure.We have been allowed by Him to seek greatness with the sweat of our hands and the strength of our spirit. … If we fail now,we shall have forgotten in abundance what we learned in hardship: that democracy rests on faith, that freedom asks more than it gives, and that the judgment of God is harshest on those who are most favored."
—LYNDON JOHNSON

"We shall answer to God, to history, and to our conscience for the way in which we use these years."
—RICHARD NIXON

"I have just taken the oath of office on the Bible my mother gave me a few years ago, opened to a timeless admonition from the ancient prophet Micah: 'He hath showed thee, O man, what is good; and what doth the Lord require of thee, but to do justly, and to love mercy, and to walk humbly with thy God' (Micah 6: 8)."
—JIMMY CARTER

1869-77
1945-53
1961-63

PRESIDENT	TERM DATES	DENOMINATIONAL AFFILIATION
George Washington	1789-97	Episcopalian (theistic rationalist*)
John Adams	1797-1801	Congregationalist; Unitarian
Thomas Jefferson	1801-09	Episcopalian (theistic rationalist*)
James Madison	1809-17	Episcopalian (theistic rationalist*)
James Monroe	1817-25	Episcopalian (deist?)
John Quincy Adams	1825-29	Unitarian
Andrew Jackson	1829-37	Presbyterian
Martin Van Buren	1837-41	Dutch Reformed
William Henry Harrison	1841	Episcopalian
John Tyler	1841-45	Episcopalian (deist?)
James Polk	1845-49	Presbyterian; Methodist
Zachary Taylor	1849-50	Episcopalian
Millard Fillmore	1850-53	Unitarian
Franklin Pierce	1853-57	Episcopalian
James Buchanan	1857-61	Presbyterian
Abraham Lincoln	1861-65	Presbyterian
Andrew Johnson	1865-69	Christian (no specific denomination)
Ulysses S. Grant		Presbyterian; Methodist
Rutherford B. Hayes	1877-81	Methodist
James Garfield	1881	Disciples of Christ
Chester Arthur	1881-85	Episcopalian
Grover Cleveland	1885-89	Presbyterian
Benjamin Harrison	1889-93	Presbyterian
Grover Cleveland	1893-97	Presbyterian
William McKinley	1897-1901	Methodist
Theodore Roosevelt	1901-09	Dutch Reformed
William H. Taft	1909-13	Unitarian
Woodrow Wilson	1913-21	Presbyterian
Warren Harding	1921-23	Baptist
Calvin Coolidge	1923-29	Congregationalist
Herbert Hoover	1929-33	Quaker
Franklin D. Roosevelt	1933-45	Episcopalian
Harry Truman		Southern Baptist
Dwight Eisenhower	1953-61	Presbyterian
John F. Kennedy		Roman Catholic

Lyndon Johnson	1963-69	Disciples of Christ
Richard Nixon	1969-74	Quaker
Gerald Ford	1974-77	Episcopalian
Jimmy Carter	1977-81	Baptist (former Southern Baptist)
Ronald Reagan	1981-89	Disciples of Christ
George Bush	1989-93	Episcopalian
William Clinton	1993-2001	Baptist
George W. Bush	2001-	Methodist (former Episcopalian)

*The term "deist" is often used for a number of early presidents and founding fathers, though this causes confusion. For some of these founders, historian Gary Scott Smith prefers the term "theistic rationalism," which mixed elements of natural religion, Christianity, and rationalism, and relied foremost on reason. Unlike deists, theistic rationalists believed that God was active in the world and that prayer was therefore effectual. They contended that religion's primary role was to promote morality, which was indispensable to society.