

THE BIBLE AND THE FOUNDERS, PART 2—PRESIDENTIAL INAUGURALS

The influence of the Bible on the Founders is readily apparent when one takes a look at the inaugural addresses of our first four Presidents: George Washington, John Adams, Thomas Jefferson, and James Madison.

It is important to notice a few key features common to each inaugural: (1) They each assert, in one form or another, an objective moral order that is anchored in a divine standard; (2) each assumes that the God who is appealed to is a God who is active in human affairs, not the deistic god who merely created the world and left it alone (contrary to popular belief, not a single Founder was a “deist” in this sense); and (3) since the United States had an overwhelmingly Christian, Protestant population, such references to God would no doubt have been understood within the context of the Judeo-Christian tradition of the Bible, with which Americans were so familiar.

In his first Inaugural, President George Washington made sure to emphasize the importance with which he held the new nation’s reliance on God:

[I]t would be peculiarly improper to omit in this first official Act, my fervent supplications to that Almighty Being who rules over the Universe, who presides in the Councils 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 . . . In tendering this homage to the Great Author of every public and private good, I assure myself that it expresses your sentiments not less than my own; nor those of my fellow-citizens at large, less than either: No People can be bound to acknowledge and adore the invisible hand, which conducts the Affairs of men more than the People of the United States. Every step, by which they have advanced to the character of an independent nation, seems to have been distinguished by some token of providential agency. And in the important revolution just accomplished in the system of their United Government, the tranquil deliberations, and voluntary consent of so many distinct communities, from which the event has resulted, cannot be compared with the means by which most Governments have been established, without some return of pious gratitude along with an humble anticipation of the future blessings which the past seem to presage.¹

Echoing the Biblical assertion that “Righteousness exalts a nation, but sin is a reproach to any people” (Proverbs 14:34), Washington emphasized the importance of morality to the body politic:

[T]he foundations of our national policy, will be laid in the pure and immutable principles of private morality . . . we ought to be no less persuaded that the

¹First Inaugural Address (April 30, 1789); John Rhodehamel, ed., *Washington: Writings* (New York: The Library of America, 1997), 731-32.

propitious smiles of Heaven, can never be expected on a nation that disregards the eternal rules of order and right, which Heaven itself has ordained...²

In concluding his address, Washington once again addressed God with gratitude and supplication:

I shall take my present leave; but not without resorting once more to the benign Parent of the human race, in humble supplication that since he has been pleased to favor the American people, with opportunities for deliberating in perfect tranquility, and dispositions for deciding with unparalleled unanimity on a form of Government, for the security of their Union, and the advancement of their happiness; so this divine blessing may be equally *conspicuous* in the enlarged views—the temperate consultation, and the wise measures on which the success of this government must depend.³

President John Adams continued the tradition of divine acknowledgment in his Inaugural address:

I feel it my duty to add, if a veneration for the religion of the people who profess and call themselves Christians, and a fixed resolution to consider a decent respect for Christianity among the best recommendations for the public service, can enable me, in any degree, to comply with your wishes, it shall be my strenuous endeavor...⁴

Adams ended his Inaugural with a benedictory conclusion similar to Washington's:

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 blessings upon this nation and its government, and give it all possible success and duration, consistent with the ends of his providence!⁵

President Thomas Jefferson, arguably the least orthodox President of the founding era, likewise offered fervent thanks to God in his first Inaugural:

[A]cknowledging and adoring an overruling Providence, which by all its dispensations proves that it delights in the happiness of man here and his greater happiness hereafter—with all these blessings, what more is necessary to make us a happy and a prosperous people? . . . And may that Infinite Power which rules the

²Ibid. 732-33.

³Ibid. 734.

⁴Inaugural Address (March 4, 1797); *The Constitution of the United States of America, and Selected Writings of the Founding Fathers* (New York: Barnes & Noble, Inc., 2012), 784.

⁵Ibid.

destinies of the universe lead our councils to what is best, and give them a favorable issue for your peace and prosperity.⁶

Likewise, in his second Inaugural, Jefferson drew a parallel between the American narrative and that of ancient Israel coming out of Egypt during the Exodus, with a passing reference to the Apostle Paul's articulation of the purpose of government in Romans 13:

I shall need, too, the favor of that Being in whose hands we are, who led our forefathers, as Israel of old, from their native land, and planted them in a country flowing with all the necessaries and comforts of life; who has covered our infancy with his providence, and our riper years with his wisdom and power; and to whose goodness I ask you to join with me in supplications, that he will so enlighten the minds of your servants, guide their councils, and prosper their measures, that whatsoever they do, shall result in your good, [Rom. 13:4] and shall secure to you the peace, friendship, and approbation of all nations.⁷

Finally, President James Madison continued the presidential tradition of acknowledging the Almighty in his first Inaugural:

[I have confidence in] the guardianship and guidance of that Almighty Being whose power regulates the destiny of nations, whose blessings have been so conspicuously dispensed to this rising Republic, and to whom we are bound to address our devout gratitude for the past, as well as our fervent supplications and best hopes for the future.⁸

And in his second Inaugural, Madison asserted that the then roaring "War of 1812" (as we have come to know it) with the British, what some historians have called the "Second American Revolution," was righteous and bore God's approval:

[I feel] a conviction that the war with a powerful nation, which forms so prominent a feature in our situation, is stamped with that justice which invites the smiles of Heaven on the means of conducting it to a successful termination.⁹

It is difficult indeed to read these small but revealing portions of our first four Presidents' inaugurals without concluding that a God heavily influenced by the Judeo-Christian tradition of the Bible played a prominent role in their thinking, and in the life of the new nation.

⁶First Inaugural Address (March 4, 1801); Thomas Jefferson, Merrill D. Peterson, ed., *Jefferson: Writings* (New York: Library of America, 1984), 494, 496.

⁷Second Inaugural Address (March 4, 1805); *Ibid.* 523.

⁸First Inaugural Address (March 4, 1809); James Madison, Jack N. Rakove, ed., *Madison: Writings* (New York: Library of America, 1999), 682.

⁹Second Inaugural Address (March 4, 1813); *Ibid.* 693.