

# Heritage Lectures

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## Presidential Faith and Foreign Policy: Are Times Changing?

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**RYAN MESSMORE:** An important issue for us in the Richard and Helen DeVos Center for Religion and Civil Society is helping to improve religious discourse in the political arena. One component of this discourse centers upon the role of personal faith in public office—the degree to which religion shapes the political beliefs, rhetoric, and policy decisions of the president, members of Congress, and other elected officials.

President Bush has openly acknowledged that his religious worldview influences his presidency, especially regarding foreign policy. In particular, he has framed his understanding of the war on terrorism as a battle between good and evil, and speaks passionately about America's purpose in the larger world and the divine gift and calling of freedom. A question arises as to whether Bush's religiously informed approach to foreign policy is consistent with the larger American political tradition, or does he represent an historical aberration?

Dr. Elizabeth Spalding brings helpful clarity and insight to this question. In a recent article for the *Wilson Quarterly*, she compares and contrasts Methodist George W. Bush with Presbyterian Woodrow Wilson during World War I and Baptist Harry Truman during the start of the Cold War, drawing important parallels with the foreign policy challenges facing America today.

We are honored to have her provide some of this historical perspective for us today.

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### Talking Points

- President Bush has received criticism for openly expressing his personal faith and stressing the religious element in the war on terrorism. Bush is not alone in having his faith influence his presidency. Harry Truman and Woodrow Wilson also linked foreign policy to religion.
- Despite their differences in political party, Truman shared similar Christian beliefs with Bush. Truman understood the Cold War in moral terms, as an epic struggle between good and evil, and he endeavored to unite the world's religions in a spiritual crusade against Communism. Like Bush, he believed that freedom is necessary for any real peace, and he took the religious dimension of the extremists of his time (Communists) seriously.
- Through his writings and presidency, Wilson constructed a detailed theology of politics, whereby he stressed the primacy of peace as the fulfillment of a progressive global order.
- Recent indicators suggest that some in the media are beginning to take religion's influence on U.S. foreign policy more seriously.

This paper, in its entirety, can be found at:  
[www.heritage.org/research/religion/hl985.cfm](http://www.heritage.org/research/religion/hl985.cfm)

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**ELIZABETH EDWARDS SPALDING:** There is a tendency to want to separate politics and religion, the two topics that everyone says we should avoid at family get-togethers if there are any meaningful disagreements. In America, we have separation of church and state—and, of course, an ongoing debate about what that separation entails. But as Harry Truman is reputed to have said, there are no atheists in foxholes or the Oval Office. When circumstances are pressing, and decisions have to be made about life and death, every president has turned to God. They have done so in different ways, and some have been quieter than others about it, but all have prayed and trusted in God's guidance and providence. Nowhere is this clearer than in American foreign policy, where often the most urgent and threatening circumstances are found.

It turns out that no matter how high is built the wall between church and state, between doctrinal belief and formal state action, we just cannot divide presidents and their faith.

A lot has been said over the years about George W. Bush and how his Christian—specifically Methodist—faith influences his politics. Here I will use key historical examples to show that Bush is not alone in having his faith influence his foreign policy. While his religion is not determinative of every presidential action he takes, it is essential to understanding what he says and does.

## Truman and the Great Commandment

By way of comparison with Bush, consider Harry Truman—a man of a different time, political party, and religious denomination. This is not the only presidential comparison we could make, but it is perhaps the most striking.

Truman's touchstone was Jesus' life, example, and teachings. Truman frequently referred to the Beatitudes and the whole of the Sermon on the Mount. He traced the biblical connections between the Ten Commandments and the Sermon on the Mount, with special attention to Deuteronomy, Isaiah, Micah, and Joel. All of this led to Truman's conclusion that we should live by and carry out the Great Commandment as imparted by Jesus in the Gospels of Matthew, Mark, and Luke. "If you will read this tenth chapter of Luke," he said, "you will find out exactly what a good neighbor means. It means to treat your neighbor as you yourself would like to be treated. Makes no difference whether he is of another race or another creed or another color. He is still your neighbor." Truman thought the restatement of the Great Commandment to love God and your neighbor as yourself and Jesus' story of the Good Samaritan applied to both domestic and foreign policy. Does this sound familiar? Bush has clearly internalized these same teachings and tried to put into action the Great Commandment and Jesus' bond between loving God and loving one's neighbor.

A committed Baptist, Harry Truman was also ecumenical. While fighting in World War I and commanding the predominantly Catholic Battery D, he wrote to his future wife that "all churches, even the Roman Catholic can do a man a lot of good. I had a Presbyterian bringing up, a Baptist education, and Episcopal leanings, so I reckon I ought to get to heaven somehow, don't you think so?" Writing in 1936 to wife Bess, he said: "It was a pleasure to hear of [daughter] Margaret going to the Baptist Sunday school. She ought to go to one every Sunday—I mean *a* Sunday school. If a child is instilled with good morals and taught the value of the precepts laid down in Exodus 20 and Matthew 5, 6, and 7, there is not much to worry about in after years. It makes no difference what brand is on the Sunday school."

President Truman linked his politics and his faith, and nowhere is this clearer than in the Cold War. In order to fight the East–West conflict, he oversaw a revolution in American foreign policy—characterized by policies and institutions such as the Truman Doctrine, the Marshall Plan, NATO, and the Berlin airlift—that redefined liberal internationalism and involved the United States in the world as never before. At the same time, Truman also tried to unite the world’s religions in a spiritual crusade against Communism; he received strong support from Catholics and overwhelming resistance from fellow Protestants, and his effort to formalize a faith-driven international campaign failed. In 1950, NSC 68—a National Security Council report that is arguably the most complete statement of America’s understanding of and goals in the Cold War—and the Korean War confirmed for Truman that, in the end, the East–West struggle would be won or lost on moral grounds. Again, he endeavored to take the moral high ground in the Cold War, this time in what he called the Campaign of Truth: a two-pronged political strategy involving the mass media and the world’s major religions that also coupled the governmental and private sectors. Once more, he met fierce resistance from Protestants, and so, with regret, he scaled back his ultimate goal, while continuing to work with the Catholic Church and expanding institutions of public diplomacy such as the Voice of America and the new freedom radios (Radio Free Europe/Radio Liberty).

From the first day of his presidency, Truman believed that America had been called to a responsibility, which had been dodged after World War I, to foster peace in the world. He often explained that this duty now extended from U.S. participation in the United Nations to combating the onslaught of worldwide Communism. But only in the context of freedom, he believed, could man exercise the free will necessary to the formation of peace and happiness. The challenge, as Truman understood it, was that the free world faced a foe which denied that “human freedom is born of the belief that man is created equal in the image of God and therefore capable of governing himself.”

Truman turned to the prophets to illustrate his understanding of peace. He cited where Isaiah

explained that God would judge among the nations and rebuke many people, and they would beat their swords into plowshares and spears into pruning hooks. But then he quoted the prophet Joel, who seems to make the opposite point. Truman noted that in Joel, the prophet proclaimed, “Beat your plowshares into swords and your pruning hooks into spears. Let the weak say: I am strong.” Truman maintained that the passages were not contradictory: “Which one do you want? It depends on what the condition is.” Joel, Truman explained, was trying to teach the people that they had to protect their regime if they “expected ever to have a free government.” Different circumstances demanded different actions, and the prudent leader must determine whether the time demands plowshares or swords.

Truman also turned to Jesus’ Sermon on the Mount. In one of his earliest foreign policy speeches as president, Truman argued that the Golden Rule should direct international affairs. As he wrote in 1952, “Confusius [*sic*], Buddah [*sic*], Moses, our own Jesus Christ, Mohomet [*sic*], all preached ‘Do as you’d be done by.’ Treat others as you’d be treated.” In post-presidential comments, he emphasized the fifth chapter of St. Matthew and the Beatitudes and quoted: “Blessed are the peacemakers, for they shall be called the children of God.” Here, he believed, was the universal wish of all people of goodwill: “That is exactly what we all want to be. We want to be peacemakers. Not just individually, but *internationally*.”

But the Cold War both modified and moderated Truman’s optimism about the possibilities of global peace. On the one hand, he rejected the idealism of those who ignored reality—he may have preferred plowshares, but he understood the need for swords. Truman also rejected, on the other hand, that narrow realism which failed to recognize the moral challenge of Communism. Freedom, justice, and order emerged in his writings and speeches as the principles that created the circumstances under which a real and durable peace *might* be possible. And of those principles, freedom had to take root first—and had to be defended first.

### Freedom: Basic and Essential

There is a lot of talk now about how George W. Bush throws around the word freedom. Critics have

accused him of embarking on a crusade for an ill-defined concept. For Bush, as we have seen for Truman, freedom is political, but it cannot be separated from faith. Freedom is central, because along with equality it is an inalienable right. But for Bush, as for Truman, freedom is also central because it is the necessary precondition for any ethical action and for any real peace.

So freedom is more than a slogan; it is basic and essential, and it is important to both individuals and nation-states. When Bush and Truman based their epic struggles on freedom, they did so deliberately. This may be clearer with Truman, because of the nature of Communist totalitarianism and its location in a dominant regime. But for Bush, too, we can understand his invocation of freedom if we understand that he takes the extremists of his time—the jihadis—as seriously as Truman took the Communists, the extremists of his time.

In this view, the jihadist terrorists act from their religious beliefs. These beliefs have twisted Islam, as Bush is always quick to point out. But he does not dispute that the extremists hold their beliefs—much as Truman did not dispute that Communists strongly held their beliefs. Also like Truman with respect to the Cold War, Bush is able to see that he can adhere to his beliefs, and the extremists to theirs, without making a moral equivalence between his deeply held beliefs and the jihadis' deeply held beliefs.

This view runs counter to many in the United States and elsewhere in the West. There are, of course, many in America who take religion seriously. But the secular view—which is prevalent among academics and the mass media—is either to discount or diminish the religious element in the war on terrorism.

Does Bush discount or diminish political, economic, cultural, strategic, and other factors? Absolutely not. But in the radical Islamic world, this means seeing that religion shapes or influences all the other factors. Can a jihadist terrorist be pragmatic? Sure. But he will be pragmatic within his religious context. Bush has identified and described this religious base for the terrorists' motivations, statements, and actions ever since 9/11.

In this way, circumstances and tactics on the part of the terrorists may change in the ongoing war on terrorism, but the primary motivation on the part of the terrorists will not. Osama Bin Laden and those he has inspired believe in their jihad.

In ways that may not be immediately obvious, religion was also at the heart of the Cold War. The Soviets totally denied and negated God. The materialist atheism at the center of Communism stood in adamant opposition to the Christian worldview of the West. Truman's take on the East–West conflict grew from his joint religious and political understanding that the free world was engaged in a total battle on all levels—spiritual, political, military, economic, and geographic—with a totalitarian enemy. Bush sees jihadism as a total perversion of Islam. Like Truman with respect to the Cold War, he frames the war on terrorism as an epic struggle between good and evil, in which our enemies are, literally, evildoers.

If Bush and Truman had been presidents at other times in American history, would this understanding of the nature of good and evil have been as important? Maybe, maybe not. The point is that they were presidents at their particular times—through, dare we say, the hand of Providence? The demands of the presidency called something out of each man. Out of Truman, and I would argue provisionally out of Bush, those demands called much out of them.

If the fact that Bush expresses and lives by his Christian faith bothers the hell out of his critics—and it does—they say that he is twice as guilty because of the sins of hubris, arrogance, and hypocrisy. By his critics, including many in his own party, Truman was considered a bulldog upstart who dared try to replace Franklin Roosevelt. Truman was aware of this criticism, and it was part of the reason he asked for people's prayers when he became president after FDR's death. But he also asked for their prayers because he believed. We have archival access to Truman's daily prayer, which he said from high school on, and what's striking about it is his entreaties for humility, understanding, and wisdom. While we don't know what Bush's daily prayer might be, he has given us plenty of clues as

to what is at the core of his Christian heart: Love your neighbor as yourself. This approach is in tune with Truman. Does this disposition make Bush and Truman soft and mushy? No, both have understood that we might have to beat plowshares into swords, even though our preference would be to beat swords into plowshares. A president has to apply his principles in the circumstances he finds himself and he contributes to. In the case of both men, this means acting according to political principles that are influenced by their Christian faith.

### Wilson the Chosen Instrument

Against our comparison of Bush and Truman, we must take a moment to look at the president who cast his shadow over the entire 20th century and whose influence remains ever-strong in this new 21st century. Woodrow Wilson is *sui generis* in terms of having a foreign policy approach named after him: Wilsonianism. We can use the words “Trumanesque” or “Reaganesque”—and some do—but Trumanism and Reaganism don’t carry the punch of Wilsonianism. Many are familiar with the political content of Wilsonianism, but we need to consider the religious influences. Through his writings and presidency, Wilson constructed a detailed theology of politics, in which the individual, the church, society, and the nations of the world were all properly placed in a progressive global order. The Christian doctrine for that theology inhered in the Presbyterian covenantal religious tradition, which Wilson first learned from his father, a prominent Presbyterian minister. As a result, Wilson’s Christianity is far different from Truman’s or Bush’s biblical evangelicalism, in which God is loving and can certainly be providential, but in which men must still exercise their free will with the hope—not the guarantee—that they do His will. Wilson’s sense of religious predestination shaped his politics.

Wilson’s worldview stressed the primacy of peace as the fulfillment of progressive history. During World War I, he once expressed “the confidence I feel that the world is even now upon the eve of a great consummation,” which would result not only in some sort of international security organization but also in coercion being put only “to the service of a common order, a common justice, and a common

peace.” Wilson based these comments on the proposition that “[t]he interests of all nations are our own also.” As he famously said in 1917, “There must be, not a balance of power, but a community of power; not organized rivalries, but an organized common peace.” Wilson knew that he was advocating a different way of engaging in world politics, but submitted its principles were both American and “forward looking,” “modern,” and “enlightened.” By American standards, he was indeed correct to repudiate realism in international affairs; but his proposed replacement misread both the principled American alternative to power politics as well as the emerging political and economic trends during and after World War I.

In addition to key religious and philosophical differences between Wilson, on the one hand, and Truman and Bush, on the other, there are important dissimilarities in terms of personality. A politician has to be confident. He has to have a thick skin. Truman and Bush possess these qualities. Wilson, by contrast, went beyond confidence. His pride and ambition flowed from his conviction that he, and he alone, was the chosen instrument to do God’s will in the world.

### Different Presidents, Common Christianity

A former presidential speechwriter once said, “If you want to know what [he] really thinks, look at what he says. He believes in a personal God who answers prayers. He believes that truth is found in all religions and that all people who pray pray to the same God. He believes that prayer and faith can allow one to improve one’s own life and save one, not just in the theological sense but in this world. And he’s told us that he does not ask God to tell him what to do, but asks God for wisdom and judgment and calm.” This speechwriter could have been talking about Harry Truman or George W. Bush, but not Woodrow Wilson. It is almost incidental that the speechwriter was speaking of Bush.

None of this is to say that either Truman or Bush is perfect. And each would be the first to admit that he was a work in progress and in need of God’s grace. But both are Christian—and a similar type of Christian. In addition to what has already been dis-

cussed, we should point to the basic sense of equality in both men. Unlike Wilson's belief that divine destiny made him superior to others, Truman and Bush have never lost sight of their equality to their fellow men—whether the neighbor is next door, down the road, or across an ocean. Their common kind of Christianity unites them, despite their differences in religious denomination, political party, and historical era.

Several times I've referred to how much of Western society, especially intellectuals and the mass media, has either diminished or discounted the role of religion in our epic struggles of foreign policy. The good news is that some are seeing the light. The editors of the granddaddy of all U.S. journals on world politics—*Foreign Affairs*—must have been

chagrined when the relative newcomer journal, the *American Interest*, outdid them in competing fall issues. *Foreign Affairs* published one very important article on religion and U.S. foreign policy. The *American Interest*, though, ran an entire section on the topic, including articles on religion's influence on U.S. foreign policy and on our jihadist foes. This is the kind of pack intellectual journalism I would like to see more of—with the mass media, mainstream policy experts, and many more academics soon taking Bush and the jihadis as seriously as they take each other.

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