

VITAL SPEECHES

— OF THE DAY —

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Wartime Faith Of Washington, Lincoln And Roosevelt

WE ARE ALL RESPONDERS NOW

Address by DAVID M. ABSHIRE, *President, Center for the Study of the Presidency*

Delivered to The General Theological Seminary of the Episcopal Church, New York, New York, April 23, 2003

Very Reverend Dean Ward Ewing and Canon Professor Bob Wright, I am delighted to be speaking to the General Theological Seminary alumni tonight. I am in awe that this is the second oldest seminary in the nation and the oldest Episcopal one. Faith in time of war, including Presidential faith, is an issue that was devastatingly thrust upon us by 9/11, a war “here among us,” and then repeated in a more controversial way by the debate involving going to war over Iraq, a war “over there from us.”

This time around, many churches sought to overarch the latter debate, perhaps as a result of some of the wisdom from the first Gulf War experience. The Wall Street Journal had a feature article entitled “House Divided,” which spoke of churches, parishioners and clergy. The piece led with the story of Reverend Bill Tully at St. Bartholomew’s stating “We’re trying to cover both views.”

I think this was a wise approach, for especially in public policy, I worry about “moral absolutism” and “moral certitude” that leave out process either by the right or the left — in other words, idealism without realism, a vision without a roadway to it. Reinhold Niebuhr’s book entitled *Moral Man and Immoral Society* reminds us of the problems of moral ambiguity and conflict among different values once the morals of an individual wade into the conflicting tides of society. The exceptions of course, are those cases of clear moral outrage. We recall Hitler’s holocaust and when that towering Lutheran theologian, Dietrich Bonhoeffer split from the majority of the German Evangelist Church, which kowtowed to Hitler. We are also reminded of America during the 1960’s, when many courageous Episcopal clergymen split from others who kowtowed to segregation.

My role tonight is to reflect on the story of three great American Presidents’ faith in time of war, and what their faith might say to us today. On this latter score, while these leaders I have selected—Washington, Lincoln and FDR—were sorely tested in their faith, so we were tested to the limit by the terrible events of 9/11. Just as these three war leaders were dealing with a war that started

here, not “over there” in a foreign land, so 9/11 started here, indeed a few blocks away from General Seminary, where I speak tonight.

Where were you on 9/11 at 8:45 in the morning? I was in a car in Northern Virginia on a cell phone with my assistant who suddenly started talking nonsense—a plane, hitting a Twin Tower in Manhattan. It didn’t make sense. Then came the Pentagon. Of course, it didn’t make sense and it was all directed by a man in a cave in Afghanistan. At 9:30 a.m. from an elementary school in Florida, a very religious George W. Bush appeared before television cameras to announce “Terrorism against our nation will not stand” and he suddenly became a wartime president.

Where was God on 9/11? That was the subject of a moving PBS documentary *Faith and Doubt*. The slaughter of the innocents on 9/11 was not just of Americans but of people representing many nationalities. It was a crime against humanity, which mocked the just war doctrine and turned the accepted laws of war upside down. The terror, pain, and destruction were dramatized to a world glued to TV.

Yet, the attackers claimed they performed an act of worship. Did God truly take a holiday on 9/11? In an interview, one young woman said she previously had frequent conversations with God, but simply stopped after 9/11. And yet out of the hate, destruction and doubt something sacred happened very quickly. We saw this something in the firefighters, policemen and rescue workers who insisted on “going back in” time and again in the face of almost certain death. And we saw it perhaps, most vividly, in the man and woman stranded together on a lonely window ledge. No one came. Suddenly, they took each other’s hand, and jumped. Did they previously know each other? Were they strangers suddenly connected? Only God knows.

The couple that jumped connected, and indeed an interconnection arose across the nation. Wearing the flag exploded and flying the flag was not something just for conservative patriots, but for people of all colors and all political persuasions. Some of that unity has since waned.

It's about time then that we learn from the faith of Washington, Lincoln, and Roosevelt in their dealing with tragedy, with their own frailties, and with their God. Certain similarities in how each man dealt with the mystery of God in his faith and work while leading our country through its greatest wars makes these three Presidents especially compelling.

First, I am struck by how Washington, Lincoln and Roosevelt accepted the divine mystery. "The Almighty has his own purposes," reverently spoke Lincoln at his second inaugural.

Lincoln through his writing and speaking gives us the best record of the three icons. He was totally biblical — King James biblical — in what he said and wrote, matching Shakespeare himself. Yet, in early years, there was suspicion as to his Christian faith, especially when he ran for Congress against a fiery evangelist. Preachers with certitude about the "elect" did put young Abe off, perhaps as Jesus was put off by the Pharisees. Young Lincoln loved reciting free thinking poet Robert Burns and he became interested in discussions on the "doctrine of necessity," likely drawn from Greek and Roman stoics, which I take as a form of conforming to reality.

Years later, Lincoln became religious but was never "churchy," even though he attended the Presbyterian Church in our nation's capital. With his son, Willie's death, he became especially involved with a favorite Presbyterian Minister in discussing death, and the possibility of life beyond. I believe he would have been at home with C.S. Lewis' *Mere Christianity*. The Bible was in his memory and on his lips; while President, in a letter to Congressman Henry C. Deming, he wrote:

"I have found difficulty in giving my assent to the long complicated statements of Christian doctrine, where any church will inscribe over its altar as its sole qualification for membership, the Savior's condensed statement of both Law and Gospel: Thou shall love the Lord thy God with all thy heart and with all they soul and with all thy mind, and thy neighbor as thyself, that church I will join with all my heart and all my soul."

Lincoln, like Washington, loved the theater (perhaps too much) and could recite long passages of Shakespeare. He did have a sense of the historical drama in which he found himself, and he recognized that he was caught as a major character in the play. But he never thought himself the producer or even the playwright. I don't think he ever thought he would go down in history as a great man, and I believe that he would be dumbstruck to see the magnificent Lincoln Memorial in his honor. Until the Emancipation Proclamation, he felt he had done absolutely nothing to be remembered in history.

I think he would be quite at home with the "serenity prayer" about knowing the difference between things one can and cannot change. He believed that there was an inner circle of free will, where he possibly could control

events, and a larger circle beyond this control—some called it fate. Early on this outer circle was ordered by his doctrine of necessity but in later life he saw it mixed with the profound mystery of the Almighty. I think an interesting point on Lincoln is the way in which he humbled himself by subtly removing himself from public discourse.

Lincoln was making history moving forward. But as English Historian, C.V. Wedgwood notes, history is written backwards, while lived forward. Moving forward, the path is filled with an atmosphere of ambiguities, calculations and risks, especially when in the fog of war. When writing history backwards, those are frequently obscured and the way often seems easy and predetermined since the fog is lifted.

The day after Lincoln's inauguration, he was presented with the ultimatum on Ft. Sumter. This one time three-week-long captain in the Black Hawk War, who had never fired a shot in combat, sat with his cabinet members. They were against attempting to reinforce Sumter. They were backed by the hero of the Mexican War, General Winfield Scott. The green Captain Lincoln made the first move to save the Union by overriding the general and the cabinet, and promptly ordered reinforcement.

Along with this decisive move, he made clear that this was a war waged to save the Union, not to emancipate slaves. The latter, as an immediate war objective, would have lost the Border States and the Democrats in the North, and indeed thereby lost the war. Frederick Douglas and many other abolitionists pilloried this author of the "House Divided" speech as duplicitous, hypocritical, and a moral relativist.

But as a great war leader, Lincoln knew the importance of timing, of mixing realism with idealism, and of the danger of a moral absolute out of context. Brilliantly timed, after the 1862 victory at Antietam, he could safely move towards emancipation, recruit 180,000 black troops in the process and also win over Europe from the Confederacy. He had moved from saving the union to freeing the slaves, and indeed had prepared the way to what has aptly been called the Second American Revolution by Professor James McPherson.

It took faith to negotiate these narrow and perilous passages. Unlike President McKinley, who on his knees he felt he had a direct message from God to go to war with Spain, Lincoln never assumed he was in lock step with God, nor that the Almighty divinely directed all he did. He was no Joan of Arc. Rather, he was a constant inquirer and aware of his fallibility. The second inaugural is filled with the subjunctive, "If God wills...." Both sides, he noted, read the same Bible and the prayers of both would not be answered fully, for the Almighty has his own purposes. Lincoln, our one president who was a true genius in so many ways, never confused himself with the Almighty.

On a rainy day with streets of mud, a lanky war-worn Lincoln arose to give that immemorial second inaugural. As he began, the sun suddenly broke through the clouds.

“With malice towards none, with charity for all, with firmness in the right as God gives us to see the right....” What balance and proportionality, and yet there is no moral equivalence mixed in his charity. Afterwards, the President’s former critic Frederick Douglass turned to him and said, “Mr. Lincoln, that was a sacred effort.”

Lincoln was slain on Good Friday by John Wilkes Booth. The actor thought slavery was an American blessing rather than an American sin and he was filled with hate towards Lincoln. There is evil in the world of Booth, of Hitler, of Stalin, of Pol Pot, and of Saddam Hussein. As we learned on 9/11, there is hate towards America. Back to our question: where was God on 9/11? But where was God on that Good Friday at Ford’s Theater, April 14, 1865? Many said Lincoln was slain for the sins of the nation as Christ was slain for the sins of the world. Leo Tolstoy called him “a Christ in miniature, a saint of humanity.”

I turn now to Washington. If Lincoln saved the country once, Washington did so three times: in the revolutionary war, at the Constitutional Convention, and as President. Unlike Lincoln, Washington was not a genius and he made some bad mistakes. But he learned from them.

As a young 21-year old Lt. Colonel in the colonial forces, Washington constantly bickered with Governor Dinwiddie over his pay not being equal to that of British regulars. He had been a hotshot surveyor before that and had made money. He, to be frank, had become something of a horse’s ass. By the way, as Jefferson later said, he was about the best horseman in Virginia. I guess he knew it.

He was sent on a mission towards modern-day Pittsburgh, encamped in the mountains at a vulnerable place called Great Meadows, and built “Ft. Necessity.” He was surprised and forced to surrender to the French and Indians, and subsequently was written up in the Times of London as a disgrace to the colonial service. A cocky Washington learned from this devastating experience, not only a new modesty but also new unconventional ways of warfare. Later, fighting with General Braddock, he survived showers of bullets, and somehow felt he must be under the “miraculous care of Providence” as bullets tore his clothes and killed horses under him.

Over three decades later, when this same but yet quite different Washington took command of the Continental Army, the one who had argued with Governor Dinwiddie over adequate pay refused to take any pay whatsoever. He still was a good horseman and a superb tactical field-commander but was never a brilliant strategist. He had a rough ride as a commander who lost more battles than he won when only one-third of the Americans enthusiastically supported the war. And yet the losing general who won the war had an extraordinary bulwark of character in a world he believed to be designed by Providence. This same bulwark of character saved the Constitutional Convention, whose Constitution had the powers of the presidency described with Washington in mind.

Living history forward, the writers of the final draft of the Constitution considered it an imperfect document. Writing history backward, it was considered the “Miracle at Philadelphia,” as Catherine Drinker Bowen labeled her book. Like Lincoln, Washington was devoted to the theater and wrote that he and others were “actors” in the “theater designed by Providence.” Again, like Lincoln, he believed that America “was the last best hope.” Washington believed that the American experiment was exceptional. “The eyes of the world” were upon us and we found ourselves in a “time to establish or ruin...our national character forever.” Lincoln believed we were “God’s almost chosen people.” Washington said, “Heaven has crowned” this nation.

Washington, while an Anglican and a vestryman himself, spent time as president talking to different religious groups from the Baptists to the Jews of the synagogues of Rhode Island. He understood that it was the freedom of religion in America that protected a very religious America. His was the achievement of protecting diversity in the American experiment. He believed a religious America was essential to good governance, and protection of religious diversity was essential to maintain a religious America.

What especially marked Washington, man of faith and humility, was how he freely let go of power. As Professor Gordon Wood has written, this “stunned the world.” After the war, the commander-in-chief turned in his sword to the Congress. He turned back the invitation to be a Cromwell when the chance arose at the Newberg conspiracy, and he refused to run for a third term as President. Self-restraint and self-denial were a part of his faith. “Whosoever will deny himself...”

George III, when sitting for a portrait by an American artist asked what Washington would do after his victorious war. The painter responded “go back to Mt. Vernon.” If so, responded the king “he will be the greatest man on earth.” Such never happened in Europe. The fussy Lt. Col. of the Colonial Army had come a long way and saved his country three times on this stage he felt to be designed by Providence.

F.D. Roosevelt, initials for Franklin Delano, was called “Feather Duster” Roosevelt by some detractor students at Harvard. The young patrician from the Hudson Valley maybe too obviously felt he was headed for the top with his handsome bearing, athletic figure and large ambition to follow in the footsteps of his illustrious cousin Theodore Roosevelt to the White House itself. But when polio struck him down in 1921 that career seemed washed up. Presidential ambitions were ended. He became the “Daddy with the Dead Legs,” as young Jimmy Roosevelt said. He could walk nowhere.

Amazingly, stranger than fiction, the Daddy with the dead legs led us through the Great Depression and the Great War, all from a wheel chair the public scarcely acknowledged. Thus, this triumphant cripple could credibly

say to a crippled America in 1933 “the only thing we have to fear is fear itself.” I think every Roosevelt biographer would admit that it was his great tragedy that gave birth to great triumph. FDR, like Washington, believed that Providence acted in mysterious ways.

Besides his polio attack, Roosevelt’s greatest stress and depression came at the end of 1940 as he alarmingly watched Hitler’s gains. As the leader of an unconcerned and isolationist America, Roosevelt felt suddenly like a political cripple as he painfully recalled how Woodrow Wilson had miserably failed with the Versailles Treaty ratification because he lacked the congressional and popular support. To make matters worse for him, FDR received in December 1940 a message, known as the “the long letter,” from Winston Churchill stating that the U.K. couldn’t last. Roosevelt did an emotional retreat for days and only after a political epiphany produced a scheme for America to become the “arsenal of democracy.” He clearly argued for the isolationists “to keep us out of the war” through the Lend Lease Act. Washington and Lincoln saved America. Roosevelt saved Great Britain.

The Atlantic front and the defeat of Hitler were Roosevelt’s priorities.

On the Pacific front, he made a terrible mistake that year when he overrode Admiral Richardson and left the fleet exposed at Pearl Harbor. He thought it would be a deterrent to a Japanese attack and not a target. He got it wrong. Roosevelt’s blunder led to the sinking of most of the Pacific fleet but resulted in us entering the war against Germany, as well as Japan.

How did this cripple do it? Certainly, a dogged characteristic in his rehabilitation from polio was his intense Christian faith. He believed in a divine design, but like Lincoln did not believe he was so anointed as to be in lock step with God. He understood the mysteries of that design. Unlike Lincoln, he was a very Episcopal conventional church member and he often said that the United States was a “Christian nation,” hardly politically correct today. He believed almost playfully that the Lord would occasionally make small things happen to encourage him forward and build hope.

He, like Washington and Lincoln, believed the world depended upon us. As he said in his final inaugural, “The Almighty God has blessed our land in many ways. He has given our people stout hearts and strong arms...He has given to our country a faith that has become the hope of all peoples in an anguished world. So we pray to Him now for a vision to see our way...” With mighty allies led by America and the war moving in our favor, he humbly noted that we had to be citizens of the world, “members of the human community” and, quoting Emerson, stated,

“The only way to have a friend is to be one.”

All three leaders had humility in many ways. Roosevelt, the cripple, was the most egotistical but still humble in his relationship towards his God. All three leaders sensed the awe over that outer circle which some call pure chance—where they did not control events, as contrasted to a small circle of their free will. Looking back like the historian, each retroactively delegated to God’s goodness and not themselves the good things of the past and the great victories that they had achieved.

From a historical and secular perspective, that inner circle was much bigger than they suspected. I cannot imagine an American figure other than Washington saving this country in the Revolutionary war, an American other than Lincoln saving the Union, or an American other than Roosevelt saving England and sustaining America so well through depression and war. Each believed in his oath to serve “to the best of my abilities,” no more, no less. Their failures, Washington’s defeats, Lincoln’s setbacks, and Roosevelt’s Pearl Harbor blunder were on God’s shoulders and beyond the best of their abilities. The words were good enough for them, “Now we see dimly through a glass, and then “face to face.” Still, in retrospect, and despite their protests to the contrary, they were not only actors but also transformational presidents moving far beyond their greatest expectations.

The wartime strength these Presidents demonstrated was quite the opposite of the religious fanaticism that secularists can appropriately fear from some deeply religious leaders who think they have a private line to receive orders from heaven. These three remarkable presidents gained quiet confidence without bombast, freedom to act without agony, a sense of proportionality to see the big picture and establish priorities, and above all, the willingness to accept the mystery of life amidst this quite unique American experiment.

Recently, Newsweek devoted a cover story to “God and Bush” (the younger) and much has been made, both pro and con, of the President’s faith. It is important to remember that most American Presidents have been religious. In the last century, whatever their failings, Theodore Roosevelt, Truman, Eisenhower, Nixon, Ford, Carter, Reagan, George H.W. Bush and Clinton were church-going Presidents. George W. Bush follows in a long line of presidential faith. In the fight against terror, President Bush and our nation face a long war. Paradoxically, we are both the most powerful and the most vulnerable nation on earth. As we emerge from the agony and ashes of 9/11, the humble faith of Washington, Lincoln, and Roosevelt is there to help this President and this Congress on down the “first responders” — for we are all responders now.

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